“...and Starring Jerry Bruckheimer as Picasso”: The Cubist Revival in Twenty-first Century Television Programming

Claude Rubinson
University of Houston—Downtown
Houston, Texas

7th Conference of the European Research Network Sociology of the Arts
Vienna, Austria
September 8, 2012
The Cubist Aesthetic

Picasso (1910) Portrait of Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler

Picasso (1912) Violin and Grapes
The Cubist Television Aesthetic

24, Season 1 (2002)

24, Season 2 (2002)

24, Season 2 (2002)
The Cubist Television Aesthetic

CSI: Miami, Season 6 (2008)
The Cubist Television Aesthetic

Cold Case, Season 3 (2006)
The Cubist Television Aesthetic

Lost,
Various Seasons
(2004–07)
The Cubist Television Aesthetic

How I Met Your Mother, Season 7 (2011)

Without a Trace, Season 1 (2002)

How I Met Your Mother, Season 7 (2011)
The Cubist Television Aesthetic

*Cubist Television:* A narrative technique that decenters audience perceptions and presents the story from multiple perspectives.

*Visual Cubism:* Multiple perspectives are conveyed through split-screen or other visual effects (e.g., trajectory shots or flashbacks)

*Narrative Cubism:* Multiple perspectives are conveyed through intersection storylines, often geographically or temporally dispersed. Intersection is integral to the plot.
The Popularity of Cubist Television

- Analysis of top-30 ranked hour-long dramas from the 1996/97–2006/07 U.S. Broadcast seasons
The Popularity of Cubist Television

• Analysis of top-30 ranked hour-long dramas from the 1996/97–2006/07 U.S. Broadcast seasons

• 40 top-30 ranked dramas over 11 seasons

• 8 top-30 Cubist dramas:
  24, CSI:, CSI: Miami, CSI: NY, Cold Case, Heroes, Lost, Without a Trace
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Season</th>
<th>Cubist Dramas</th>
<th>Top-30 Dramas</th>
<th>Proportion of Top-30 Dramas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006/07</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005/06</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004/05</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>0.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003/04</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002/03</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001/02</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000/01</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999/00</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998/99</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997/98</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996/97</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Popularity of Cubist Television

Mean Non-Cubist Rank

Mean Cubist Rank

Mean Non-Cubist Share

Mean Cubist Share
The Popularity of Cubist Television

- Media scholars emphasize slick production values, viewer distrust of the neoliberal state, and happy endings. These explanations are too particular and don't address the Cubist aesthetic itself.

- Sociological theories of cultural forms ask “Why did Cubist television arise when it did?”
  - Exogenous/political-economic models
  - Ecological/fashion models
The Popularity of Cubist Television

• Content analysis of television dramas for Cubist visual compositions (fractured backgrounds, fractured views, multiplied views, and circling shots)
The Popularity of Cubist Television

- Content analysis of television dramas for Cubist visual compositions (fractured backgrounds, fractured views, multiplied views, and circling shots)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean Minutes per Episode</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-Cubist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fractured Backgrounds</td>
<td>5.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fractured Views</td>
<td>4.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiplied Views</td>
<td>1.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circling Shots</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Episodes</td>
<td>590</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Popularity of Cubist Television

- Content analysis of television dramas for Cubist visual compositions (fractured backgrounds, fractured views, multiplied views, and circling shots)
The Popularity of Cubist Television

- Content analysis of television dramas for Cubist visual compositions (fractured backgrounds, fractured views, multiplied views, and circling shots)

- Preliminary results are equivocal. Emergence of Cubist visuals at the turn of the century is consistent with exogenous model. But gradual adoption of form is consistent with ecological model.
The Popularity of Cubist Television

• Content analysis of television dramas for Cubist visual compositions (fractured backgrounds, fractured views, multiplied views, and circling shots)

• Preliminary results are equivocal. Emergence of Cubist visuals at the turn of the century is consistent with exogenous model. But gradual adoption of form is consistent with ecological model.

• Diffusion pattern of fractured and multiplied views suggests third model: the cultural innovation.
Cultural Innovation Hypothesis

- Based on Coleman, Katz, and Menzel (1957)
- Hypothesis: Cultural innovations spread throughout ecosystem but do not become passé as with fashion, as long as they continue to meet a need.
- Question then becomes: If the Cubist television aesthetic is a cultural innovation, what function does it serve?