The complex narrative within television shows was developed in the 1990s, and has increased in popularity ever since. Jason Mittel (2006) says the complex narrative “challenges the norms of what the medium can do,” as it breaks away from shows with set characters and episodic timelines. Complex narratives tell stories in a more meaningful way, and they are able to do this through various storytelling devices. Flashbacks, repetition, portrayal of differing beliefs and opinions, multiple plot lines converging at the end of the story, different time frames, circular plotting and backward storytelling are just some examples of devices used to create a complex narrative. Interestingly, the complex narrative draws many of its features from film. TV’s one dimensional approach of non-complex narratives has been and gone, as incorporating internal messages and poignant themes into a tv show has become extremely popular in the twenty first century. This is something that was previously only done in film, but has crossed over to our favourite television series'. The example of a complex narrative within a tv show that I will explore in this essay is Season One of ‘True Detective.’

The platforms that True Detective is shown and discussed lend the show to being a complex narrative. The show was aired on HBO, a channel which Jason Mittel describes as having “built its reputation and subscriber base around narrative complex shows.” Shows aired on the channel such as The Sopranos and The Wire are similar to True Detective in terms of their complicated storylines and characters. Furthermore, a show’s surrounding discourse often has a lot to say about whether it is a complex narrative. In the case of True Detective, because it is such a profound show, hundreds of reviews have been written attempting to dissect the show’s meaning and purpose. Fan forum and pages have been created in homage to the show and the complex nature of the series has enabled a devout following by people all over the world.

True Detective has been examined as a Dramatica text, which lends itself to being a complex narrative. A Dramatica text involves the show’s creator wanting to display a deep and meaningful message. It follows a main character with a set way of thinking (Rust begins as a pessimist, skeptical of any forms of afterlife or religion after the death of his daughter.) This lead character develops a relationship with their polar opposite, in this case Marty, who believes in seeing the light and a divine presence. The development of this relationship in a Dramatica text enables the main character to adopt a new mode of thinking, and Rust demonstrates this in the season’s final scene. Once out of the hospital, the metaphor of Rust’s attempt to ‘see the light’ finally come to fruition. During his near death experience, Rust says “I knew my daughter waited for me, there...I could feel the peace of my Pop, too.” The pessimist backflips on his beliefs and even reminds Marty that “the light’s winning” because “once it was only dark.” Creator Nic Pizzolatto illustrates many messages throughout the series, but the final message here shows why the text is being described as Dramatica. This form of story structure has usually been associated with complex narrative films, therefore True Detective has yet another quality of a type of complex narrative; in this case, Dramatica.

One other important message that Pizzolatto portrays further contributes to the show as a complex narrative, and that is man’s interaction with storytelling itself. A clear dichotomy is established early on in the season between investigating a story to find the truth and
religion as a story to escape the truth. This idea plays on our grasp of reality, and questions religion as a form of what Pizzolatto describes as a form of “derranged enlightenment”. It can be argued that complex narratives can exist without True Detective’s poignant themes such as religion, death, infidelity, reality and the pursuit/avoidance of the truth. However, the use of these themes in conjunction with self-conscious narrative devices such as dual frames enables the audience to think about the show and it affects an audience’s inner psyche, which is something that separates complex narratives from the serial counterparts such as sitcoms Seinfeld and Friends.

Furthermore, complex narratives are able to develop complex perceptions of characters. This is enabled by the use of relationships, flashbacks, repetitions, memory, narration and performance. Narration, for instance, plays an important role in developing the understanding of Rust's character. The show’s narration comes in the form of Rust's soliloquies to the two police detectives and it provides an insight into his philosophical, complex mode of thinking. Therefore, the development of the inner psyche of characters is a further quality of the complex narrative.

Finally, the way texts conclude relates to whether or not they are complex narratives. The In Poetics of Contemporary Television (2011), Jason Mittel writes that complex narratives often “embrace ambiguity and circularity”, but they also enable “reflexivity and finality.” True Detective does this expertly as the audience is able to question their own beliefs on religion and reality, to ask themselves whether they are a believer or not.

REFLECTION #2

Prior to taking this semester’s course, I wouldn’t have been able to write more than a sentence on what TV means to me. “A place where I watch sport and other TV shows” would have been the extent of the response. However, through learning new concepts that relate to tv viewing, I am now able to conceptualise the role that tv plays in my life.

There are two clear platforms in which I watch my TV: the TV in the living room and the laptop which I take to my bedroom. The TV in the living room is split into two modes of tv viewing; free to air and foxtel. We purchased foxtel so I could watch more sport, but I still watch free to air, often when I’m with my family through shows such as The Bachelor and The Project. The post broadcast era of television does influence my TV viewing, as I watch shows on my laptop via the internet for free. I dot his because I feel its the best and easiest way to access my favourite shows and I don’t want to spend money on platforms such as Netflix.

In terms of the type of TV shows that I watch, I enjoy complex narratives. Complex narratives involve the development of characters in a storyline that isn’t completely episodic, but varies through the use of story devices such as flashbacks, separation of timeline etc. Shows that make me analyse the characters and the plot intrigue me, so I much prefer
shows such as Fargo and Breaking Bad compared to shows such as How I met your mother. However, my TV diary clearly displays that I view shows with a simpler narrative, such as reality shows ‘The Bachelor’ and ‘Keeping up With the Kardashians.’ This relates to Morley’s (2000) point about “conflicts of viewing choice,” as my mum and my girlfriend, in this case, are dictating what I watch. Despite not particularly enjoying a show like Keeping up With the Kardashians, I don’t mind watching it because it is one of my girlfriend’s favourite shows and I’m watching it with her. We don’t watch it often, but I am more than happy to break my complex narrative affinity for her. There is a clear “toleration, organisation and management of difference” that occurs when we are choosing a show to watch, as she watches one of my favourite shows South Park with me as well as complex narratives such as Fargo. The same applies with my mum, as I come home from work and like to spend time with her, so we sometimes watch The Bachelor because she likes it. Therefore, my TV viewing is not only dictated by my tv interests, but also the people that I watch TV with.

The idea of TV liveness clearly resonates with my TV viewing experience. TV liveness involves viewing tv with the belief that what you are watching is occurring at the present time. My TV diary clearly displays a love for viewing sport on TV, as I could sit down on a Saturday and devote the entire afternoon and evening to football (I often do.) I love watching sport on TV not only because I love sport, but because of the fact that anything could happen at any time. The idea of it being live and unpredictable fascinates me, as I find myself hoping for a particular outcome. I also like the fact that watching sport has real life implications, involves real people and the result has a huge effect on fans all over the country. Another interesting component of my tv sport viewing is the live betting that I often do while watching a game. Before the game starts or during the match, I like to place small bets on certain outcomes, which increases my investment in the TV spectacle. The excitement of following a bet whilst watching the game on the TV is something that I really enjoy and is one of the highlights of my TV experience. Furthermore, I develop further investment to the sport being showed on TV due to my support for different teams and I am extremely passionate about The Melbourne Football Club and Liverpool Football Club. I am always excited to turn on the TV to watch my two teams, and this also relates to the point that TV is able to cross geographic boundaries, as I will watch Liverpool play at Anfield in England at 2 am Australia time.

The TV in my living room definitely acts as “the totemic centrepiece” (Morely, 2000) of my home, and as discussed by Morley, the space of my living room is arranged in such a way that the TV is able to be seen from every angle. The room is dictated around the TV, so I watch television when I’m having dinner, lunch, sitting on the couch or playing with my dog. David Gauntlet and Annet Hill said that “television is often a primary determining factor in how households organise their internal geographies and everyday timetables.” Despite the lure of sitting in my room all day watching my favourite TV shows on my laptop, the TV in our living room still acts as my primary source of television and is vital to our home’s structure. I think that the TV is also important because I live in a small apartment, therefore there is little space and the living room is the hub for both family and alone activity.
I enjoy the fact that TV takes you “into a different space” and is able to “transgresses boundaries” (David Morley, 2000). This is reflected in my enjoyment of shows such as Fargo which are set in a foreign environment, and also explains why I cannot become invested in shows such as the Bachelorette, as I don’t feel intrigued into exploring the staged reality environment.

References

Reflection #1


Jason Mittel, 2006, Narrative complexity in contemporary American television, issue 28, p.29


Reflection #2

David Morley, 2000, Home territories: media, mobility and identity, pg 105-115

Jinna Tay and Graeme Turner, 2009, Television studies after TV: understanding television in the post-broadcast era, pg 54-56