

STYLE AND STAGING: ASPECTUAL VARIATIONS OF MISE-EN-SCÈNE IN AARON SORKIN'S TELEVISION SERIALS

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KEYWORDS

Aaron Sorkin; mise-en-scène; style; staging

ABSTRACT

This article explores style as a central issue in the study of television fictional serials. With a special focus on Aaron Sorkin's works in this field, it aims at stylistic markers that result from the interactions between dramaturgical writing and cinematic *mise-en-scène*. The article points at different

solutions employed by directors associated with Sorkin's productions for proper staging of these works. The analysis values the heuristic uses of the concept of "style", in disciplines like art history and literature studies, while experimenting on their possible applications to television serial drama. The article also specifies functionalities of style, in relation to processes of authorship attribution, thus qualifying its place in staging as a creative agency of TV serials. As proving grounds of this examination, the article analyses the works of two directors of Aaron Sorkin's show *The West Wing* (Thomas Schlamme and Alex Graves) by evaluating the manners in which they propose different solutions for the staging of Sorkin's dramaturgy.

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1. PROLOGUE: STYLE, BUT NOT AUTHORSHIP, TOWARDS A POETICS OF STAGING

In this study, I investigate “style” in television serials as a means to understand – and mostly problematize – several dynamics governing authorship in works of this specific cultural field. In so doing, I employ stylistics as a heuristic tool for addressing some aspects of creative agencies that bring these productions to life, making them available for aesthetic appreciation and cultural evaluation.

I recognize the issue of authorial attribution in TV serials as something involving several theoretical discourses originated in Social Sciences, Literary Studies, Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art – and even in Law.¹ In most of these cases, authorship is generically associated with diversified dynamics of creation in professional communities, leading to social identification of agents in the production sphere as responsible for artworks. However, my point here is that authorship designates a phenomenon considerably distinct from that of style, at least from a theoretical standpoint.

In most sociological and historical frameworks for theorizing authorship in cultural fields of art production, such attribution is a matter of the social processes within which individuals and institutions strategize and consolidate instances for the recognition of the causal history of these products. Just considering two separate systems of authorship, literary studies and Art History outlined this issue in similar ways: there is a commonality between Pierre Bourdieu's ideas about the formation of a “literary field” (in the ways Gustave Flaubert and Charles Baudelaire projected their literary aspirations of autonomy) and Michael Baxandall's interpretation of Pablo Picasso's strategies for distancing himself early modernist painters of early 20th Century, aiming to establish his own work in Paris. Both cases illustrate how authorship in art and literature is coined as a process of social positioning of individuals within social environments, of disputes and negotiations for recognition, in contexts of collective agencies (involving art critics, dealers, and their institutions, just to name a few).²

1 While I recognize this wealth of theories dedicated to studies of authorship, stemming from philosophical to literary sources of explanations (Barthes, 1977; Benjamin, 1998; Foucault, 1998), my aim here is to concentrate on those perspectives more connected with the nature of processes in authorship attribution closer to the study of audiovisual formats, such as film and television serials – the list of which I shall decline when opportunity arises in this article.

2 In the scope of my exploration of authorship in TV serials (Picado and Sousa,

Such views on authorship are reflected in the ways TV serials are approached, in terms of their modes of production – within hierarchical structures of creation in segmented crafts (scriptwriting, staging, cinematography, sound, acting, among others). Jason Mittell's take on authorship is not distant from Bourdieu's, apart from the fact that television authorship is not defined “by origination” but “by responsibility” (Mittell 2015: 87, 88). One important element of how TV serials are detached from literary authorship is the fact that dramaturgical conception tends to play a larger role than any other sectors of these productions, in terms of authorial recognition – thus serving for my argument for separating “authorship” and “style”, since the latter involves sorts of creative choices somehow suggested by dramaturgical conceptions, originated in scriptwriting.

Since most programs' managerial oversight typically come from a writer, the writing process is seen as more central to a series' creative vision than is the contribution of directors, who are often hired as rotating freelancers rather than permanent members of the production team. The writing staff is much more stable, typically with a regular team of between 6 and 12 writers (many of whom also have producer credits) whose work in a “writer's room” is regarded as the program's nerve center (Mittell 2015: 90).

One critical approach on authorship comes from Ted Nannicelli's appreciation of TV serials as artworks. Departing from contemporary analytic aesthetics, his views on authorship serve as sources for my taking into account the role of staging – with the quota of style embodied by it. For starters, Nannicelli distances himself from the dominance theories pose on stances of production for the analysis of television as an artform – in appraisal of the critical, aesthetic appreciation, and the ways in which it ascribes not only meanings for artworks but also levels of responsibility for their successes or failures. Nannicelli also establishes a distinction between

2018), this common ground between Baxandall and Bourdieu is exemplified by how similar are their historical characterizations of disputes in their respective artworlds, regarding the conquest of autonomy: the notion of “*troc*”, explored extensively by Baxandall (Baxandall, 1985) is an obvious counterpart of Bourdieu's descriptions of strategies of both Flaubert and Baudelaire in order to consolidate their literary production in 19th Century (Bourdieu, 1996). Concerning authorship in TV serials, the important point is that such disputes for recognition occur mainly within collective contexts of professional circles, and not as a contradiction between artistic creation and managerial logic of cultural production.

“authorship” and “agency”, as a central axis for my arguments favoring entailments between “style” and “staging” – especially in the role played by teams of directors in TV serials. According to him, the concept of agency is more suitable for the understanding of how appreciation points towards the stances of production responsible for the qualities presented by artworks – which is a more nuanced phenomenon than authorship attribution.

Supposing, again, that authorship does, in fact, involve a certain degree of control over the whole of a work, we are likely to need another means of praising creative contributions and talking about achievement in the context of television, where authorship in this sense simply does not obtain in the majority of cases. The broader concept of agency provides those means (Nannicelli 2016: 25).

I add to this thinking about agency two other sources for how to analyze style in TV serials: the first one is David Bordwell's poetics of cinematic staging as a stylistic vector of classic narrative cinema. Beyond the mere description of the practical procedures of filmmaking, Bordwell insists on the fact that these creative solutions of staging are results from a dual dynamic of the reliance these works develop in regard to the understanding that comes from a history of film reception; apart from such aesthetic groundings of his poetics, Bordwell also rely on the internal negotiations happening between a diegetic model of film narrativity, and the mimetic counterpart of this narrative structure - in short, he is talking about the relationship between dramaturgy and *mise-en-scène*.

The poetics of any artistic medium studies the finished work as the result of a process of construction – a process that includes a craft component [...], the more general principles according to which the work is composed, and its functions, effects and uses. Any inquiry into the fundamental principles by which artifacts in any representational medium are constructed, and the effects that flow from these principles, can fall within the domain of poetics (Bordwell 2007: 12)

As I move towards aesthetic appreciation of TV serials, my claims about style involve a disciplined sort of perceptual attention, proper to all sorts of cultural criticism. In several

branches of Art History and philosophical Aesthetics, this is an issue that calls for the centrality of a notion like “aspectuality”, an item to be developed in the next section. In what concerns the import of these attitudes in analyzing TV serials, my approach is supported by a growing body of literature and research, claiming for the employment of methods of “close reading” of TV serials, addressing different qualities of their meanings and aesthetic functioning (Butler 2013; Jacobs and Peacock 2013). This involves attention to how often significant details are disclosed, which often leads to a more analytical approach towards the phenomenon. This approach employs a heuristic of reverse-engineering viewing experience, a recommended procedure indicated by several scholars of TV serials.

Thus the same attention to detail that scriptwriters, directors, cinematographers, editors, and so on, put into the construction of a television text must be employed in the deconstruction of that text. This is a lesson of film and television analysis that I learned long ago when, as an undergraduate, I was forced to perform shot-by-shot scene *découpages* in a French cinema class. (Butler 2010: 6)

From an empirical standpoint, my choice of examination is centered in the works of playwright, screenwriter, and showrunner Aaron Sorkin. I focus particularly on some of his key productions, including *Sports Night* (ABC, 1998/2000), *The West Wing* (NBC, 1999/2006), *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip* (NBC, 2006/2007), and *The Newsroom* (HBO, 2012/2014). As an issue of TV stylistics, I concentrate specifically the development of staging techniques for the initial four seasons of *The West Wing*, at the period he remained in charge of scriptwriting³. In this short duration, I detect nuances of a “historical poetics of *mise-en-scène*” (Bordwell 2005), referring to a set of theatrical techniques of directors to validate Sorkin's dramaturgical writing.

As I mentioned earlier, in the next section I shall explore a heuristic of style in TV serials, though the articulation of significant markers of staging (hereby defined as “aspects”). In that part of my argument, I decline the importance of several

3 John Wells, one of the producers of *The West Wing* (alongside Aaron Sorkin and Thomas Schlamme) describes, in a statement to the Writer's Guild Foundation, the tension in show's production that resulted in the dismissal of Sorkin as the chief of the series' writing room, by the end of its 4th season – though he remained with the credits as its main creator. The entire statement can be found at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RqbiRdd67d8>.

methods for interpreting artworks, mainly derived from Art History (with significant and documented influences in film and contemporary TV analysis), all of which are considerably based on inferential and functional attributes of perceptual appreciation of artworks. This correlation of inference, aspectuality, and appreciation constitute a system of my conceptions about staging as a stylistic vector and a perceptible property of TV serials.

In subsequent sections, I delve into my inquiries about the poetic dynamics of style in TV serials, centering it on the staging patterns of *The West Wing*. My aim is to explore this “aspectualized” embodiment of such creative choices of *mise-en-scène* in Sorkin's works. While pointing out various approaches of teams of directors of *The West Wing*, I observe two distinct patterns in the *mise-en-scène* - particularly evident in the cases of Thomas Schlamme and Alex Graves. Despite differences in the frequency of their collaborations, the interaction of Sorkin's writing with these directors yields two distinct methods for bringing Sorkin's dramaturgy to fruition. I therefore choose the distinct cinematic framing and shooting techniques adopted by these directors as aspectual markers characterizing this evolving quality of the style of *The West Wing* over the course of the series' arcs and seasons.

2. STAGING AS STYLISTIC VECTOR: ASPECTUALITY, APPRECIATION, INFERENCE

I am proposing a stylistics of TV serials, defining the staging activity as an *agential stance* for eliciting effects over audiences – inductive of aesthetic responses that result in the proper evaluation of these works. When this process is addressed through a disciplined perceptual appreciation, one senses the importance and centrality of a notion like that of the significant “aspect” an element that governs attention to artworks in criticism. A quite influential reference of such a disciplined dimension of criticism is Arnold Isenberg's “Critical Communication”, from which I extract this single passage as illustrative of his method:

I may be stretching usage by the senses I am about to assign to certain words, but it seems that the critic's meaning is “filled in”, “rounded out”, or “completed” by the act of perception, which is performed not to judge the truth of his description

but in a certain sense to understand it. (Isenberg 1949: 336)

Within confines of philosophy of art and visual semiotics, “aspectuality” instantiates the assumed “likeness” or “realism” of illusionist paintings (Eco 1968; Lopes 1996; Schier 1986), while also serving for segmenting elements characterizing artworks' recognizable stylistic unity (Ginzburg 1989; Wölfflin 1950). In studies of visual discourse, “aspect” is linked to the selective operations of perceptual gestalt involved in pictorial perception – thus allowing for the dynamic effects on stable visual forms of representation, in the art of caricature (Picado 2016), in genre paintings (Gombrich 1960), and even photojournalism (Picado 2008). These heuristic employments of “aspectuality” by art historians and philosophers carries an important lesson on how to proceed with a structured evaluation of staging in the appreciation of TV serials – thus serving as proving ground for how to define the agencies of style in this field.

Such a connection between a criticism's heuristics (such as Isenberg's) and bearers of style in audiovisual studies (like Bordwell's) could be summarized by a theory of art interpretation founded in poetics as a discipline: from the standpoint of giving value to perceptual abilities of critical evaluation of films, Bordwell's inferential model of interpreting narrative films is instructive on how to understand staged presentation of TV serials, not only as a strict “charge” originated in the dramaturgical conception of the work (Baxandall 1985), but also embodying an important creative agency – ultimately responsible for how TV serials retain a recognizable identity of style. This critical enterprise grounded in poetics is dependent on the appreciator's discipline for segmenting perceptible aspects as bearers of meaning, albeit not reducing these to any constraints of a code, a language, or informational structures.

By situating matters of meaning within the framework of effects, poetics need not adopt the communication model of sender-message-receiver, or what has been called the “conduit” metaphor. Nor need it follow the signification model of sign, message, and code. The poetics I would propose rests upon an inferential model, whereby the perceiver uses cues in the film to execute determinable operations, of which the construction of all sorts of meaning will be a part. To some extent, the filmmaker (being' himself or herself also a perceiver)

can construct the film in such a way that certain cues are likely to be salient and certain inferential pathways are marked out (Bordwell, 1989: 270)

Another important source of Bordwell's influence in my views on TV serials stylistics is his conception of cinematic staging as a *functional counterpart* of how narrative films work by enacting stories - hence by presenting themselves through systems of staging: this idea comes from Bordwell's theories of narration and moves toward a more developed sense of film styles, as engrained in theories of staging. My analysis of TV serials stylistics is connected to Bordwell's insightful coordination between history of staging in classical and modern cinema, followed by the fact that staging schemes result from challenges imposed by the narrative conception of these works, manifested through scriptwriting.

In this sense of Bordwell's film poetics, the narrational programs historically consolidated by classic narrative cinema are not easily separable from the variety of solutions filmmakers brought up to dramatize stories, by means of mimetic resources of live characters, actions, and settings (and later, also sounds and colours), all of which serve a purpose of enacting these narrative structures. For that reason, Bordwell coordinates staging and narration as functional counterparts of his system of film poetics. Borrowing from distinctions drawn by Russian formalists between *syuzhet* and *fabula*⁴, Bordwell states that style is somehow correlated with this embodied aspect of staging, and also with how drama manifests itself as plotting - to the point of somehow vindicating controversial points about media specificity of cinematic style.

Style also constitutes a system in that it too mobilizes components - particular instantiations of film techniques - according to principles of organization. There are other uses of the term "style" (...), but in this context it simply names the film's systematic use of cinematic devices. Style is thus wholly ingredient to the medium. (Bordwell 1985: 50)

4 In Boris Tomashevsky's "Story, plot, and motivation", the concept of "Fabula" designates the general universes of the story, specifically in terms of its temporal ordering of presentation, apart from the modes in which narration structures it; "Syuzhet", on the other hand, is the actual arrangement established for story, structuring its chronology in a manner to generate the sense of plotting that readers experiment as they follow narrated events (Tomashevsky 2002: 164,165). In Bordwell's take on these concepts, "syuzhet" is turned into staging, thus concentrating roles that literary diction ascribed to correlations between plot (as narrative technique), and reading (as aesthetic response).

This collateral effect of style and media touches on a challenging issue of studies of TV serials, with this peculiar interdiction of any association between fictional television with principles drawn from other cultural domains, such as narrative cinema. Among these sources of the absorption of film analysis into televisual studies, the most widely recognized perspective of such narrowing views in favor of media centrality is Jason Mittell's arguments on the unique quality of narrative structures of TV serials, as a prevalent force in their cultural evaluation - most particularly in the context of the turn of "narrative complexity" in contemporary works in this field (Mittell, 2006).

In this particular angle of Mittell's claims about media specificity, it must be firstly noted that it is a corollary of cultural diagnosis about narrative complexity in contemporary storytelling techniques of TV serials - thus bringing to media's technological and institutional infrastructures an aspect not entirely belonging to its logic of production. In fact, if such complexity is central for narrative structures of contemporary TV serials, this could be perfectly derived from the modes in which televisual staging gave way to some of the creative resources of late 20th Century's modern cinema. Mittell himself claimed that television adopted cinematic elements of complexity (thematic, narrative, and staged presentation), which enabled certain TV serials to be recognized as carriers of some specific, complex style. Therefore, television's media specificity merely serves to separate - in a similar vein of distinction, proper to Bourdieu's sociological theories of taste (Bourdieu 1984) - these conversations of elements of *mise-en-scène*, separating its contemporary manifestation from the negative aesthetic connotations associated with traditional televisual staging for fiction.

Although certainly cinema influences many aspects of television, especially concerning visual style, I am reluctant to map a model of storytelling tied to self-contained feature films onto the ongoing long-form narrative structure of series television, where ongoing continuity and seriality are core features, and thus I believe we can more productively develop a vocabulary for television narrative on its own medium terms. Likewise, contemporary complex serials are often praised as being "novelistic" in scope and form, but I believe such crossmedia comparisons obscure rather than reveal the specificities of television's storytelling form. Television's narrative complexity is predicated on specific facets of

storytelling that seem uniquely suited to the television series structure apart from film and literature and that distinguish it from conventional modes of episodic and serial forms (Mittell, 2015: 18).

In this passage of *Complex TV*, Mittell has suddenly distanced himself from a mandate of Bordwell's original film poetics: by acknowledging connections between narrative and televisual styles of staging (items Bordwell recognizes as germane to specific media profiles), Mittell is in fact, maybe involuntarily, stating that television style is not a matter of media specificity, since "cinema influences many aspects of television, especially concerning visual style" (Idem, *ibidem*). In Mittell's argument, the weight for differentiating television and film lies on their respective storytelling techniques, i.e., those fields of Bordwell's poetics dealing with narrative structures. In correlating specificity of serial storytelling in contemporary television with claims of media specificity, Mittell brings serial storytelling to the fore, something unspecific to media varieties— unless one thinks that history of televisual seriality is a narrative device altogether distinct from artforms like 19th Century's serial novel, or 20th Century's serial comics.

By examining TV serials, I aim at stylistic markers already embedded in these significant aspects of the works, particularly instantiated in the staged presentation of such products. I focus on the fundamental techniques of staging, addressing these from the standpoint of a disciplined perceptual experience of criticism. Such stylistic heuristics present theoretical and analytical challenges to me, notably as they require a perceptual focus on the "internal" construction of these works – something claimed for in contemporary branches of television studies. In these views, close analysis is claimed for as a heuristic force for cultural evaluation, with special attention to their staging schemes.

The lack of close analysis in the field has permitted work that is often derivative, unadventurous and under- or unsubstantiated to dominate. Scholars have strayed from an understanding that the most responsive and persuasive theorizing arises from careful observations of the particularities of television texts. (Cardwell 2005: 179)

Back to my central issue, I shall now explore the roles ascribed for staging of TV serials, with a focus upon workings of directors on dramaturgical materials of Aaron Sorkin's

televisual narratives. I define those differences of staging approaches as useful items for the employment of stylistic heuristics in the analysis of TV serials, from a poetic standpoint. While demonstrating my points, I direct my perceptual attention towards aspects qualifying such stylistic differences, as well as claiming for the ways in which these resources result from a pervasive influence of cinematic staging on contemporary TV serials.

3. THE DIRECTORS' SHARE, PART 1: THOMAS SCHLAMME

The interaction between dramaturgy and *mise-en-scène* will be examined now as an issue of stylistic analysis: my focus relies on creative choices performed by directors, in response to dramatic resources coming from Sorkin's scriptwriting. Specifically, I consider how dialogue and speech are constructed in TV serials, and how it conditions directors to meet those demands coming from the scriptwriter, as sorts of "charges" of dramaturgy to *mise-en-scène* (Baxandall 1985). The development of staging styles for presenting characters' verbal language is a function of these correlations between creative stances of televisual production. Staging styles are the outcome of the directors' task for enacting stories coming from the resources of dramaturgy, by the ways they employ elements such as the verbal composition of dialogues in these works.⁵

For my part, I initially examine how staging methods and stylistic markers in TV serials are helpful for comprehending the directorial operations employed for specific narrative situations in Sorkin's writing. Such moments revolve around narrative universes primarily organized around various agents, carrying out their journeys and actions within confined interior spaces - teams of people constituted in particular spatial units, such as a wing of the White House, a television studio, or a cable channel newsroom. The staging promotes the verbal performances of characters, as a core resource of how televisual drama is presented in Aaron Sorkin's dramaturgy.

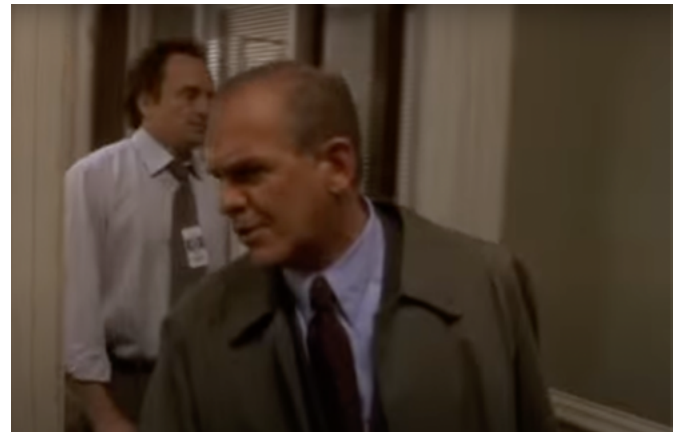
5 This becomes evident as one notices the discrepancies between Sorkin's writing and the approaches emerging through the sharing of his creative ideas and directorial solutions for it. If we focus on director Thomas Schlamme's collaborations during the period between *Sports Night* (ABC, 1998/1999) and *The West Wing*'s first four seasons (NBC, from 1999 to 2003), it is noticeable that the style of Sorkin's production is a result of the staging solutions brought by him to highlight Sorkin's scriptwriting.

It is true that Sorkin tends to place his fictions in a very concrete environment, almost always related to professions that have to do with the use of words as their main tool. Television journalists, politicians or lawyers are types of characters who are supposed to have a capacity for oratory. If, in addition, one can add to these a privileged education in elite universities, as usual in the work of the writer, it is not too exaggerated that they also share a similar language. So much so that, at specific moments, when he introduces characters that are foreign to the context of the protagonists, it is clear how the form of the dialect remains unchanged. (Sánchez Baró 2015: 210, my translation)

To analyse the stylistic composition of Sorkin's works, it is important to consider how Schlamme maneuvers the fluctuation between scenes taking place in various locations and those confined to a single space. At the time of *Sports Night*, there was debate over whether to assign a preparatory/intermediate role to the former and a more prominent role to the latter - being worth to notice this TV show has a setting scheme reminiscent of a sitcom, including the use a multi-camera staging system in different parts of the setting⁶. The pilot episode of *The West Wing* completely reversed this procedure. It places emphasis on dynamic situations with characters crossing out different spaces of the setting and always interacting with each other in these contexts. This is done to such an extent that the audience's attention is fully absorbed by a single moving camera panning across different portions of the West Wing of the White House, with very few interventions of cutting scenes, unless when strictly necessary (see figs. 1 and 2).

Staging solutions arise in this context, with the aim of highlighting a unique facet of Sorkin's writing, namely his style of dialogue construction. This involves a *mise-en-scène* entirely structured by *walk-and-talk*, characterizing the most significant cinematic feature of *The West Wing*. This technique has been previously utilized in other TV shows, albeit selectively (like *The Larry Sanders Show* and *E. R.*), in episodes directed by Schlamme, employing Steadicam footage to emulate what these serials had already been doing. This lends a cinematic appeal to Sorkin's work and highlights the dynamic

⁶ To this respect, strange as it may seem, it is worth mentioning that for some episodes during the first season, *Sports Night* even counted on a laughing track, a clear indicator of this dramatic genre in TV serials – a resource later abandoned after the first episodes of its initial season.



FIGS. 1 AND 2: FRAMES FROM *THE WEST WING*, PILOT EPISODE, 1999. © JOHN WELLS PRODUCTIONS & WARNER BROS. TELEVISION.

quality of his original drama, achieved by the fluid, mobile, and uninterrupted presentation of its audiovisual content (see figs. 3 and 4).

Through a sequence that is shot in continuity, and in which character's entry and exit is constant, the transition between different argumentative lines is produced with the same immediacy as that effected by a change of spaces. The walk and talk thus reveals itself as an appropriate technique to economically solve the multiple interactions demanded by a seriality of joint protagonism. (Sánchez Baró 2015: 273, my translation)

Returning to specific instances of staging enacting elements of dialogue dramaturgy, let us acknowledge how the renowned sequence shots serve as vectors for *The West*



FIG. 3: FRAME FROM *THE LARRY SANDERS SHOW*, EPISODE “ANOTHER LIST” (S06E01), 1998. © BRILLSTEIN-GREY ENTERTAINMENT, HBO, COLUMBIA PICTURES TELEVISION.



FIG. 4: FRAME FROM *E.R.*, EPISODE “THE SECRET SHARER” (S02E08), 1995. © CONSTANT C PRODUCTIONS, AMBLIN TELEVISION, WARNER BROS. TELEVISION.

Wing's stylistic profile. In these rather well-known sequences⁷, one observes an aspect David Bordwell identified as connecting stylistic characteristics with poetic principles of cinematic staging - in particular, manifested through solutions for the theatrical portrayal of dialogues among multiple parties – exemplified by sequences portraying several people gathered around a dining table:

Two staging options have come to dominate current practice. There's what film-makers call “stand and deliver”, where the actors settle into fairly fixed positions. Usually this is handled in singles and over-the-shoulder angles, but we may get instead the floating-head treatment, with the characters fixed in place and the camera drifting around them [...]. The alternative staging option is “walk-and-talk”, with a Steadicam carrying us along as characters spit out exposition on the fly. (Bordwell 2002: 25)

Furthermore, Schlamme's approach to *mise-en-scène* presents another manifestation of the “intensified continuity” prevalent in contemporary narrative cinema (Bordwell 2002). This is not achieved through techniques that empha-

size a more cohesive narrative flow, commonly used in current filmmaking through editing resources. Schlamme's staging approach centers on a horizon of sensitive immersion to this sort of televisual presentation of drama. By examining the staging techniques adopted for dialogues in *The West Wing*, this other aspect of a dramatized continuity emerges, brought about by the emphasis on elements derived from Sorkin's dramaturgy. Among others, it includes the musical modulation of the dialogue composition, characterized by rhythms, alliterations, repetitions, and sudden oscillations between the different speech centers interacting within each scene or sequence, functioning for the staging as a significant factor for the cinematic embodiment of these moments.

[A] key aspect of the speed of Sorkin's dialogue is its constancy; it comes from the essence of the characters and not from the circumstances of the narration. Often, discussion in the style of classic screwball comedy, battle of the sexes, is singled out as Sorkin's favorite territory for fast-paced dialogue, but in reality, the screenwriter uses this style for a variety of registers. In Hawks' comedies, speed is often accompanied by a tension in the scene: the pace is high, as is the tone...(Sánchez Baró 2015: 217-218, my translation)

The switch from “field/counter-shot”, in favor of the “full continuity” staging style of verbal interactions among sev-

⁷ One of the most famous instances of this style is the sequence of the *teaser* of “Five votes down”, fourth episode of the first season of *The West Wing* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wmv07XfeC1E&t=7s>)

eral characters demonstrates the alliance between dramaturgy and *mise-en-scène*, exemplified by the how Sorkin and Schlamme collaborate in the first seasons of *The West Wing*. This interaction between playwright and director/producer results in a comprehensive sensory experience that enhances the recognizability of the central role of scriptwriting, by the ways in which *mise-en-scène* outlines its presence in a cinematic form. The staging approach embodies the distinctive features of Sorkin's work in contemporary television.

Notwithstanding, it is necessary to comprehend how this "stylistic sharing" occurs in the concrete and continual dynamics of interaction between the creative postures of TV series. The workarounds to improve the staging of Sorkin's dramaturgical style often bring about substantial changes, occurring within lapses of arcs and seasons of this show. In art and literary history this recognition is informed by various techniques one can acknowledge for this sedimentation of significant aspects functioning as bearers of style: their reality is essentially relational, depending on the evolution of appreciation in time.

In this context, "style" refers to the temporal ordering of the manifestation of artforms, expressed through the dynamics of formatting, solidifying, and dissolving. This process is subject to continual testing through interaction with audiences over time - with resulting effects on the works themselves, as they respond to such variations of social appreciation. In the field of literary history, critics examine the concept of "lives of style" in modern fiction, particularly the impact of "usury" of forms on styles. This is done to elucidate how styles wither away due to historical and social contexts of continual aesthetic evaluation.

As soon as we consider that the aging of stylistic facts by loss of expressive yield is inevitable or even mechanical, this aging does not call for interpretation (...). But it is already interpreting to consider, for example, that the notion of usury is only fully relevant for the "modern" literary regime, that which makes 'novelty' and 'originality' two of its primary criteria for the attribution of aesthetic value. (Philippe 2021: 51, my translation).

As I turn to the works of other directors offering staging solutions for Sorkin's work, especially in *The West Wing*, a glimpse can be offered to inform ways in which such temporal dynamics informs the negotiations of TV serials with their audiences over longer periods of their arcs and seasons. To a

certain degree, it is conceivable that Schlamme's staging solutions have met a certain limit, thus requiring the concurrence of new sorts of solutions in *mise-en-scène* – thus directing the show to other sorts of styles for dramatic presentation.

4. THE DIRECTORS' SHARE, PART 2: ALEX GRAVES

Coming to this point, my vindication of a heuristics of style for the analysis of staging solutions in TV serials is justified, at least in some respects. The disciplined perceptual attention for significant "aspects" of these works was partially employed in the previous analysis of Schlamme's collaborations with Sorkin - particularly to the end of presenting dialogues through agents' physical and verbal performance (enacted as a *walk-and-talk* staging style), as something spectators can experience as narrative immersion. In this way, the distinctive *mise-en-scène* of the Sorkin/Schlamme collaboration implies a passive beholder of these scenes, functionally structured through "vectors" and "postures" of immersion.

A vector of immersion is, in a way, the access key thanks to which we can enter this [fictional] universe. The postures of immersion are the perspectives, the scenes of immersion that vectors assign to us. They determine the aspectuality or the particular modality under which the universe manifests itself to us because we enter it thanks to an access key, a specific vector of immersion. (Schaeffer 1999: 244, my translation)

The most noticeable aspect of this collaboration is already apparent, thus defining staging as a functional counterpart (proper to cinematic devices) of a structuring musicality of speeches and dialogues that typify Sorkin's dramaturgical compositions. From this staging perspective of directorial solutions, the selection of cinematic shots implies a preference for the integration of verbal language with bodily performance, especially through walking, visually demonstrated by the concentration of character's scenic presence. In practice, this implies a model for cinematic framing positioned within a closer range to actors' performances. The shots preserve the combined quality of performance and settings, using a system of lenses closer to characters and their movements (see Fig. 5).



FIG. 5: FRAME FROM *THE WEST WING*, EPISODE "FIVES VOTES DOWN" (S01.E04). 1999. © JOHN WELLS PRODUCTIONS & WARNER BROS. TELEVISION.



FIG. 6: FRAME FROM *THE NEWSROOM*, EPISODE "NEWS NIGHT 2.0" (S01E02). 2012. © HBO ENTERTAINMENT.

As a comparison, other TV shows by Sorkin, as *The Newsroom* (HBO, 2012/2014), present the audience with a unique context to explore the effects of the staging style, particularly in the visual framing of scenes. The staging style here adopted employs lenses with longer focal length, thus resulting in a more distant framing from actors. This approach attenuates the sensibility that would otherwise resonate characters' physical performances, as well as the rhythmic evolution of their speeches and dialogues, as a component of cinematic settings.

The integration between characters' actions and the rhythmic/musical qualities of their speeches is not performed through Schlamme's staging system. This technique of creating a distance between the framing and the character's en-

actment equally implies a viewpoint overseeing the scene, as a hypothetical representative of a presumed spectator of the scene. This distinguishes us, as viewers, from the dramatic focus created by the interactions of multiple agents in a confined space, in the flow of their physical performances of walking through different settings, such as the consecrated Schlamme's. solution (see Fig. 6).

It is not coincidental that such a staging style appears in an episode of *The Newsroom* directed by Alex Graves: this *mise-en-scène* stems from a specific approach that this director applied to Sorkin's dramaturgy - not only here, but in other works by Sorkin. In various

episodes of *The West Wing*, Graves introduced this sort of staging, hence suggesting significant alterations to the entire staging system for this series.

To address this issue, I shall first examine the impact of Graves' staging style, which was indirectly referenced during a discussion among members of *The Newsroom's* production team - while describing something Sorkin classified as the "coverage" of this show. Producer Alan Poul and director Greg Mottola discuss the filming style of this series, particularly the camera positioning. According to Poul, the camera acts as the viewer's eye, following the action. The system also allows for more natural performances from actors - who are unaware of how they are being framed during the shots. Mottola also recalls that this style originated from cinematographer Barry Ackroyd's approach to filming scenes beyond the limited scope of characters, using telephoto lenses, ultimately achieving a voyeuristic perspective through these shots.⁸

Though not directly aimed at Graves, these comments refer to a key element of the contribution this director brought to Sorkin's dramaturgy, particularly in certain storylines of *The West Wing*, specifically during the second and third seasons. A shift in the staging style is evident during this period, thus suggesting a rejection of limiting *mise-en-scène* to a mere reflection of Sorkin's musical dialogues - such as in Schlamme's system.

⁸ These discussions compose an extra segment of the DVD of the first season of *The Newsroom* (2012), entitled "The roundout".

In the development of Graves' involvement with *The West Wing's* directorial team, there is a consistent shift from the typical approaches employed earlier, serving as an illustration of something that literary stylistics defines as the "usury" of style. According to Gilles Philippe, this phenomenon exemplifies a historical process of transformation that affects the manners by which French writers have improved the development of a literary language - in its ongoing connection to/distance from French vernacular (Philippe 2021). In applying this principle of "usury" to the dynamics of staging in TV serials, this shift towards new solutions for cinematic enactment demonstrates Graves' ongoing evolution as a director.

Although this presentational tradition of characters conversing while walking still prevails in *The West Wing*, alternative ways of framing the beginnings or intervals of scenes and sequences suggest themselves over time. While serving to indicate "positions of immersion" for audiences (Shaeffer 1999), this new staging style no longer needs to generate resonances between scenic tempos and speech rhythms. In Graves' case, the aim is to present the drama from a neutral standpoint, without imposing any suggestions about a staging function that represents audience's immersion. This staging technique materializes itself through a strategy of cinematic framing that Edward Branigan coined as "point-of-view shot" (POV). The delicate balance between the optical structure of cinematic framing and the discursive implications of this positioning of shots promises a relationship with characters themselves (through their emotional or perceptual states), and the instance of narration signified by these shots:

The elements of the POV structure require a transition device since the camera must physically shift between element one (point) and element four (from point). This shift is the physical correlate for a shift in narrative perception from, for instance, omniscient and voyeuristic to subjective and personal. The device may take the form of a simple cut to a new camera set-up, an optical printer effect (dissolves, fades, wipes, etc.), or camera movement, in which case we watch while the camera repositions [...]. In fact, we may say that neither a change in camera set-up nor camera movement is necessary to a change in narration. What is important is not the camera as an absolute reference point but the relation among camera, character, object and a perceiver's hypothesis about this relation. (Branigan 1984:109-110)



FIG. 7: A FRAME FROM *THE WEST WING* EPISODE "THE WAR CRIMES" (S03.E05). 2001. © JOHN WELLS PRODUCTIONS & WARNER BROS. TELEVISION.

In *The West Wing's* third season another shift in staging becomes more strongly pronounced, thereby stressing the significance of Graves' directorial choices. In small parts of this season, a framing style emerges – positioned at a greater distance from main characters' perspective – using the setting's surfaces (walls, glass, mirrors interrupting/revealing scenic elements), and gradually blending in with the prevailing *en route* modes of staging in this show.

This type of occurrence is mainly present in beginnings of sequences, particularly those taking on a more prominent dramatic significance. For example, in the case of the fifth episode of this season, "The War Crimes", we see the secretary of President Jed Bartlett in the foreground, announcing that Vice-President John Hoynes is waiting outside the Oval Office; the camera positions itself at an oblique angle, suppressing the President from our view (but keeping his voice as a dramatic center of the scene), while visually identifying the entering Vice-President positioned in the background, in the adjacent waiting room (see Fig. 7).

The stylistic inflection of this sort of staging is fully consolidated in "The Two Bartlets" (thirteenth episode of the third season, in 2002), commanding larger extensions of the storyline, and conferring a distinct style for the whole episode, in contrast with the show's general profile. In this case, the succession of events in the drama is less significant than the establishment of a more "testimonial" camera positioning for several scenes. This delineates a style of *mise-en-scène* setting the stage for what producers of *The Newsroom* identified as the most noticeable virtue of this alternative staging style for Sorkin's TV shows.



FIG. 8: A FRAME FROM *THE WEST WING* EPISODE “THE TWO BARTLETS” (S03.E13). 2002. © JOHN WELLS PRODUCTIONS & WARNER BROS. TELEVISION.



FIG. 9: A FRAME OF *THE WEST WING*, EPISODE “THE TWO BARTLETS” (S03.E13). 2002. © JOHN WELLS PRODUCTIONS & WARNER BROS. TELEVISION.

If we examine the relevance of segments like the teaser and the final sequence of “The Two Bartlets”, they lay out the foundations for this staging style by introducing the primary storylines of the episode. Graves staging style offers an alternative functionality for the scenic enactment of Sorkin’s dialogue dramaturgy, aiming at an effect towards audiences marked by a sort of “immersion position” in the scene – instead of offering a cinematic contrast to the verbal exchanges between the main characters.

The opening sequence in the episode (see Fig. 8) utilizes framing to create a sense of distance between its two characters, Josh Lyman and Amy Gardner. This distancing effect is amplified by the obstacles that interrupt their visibility to audiences (walls and domestic objects), as well as those that enable it (mirrors and windowpanes). Additionally, the speech centers are often situated outside of the frame, meaning that we can hear the characters without always seeing them. The gathering of these elements creates a distinct style for the scene. With Graves, the focus rests on longer silent intervals, emphasizing the more subdued atmosphere of the episodic situations.

In another segment of this episode (See Fig. 9), a brief dialogue takes place in Josh Lyman’s office with Sam Seaborn, an assistant on the West Wing staff of the White House. This interaction is staged in the same manner as the teaser, involving the topic that Josh and Amy discuss in the teaser. More noticeably, conventional techniques of cinematic dialogue staging – such as shot/reverse and editing resources – are entirely absent from this scene. These choices detach Graves’ staging style from the purpose of producing a more

pronounced rhythm of continuous scansion through character’s performances through continuous walking and talking, such as in Schlamme’s approaches.

Instead, the prevailing staging method involves placing the camera in concealed areas (just behind the doorway to the office), refraining from moving itself towards the area of dialogue, and obstructing our view through Seaborn’s blurry figure – or completely blocking it when other characters enter, traversing the space of the room. Again, this staging does not favor any effects of rhythm, characteristic of a *mise-en-scène* that explores a moving continuity, but instead establishes an almost voyeuristic witnessing effect, something permeating almost the entire length of this episode. Extravagant as it might sound, such a staging style resembles the mode of arranging shots dear to Max Ophuls’ style, in films like *Lola Montès* and *The Earrings of Madame...* (see figs. 10 and 11).

In contrast, Graves’ staging solutions in *The West Wing* demands a heuristic approach to the notion of “style”: this includes identifying the temporal inflections of these changes, as noticed by historians of art and literature, by the evolutionary and fading curves of the presence of certain aspectual traits in TV serials. The lengthy collaboration between Sorkin and Schlamme illustrates the historical dynamics of staging styles characterizing their most significant aspects. This includes their origins, sedimentation, and eventual diminishment, all in the context of the continued relationship with audiences that influences stylistic choices in the staging of Sorkin’s works.

With Graves, however, I comprehend the emergence of these creative solutions as a turning point in current stylistic characteristics, while being on the brink of exhaustion



FIG. 10. FRAME FROM *LOLA MONTÈS*, (MAX OPHÜLS, 1955)



FIG. 11. FRAME FROM *THE EARRINGS OF MADAME DE...* (MAX OPHÜLS, 1953)

or overuse – and when new dimensions of the synergies between dramaturgy and staging are ultimately defined. So, one gains insights into the heuristic validity of style as a means of exploring TV serials through the analysis of two key vectors: firstly, through Schlamme's work, one comprehends the dynamics underpinning the development and consolidation of style; secondly, we can observe the transformation of style, as it is forced to meet demands posed by the work's interactions with audiences, thus evolving over time - as exemplified by Graves' staging style.

5. IN GUISE OF CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A HEURISTIC OF STYLE FOR A POETICS OF TV SERIALS

In the process of analyzing the agencies of staging in consolidating markers of style in TV serials, I expect to have demonstrated two points of my explorations on these issues: firstly, the importance of distinguishing, either theoretically or in the analysis of these works, the importance of not assuming the stylistic agencies as implicated in dynamics of authorship attribution – something that requires a more centered attention to the poetic functioning of these works, in regards to the social dynamics governing the ways in which TV serials are identified with authorship.

Secondly, such a focalization upon poetic functionalities demands a treatment of style that emerges as a recognizable profile of these works of fiction. At this point, stylistic is embedded in a particular heuristics, which is dependent on the relationships TV serials construct with audiences overtime. This is why traits of style are mainly identified with “aspectuality”, a set of significant properties that become recognizable markers of serial works by the processes through which they build up their relationships with audiences across the duration of arcs and seasons.

In the case I proposed for examination, in the workings of directors associated with Aaron Sorkin's shows, these defining aspects serving as bearers of style are mainly associated with the staging solutions directors brought in (especially during the four first seasons of *The West Wing*), in order to generate a particular traction for the dramaturgy of this work, specifically the dialogue compositions proper to Sorkin's writing. In viewing how directors Thomas Schlamme and Alex Graves worked in staged enactments of this dramaturgy, one encounters these continuous processes of creating, settling, and abandoning artistic solutions, subjected to the tests of time and interaction with the presumed audience of Sorkin's shows.

In such terms, I finally propose a poetic approach of the analysis of TV serials grounded on a heuristic of style, thus conceiving it as an instrument for understanding the workings of television with audiences, particularly in the ways they generate their most recognizable qualities of their presentation. In the role of objective critics of serialized television fiction, we must examine stylistic markers for their impact on the work's aesthetic effects and how they drive the relationship built between the work and its audience.

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