Reconsidering Formal Analysis

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What do we mean by form? The word can denote style (camera, editing) or structure (episode, season). And there is the broader category of media: the novel, the movie. We have seen a great deal of justified pushback against "novelistic" and "cinematic" as descriptors of current television—often simplified advertisements of cultural status, supplied by those unfamiliar with serial television as a distinct practice.   But equally problematic is the exceptionalist argument that aims to wall television off from its cultural and formal inheritances. Critics have discussed the novel as a productive parasite, a conglomeration of inherited languages interlaced to create shapes both old and new. We need a similar approach to television: grounded in syntax, in style, in what is particular about televisual art, but also committed to examining how, just as the novel borrows from its predecessors, televisual form is always in conversation with the millennia of narrative projects that have preceded it.

I propose that we deploy three distinct but mutually engaged categories of television form. The first of these is "cognate form," that is the vocabularies and organizational strategies that television inherited from its older sibling, the cinema. Matt Zoller Seitz's article explicitly equates "form" in cinema and television with "filmmaking"—that is, the choices of camera, editing, *mise-en-scène*, and sound that determine how a particular story is told within the context of a particular medium. Cognate form helpfully allows us to see both what is shared and what is disparate in the cinematic and the televisual. We would need to think about familiar televisual habits—the close-up, the push-in, the climactic montage—alongside televisual eccentricities—most prominently, the long take— to consider fruitfully how seemingly parallel techniques across media operate when translated. I would suggest that we need to bracket the term "cinematic," unless we are indicating specific moves that recall specific cinematic traditions— as opposed to the basic elements of cinema as art. We might think of the compositional language of cinema as the equivalent of British English and the compositional language of television as the equivalent of American English— inextricably linked, but by no means identical.

The second category is "ancestral form," a category that puts television into a much longer conversation than that proposed either by televisual exceptionalists or cinematic free-thinkers. A lazy use of ancestral form would make the TV-as-novel assertions that have leaked into so many discussions, gesturing only vaguely to issues of long narrative or serial involvement, rather than at particulars of pre-20th century formal characteristics. Clearly, rigorous connections across serial storytelling phenomena are worth pursuing.   But I have also proposed thinking about television in terms of prosody, that is the techniques of meter and rhythm, enjambment and anaphora, that have defined forms of poetry for thousands of years. Whatever the values of analogy between television and the

poem, certainly one benefit is that poetry has always been recognized first and foremost by its forms—by choices of line length and stanza, of sounds and verbal interconnections. Beginning with form, rather than discovering it haphazardly in process, means we are free to address it liberally or parsimoniously, always conscious that form must be the foundation of analysis. Form inheres in the segments of narrative (scenes, episodes, arcs, seasons) through which television is narrated, a division of material similar to the segmentations of language that govern poetry.

The third category is "local form," by which I mean formal characteristics that derive neither from cinema nor from structures that preceded the cinema. I mean form that is found chiefly, if not exclusively, in television—and especially (for these purposes) serial television. For example, I argue that fifth episodes of many recent serial programs have represented turning points in the development of each particular show—moments when certain choices of style or options of storytelling become encoded or viable, and recognizable by viewers. (Prominent examples include *The Sopranos*' "College"; *Deadwood*'s "The Trial of Jack McCall"; and *Breaking Bad*'s "Gray Matter.") There is no real equivalent to the fifth-episode pivot in earlier formal systems; or, more precisely, the conditions that create this pivot (as much accidental as planned) are particular to the production circumstances and narrative imperatives of television. We may typically think of a pilot (another object with no equivalent in other arts) as a collection of possibilities, rather than a formal object as such. But if we put pressure on the pilot as a formal apparatus, with a particular history and a particular variety of techniques (we might label some of these "synecdoche," "inauguration," "tone") we can think locally about the challenges of shape and design that television has investigated, and continues to investigate, for itself.