On the Emergence and Diffusion of Cultural Innovations: The Cubist Aesthetic in Twenty-first Century Television Programming

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Sociological Theories of Cultural Forms

- Exogenous models emphasize the role of external conditions, usually the political-economy
- Ecological models operate within the cultural realm
  - Fashion models (Simmel 1957; Blumer 1969; Lieberson 2000)
  - Cultural Innovation models (Coleman, Katz, and Menzel 1959; Rossman 2012)
Cultural Innovation Model

- Functional argument: Cultural innovations emerge to meet a particular need.
- Diffusion pattern: Cultural innovations spread throughout ecosystem but do not become passé as with fashion, as long as they continue to meet a need.
- Key question: What function does a cultural innovation serve?
Cubist Television as a Cultural Innovation

*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 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 Emergence of Cubist Television

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Season</th>
<th>Cubist Dramas</th>
<th>Dramas in Top-30</th>
<th>Proportion of Top-30 Dramas</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006/07</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005/06</td>
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<tr>
<td>2004/05</td>
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<td>12</td>
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<td>2001/02</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>0.07</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000/01</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>1996/97</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Popularity of Cubist Television
The Popularity of Cubist Television

[Graph showing the proportion of Top-30 Programs for All Dramas, Conventional Dramas, and Cubist Dramas from 1996/97 to 2006/07.]

- **All Dramas**
- **Conventional Dramas**
- **Cubist Dramas**

[Bar chart showing the proportion of Top-30 Dramas for Conventional Dramas and Cubist Dramas from 1996/97 to 2006/07.]
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.
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• Simmel: aesthetic forms as manifesting a society's world-view; artistic style as a way of imposing order on the world.

• Sorokin: sensate periods portray reality as it really is; secular subjects and naturalistic representations; sensate periods are materialistic and characterized by organic solidarity.
The Diffusion of Cubist Visuals

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

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mean Minutes per Episode</th>
<th>Non-Cubist</th>
<th>Cubist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fractured Backgrounds</td>
<td>5.93</td>
<td>8.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fractured Subjects</td>
<td>4.89</td>
<td>7.17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Multiplied Views</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>2.67</td>
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<tr>
<td>Circling Shots</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of Episodes</td>
<td>590</td>
<td>150</td>
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</table>
The Diffusion of Cubist Visuals

- Content analysis of television dramas for Cubist visual compositions (fractured backgrounds, fractured subjects, multiplied views, and circling shots)
Explaining the Emergence and Diffusion of Cubist Television

• Supply-side explanations:
  – Institutionalized mimicry (Bielby and Bielby 1994)
  – Production of symbolic culture (Peterson)

• Demand-side explanations:
  – Fashion cycle (Lieberson 2000)
  – Psycho-cultural resonance (Simmel and Sorokin)

• Functional explanation:
  – Cubist television as a cultural innovation added to our shared cultural repertoire (Swidler)
  – Cubist television as a symbol that we have learned to interpret, and may therefore be deployed as needed