

Jonas Nesselhauf/Markus Schleich

A Stream of Medial Consciousness. Transmedia Storytelling in Contemporary German Quality Television

Abstract

Transmedial phenomena are omnipresent in what is often dubbed ›quality television‹. Shows like *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013) or *Game of Thrones* (2011–) do not only rely on storytelling within the show itself but also offer their viewers a variety of possibilities to delve into the universe of the franchise. Mobile apps, minisodes, or interactive websites guarantee a deeper involvement of fans and personalize the viewing experience. These shows also add narrative complexity on a horizontal level, which many see as a recent criterion for ›quality television‹. Whereas ›good‹ television seems to be exclusively located in the US, where premium cable operators like HBO, Showtime, and AMC use new media to transgress the borders of the television screen, the developments in Germany are often criticized for a lack of innovative strategies. There is at least one German show to challenge this perspective: *Zeit der Helden* (2013). Regardless of the involved media, the show features a complex narrative and ambivalent protagonists. Even though the setting promises a suburban everyday-life melodrama, the show explores the cracks that offer a look beneath the surface. The website www.zeitderhelden.de offers a scavenger hunt into the protagonists' past. In order to grasp the depth of the characters fully and to understand the complexity of the story arc, the viewer has to actively interact with the franchise and to enter a digital universe that in itself is just as dazzling as the shows' characters.

1. Quality Television. Of German Apples and US American Oranges

25 years ago, television was primarily associated with cheap entertainment and the secondary use of Hollywood blockbusters (cf. SCHWIERIN 2013: 24; THOMPSON 2007: xvii). But then, »[s]omething [...] happen[ed] on American TV« (AKASS/MCCABE 2007: 1) and television featured material worthy of the silver screen (cf. KÄMMERLINGS 2010: n.pag.). Cinema is no longer the dominant visual outlet for fiction (cf. METELING/OTTO/SCHABACHER 2010: 7) and television—or a segment of it that is often referred to as ›quality television‹ (cf. THOMPSON 1996: 13)—has established itself as the preferred medium for complex narratives (cf. BUCKLEY/LEVERETTE/OTT 2008: 1) and as an independent art form.

Whenever there is a discussion in Germany about quality television, be it among scholars or fans, series and serials from the United States seem to be widely praised. There is a general notion of enthusiasm among the works of scholars of literary studies as well as media, film, and cultural studies, especially in Germany. The growing number of publications (cf. BOHNE/ESCHKE 2010; GRAWE 2010; KELLETER 2012; KÜHN/SCHMÖLLER 2011; METELING/OTTO/SCHABACHER 2010; PIEPIORKA 2011; SEILER 2008) regarding various aspects of quality television indicates a significant academic interest in the field. At the same time, silence is cast on domestic outings. In German newspaper *feuilletons*, the German television landscape is depicted as a cultural wasteland (cf. BUß 2013: n.pag.; DIEZ/HÜETLIN 2013: 130) not worth to be part of the quality television discourse. As a result, German serials are rarely featured in this field of research (cf. BLEICHER 2010: 9) and when they are, they are often seen in the context of »des tourenden Formats« (TÜRSCHMANN/WAGNER 2011: 13), a term denoting German adaptations of American serials. Studies that focus on genuine German serials are almost exclusively concerned with *Tatort* (cf. GRÄF 2010; GRÄF/KRAH 2010; HIBNAUER/SCHERER/STOCKINGER 2012) and, to a limited extent, *Polizeiruf 110* (cf. WALTER 2011).

None of the publications mentioned above specifically highlights this aspect, but the large amount of articles focussing on US-American serials could be interpreted as a lack of quality in German television. Do US-American serials represent the kind of quality television that is yet to come for German serials? Can none of the praised ›quality‹ be found in German television? In contrast to academia, which does not answer these questions, journalist Dennis Krah states that there seem to be two kinds of television: the ›good kind‹ that mainly comes from the US and the ›bad kind‹, which is almost exclusively made in Germany (cf. KRAH 2013: n.pag.).

This specific stance is not only shared within the German community, it is also quite common abroad:

And what about German TV? Why [...] are there no German TV series filling BBC4's 9pm Saturday night Euro-drama subtitle-a-rama slot? [...] We aren't missing much, apart from a cop show called Derrick which finished broadcasting 15 years ago. Your next box

set might well be in Danish but nobody's will be in German. But why is there no German rival to Denmark's *The Killing*, Sweden's *Wallander*, Italy's *Inspector Montalbano* or France's *Spiral*? (JEFFRIES 2013: n.pag.)

As innovation is a key to quality, German television, lacking such element, is perceived as dull and slow to pick up trends. US American cable operators like HBO, AMC, and—to some extent—Showtime use new media to transgress the borders of the television screen. German operators in contrast are often criticized for a lack of innovative strategies to commit the audience to their serials, which are constantly seen as anything but innovative. In 1998, Knut Hickethier demanded innovative transmedial strategies for television to stay relevant within a steadily changing media landscape (cf. HICKETHIER 1998: 76). Especially the so-called ›post television era‹ (cf. BUCKLEY/LEVERETTE/OTT 2008: 1–9), in which more and more people consume video on demand, requires television to be a platform for a multimedia experience (cf. KIRCHMANN 2010: 63). Dislocating the narrative into interactive and digital areas is a proper reaction to a more media affine viewership (cf. NELSON 2013: 21). Accordingly, ›quality television‹ must understand itself as a »Hypermedia TV Narrative« (NELSON 2013: 21) in order to establish interactivity and connections between product and consumer (cf. SCHWIERIN 2013: 24). This should then generate new narrative approaches with experiments and ›expanded narration‹ as Bernd Kracke and Marc Ries label it (cf. KRACKE/RIES 2013: 10).

In the following, the focus lies on the relation between quality television and transmedial storytelling and the question whether there are German serials that make use of transmedial storytelling, which could offer a chance to reintegrate German serials into the discourse of quality TV.

2. Complexity and Transmedia Storytelling in Contemporary Television

In recent years, there have been quite a few attempts to narrow down what puts the ›quality‹ in ›quality television‹. Labels such as »art TV« (MITTELL 2006: 29), »prestige TV« (HILL 2013: n.pag.), or »auteur series« (DREHER 2010: 23) all quote literary merits and innovative narrative strategies as criteria. Quite recently, Jason Mittell ditched his idea of »art TV«. According to him, quality television is complex television. *The Sopranos* (1999–2007), *The Wire* (2002–2008), and *Breaking Bad* can offer complex narratives because they have a lot of screen time to do so:

Even a show that fails to find an audience typically airs for a comparatively long time—for instance, the single-season *Terriers* may be viewed as a commercial failure, but it still offered 13 episodes of serial storytelling, with a combined running time of over nine hours that eclipses the scope of most novels and nearly every feature film. (MITTELL 2015: n.pag.)

Time allows for idiosyncratic storytelling with overlapping plot lines, slow character development, and controversial themes. Jason Mittell's article

»Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television« offers what the authors believe is a fruitful estimation: »I believe that American television of the past twenty years will be remembered as an era of narrative experimentation and innovation, challenging the norms of what the medium can do« (MITTELL 2006: 29). A few years later, Mittell argues that

[f]ew storytelling forms can match serial television for narrative breadth and vastness. A single narrative universe can continue onward for years, or even decades in the case of daytime serials, with cumulative plotlines and character backstories accruing far beyond what any dedicated fan could reasonably remember. [...] In short, of all the challenges that face the creators of television fiction, the lack of screen time to tell their stories is hardly an issue. (MITTELL 2015: n.pag.)

Time is what makes all the difference, what allows for all these grand narratives to be so complex and compelling. Time represents the vertical level of complexity and complexity definitely stands out as a criterion of quality television.

We think of it as fruitful to add another aspect of complexity; i.e., complexity on a horizontal level, the ›transmedial space‹ (cf. NESSELHAUF/SCHLEICH 2014: 21). Henry Jenkins defines transmedia storytelling as

a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes it[s] own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story. (JENKINS 2007: n.pag.)

Thus, besides a progressing storyline there are other medial outlets to enhance the serials' universe. To exemplify what this means, one could turn to AMC's *Breaking Bad* among many others.

According to Ivan Askwith's *Television 2.0*, the viewer is more likely to stay interested in an artefact, the more opportunities it provides for social, emotional, temporal, and intellectual engagement (cf. ASKWITH 2007: 51). *Breaking Bad* offers a lot of »related activities« (BOBINEAU 2013: 34) that function as ›touch points‹ for interaction. For instance, the viewer has the chance to put him- or herself in the shoes of Hank Schrader, during an investigation that has been created on the serial's website. Or he or she can actually *be* Jesse Pinkman in the application *The Cost of Doing Business* and work his or her way through the criminal underbelly of New Mexico. In both cases, the viewer—or, rather, the user—enters a narrative extension of *Breaking Bad* and acts as one of the serial's main characters. There is new content adding depth to these characters but no connection to the main plot. These touch points can be classified as ›experimental activities‹, as they turn the viewer into an »active agent with varying degrees of autonomy and control« (ASKWITH 2007: 77).

For ›ancillary content‹—additional information—one can visit Saul Goodman's website and get the lawyer's advice on the viewer's criminal activity or learn about Walter White's cancer while browsing www.savewalterwhite.com. The viewer can also figure out which criminal he or she would be on a ›criminal aptitude test‹ that would be a ›challenge activity‹, questioning

the viewer's knowledge of the serial (cf. BOBINEAU 2013: 34). These apps or games rely on previous knowledge of the show and reward the user with images and small scripts. Furthermore, there are plenty of ›minisodes‹ that provide more details about the protagonists to soften the blow of yet another devastating cliff-hanger. If the viewer has done all that but still wants to dwell in the *Breaking Bad* franchise, he or she could still play a round of *Metho-logy*—a *Breaking Bad* themed version of *Monopoly*—, which is more of a ›themed activity‹ as it does not directly belong to the franchise itself. All of these additional delivery channels enable the viewer to customize his or her viewing experience. The recipient fumbles slightly with the way a serial is perceived and these transmedial elements allow for more complexity on plots, the fictional world, and its characters.

Despite this, we still believe that there is a hierarchy between the involved media. Chronologically, *Breaking Bad* appeared *before* the advanced ›serial frame‹ (cf. NESSELHAUF/SCHLEICH 2014: 20) of apps, games and minisodes. All these spin-offs appeared after the first season, when the serial had built a certain fan base and reputation and served mainly to keep the audience busy while nervously awaiting the second season of the main franchise. *Breaking Bad* does very well work on its own, while the spin-offs rely on an at least partial familiarity with the main vehicle—Mittell labels it »the mother-ship« (MITTELL 2015: n.pag.) of the serial franchise *Breaking Bad*. Referring to Jonathan Gray's *Show Sold Separately*, Mittell further claims that:

We cannot view any text in our media-saturated age in isolation from its paratexts—for instance, films come pre-framed by trailers, DVD covers, and posters, and once any text enters into cultural circulation, it becomes part of a complex intertextual web. However, we can distinguish between paratexts that function primarily to hype, promote, and introduce a text, with those that function as ongoing sites of narrative expansion. (MITTELL 2015: n.pag.)

The paratexts mentioned before all fall into the category of promotion. Their sole purpose is to create attention for the serial itself to go viral (cf. LANGNER 2007: 29). In a complex media age like ours, television programmers need to find new ways to hold on to the audience at comparably little costs. As Sönke Hahn puts it, these offerings function mainly to keep the viewer awake during times when the serial itself falls asleep (cf. HAHN 2013: 10). While a serial is on hiatus, there is an immanent danger of losing viewers not only to other television serial but to entirely different media as well:

The current industrial obsession with engagement begins with the assumption that the traditional »mass audience« is dead. Faced with a proliferation of media options and content choices, the mass audience—so critical in television's earliest years—has fragmented into a million niche audiences and communities. [...] Fragmentation simply suggests that a mass audience can no longer be taken for granted. (ASKWITH 2007: 18)

A positive aspect of this development is that the networks rethink their status as mere provider of television content:

In their attempt to create programming that »rivets« the audience, television executives now find themselves struggling to transform television from a medium defined by pas-

sive consumption to one characterized by active—and wherever possible, interactive—engagement. (ASKWITH 2007: 19)

But as the television content is still their bread and butter, the transmedial world created around the franchise has strict limitations. As Julien Bobineau indicates, networks want the involved media to reflect the hierarchy of ›the mothership‹ and additional content (cf. BOBINEAU 2013: 42). We would follow up on this idea by adding that, if the additional content becomes too elaborate and is able to function all by itself, viewers might not return to ›the mothership‹ but remain on the outskirts of the multimedia universe. To put it bluntly, networks use interactive content to sell a product, not to innovate storytelling. Transmedial aspects *must not* be necessary to understand the monomedial structured *Breaking Bad*. To further illuminate this issue, let us draw upon the thoughts of a man, who knew probably very little about transmedial worlds, but a lot about epic storytelling. Aristotle said about the unity of plot:

As therefore, in the other imitative arts, the imitation is one when the object imitated is one, so the plot, being an imitation of an action, must imitate one action and that a whole, the structural union of the parts being such that, if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed and disturbed. For a thing whose presence or absence makes no visible difference, is not an organic part of the whole. (ARISTOTLE 1907: 34)

When we focus on the narrative nature of these transmedial offering, we must admit that they do very little for the story itself. None of the transmedial spinoffs of *Breaking Bad* are really necessary for Walter White's transformation into Heisenberg and none of the serials plot holes are filled within the paratexts, even though they undoubtedly add depth to the fictional universe. These paratexts circulate *around* the text, or ›the mothership‹, but are »not fully integrated into the show's complex serial arcs« (MITTELL 2015: n.pag.). The ideal of transmedia storytelling, as proposed by Jenkins, is that each of the involved media contributes a unique part to the story as a whole. While the additional content mentioned above does offer unique experiences—a television show is not primarily designed for active interactivity but rather passive consumption—it does not do much (or anything at all) for the story. So it might be interesting to differentiate transmedial storytelling as a part of the story arc from transmedial storytelling that simply expands the fictional universe.

Bizarrely enough, while there is an on-going debate on Germany's run down television landscape, when we thought about serials that actually use transmedia storytelling to swap out essential parts of its plot to other medial channels, we instantly thought of a German serial: *Zeit der Helden*.

3. Narrative Transmedia Unfolding. www.zeitderhelden.de

Zeit der Helden ran from March 25 to March 29, 2013, from 8.15 pm to 9.00 pm and from 10.00 pm to 10.30 pm, all in fictional real-time. *Zeit der Helden* presents the viewer with the story of two families during the Easter week. Arndt and Mai, on the one hand, question their social roles within the changing family context as their offspring prepares to leave the family home. Arndt decides to buy a certain object to lure the children back home. Meanwhile Mai flirts with disaster in the form of an old high school boyfriend. Gregor and Sandra, on the other hand, realize they never had children because they always put their careers first and developed a very competitive behaviour. When Gregor loses his job, their fragile marriage is put to a test and new information regarding Gregor's fertility derails the situation further.

The serial has not yet been featured in an academic paper. One reason for this might be the somewhat bizarre decision of its network, WDR, to place *Zeit der Helden* within the ›40+‹ initiative—an entire week's program devoted to midlife crisis and other ›catastrophes‹. Some critics state that *Zeit der Helden* is not interested in easy answers about relationships but rather focuses on the complexity of basic human interaction (cf. KUZMANY 2013: n.pag.)—but in the ›40+‹-context, most scholars and critics might have expected the serial to be just another mediocre soap opera, of which there are quite a few already.

The serial itself is well made, shot entirely in the dark surroundings of a tiny German suburb, with an accompanying bombastic score that creates a threatening atmosphere; and it utilizes the narrative device of fictional real-time to great benefit. It is rather obvious that the serial plays with stereotypes found in the most prominent serial using fictional real time: *24* (2001–2010). When Arndt makes a hazy excuse to leave the house for a late job (he works as a electrician), he meets a dodgy man in a dimly lit industrial area. There is a lot of secrecy involved, as both negotiate on how and when the not yet identified ›commodity‹ is to be paid. When they meet each other half way for a compromise, Arndt is told to return later, to avoid potential witnesses. This works similar to *24*, albeit on a significantly smaller scale, and the viewer is to expect a shady deal with severe consequences. But whereas *24* would usually discharge these tensions with an explosion, *Zeit der Helden* delivers a rather profane explanation: it turns out that Arndt planned to buy a swimming pool—an obviously stolen good—to create an environment that makes visiting home a pleasant experience for his children.

Zeit der Helden mingles genres such as the crime thriller with melodrama, which according to Thompson is a distinctive feature of quality TV (cf. THOMPSON 1996: 14), but almost 20 years after his analysis—and after the success of *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, and *Mad Men* (2007–)—, the fusion of established genres to create a new one is hardly innovative anymore.

However, the handling of genres is not the outstanding feature of *Zeit der Helden*, even though this adds complexity of a certain kind. What makes this serial complex is not necessarily the factor time. It's hard to use the term epic here, as it only ran for 9 episodes, so instead of 24 we have *5hours & 35minutes*. The serial gains much of its complexity from a digital scavenger hunt that could be found at www.zeitderhelden.de. *Zeit der Helden*, just like *Breaking Bad*, offers its viewers the possibility to actively shape the way they watch the serial. On a special website, fans could dive into the backstories of the protagonists by playing online games, reading diary entries or watching short films. Viewers could decide how deeply they want to explore the serial and its fictional world offers a rich and colourful history for each character and their relationships. Unfortunately, after 12 months, most of the content went offline.

How did this differ from a serial like *Breaking Bad*? There are some aspects where the transmedial approach of *Zeit der Helden* goes beyond expanding the fictional world. There is undoubtedly still a hierarchy between the involved media: »the mothership« of the serial can be watched on its own and delivers a functional viewing experience; the website, though, did not offer a satisfying coherent narrative when perceived isolated from the serial. Still, the website was not merely meant to be a goodie bag for dedicated fans who want to dwell within *Zeit der Helden* and learn a bit more about the characters and it was not just about playing games. Rather, the website provided bits and pieces of the characters' past that shed an entirely new light on their present actions and thus were firmly integrated into the overall story arc.

4. New Digital Perspectives. The Kids Are Alright

One specific element that we would like to explore in depth is the function of parenthood. In episode 5, the viewer learns that Gregor is infertile and that he used Sandra's career-oriented life style as an alibi. When he loses his job and push comes to shove, he has a heated argument with Sandra and informs her about his deficit. Sandra reacts quite furiously to Gregor's confession: she takes a chain saw from the basement and dismembers the furniture around her.

Her reaction appears to be irrational, overly aggressive, and not consistent with her portrayal to this point. The scene appears to break with the conventions of the serial to be somewhat realistic. It is only when the viewer digs a bit deeper into Sandra's past on the website www.zeitderhelden.de that her behaviour is put into perspective. There are several clips and games exploring her youth and adolescence: since her early childhood, Sandra reacted violently to defeats of any kind. Be it at school sports, her job, or her relationship: missing out on something, a victory to be specific, infuriates her. In another clip, it is revealed that her parents educated her in an uber-

competitive way. Missing out on the chance to have a baby, whether she wants a baby or not, is to her like losing a business deal or losing a game of handball—one of the clips shows her isolated in the dressing room after she bit an opponent who defeated her, even though it was a harmless friendly match. The show itself does not mention any of this. As a matter of fact, her reaction might turn some viewers off, as it does not seem very plausible within the sole context of the serial. The viewer needs the information on the website to round her story off. If the serial had incorporated these facets of her personality, the scene would be more in line with her rather sober portrayal. Exploring her backstory within the serial would have been static, whereas actively researching Sandra's past within the digital content is dynamic and personalized.

The same is true in the case of Gregor. On www.zeitderhelden.de, the viewer uncovers Gregor's inability to father a child was the reason he broke up with his former girlfriend Esther. This is also mentioned in the serial itself, but the fact that this left him traumatized is not. His state of mind has some interesting consequences: for the first four episodes, Gregor tried to befriend Arndt's son Ben, which is a quite curious behaviour for someone who apparently decided not to have children to focus on his career. Later, it is revealed that his attitude is motivated by despair. At a later stage, Gregor mentions to Arndt how much he envies Arndt's family with two kids, even though Arndt envies Gregor for not having to put up with all the stress. Arndt tells Gregor that not having children was the right decision, the right choice. At this point, the situation seems clear: Arndt is privileged for being able to decide whether to have children or not, whereas Gregor had no choice whatsoever.

With information obtained from www.zeitderhelden.de the viewer's perspective changes. The viewer knows that Mai gave birth to Pauline before she met Arndt. It is reasonable to assume that Ben is the son of Mai and Arndt. There is one game called ›my wife, her daughter, our child live here‹, though, in which the viewer/player learns that Mai and Arndt applied for an adoption. Given that it is known that Mai is fertile, this indicates that Arndt is infertile as well, thus making the two men very much alike. It is one specific moment when www.zeitderhelden.de goes beyond expanding the universe; narratively speaking, this is game changer, because the viewer can now re-evaluate his impression of Arndt and Gregor, as both of them had a choice; they've simply chosen differently. The website does change the story, gives additional information that influences the plot itself. Indeed, there are numerous other hints that explain the characters in a way the serial does not.

5. Transmedia Storytelling. More than Merchandise

Zeit der Helden is closer to Jenkins' idea of transmedia storytelling than *Breaking Bad*, even though the latter claims a far more prominent role in the

discourse surrounding transmedia storytelling in general and quality TV in particular. *Zeit der Helden* qualifies for ›complex TV‹ as drafted by Mittell. There are many positive aspects of the show that are usually rare within German television: the serial has a memory, is literary and writer-based, has an ensemble cast, creates a new genre, appeals to an educated audience, is self-conscious, aspires to realism, and at least partly tends to the controversial theme of depression. Obviously, *Zeit der Helden* would score rather well in Robert J. Thompson's omnipresent list from 1996, but one should not ignore the fact that most of the notoriously mentioned serials like *The Sopranos*, *Mad Men* or *The Wire* did not attract large audiences; they all ran on networks like HBO, AMC, or Showtime which never strived for high ratings because their business model is not based on it. Quality television is designed for a minority. While Carsten Heidböhmer hails the serial as probably the best German serial of 2013, he has to admit that the serial did not find an audience (cf. HEIDBÖHMER 2013: n.pag.).

The reason for this might not be found in the serial itself, but rather in its transmedial structure. One could argue that the serial aims to capture the interest of the 40+ generations, whereas the digital content appeals to a much younger audience. *Zeit der Helden* does not rely on monomedial storytelling, which is a step into the right direction, but misplaced within the overall program. The target audience perceived it as a well-executed melodrama, but not as milestone of transmedia storytelling. And while Tilman Gangloff's praise for the serial (cf. GANGLOFF 2012: n.pag.) is meant to promote it as an opportunity for television to discard its status as an ›accessory medium‹ (*Begleitmedium*) and to reclaim its spot as a ›key medium‹ (*Leitmedium*), this appraisal does not help the serial's reputation. *Zeit der Helden* is a transmedial vortex and omnidirectional stream of medial consciousness, not a monomedial sequence. The involved media channels are all accessories for the transmedial experience. When the monomedial serial is perceived as a ›key medium‹, the quality of the whole endeavour suffers badly.

To conclude, we would like to stress the narrative potential of transmedia or crossmedia storytelling. Not only does it enable the viewer to interact with a product, he or she turns into the actual producer of his viewing experience. *Zeit der Helden* blurs the hierarchy of the involved media; it relies on all medial channels to narrate its story, especially when viewed in real time like it was intended. In order to make sense of the at times arbitrary actions of the protagonists, the viewer has to dig deeper, unless of course he or she is satisfied with the somewhat sparse information policy of the serial itself. But it is only a fragment of a bigger picture that is tessellated from a variety of medial parts. Transmedia storytelling does away with the strict distinction of text and paratext. It is a crossmedial stream of consciousness, which only unfolds fully to those who invest time and energy, actively participating instead of just passively watching the telly. *Zeit der Helden* works well in the context of quality TV—it is ironic, though, that it gains much of its quality beyond the television screen.

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