

The origins of contemporary serial drama*

Origem do drama seriado contemporâneo

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ABSTRACT

Using as base methodological and conceptual contributions of the Philosophy of Drama, this paper seeks to investigate the origin of Contemporary Serial Drama. To do so, it offers a diachronic reflection on the constitution of Drama as a television genre, whose transformations serve as a landmark to think about the formal immanence of contemporary Drama. With this, it intends to demonstrate that it is in the dialectical relation among micro-structures (beat and episode) and macro-structures (arch and season) of television series that relies its dominant characteristic.

Keywords: Serial dramaturgy, television series, dramatic structures, philosophy of drama

RESUMO

Tomando como base contribuições metodológicas e conceituais da filosofia do drama, este artigo busca investigar a origem do drama seriado contemporâneo. Para tal, oferece uma reflexão diacrônica sobre a constituição do drama enquanto gênero televisivo, cujas transformações servem de parâmetro para pensar na imanência formal do drama contemporâneo. Com isso, pretende demonstrar que é na relação dialética entre as microestruturas (cena e episódio) e as macroestruturas dramáticas (arco e temporada) das séries de televisão que reside a sua característica dominante.

Palavras-chave: Dramaturgia seriada, séries de televisão, estruturas dramáticas, filosofia do drama

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THE DRAMA AND ITS POLYSEMIC DISSOLUTION

THE ATTEMPTS TO a more precise categorization of the terms and concepts in regarding to the philosophy of Drama – and we might say, to all the philosophy of language – bump into the multiplicity of meanings that these concepts and terms have both in the common sense, which attribute to them some definitions that, even tough are not far from the original meaning, use to tangent its primeval attributions, and even the scientific language, that is capable of, depending on the repertoire which it is based upon, offer even more broad meanings than those of the common sense. This conceptual polysemy is doubtless the result of the discursive nature with which the human sciences construct and attribute meaning to the phenomena they investigate, but it is also related to the changes in the cultural and artistic practices during the historical course of its own concrete expressions. In this sense, the terms and concepts to which we refer here are historical not only because, in such an ancient field as the philosophy of Drama, the theoreticians and the critics formulated them in different moments of the dramatic history, but also because they historicize the phenomena inside an even more strict and delimited field of dialogic practices that express, in its profound mesh of meanings, specific historical experiences.

The Drama is certainly one of those terms in which its broad polysemy is on the verge of a conceptual dissolution. Similar to what happens to the Tragedy, whose cartography of meanings was already written by Raymond Williams (2002), the Drama permeates our ever day experience in different instances, imposing even more difficulties to establish more crystalline and analytically operational concepts. Somewhere else, the same Williams has pointed out two basic meanings of the Drama, “first, to describe a literary work, the text of a play; and second, to describe the performance of this work, its production” (Williams, 1995: 159). As so, the Drama function booth as taxonomy of performatic experiences, staged to a real or virtual audience, and as description of the stylistic elements engendered in a text in order to produce specific spectatorial effects.

Pointed like this, the Drama is related to two sovereign Arts, the Literature and the Theater. It finds its sources in Ancient Greek Tragedy and in the epistemological tradition that, throughout the centuries, took for granted different conceptual elements of Aristotle’s Poetics and created with it some more or less hermetic models, present in playwrights and theoreticians of different nations, ages and styles. But aside the assumption of the Drama as a literary genre, whose specificities we shall discuss later, the changes in the dramatic possibilities, related to the emergence and the consequent popularization of the moving image apparatus (first cinema, then television, and later the internet), created new works and new discursive practices which we can call

Drama. No longer confined in its literary and theatrical tradition, and now in a more direct dialogue with works from the popular culture and the media, the Drama metamorphoses itself with deliberate hybridizations of genres and formats, according to the uses of the common sense. It is Drama, therefore, the journalistic representation of the evicted from a natural catastrophe¹, as well as a television genre with a specific temporality, performatic experience and production of meanings.

In this paper, we are interested in discussing, from a preliminary analysis regarding to its formal immanence, the origins of Contemporary Serial Drama. For so, we need to describe with more conceptual clarity the specificities of a serial dramaturgy with a diachronic approach, that is, evaluating the changes through the ages, but also with a synchronic approach, i.e., with the simultaneous comparison of correlated works. Beside that, we depart from a premise which, by itself, already needs a broad debate: the very existence of a contemporary television Drama – in this sense, in opposition to an ancient form of TV Drama. Starting from this opposition, we can point out specific characteristics of the contemporary dramaturgy, in order to conceptually illuminate a discussion that, most of the time, finds itself tied in an unreasonable clash of passions among genres, formats and nationalities of TV shows. Our hypothesis, in this moment, is that the relation between Drama and Epic, that is, between the concise intensity of the episode and the narrative distention of the season, provides a double sensorial engagement that demands, on one side, the feverish experience of the dramatic violence condensed in one hour of continuous exhibition, and, on the other side, the leisurely, simmering pleasure of watching the unfolding of the narrative during weeks, months and years of a show's lingering exhibition.

Both these experiences are modulated according to the dramatic buildings that overlap, from the arrangement of microstructures (unitary scenes that articulate themselves into the fabric of the episode) and macrostructures (transversal arches that interweave with the cloth of the season), and that perceive both episodic conflict tension and long term unwinding of premises. However, instead of the mere opposition between the episode (with Dramatic nature) and the season (with Epic nature), what we see is that the Contemporary Serial Drama wages a synthesis of them, offering to the episodes the narrative dimension that interconnects the plots (that are no longer just procedural situations), and to the seasons the dramatic dimension manifested in the unitary development of the story until the outbreak of a climax.

For so, we will come up here with a theoretical path both different and similar to those already canonical analysis of contemporary television series that

1. About the apparently incoherent proximity between Drama and Journalism, look at Coutinho (2012), in which contemporary television news is analyzed in its dramatic, spectacular constitution.

permeated the academic debate in the last few years. The main concepts recently suggested to understand the current productions, like Narrative Complexity (Mittell, 2006), *Série Feuilletonnante* (Buxton, 2010) and even TV Series Culture (Silva, 2014), all seem to mingle narrative and stylistic aspects of the shows with the social, cultural and technological contexts that built them, in an attempt to relate, as Mittell does, the so-called complex narrative strategies to new ways of production and reception of television itself; or, as does Silva, when he discusses the relation among narrative forms, technological contexts and ways of consumption as imperatives to the emergence of a singular cultural ecosystem, in which TV series mobilize productive and receptive instances in an intense process of production of meanings.

Therefore, without renouncing here to that conceptual armory with already proven validity, but betaking a perspective that we understand is fundamentally new, we seek in this paper to offer an eminently Dramatic look to these audiovisual phenomena, which until now used to be analyzed only in its Narrative dimension, most of the time with traditional methods of the Narratology². It means that an approximation of the philosophy of Drama (by a conceptual or even methodological affinity) with TV series field of studies is suggested here, on the one hand, because of the ability the philosophy of Drama have accumulated, specially during the last two centuries, in analyzing how the relation between form and content promoted profound stylistic changes that defined the emergence of Modern Theater in the late 19th century; and, on the other hand, due to the very dramatic nature of TV series, nowadays no longer confined to unitary time-space experiences (which historically consubstantiated the notion of episode), and outstretched in the narrative dimension of the season, which can be structured with arches, reversals and climax (eminently dramatic terms). Our goal is thus to discuss, from Benjamin's idea of origin, the formal constitution of the Contemporary Serial Drama and its dialectical relation, formative and former, not only with technological and cultural changes in the current context (e.g., digitalization, social network, fandom), but mostly with a worldview, *Weltanschauung*, the ethos of a specific age in our recent history.

PHILOSOPHY OF DRAMA: BEYOND THE MERE GENERIC CATEGORIZATION

To evoke in this moment all different perspectives around the very categorization of Drama is something that not only escapes from the specific purpose of this paper, but also would require a vast, diachronic discussion, whose amplitude would certainly extrapolate the extension of this article. We are here facing a very ancient field of studies, from which derived different modes

2. To seek an important, and rare, example that departs from this, look at Palottini (2012).

of understanding the dramatic phenomena. Despite this problem, it is indispensable to point out that our conceptual basis rests upon two fundamental perspectives: Drama as a literary genre and Drama as artistic specie. As such, each one has a multilayered semantic nature, and what interests us here is to understand how Drama, as a genre of *Poiesis*, is related to Drama as a TV show.

In the literary genre field of Poetics, the Drama stands along with the Epic and the Lyric as the triad of possibilities in representing the world through narrative (which is here understood not only as a textual materiality, but also as a unit of meaning that can be transmitted through performance, songs, images or sounds). Each one refers to specific forms of symbolic construction, in which structure are implicated particular ways to stand before factual world and its stories. They are not, however, narrow, tight categories, even though they are, by nature, pure. They consist above all in historically constructed forms that vary from time to time, according to the changes in the content they seek to express.

To recognize this complex nature of Drama as literary genre requires identifying, in the core of its essence, the constitutive elements which allow its appearance. These elements, singular characteristics that differentiate Drama from the other genres regarding both the choice of stylistic procedures and work's structures and goals, were already well explained by theoreticians such as Lukács (1965), Williams (1995) and Szondi (1983), just to stay with authors from the Critical Tradition Theory who never look at the genres, even with its essentialist dimension, jettisoned from the historical processes that constitute them. And they did so to better understand the radical changes in the Drama between the end of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, with the emergence of Modern Drama.

For them, Drama is primary, unitary and intersubjective. Its gearing is linked to the action of autonomous characters, detached from an exterior narrative instance. Its interests mobilize conflicts of wills that, with dialogue and dispute, move the dramatic action through substantial changes in the course of the story (*peripeteia* or reversal) and through discoveries shared with the audience about the very nature of each character (*anagnorisis* or recognition). As so, Drama is dialogical by essence, and here dialogue is seen not as the basic way to mutual comprehension, but as the catalyst spark of Truth's unveiling, through the painful, ostensive revelation of the subjectivities on stage.

Ultimately, the whole world of the Drama is dialectical in origin. It does not come into being because of an epic I which permeates the work. It exists because of the always achieved and, from that point, once again disrupted sublation of the interpersonal dialectic, which manifests itself as speech in the dialogue. In this

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respect as well, the dialogue carries the Drama. The Drama is possible only when dialogue is possible (Szondi, 1983: 197).

As artistic specie, the Drama can manifest itself in different means and according to multiple cultural practices. Its original place of existence is certainly the theater, whose critical tradition made by the dramatists (from Diderot and Lessing to Brecht and Artaud) or by philosophers and critics (from Aristotle and Hegel to Szondi and Williams) established some basic elements to the understanding of its phenomena. So, while historically delimited artistic processes, the several faces of the Drama as theatrical specimen (Diderot's Moral Drama, Lessing's Bourgeois' Drama, Drama in Crisis by Ibsen and Chekhov, Hauptmann's Naturalistic Drama, the Existentialism by Camus and Sartre, Modern Drama by Miller, Williams and O'Neill, Brecht's Epic Theatre, Postdramatic Theatre by Wilson and Grüber) all represent singular, detached moments in the history of Art's forms, in which formal disruptions emerge from incorporating new contents. This understanding allows us to comprehend artistic processes not only as *natural* changes in formal elements, the result of artists' subjective perceptions jettisoned from historical processes; instead, we have to conceive Art as a living organism, that changes every time, motivated by the new social, cultural, technical, political and even economical dynamics that surround it.

In the case of the philosophy of Drama, form became the central element that demonstrates the singularity of artistic expression, when dialectally related to the contents it gives life. This perspective refers to the notion, typical of the Critical Theory from a Hegelian tradition, that form and content are both indistinguishable elements, in a way that one is the dialectical counterpart of the other. As Peter Szondi explains, this idea points to, at the same time:

both the solid and lasting nature of form and to its origin in content – thus its capacity to state something. A valid semantics of form can be developed along these lines, one in which the form-content dialectic can be viewed as a dialectic between the statements made by form and content (Ibid.: 25).

To bring this methodological suggestion to the problem of television Drama means that its formal changes occurred as a result of its relation with the content, through attempts to represent the very changes in social dynamics and in the *Zeitgeist*, the worldview. That's why the understanding of the changes in TV Drama throughout history cannot be isolated from the contexts and the singularities to which each show is directly related, whether they are discursive (changes in content's addressing modes), technological (shifts in the technical

possibilities of broadcasting the content) and social (turns in the social dynamics represented by the content). For so, to understand the origins of Contemporary Serial Drama – and its formal, immanent nature –, we should comprehend, in a broader spectrum, the ways Drama as TV genre has been formed and transformed, i.e., its roots and its erosions.

FROM TELEPLAY TO *FEUILLETON*: FUNDAMENTAL TRADITIONS OF TELEVISION DRAMA

Before moving forward, we shall clarify that when we put together the debate about contemporary television series and the historical field of the philosophy of Drama, we do not want to withdraw the critical thought on dramatic forms of its epistemological place within the history of artistic knowledge. In other words, we are not here nearing two apparently opposite fields just to grant television series with an artistic value which its mediated condition supposedly could not guarantee. Our interest is to find in the formal analysis of contemporary dramatic series its singular way in creating media narratives, and for so, the philosophy of Drama, with its methods of formal analysis, offers not only important conceptual elements but mainly the idea that the quest for the essence and the origin may help to understand the effective functioning of particular cultural works. “More than anything else, this interest in the essential is precisely what is calculated to show that can better illuminate the aesthetic genres in their true meaning and in the right perspective” (Benjamin, 2003: 43).

With this, we intend to present here a brief, although variegated, overview of the main historical forms of TV Drama as a genre, with its specific structure of meanings which aims the production of particular spectatorial effects. And we go this way because, in Television Studies, Drama is understood both as a genre³ and as a format, just as *telenovela*, talk show, news, which means they are comprehended as “cultural products, constituted by media practices, and subject to ongoing change and redefinition” (Mittell, 2004: 01). That is, Drama as Television Genre is not the same as Drama as Literary Genre, even though its proximity may be more apparent than subliminal. This happens because Television Drama, as a genre, has different formats, from different cultural backgrounds, but its deeper roots are always the same: the teleplay, i.e., the single play exhibited live, that was the common ground of Television’s first years, “whose origins in theatre and radio helped to establish its cultural reputation, with some critics even considering it almost ‘literary’ in its themes and artistic aspirations” (Creeber, 2008: 15). In different countries all over the world, including Brazil, teleplay represented a crucial element to the founding of the networks, with its exclusive, notorious stars and writers.

3. It is not our interest here to discuss profoundly the notion of television genre, and its specificities as a cultural category. To seek more about it, look at Gomes (2011) and Rocha; Silveira (2012).

The teleplay as a genre will be seen here as a set of discursive production rules that patterned spectators' system of expectation, presenting instructions of "reading". A genre as a product that stepped into television competition dialectics, building a particular type of media contract with the audience, e.g., the preference for staging dramatic texts, not in chapters or episodes, but in a single transmission. As a television product, teleplay answers to a certain narrative strategy that compasses and differentiates it from other programs like *telenovela*, satire and musicals (Brandão, 2005: 51).

This means that the dominant, basic structure of Television Drama in the early ages (the teleplay) relied on the unity of action, typical of the traditional, Aristotelian Drama. And it happened not only when the shows exhibited literary plays (with performances and staging methods similar to the theatre), but also with texts written exclusively for the silver screen, from writers such as Paddy Chayefsky, Rod Serling, Reginald Rose, Sydney Newman and Cassiano Gabus Mendes⁴. These texts gradually incorporated the specificities of the new medium, avoiding abrupt changes in settings or exterior shots, focusing interpersonal relations in the verge of a dramatic crisis that progressed in an intermittent sequence of connected scenes until the climax and the resolution.

4. Although Brazilian Television Shows from these early days were almost all destroyed, we have several American or British Teleplays to watch, whether on DVD or on the internet.

The end of the teleplay as the dominant format of Television Drama happened because of technical (like the appearance of video-tape), economical (the need to cheapen production with a serial, industrial pattern) and cultural reasons (the popularization of TV set among the middle classes), which all reified into aesthetic changes, with the emergence of Serial Dramas with specific subgenres, like western (*Bonanza*, NBC, *Maverick*, ABC, and *Gunsmoke*, CBS, are all classic examples), adventure (*Zorro*, Disney/ABC, and *The Avengers*, ITV) and science fiction (*Doctor Who*, BBC, and *Star Trek*, NBC), just to stay with some of the most relevant shows. In Brazil, beyond the success US shows had back there, networks also produced on those subgenres, from the social and cultural reality of the time. *Capitão 7*, TV Record (which brought here superhero stories), *O vigilante rodoviário*, TV Tupi, and *22-2000 Cidade Aberta*, TV Globo, were all good examples of successful Serial Dramas in those established subgenres.

These new shows decisively introduced serialization as the core of television industry, creating narrative universes to the development of the stories, with a more or less stable, episodic structure, with the same characters and possible dramatic situations. With this, these series set off a complex process of repetition and renovation, in whose kernel was an economic imperative: with

a fix cast, repeated settings, and dramatic situations replicated *ad infinitum*, the series gained a procedural characteristic, i.e., each episode developed a new story about events coherent to the narrative universe of the show: a new crime to investigate, the return of the always defeated villain, a hard to cure disease, etc. In other words, although the nature of the episode has lost the eminently unitary property that teleplay exhibited, the series still kept it in the deeper layer of the narrative, whether in its thematic order (a new plot presented and concluded in the same transmission) or in its discursive order (a new way to represent procedural situations of the series' narrative universe).

In terms of dramatic structure, these series presented the episode with a unitary plot, which had beginning, middle and ending, restoring moral, unchangeable values of the protagonist's superiority over the antagonist. The characters thus showed few or none subjective development, remaining the same apart the changes in the narrative universe. These series presented them as pain characters, open to multiple reuses, whose *ethos* didn't change throughout the episodes. Their mystifying nature matched well with the necessity of the long-term identification, always repeated and always renewed, that television needed to establish back there.

However, beside this episodic characteristic of the Serial Drama, another dramatic form was also crucial to implode teleplay as an economic and cultural viable format: the *feuilleton*, brought to television from literature and radio, whose dominant format would later be *telenovela/soap opera*. They are, for sure, different traditions, even though literature and radio are primeval ancestors to both teleplay and *telenovela*. While teleplay sticks its roots in classical literature, that already have reached larger audiences on radio, *telenovela* had in popular novel and in melodrama – both also with acknowledged tradition on radio – its structural basis. In Brazil, as our history already tells it, the narrative model of Serial Drama did not become crucial to the economic and cultural development of our television, being promptly overcome by the *feuilleton*, whether in *telenovela* or in miniseries.

In terms of dramatic structure, the *feuilleton* is not built in episodes, but in chapters, and this difference is far from been merely a nomenclature whim. The episode has a narrative situation that rises from the dramatic unity, the plot, which progressively develops towards its own overcoming, i.e., the episodic plot does not repeat itself, although its structure might be replicated. Its nature, thus, is essentially dramatic in the adjective mean of the genre, since it is presented and solved in a single transmission. The chapter, on the other hand, follows the gradual and slow unveiling of the plot, which now does not present itself as a unitary structure in a single transmission, but continually

weaves dramatic situations aiming the daily attendance. If in the episode the resolution means the result of the dramatic action climax, which overcomes and supersedes the plot so the next transmission may initiate a new, singular event, in the chapter, the resolution is the pinnacle of an unsolved dramatic situation, cliffhanging the unwinding of one of the parallel plots. Summing it up: the episode solves the plot during a semantic, unitary structure; the chapter expands the plot, delaying the resolution of dramatic situations.

These two models of narrative (teleplay and *feuilleton*) are both important grounds to the building of Television Drama in its most vast complexity. As so, they act like equidistant poles in a large, variegated line, which contains all different forms and formats of Serial Drama, whether in the unitary, concise transmission of dramatic experiences, or in the unreel blooming of extensive narrative arches. Allrath and Gymnich (2005: 6) already suggested a graphic line, called *series-serials continuum*, in which, on one pole, there is the dominantly episodic structure (*series*), and, on the other pole, there is the *feuilleton* par excellence (*serials*), and between them there is a multifaceted scale of Television Shows and its singular narrative strategies.

However, the argument we are defending here is that Contemporary Serial Drama does not belong to any part of that *continuum*, but to a parallel line, which is, precisely, the abstract point where both poles of the *continuum* finally meet. This Contemporary Drama we are here talking about, at the same time unifies and overcomes episodic and serial experiences, in a complex, dialectic synthesis of dramatic structures which retains and forsakes both the concise unity of the episodic plot, limited to a single transmission, and the expansion of the plot throughout the season aiming the audience unceasing pleasure. While it isn't episodic or serial in its core, this Contemporary Drama is actually both, and with this singular duality it writes its name in the history of Drama and Television. It is its origins, thus, that we are now going to discuss.

THE ORIGINS OF CONTEMPORARY SERIAL DRAMA

The idea of origin, as we are here suggesting, has direct relation with Walter Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. As a method of analysis regarding artworks inscribed in specific historical periods, Benjamin's thoughts on aesthetic investigation present a radical proposition that advocates the insertion of the conceptual debate within a formal dimension, in a way that singular moments in Art history does not occur only when there are expressive changes in the content or the theme, but most of all when we have ruptures in the aesthetic modes of organization which the *oeuvre* promotes inside its own stylistic elements.

Therefore, the concept of allegory, that Benjamin sets as crucial to the understanding of Tragic Drama in the history of Art, and that is perceived in the image of the ruins and catacombs that illustrates the play's constitutive ambience, can be defined as a set of aesthetic singularities manifested in the inner form of the plays, such as the characters' desires and wills, the dramatic plot and its spectatorial effects, as well as the preference for mannered verses, especially the Alexandrine. Thus, Benjamin analyzes the words, the verses, the *coups de théâtre*, and even the songs written in the German Tragic Drama aiming to, in a dialectic synthesis of form and content, demonstrate, from the separation of signification and signifier, typical to the allegory, the specific scission of the World that was the general thought of the historical period in question (16th and 17th centuries).

To do so, Benjamin works with the idea of origins not as genesis, that is, the Adamic beginning of the original conception of artistic forms. He is not interested in rebuilding, step by step, a linear historical background which begins with the factual demarcation of a first day and then extends forward until an also arbitrary ending. Otherwise, his goal is to promote a broad, historicizing reflection able to perceive, in the inner form of German Tragic Drama plays, essential elements that shall define its place in the history of Art.

The term origin is not intended to describe the process by which the existent came into being, but rather to describe that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance. Origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming, and in its current it swallows the material involved in the process of genesis. That what is original is never revealed in the naked and manifest existence of the factual; its rhythm is apparent only to a dual insight. On the one hand it needs to be recognized as a process of restoration and reestablishment, but, on the other hand, and precisely because of this, as something imperfect and incomplete. [...] Origin is not, therefore, discovered by the examination of actual findings, but it is related to their history and their subsequent development. The principles of philosophical contemplation are recorded in the dialectic which is inherent in origin. This dialectic shows singularity and repetition to be conditioned by one another in all essentials. (Benjamin, 2003: 46).

With this idea in mind, how can we observe Contemporary Serial Drama as a singular dramatic form, whose origins express a decisive fissure in the historical course of its own works? To try and answer this, we start from some defining aspects that can function as methodological parameters to approach the issue. First, it is important to highlight that we are facing such a vast group of TV shows that a totalizing vision is at the same time impossible to render an

accurate analysis, and incapable of include the particular singularities that each show naturally present. But, also in this issue, Benjamin helps us, when he says that “the attempt to define ideas inductively – according to their range – on the basis of popular linguistic usage, in order to proceed to the investigation of the essence is what has been thus defined, can lead nowhere” (Ibid.: 39). That is, to analyze all Dramatic Serial Shows in order to obtain certain data that demonstrate its proximity or its distance among them, inevitably bump into a double impediment: a material obstacle (the size and the amount of transmissions) and a methodological restriction (the chosen of similar procedures of investigation).

As Benjamin, who dealt not with an immeasurable amount of works from different countries, but with literary plays whose represented world and whose language have so much changed that they were in fact irretraceable, we are going to observe, in a defined spectrum of TV shows, shared elements that highlight them from this large, misshapen scale of television series. What we call here Contemporary Serial Drama isn't, as we already described, a generic definition based on a chronological perspective. That is, they are contemporary not because they share the same age and epoch, but, as Giorgio Agamben remembers us, because they inscribe themselves in the present and prolongs their influence to the future, a becoming.

The contemporary is he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness. All eras, for those who experience contemporariness, are obscure. The contemporary is precisely the person who knows how to see this obscurity, who is able to write by dipping his pen in the obscurity of the present (Agamben, 2009: 44).

With this, we can assure that the place where Contemporary Serial Drama emerged from is the Cable TV in the U.S., during the late 90's and early 00's. When we watch shows like *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *Mad Men*, *Breaking Bad*, *Homeland*, *House of Cards*, *The Newsroom*, *Girls*, *Game of Thrones* and *True Detective*, we see a relation among them that exceeds deeply their contents (from intergalactic wars to professional crisis in a big city), their systems of exhibition (today more and more detached from the classic schedule) and their relationship with the audience (each day more integrated to a complex process of cultural mediation). And more recently, featured shows like *Borgen*, from Norway, *Broen*, from Denmark, the French *Les Revenants*, the German *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter*, the Canadian *Orphan Black*, the British *Utopia*, *Broadchurch* and *Downton Abbey*, and even Brazilian series like *A teia*, already have what, for us, is the most radical form of Contemporary Serial Drama:

a progressive and complex representation of the World that, little by little, unveils its rhizomatic profundity, whose primeval function is to gradually deteriorate our initial comprehension of the World and to slowly reveal an ambiguous, multiform Truth that inhabits the deep bosom of the characters and their human relations. In doing so, they avoid the first impression; the spectacularized and mediatized view of the World that mass media grants the right to represent. In this way, they question, in the dramatic structure of the shows, the status of Truth as a factual element subject to objective apprehension, typical of the totalizing discourses from Post-9/11 World, with its refusal to multiculturalism as a real politic regarding otherness. Each day, in messianic speeches from different religious, political or economical orders, which indiscriminately sprout in texts and images and sounds around us, the Truth emerges as something undoubtedly concrete, and projects itself to the World as an unswerving promise.

When Contemporary Serial Drama problematizes this kind of thought, showing inside its dramaturgy an indelible narrative development which, episode by episode, raises a contradiction that puts in crisis our most immediate decoding of the World, these shows, at the same time, deviate from a mythic, totalizing unity of the World and from the fallacious dispersion of shallow plots, only to propose a dramatic structure able to offer episode's unitary experience and to unwind through time fraying the staged situations.

Instead of the moralizing manifestation of the Truth, the episode in Contemporary Serial Drama works a dramatic *tour-de-force* that both unifies and expands the sensorial engagement with the story. Truth, here, as Benjamin remembers us, "is not the process of exposure which destroys the secret, but a revelation which does justice to it" (2003: 31). In Contemporary Serial Drama, characters are more multilayered than just social types open to easy apprehension. As so, they not only present structural moral flaws, but also are subject to severe ethic changes through the narrative, and, in the best cases, become characters able to shelter moral ambiguities which resist to any typifying classification.

The plots, by their side, are built into articulated meshes of dramatic situations based on narrative cores that both expand and enclose each other in a very organic way (these series may simply kill detached characters, or even protagonists, just to provoke profound reversals in the story). Their resolution may be either the establishment of a situation that extends beyond the own series, in a dramatic *continuum* (we may recall here the series finale of *The Sopranos* and *Battlestar Galactica*), or the definite solution for the central arch that supports, like the backbone, all other parallel and circumstantial plots

(the recent ending of *Breaking Bad* is an example here). In the first case, the series finale does not represent the complete restitution of the Truth – on contrary, it shows that the World extends its complex existence beyond the concrete materiality of the transmission. In the second case, the resolution does not replace an anterior order which the central dramatic arch have destroyed (there is no Fortinbras arriving to offer the people of Denmark a new kingdom), but the final redemption of men or women incapable of making up to their own destiny, evicted from the World they built by themselves but that no longer endures them. The only fair, possible resolution in Contemporary Serial Drama is the ruin, although sublime, whether to build from it a new, redeemed World, or to forget in the wreckage of memory a reign of terror.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Undoubtedly, the argument presented in this paper needs, and shall, be discussed with the concrete materiality of the shows, today with a broader, transnational circularity, and an easier analytical handling. In the contemporary context, the culture of consuming series occurs through different platforms, in an amalgamated web of sites and apps that offer the content, whether in official sites or VOD services (Netflix or Hulu, for example), or in pirate sites that spread these contents through torrent or streaming. Beside this, the very production of TV series finds today a fertile ground, with the multiplication of windows of access (TV, computer, tablet, smartphone) and even the emergence of specific legislation to produce national content to Cable networks, as is the case of Brazil, with the law 12.485/11, the so-called Law of Cable TV.

In methodological terms, the analysis of the episodes (like the beat sheet), along with the interpretation of the complex connection of plots in the season overall, may help to better look at the conceptual dimensions here sketched, and certainly it will be a next step in our research. In fact, one of the main problems in studying television series is methodological, regarding the amount of episodes which ever show usually has, as well as the long period of time, that results almost always in changes in schedule, in direct interferences from producers and executives, and even in the influence of the audience, with its ratings and its social network manifestations about the course of the plots and the characters.

However, a more factual analysis of the specific audiovisual data (style, dramaturgy, staging) should start from a conceptual point of view, which could observe, in a vast, synchronic way, the formal proximity among works of apparently different nature. And was with that in mind that we sought, in this paper, to delimit a general idea, from an inductive method, which could approach

series in a transversal way, in order to reach not the expressive singularity of scattered shows (with pursy case studies), but a shared essence that could compass the whole according to what unifies and distinguishes them, and not to what disjoints and particularizes them.

Therefore, we may end here reaffirming that Contemporary Serial Drama is defined as an artistic form with its own merits from the way it engenders a dramatic mechanism which has, inside its deeper structure of meanings, a tense balance between episodic and serial forces, in way that one leverages and supports the other. However, this does not mean an hybrid form (in which the specific elements emerge and detach from the whole's significant rules), but a synthesis, a new dramatic organization that grants the season, as a narrative structure, with a progressive, climatic dimension typical of the Drama, and to the episode, as a dramatic unity, the dispersion and the narrative concatenation typical of the Epic. On the order side, in the episode we may also experience the semantic unity of a dramatic, unitary situation (far from the schematic dispositive of procedural narratives) and in the season we may be able to recognize, from the compensated excavation of the surface of the story, the complex profundity of a World impossible to be apprehended as an absolute Truth.

The essence of Contemporary Serial Drama rests precisely in this dialectic. ■

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