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Modern Television Series as a Phenomenon of Popular Culture

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Modern popular television series have changed the stereotype of TV series, which were considered as a primitive genre and secondary phenomenon created for housewives and elderly leisure. Since the mid-2000s American and British sitcoms have formed a picture of the world for millions of viewers, expanded the idea of the reality which is appropriate for living and working despite the complexity, drama and tragedy. They created an entirely new manner of artistic description of people. In fact, over the last decade there was developed a new layer of „serial” popular culture. It formed not to say intelligent but psychologically new audience. In addition this audience consists of different age and social groups. The goals of this article are: analysis of the features of popular culture phenomenon, the reasons for its emergence and influencial features on mass audience.

Television series as a genre of mass and popular culture has caused disdain from the side of culturologist, philosophers, sociologists and psychologists for many years. Now it became more intelligent, exciting and provocative. People of different social statuses, professions and ages are able to find a television series according on their interest. Some viewers are watching with great interest the adventures of people during zombie apocalypse (*The Walking*

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Dead), others prefer medical drama (*Grey's Anatomy*, *House M.D.*), or a Ro-
binsonade with elements of mystery, drama and science fiction (*Lost*). At the
same time some researchers claim that modern series eventually replace cinema,
because they represent quality complex cultural product and has such advanta-
ges as professional literary basis, slow deepening into the subject and serious
dramatic material.

The popularity of television series is caused by several factors. Firstly,
they help to distance yourself from the intricate reality. Secondly, by actualizing
immediate life questions they are looking for different answers. Thirdly, bringing
people of different social and age groups together they create a culture of
watching the series and subsequent discussion with colleagues and friends.
Fourthly, with adaptation a viewer learns about life „behind the scenes" of
various professions: doctors, advertisers, TV employees etc. For example the
series *The Crazy Ones* represents life of the advertisers from *Madison Avenue*,
Justice Dexter shows the world of forensic experts and the inner world of the
protagonist.

We can find opposition of television series and films in cultural debates.
Let us distinguish two positions: a critical one and a favorable one. Critics say
that serials are not the high art because the entertainment content prevails over
the form. From this point of view series are timekillers (ordinary product desi-
gned to kill time through distraction from the main occupation or work from
time to time). The time you spend watching a season of television series is
worth ten films at the cinema.

Among the arguments in favor of modern series are: its superiority over
mainstream cinema – themes are more comprehensive and finished. Vasily Ko-
retsky, cinema reviewer, in his article *How today's television series turns into
cinema of the future* claims that the series is a new form of epic works which
has existed in novels and now pop up on television, tablets, laptops[1]. The
proof for this is the series *Game of Thrones* – a serial epic drama with features
of fantasy that was nominated for *Emmy* in the category *Best Drama Series*.
Although it must be said that the story about a teacher who has to make a living
producing drugs – *Breaking Bad* won this award.

Nikolaj Coster-Waldau, actor of the series *Game of Thrones*, answering
the question about domination of television series on films, says: „I do not think
that television series dominate but they attract the best creators of movies.
Series have more space to tell the story. It can be ten hours. You can choose

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[1] V. Koretskiy, *Kak segodnyashniy teleserial prevraschaetsya v kino buduschego*, Russkiy reporter
25 (2013), p. 58–65.

movie's budget: more or less. This is attractive both for writers and direc-tors"[2].

Budgets of modern series reached more than a million dollars for one episode. Professional actors star the main parts (e.g., Steve Buscemi, Kevin Spacey) and directors are well-known people such as Martin Scorsese (*Boardwalk Empire*), David Fincher (*House of Cards*), Guillermo del Toro (*The Strain*) and others.

There are also few more advantages: the duration of episodes (20–40 min.) and narrative form that is more suitable for modern people. Due to its form of narrative the series can offer a wider diversity of plots and detalization. In *Desperate Housewives*, *Dexter* and *House MD* dramatic and comedic scenes, moments of suspense and latent eroticism alternate. Such features as high emo-tional tension, drama and comedy interweaving elements make series closer to real life[3].

In addition modern television became an excellent platform for experi-ments. Now producers control production less so creators are able to imple-ment interesting ideas and look for new forms of presentation. This proves the popularity of such series as *Mentalist*, *Seer*, *The Sopranos*.

Vasily Koretsky pays attention to the term „series" which first appeared in the film industry. Before emergence of repertoire distribution the genre of grip-ping shorts with extensions was very popular. They were created based on tabloid-satirical novels. These films include *Fantomas* (five episodes), *Vampires* (ten episodes) and *Judex* (thirteen episodes).

According to experts TV series are at the third period of development. The first period appeared in 1940–1955 (*I Love Lucy*, *Perry Mason*), the se-cond – in 1990–2000 (*Hill Street Blues*, *Moonlighting*, *Northern Exposure*). The current period started approximately in 2005–2006 (*Law & Order*, *Game of Thrones*, *Breaking Bad*) and coincided with the strengthening of positions of cable and media companies[4].

Television series started out in 1930's, when there was such a format as a „soap opera". This term meant a popular genre of drama programs which dominated in the broadcast and were designed for female audience.

The first sings on TV was the series *Fareway Hill* (1946). In the center of the plot there is a widow from New York who moves to a small town where she

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[2] R. Lambie, *Nikolaj Coster-Waldau interview: Game of thrones acting, and the fantasy genre*, http://www.denofgeek.com/tv/20795/nikolaj-coster-waldau-interview-game-of-thrones-acting-and-the-fantasy-genre (24.02.2015).

[3] V. Koretskiy, *Kak segodnyashniy teleserial...*, p. 58–65.

[4] M. Bondar, *Budushchee – za seryalamy*, Russkyy bazar 39 (2014), http://russian-bazaar.com/ru/content/157690.html (24.02.2015).

meets a man engaged with another woman. Paying attention to the fact that
,,soap operas" as one of the forms of television series was aimed at housewives,
its main task was to fill the time for ,,a woman who found herself in home
isolation" (M. Brown).

Everyday routine contributed to the fact that life seemed grey and monoto-
nous. That is why women gladly engaged in thrilling, intriguing, full of ups and
downs but artificial life of ,,soap operas". These factors promoted consideration
of series as an insignificant genre. However in the 1950's in the United States
there was a new US television programming, which prepared the ground for the
television of that format which we used to see today. The long-running series *As
the World Turns* (1956–2010) played an important role too. It became the ,,gold
standard" of the genre: slow search of answers to domestic and psychological
problems, a wide range of professions mentioned in the series and so on.

While in the 1950's and 1960's political and social themes appeared in the
story of series by chance, in the second part of the 1970's the audience began
to demand more urgent stories. Formed earlier principle, according to which the
viewer always chooses ,,convenient" television product, has not been effective
yet. People wanted to see something exciting and provoking. At the same time
in 1972–1973 the number of films made for television broadcast exceeded the
number of Hollywood films aired on television for the first time[5].

Television series actualized new topics: *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*
(unlike the previous series, the main character was not widowed, divorced or
actively looking for a man), *All in the Family* (updated such topics as racism,
homosexuality, women's rights, rape, abortion, cancer, the Vietnam War), *Dal-
las* (attracts attention with its eye-catching plot which is connected with such
topics as wealth, sex, intrigue and power struggles) and others.

The second period of the development of TV series accounted for the
1990's and attracted the attention of younger audience. *Beverly Hills, 90210,
Melrose Place* and *Dawson Bay* focused on younger audience than ever before.

During this period significant changes happened. They laid the background
for the development of modern series as an ,,smart" copyright product. In 1990
a famous American director David Lynch created *Twin Peaks*. The first season
of the series created by all the rules of this genre with the addition of romance
and detective investigation. That is why it was successful among the average
viewer – housewife. ,,However in the second season the true intention of Lynch
and the film screenwriter Michael Frost became clear: cleverly using all existing
stamps and combining detective story with ,,black" comedy, mysticism with

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[5] V. Koretskiy, *Kak segodnyashniy teleserial...*, p. 58–65.

melodrama and thriller with surrealism, creators openly joked on housewives in the final (30 episode)"[6].

The third wave of TV series has place in the mid-2000's. At this time a person begins to feel the need for a new way of mastering reality. Changing its format television series could offer adequate stories about a complex world, so they started to occupy leading positions. In his book *The Language of New Media* Lev Manovich discusses the new shapes of our perception of culture, pointing out the importance of rapid coverage. Those events which have taken place today can be implemented in cinema just in few years. In turn television series immediately cover current topics. Many episodes of the series tell about the events taking place several weeks before creation of the episode[7]. For example, the complete process of creating one episode of *South Park* (from the idea to the release the episode) needs only six days. This ensures well-timed commentary support for socially significant events and themes.

Thus the third period TV series do not coincide with the definition „soap opera". Soap operas were created only for housewives. From now on the actualized topics should not be politically correct and obligatory have the happy ending. As an example let us remember the television series *House MD* which, according to S. Pereslegin, is psychotherapy sessions for the audience. The scholar believes that this series prepares viewers for a new life in which there will be no happy-endings.

Note another interesting trend. The bloom of the series of the third period coincide with the development of 3D-film technology, computer special effects and entertainment. And at this time viewers start to prefer short episodes (40 min) on television, where characters mainly speak to each other.

At the turn of the 21st century there was one of the most significant changes – the democratization of choice. It is difficult to say that now we have no choice: the number of material things that are in our usage today is thousands times more than a hundred years ago. Every year there is a variety of movies and TV series, according to UNESCO, worldwide film studios produce annually 4250 movies. At the same time despite the increase of information its consumption has hardly increased. In the United States in 1992 the average American household spent on watching television, listening to music or reading 3324 hours, in 2000 – 3380 hours [6]. Due to the estimates of critics from 100 films only 10 gain popularity all around the world. This suggests that the behavior of

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[6] A.I. Denysova, *A.I. Seryal kak kulturnoe y subkul'turnoe yavlenye*, Analytyka kulturolohyy 23 (2012), p. 54.

[7] P. Hernández, *Muiño L. Por qué nos gustan tanto las series*, http://www.lavanguardia.com/estilos-de-vida/20141205/54421043623/por-que-nos-gustan-tanto-las-series.html (24.02.2015).

consumers in the information society has changed and, as never before, audience influences the development of film and television industry. The viewer realizes what big companies can do with him and it is difficult to manipulate such a viewer. „The consumer is neither a simpleton or a victim of a capitalist conspiracy nor frivolous man who only wants pleasure"[8].

Understanding the importance of choice in today's information society is crucial for comprehending contemporary viewer and sources of „smart" television series. We will name the works of the third period as „smart" series. A number of new television series are created in the mid-2000's. They give the viewer a possibility to choose. Therefore he can accept or reject a cultural product, based on the various proposals from cable and multimedia networks, directing decisions and novelty.

„Smart" series differ from works of earlier waves of development by displaying cultural trends and complexity of the modern world. The themes underlying the series should motivate modern viewer. Talking about daily routine and involving it in the plot (protagonists in *Velvet* invite viewers to share dinner with them on social networks), TV series have great potential of intellectual and emotional impact. The current viewer requires increasing sophistication and complexity of the plot.

American media theorist Steven Johnson in his work *Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Popular Culture Is Making Us Smarter* proves that modern culture – television and computer games – in contrast to popular opinion about reducing of intellectual ability of the viewer suggests aggravation of his mind. To understand what is happening in the television series you should keep in mind dozens of storylines, relationships between characters, their history etc[9].

S. Johnson claims that earlier television could simplify the story about human relationships. But now there is a tendency to improve cognitive skills of the audience not only in the reality show but in series' scenarios. Also the scholar suggests that modern television and movies have reduced the number of „flashing arrow" (metaphorical name of admission, which is used to add an object or situation which will contribute to the further development of the plot), allowing the audience to understand the plot and it also requires more cognitive concentration, paying attention to details and information if the audience wants to understand what they are watching.

„Smart" series is a collection of interconnected stories. Because of this they are given by the hidden plot elements which are virtually impossible to

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[8] I. Shmigin, *Filosofiya potrebleniya*, Khar'kov 2009, p. 17.

[9] S. Johnson, *Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter*, Riverhead 2005, p. 1–250.

understand in one view and which are disclosed at the end of the season. And some elements are intertwined with the storyline and disclosed only in a few season (*Fringe*, *Lost*).

„Smart" series differ because of better adaptation to new ways of reproducing information than other works of art. Media expert Ana Tous claims: „Fictions are the best engines in television industry". So viewers prefer television series as modern audiovisual means of content transmission[10]. We can watch the television series at any convenient time. On the example of *House of Cards* which was laid out on Netflix (the whole season) we can see the trend: in the future you can watch series anywhere and at any time without waiting for the release of next seasons.

The world of a series and development of its characters are important elements of „smart" television series, both embodied in the creation of a series of articles in *Wikipedia* (we give as an example the well-known online encyclopedia, because its contributors have created a large number of materials about contemporary series): protagonists' biographies and their characters' description, list of episodes, critics, some interesting facts.

Another important feature of modern series is the diversity of characters who have both advantages and disadvantages. For example the protagonist of the series *Breaking Bad* – school teacher who makes amphetamine – is intriguing and arouses compassion. It is also important that the main characters are very realistic. They do not look as models (for example cross-eyed Benedict Cumberbatch (*Sherlock*), the average ugly girl Elisabeth Moss (*The Crazy Ones*, *Mountain Lake*), like a plumber Hugh Laurie (*House M.D.*), playboy--drinker David Duchovny (*Californication*)[11].

Due to serious competition the creators of „smart" TV series monitor the quality of their products very attentively: majority of the shows pay serious attention to details. Thus professional doctors were always present at the stage of *House M.D.* In the process of creating historical TV series experts in particular historical era are involved.

There are several definitions of the quality of TV production in discussions surrounding the development of television. Inna Kushnariova in her article *How We Were Accustomed to Series* highlights three main definitions. Firstly, it was believed that quality television was national television, programs in which the country told about itself, its past and future. Secondly, the quality was made to locate in a specific television genre – drama, television performance, less comedy series. Finally, high-quality television product eventually should get the

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[10] P. Hernández, *Muiño L. Por...*, (24.02.2015).
[11] V. Koretskiy, *Kak segodnyashniy teleserial...*, p. 58–65.

status of classics, remain in the memory of generations. At the beginning quality of television was presented by technical standard only. Today the development of technologies totally changed the quality of television picture, which now not much differ from cinema. „Visualization began to play on television an independent role. Now it is not a supplement to the scenario text. Drama, plot and genre peculiarities of new series allow to show off technological capabilities of new television sparing no money"[12].

The new visual language of television and the emergence of the phenomenon of „smart" TV series drop to the change of the roles film and television play in society. In this context the idea of Ukrainian scholar George Pocheptsov is interesting. He considers movies and television as two driving forces, which can give answers on strategic and tactical questions.

Television series, according to G.G. Pocheptsov, appear to answer tactical questions. The strategy has been assigned to the movie. „When George Lucas created his *Star Wars*, working with John Campbell, who in the Western world is the number one in the study of mythology, it was the transition to the next level" – emphasizes the scholar[13]. And now TV series also have taken up another mythology, not routine, but strategic. „In the TV series the role of psychology increase. For example, when profiling professionals help to search criminals (series *Mentalist*, *Criminal Minds*). The main idea is that a crime committed today can be bound to failures in a man's previous life"[14].

Finally, we should mention another aspect that can be developed in further studies. In Ukrainian the word „smart" has the meaning as „gifted mind". At the same time Ukrainian market has a lot of „smart" technology, where the principal value has the prefix „smart" (smart phone, Smart TV etc.). We want to connect the meaning „smart" in popular context and „smart" TV series in our sense (using new visual language, detailed study of characters of protagonists and plot details, quality literature basis).

Thanks to smart technologies a viewer can change the course of events and the fate of characters in the series. New opportunities give a choice (we can emphasize the growing importance of choice) to view not given by the author image but the whole season in chronological order or in a free manner, thus combining narrative plot of story and creating a new story. The ability to rewind scenes and to watch favorite episodes several times, to switch from one character to another and follow their stories and dive deeper in search of hidden connections – is one of the potential facets of „smart" series.

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[12] I. Kushnareva, *Kak nas priuchili k serialam*, Logos 3 (2013), p. 12.
[13] *Potoki informatsii*, http://www.nkj.ru/archive/articles/5922 (24.02.2015).
[14] Ibidem.

In addition, today there are applications that allow you to evaluate a particular part of series while watching it. It gives a possibility to analyze the quality and efficiency of the material. Thus, the Internet gives a viewer possibilities to support two-way communication with the creators of TV-products. By sending messages the viewers are able to get an answer in the next scene in the series.

At the same time the TV series of the third period are self-critical and (with the main technical achievements) actively reflect on them. One striking example is the mini-series *Black Mirror* (UK, 2011 – till now)[15]. In modern life, as in the life of characters, there are many technical innovations which turn reality to absurd, so the viewer is offered an alternative view on technology. In each series, we see a new version of the future, new characters and new technology that lead the plot in motion. For example, three stories of the first season tell of the negative side of the Internet and social networks (*The National Anthem*), industry of television show, which recently flooded television screens (*Fifteen Million Merits*) and technology „memory editing” (*The Entire History of You*).

We come to the conclusion that because of ideological changes and the development of popular culture we need a new philosophical and cultural reflection on the TV series phenomenon. More than ever the viewer understands the nuances of culture industry. Moreover he has possibilities to make a choice previously denied, so he has a desire to manage his own information space. At the same time the format and nature of TV series have been changed. They should be considered not only in terms of entertainment (the first two periods of television development), but also in terms of creating meanings, values and communication (serials of the third period). It is the practical aspect of this article.

Semantic content of „smart” TV series (third period of television series) is closely associated with the life of the audience. Changing of social, cultural and economic conditions and lifestyle at the turn of the 21st century helped to change its needs, and in return the audience directly influenced the content of a television product.

NOWOCZESNY SERIAL JAKO ZJAWISKO KULTURY POPULARNEJ

(STRESZCZENIE)

We współczesnych serialach stosuje się nowy język wizualny. Na jego podstawie można dokonać szczegółowego opisu charakteru głównych bohaterów, przebieg fabuły, której podstawą jest dobra literatura. Według autora artykułu nowoczesny serial określany jest jako „inteligentny”. Wynika to z rozwoju nowoczesnych/inteligentnych technologii coraz powszechnie dostępnych.

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[15] *Black Mirror (mini-series)*, http://www.kinopoisk.ru/film/655800 (24.02.2015).

MODERN TELEVISION SERIES AS A PHENOMENON OF POPULAR CULTURE

(SUMMARY)

This article is about the features of the third period of the development of television series which has become a source of new meanings and values in popular culture. Modern television series differ by the usage of new visual language, detailed description of main characters' nature and details of the plot and good literary basis. The television series of the third period are named „smart" by the author. It is associated with the significant intellectual progress of modern viewers and popular smart technologies in today's world.

MODERNE FERNSEHSERIEN ALS EIN PHÄNOMEN DER POPKULTUR

(ZUSAMMENFASSUNG)

In dem Artikel erschließen sich die Besonderheiten der dritten Welle der Entwicklung von Fernsehserien, die eine Quelle der Sinnsuche und der Idealwerte in der populären Kultur geworden ist. Aktuelle Serien unterscheiden sich durch eine neue Bildsprache, eine detaillierte Beschreibung der Charaktere der Hauptfiguren, Stoffdetails und auch eine literarische Qualitätsbasis. Serien der dritten Welle der Entwicklung nennt der Autor „smart", da sie mit dem gegenwärtigen geistigen Sprung der Zuschauer und den herrschenden Smart-Technologien verbunden sind.