CRITICIZING THE SERIES: TELEVISION CRITICISM AS A GENRE BETWEEN CINEPHILIA AND FAN CULTURE

Abstract
A recent French publication called *Le sérieophile* has proposed a neologism to reflect the idea of critical practices of cinephilia moving into what the English-speaking world, too, can call “TV-philia”. In the last fifteen years, changes in TV seriality have crossed paths both with the explosion of the Internet fan culture and with the horizontal spread of analytical skills (such as those provided by the recent proliferation of university courses on television, seriality and media narratives). In fact, TV series have also become a breeding ground for testing what is happening within the sphere of more traditional criticism, normally devoted to movies only: the increasing closeness of institutional criticism and blog criticism, the democratization of critical discourse, a massive sharing of basic analytical categories, and a certain devotion to one’s own object of criticism.

This article presents two analyses. The first and more theoretical explores analogies and differences between categories of cinephilia and TV-philia, by trying to understand whether the latter’s critical dimension may be considered a fully fledged and distinctive cultural practice. The second uses case studies to test some forms of cross-media critical analysis on TV series, using overlapping elements of TV criticism, such as publishing genre and fan culture, as examples.

Keywords
Cinephilia/TV-philia; television analysis; television criticism; fan culture; episodes.

1. FROM CINEFILIA TO TV-PHILIA

According to Hervé Glevarec, TV-philia is closely linked to fans’ amateurship, although being at the same time strongly connected with the technological dimension of consumption. Television is not only one of the contexts where viewing takes place, and now often replaced by the computer screen or other mobile devices, but the experience of the TV series for their fans is also closely dependent on whether the product (or the consumer) are capable of migrating from a medial context to another, and carrying with them value-laden and aesthetic discourses as well. Glevarec is also comparing cinephilia and TV-philia.

The former shares with the latter a realm of scopic pleasure, at times together with a widespread aestheticization of the medium per se, although for the most part not sharing its categories. Both the stylistic features – the mise en scène as politics of 1950’s cinephilia, repeatedly renewed also at the time of the new cinephilia¹ – and

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the politics of authorship are relatively quite marginal (although present) in TV-philia. It is true that great attention has been – and is still being – paid to authors who in TV enjoy a blurred status, suspended as they are between being creators, directors or demiurges – such as Joss Whedon, J.J. Abrams, Stephen Moffat, Ryan Murphy etc. – but what really counts are narrative universes. Not “the invention of a gaze” but rather being engrossed in a fictional world, within increasingly daring narrative strategies. The passion for the series’ narrative architecture, alongside the presence of full-fledged narrative ecosystems, strikes therefore a perfect alliance with their related multimodal technology, so much so that at times users characterised by a strong and knowledgeable consumption of TV series, films, cartoons, web-series, shorts on YouTube and other products are now clearly grouped together under the umbrella of “mediaphilia”. In brief, again with Glevarec, “the series’ contemporary enthusiasts are not militants, but existentialists; they value authors and genres less than the fictional universe and closeness to it”.

If cinephilia applied its own aesthetic categories and transposed them into critical activity, and if again the new cinephilia is striking an alliance with changed technological contexts by exploiting the sharing culture for new forms of sharing and revamping of those categories, where would the critical practice of TV-philia find its institutionalisation?

The question is well grounded, as the concept of institutionalization of “philia” passions has always triggered a cultural confrontation with the fan, as shown by the cinema practices which are resisting the most against critical authentication (just think about the historical example of cult moves). However, describing the world of TV-philia as a territory strictly divided between audiences finding their gratification in the product and its technological and discursive usability (perhaps expanding to encompass creative audiences), and critics working “on” the series through forms of value-laden categorizations, would be too convenient.

Indeed, the focus of the present article is precisely the osmotic qualities of the two practices, the critical one and that of TV-philia. In any case, TV-philia should not be taken to merely stand for fan culture (more linked to many and widespread forms of mediaphilia), but instead being the expression of a cultural practice based on renewal, on artistic diversification, and the individual sphere finding identity values in particular in TV series. It is true that in the ever growing dissemination of skills linked to consumption and the discourse around seriality, differences have now emerged between whoever – as in cinema – identifies ideological values inside

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7 Glevarec, La Sériephilie. Sociologie d’un attachement culturel, 24.
production genres (TV quality equating to a “film worthy of an Oscar”, for example⁸), but in effect it is seriality in general presenting itself as a genre, and it is genre producing “TV-philia”.

2. FROM TV-PHILIA TO CRITICISM

What has happened to cinema criticism in recent years? The question has been raised several times⁹. In short, we could say that cinema criticism has bestowed something in terms of historical authoritativeness, often assured by the publication and reviewer of reference, as the expert establishing the common taste to secure some space. This is a physical space (the number of publications and reviewers working at the time of the web) and a discursive space. There has never been so much critical work as today. However, cinema critique deals with the same shift we have mentioned above: the distance between the experts and the amateur is becoming paper thin, and what counts now is the well-known concept of online reputation, so much sought after to have produced a formidable industry of practical how-to’s and even an Online Reputation for Dummies¹⁰. Meta-sites like Rotten Tomatoes or Metacritic offer scores and quantitative assessment of rating flows, by differentiating between the weight of “top critics” from that of less authoritative online critics – thus apparently introducing again features of individual expertise and reliability, while in reality showing how in the age of plenty systems of taste measurement are much in demand.

Therefore, cinephilia applies in its turn critical forms of reference. They could be historical publications (Cahiers du Cinéma), online periodicals (like the international Cinephile or The Dissolve, the Italian Filmidee or La furia umana), but also websites of streaming-on-demand with platforms similar to social networks (Mubi.com), websites of DVD labels hosting cinephile critique (Criterion.com), down to spontaneous practices such as online forums, YouTube channels airing anthologies of movies or sequences, YouTubers’ reviews and much more.

In brief, this is quite a disparate setting. Which tools and symbolic hierarchies should then be applied, in order to differentiate critical practices from cinephile practices, and among cinephile practices, how could we separate more structured experiences from the typical practices of fan culture? Here, the risk of arbitrariness is quite tangible.

When we talk about television criticism, we are not referring of course to the columnist’s editorial genre where the most important contributor of the newspaper comments and interprets TV programmes, whether fictions, shows, magazine programmes, live shows and so on. We refer more precisely to the criticism of seriality. And – following the same conceptual course – what are the critical practices which are produced by “TV-philia”?

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The essential problem is that critical practices produced by TV-philia are many, multifaceted and need increasingly sophisticated tools. On the one hand this is a fascinating area of discovery, on the other hand identifying TV-philic practices could prove to be quite difficult. What is certain is that in TV-philia, differently from cinephile practices, the sharing of one’s views with readers/users becomes indispensable and a key element in the structure of critical writing. In our opinion, developing a case study (among the many existing) could be useful as, specifically due to the strong need for sharing induced in the viewer, both in the universe of the fan culture and in that of the more traditional critical practice, it enables to clarify, at least in part, some questions we have posited. The case being studied refers to the critical reviews of the television series *Game of Thrones* (GOT), a television treatment of the *A Song of Ice and Fire* cycle novels by George R.R. Martin.

GOT develops along several spatial levels and within different genre codes: war movie, fantasy, science fiction. “In sci-fi genre, reality is technologically heightened and ontologically extended in order to widen the variety of possible conflicts, while in fantasy a whole universe is conceived *ex novo* as an immense chessboard on which a series of territorial conflicts can be staged. This structural link between spatiality, conflict and life forms, reaches in GOT unheard-of levels of articulation, development and proliferation. The epic trait of the literary saga combines with the figurative potential of the filmic medium to build the TV series as a great contemporary narrative. Here the space is the very substance of the tale, the matter at issue; watching how the subjects are placed in space leads to explore their mutual relations in depth”[11]. If space is the matter of the narrative, space as well – meant as the place of critical practice – becomes an essential element; more and better than any other contemporary series, GOT is the focus of study, criticism, interpretation and analysis on several medial platforms.

GOT is the television adaptation of a cycle of novels that George R.R. Martin started to write in the early 1990’s and has come to produce an unprecedented fandom in the history of literature. For this reason, for the first time in Italy we are observing a critical practice focusing separately on “readers” (of the saga) and “novices”. Once a week and just a few days after the broadcasting of the GOT episode in the United States, the website *Serialmente*[12] presents a double review with the warning: “The two articles dedicated to the episode differ in many details. In particular, they are presenting several remarks on the adaptation of the literary work and information about the developments of the plot that may spoil the viewing for those who are not familiar with *A Song of Ice and Fire*. For this reason we invite viewers who do not like spoilers to refrain from looking at the article or comments, and instead to refer to the reviews specifically dedicated to them. In the remarks to this article the rule of spoiler-free up to... is applied”[13]. The

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[12] Up to early 2014 *Serialmente.com* was one of the most popular Italian portals dedicated to TV series. Its specific trait lies in the fact that it reviewed individual episodes of a high number of television series with critical skills and a strong attention for the interactivity between reviewer and reader. Now the layout of the site has changed and it develops in a freer way, at times through episode-by-episode reviews, but more frequently through in-depth articles of different kinds, designed to present and exchange views on several television series.

reader can therefore choose between two separate reviews written by the same author and also two different spaces where they can communicate both with the reviewer and other users. And if the “novice” just writes in the space dedicated to him/her, the “reader” (who is not afraid of spoilers) often writes in both spaces, so as to participate in two separate discussion areas.

This form of TV-philic criticism reminds us that it is certainly the work of analysis on the fictional universe (which obviously differs for novices and readers) which trump the critical analysis of television series meant as a single audiovisual object on which attention should be focused. The theme of television adaptation remains central for the website serialmente.com which, having ended the chapter of the “double review” for each episode, continues to treat the relationship between television series and literature as one of its main topics, as seen in its new column “The book was better”: “Each morning a television treatment would get up knowing that it would have to run faster than the fanbase of the book. All of that is at risk of fierce criticism – narrative liberties, additions, missing parts, choice of interpreters – but it would not dampen in any way the expectation and desire to savour through televised images what has remained impressed on the mind when reading the story”14.

Even though Serialmente.com uses categories taken from cinephilia (links with the novel and its adaptation, genre identification, politics of authorship applied to series etc.), it is the relationship between reviewer and reader which prevails over any critical category. The interaction between the writer and the reader generates a discussion opening the way to new food for thought, in its turn moving on to other texts in the website or other ones (focusing on criticism, like Mediaworld.it, for example, or fansubbing like italiansubs.net). The relationship with the reader is therefore the focus of critical practice, and it does not come as a surprise if an important space of the site is assigned to the latest posts and most commented reviews. In our opinion, it is precisely in this close tie between the author of the review and the reader that the cinephile practice is established, which at least in part distances itself from traditional cinema criticism.

The “condition of proximity” with the series universe by fans imposes specific rules to TV-philia as well. Writing about GOT, for example, means writing about a world which the viewer/reader identifies fully with, and therefore the subject of the analysis should be treated with caution. The practice of reviewing every single episode has exploded first in the Internet with Lost, the first television series to be completely subjected to the web55, further expanding to become a widely-used critical form especially when the subject of the analysis is a high concept56 series, multiplying its possible fruition options through several experiences, as is the case for GOT. The site badtv.it for example, chooses an episode-by-episode review and uses the classic categories of cinephilia57. Simone Novarese explores the episode through narrative plots and the mise en scène; the web site seriangolo.it as well carries out an analysis of the individual episode of the TV series, by applying the categories of cinema criticism through the symbolic

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keys of interpretation based on colours. The site also presents an interactive game for readers of contents dedicated to GOT, FantaGOT.

4. VIDEO-CRITICISM AND NEW FORMS OF ANALYSIS

If we have remarked that writing on the web tends to privilege – in its categories – the relationship with readers, this relationship is compulsory in video-criticism. Today cinephiles not only write about cinema, but also talk about it. Thoughts and opinions flow freely as they are recorded from any kind of more or less professional cameras and are then published on the Internet. The purpose of that is to be seen, discussed, shared, reproduced and linked. The new reality of video-criticism must be considered as an alternative way to talk about cinema, certainly different from official criticism. There are no “high” models of reference, this is a critical form which, besides allowing for the freedom to deal with any topic linked to the audiovisual or play object, enables video-reviewers to talk about themselves and showing themselves in the most effective ways. The most widely-used channel is undoubtedly YouTube; in just a few years YouTubers have become real stars. At national level, for example, the Yotobi channel is run by Karim Musa, the first Italian video-reviewer. Yotobi is a real web-celebrity, with almost one million registered users and more than a total of 66 million views. These figures are out of reach for the other reviewers using videos to record their analyses. With his reviews about “Z” genre movies, Yotobi has become a tangible, loved, hated, sought-after, parodied phenomenon, some of his columns are also dedicated to videogame reviews (another widespread practice on YouTube) and very rarely to video-reviews of TV series. Precisely in view of the osmotic relationship developing between the user and the author of video-criticism, the television series is a dangerous object for YouTubers wanting only to increase their visibility. The series is a slippery ground exactly because it carries with it strong identity values, because fans feel they belong to the specific fictional universe which not even the web celebs should question.

In its GOT video-review, in fact, Yotobi does not apply his critical skills, but – in fear of losing his credibility and esteem – tries to defend his negative opinion apologizing with users for his opinion. In any case the video has reported more than 615 thousand views, although harshly criticised.

Outside the national context, if we limit the investigation to the YouTube channel, TV-philia is constantly growing, both qualitatively and quantitatively, thanks to video-criticism. Examples range from review/discussion in a formal studio setting as is the case for the channel run by the expert TV-philoc of “What the Flick?!”, to a per-

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19 Seriangolo.it, last modified April 30, 2015, http://www.seriangolo.it/2015/03/30/fanta-game-of-thrones-5-come-funziona/).
20 YouTube was born in February 2005 and has now exceeded one billion users in the world (every minute more than 100 videos are uploaded all over the world). In Italy Youtube has 20 million unique visitors a month.
21 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FOB6feNi79c.
22 The channel deals mostly with reviews of individual episodes of different television series; if we want to understand the type of critical analysis being carried out, a good example is that of the review of episode 4x10 (Children) of GOT, with 464,000 views: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCwTcFa0YfJhHJrmP0ptxw.
sonal approach like that of Jeremy Jahns (from the eponymous channel Jeremy Jahns) who, through the video-review of the TV series, pursues the main goal of entertaining, while also showing a strong knowledge of the subject matter\textsuperscript{23}. At national and international level, there are also dozens, hundreds of YouTubers with approaches belonging more to the fan culture than TV-philia where the aim is often that of “making oneself being heard” more than voicing a well-grounded opinion, where the so-called shitstorm\textsuperscript{24} tends to prevail over any other kind of critical or analytical approach to the object being examined.

And finally, it is precisely from the relationship and collaboration between spectators that the practice of fansubbing can be activated. The boundary separating the fan culture from TV-philia is even more blurred in this field. Are we seeing a critical practice or a mere dissemination of contents/devices?\textsuperscript{25}

Let us turn again to GOT as an example\textsuperscript{26}. The first four episodes of the fifth season of the series, one of the most pirated series in the world, were launched online illegally before their official broadcast on TV (according to the website Torrent Freak they were downloaded millions of time in just 24 hours). It is obvious that, as stated by Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni, “the consequences of the practice reverberate on the viewers’ practices, as well as on the procedures of those who offer contents illegally” and therefore, we would like to add, those who offer the subtitles for the fruition of said contents\textsuperscript{26}.

HBO had sent the four episodes of the series to reporters and television critics to look at them and write their reviews before the broadcasting of the series.

The online airing of these episodes, besides being a source of embarrassment for the cable channel, has also been an ordeal for fansubbers as well, who had to work double shifts to offer GOT fans the subtitles of the episodes. The fansubbers spoke of their work in this way: “\textit{Game Of Thrones} is a bit like Christmas: when it comes, it comes! And this year four preairs to translate did take us all a bit by surprise, like wildlings wanting to attack the Wall. But we are like the Night’s Watch, ready to face all. We won at the end, and now here it is, the eagerly awaited première of the fifth season of this glorious series”\textsuperscript{27}.

Fansubbers are prosumers, consumers manipulating the product to adapt it to their needs, at times bringing to it substantial innovations and changes. In fansubbing sharing is essential. The pleasure coming from exchanging and viewing derives specifically from this sharing. Each practice of fan culture is meaningful only if shared, in the practical work and its subsequent dissemination. Gratification lies in the endless list of thanks written in the forums by the thousands of people taking advantage of the subtitles, in the level of translations which can be attained only through the collective nature of the work. If, as we have seen, interactivity and participation in the review become the preferential way to conceive the practice of TV-philic criticism, then participation and

\textsuperscript{23} Jeremy Jahns has more than 218 million views, an example of review may be that of the famous episode 3x09 (\textit{The Rains of Castamere}) of \textit{GOT}, with almost 700,000 views https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ys_wRXmdBng.

\textsuperscript{24} An exhaustive definition of the shitstorm phenomenon, developing in the information environment is that of B.C. Han, \textit{Im Schwarm. Ansichten des Digitalen}, Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2013.

\textsuperscript{25} About \textit{GOT} see also W. Irwin, H. Jacoby (eds.), \textit{Game of Thrones and Philosophy: Logic Cuts Deeper than Swords}, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2012.


\textsuperscript{27} http://www.italiansubs.net/index.php?option=com_remository&Itemid=6&func=fileinfo&id=5791.
sharing in the fansubbing practice, if not properly defined as a critical practice, could at least be included in the universe of a new genre, that of seriality, the kind of genre generating TV-philia, the genre which can have a meaning only in sharing. “Each element, object, subject, […] etc., are of value only in their connection with the whole, and produce meaning only in and through globality […]. One feels in contact with others, participates with them in a much wider scheme of things.”

28 M. Maffesoli, La contemplazione del mondo. Figure dello stile comunitario, Genoa: Costa & Nolan, 1996, 52-53.