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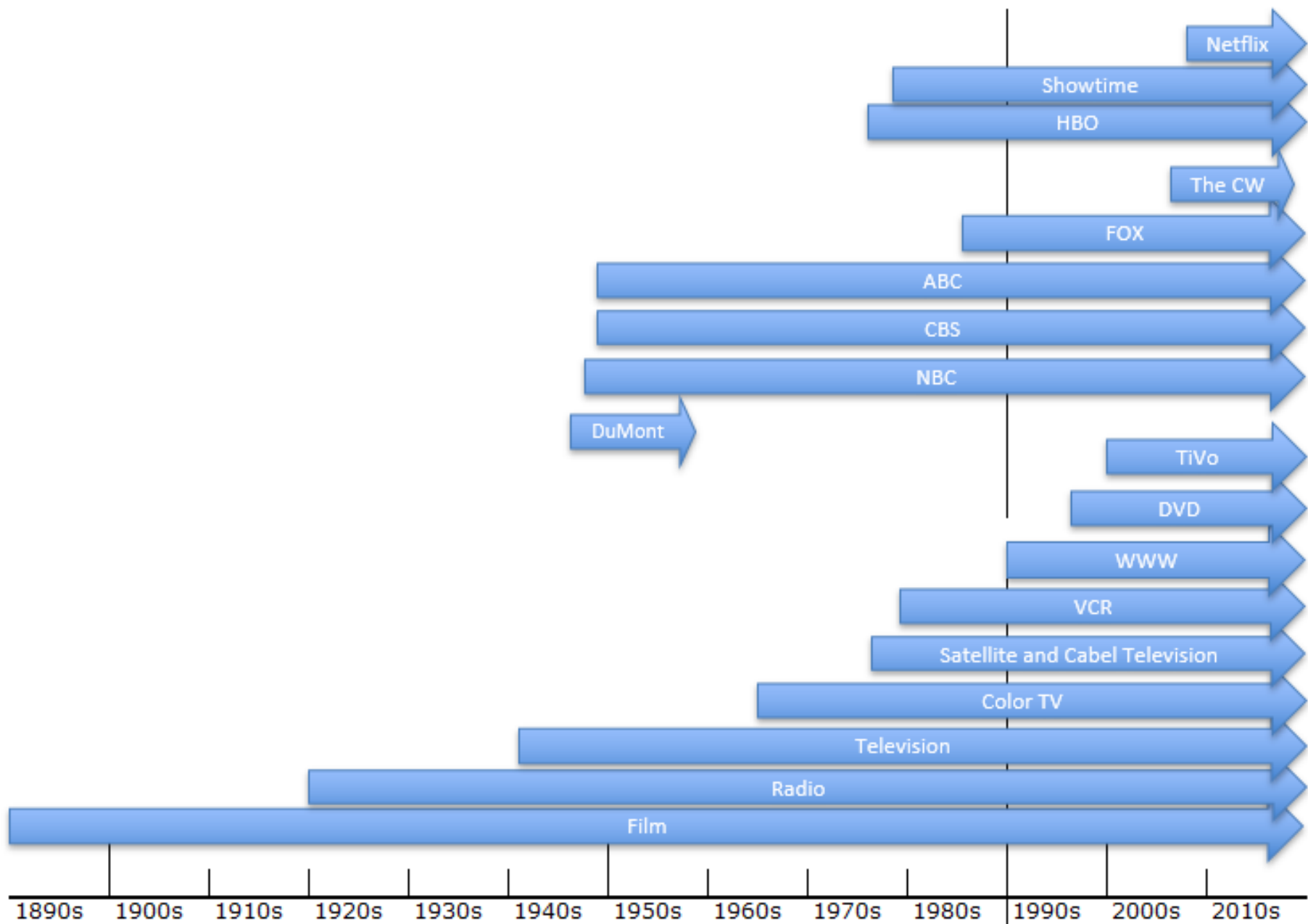
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Realism in Television Series

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Overview

- Historical background: institutions, intermediality, early series
- Specifics of quality TV series
- Forms of realism in TV series
- Act structure and the relation to realism
- Aspects of characters and their relation to realism
- 3 examples: The Wire, Arrested Development, Battlestar Galactica

Netflix

Showtime

HBO

The CW

FOX

ABC

CBS

NBC

DuMont

TiVo

DVD

WWW

VCR

Satellite and Cabel Television

Color TV

Television

Radio

Film

1890s 1900s 1910s 1920s 1930s 1940s 1950s 1960s 1970s 1980s 1990s 2000s 2010s

The Golden Age of Television Drama in the U.S.: The Live Anthology Drama Series

- Famous shows:
  - Kraft Television Theatre (1947–1958, NBC)
  - The Philco Television Playhouse (1948–1955, NBC)
  - Playhouse 90 (1956–1960, CBS)
- Anthology series: each episode features a different drama with characters that are not related to previous episodes
- Major prime time entertainment in the 1950s

The Live Anthology Drama Series

- Broadcast live: no satisfying means for recording a television show
- High quality
- Usually 30–60 minutes long
- Ideal spot for commercials (large audience, sophisticated content, prime time slot)
- A lot of famous actors, directors, and writers worked for these shows early in their careers (Marlon Brando, Paul Newman, Steve McQueen; Robert Altman, Sidney Lumet; Gore Vidal)

A Second Golden Age of Television Drama

- The Sopranos (1999–2007, HBO)
- The Wire (2002–2008, HBO)
- Arrested Development (2003–2006, Fox; comedy program; new season on Netflix in 2013)
- Lost (2004–2010, ABC)
- Battlestar Galactica (2004–2009, Sci-Fi Channel)
- Breaking Bad (2008–2013, AMC)
- The Walking Dead (2010–, AMC)
- Game of Thrones (2011–, HBO)

Quality TV

- Serials (over-arching plotlines; e.g., soap operas) vs. series (stand-alone episodes; e.g., sitcoms)
- Complex narrative structure: interwoven story arcs, unreliable narration, multiple timelines, etc.
- Complex, ambiguous characters
- Non-generic content
- Controversial topics
- Intertextual and intermedial references
- Single-camera vs. multi-camera set-up
- High production values
- …

(cf. McCabe/Akass 2007)

Mental Construction of Fictional World

- Dynamic construction of the physical, social, political, psychological, perceptual etc. rules of a fictional world (diegesis) and its inhabitants (cf. Wulff 2007).
- Based on "principle of minimal departure" (Ryan 1980) from our actual world.
- While audiovisual representations provide a lot of sensory information about a fictional world, recipients still fill in certain gaps, e.g., off-screen space.
- Viewers have expectations and hypotheses about the world and the narrative (cf. Bordwell 1985, 1989) based on knowledge of the actual world, of (other) media and how the represent fictional worlds, of other texts, and of genres.

Realisms in TV Series

- What is represented (diegesis, topics) can be understood as being distinct from its representation (audiovisual configuration).
- Many aspects of a series can be interpreted as more or less realistic by a specific viewer (cf. Kress/van Leeuwen 2006)
- … in relation to established rules of a certain text/a certain world
- … and in contrast to other texts and media (cf. Carroll 1988).
- Quality TV series are evaluated in comparison with other TV series (e.g., soap operas), with film, and often with literature.
- *A Song of Ice and Fire/Game of Thrones*: high fantasy with detailed representations of political and economic systems through individual perspectives of members of various (underrepresented) social groups.

Various Markers of "Realism" in TV series

- Relative fidelity, plausibility, similarity
- Or as contrast to the (stereo-)typical and idealized
- Complexity as realism

- Physical, social, political etc. realism (laws of the diegesis)
- Psychological realism

- Experiential realism
- Photorealism

- Generic markers
- Filmic/audiovisual markers
- …

Act Structure

- Broadcast television networks vs. premium channels and streaming media providers
- Fixed length (with or without commercial breaks) vs. variable length
- Cliffhangers are not only used at the end of the episode but before the commercial break
- Sequence of events and the character arcs have to fit into this structure
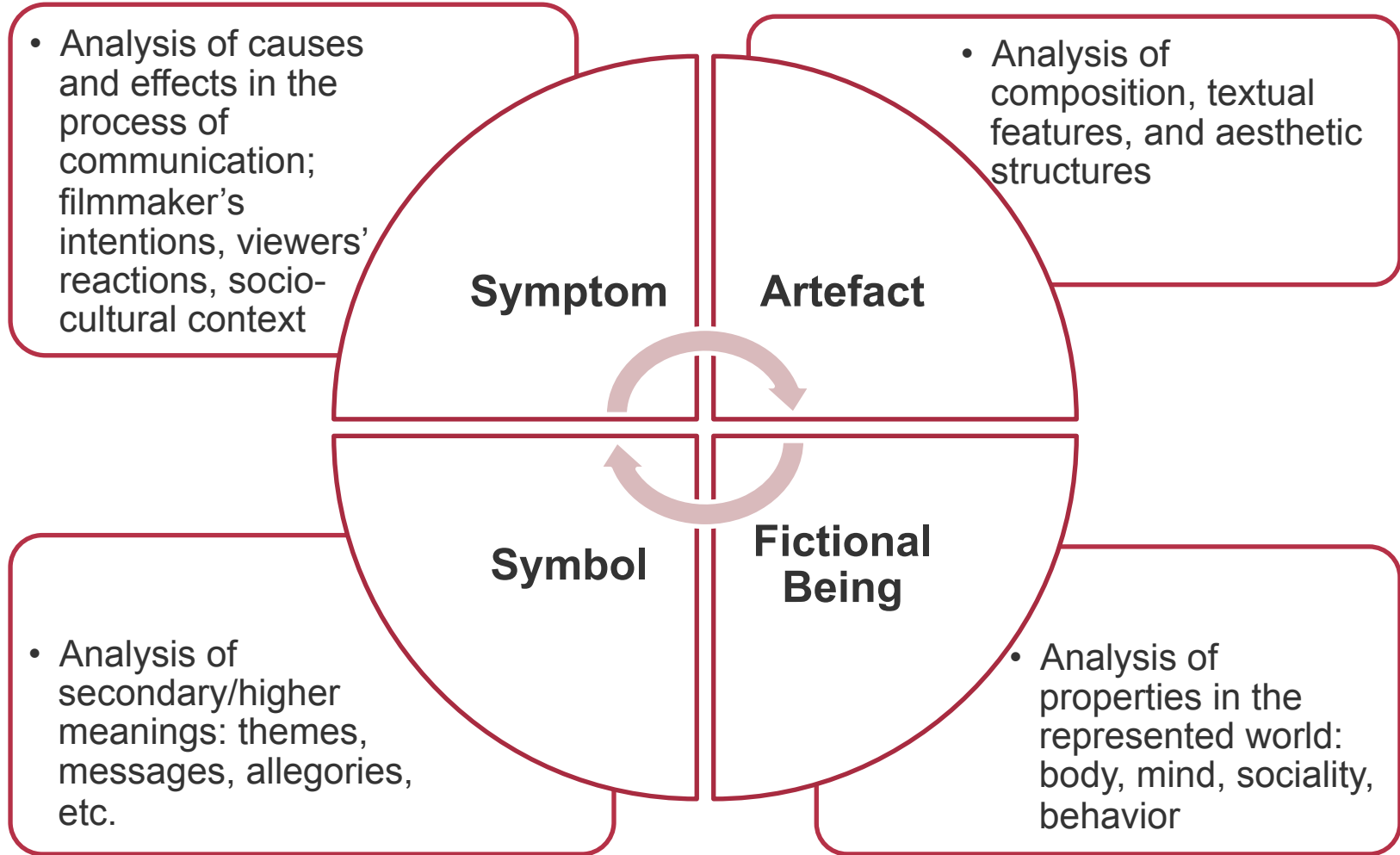
Characters

- Complex psychology
- Rich backstory
- Credible actions and reactions
- Not mainly motivated by their actantial role/narrative function
- Not idealized as hero or villain type

Clock of Character: Eder (2010)

- Analysis of causes and effects in the process of communication; filmmaker's intentions, viewers' reactions, socio-cultural context

- Analysis of composition, textual features, and aesthetic structures

Symptom   **Artefact**

Symbol   **Fictional Being**

- Analysis of secondary/higher meanings: themes, messages, allegories, etc.

- Analysis of properties in the represented world: body, mind, sociality, behavior

The Wire (2002–2008, HBO)

- Multiple strongly interwoven plotlines
- Multiple rounded characters with complex motivations
- Various social groups
- In-depth look at certain events in a city from various perspectives
- New perspectives, milieus, and social strata added in each seasons

Arrested Development (2003–2006, Fox; 2013 Netflix)

- Pseudo-documentary
- Seemingly hand-held camera
- Exaggerated content
- Cartoonish characters, exaggerated acting
- Highly metareferential

Battlestar Galactica (2004–2009, Sci-Fi Channel)

- Science fiction setting
- Social realism: survival of small society, behavior of various groups
- Production constraints: budgets, time, staff
- Photorealism: sets, CGI

Conclusion

- Recipient-centric view of realisms
- Local interpretation in relation to experience of actual world, media, and media texts
- Possibilities and constraints of television
- Quality television series compared to more conventional series films, and literature

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