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Engaging Television Characters – A Cognitive Approach to Contemporary Television

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Abstract

To what degree is the viewer's engagement with a television character triggered by the distinct narrative context of a programme? As with other types of storytelling (e.g. film, literature), engaging with a television character is an integral part of the overall experience of watching television. More specifically, television characters provide an emotional focal point for the audience. They invite us to imagine ourselves in their situation, challenge our sense of morality, and encourage us to consider how we would react if we were to encounter them in our everyday life.

Whereas in the past relating to television characters has been somewhat of a private phenomenon, our relationship with television characters has become increasingly public within the last decade. The ever-growing recap culture around all types of television programmes on websites such as The AV Club, Uproxx, and IndieWire, and the lively discourse around television characters on social media (e.g. Twitter, Instagram, Facebook) underline this increased public interest in television characters.

Given the current popular interest in viewer engagement with television characters, it is surprising that only a limited number of scholarly works have previously explored this subject. Furthermore, most existing studies on the viewer/character relationship in contemporary television exhibit little variation in their focus on genre and character type. More specifically, as a result of the impact of *The Sopranos* (1999 - 2007) and *Breaking Bad* (2008 – 13) on popular culture, scholarly discourse around television characters has been dominated by studies on the morally corrupt antihero protagonists of contemporary television drama. Aside from a few notable exceptions (e.g. Gorton, 2009; Blanchet and Vaage, 2012; Mittell, 2015), most existing studies on viewer engagement with television characters ignore the way in which narrative characteristics inherent to the television medium influence the viewer/character relationship.

The main aim of this thesis is to establish a medium- and programme-specific, text-based theoretical model for the study of viewer engagement with television characters. Various television formats are examined, including wrestling, contemporary drama, animated series, and late-night chat programmes. Also examined are the specific modes of engagement (e.g. antipathy, parasocial engagement, long-term viewer engagement) that shape

the viewer-text relationship. The methodological approach is primarily based in cognitive media theory and television studies, however, studies on viewer engagement from a wide range of disciplines (e.g. literary studies, psychology, sociology) are also considered. By examining viewer engagement in this way, this thesis challenges and builds upon existing theoretical approaches, and seeks to provide the reader with a deeper understanding of a relationship that, despite its growing importance in the everyday lives of many television viewers, has thus far only received limited scholarly attention.

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Acknowledgement

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Author's Declaration

This thesis represents the original work of Oliver Kroener, unless otherwise stated in the text. The research upon which it is based was carried out in the Film, Theatre, and Television Studies Department at the University of Glasgow under the supervision of Dr Ian Garwood and Dr Amy Holdsworth during the period of October 2014 to December 2017.

1 Introduction: Why Television Characters?

The penultimate episode of the third season of HBO's fantasy hit series *Game of Thrones* (2010 -) ends with the violent death of three of its main characters ('The Rains of Castamere', 2013). In particular, the wedding of Robb Stark (Richard Madden) and his pregnant wife Talisa (Oona Chaplin) takes a dark turn when the wedding band plays 'The Rains of Castamere', which the show has previously established as the theme song of House Lannister, the main enemies of the Stark family. At this point, the episode cuts to a lingering close-up of Robb's mother Catelyn (Michelle Fairley). She already looks worried, but becomes suspicious when she realises that some of the soldiers who are attending the wedding are wearing chainmail underneath their regular clothing. Catelyn tries to warn Rob, but before he can react an enemy soldier takes out a knife, grabs Talisa, and repeatedly stabs her in the chest. The non-diegetic music swells as Robb and Catelyn get hit by arrows and Stark soldiers are killed around them. In a desperate attempt to save Robb's and her own life, Catelyn begs the villainous Walder Frey (David Bradley) to stop the killing. However, she does not succeed and has to watch as her son gets murdered right in front of her. Catelyn reacts to Robb's death by letting out an animalistic scream and the episode finally ends when an enemy soldier grabs her and slits her throat.

'The Rains of Castamere' (2013) caused an uproar among viewers when it first aired and since then it has become one of the most notorious episodes in television history. In addition, viewers began to upload reaction videos to YouTube of what has since been commonly referred to as 'the red wedding'. These videos, many of which seem to have been filmed in secret, showcase how viewers reacted to 'The Rains of Castamere' when they watched it for the first time. Some viewers that are featured in these videos just watch in shock whereas others cover their eyes, scream or throw household items at their television sets as the red wedding unfolds in front of them (Horrorcirdan, 2013). The fact that 'The Rains of Castamere' elicited a strong emotional response in many viewers also becomes apparent when looking through the comment sections of television fan sites. For example, a user on IndieWire voiced her frustrations about the episode by stating, "I'm dismayed. I no longer care about anything in the story," whereas another user on the same website suggested that

by killing off three major characters, the showrunners of *Game of Thrones* essentially "killed the show" (Walsh, 2013).

These passionate viewer responses to the deaths that occur in 'The Rains of Castamere' are not an isolated phenomenon. Rather, they exemplify a general increased interest in television characters amongst popular audiences. This increased interest is apparent in the countless online think pieces that dissect the behaviour of television characters. I am here referring to articles such as *Viking's Ragnar Lothbrok Is The True Hero Modern Antiheroes Misunderstand* (Perkins, 2014), *An Open Letter to Marnie Michaels of Girls* (Chaney, 2017), and *Terrible Teens on TV: The Brats That Need to Grow Up* (Moylan, 2016). In addition, the number of television recaps on pop culture websites such as The AV Club, Uproxx, and Vanity Fair has visibly increased within the last decade. Recap articles not only provide viewers with a summary of the most recent episodes of their favourite programmes, but the comment sections attached to them give users a space to share and discuss their own thoughts about the characters featured on these programmes. The current interest in television characters is most evident, however, on social media websites such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. Twitter is particularly noteworthy in this regard since it enables viewers to share their opinions about a character by using character-specific hashtags (e.g. #justiceforbarb, #jonsnowlives, #rickgrimes).

That viewers are engaging with television characters more than ever before is not enough on its own to answer a question fundamental to this thesis: Why study viewer engagement with television characters in the first place? 'The Rains of Castamere' and the viewer reaction to this episode provide a suitable response to this question. In particular, during the final ten minutes of the episode, the viewer is closely aligned with Catelyn Stark. As the red wedding unfolds, the camera repeatedly lingers on her face, giving viewers the chance to read and react to her facial expressions. Moreover, the viewer discovers together with Catelyn that something at the wedding ceremony is wrong and when she is finally killed, the camera again closes in on Catelyn's face to intensify viewer engagement. The way in which 'The Rains of Castamere' portrays the red wedding underlines that characters are a key element of how viewers relate to television narratives on a cognitive level. They offer viewers an

emotional entry point to a narrative and help them to make sense of the unfolding story.

This sentiment is not new. For example, Murray Smith (1995) has argued that "characters are central to the rhetorical and aesthetic effects of narrative texts" (p. 4). Indeed, he goes so far as to suggest that "character structures are perhaps the major way by which narrative texts solicit our assent for particular values, practices, and ideologies" (p. 4). Meanwhile, Kristyn Gorton (2009) argues that engaging with a television character over an extended period of time is an intricate cognitive process that has the potential to affect how we behave in our everyday lives (p. 124). Other seminal studies on viewer engagement with film and television characters include Noel Carroll's (2004) and Murray Smith's (2011) respective studies of Tony Soprano, Jason Mittell's (2015) analysis of viewer engagement with complex television characters, Misha Kavka's (2012) work on reality TV, and Magrethe Bruun Vaage's (2015) study of American television antiheroes.

All of these studies offer new insights into how viewers relate to television characters, but most of them focus on similar themes. For example, in his study on complex television narration, Mittell (2015) primarily emphasises that television's inherent narrative qualities (e.g. serial storytelling, long-term viewer engagement) shape the viewer/character relationship. Although Mittell refers to characters from a number of genres over the course of his study, he employs *Breaking Bad's* (2008 - 13) Walter White (Bryan Cranston) as his primary example (pp. 118-64). This morally flawed character certainly makes for a fascinating object of study, yet he also symbolises the current academic obsession with antihero characters – an obsession that has led to a number of studies which mainly approach viewer engagement from a moral perspective. Of course, a character's moral orientation is an important element of how we relate to that character on a cognitive level; however, the discourse around television characters has focused too strongly on this particular aspect, especially since there are various forms of viewer engagement that have not yet been widely explored.

Another shortcoming of the current discourse around television characters is that some studies simply apply theories originally developed for the study of film to the study of television. This approach is problematic because, while they share a common narrative language, film and television are distinct narrative

formats that differ in significant ways – narrative structure, performance, and production value, to name just a few. I am not arguing that when studying television characters one should dismiss theories on character engagement that were developed for other media. However, the implications of applying such theories to another medium need to be carefully considered.

Many studies on viewer engagement that originate from cognitive media theory suffer from a lack of medium specificity. While my own research is also rooted primarily in cognitive media theory and television studies, I have worked to address the issue of medium specificity through taking a more interdisciplinary approach. Throughout this thesis, I combine cognitive studies on character engagement with theories from television studies, animation studies, sociology, and psychology in order to provide a text-based and programme-specific investigation of the viewer/character relationship in contemporary television which highlights elements of the relationship that have not previously been explored.

In contrast to most existing studies on viewer engagement with television characters, my research does not exclusively focus on the differences between television and other forms of storytelling. Instead, my main research question is, how does the narrative context of a television programme affect character engagement? While medium- and genre-specific questions do factor into my analysis of character engagement, my primary focus is text-based – namely, I consider how a television programme's narrative framework (e.g. structure, visual style, generic aspects) shapes the viewer's relationship with its characters.

Following Smith (1995), this thesis employs a cognitive, text-based approach to "understand the ways in which texts produce or deny the conditions conducive for various levels of engagement, rather than the ways they enforce them" (p. 82). In the past, cognitive media theory has been criticised for being a dispassionate or clinical way to study viewer engagement. This criticism has especially been levelled at studies that are part of the recent quantitative turn (e.g. Chow et al., 2015; Green et al., 2008) in cognitive media theory, wherein scholars typically emphasise the discipline's ties with neuroscience (e.g. Brunick and Cutting, 2014; Smith, 2014a). Before carrying out further quantitative research on viewer engagement with television characters, a qualitative

framework for this type of research needs to be more firmly established, and that is what this thesis aims to do through its focus on the text itself.

Rather than dissecting individual viewer responses, this thesis examines the narrative frameworks against which these responses occur. Based on this approach, one might argue that the engagement patterns that I analyse throughout this thesis exclusively depend on my own interpretation. However, as Smith (1995) notes, while texts can be interpreted in various ways, they still "resist certain uses and facilitate others" (p. 63). This means although viewers might not engage with television characters in a universal way, their individual responses are still generated by the text (even if they are oppositional).

In the context of this thesis, I define the viewer as any person who relates the (fictional) world of a television programme to their everyday life.[1] My definition of 'the viewer' is deliberately broad, and does not distinguish between individual characteristics such as gender, race, age, class etc. The reason for this is that this study is not primarily concerned with audience reception, but focuses on how the distinct narrative context of a programme prompts certain types of engagement. Therefore, exploring a multitude of spectatorial positons would go beyond the scope of this thesis and detract from its main focus: the text.

Although the methodological approach of this thesis is largely text-based, I still cite individual viewer responses to illustrate my argument. All of the viewer responses that I refer to herein are taken from online message boards and social media websites. By gathering and interpreting these online responses, I follow a methodological approach that Robert Kozinets (2015) has defined as "netnography". Kozinets (2015) states that, historically, sociologists and anthropologists have been concerned with studying culture and community (p. 6). Netnography aims to do the same, yet it does so within an online environment.

A benefit of netnography as a research tool is its flexibility. For example, netnography can be conducted by an individual researcher or a group of researchers (Kozinets, 2015, p.4). Thus, it exists somewhere between big data analysis and the close readings of discourse analysis (Kozinets, 2015, p. 4). Netnography is also less obtrusive than more traditional audience research

[1] For a more detailed discussion of my usage of the terms viewer and viewer engagement, see chapter two.

methods (e.g. personal interview, surveys) (Kozinets, 1997, p.471) because it enables researchers to investigate people in a more natural environment. As Kozinets (2015) puts it, "[From] posts and updates, Twitter poetry, YouTubery, and of course blogs, we can learn about real concerns, real meanings, real causes, real feelings" (p. 17). Netnography is often used to examine what constitutes a specific online community. In this thesis, I mainly use netnography to provide evidence that television characters elicit strong cognitive responses from the audience; my methodological approach, however, always remains text-based. For example, the primary question underlying the case studies in chapter four is not "Why does viewer x hate this character?", but "How do the textual features (e.g. character traits, visual style, narrative structure) of a programme affect a character's antipathetic potential?"

The case studies in this thesis have been selected in an effort to expand the scope of previous cognition-based studies on viewer engagement. Most studies on viewer engagement that originate from cognitive media theory focus exclusively on cinematic narratives or, if they discuss television characters, they mainly examine how viewers relate to characters from "complex" (Mittell, 2015) television dramas. Even within television studies, drama is the most studied television genre when it comes to viewer engagement. This is exemplified by a recent collection on viewer engagement which, despite being entitled *Emotions in Contemporary TV Series* (Garci□a, 2016), largely features essays that focus on big-budget, critically acclaimed "quality" (Akass and McCabe, 2007) dramas. Our relationship with characters from other genres remains somewhat elusive. Of course, there are some studies that examine other genres (e.g. Bonner, 2011; Kavka, 2015), yet these are not primarily concerned with character engagement. In contrast, this thesis investigates viewer engagement with characters from a wide range of genres: wrestling, drama, late-night chat, and animated television.

Chapter two provides the methodological foundation for my research. In this chapter, I define the key terms of this thesis, discuss the main theories it is based on, and establish how my work is distinct from other studies on viewer engagement with television characters. The bulk of the chapter comprises a review of existing studies on viewer engagement from cognitive media theory and television studies. Specifically, I discuss a number of works that focus on viewer engagement with characters from different types of visual media

storytelling (Bordwell, 2008, 2011; Smith, 1995, 2011; Plantinga, 2009). In addition, referring to the respective works of Ed Tan (1995) and Anne Jerslev (2006), I approach viewer engagement from an aesthetic point of view. While this discussion of the aesthetic dimension of viewer engagement functions as a precursor for all of the subsequent case studies, it particularly functions as the theoretical foundation for chapters four and five, which explicitly focus on how a programme's visual style (e.g. mood, mise en scène) can impact character engagement.

The second part of chapter two focuses on viewer engagement in contemporary television. In this section, I clarify to what degree questions of genre factor into this thesis (Neale, 2015), distinguish between viewer engagement in fictional and factual television (e.g. Kavka, 2005; Skeggs and Wood, 2012), and explore how the differences between television narration and other forms of storytelling affect viewer engagement (Creeber, 2004; Geraghty, 1981). The chapter ends on a discussion of a number of studies that specifically examine viewer engagement with television characters. These studies include, but are not limited to, Ien Ang's (1985) work on emotional realism, Kristyn Gorton's (2009) work on emotional strands, and Robert Blanchet and Margrethe Bruun Vaage's (2012) study on long-term viewer engagement with television characters.

Chapter three provides the first series of case studies, which are centred around television wrestling. I argue that viewer engagement with wrestling characters represents a mixture of engagement patterns from various television genres. At the beginning of the chapter, I use prior studies on professional wrestling (e.g. Barthes, 2005; Jenkins, 2005; Morton and O'Brien, 1985) to distinguish between live and television wrestling. Moreover, I discuss the character types (e.g. heel, babyface) that are typically featured on wrestling programmes, and investigate how liveness (Auslander, 2008; Marriott, 2007) impacts viewer engagement.

In the second part of chapter three, I employ specific case studies to illustrate my argument. For example, referring to the hyper-realistic wrestling performances of Mick Foley (Michael Francis Foley), I argue that, similar to soap operas, wrestling programmes are characterised by what Ien Ang (1985) has defined as "emotional realism" (p. 45). Particularly, I argue that not knowing to what extent a wrestling match is scripted adds a sense of emotional realism to

the viewer's engagement with the characters. In addition, referring to Kavka's (2005) work on reality TV, I discuss how wrestling programmes employ a realistic aesthetic to further increase viewer engagement. In the final section of the chapter, I argue that television wrestling regularly exploits the viewer's long-term engagement (Blanchet and Vaage, 2012) with the characters to intensify the emotional impact of the storytelling. The main example I use to illustrate this argument is Hulk Hogan's (Terry Bolea) infamous heel-turn at 'WCW Bash at the Beach' (1996).[2]

Chapter four focuses on viewer antipathy in contemporary television drama. As previously noted, many recent studies originating from cognitive media theory seek to determine why viewers tend to sympathise with television antiheroes despite their frequent despicable behaviour. This chapter investigates the opposite phenomenon – namely, how exactly does a television character become less likeable? I argue that a character's antipathetic potential is determined by how that character is presented within the narrative context. To illustrate my argument, I discuss two examples from contemporary television drama: Joffrey Baratheon (Jack Gleeson, *Game of Thrones*) and Andrea Harrison (Laurie Holden, *The Walking Dead*). While Joffrey is a clear-cut villain that the show creators have engineered to be hated, Andrea represents a more complicated case since, despite the fact that *The Walking Dead* (2010 -) portrays her in a sympathetic light, she has become one of the most hated television characters of all time.

In their respective studies on viewer engagement with Tony Soprano, Carroll (2004) and Smith (2011, 2014) argue that, in spite of their morally flawed behaviour, antiheroes possess a number of redeeming qualities to enable viewers to sympathise with them. In contrast, television characters with a high antipathetic potential are marked by an absence of redeeming qualities. Referring to Vaage's (2013) concept of fictional reliefs, I argue that the viewer's sympathetic engagement with a character is not solely a question of morality. Since television drama is a fictional genre, viewers are not obliged to sympathise with a character simply because that character is presented as more virtuous than another character. Instead, viewers are free to like or dislike characters for

[2] The term "heel turn" is wrestling vernacular for wrestlers who turn from a hero into a villain.

basic reasons such as their race, gender, level of intelligence, underdog position etc.

In my discussion of Joffrey Baratheon, I examine how *Game of Thrones* combines various narrative elements (e.g. mise en scène, performance, serial narration) to establish this character as unlikeable. Moreover, I argue that hating Joffrey can actually be enjoyable for viewers because it offers them the chance to experience transgressive pleasure and Schadenfreude. In the second case study of chapter four I analyse the narrative context that has encouraged so many viewers to hate *The Walking Dead*'s Andrea Harrison. For example, Andrea's behaviour is often illogical and she is frequently placed in opposition to the show's most sympathetic characters (e.g. Rick [Andrew Lincoln], Michonne [Danai Gurira], Daryl [Norman Reedus]). In addition, since the programme maintains that Andrea is a sympathetic character, hating her does not allow viewers to experience the same level of Schadenfreude and transgressive pleasure as they would with an unequivocal villain like Joffrey.

Chapter five focuses on viewer engagement with animated television characters. Here I investigate how the interaction between the performances, narrative structure, and visual style of animated television programmes shapes the viewer's relationship with the characters. At the beginning of the chapter, I refer to studies on animation (McCloud, 1994; Wells, 1998) to explore the differences between engaging with animated versus live-action characters. For example, I discuss how what Smith (1995) refers to as recognition becomes a more central element of viewer engagement if the character the viewer relates to is animated. This discussion is followed by a more detailed analysis of viewer engagement with animated television characters. Part of this analysis is a re-evaluation of certain narrative features that have heretofore dominated scholarly discourse around animated characters (e.g. voice acting, the uncanny valley effect).

The two main case studies I discuss in chapter five are *South Park* (1997 –) and *The Legend of Korra* (2012 – 14). These two animated programmes are not only aesthetically different, but they also feature two distinct performance styles: figurative and embodied. Referring to the work of Donald Crafton (2013), I discuss how each programme's performance style encourages a different mode of viewer engagement. My analysis of *The Legend of Korra* mainly focuses on the interplay of serial storytelling and embodied animated performances. I argue

that *Korra* combines this mode of performance with serial storytelling to encourage viewers to engage with the show's characters on a deeper level. In contrast to *Korra*, *South Park* features figurative animated performances, a limited animation style, and a fluid narrative structure that oscillates between episodic and serial storytelling. I argue that while *South Park* exclusively employs figurative animated performances aimed at eliciting from the viewer a visceral emotional response (e.g. laughter, disgust, shock), the show's increasingly serial storytelling hints at a deeper level of characterisation. More specifically, referring to Kenny's (Matt Stone) character development over the course of the series, and the death of Chef (Isaac Hayes) in 'The Return of Chef' (2006), I argue that *South Park* invites viewers to either engage with the characters on a visceral level or to embrace the sense of embodiment that is introduced through the show's slow transformation from episodic to serial storytelling.

Chapter six presents the final case study of this thesis, which focuses on viewer engagement in late-night chat programmes. In contrast to the other case studies I discuss in this thesis, late-night chat is not a fictional genre, but largely features characters that play versions of themselves.[3] Throughout the chapter, I refer to sociological studies on "parasocial interaction" (e.g. Giles, 2010; Horton and Wohl, 2006; Rojek, 2015), a crucial term which defines non-reciprocal relationships between television characters and their audiences. Yet, my argument does not only relate to the parasocial performances of late-night hosts and guests. Rather, I contend that late-night chat programmes exploit the viewer's longing to be part of an exclusive community.

The domestic mise en scène of late-night chat is essential in establishing the illusion of community since it immediately suggests to the audience that the characters occupy the same social space as them. In addition, citing examples from *Conan* (2010 -), *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* (2015 -), and *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* (2014 -), I argue that the performances of late-night hosts are also instrumental in creating this sense of community between the characters and the viewer. This illusion is further heightened in the interactions between hosts and guest. As Jane Shattuc (2008) notes, celebrity

[3] As previously discussed, the perceived level of realism is also a crucial part of viewer engagement with wrestling characters. Yet, wrestling programmes still rely on scripted storylines and feature character playing roles whereas late-night chat shows are clearly framed as factual entertainment.

interviews are characterised by their transactional nature. In exchange for disclosing previously untold private anecdotes, the celebrity guests are given a platform to promote their newest film or album. Contemporary late-night programmes often feature additional segments (e.g. celebrity party games) that give viewers the opportunity to spend more time with the hosts and the guests. I argue that, even more so than traditional celebrity interviews, these segments aim to establish a sense of community.

As I have emphasised throughout this introduction, the primary aim of this thesis is to establish a text-based and programme-specific model of viewer engagement with television characters. Obviously, television is such a vast medium that it is impossible for this to be a comprehensive study. Still, this work represents an important step in establishing a qualitative framework for the study of viewer engagement with television characters. When I initially began working on this thesis, it was my hope that extending the scope of existing cognition-based studies would reveal previously unknown aspects of how viewers relate to television characters. Based on the research that I have carried out over the past three years, this has proven to be accurate. For instance, I found that wrestling programmes complicate viewer engagement by combining a range of generic elements from various genres, whereas viewer engagement with animated characters is largely shaped by the tension between a programme's visual style and the inherent narrative characteristics of television narration. The following five chapters not only emphasise that engaging with a television character is different from engaging with characters from other media (e.g. film, literature), but also make clear that the viewer/character relationship in contemporary television is closely tied to the specific narrative contexts of individual programmes.

2 Engaging (Television) Characters

In this chapter, I am mainly concerned with establishing the overarching theoretical framework of this dissertation. In order to establish my own methodology, I examine different modes of character perception, provide an overview of cognition-based studies on viewer engagement with fictional characters, and discuss some of the key differences between television narration and other forms of storytelling. In the main body of this chapter, I focus on the similarities and differences between television and other types of fictional characters. In the course of this chapter, I also discuss a number of existing studies on television characters to highlight some of the gaps in the current discourse around viewer engagement in contemporary television and, more importantly, to make clear how exactly my methodological approach differs from previous works on this subject. In particular, I argue that the study of viewer engagement with television characters needs to be extended to include characters from a variety of television formats and genres.

I begin this chapter with a general discussion of character perception. This overview of possible modes of character perception, which is primarily based on Uri Margolin's (2010) work, demonstrates the amount of mental activity and the level of suspension of disbelief that is expected from viewers when they engage with fictional characters. This is a necessary prerequisite for my entire dissertation since, although in the course of this work I investigate viewer engagement with television characters from a variety of genres, all of these characters are, at least to some degree, fictional. Thus, my discussion of character perception in this chapter allows me to focus in more detail on the effects of the narrative characteristics of a particular television genre on viewer engagement in the subsequent chapters.

This section is followed by a discussion of cognitive film theories on viewer engagement (e.g. Bordwell, 2008, 2011; Plantinga, 2009; Smith, 1995). While many of these studies provide the basis for this dissertation, I believe that they cannot be simply applied to television narration. More specifically, many cognition-based studies on viewer engagement have been developed for film and not television. As a result, these studies tend to neglect the effects that the distinct narrative setup of television has on viewer engagement.

I believe that in order to successfully apply existing cognitive studies on viewer engagement with filmic characters to television, one has to acknowledge that they operate within a different narrative context. Thus, in the second half of this chapter, I mainly discuss what I consider to be the key differences between television narration and other forms of storytelling. To establish how exactly television differs from other narrative media, I refer to various narrative theories from the field of television studies including, but not limited to, the work of Raymond Williams (1990), Robert C. Allen (1985), and Christine Geraghty (1981).

In the final section of this chapter, I discuss a number of theories on viewer engagement with television characters that recognise that the narrative characteristics of television alter the viewer/character relationship (e.g. Kristyn Gorton, 2009; Ien Ang, 1985; Margrethe Bruun Vaage, 2013). Combined with my discussion of character-based cognitive film theories, this primarily analytical and, to a lesser extent, historical overview of selected television theories provides the basis for the following chapters, all of which are case studies that examine the viewer/character relationship in contemporary television across a variety of formats and genres.

2.1 Character Perception

While there are multiple studies that examine the viewer's perception of fictional characters, I have chosen to primarily focus on Uri Margolin's work. The main reason for this is that Margolin's (2011) theory includes an overview of some of the key studies on character perception. Margolin suggests that readers have a number of options when it comes to relating to fictional characters (Margolin, 2011). These options might be viewed as different levels of character perception. Drawing from medieval philosophy, Margolin (2011, p. 401) distinguishes between four modes of character perception: de sensu, de dicto, de re, and de se. He categorises these four modes of character perception as a scale that ranges from an objective view of characters (de sensu mode) to an increasingly subjective one (de se mode). In the de sensu mode, readers are mostly concerned with the sense or meanings of expressions of the text whereas, in the de dicto mode, the reader focuses more on the content or intentions of the narrative (Margolin, 2011, p. 401). The de re mode is marked by readers who are preoccupied with the truth value of the proposed claims, the states of

affairs of the text, and the individuals that are featured in the text (Margolin, 2011, p. 401) In the de se mode, the reader directly relates the claims, individuals, and states of affairs of a text to her own experience (Margolin, 2011, p. 401).

In the de sensu mode, which Margolin (2011) regards as the most basic mode of character perception, viewers perceive fictional characters as "semantic items" (p. 401) that do not bear any resemblance to persons existing in the real world. Rather, in this mode, fictional characters only represent a collection of character traits that are ascribed to a name. Thinking of characters in this way reduces them to "a collection of information items compiled from the text by the reader and stored in a common named file" (Margolin, 2011, p. 402). Margolin states that it is crucial for the de sensu mode that no existence claim is made. Instead, in the de sensu mode, fictional characters are only abstract entities held together by a name. There might be some symbolic meaning encoded within the characters, but the reader is not meant to engage with them on an emotional level (Margolin, 2011, pp 401-403). According to Margolin, this mode of character perception was in particular encouraged by Russian formalists and French structuralists of the nineteen-sixties and seventies such as Roland Barthes, Mieke Bal, and Boris Tomashevsky.

In the de dicto mode, the reader entertains the idea that, at some point, a fictional character might have existed in the real world but still does not engage with that character as one would engage with a real person. For example, the de dicto reader accepts that there might have been a person named Sherlock Holmes living in London, but never goes beyond that assumption (Margolin, 2011, pp. 403-405). In contrast to a semantic character reading, the reader now accepts the character as an "individual entity" (Margolin, 2011, p. 404). Margolin states that a useful analogy is to think of someone the reader knows second or third hand. In the de dicto mode, fictional characters are still "the product of someone else's imagination as encoded in the text we are reading" (Margolin, 2011, p. 404). This means the reader does not ascribe any character traits or behavioural patterns to a character beyond what is explicitly stated in the text. As a result, readers do not empathise, sympathise or identify with characters in the de dicto mode. Moreover, most readers will not feel disturbed if they spot any character-related textual inconsistencies since there is

still the possibility that the character does not exist (Margolin, 2011, pp. 403-404).

In the de re mode, readers accept the existence of fictional characters that behave similar to human beings and have their own sense of agency. This is a noteworthy difference to the de dicto mode, in which readers perceive fictional characters as individual entities, but still doubt their existence (Margolin, 2011, pp.403-405). It is this "existential jump" (Margolin, 2011, p. 406) that makes it possible for readers to interpret a text and engage with its characters. As Margolin (2011) states, "we cannot fully engage with a character until we have in our minds not just propositions, but the mental construct or representation of a world and individuated entities existing in it" (p. 406). This is a crucial prerequisite since it enables readers to engage with fictional characters on an emotional and cognitive level. The de se mode also permits readers to fill in blanks in the narrative since they can infer behavioural patterns by interpreting the text and its characters. For example, if the reader thinks of fictional character x as a real human being, she can infer how x will behave in the future by interpreting the character's behaviour up to that point in the story (Margolin, 2011, pp. 405-409). Yet, to some extent readers still play a game of make-believe since they pretend there is a fictional world that is inhabited by human-like fictional characters (Margolin, 2011, p. 409).

According to Margolin (2011), the difference between these first three modes of character perception and the de se mode is that it connects the "game world" (p. 410) to the real world. That is to say, in the de sensu, de dicto, and de re mode, readers are only concerned with an external fictional world, but in the de se mode they make inferences about their own lives based on their relationship with the fictional world and its inhabitants. Margolin (2011) states:

> In the de se mode we are concerned with the game world, that is, first with participatory response or our own experiencing or feelings with respect to the narrated and second with the real-world impact of the narrated, our doing some further things in the actual world as a result of our cognitive and emotive encounter with the object called fictional character. (p. 410)

The de se mode distinguishes itself by any mental activity that goes beyond textual comprehension. However, there are still various levels of reader engagement with fictional characters that go beyond textual comprehension. For

example, some readers might regard engaging with a fictional character as a "voluntary game" (Margolin, 2011, p. 410) whereas others might "[make] the game of make believe [their] temporal reality" (p. 410) or oscillate between these two levels of engagement.

This dissertation largely focuses on what Margolin defines as the de se mode of character perception. This means throughout this work, I mainly investigate types of viewer engagement in which the game world of a television narrative and the viewer's everyday life collide. For instance, in chapter four, I investigate to what degree the process of hating a television character is informed by the viewer's own social life whereas in chapter six I argue that viewer engagement in the late-night chat show relies on the viewer's longing to be part of a community.

My understanding of the term viewer engagement is also closely tied to Margolin's theory on character perception. In particular, in the context of this thesis, I define viewer engagement as any form of relating to a character that goes beyond textual comprehension. Thus, my definition of viewer engagement equally refers to the cognitive and the emotional connotation of the term. The reason for this is that often the viewer's cognitive and emotional response to a television character cannot be easily separated. For example, as I discuss in chapter four, viewers might go from liking to hating a television character over the course of watching a programme. This is equally a cognitive and an emotional process. To be more specific, the viewer's emotional engagement with a character might change over the course of watching a programme as a result of her ongoing re-evaluation of that character on a cognitive level. As a result of the way in which the cognitive and emotional aspects of engaging with a television character constantly overlap, I have decided not to make a clear distinction between cognitive and emotional viewer engagement. Instead, in some of the subsequent chapters, I focus more strongly on the cognitive dimension of the term whereas in other chapter I focus more strongly on the viewer's emotional response to television characters.

In the next section, which focuses on existing cognitive film theories on viewer engagement, I discuss to what degree a viewer's personal life can inform their relationship with a fictional character. Despite the fact that most cognitive film theories on viewer engagement do not acknowledge character perception as

a separate cognitive process (e.g. David Bordwell, 2008; Murray Smith, 1995), they still operate in the de se mode of character perception.

2.2 Cognitive Film Theory & Viewer Engagement

This section is primarily concerned with how viewers relate to fictional characters from visual media storytelling on a cognitive level. Yet, before analysing character engagement in detail, I want to briefly investigate viewer engagement in visual media storytelling in more general terms. The two questions underlying this more general discussion of viewer engagement are 'What motivates us to engage with films or television programmes in the first place?' and 'To what degree does the aesthetic quality of a narrative affect viewer engagement?'

In his seminal work on viewer engagement, cognitive film theorist Ed S. Tan (1996) argues that, on a psychological level, feature films provide viewers with two sources of satisfaction. According to Tan (1996), "the first is the fictional world depicted by the film" (p. 32) and "the second derives from the technical-stylistic qualities of the medium" (p. 32). Referring to Zillman and Wakshlag's (1985) work on viewer engagement in the television crime drama, Tan (1996) further argues that if we were asked to reduce the primary motivational attributes of the feature film to only one factor, then this factor would most likely be "tension reduction" (p. 35). With tension reduction, Tan (1996) refers to the "small-scale emotional catharsis" (p. 35) that viewers experience anytime they watch a film or television programme. According to Tan (1996), this "creation and resolution of tension" (p. 35) not only occurs within the fictional world depicted by the film, but also on the artefact level, which is how Tan refers to the formal and aesthetic attributes of a film. More specifically, Tan claims that the events depicted in a fictional narrative can create a sense of tension in the viewer. Yet this tension is typically resolved by the end of a film. Equally, deciphering a film's "systems of plot and style" (Tan, 1996, p. 35) requires cognitive effort and creates "a desire for order" (p.35) in the viewer. However, these systems of plot and style usually become more orderly over the course of a film, which also acts as a release of tension for the viewer (Tan, 1996, p. 35).

In her audience study of *The Lord of the Rings* (2001), Ann Jerslev (2006) builds on Tan (1996) theory of empathetic and non-empathetic fiction and

artefact emotions. Jerslev (2006) summarises Tan's model of spectatorship as follows:

> Empathetic emotions are related to the absorption in plot development and the destiny of characters. Non-empathetic emotions are not related to plot development or characters but follow from the loosening of the emotional attachment to narrative action in order for the viewer to be more passively taken over by the senses and surrender to the spectacular quality of the visual style. (p. 215)

Based on her own empirical research, Jerlsev (2006) agrees with Tan's model of spectatorship, but argues that it needs to be extended to include non-empathetic fictional emotions (p. 215). Jerslev (2006) bases this argument on the fact that, anytime viewers voiced their admiration for the *The Lord of the Rings*' imagery, they distinguished between mise en scène (e.g. spectacular landscapes, battle scenes) and special effects (CG images) (p. 215). As Jerslev (2006) states, both of these processes are largely non-empathetic since they are "at least to a degree emotionally detached from the first-person simulation of the actions of the protagonist(s)" (p. 215). At the same time, Jerslev (2006) makes clear that when viewers respond to the mise en scène of a film, they are still describing fiction emotions.

Tan's and Jerslev's respective works on viewer engagement are noteworthy for a number of reasons. Firstly, they highlight that character engagement is not an isolated process, but occurs against the backdrop of a multitude of cognitive processes. That is to say, in addition to engaging with a television character, viewers might process a narrative's plot or react to its visual style. Secondly, the two studies inform my discussion of character engagement in the upcoming chapters. Although I am primarily concerned with what Jerslev refers to as empathetic fiction emotions, I also discuss non-empathetic fiction and artefact emotions over the course of this thesis. For example, in chapter five, I examine viewer engagement with animated television characters in relation to performance, visual style, and narrative structure. In chapter six, I discuss to what degree the mise en scène and the mood of late-night chat shows prime a distinct emotional response in the viewer. In the context of this thesis, Tan's and Jerslev's studies function as the theoretical basis to discuss viewer engagement with television characters from an aesthetic point of view. Thus, in order to gain a better understanding of the psychological

dimension of viewer engagement in film and television, we need to look more closely at the works of cognitive film theorists who have specifically investigated character engagement in the past.

David Bordwell's (2008; 2011) theory on filmic narration and fictional characters is primarily characterised by what he defines as the common sense/folk psychology approach. At its most basic level, common sense means that, any time viewers watch a narrative unfold, they apply the same cognitive and emotional skills they rely on in their everyday lives. Referring to how viewers understand a narrative, Bordwell (2008) claims that "given a representation, the spectator processes [this representation] perpetually and elaborates it on the bases of schemas she or he has to hand" (p. 93). He elaborates on the concept of common sense and its relation to cinematic storytelling in a blog post, stating:

> Filmic storytelling relies upon cognitive dispositions and habits we've developed in a real-world context. That's not to say that films capture reality straightforwardly…It's simply to say that ordinary perception and cognition ground what narrative filmmakers do. (Bordwell, 2011, Folk psychology: Success stories section, para. 2)

Bordwell here acknowledges that film does not capture reality, but argues that viewers still employ the same cognitive skills they rely on in their everyday lives when they watch a film. This observation ties in with Margolin's (2011) notion that any time the reader engages with a narrative in a way that goes beyond textual comprehension, she essentially participates in a game of make-believe. Textual comprehension might be regarded as a relatively objective cognitive process given that it largely refers to the viewer making sense of the unfolding story. Yet, the viewer's response to a character on screen is both objective and subjective since it is equally based on the narrative context and the viewer's personal experience. I want to briefly elaborate on this notion since it strongly informs my understanding of viewer engagement with television characters throughout this thesis.

Media theorist Stuart Hall (1999, pp. 513–517) has famously argued that television images contain encoded messages that the viewer might encode in a number of ways. While I do not believe that Hall's theoretical model can be easily applied to the study of viewer engagement with television characters, I still think that it is noteworthy in the context of this study since it underlines

that the relationship between the sender (text) and the receiver (viewer) is not linear. In particular, Hall (1999) argues that, despite the fact that a television image or a sequence of images might aim to send a particular message to the audience, viewers might decode that message in a number of ways. I believe that this idea applies to the viewer's engagement with television characters.

For example, as I discuss at length in chapter four, the entire narrative context of *Game of Thrones* (2011 -) works in unison to establish Joffrey Baratheon as an unlikeable character. The way he is shot, Gleeson's performance, and how the other characters react to Joffrey makes it clear that he is a villain. At the same time, Joffrey's high antipathetic potential still does not guarantee that every viewer will react to him in a negative way. Yet, even the reaction of those viewers who defy the authorial intent of the show and sympathise with Joffrey is generated by the text. In other words, while viewers are free to like or dislike Joffrey, neither response cannot be completely separated from the text. Noël Carroll has previously commented on this idea of the text as the generator of the viewer's response to the characters. In his study of horror, Carroll (1990) states:

> With respect to fictions, the author of such works presents us with conceptions of things to think about—e.g. Anna Karenina's suicide. And in entertaining and reflecting upon the contents of these representations, which supply us with the contents of our thoughts, we can be moved to pity, grief, joy, indignation, and so on. (p. 88)

Yet, even if we accept the notion that the viewer's response to fictional characters originates from the text, this does not give us a deeper understanding of how exactly we relate to those characters. Again, I believe Bordwell's (2008, 2011) concept of folk psychology proves to be helpful.

Bordwell argues that the spectator's reliance on folk psychology is not restricted to understanding a narrative, but also factors into the ways in which viewers relate to the characters in the story world. According to Bordwell (2011), in our everyday lives, we tend to evaluate the people around us quickly. This evaluation process is based on our first impression of a person. For example, only from glancing at a person, we judge their age, gender and personal attributes. In addition, a person's facial expressions, gestures, and voice give us some information about their emotional state (Bordwell, 2011, Folk psychology: Success stories section, para. 4). A narrative can establish a

character quicker by making use of these “everyday capacities” (Bordwell, 2011, Folk psychology: Success stories section, para. 4)—although such shortcuts might rely on stereotypes.

Of course, the viewer’s first impression of a character might be confirmed, questioned or challenged in the course of the narrative (Bordwell, 2011, Folk psychology: Success stories section, para. 4). However, this rarely happens since the viewer’s first impression of a character is strengthened by two factors: “belief presence,” the viewer’s tendency to resist changing a judgment, and “confirmation bias,” (Bordwell, 2008, p. 32) which Bordwell describes as the viewer’s unwillingness to re-evaluate her initial impression. Bordwell’s concept of folk psychology is closely related to what Margolin defines as the de se mode of character perception since both concepts require the viewer/reader to mentally construct a character from the information they are given in a text. Yet, Bordwell (2008) distinguishes between how characters are established in film versus literature. For example, in literature, the viewer mentally constructs a character based on the descriptions in the text whereas film and television narratives require actors to portray characters. Thus, although these characters are still fictional, they are linked to “distinct and identifiable bodies” (Bordwell, 2008, p. 31).

Bordwell (2008) also points out that when viewers watch a film, they take part in “social mind-reading” (p. 33). For example, social-mind reading refers to how what a character is saying, how she says it, what she is doing with her body, and her facial expressions inform the spectator about what that character is thinking and feeling (Bordwell, 2011, p. 33). According to Bordwell, like folk psychology, social mind-reading is a cognitive process that viewers perform on a regular basis in their everyday lives. Bordwell recognises that reading a character’s mind arouses emotion in the viewer, but he is ultimately more concerned with the role that fictional characters play in the overall narrative structure.

Carl Plantinga is another cognitive film theorist who has investigated viewer engagement with fictional characters at length. He claims that the viewer’s ability to engage with fictional characters on an emotional level is based on “the human tendency to personify and respond to abstract, nonhuman entities, especially in the context of visual representations” (2009, p. 98). Plantinga cites an experiment in which viewers were shown a short film that

featured depictions of geometrical shapes as an example to illustrate this argument. Most viewers interpreted the movement of the geometric shapes as the "interactions of intentional agents" (Plantinga, 2009, p. 98). Plantinga (2009, p. 98) notes that, if viewers interpret the movements of geometric shapes as the interactions of intentional agents, then it also seems logical that they would view animated characters in a similar way and respond to them on an emotional level. Following this logic, it also makes sense that viewers would regard fictional characters as lifelike human beings and respond to them on an emotional level. Plantinga's observations are noteworthy in the context of this study because they highlight the degree to which viewers are willing to engage with the characters they watch on screen. The idea that spectators ascribe meaning to the behaviour of even the most abstract fictional character influences each subsequent chapter of this work, but it becomes particularly important in chapter five which specifically focuses on viewer engagement with animated television characters.

Plantinga's observations on empathy/sympathy are even more important in the context of this thesis since they strongly inform my own understanding of viewer engagement in the subsequent chapters. Plantinga (2009, p. 100) suggests abandoning the idea of distinguishing between empathy and sympathy because he believes that these two elements of viewer engagement continuously blend into each other. According to Plantinga (2009), the distinction between empathy and sympathy is "fraught with ambiguities and contradictions," (p. 99) because viewers are not only "feeling with" (p. 99) (empathy) or "feeling for" (p. 99) (sympathy) a character. Instead, Plantinga (2009) claims that the viewer's emotional reaction to a character always represents a mixture of both.

For example, he (Plantinga, 2009) argues that when viewers engage with a character in great danger, they experience a mix of empathy/sympathy. They may share the character's feeling of fear, but this feeling might be interspersed with feelings of pity for the character or a feeling of suspense that results from the viewer's knowledge of the narrative context. Theorists in favour of distinguishing between empathy and sympathy (e.g. Neil; Smith) might argue that this example just represents a case in which both occur at the same time, but Plantinga (2009) states that all instances in which viewers respond to characters on an emotional level represent a mixture of empathy and sympathy. Thus, distinguishing between the two seems arbitrary. Plantinga (2009) also

claims that by strictly distinguishing between empathy and sympathy, theorists only add an artificial layer of complexity to the analysis of viewer engagement with fictional characters. Furthermore, even psychologists disagree about the usage of the terms (Plantinga, 2009, p. 100). Consequently, Plantinga does not distinguish between empathy and sympathy, but uses the term sympathy to refer to both "feeling for" and "feeling with" a character. He (Plantinga, 2009) defines sympathy as follows:

> The condition of sympathy, I argue, is typically marked by what I call affective congruence, a state in which the viewer is concerned for the plight of a character and may experience emotions that have similar orientation or valences with characters yet are rarely, if ever, identical. (p. 101)

To me, Plantinga's argument is convincing. Therefore, I will also refrain from distinguishing between empathy/sympathy in the course of this dissertation. While my decision to not distinguish between empathy and sympathy informs my methodological approach for each subsequent chapter of this work, it becomes particularly important in the context of chapter four since my investigation of viewer engagement with antipathetic television characters in this chapter is closely tied to cognitive film studies on empathy and sympathy.

It should be noted that even within cognitive media theory Plantinga's approach is divisive since it stands in direct contrast to the work of other cognitive media theorists. For example, as Plantinga acknowledges, Torben Grodal (1997) argues that any time the viewer engages with a character, they essentially experience the same feelings as the character in the diegesis. I disagree with Grodal's and similar models of viewer engagement that argue in favour of emotional simulation since they idealise and simplify the process of engaging with fictional characters on an emotional level. As Plantinga (2009) notes, engaging with a character is a complex cognitive process that may involve "empathy, antipathy, neutrality, cognitive assessment, emotions, motor mimicry, and/or emotional contagion" (p. 102). Yet, models of viewer engagement that argue for emotional simulation do not seem to allow for such a fine-grained cognitive response. What further complicates the concept of emotional simulation is that viewers differ in their mental and affective life from the characters in the story world, which enables them to navigate between different characters and their goals.

This ability of the viewer to navigate between different characters becomes particularly apparent in network narratives. At their most basic level, network narratives feature a wide array of characters. They often lack a main protagonist and are typically concerned with the ripple effects that the actions of a character have on the web of relationships between the cast of characters. These narratives require viewers to "negotiate the goals of and respond in complicated ways to multiple characters in varied situations" (Plantinga, 2009, p. 105). Plantinga (2009, p. 105) cites *The Big Chill* (1983), *The Usual Suspects* (1995) and *Magnolia* (2004) as typical network narratives. Plantinga's observations on network narratives are crucial in the context of this study since, as I will discuss in more detail later on in this chapter, most contemporary television series can be considered network narratives.

On a more general level, Plantinga (2009) argues that character engagement is both an internal and external cognitive process. This means that when engaging with a character, viewers might partially experience that character's emotions, but they are always mixed with and informed by the viewer's own goals and emotions. I agree with this assertion. Consequently, I also agree with Plantinga's (2009, p. 106) suggestion to avoid using the term identification altogether because it implies that the viewer shares a character's goals and emotions.

Murray Smith (1995) establishes a theoretical model for the study of viewer engagement with fictional characters that goes beyond the idea of identification. Smith's seminal work strongly informs my own methodological approach in this dissertation. I am convinced that, if it is combined with existing studies on television narration, Smith's theory can provide valuable insights into the viewer's relationship with television characters. At the same time, his theoretical model is somewhat limited since it is based around the idea that the viewer's relationship with fictional characters is largely based on a character's moral orientation. While certain elements of Smith's work inform my overall methodological approach, his work factors most strongly into chapter four since I specifically investigate the role of morality for the viewer's engagement with antipathetic television characters in that chapter.

Smith (1995, p. 74) believes that any filmic narration consists of three distinct qualities: knowledgeability, communicativeness, and self-consciousness. Knowledgeability refers to the range and depth of a narrative. For example, one

would speak of a narrative with a great range if it involves a considerable number of characters and takes place over a long period of time. In contrast, a narrative with less range might be restricted to a single character and take place over a limited amount of time. For example, *Cloud Atlas* (2012) might be considered as a narrative with a great range since it involves a large number of characters and takes place over different centuries whereas *Buried* (2010) might be considered as a narrative with little range since it takes place over a limited period of time and features only one character. Depth refers to the level of subjective access a narrative grants the viewer. As a result, a narrative that only allows viewers access to the objective story world would have less depth than a narrative that gives viewers access to the subjective experiences of a specific character (e.g. through dreams, hallucinations, visualisation of thoughts) (Smith, 1995, p. 74).

For example, since it primarily allows viewers access to the objective story world, *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) has less depth than *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), in which the viewer is frequently granted access to the main protagonist's memories and imaginations. Once a narration has established a certain range and depth, it can communicate knowledge to the viewer, but the amount of knowledge a narration distributes is often genre- or even film-specific. For example, in suspense or detective films, the narration tends to be uncommunicative. The reason for this is that the viewer is supposed to speculate about basic narrative events. Meanwhile, the narration in dramas tends to be more communicative since the focus is not as much on narrative events, but on how the characters react to them (Smith, 1995, p. 74).

According to Smith (1995), films elicit three levels of engagement with fictional characters. He refers to these three levels of engagement as "the structure of sympathy" (Smith, 1995, p 81). The structure of sympathy can be regarded as a measurement device for the viewer's level of engagement with a fictional character. It consists of recognition, alignment, and allegiance. According to Smith (1995), the structure of sympathy should be considered as a system that relies on the "co-operative activity of the spectator," (p. 82) meaning the viewer has to be regarded an active part of the engagement process and is not "the passive subject of the structuring power of the text" (p. 82). In more general terms, the structure of sympathy can be viewed as a fine-tuned method to determine how viewers engage with fictional characters. As "the

ultimate organizer of the text," (Smith, 1995, p. 75) narration is the force that generates all three levels of the structure of sympathy. That is to say, it provides the context for recognition, alignment, and allegiance to occur. For example, recognition can only occur if the narration provides the viewer with a human face or body. As Smith (1995) puts it, "if the attributes of a character are continually in flux, or if we see only one part of a character, then recognition will be retarded or perhaps prevented" (p. 76). Equally, if a narrative suppresses the subjective access to a character or presents her as morally ambivalent, then alignment and allegiance are restrained. Still, even in the most abstract narratives, the structure of sympathy is only suppressed, but not fully blocked (Smith, 1995, p. 76).

According to Smith (1995), recognition, the first level of the structure of sympathy, refers to the viewer's construction of a character. In filmic narratives, recognition is usually tied to the continuous representation of a body or a human face. In his study, Smith notes that viewers are aware of the fact that the characters in a film are fabricated, but, unless a narrative explicitly states otherwise, they still expect them to behave analogously to human beings. Indeed, by perceiving fictional characters as human beings, viewers become able to further engage with them. In other words, viewers relate to what they take to be a real human being, but they would not find themselves attracted to an abstract collection of character traits. Certain types of fictional characters such as, for example, animated characters can further complicate the process of recognition. As a result, in chapter five, which focuses on animated television characters, I discuss this element of viewer engagement in more detail. Recognition has received less scholarly attention than alignment and allegiance. Smith (1995) traces this circumstance back to the fact that many theorists consider it obvious. However, there are films that hinder or suppress recognition. Some examples Smith gives are Alexander Dovzhenko's *Arsenal* (1929) and Luis Buñuel's *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977), but one can also think of more recent examples such as *A Scanner Darkly* (2006) or *I'm Not There* (2007). In particular, those films that complicate the process of recognition emphasise its apriori status for alignment and allegiance to occur (Smith, 1995, pp. 82-83).

Alignment describes the process by which the viewer is placed in relation to a character or a set of characters. According to Smith (1995), alignment is

quite similar to “the notion of literary focalization” (p. 83). The viewer’s alignment with a character is related to two other narrative functions: spatio-temporal attachment and subjective access (Smith, 1995). Spatio-temporal attachment refers to the way in which a narrative might focus only on a single character or move between a set of characters whereas subjective access refers to the level of access a narrative grants the viewer to the thoughts and feelings of a specific character. In conjunction, spatio-temporal attachment and subjective access regulate the level of knowledge between the viewer and the characters and lead to a structure of alignment. According to Smith (1995), spatio-temporal attachment and subjective access may vary from character to character. Furthermore, alignment does not equal perceptual alignment. This means that, for example, a film that heavily relies on POV shots does not automatically result in viewers being more closely aligned with a character (Smith, 1995, p. 83).

Smith (1995) argues that allegiance, the third level of the structure of sympathy, is closest to what is commonly referred to as identification. He contends that when speaking about identifying with a person/character, viewers usually refer to a number of factors including another person’s class, nationality, age, ethnicity, and gender. A crucial prerequisite for forming an allegiance with a character is that the spectator has what she takes to be “reliable access to the character’s state of mind, on understanding the context of the character’s actions, and having morally evaluated the character on the basis of knowledge” (Smith, 1995, p. 84). Smith (1995) argues that allegiance has both cognitive and affective dimensions. For example, if a character behaves in a way that upsets or angers the viewer, she will recognise such behaviour and categorise that character accordingly. Based on these categorizations viewers construct moral structures on a cognitive level. That is to say, they rank characters in a system of preference.

Smith (1995) acknowledges that various narrative aspects factor into the viewer’s moral evaluation of a character (e.g. character action, iconography, music). In addition, he points out that no level of the structure of sympathy requires the viewer to replicate the thoughts and emotions of a character. This is an important distinction to make since some character-based cognitive theories claim that when viewers watch a narrative unfold, they experience the exact same feelings as the characters in the story world. In contrast, recognition

and alignment only require viewers to understand the actions and mental states of a character. Only with allegiance, viewers move beyond comprehension. They make moral judgments about characters and respond to them on an emotional level. Allegiance predominantly differs from emotional simulation in that the viewer reacts to a character on an emotional level instead of experiencing the same emotions as that character. While viewers may still respond strongly towards a fictional character, this response is always sympathetic rather than empathetic. Thus, according to the structure of sympathy, if a narrative elicits a strong emotional response from the viewer, this only means that she understands the protagonist and the narrative context, has morally evaluated the character, and "responds emotionally in a manner appropriate to both the evaluation and the context of the action" (Smith, 1995, p. 86).

As previously noted, I believe that, although it was mainly developed for the analysis of characters on film, Smith's theory can also help us to better understand the relationship between viewers and television characters. In the context of this study, Smith's theoretical approach is mainly valuable for the ways in which it complicates the process of identification and emphasises the crucial role that the narrative context plays for the viewer's relationship with a fictional character. Yet, aside from its influence on the overall methodological approach of this dissertation, Smith's theory also factors directly into the subsequent chapters of this thesis. In particular, alignment and allegiance are two important aspects of my analysis of antipathetic television characters in chapter four. Meanwhile, recognition directly factors into my discussion of animated television characters in chapter five. The main reason for why Smith's model of viewer engagement with fictional characters does not factor more strongly into the subsequent chapters of this dissertation is that it is closely tied to questions of morality and one of the main aims of this dissertation is to challenge the idea that the viewer's relationship with a television character is primarily determined by her moral evaluation of that character.

Since *Engaging Characters* has been first published, the structure of sympathy has become one of the most common tools to analyse viewer engagement with characters on film. However, attempts to apply Smith's theory to television characters have arguably led to mixed results. For example, in *Complex TV* (2015), Jason Mittell applies the structure of sympathy to television characters, yet he does not clearly acknowledge that this theory might operate

differently in a television studies context. Furthermore, Mittell's (2015, pp. 118-64) main case study is *Breaking Bad's* (2008 -13) morally compromised protagonist Walter White, which fits in neatly with the structure of sympathy's focus on morality. Thus, before discussing television narration and television characters in more detail, I want to briefly highlight some of the challenges of applying existing cognitive film theories on viewer engagement to the television medium.

2.3 Cognitive Film Theory & Television

Most of the theories I have discussed so far provide viewers with the theoretical tools to further investigate viewer engagement with characters in visual media storytelling. Yet these theories have been exclusively concerned with film. Obviously, there are many overlaps between film and television narration, but the two are still unique narrative forms. Therefore, one needs to be careful when applying theories that had been originally developed for film to television. For example, while Noël Carroll's (2004) and Murray Smith's (2011) respective studies on viewer engagement with Tony Soprano provide valuable insights into the challenges of sympathising with a morally corrupt protagonist, these works also highlight some of the problems of many cognition-based studies on viewer engagement with television characters.

The Sopranos (1999 – 2007) has been one of the most critically acclaimed and most-studied television series of the last decade. The series revolves around New Jersey mob boss Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini) and his struggles to navigate between his crime family and his immediate family. The series has not only been popular with television audiences around the world but it has also generated significant academic attention. In particular, scholars have been fascinated with Tony Soprano. Among others, Noël Carroll and Murray Smith have examined viewer engagement with this character in detail.

Both Carroll and Smith have investigated why viewers would find themselves attracted to Tony Soprano, given that the series constantly depicts him lying, cheating, and murdering. Smith states that there are several reasons why viewers care for Tony. For example, Smith (2011) argues that viewers feel attracted to Tony because his actions often have a moral foundation and because the series continuously portrays him as a regular guy (p. 17). Similarly, Carroll (2004) remarks that "many of us can recognize our own lives in Tony's—

broken water heaters, rebellious or otherwise misbehaving children, querulous elderly relatives, marital tensions, annoying extended family members and overbearing in-laws, and so forth" (p. 126). In other words, many viewers might view the ordinary domesticity of Tony's life as similar to their own domestic lives, which immediately establishes him as a relatable character.

In the course of his investigation of Tony Soprano, Smith (2011) refers to the structure of sympathy. As previously discussed, moral evaluation lies at the core of allegiance. Thus, Smith suggests that, despite the fact that a character might appeal to the audience based on amoral attributes (e.g. appearance, intelligence, charm), these attributes do not influence the viewer's decision to form an allegiance with a character. In general, Smith argues that the viewer's relationship with Tony Soprano is characterised by ambivalence. For example, although Tony is a murderer, the audience might still sympathise with him based on his anxieties, vulnerability, and his frustrations (Smith, 2011). Moreover, viewers might ally themselves with Tony because, corrupted as he might be, he is still one of the most moral characters in the series (Smith, 2011). According to Carroll (2004), it is logical that viewers will form an allegiance with those characters they consider safest to interact with. As he puts it, the viewer's tendency to ally themselves with moral characters is "an insurance policy of sorts" (Carroll, 2004, p. 133). Ultimately then, what distinguishes Tony from most of the other gangsters in the series is that, while the audience might not categorise him as virtuous, he at least follows some sort of moral code (Carroll, 2004). As a result, Smith (2011) argues that one way to categorise the viewer's relationship with Tony Soprano is partial allegiance, which he defines as follows:

> We ally ourselves with some of his actions and attitudes and not others; indeed, some of his actions and attitudes draw our antipathy rather than sympathy. Our sympathy for Soprano is 'not unconditional'. Moreover, to compound matters, a single action may draw out distinct and contrasting responses from us. (p. 25)

However, Smith (2011) also acknowledges that partial allegiance only represents one option for the viewer to engage with Tony. Historically, the gangster figure has been viewed as possessing a "transgressive allure" (Smith, 2011, p. 25) because engaging with a gangster gives viewers the chance to play out their own transgressive fantasies in a fictional environment. Smith (2011) states that *The Sopranos* "continually plays off the transgressive appeal of Soprano against both

his immorality and his ordinariness" (p. 25). For some viewers, this might lead to what Smith defines as perverse allegiance. This term refers to the idea that some viewers might sympathise with Tony as a result of his immoral behaviour. The final option for viewer engagement with Tony Soprano that Smith discusses is antipathy. (2011, p. 26). According to Smith, this option stands in direct contrast to forming a perverse allegiance with Tony since antipathy means that the viewer rejects him as a result of his immoral behaviour. Referring to chapter four, I believe that antipathy is a more complicated engagement process than Smith suggests in his work on Tony Soprano.

Both Carroll (2004) and Smith (2011) emphasise Tony's complexity by stating that his moral ambivalence complicates the ways in which viewers engage with him. In particular, Smith's discussion of potential ways for viewers to engage with Soprano (e.g. partial allegiance, perverse allegiance) accentuates that the viewer's moral evaluation of a character lies at the heart of allegiance. Yet this focus on the moral dimensions of Soprano's character is also problematic. Firstly, Smith assumes an ideal audience, in which all viewers share the same moral values. Secondly, Smith's focus on morality minimises other forms of viewer engagement that are not necessarily related to questions of morality. To a large degree, this criticism of existing studies on viewer engagement with television characters informs the rationale for my own case studies in this dissertation. More specifically, as I argue in detail in chapter four, while a character's moral orientation can potentially affect the viewer's relationship with that character, it is not the only determining factor. Moreover, the degree to which a character's morality affects the viewer's relationship with her differs from genre to genre and depends on the narrative context.

In their respective studies of Tony Soprano, Smith (2011) and Carroll (2004) acknowledge that Soprano is a television character, but they do not investigate to what degree this affects the viewer's engagement with him. Both theories provide the reader with valuable insights on how viewers relate to morally corrupt characters, but it is still surprising that neither Carroll nor Smith highlight that engaging with a television character is different from engaging with characters from other types of storytelling. In particular, when it comes to investigating viewer engagement with fictional characters, the structure of sympathy is a helpful theoretical tool. Yet, when such a theoretical model is applied to a different narrative format, this change of context needs to be

carefully considered. On a more general level, any study that investigates viewer engagement with television characters needs to pay close attention to how the individual narrative context of a programme affects character engagement. Thus, in the next section, I will provide a closer look at some of the narrative elements that are crucial for my discussion of viewer engagement in the subsequent chapters.

2.4 Television Genre & Television Narration

The narrative context of a television programme, which represents the combination of all of its narrative elements, has a strong influence on how viewers relate to the characters that are featured on that programme. These narrative elements include, but are not limited to, structure, plot, performance, cinematography, editing, sound, and mise en scène. The arrangement of these narrative elements is somewhat genre-specific. Thus, before examining the relationship between narrative context and character engagement in more detail, I need to clarify to what degree this thesis is concerned with questions of genre.

Previous studies have shown that defining a television genre is not as simple as one might assume (e.g. Feuer, 1992; Mittell, 2001; Neale, 2015). For example, referring to a wide range of studies on television genre, Neale (2015) notes that, while some television programmes easily fit into traditional genre categories (e.g. comedy, drama, horror), others (e.g. news, game shows, reality television) cannot be as easily categorised (p. 4-5). Based on the generic overlaps between different television programmes, some scholars have argued that traditional genre categories cannot be easily applied to television and have called for a different approach to the study of television genres (e.g. Mittell, 2001).

As a result of the somewhat problematic nature of television genre theory, I have decided to not follow a specific definition of genre in this thesis. Rather, the degree to which questions of genre factor into my discussion of viewer engagement is shaped by individual case studies. For example, genre is a key factor of my analysis of viewer engagement with wrestling characters in chapter three. In contrast, despite the fact that *Game of Thrones* and *The Walking Dead* (2010 -) contain fantasy and horror elements, the genre-specific

aspects of these programmes do not factor as strongly into my analysis of viewer antipathy. Instead, my analysis of viewer antipathy in contemporary television drama is more closely tied to the narrative format of these programmes. Based on Neale's (2015) work on television genre, this such an approach is not unusual. In particular, Neale suggests that in television, more than in most other forms of storytelling, genre and narrative format blend together. For example, the iconography of *Game of Thrones*, which features dragons, ice-zombies, and sorcerers, firmly establishes the show as a work of fantasy. Yet, solely based on its plotting and narrative structure, one could also define *Game of Thrones* as a medieval soap opera.

Genre is still the most common way to differentiate between television programmes. Yet, as my brief overview of television genre-theory indicates, dividing programmes by genre can quickly become complicated. Therefore, some television theorists distinguish more broadly between fictional and factual television. In this thesis, the two case studies that qualify as factual television are chapters three and six. In particular, both wrestling and late-night chat adopt narrative elements of reality TV. While I acknowledge the differences between engaging with fictional and factual television characters in these chapters, it is also worth discussing this aspect of viewer engagement in more general terms.

When it comes to determining the differences between viewer engagement in fictional and factual television, Misha Kavka's (2005) work on reality TV is particularly helpful. Kavka (2005) states that 'feeling' is one of the main differences between fictional and factual television, arguing that "in terms of emotive function, feeling has no place in information programming" (p. 94). In contrast, fictional TV programmes are largely concerned with eliciting an emotional response in the viewer (Kavka, 2005, p. 94). According to Kavka (2005), as a result of the ongoing "tabloidization" (p. 95) of television, fictional and factual television have begun to mix. While many factual programmes have adopted elements of fictional television to intensify the audience's emotional engagement, fictional programmes have added a sense of reality to their narratives to increase spectacle (Kavka, 2005, p. 94).

Kavka cites reality TV as a prime example of this new type of programming which mixes fictional and factual TV. She (Kavka, 2005, p.94-95) claims that reality TV adopts certain aesthetic, performative, and narrative

elements from factual television to create a sense of immediacy. According to Kavka (2005), "this immediacy serves as the grounds for what we take to be real, and is itself known or measured through our affective response" (p.95). That is to say, since reality TV features 'real' people and presents itself as more real than fictional TV, viewers often react to it more strongly on an affective level. Ultimately, Kavka (2005) describes reality TV as both "compelling and threatening" (p. 95) since it connects fiction and reality via "mediated intimacy" (p.95).

Skeggs and Wood (2012) argue that reality TV's mediated intimacy "produces a form of connectivity that cannot be known and contained by cognition and speech" (Skeggs and Wood, 2012, p. 73). They refer to the fact that, typically, reality TV programmes create an aura of immediacy and intimacy to encourage affective viewer responses. The performances of the (non)-actors are a key element in achieving these affective viewer responses (Skeggs and Wood, 2012, p. 73). In particular, according to Skeggs and Wood (2012), performance in reality TV "combines speech, movement, aesthetics, and gestures into an affective scene with which we as audience are incited to make connections" (p. 73). Thus, rather than encouraging viewers to process a performance on a cognitive level and react to it emotionally, reality TV performances primarily invite viewers to feel (Skeggs and Wood, 2012, p. 73).

As previously noted, these observations on viewer engagement in reality TV are particularly noteworthy with regard to chapters three and six of this thesis since both wrestling and late-night chat represent a mix between fictional and factual programming. For example, television wrestling employs Reality TV devices to establish a sense of immediacy and elicit affective viewer responses, and late-night chat shows establish a communal mood in order to encourage viewers to engage with the characters on a more intimate level.

The remainder of this chapter focuses on fictional television since, with the exception of chapters three and six, the case studies in this thesis are fictional programmes. Consequently, in order to be able to discuss viewer engagement with fictional television characters in more detail in the subsequent chapters, we need to look more closely at the relationship between the narrative setup of fictional television and viewer engagement.

In *Serial Television*, Glen Creeber (2004) distinguishes between different television formats such as soap opera, series, anthology series, serial,

miniseries, and “made-for-TV movie” (p. 8). To some degree each of these formats adhere to their own rules and norms, but largely they are variations of the series and the serial. This indicates that over time the series and the serial—both of which have their origins in television drama—have become the two dominant storytelling formats in fictional television.

In terms of its narrative structure, the television series is similar to films or self-enclosed forms of literature (e.g. novella, short story). Creeber (2015) defines the series as “continuous stories (usually involving the same characters and settings) which consist of self-contained episodes possessing their own individual conclusion,” (p. 8) adding that the single episodes of a series “can be broadcast in any order without losing narrative coherence” (p. 8). Similarly, Jason Mittell (2007) states that television series create “a consistent storyworld, but each episode is relatively independent — characters, settings, and relationships carry over across episodes, but the plots stand on their own, requiring little need for consistent viewing or knowledge of diegetic history to comprehend the narrative” (p. 163). Historically speaking, television series can be found in almost any television genre, yet the format has been more popular in some genres than others. For example, it has been frequently adopted by sitcoms (e.g. *I Love Lucy* [1951 - 57], *Cheers* [1982 - 93]) and police/crime dramas (*Law & Order* [1990 - 2010], *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* [2000 -]).

Based on their focus on self-enclosed plotlines, critics often refer to such crime series as ‘case-of-the-week’ shows. Another common variation of the series is the medical procedural (e.g. *ER* [1994 — 2009], *House M.D.* [Fox, 2004 - 12]), in which single episodes usually revolve around the resolution of a particular medical case. From a storytelling perspective, the narration in a series can at times come across as artificial or rushed since the main plot has to be resolved in a relatively short time span (typically half an hour or an hour, depending on the programme). Television series also often encounter problems when it comes to maintaining an element of surprise, which is, again, based on the viewer’s expectation that the plot will be resolved by the end of the episode. The format of the television series appeals to television creators and network executives. For example, television series are essential when it comes to attracting a new audience since viewers can tune in at any given point without feeling lost in a continuous plotline (Mittell, 2007, pp. 163-164; Newman, 2006, p. 16). Thus, some viewers might watch every episode of a

series while others might prefer to only check in occasionally (Mittell, 2007, pp. 163-164; Newman, 2006, p. 16).

In contrast to the series, television serials tell a continuous story over the course of multiple episodes (or seasons) of a programme. Most television serials take place in a familiar setting, but since the plotlines unfold across multiple episodes, the viewer has to construct the diegesis based on her knowledge of the entire history of the programme. In the case of long-running serials (e.g. *Coronation Street* [1960 -], *EastEnders* [1985 -]) this can encompass a vast amount of narrative information. Robert C. Allen (1985) has acknowledged this aspect of serial narration in his work on soap operas, explaining that "each episode, each new character, each new plot becomes a 'theme' to be assessed against the horizon supplied by the reader's perception of the text up to that point" (p. 86).

As with the television series, serials can be found in almost any television genre—yet in the past the serial format has become synonymous with the soap opera whereas in contemporary television it has been widely adopted by television dramas. Based on these strong genre ties, many seminal studies on serial narration (e.g. Allen, 1985; Geraghty, 1981; Mittell, 2015) primarily focus on soap operas and television dramas.

Glen Creeber (2004) states that the success of the serial particularly lies in its ability to reflect and exploit what Raymond Williams (1990, p. 87-90) has famously referred to as television flow. He elaborates on the connection between seriality and flow by stating that "like soap opera, serialised drama recurs regularly throughout the schedule, weaving in and out of the domestic space and deliberately tapping into and playing with an audience's sense of time in a way never before imagined by the cinema, theatre, or single play" (Greeber, 2004, p. 4). Further emphasizing duration as a crucial aspect of the serial viewing experience, Creeber (2004) claims that simply based on the amount of story time that serials have at their disposal to develop their stories, they are able to achieve a narrative scope and a level of viewer engagement that is only equalled by few contemporary storytelling formats (p. 4).

In contrast to television series, which are often described as plot-driven, serials are more interested in investigating the ripple effects that narrative events have on the characters and their relationships. This results in a high level of redundancy when it comes to the retelling of narrative events. Yet, this level

of redundancy is often necessary to make sure that viewers share the same level of knowledge with regard to certain plot developments. As Christine Geraghty (1981) points out: “[Gossip] plays an important role formally in binding together the various plots and the different characters and making them coherent” (p. 24). Moreover, the retelling of a narrative event can also function as a way to develop characters. This means while viewers might already be aware of a narrative event, they often learn through its retelling how it has affected a specific character. According to Geraghty (1981), serials “very frequently revolve around questions of knowledge or ignorance on the part of different characters, and the decision to tell a character about a previously unknown event is often a major issue” (p. 24). In that way, gossip becomes part of the action itself.

A good example for how this narrative technique works in practice can be found in *Breaking Bad*. The viewer is aware of the fact that Walt (Bryan Cranston) has watched his partner Jesse’s (Aaron Paul) girlfriend Jane (Krysten Ritter) choke on her own vomit in her sleep without making any attempts to help her, but it takes three seasons until Jesse finds out that Walt let Jane die. During the intermediate seasons, Jesse becomes depressed and the show repeatedly reminds viewers that his depression has been largely caused by his girlfriend’s death. (‘ABQ’, 2009)

As previously indicated, serials are to a large degree defined by their open-endedness. This means that plotlines are rarely fully resolved, and if they are, they are typically immediately replaced by “more suspenseful or engrossing narrative enigmas to keep viewers watching” (Mittell, 2007, p. 164). In the same way, Allen (1985) states that instead of providing an ultimate narrative telos, soap operas usually feature a number of overlapping “mini-closures” (p. 75) that resolve a particular narrative question, but do not move the text closer towards an ultimate resolution. On a broader level, Allen (1985) argues that the viewer’s engagement with a serial is characterised by what he describes as the “wandering viewpoint,” (p. 76) a mix between protension (expectation) and retention (retrospection). With that he refers to the fact that in serials once a plot has been resolved, it immediately becomes the basis for a new plot (Allen, 1985, p. 76). Thus, serial narration can be seen as a cycle of questions and answers, in which current questions are emphasised while those already answered slowly fade and retreat into the background (Allen, 1985, p. 76).

This avoidance of full narrative resolution has also given rise to another narrative trademark of the serial: the cliffhanger. Designed to "stimulate viewers to tune in for the next episode," (Mittell, 2007, p. 164) cliffhangers are narrative situations that are typically introduced right at the end of an episode, but do not get resolved until the next episode (or in some cases, even later on in the series). Geraghty (1981) traces the origins of the cliffhanger back to silent movie serials, explaining that a cliffhanger essentially means that "the unfolding of the action is cut off at a crucial point so that the enigma is unresolved and the leading characters remain in danger" (p. 14).

For example, season three of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987 – 94) ends with a cliffhanger. After having been abducted and assimilated by the evil Borg, Captain Jean-Luc Picard (Patrick Stewart) threatens the crew of the enterprise to surrender their ship to the Borg ('The Best of Both Worlds', 1992). Of course, most viewers will assume that Picard's assimilation is only temporary, but it is unclear how the storyline will exactly play out, which sparks the viewer's curiosity and makes it an effective cliffhanger. Serials may vary in how often they use this narrative strategy, but cliffhangers remain an important aspect of how serial narratives are organised (Geraghty, 1981, p. 15)

As of today, there are still television programmes that are strictly modelled after the series or the serial format, but many contemporary television shows exist as a mix between the two. In these hybrids of the series and the serial, plotlines that are central to a show's basic premise often do not get resolved until the end of the series whereas subplots usually get resolved at the end of a multi-season story arc or the end of a season. For example, Jax Teller (Charlie Hunnam, *Sons of Anarchy*) cannot abandon his life as an outlaw biker and Walter White (*Breaking Bad*) cannot stop producing crystal meth since these plotlines are tied to the basic premise of their respective shows. Yet there are still various subplots that get resolved throughout *Sons of Anarchy* (2008 – 15) and *Breaking Bad* such as Jax finally taking control over the Sons of Anarchy in season five or Walt defeating his long-time opponent Gus Fring (Giancarlo Esposito) at the end of season four. Other examples for programmes that represent a mix between series and serial include *The X-Files* (1993 –) and *Battlestar Galactica* (2004 – 09), both of which frequently combine stand-alone episodes with multi-episode story arcs.

As indicated here, the series and the serial format give television creators a variety of options on how to structure a programme. At the same time, both television serials and series are in some ways restrained by the television medium. For example, television creators typically have to follow particular guidelines when they are crafting their stories since, unlike films, many television programmes are interrupted by commercial breaks (Mittell, 2007, p. 165). These mandated breaks are often already considered in the writing process. As a result, they have become imprinted into the structure of television narration. For example, commercial breaks often signal act breaks or are designed to amplify moments of emotional engagement.

It should be noted that, primarily as a result the changes in television distribution, some contemporary television programmes (e.g. *Twin Peaks: The Return* [2017]) have become more experimental with regard to their narrative structure. In particular, many television programmes are simultaneously distributed through traditional broadcast models and online streaming platforms. Meanwhile, other programmes are exclusively released on ad-free premium channels or online streaming platforms. Thus, the structure of these programme is not dictated by commercial breaks which gives the creators more creative freedom. Yet, despite the fact that the recent evolution of television distribution has given showrunners more creative freedom, it has also resulted in new challenges for them. For example, some online streaming services have become more experimental when it comes to the distribution of television content. In particular, while Netflix typically releases entire seasons of their shows (e.g. *Stranger Things [2016 -]*, *The Defenders* [2017 -]) on a specific day, other streaming services (e.g. Hulu) maintain a weekly release schedule. This means while the creators of these shows do not have to consider commercial breaks when they are crafting their stories, they might have to structure their shows differently as a result of the viewer's ability to binge-watch an entire season of television on a single day.

In practice, despite this ongoing evolution of television distribution, many elements of television narration remain stable. For example, often television creators who today produce content for ad-free premium channels or online streaming services have previously worked in a more traditional production environment. Thus, although they do not necessarily have to, they still follow many of the established rules of television narration. Furthermore, while some

television shows might have adopted a slightly more experimental narrative structure than others, most programmes still employ cliffhangers to ensure that viewers will tune into in for the next episode.

In the context of this study, this brief overview of television narration is primarily meant to highlight the differences in narrative structure between television and other narrative forms. Acknowledging these structural differences is crucial for my investigation of viewer engagement with fictional television characters in the following chapters since television's unique narrative framework provides the basis for how viewers relate to television characters. In the final part of this chapter, which can be seen as an extension of this section, I take a closer look at the differences between fictional television characters and characters from other narrative formats. Moreover, I discuss some existing studies on television characters that recognise that the distinct narrative characteristics of the television medium are a key element of the viewer's engagement with television characters.

2.5 Television Characters

Many of the distinct features of television characters stem from the previously discussed structural differences between television narration and other forms of storytelling. In the previous section, I have primarily focused on fictional television genres to highlight the unique narrative characteristics of television narration. Thus, it should be stressed that I am convinced that the narrative context shapes the characters in any type of television programme. To put it differently, television narration generates particular types of characters, which become the basis for unique forms of cognitive and emotional engagement. Jason Mittell (2015) claims that "characters are triggered by the text, but come to life within our consumption of fiction and are best understood as constructs of real people, not simply images and sounds on a screen" (p. 118). Similarly, in her definition of television characters, Roberta Pearson (2007) highlights their inherent autonomous potential, thus further suggesting that television characters are more realistic than other types of fictional characters:

> Television characters are not like holograms. Each tiny fragment does not contain the sum of the whole, but rather becomes fully intelligible only when juxtaposed with all other tiny fragments in all the other scenes in all the other episodes in which the character appears. Television characters are to some extent autonomous beings, autonomous, that is, of the televisual codes and individual scenes/episodes that construct them, existing as a whole only in the minds of the producers and the audience. (pp. 42-43)

In addition, Mittell claims that serial television characters are defined by their collaborative origins. More specifically, Mittell (2015) states that television characters are not the creation of a singular author, but the end result of the collaboration between a writer, a director, and a performer (p. 119). In comparison to literary characters this assessment makes sense, but the same argument could be made with regard to film. Nevertheless, Mittell (2015) seems to assume that when it comes to a television programme the impact of these collaborative origins are more tangible in the final product. For example, he notes that in many contemporary television series (e.g. *Justified* [2010 – 15], *Enlightened* [2011 – 13], *30 Rock* [2006 – 13]), the actors who portray the main protagonists also act as executive producers on the show, which leads to them having more creative control over the characters they play (Mittell, 2015, pp. 118-119). Mittell further states that other external factors such as, for example, actors becoming pregnant, getting sick, or dying while a show is in production can also affect the portrayal of a television character and force television productions to adapt to these changes. Of course, external factors can also affect film productions, but since television programmes are usually in production for several years, the argument could be made that they are more susceptible to external influences.

Mittell (2015) also argues that intertextuality is a crucial aspect of the viewer's relationship with televisual characters, stating that "actors serve as sites of intertextuality, merging viewer memories of previous characters and knowledge about offscreen lives to colour our understanding of a role" (p. 122). For example, this means that viewers of *Breaking Bad* are likely to be more shocked to see Walter White deceive and murder people if they primarily know Bryan Cranston as the loving family man Hal from *Malcolm In the Middle* (2000 – 06). Similarly, the audience will probably accept Raylan Givens (Timothy Olyphant, *Justified*) quicker as a modern day incarnation of a Wild West sheriff if they have previously seen Olyphant portray a sheriff in *Deadwood* (2004 – 06).

It should be noted that intertextuality does not only affect the viewer's engagement with television characters, but also factors into how viewers react to characters in feature films. Yet, albeit there are some exceptions to this rule (e.g. actors who frequently appear in the same film genre or actors who appear in a series of films) the effects of intertextuality are arguably more pronounced in television since the performers typically inhabit their roles for an extended period of time.

In addition, apart from partially basing their reaction to a character on previous performances of the same actor they are familiar with, audiences also approach television characters with other preconceptions. For example, Mittell (2015) claims that television viewers expect the main protagonist of a programme to survive throughout the show, in particular with regard to programmes that are named after their main characters such as *The Cosby Show* (1984 – 92) and *Magnum, P.I.* (1980 – 88) (p. 123). As a result, one of the major challenges of television narration is to create dramatic stakes in spite of the viewer's knowledge about the main characters' safety. While these observations are accurate when it comes to the television series, Robert C. Allen (1985) has investigated the same phenomenon in the context of soap operas and comes to a different conclusion. According to Allen (1985), in soap operas there are no limits as to what can happen to a character—characters may vanish, die or even come back from the dead. In that way, soap operas have altered the viewers' preconceptions about serial characters in general. Of course, the death of the main protagonist or a major character is still a rare instance in any television show, but when it is effectively used (e.g. *Six Feet Under* [2001 -05], *Boardwalk Empire* [2010 - 14, *Game of Thrones*) this narrative strategy can raise the viewer's emotional investment and create a more life-like, 'anything can happen' atmosphere.

Most of the distinct features of television characters that I have discussed so far stem from the television production context and can be seen as prerequisites on how viewers relate to television characters, but there are also distinct features of television characters that are closely related to the unique structural attributes of television narration. Geraghty (1981) argues that in terms of their age, relationships, and attitudes one can typically find a wide range of characters in serial television narratives, simply because a diverse collection of characters also ensures diverse plotlines. In addition, according to

Geraghty (1981), characterization in the television series has to be “swift and sharp” (p. 19) so both casual and regular viewers can immediately identify what kind of a character they are confronted with. For example, Geraghty refers to a character’s voice and appearance to establish such a quick characterization.

Serial television narratives are largely defined by their characters’ relationships. As a result, replacing a character or redefining a relationship represents a challenge for any television serial since those are often what attracted viewers to a programme in the first place. This is particularly true for comedies, since it is primarily the ensemble cast that distinguishes one comedy series from the other. Moreover, as Mittell (2015) points out, in television narration there is a slope between main characters and secondary characters, meaning that television shows will usually focus on a core set of characters while secondary characters often only exist at another character’s periphery. In addition, characters can provide stability to a series. For example, daytime soap operas rely on “anchor characters” (Mittell, 2015, p. 126) the viewer can engage with while secondary characters come and go, and complex television narratives like *Lost* need a stable set of characters that the viewer can engage with in order to ground their “enigma-driven” (Mittell, 2015, p. 126) storytelling. In contrast, more episodic television programmes (e.g. police procedurals) do not rely as heavily on a stable set of characters, simply because they are more plot- and less character-driven (Mittell, 2015, p. 127).

Allen (1985) highlights that serial characters are distinct from other fictional characters because they have histories and memories. Moreover, he notes that any time viewers react to the relationship between two characters in any medium, they read that relationship against its history up to that point in the story. The crucial difference between serial television and other narrative formats is that the “reservoir of relational possibilities is more extensive than in any other narrative form” (Allen, 1985, p. 72). For example, with regard to certain soap operas, viewers could read a particular relationship against its status from five, ten or, in some cases, twenty years ago. But Allen’s (1985) observations not only refer to text time, they also refer to real time since it might have taken the viewer twenty years to read the text (p. 72). Of course, with the emergence of DVD box sets and online streaming platforms viewers are able to binge-watch a television series in a shorter amount of time, yet trying to catch up on a daily soap opera that has been running for over twenty years

seems almost impossible or would at least require a very committed viewer. Allen (1985) investigates the histories and memories of serial television characters primarily through their relationships with other characters whereas Greg M. Smith (2006) suggests that a way to trace the development of a single character throughout a television serial is to look at their character arc.

Character arcs can also be seen as the connector between the characters and the plot of a serial. G. M. Smith (2006) states that characters arcs are carefully planned out by television creators and usually include significant turning points. Moving a character's arc along too slowly may result in the audience getting bored with that particular character while moving her arc along too quickly signals that a programme might not make use of the serial format's quality of imitating the "protracted rhythms of real life" (Smith, G. M. 2006, p. 84). G. M. Smith further points out that character arcs need to be carefully structured so that they do not climax in the same episode since, otherwise, the plot might be exhausted too quickly.

The need for carefully structured character arcs has a direct impact on serial narration. Obviously, not every plot development moves along a character arc in the same way. Instead, as G. M. Smith (2006) puts it, "on a primetime serial, some events are more serial than others" (p. 84). This means that only some plot events in a serial significantly move along a particular character arc while others might be less influential with regard to a character's overall development. Yet while it might be easy to determine the significant turning points in a character arc, it is often more difficult to identify those events that have no ramifications at all on a character's overall development (Smith, G. M. 2006, p. 84). Combining Roland Barthes' theory of hermeneutic codes with his examination of character arcs in television narration, G. M. Smith (2006) suggests that television serials either pose hermeneutic questions that are answered immediately (usually in the same episode) or semi-hermeneutic questions that are not answered immediately. G. M. Smith (2006) claims that semi-hermeneutic questions are often related to character arcs and provide what he defines as "resolution without progress" (p. 85). Based on these observations, Smith argues that character arcs arrange crucial and less crucial plot events of a character. This arrangement of events then leads up to turning points which are plot events that all further action of the character is based on. Ultimately then, G. M. Smith (2006) defines character arcs as "a line of

character action from irrevocable turning point to irrevocable turning point, extending through the serial narrative" (p. 85). In the context of this research project, Smith's notion of character arcs is crucial since it not only provides a character-based concept to organise the plot of a television serial, but, at the same time, provides a character-based method to trace how viewers relate to television characters on a cognitive and emotional level.

2.6 Viewer Engagement with Television Characters

In the course of this chapter, I have reviewed cognitive media theories on the viewer/character relationship in film, criticised how such theories have been applied to television narration in the past, and explored the differences between television narration and other narrative formats. In the final section of this chapter, I will examine some of the already existing works on viewer engagement with television characters from the field of television studies. More specifically, I will analyse the methodological approach these works take to the study of television characters and investigate to what degree they acknowledge the narrative differences between television and other mediums.

As I have emphasised throughout this chapter, I believe that engaging with a television character is a distinct cognitive process that is different from engaging with characters from other narrative formats. In his work on television drama, John Caughie (2000) summarises the unique cognitive aspects of engaging with television characters as follows:

> Well trained by soap operas, crime series, and other forms of serial or series narrative to sustain plots and characters over time, the audience develops an aptitude for interrupted and interruptable narrative. More than that, lacking the concentrated forms of identification which the articulation of point of view invites in the cinema, television drama substitutes familiarity, repetition, and extension of time. If the space of the look is foundational for our engagement in cinematic forms of narrative, the extension of interrupted time gives us forms of engagement, involvement, and subjectivity specific to television. (p. 205)

Caughie (2000) argues that the unique temporal aspects of television narration also facilitate unique engagement patterns, yet he does not state what these exclusive forms of engagement are exactly. Meanwhile, other works on television narration have also acknowledged the unique nature of viewer

engagement with television characters. For example, in his work on soap operas, Horace Newcomb (1974) already recognised intimacy and continuity as crucial narrative elements of soap opera narration. Moreover, Newcomb (1974) argued that serial narration allows for more audience involvement and gives viewers the "sense of becoming a part of the lives and actions of the characters they see" (p. 253). Elaborating on Newcomb's work, Glen Creeber (2004) argues that while it adopts "the narrative arc of the single play, the serial also employs the episodic nature of television so that levels of intimacy and continuity can be developed and maintained" (p. 9). While Caughie (2000), Newcomb (1974), and Creeber (2004) all acknowledge that the unique narrative aspects of television narration (e.g. flow, intimacy, seriality, repetition, familiarity) shape how viewers relate to television characters, their respective works are ultimately not concerned with examining viewer engagement with television characters in detail.

In contrast, Christine Geraghty (1991) offers a detailed examination of viewer engagement with soap opera characters. Geraghty states that the way in which viewers react to soap narratives can be characterised as a double process—a mix between "emotional engagement" (p.21) and "acute awareness of the devices of its narrative process" (p. 21). Geraghty further implies that the way in which soap operas "simultaneously engage and distance the viewer" (1991, p. 23) is inseparably tied to how viewers engage with their characters. For example, soap opera viewers can be fully immersed in the drama of a particular character while watching a soap, but they might also criticise an actor's performances or marvel at how a particular plot event was executed when discussing the programme with a friend (Geraghty, 1991, p. 23). Geraghty (1991) summarises viewer engagement in soap operas as follows:

> The narrative work of soaps is to create that double vision, that oscillation between engagement and distance, which enables us to be both a concerned follower and an outside observer and which makes discussion of a soap almost as pleasurable as watching the programme itself. (1991, pp. 23-24)

When speaking of viewer engagement with television characters, one might immediately think of forming an emotional bond with a character, but Geraghty (1991) makes clear that being an outside observer is a crucial part of watching

television. Although Geraghty is specifically concerned with soap characters, her analysis can be easily extended to include other television genres and formats.

For example, for many viewers, the discussion surrounding popular television dramas (e.g. *The Walking Dead*, *Breaking Bad*, *Game of Thrones*) and their characters has become a distinct part of the television viewing experience. This trend can be seen in the detailed reviews and discussions of television programmes on websites such as The AV Club or Hitfix as well as in the continuously expanding number of podcasts on popular television shows (e.g. *A Cast of Kings*, *The Ones Who Knock*, *Republic City Dispatch*). In addition, the discussion of television programmes is often even officially encouraged by television networks—for example, through talk shows in which the most recent events of a show are discussed (e.g. *Talking Dead*, *Talking Bad*) or podcasts that offer fans a glimpse behind-the-scenes (e.g. *Breaking Bad Insider Podcast*, *The American Crime Podcast*). Of course, not all of these discussions are about characters, but commenting on the performance of an actor or analysing a character's behaviour remains a crucial aspect of the conversation around television programmes. For example, reviewers and board members on The AV Club regularly comment on character arcs, character growth, and criticise if characters behave inconsistently. These weekly discussions on television fan sites further highlight the unique aspects of the relationship between viewers and television characters since viewers often get upset about a specific character's development as a result of the sense of familiarity and intimacy they feel towards television characters.

Interacting with television characters by discussing or analysing their behaviour with other people is an important aspect of the viewer/character relationship that should not be underestimated, but it is also a distant form of viewer engagement that stands in contrast to emotional engagement with television characters. As previously noted, engaging with a television character on an emotional level is a complex process that only few existing studies on television characters have examined in detail.

In her analysis of soap operas, Tania Modleski (2008) proposes one of the earliest models of engaging with television characters on an emotional level: the ideal mother. Modleski describes this model of viewer engagement as follows:

> The subject/spectator of soap operas, it could be said, is constituted as a sort of ideal mother: a person who possesses greater wisdom than all her children, whose sympathy is large enough to encompass the conflicting claims of her family (she identifies with them all), and who has no demands or claims of her own (she identifies with no one character exclusively). (2008, p. 84)

Modleski's (2008) engagement model incorporates the concept of the viewer's shifting viewpoint between characters with the idea that the highest goal of the (predominantly female) soap opera viewer is to see 'their' families united and happy. Yet, soap operas generally withhold narrative conclusions from the viewer and, even if a temporary solution is reached, it usually only leads to "further tension and suffering" (Modleski, 2008, p. 84). According to Modleski, soap operas affirm the primacy of the family not by portraying an ideal family, but by depicting a family in a constant state of crisis. By doing so, they appeal to the viewer/ideal mother who overlooks every character's behaviour and is supposed to be understanding and tolerant of all the wrongdoings and problems within the family (Modleski, 2008). This means the viewer identifies with each character in turn, extends her sympathy to both sinner and victim, and is in a position to forgive all (Modleski, 2008, p. 85). As a result, soap opera viewers can never reach a permanent conclusion with regard to certain plot developments (and, by extension, characters) since they are always presented with conflicting sides of the same argument (Modleski, 2008, p. 85).

Modleski (2008) further claims that the character of the villainess, a stable character in most soap operas, stands in direct opposition to the viewer/ideal mother. The villainess is often portrayed as a scheming mastermind who is only interested in achieving her own goals and causes trouble among the other characters in the story. According to Modleski (2008), she is the counterpart to the viewer/ideal mother, whose ultimate goal is to achieve harmony for her fictional family. The viewer is encouraged to despise the villainess and direct negative feelings such as anger and frustration towards her (Modleski, 2008, p. 86). Modleski (2008) states that, as a result of the serial format, the villainess never achieves her ultimate goal of causing permanent chaos among the other characters, but she also never completely fails. Thus, viewer engagement with soap opera characters is cyclical, meaning that any time viewers watch a soap opera, they enter a constant cycle of repetition (Modleski, 2008, pp. 88-90).

Modleski's theory, which was first published in the nineteen seventies and examines soap operas as part of a larger project on mass-produced fantasies for women, highlights aspects of viewer engagement with television characters that are still valid today. For example, the idea that viewers extend their sympathies to both sinners and victims and frequently switch allegiances with characters while watching soap operas is still accurate for most contemporary television serials. In addition, as previously discussed, it has remained a distinct aspect of the viewer/character relationship in serial television that viewers are unable to complete their moral evaluation of certain characters because narrative resolutions are often withheld until the end of the programme. In other words, viewers are reluctant to judge characters since there is always the chance that they will redeem themselves in next week's episode.

In contrast, when it comes to defining a universal model of viewer engagement with television characters, Modleski's (2008) work is limited. For example, while logical in the context of the soap opera, the concept of the viewer as the ideal mother can arguably not be as easily applied to other television genres. In addition, contemporary television narratives still feature characters that the viewer is supposed to reject, but the character of the villainess does not seem to be as prevalent anymore—this is particularly true for antihero narratives which are largely built around the notion that no character is entirely good or evil. Furthermore, although this criticism is not exclusive to Modleski's (2008) work, it needs to be further investigated if viewer engagement with serial television characters is still as cyclical as Modleski suggests.

Ien Ang (1985) has also examined viewer engagement with television characters in her work on *Dallas* (1978 – 91). Ang specifically focuses on how viewers relate to soap opera characters on an emotional level. She argues that viewers of *Dallas* respond to the show and its characters on multiple levels: on a denotative level, they recognise that *Dallas* is fictional and often unrealistic, but, on a connotative level, they praise the show's resemblance of humanity (Ang, 1985, p. 42). This distinction is striking since viewers are obviously aware of the fact that *Dallas* is fabricated, but also feel most attracted to its realistic elements. This opens up the question as to what elements of *Dallas* can be considered as realistic at all. Based on the viewer's reactions to the show, Ang (1985) argues that "concrete situations and complications [in Dallas] are regarded as symbolic representations of more general living experiences; rows,

intrigues, happiness and misery" (pp. 44-45). This means viewers "ascribe mainly emotional meanings" (Ang, 1985, p.45) to *Dallas*, a process that Ang defines as "emotional realism" (p. 45). To be more specific, Ang (1985) claims that "what is recognized as real is not knowledge of the world, but a subjective experience of the world: a 'structure of feeling'" (p. 45). In other words, viewers realise that most of what is depicted in *Dallas*—the high fashion, expensive cars, and beautiful people—is not representative of their everyday life, but assume that the ways in which people interact with each other is. Thus, Ang sees *Dallas* as a combination of "external unrealism" and "inner realism" (p. 47).

Like Geraghty (1991), who has defined the oscillation between engagement and distance as a key aspect of engaging with soap opera characters, Ang argues that it is the distance between the real and the fictional world in *Dallas* that allows viewers to indulge in its excessive emotions (1985, p. 48). Ultimately then, Ang does not evaluate specific emotional responses to television characters, but explains how *Dallas*' narrative framework enables viewers to relate to its characters on an emotional level in the first place. It seems as if the concept of emotional realism could be more easily incorporated into a universal model of viewer engagement with television characters than, for instance, Modleski's (2008) theory of the viewer as the ideal mother. Still, it needs to be proven if Ang's (1985) theory can be easily applied to other television formats and genres. In addition, since emotional realism primarily describes how television programmes provide the narrative framework for emotional engagement to occur, Ang's theory needs to be complemented with subsequent theories that investigate specific emotional responses to television characters. While Ang's theoretical concept has previously been primarily used to analyse viewer engagement with characters from contemporary television drama, I believe that it also is a helpful theoretical tool to analyse viewer engagement with characters from other television genres. In chapter three, I specifically discuss to what degree emotional realism affects the viewer's engagement with characters from television wrestling.

In her analysis of emotional engagement in *Perfect Strangers* (2001), Sarah Cardwell (2005) argues that "rather than a determined movement towards a moment of intense emotion, there is a continual 'pulling back' from a clearly defined emotional release" (p. 184). Cardwell bases this argument on her analysis of *Perfect Strangers*' aesthetics and her examination of the programme

in relation to cognitive media theory—in particular, Greg M. Smith's (1999) work on mood-cues and emotional markers (pp. 103-126). Kristyn Gorton (2009) has also investigated viewer engagement in contemporary television. In particular, Gorton has examined emotional engagement in *The Sopranos*, *ER*, and *State of Play* (2003). Analysing the viewer's emotional response to a typical episode of *ER*, Gorton (2009) states:

> Although ER is not aired daily like soaps (except in the case of reruns) viewers are similarly led along a 'wave of feeling' until the climax, usually occurring three-quarters of the way through the episode. At this point, the tension, largely constructed through the tight editing, slows down and encourages viewers to release emotion. The final segment of the episode often offers a resolution and time to reflect on the feelings established throughout the episode. (p. 117)

Gorton here makes clear that beyond a narrative structure, television programmes also dispose of an emotional structure. In addition, she claims that aesthetic aspects such as editing and sound design are crucial elements when it comes to determining the viewer's emotional engagement with a television programme. Gorton uses a scene from *ER* that is completely devoid of sound as an example to prove her point. In the scene, Dr. Mark Greene (Anthony Edwards) has to tell a man that his wife has died during childbirth. According to Gorton (2009), the scene's lack of sound heightens the viewer's emotional engagement because the silence or "white space" (p. 118) forces viewers to "enter in [their] own dialogue" (p. 118).

In addition, Gorton (2009) argues that, since serial characters have histories, television serials can elicit emotions in a way that few narrative forms can. Yet, while knowing a character's history might add to the viewer's emotional engagement, not knowing a character's history "does not preclude an emotional attachment to the piece" (Gorton, 2009, p. 118). As Gorton points out, this is a result of the fact that television programmes have to appeal to both faithful and casual viewers (2009, p. 119).

Investigating emotional engagement in *The Sopranos*, Gorton (2009) highlights the show's focus on intimacy. Gorton states that *The Sopranos* not only encourages viewers to enter its fictional world and follow its characters and their emotional struggles, but also invites viewers to compare the fictional world to their own lives. For instance, using herself as an example, Gorton (2009) states that following Carmela Soprano's (Edie Falco) emotional journey as a

wife, woman, and mother for six years has affected her own experiences (p. 124). As a result, Gorton argues that watching a fictional character's life unfold on screen encourages viewers to reflect on their own lives. One might argue that is equally true for film, but Gorton (2009) makes a clear distinction between film and television, stating that:

> The longevity of a series and its ability to construct an intimate world is distinct from the experience one might have watching a film. No matter how adept a film is at constructing an intimate portrayal of a person's life, it does not compare with the slow-building portrait offered in a long-running series on television. (p. 124)

Gorton here highlights how the distinct narrative structure of the television serial adds a sense of intimacy to the viewer's engagement with the characters. In summary, Gorton recognises that the viewer's emotional engagement with a television programme is not solely based on how an individual narrative component operates. Rather, according to Gorton (2009), our emotional reaction to a television programme is the result of a programme's narrative context (e.g. the interaction between structure, performance, editing). In a more recent study, Robin Nelson (2016) approaches viewer engagement in contemporary television in a similar way.

Nelson (2016) argues that many contemporary television dramas are structured by what he terms "moments of affect" (p.29). He defines these moments of affect as an "unusually intense encounter in a process of dynamic interplay between feeling and cognition mobilised by textual complexity and a concern with being in the world, in both the context of the fiction and the viewing context" (Nelson, 2016, pp. 30-31). Thus, these moments of affect are not merely the result of our visceral or cognitive response to a programme. Rather, they occur when these two processes collide. In particular, while the aesthetic quality of a particular scene might elicit a visceral reaction in us, Nelson (2016) argues that this experience has the potential to take on a deeper meaning (and turn into a moment of affect) if the scene is anchored within a serial narrative framework. For example, uninitiated viewers might primarily experience a visceral reaction (e.g. shock, disgust) as a result of the violence that is on display in 'The Rains of Castamere' (2013). However, for long-time viewers of *Game of Thrones*, the brutal murder of three of the show's main

characters might elicit a more complex emotional response that represents a mix between cognition and affect.

Nelson summarises what he defines as moments of affect by stating that contemporary televisions serials offers viewers a distinct experience that draws "upon the attractions of serialization offered by television more than cinema, but with something of the visual style and concentrated engagement of film" (p. 50). I agree with this sentiment, but I also believe that Nelson's definition of his own term is too narrow. For example, Nelson suggests that moments of affect exclusively occur in "complex" (Mittell, 2015) television drama, which I believe is a questionable argument. In addition, although Nelson acknowledges the importance of long-term viewer engagement for moments of affect, he does not discuss at length how exactly watching a programme for an extended period of time shapes the viewer's relationship with the characters. At this point, I should note that Gorton's (2009) and Nelson's (2016) respective studies have been highly influential for my own methodological approach. In particular, similar to these studies, my main focus in the following chapters is on how the distinct narrative context of a programme shapes our engagement with its characters. Yet, before I move into the discussion of my case studies, I need to examine a crucial element of the viewer/character relationship in contemporary television that I have previously only hinted at: long-term viewer engagement. While many of the studies that I have discussed over the course of this chapter (e.g. Caughie, 2000; Gorton, 2009; Nelson, 2016; Smith, 2011) acknowledge that following a programme for an extended period of time can alter how we relate to the characters that are featured on that programme, this element of viewer engagement has rarely been explored in detail. Thus, in order to clarify to what degree long-term viewer engagement can affect our relationship with a television character, I will take a closer look at two studies that have previously investigated this phenomenon (Blanchet and Vaage, 2012; Warhol, 2003).

Using *Mad Men* (2007 – 15) as an example, Blanchet and Vaage (2012) argue that the viewer's strong emotional response to a television programme is often not the result of its universal themes or how expertly the narrative has been crafted, but largely originates from their long-term engagement with the characters. Investigating familiarity and intimacy with television characters, both of which are a direct result of long-term engagement, Blanchet and Vaage explore the theoretical concept of "parasocial relationships" (2012, p. 21). The

term, first coined by sociologists Horton and Wohl (2006), describes one-sided relationships with fictional and non-fictional characters. For example, in the past it has been used to define the relationships between radio hosts and their listeners. Blanchet and Vaage (2012) primarily criticise "the vagueness of the notion of parasocial interaction, and the lack of differentiation from other types of engagement, such as sympathy and empathy" (p. 21) with regard to previous studies that have applied the term. In order to avoid these shortcomings, Blanchet and Vaage divide their own analysis of long-term engagement and parasocial interaction with television characters into various subcategories.

Blanchet and Vaage (2012) argue that being exposed to a character for an extended period of time can increase the viewer's liking of or interest in a character. The authors describe this narrative phenomenon as the "familiarity or exposure effect," (Blanchet and Vaage, 2012, p. 22) which they argue holds true for both television characters and television programmes as a whole. Yet, the exposure effect might flatten out after a certain period of time, meaning that the viewer's liking of a programme and its characters does not steadily increase. Instead, after it has reached a peak, it often declines, which can lead to a programme's cancellation (Blanchet and Vaage, 2012).

Blanchet and Vaage (2009) argue that it is primarily pleasurable for viewers to engage with television characters because after a certain period of time the audience feels as if they know the characters well. In contrast, films are less likely to achieve that same feeling since the shorter amount of screen time does not give viewers the chance to develop the same sense of familiarity with the characters (Blanchet and Vaage, 2012, p. 24).

Further exploring the effects of long-term engagement with television characters, Blanchet and Vaage (2012) also investigate what leads someone to form a friendship with another person. They conclude that two aspects are crucial to becoming friends with another person: "physical proximity and perceived similarity" (Blanchet and Vaage, p. 26). This seems logical since one first has to meet another person in order to become friends with them. In addition, it also makes sense that people would be more likely to form a friendship with someone that they perceive as similar to themselves.

Referring to Smith's (1995) structure of sympathy, Blanchet and Vaage (2012, p. 27) point out that alignment is a powerful way to get to know film and television characters. For example, alignment can increase the viewer's

sympathy for a character, since it gives them the chance to recognise similarities between themselves and the character. Yet, alignment does not automatically lead to allegiance since this aspect of the structure of sympathy is tied to the viewer's moral evaluation of a character (Blanchet and Vaage, 2012, p. 27). Thus, Blanchet and Vaage argue that one shortcoming of the structure of sympathy is that it highlights the moral aspects of the viewer/character relationship, but neglects its temporal dimension. In other words, it does not differentiate between short-term and long-term engagement with fictional characters.

According to Blanchet and Vaage (2012), "the shared history account," (p. 28) which they regard as one of the key aspects of the viewer/character relationship in contemporary television, can fill this gap. Essentially, the shared history account means that, similar to friendships in real life, viewers feel connected to television characters as a result of the history they share with them. As Blanchet and Vaage (2012) state:

> We share a history with [television] characters: first, because of the series' longer screen duration and, second, because our own lives progress as the series goes on. This bond cannot be reduced to the processes of empathy and sympathy, as we can also sympathize and empathize with strangers to whom we do not feel connected in such a special way. (p. 28)

Again, the authors point out the limits of the structure of sympathy, but they also make clear that engaging with a character over a long period of time is a complex and distinct aspect of the television viewing experience. For example, Blanchet and Vaage (2012) claim that on a moral level neither Don Draper (Jon Hamm) nor Peggy Olson (Elisabeth Moss), the two main characters of *Mad Men*, are necessarily sympathetic people. Still, the authors argue that viewers feel favourable towards Don and Peggy, simply because they have followed them in their struggles and conflicts over several seasons, meaning they now share a history with them (Blanchet and Vaage, 2012, p. 29).

On a broader level, Warhol (2003) argues in her study on long-term viewer engagement in soap operas that viewers who follow a soap opera for an extended period of time acquire a "level of literacy in soap opera convention" which enables them to even interpret episodes that they have not seen before (p. 110). For example, Warhol (2003) refers to the ability of long-term soap

viewers to interpret “the long looks and enigmatic remarks exchanged between characters, the double takes, the pauses in dialogue, and the seemingly arbitrary cutting off of scenes upon certain characters’ entrances” (p. 110). Warhol (2003) further suggests that the only way to become ‘better’ at reading the behaviour of certain characters and narrative cues is to watch a soap for an extended period of time. Ultimately then, following Warhol’s logic, this means there is no easy replacement for the shared history account.

According to Blanchet and Vaage (2012), another crucial aspect of the viewer’s long-term engagement with television characters is investment. In a sociological context, the term can refer to various types of investment (e.g. money, time, effort, sacrifices, general emotional investment). With regard to television programmes, investment refers to the fact that at a certain point of the narrative, viewers feel consciously or subconsciously reluctant to stop watching a programme because they feel that they have already invested too much time in it (Blanchet and Vaage, 2012). In addition, viewers often get emotionally invested in a show’s characters and their relationships. In that way, the investment model represents a counter-balance to the idea that viewers primarily get attached to television serials because they want to know what will happen next.

Finally, Blanchet and Vaage (2012) argue that the viewer’s long-term engagement with television characters enables serial television programmes to employ unique storytelling techniques such as “instant intensity” (p.32-34) and “surprise through familiarity” (p.32-34). Instant intensity means that, based on the shared history account, television programme can create emotionally tense situations at any given point in the story (Blanchet and Vaage, 2012, p. 33). In order to achieve the same level of emotional impact, a film (unless it is a sequel or part of a series of films) needs to set up the characters and the story world first—and even then it is questionable if it can elicit a comparable emotional response since viewers have not spent the same amount of time with the characters (Blanchet and Vaage, 2012, p. 33). Warhol (2003) also comments on this phenomenon, stating that the more familiar a viewer is with the history of a soap opera, the more capable that viewer will be of reading and engaging with the “intensities” (p. 110) of a present episode. Furthermore, Warhol (2003) claims that “part of the appeal of following a soap opera over an extended period of time is the accumulation of knowledge of those emotive details that

add layers of affect to each new episode" (p. 113). Thus, while we might be able to explain the emotional resonance of a specific scene to an uninitiated viewer, that viewer will not be able to 'feel' it in the same way as a long-term viewer of the same programme (Warhol, 2003, p. 113).

Surprise, or surprise through familiarity, means that television programmes can create emotionally affecting situations by subverting the audience's expectations, which are largely based on their familiarity with a programme and its characters (Blanchet and Vaage, 2012, p. 34). Again, the same might be said about film, but, as with instant intensity, Blanchet and Vaage (2012) argue that film rarely achieves the same sense of familiarity as television in the first place. As a result, a television character suddenly breaking with her established behaviour might elicit a strong emotional response in the viewer. According to the authors, this effect can be enhanced if it is accompanied by a shift in storytelling (Blanchet and Vaage, 2012). For example, as Blanchet and Vaage state (2012, pp. 18-19), the scenes in the *Mad Men* episode 'The Suitcase' (2010) in which Peggy and Don express their anger and sorrow are effective in engaging the viewer on an emotional level for two reasons: Firstly, because both of these characters rarely express their emotions, and secondly, because *Mad Men* as a show is very restrained and only occasionally features scenes in which any of the characters express their emotions openly.

2.7 Conclusion

My investigation of studies on viewer engagement with fictional characters and my subsequent discussion of studies on television narration and television characters in this chapter show that the theoretical framework for studying viewer engagement with television characters needs to be extended. For example, primarily as a result of the strong influence of Smith's (1995) work on viewer engagement with fictional characters on film, many cognition-based studies on the viewer/character relationship in contemporary television (e.g. Mittell, 2015; Vaage, 2015) still focus on questions of morality. At the same time, other notable engagement patterns (e.g. antipathy, long-term viewer engagement), many of which are closely tied to the inherent narrative characteristics of the television medium, are less frequently explored.

As I have emphasised in the second half of this chapter, there is only a limited number of studies that recognise that the distinct narrative context of a

television programme has an effect on the viewer's relationship with the characters. These studies have had a particularly strong influence on my own methodological approach in this dissertation. In particular, my methodology in the following chapters is influenced by studies such as Ien Ang's (1985) work on emotional realism in the television soap opera and Blanchet and Vaage's (2012) work on long-term viewer engagement with television characters since these studies combine aspects of cognitive film theory and television theory to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between viewers and television characters.

Despite the fact that my own methodology has been influenced by these studies, they also point towards some of the problems in the current discourse around viewer engagement with television characters. Most importantly, they underline that many studies that investigate the viewer/character relationship in contemporary television favour certain television genres over others and tend to focus on similar types of characters. For instance, many studies on viewer engagement with television characters exclusively focus on critically acclaimed, high-budget, 'quality TV' dramas and often only examine the viewer's relationship with morally ambiguous television characters. In the following chapters, I attempt to close these gaps in television research by investigating the viewer's relationship with characters from a variety of television formats and genres while paying close attention to how the narrative fabric of each of these genres shapes the viewer's relationship with the characters.

It should be noted that I am aware that this dissertation cannot be a comprehensive study of viewer engagement with television characters, simply because the television medium consists of such a wide range of genres and formats. Yet, by focusing on viewer engagement with television characters from a variety of genres (wrestling, drama, late-night chat, and animation) and examining a wide range of engagement patterns (e.g. long-term viewer engagement, antipathy, parasocial interaction) with these characters, I hope this work can initiate a shift of focus in the current discourse around television characters. In the first case study of this thesis, I investigate viewer engagement in a television genre that previously has not received much scholarly attention: television wrestling.

3 Wrestling with Characters

In December 1997, WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment) chairman Vince McMahon addressed the viewers of *Monday Night Raw* (1993 –) to announce a change of direction for his company. In his announcement, McMahon (1997) states that "even though [the WWE calls itself] sports entertainment because of the athleticism involved, the key word in that phrase is entertainment" ('Episode #5.48'). The WWE chairman also emphasises that wrestling goes beyond regular sports broadcasts and features narrative trademarks from various television programmes. For example, McMahon (1997) points out that "[*WWE* borrows] from such program niches like soap operas like the *Days of Our Lives* or music videos such as those on *MTV*, daytime talk shows like *Jerry Springer* and others, cartoons like the *King of the Hill* on FOX, sitcoms like *Seinfeld*, and other widely accepted forms of television entertainment" ('Episode #5.48'). When this announcement first aired, it was revolutionary for the transparency with which McMahon discusses the wrestling business. Although in the nineteen nineties it was already public knowledge that the outcome of professional wrestling (pro wrestling) matches is staged, a promoter stepping in front of the cameras and letting the audience in on the creative process was still unusual. In the context of this study, McMahon's announcement functions as a definition of pro wrestling in general and television wrestling in particular.

As McMahon ('Episode #5.48') indicates, pro wrestling represents a combination of several genres. It is based in vaudeville theatre, but also incorporates elements of television sports programmes, reality television, and soap operas. In this chapter, I argue that viewer engagement with wrestling characters is defined by this generic hybridity. In particular, I contend that television wrestling elicits a number of engagement patterns that are typically associated with other television genres (e.g. soap opera, sports, reality TV). In addition, throughout this chapter, I assert that there is an underlying tension between fact and fiction in all wrestling programmes that shapes the viewer's relationship with the characters. I begin this chapter with a theoretical and partial historical overview of pro wrestling. As part of this investigation, I examine existing scholarly works on pro wrestling (e.g. Barthes 2005; Fiske 1987) and provide the reader with a brief history of television wrestling (e.g. Morton and O'Brien 1985; Jenkins 2005). I also analyse some of the most common

character types in television wrestling and examine how these character types have evolved over the years. The main part of this chapter is a detailed investigation of viewer engagement with wrestling characters. This investigation begins with a discussion of the ways in which wrestling and sports programmes are similar when it comes to viewer engagement. The following section examines the role of liveness for viewer engagement with wrestling characters. This section ends with an extended analysis of what is arguably wrestling's most important live element—the commentary. The final section of this chapter focuses on two of the most important elements of viewer engagement with wrestling characters. Firstly, referring to Ien Ang's (1985) concept of emotional realism, I argue that the realistic elements that are at the core of TV wrestling increase the viewer's emotional response to the characters. Secondly, referring to Blanchet and Vaage's (2012) theory on the effects of long-term viewer engagement with fictional characters, I contend that TV wrestling frequently utilises the audience's long-term engagement with the characters to increase emotional impact.

It should also be noted that, in the course of this chapter, I mainly refer to WWE (formerly World Wrestling Federation) programmes. This has various reasons (e.g. accessibility, narrative consistency), but the main reason is that WWE is the most well-recognised wrestling brand in the world today. From the mid-nineteen nineties to the beginning of the new millennium, WWE, WCW (World Championship Wrestling) and, to a lesser degree, ECW (Extreme Championship Wrestling) were competing in what has been referred to by wrestling experts as a "ratings war" ('The Rise of the NWO', 2014). However, this ratings war ended in 2001 with WWE purchasing WCW and ECW declaring bankruptcy soon after. Since then, WWE has been the dominant force in television wrestling worldwide. Not only are WWE programmes televised all over the world, but the company gained even more exposure with the introduction of the WWE Network in 2014. The WWE Network is an online-based streaming platform that gives viewers access to WWE*'s* weekly shows, pay-per-view events, and a substantial part of their back catalogue. In comparison, smaller wrestling promotions such as Total Nonstop Wrestling and Ring of Honor, both of which currently air on Destination America in North America, only have limited television exposure outside of the United States.

3.1 From Carnival to Television

Pro wrestling has existed as a form of popular entertainment since the nineteenth century. Yet, somewhat surprisingly, this form of popular entertainment has not received much scholarly attention. In addition, many existing studies on pro-wrestling tend to focus on live events instead of wrestling television programmes. Of course, live and television wrestling work in similar ways, but there are also some notable differences between these two formats. Generally speaking, much of the scholarly work that has been done on live wrestling can also be applied to television wrestling since the core dynamics of pro wrestling have remained the same for decades. At the same time, watching wrestling on television is a different experience from attending a wrestling live event, primarily as a result of how television wrestling has continued to adopt elements from other genres over the years. In this section, I will trace the development from pro wrestling as a form of live entertainment to wrestling as a television genre and clarify the similarities and differences between the two formats.

In what is still one of the seminal works on pro wrestling, Roland Barthes (2005) defines wrestling as “a spectacle of excess” (p. 23). Barthes (2005) further notes that wrestling is “a sum of spectacles, of which no single one is a function: each moment imposes the total knowledge of passion which rises erect and alone, without ever extending to the crowning moment of a result” (p. 24). Barthes here identifies two of the core elements of pro wrestling: spectacle and immediacy. Spectacle, as Barthes understands it, refers to the spectacular nature of watching two (or more) wrestlers participate in a complicated choreographed performance. Meanwhile, immediacy describes the way in which a single wrestling move or move or hold (e.g. body slam, sleeper hold) can capture the viewer’s attention. John Fiske (1987) elaborates on Barthes’ observations by arguing that in wrestling the “spectacular involves an exaggeration of the pleasure of looking” (p. 199). Fiske (1987) further states that the spectacle “exaggerates the visible, magnifies and foregrounds the surface appearance, and refuses meaning and depth” (199). According to Fiske, the result of pro wrestling’s emphasis of spectacle is a liberation of subjectivity. That is to say, the wrestlers and their bodies are not signifiers for a deeper meaning, but they in fact become the meaning. Fiske also links pro wrestling to

the carnival. Referring to Mikhail Bakhtin, he states that carnival life is only subject to the laws of its own freedom (Fiske, 1987, p. 197). Predominantly, carnival inverts the rules of normalcy and "builds a world upside down" (Fiske, 1987, p. 197). This upside-down world is typically a parody of normal life. Fiske (1987) argues that wrestling functions in the same way since, despite the fact that there are rules, these rules are frequently disregarded. For instance, "the wrestlers' managers fight as often as the wrestlers, wrestlers not officially involved join in the bouts, the ropes which separate the ring (the area of contest) from the audience are ignored and the fight spills into the audience who become participants" (Fiske, 1987, p. 200). Fiske (1987) continues to highlight links between wrestling and the carnival (e.g. its emphasis of grotesque bodies), but this description already makes clear why one might view wrestling as a carnivalesque spectacle that parodies normal life and builds a world upside down.

Barthes (2005) has not only been fascinated with wrestling as a result of its spectacular nature, but also as a result of its narrative abilities. He argues that wrestling requires an immediate reading by the spectator because in wrestling "it is each moment which is intelligible, not the passage of time" (Barthes, 2005, p. 24). This is not only true for the characters the wrestlers portray, but also for the ways in which they act during the matches: every move, every gesture, and every interaction with the audience is characterised by obviousness. For example, this includes wrestlers pretending not to be able to move after they have been attacked, wrestlers displaying pain through their exaggerated facial expressions in a hold, and wrestlers taunting their opponents after having performed a successful attack (Barthes, 2005, p. 26-27). Ultimately then, wrestling is characterized by an absence of hidden meanings since the audience has to understand everything on the spot (Barthes, 2005, p. 24). Based on its narrative clarity, wrestling has also often been described as a morality play. John Campbell (1996) notes that morality plays commonly feature "mighty heroes" (p. 128) and "monstrous villains" (p. 128) fighting each other in a battle between good and evil. Campbell points out that, while it does not matter to the spectator if a wrestler wins or loses, it does matter if he or she adheres to the rules of the morality play. As he puts it, "the wrestler's character and actions must conform to the audience's clearly drawn expectations of what good and evil will do" (Campbell, 1996, p. 128). The evil portrayed by villainous wrestlers

must be strong since this creates more dramatic tension and it is also crucial that the villain is eventually defeated in order for the in-ring drama to fit in with the tradition of the morality play (Campbell, 1996, p. 128). Claiming that "above all" (Barthes, 2005, p. 28) wrestling is supposed to portray a "purely moral concept," (p. 28) Barthes also recognises the moral dimension of wrestling. In fact, Barthes (2005) argues that the idea of making a villain 'pay' for her villainous behaviour is essential to the idea of wrestling because it restores the moral order. However, Barthes also notes that viewers might find satisfaction in watching a villain break the rules since it provides them with a sense of delinquent pleasure. In addition, a wrestling villain who disregards the rules and gets away with it also increases the viewer's sense of anticipation since typically this type of character will have to pay for her transgressive behaviour at some point in the future (Barthes, 2005, p. 28).

Most of the works I have discussed so far focus on the core dynamics of pro wrestling, which means they apply to both live and television wrestling. This elicits the question as to how these two categories of wrestling differ from each other. Arguably, television wrestling also offers viewers a spectacular and carnivalesque morality play that takes place in a sports environment, yet the viewing experience is distinctly different. As previously argued, the primary reason for this is that, over the years, wrestling programmes have adopted a variety of narrative elements from other television genres. Before discussing the influence that the television medium has had on pro wrestling on a narrative level, it is necessary to take a brief look at wrestling's evolution from live entertainment into a television genre.

Before pro wrestling became a television format, there had been attempts made to establish wrestling as a radio programme in North America. These attempts ultimately failed, largely because wrestling is primarily a visual spectacle and radio announcers experienced difficulties when it came to conveying the nature of specific wrestling moves orally. Similar to sports broadcasts and live theatre, wrestling mainly became a way to fill time slots in the early days of television. Yet, it was also during this time period that wrestling developed into the communal experience that it has remained until today. For example, neighbours and relatives would often gather around the television to watch wrestling matches together (Morton and O'Brien, 1985, p. 47). Most early wrestling programmes were local productions from the American

East Coast (e.g. New York, Chicago) that were then sent out to different local stations across the country. In comparison with contemporary wrestling programmes, these early wrestling programmes seem much more basic. At the same time, they already contain glimpses of how the television medium would transform pro wrestling. For example, the matches were already interspersed with interview and backstage segments that gave wrestlers the chance to further develop the characters they portrayed and progress the stories (Morton and O'Brien, 1985, p. 47). By the nineteen sixties, wrestling had almost vanished altogether from American television screens. The novelty of it had worn off, viewers had grown tired of the same old routines, and wrestling promoters failed to generate interest for the upcoming matches (Morton and O'Brien, 1985). As a result, pro wrestling had to find new ways to attract viewers. It proved to be a successful strategy to hype future matches via interviews or video montages that introduced the viewers to the in-ring abilities of particular wrestlers (Morton and O'Brien, 1985). However, at this point in time, wrestling was mostly a local phenomenon. This means during live events, promoters would try to generate interest for the local wrestling television programmes and vice versa (Morton and O'Brien, 1985, p. 48-51).

In North America, wrestling first started to be broadcast nationally at the beginning of the nineteen eighties when Ted Turner's Atlanta-based station WTBS turned into a national television station (Morton and O'Brien, 1985). Soon after, in the fall of 1983, the USA network started airing *WWE All American Wrestling* (1983 – 94). The advent of cable and satellite television brought with it a need for more content. As a result, wrestling became a regular part of the programme schedule. It was also with the beginning of the cable and satellite network era that wrestling began to adopt more elements from other television genres. In particular, Vince McMahon Jr., the owner of WWE, embraced the idea of incorporating aspects from other television genres into his wrestling programmes in order to make them more accessible for a mainstream audience (Morton and O'Brien, 1985).

In the United Kingdom, wrestling primarily became popular in the nineteen sixties as part of ITV's *World of Sport* (1965 – 85), where it remained a part of the programme until its cancellation in 1985. While at this point the popularity of wrestling had waned, ITV still continued to air wrestling until 1998. Shortly after, American wrestling programmes produced by WWE started airing

on Sky Television. Since then, other wrestling programmes have aired in the UK (e.g. *WCW Worldwide* on ITV, a variety of matches from different promotions on the Fight Network), but none of them have reached the popularity of WWE's wrestling programmes. At the time of this writing, numerous programmes produced by WWE continue to be broadcast on Sky and are also available via the WWE Network.

In his work on television wrestling, Henry Jenkins (2005) focuses on the influence the television medium has had on pro wrestling. He criticises Barthes (2005) for being too focused on single wrestling matches and isolated gestures, but also recognises that Barthes could not have predicted how "the narrative mechanisms of television" (Jenkins, 2005, p. 34) would transform wrestling. Jenkins (2005) views wrestling as "masculine melodrama," (p. 34) a form of the television soap opera that is primarily aimed at a male audience and includes a cast of continuing characters and rivalries that unfold over an extended period of time across numerous matches, interviews, and various out-of-the-ring segments. He defines television wrestling as follows:

> Television wrestling offers its viewers complexly plotted, ongoing narratives of professional ambition, personal suffering, friendship and alliance, betrayal and reversal of fortune. Matches still offer their share of acrobatic spectacle, snake handling, fire eating, and colorful costumes. They are, as such, immediately accessible to the casual viewer, yet they reward the informed spectator for whom each body slam and double-arm suplex bears specific narrative consequences. A demand for closure is satisfied at the level of individual events, but those matches are always contained within a larger narrative trajectory which is itself fluid and open. (Jenkins, 2005, p. 34)

Jenkins (2005) here acknowledges previous definitions of pro wrestling and makes clear that wrestling has been redefined by the television medium. He also indicates that when it comes to its narrative format, television wrestling exists somewhere between the series and the serial. For example, according to Jenkins (2005), wrestling programmes typically raise narrative enigmas during the free broadcasts, but only resolve these enigmas during the monthly pay-per-view events (p. 35). Jenkins (2005) also notes that although wrestling programmes strongly resemble soap operas in form and content, they ultimately defy such a

categorization because they are primarily aimed at a male audience (p. 35).[4] More specifically, television wrestling provides its predominantly male viewers with an emotional outlet that allows them to engage with soap opera-esque stories and characters in a programme that is specifically targeted at them. Boyle and O'Connor (1993) have made similar observations in their study on viewer engagement in television sports programmes. They state:

> Emotional response in television sport is based to a large extent on identification with players and characters. There are a number of devices, both textual and contextual, operating to invoke such a response. . . . Regular viewers of soap opera know the history of each character and their place not only within the current narrative, but also their place and relationship to others in the past. Similarly, regular viewers of television football know not only the players in a particular match, but also the trajectory of their careers to date. (Boyle and O'Connor, 1993, p. 112)

Similarly, television wrestling "bridges the gap between sport and melodrama" and thereby enables "the exploration of the emotional and moral life of its combatants" in a sports environment (Jenkins, 2005, p. 39). In the course of his work, Jenkins analyses specific wrestling characters, storylines, and reoccurring motives in WWE programming and makes a convincing case for wrestling as a masculine form of melodrama. However, Jenkins (2005) neglects certain aspects of the viewer's relationship with wrestling characters. For example, he does not examine to what degree wrestling's unique mix of reality and fiction influences viewer engagement and he also does not explore long-term engagement with wrestling characters. Most viewers with a minimal intertextual understanding of different television genres will notice the ties between wrestling and soap operas, but wrestling programmes also share various narrative trademarks with reality TV.

June Deery (2005) notes that reality TV is in many ways similar to sports programmes in that actual events are filmed (although in reality TV the 'real' events are often scripted) and the viewers are entertained "through the drama of suspenseful competition" (p. 4). In addition, both reality TV and sports broadcasts typically focus on the extraordinary. Yet, in the context of sports

[4] In *GLOW* (2017 -), a recent TV series that fictionalises the development of the first women's wrestling promotion in the US, the close relationship between wrestling and soap opera becomes a crucial element of the plot.

programmes this refers to excellent athletic performances whereas in reality TV it can also refer to the freakish or shameful (Deery, 2005, p. 4). Deery (2005) states that one of the main differences between sports programmes and reality TV is that sports programmes typically focus on the skills and actions of the players while reality TV programmes are more concerned with the emotions and opinions of the contestants. Once again, television wrestling lies somewhere in between. Similar to sports programmes and reality TV, in wrestling actual events (e.g. the matches) are filmed and the viewers are entertained through the drama of suspenseful competition. Yet, while television wrestling focuses on the skills and actions of the players, it also focuses on their emotions and opinions. In addition, while wrestling focuses on the extraordinary, this refers to both athletic performances and the freakish and shameful in general. For example, viewers are supposed to marvel at Brock Lesnar's (Brock Edward Lesnar) strength and athleticism, but, at the same time, there is an underlying freakish appeal to watching someone perform who is as physically fit as Lesnar. In contemporary wrestling, guiding the viewer's attention to the unusual bodies of the performers has become less common than in the nineteen eighties and nineties when announcers repeatedly referred to some wrestlers as freaks. Nevertheless, the often unusual bodies of the performers are still a key element of wrestling's appeal. Arguably, this becomes more apparent in relation to wrestlers whose body is noticeably different from what is considered the norm (e.g. the unusually tall Big Show [Paul Wight]). According to Deery (2005), another trademark of reality TV is that it "muddies and plays with the distinction between event and program, between real life and representation" (p. 26). At the same time, reality TV frequently adopts conventions of fiction such as shaping stories and characters, encouraging melodrama, and employing emotive music (Deery, 2005, p. 27). This means, although some reality TV programmes might be fictionalized to a great degree, the viewer's longing for the real remains one of the main attractions of this particular genre. Since television wrestling frequently adopts conventions of fiction, one might be tempted to think of it strictly as a fictionalised serial narrative, but I believe that wrestling defies such a clear categorisation. Instead, wrestling frequently plays with the distinction between real life and representation. This is true for the characters, the storylines, and the actual performances. I discuss the relationship between television wrestling and perceived reality in more detail later on in this chapter,

but I still want to give one example to make clear that in wrestling reality and fiction are often not as easily distinguishable as one might think.

The match between Bret 'The Hitman' Hart (Bret Hart) and Shawn Michaels (Michael Shawn Hickenbottom) at 'Survivor Series 1997' is a good example of how closely related reality and fiction can be in television wrestling. The confrontation between Hart and Michaels primarily became famous for its unscripted finish that saw WWE owner Vince McMahon strip away the WWE championship title from Hart. The unscripted finish of the match is commonly referred to by wrestling critics as the 'Montreal Screwjob' and became the biggest scandal in the history of pro wrestling. According to post-match interviews with the participants, McMahon had apparently been worried that Hart would go against the agreed-upon finish of the match and refuse to give up his championship title (*Hitman Hart: Wrestling with Shadows*, 1998). Thus, the promoter assured Hart that he would win the match, but then ordered the referee to end the match and declare Michaels the winner as he had Hart in a submission hold ('Survivor Series 1997'). On a story level, Hart had simply lost his title to Michaels, but in reality McMahon had lied to Hart and went against the agreed-upon outcome of the match. After 'Survivor Series 1997', WWE was forced to turn Vince McMahon into an on-screen villain since, any time he showed up on television, the live audience booed him because they felt that he had cheated Bret Hart out of his title. This resulted in the creation of the evil Mr. McMahon persona—a caricature of the real life Vince McMahon. In the following years, Mr. McMahon became a crucial part of many scripted storylines and developed into one of the most-hated villains on the WWE roster. To further increase the audience's dislike of Mr. McMahon, WWE re-created the ending of 'Survivor Series 97' at the 1998 incarnation of the event in a match between The Rock (Dwayne Johnson) and Mankind (Michael Foley) ('Survivor Series 1998'). The ending of the match, which mirrored the ending of the Hart/Michaels match one year earlier, saw Mankind lose against The Rock. However, this time the outcome was scripted ('Survivor Series 1998').

To this day, wrestling experts debate if McMahon's behaviour at 'Survivor Series 97' was justified or not, but this is not my main interest here. Instead, I am referring to this incident because it highlights how, in television wrestling, fictional characters, scripted storylines, and real-life events often collide in unusual ways. For instance, television wrestling sometimes turns real-life events

into scripted storylines and the characters the wrestlers portray often represent an extension of their real-life persona, which can make it challenging for the viewer to distinguish between fact and fiction. On a broader level, television wrestling cannot be as easily categorised as some of the existing works on pro wrestling make it seem. Wrestling programmes are not only a carnivalesque spectacle, a morality play, a form of masculine melodrama or a variation of reality TV. Instead, television wrestling combines aspects from all of these genres and turns them into one unique genre. Consequently, the ways in which viewers engage with wrestling characters also represents a mix of engagement patterns with characters from different television genres. Yet, before analysing viewer engagement with wrestling characters in more detail, it is necessary to take a closer look at the types of characters that populate wrestling programmes.

3.2 Wrestling Characters

As with any other television genre, wrestling characters are distinct to the genre and closely tied to the narration. Earlier on in this chapter, I have emphasised that pro wrestling is characterised by a sense of ambiguity since the degree to which the in-ring performances are staged is never entirely clear. Yet, in pro wrestling, this inherent sense of ambiguity is typically combined with narrative clarity. However, arguably not only wrestling plotlines are characterised by a sense of clarity, but also the characters that are featured in them. To put it differently, wrestlers are rarely complex characters since this would not be suitable for the simplistic stories that television wrestling typically tells. For example, a complex characterisation might leave viewers unsure about a wrestler's motivation, which could harm the spectator's overall enjoyment of the narrative. In contrast, contemporary television dramas often feature characters that exist in a moral grey area. In such programmes, the protagonist's moral ambiguity is often a key element of viewer engagement since it poses a moral challenge to the viewer.[5] This is not the case for wrestling characters. Of course, wrestling heels (wrestling vernacular for villain) also violate moral principles on a regular basis, but there is no ambiguity about their behaviour. In addition, although the portrayal of wrestling characters has evolved over the

[5] See chapters one and three for a more detailed analysis of this type of viewer engagement.

years, most contemporary wrestlers can still be classified as either babyfaces (heroes) or heels (villains).

Wrestling heels are largely characterised by their willingness to do anything to win a match, which includes breaking the rules. For example, the heel "pulls hair, hits an opponent who is on the ropes, pulls the opponent's trunks to escape a hold, gouges eyes, use foreign objects pulled from the trunks" (Morton and O'Brien, 1985, p. 128). By breaking the rules, heels violate the viewers' sense of justice and provide them with an outlet for their personal anger and frustrations (Morton and O'Brien, 1985). Viewers can easily identify a heel based on her appearance and her in-ring behaviour. This is especially true for heels that are based on an already established heel type. Some of the most common heel types include the evil foreigner, the evil businessman, and the mystical heel (who often derives his power from a supernatural source)[6] (Morton and O'Brien, 1985). Since heels are easily identifiable, the viewer knows which character they are supposed to aim their negative emotions at. For example, referring specifically to evil foreigners, Morton and O'Brien (1985) state:

> Any fan who lost a loved one at Pearl Harbor, in Vietnam or Korea, who fought in World War II, can appreciate seeing a German Nazi, a Japanese Sneak, or a Russian Communist get the beating he deserves if not for his own sins then for those of his fathers. (p. 130)

The same is true for most other heel types. For example, the evil businessman also gives viewers the chance to let go of real-life frustrations. However, the audience's frustrations towards this heel type might not be as racially-charged as the frustrations they might feel towards evil foreigners. Most of the heel types that Morton and O'Brien (1985) define in their work still exist today. Yet, there has been a recent trend towards less hyperbolic heels. In fact, modern heels are often an extension of a wrestler's real-life persona, which gives them a sense of being grounded in reality. Moreover, modern heels often cannot be easily categorised. For example, current WWE champion Seth Rollins (Colby Lopez) is an arrogant, scheming, and self-entitled coward. These character traits clearly position him as a heel, but his character still does not fit

[6] Classic examples for evil foreigner include The Iron Sheik (Hossein Khosrow Ali Vaziri) and Nikolai Volkoff (Josip Nikolai Peruzović). Classic examples for the evil businessman include The Million Dollar Man (Theodore Marvin DiBiase Sr.) and Rick Flair (Richard Morgan Fliehr). Classic examples for the mystical heel include Papa Shango (Charles Wright) and The Undertaker (Mark William Calaway).

in with any of the already established heel categories. Similarly, regardless if he is playing a babyface or a heel, Brock Lesnar (Brock Lesnar) does not conform to a specific character type since his wrestling persona is largely based on his real-life background in Ultimate Fighting. Meanwhile, other current heels such as Rusev (Miroslav Barnyashev), who plays a modernised version of a foreign invader, and Bray Wyatt (Windham Lawrence Rotunda), who plays a redneck cult leader that possesses mystical powers, still perfectly fit in with the heel types that have been established decades ago. Still, there has been a notable change since the nineteen nineties when WWE's roster was featured deranged barbarians, mysterious voodoo priests, and evil clowns. In particular, while some of these outlandish heel types still exist, modern wrestlers tend to portray them with more subtlety. The main reason for this is that contemporary WWE programmes have adopted a presentation style that is similar to traditional sports broadcasts. Thus, modern wrestling programmes often foreground realism over spectacle and the performances have to fit in with this more realistic tone.[7]

Babyfaces are equally simplistic characters. Similar to heels, viewers can usually easily identify babyfaces based on their appearance, gestures, and in-ring behaviour (Morton and O'Brien, 1985). For example, while heels typically ignore or insult the audience on their way to the ring, babyfaces will try to connect with the audience. They might high-five fans on their way to the ring or even throw their t-shirt into the audience before the start of a match. During the fights, babyfaces generally abide to the rules and fight honourably. However, the most important trademark of a babyface is that she has a significant virtue. Classic babyface virtues include "patriotism, ethnic loyalty, [and] love of family" (Morton and O'Brien, 1985, p. 142). In the past, these babyface virtues have been distilled into character types such as the good ole' boy, the masked lawman, the patriot, and the ethnic minority hero (Morton and O'Brien, 1985, pp. 143-151). In the modern wrestling era, many of these babyface character types have either become obsolete or they have been

[7] It should be noted that, despite the fact that, in recent years, WWE has taken a more realistic approach to characterisation and storytelling, the promotion sometimes still uses what wrestling experts refer to as gimmick matches to attract viewers. These matches typically feature a unique set of rules and emphasise spectacle over the wrestlers' athletic performances. In addition, gimmick matches are often based on the persona of a particular wrestler. Recent examples of gimmick matches include the 'House of Horrors' match ('Payback 2017'), which originated from Bray Wyatt's mystical heel persona, and the 'Punjabi Prison Match' ('Battleground 2017'), which was based on Jinder Mahal's (Yuvraj Singh Dhesi) Indian heritage.

significantly redefined. For example, there are hardly any babyfaces on the current WWE roster that can be described as a good ole' boy—a confederate type from the American south who is proud of his heritage and confident in his in-ring abilities (Morton and O'Brien, 1985, 144).[8] Of course, there are still some modern babyfaces that fit into the categories that have been established decades ago. Perhaps the most obvious example for this is John Cena, who portrays a modern version of the American patriot character. Yet, instead of being defined by a specific character type, modern babyfaces are often more defined by their virtues. It should also be noted that, in contemporary wrestling, babyfaces who always abide to the rules have become somewhat of a rarity. Instead, even the most virtuous heroes (e.g. John Cena) sometimes break the rules if it is necessary to win a match.[9]

Aside from these minor adjustments to the ways in which heels and babyfaces are generally portrayed, there has been a trend in modern wrestling towards antihero characters. Paralleling the rise of antiheros in television drama, antihero wrestlers began to become more popular at the turn of the century. Arguably, the popularity of antihero wrestlers is somewhat surprising given that one of the defining features of wrestling is narrative clarity. In contrast, antiheroes are largely defined by their in-between status (they exist somewhere in the space between hero and villain). Wrestling expert Wade Keller (2012) echoes this sentiment in an online article on tweeners (wrestling vernacular for characters that are neither heels nor babyfaces) in which he argues that, ideally, pro wrestling should be a battle between a "a clear-cut babyface and a clear-cut heel" (para. 6). Specifically referring to viewer engagement, Keller (2012) states:

> Pro wrestling is most compelling and effective when it gives us that outlet to cheer for someone who clearly we identify with and admire or have reason to want to see succeed, and against people who don't share our values and remind us of people who we feel cheat to get ahead or have different values. (para. 8)

[8] On the current WWE roster, arguably the wrestler that comes closest to portraying this character type is the Syrian-Canadian Sami Zayn (Rami Sebai). Yet, even Zayn represents a modern take on the good ole' boy.

[9] It should, however, be noted that when a babyface breaks the rules, this is often presented as a reaction to the heel's initial rule-breaking.

Despite the fact that many pro wrestling experts seem to share Keller's opinion, antihero wrestlers have been extremely popular with wrestling audiences since the early 2000s. However, a brief look at one of the most popular antiheroes in pro wrestling history highlights that wrestling antiheroes are distinct from the morally complex antiheroes of contemporary television drama. Arguably, 'Stone Cold' Steve Austin (Steven James Anderson) is the most popular antihero in the history of pro wrestling. Originally, WWE had planned for 'Stone Cold'—a cursing, beer-guzzling Texas redneck—to be one of its major villains, but the character became so popular that the promotion had to abandon their initial plans and turn him into a babyface. Arguably, this is where the major difference between wrestling antiheroes and the type of antiheroes that are typically featured in contemporary television drama lies: wrestling antiheroes are often just heels or babyfaces in disguise.[10] For example, although the Stone Cold character is an authority-defying loner, who does not care what anyone else thinks about his actions, WWE also cleared positioned him as a babyface for most of his career. For example, Stone Cold prominently feuded with Mr. McMahon and The Undertaker, who, at the time, were the top heels of the company. It should also be noted that there have been wrestlers before Steve Austin that could be classified as antiheros, but it was the success of the 'Stone Cold' character that turned the antihero into a staple wrestling character. Arguably the prime example for a modern wrestling antihero is Dean Ambrose (Jonathan Good). Similar to Stone Cold, Ambrose is primarily defined by his disregard for authority and unpredictable behaviour. Yet, at the same time, Ambrose also possesses traditional babyface virtues such as honour, respect, and loyalty.

Ultimately then, contemporary wrestling is still characterised by a clear distinction between heels and babyfaces. The in-ring behaviour of the wrestlers is equally consistent: heels still insult the audience and break the rules whereas babyfaces still respect the fans and generally attempt to fight honourably. Nevertheless, wrestling characters have evolved over the years. Most notably, there has been a shift in the wrestling industry towards more realism, which has led wrestling experts to refer to the current period of wrestling as the "reality

[10] Of course, there are instances in which the live audience cheers for a heel or boos a babyface. Yet, this is a distinct phenomenon that is not immediately related to that character's heel or face status.

era" (Nguen, 2015; Oster, 2015). As a result of this shift towards more realism, the portrayal of contemporary wrestling characters has become more nuanced and has led to more realistic wrestling gimmicks (wrestling vernacular for character/persona). For example, regardless if a wrestler plays a heel or a babyface, modern wrestling gimmicks often represent an extension of the performer's real-life persona (e.g. Brock Lesnar, CM Punk). Also tied to this reality trend is wrestling's embrace of antihero characters, which is one of the most notable developments in pro-wrestling since the beginning the new millennium. However, most wrestling antiheros are heels and babyfaces in disguise. This means they are either 'cool heels' or babyfaces that have an edge to them, designed to attract those viewers that are reluctant to engage with more straightforward heel or babyface characters.

3.3 Viewer Engagement with Wrestling Characters

3.3.1 Wrestling as a Sports Programme

Some studies on television wrestling acknowledge its roots in sports programming, but these studies typically do not explore to what degree the relationship between wrestling and sports broadcasts shapes the viewer's relationship with wrestling characters. Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning (1986) have explored the role of sports for society at length. Elias (1986) states that modern societies are characterised by emotional self-restraint. As he puts it, in a modern society there is "only a comparatively limited scope for the show of strong feelings, of strong antipathies towards and dislike of people, let alone of hot anger, wild hatred or the urge to hit someone over the head" (Elias, 1986, p. 41). According to Elias, the social need for people to contain their emotions can create tensions within a person. Yet these tensions can be counter-balanced by participating in a sports event as either a performer or a spectator (Elias, 1986, pp. 41-43). Elias further suggests that experiencing the mimetic excitement of the battle between two sports teams is even more enjoyable in a group setting. Following Elias' logic, sports provide participants and spectators with the opportunity to experience a sense of mimetic excitement that can have a cathartic effect. At the same time, engaging with sports events on an emotional level may elicit elements of anxiety, fear, and despair for some viewers (Elias, 1986, p. 49).

While it seems logical to me to apply this theoretical model to television wrestling, one might argue that the type of emotional catharsis Elias (1986) ascribes to watching sports is similar to the emotional catharsis soap operas and reality TV programmes provide the audience with. However, there are certain elements of viewer engagement that are distinct for watching sports. These include the level of excitement and the clarity of the emotional engagement. In particular, watching sports encourages a form of emotional engagement that directly links motion and emotion (e.g. gestures, chanting) (Elias, 1986, p. 50). Moreover, it is widely accepted that sports viewers blindly support or dislike a particular team. Of course, the intensity of the viewer's emotional engagement might vary depending on if she is attending a live event or watching from home, but that does not change the fact that some engagement patterns are distinct for watching sports.

It should also be noted that there are existing studies on the correlation between viewer enjoyment and violence in sports programmes. These studies have shown that most full-contact sports (e.g. wrestling, boxing, mixed martial arts) draw the viewer's attention to the most violent aspects of the athletic performance. Still, this does not make clear if viewers generally find more enjoyment in watching violent sports programmes. Bryant, Raney, and Zillmann (1998) give three explanations as to why viewers might enjoy watching violent sports. Firstly, watching violent sports may provide viewers with a greater sense of catharsis, meaning the more violent a sports programme is, the more cathartic the experience of watching that programme becomes for the viewer (Bryant, Raney, and Zillmann, 1998). Secondly, violence generally involves one person asserting dominance/control over another person (Bryant, Raney, and Zillmann, 1998). In particular, Bryant, Raney, and Zillmann state that by aligning themselves with the person that asserts dominance, viewers may experience a transgressive sense of satisfaction. The third rationale for why viewers may enjoy violent sports programmes is that violence can heighten the sense of competition. This means, according to Bryant, Raney, and Zillmann, an opponent who is asserting violence over another person mainly shows that she possesses the will to win (1998, pp. 259-260). Bryant, Raney, and Zillmann conclude that there is a direct correlation between violence and viewer enjoyment and argue that this correlation is frequently exploited by television producers (1998, p.261). According to Messner et al. (2000), this is especially true for television

wrestling where “violence makes up the entire fabric of the theatrical narrative” (p. 391). Furthermore, sports viewers not only react strongly to the actual violence that is depicted on screen, but also to the perceived level of violence. This perceived level of violence can be heightened by the play-by-play commentary, which is an integral part of most sports broadcasts (Bryant, Raney, and Zillmann, 1998, p 262).

In many ways, viewers are encouraged to engage with wrestling programmes as if they were watching a regular sports broadcast. For example, the audience is urged to cheer on their favourite wrestlers and they are also allowed to hate wrestlers without reservations. This is a notable difference to other television genres (e.g. soap opera, drama) in which the audience is asked to embrace their ambivalent feelings towards certain characters. As with sports programmes, wrestling viewers are encouraged to express their emotions directly through gestures and chants. However, as a result of wrestling’s narrative clarity (e. g. clear division between babyfaces/heels), the emotional response the performers are able to elicit from the audience is potentially more intense than in most sports programmes. Television wrestling also frequently exploits the viewer’s desire for violence. This becomes particularly obvious with regard to certain match types such as steel cage, no disqualification or TLC (tables, ladders, and chairs) in which the rules are partially suspended so the performers can use a range of weapons to inflict pain upon their opponents. Yet, as with most sports programmes, the violent aspects of wrestling are mainly emphasised by the commentators, who frequently add to the impact of specific moves by pointing out how violent or painful they are. It should be noted that I have deliberately not discussed to what degree the live atmosphere of wrestling programmes, which is another result of the genre’s roots in traditional sports broadcasts, influences viewer engagement. The reason for this is that I am convinced that liveness is such an integral element of how viewers relate to wrestling characters that it needs to be dissected in more detail.

3.3.2 Television Wrestling and Liveness

The term liveness, which previously has been examined by Phillip Auslander (2008) and Stephanie Marriott (2007), is somewhat elusive. In the past, it has been used to analyse television programmes on an aesthetic level, but it also evokes questions regarding time and space. In the context of this study, liveness

provides a theoretical framework to examine to what degree television wrestling's live aesthetic influences viewer engagement. Both Auslander and Marriott state that in comparison with other narrative formats (film in particular), television has often been defined as a live medium. In the early days of the medium, in which live broadcasts of stage plays and sporting events were among the most common television programmes, this might have been a valid claim, but it is much more difficult to uphold this claim in the current media landscape. Although live broadcasts still exist, contemporary television programmes often consist of a mix between live and pre-recorded content. Moreover, as a result of DVRs, streaming platforms, and illegal downloading, modern television viewers are in complete control as to when they want to watch a programme. Consequently, one might argue that in today's media landscape, the idea of liveness has become obsolete.

However, I agree with Marriott (2007), who argues that liveness should not only be viewed as an ontological phenomenon since "[television], after all, frequently performs immediacy in ways which are not ontologically given but which have devolved, rather, from the communicative imperatives of the medium" (p. 52). Marriott here suggests that liveness is primarily tied to ways in which a programme communicates with its viewers. Following this logic, even a recorded version of a programme that had originally been broadcast live still contains a certain level of liveness. In their study on time and reality TV, Misha Kavka and Amy West (2004) also comment on this phenomenon. Kavka and West (2004) state:

> Even in the absence of a direct alignment between the event and its transmission, which is the case for all but the studio transmissions of Reality TV programmes, contemporary factual shows adopt the verbal and visual rhetoric of liveness, while viewers happily participate in this illusion (2005, p. 139).

Although Kavka and West mainly refer to factual television programmes here, their observations also function as an accurate description of contemporary wrestling programmes. Yet, they do not discuss in detail which narrative elements heighten a programme's sense of liveness. In order to clarify this argument, I will briefly discuss what Marriot refers to as markers of liveness.

According to Marriott (2007), television programmes that feature interactive elements (e.g. giving the viewers the possibility to call in and talk to

the host) possess a high level of liveness because there is a direct communication between the programme and the viewers. Marriott states that some television programmes emphasise liveness by displaying text messages sent by the viewers as a scrolling text at the bottom of the screen. According to Marriott, other markers of liveness include a scroll at the top or bottom of the screen that reminds viewers that they are watching a live broadcast. Another crucial aspect of liveness is how the hosts or commentators of a programme address the audience. Marriott (2007) argues that there are notable differences in how commentators analyse events depending on if they refer to past or present events. For example, if a commentator is commenting on an event in the past, the commentary usually lacks a sense of urgency that is characteristic for live commentary (Marriott, 2007, pp. 63-64).

Based on Marriott's (2007) definition of liveness, I argue that contemporary television wrestling is characterised by an abundance of liveness. For example, most WWE programmes include a scroll at the top of the screen that constantly reminds viewers of the fact that they are watching a live broadcast. In addition, almost all WWE shows are filmed in front of a live audience, which further adds to the viewer's sense of liveness. WWE has also recently begun to provide the audience with Twitter hashtags for almost all of their matches. These hashtags are supposed to encourage the audience to discuss the matches on social media. During the matches, a selection of the incoming tweets is televised as a scroll at the bottom of the screen. WWE also often highlights the tweets of their wrestlers. Often these tweets are part of the ongoing storylines. For example, before the start of a match, the commentators often discuss if one or both opponents have commented on the match on Twitter. Yet, there are also instances in which the wrestlers' tweets are not directly connected to the storylines. For example, injured wrestlers often use Twitter to update the fans on the status of their recovery or thank them for their support.

Figure 1 Use of live markers on WWE programming

While the incorporation of social media into their weekly programmes has been a more recent phenomenon, WWE has been emphasising liveness for years—mostly through the use of direct address. For example, the wrestlers typically address the audience directly in their promos (interviews or backstage segments in which a wrestler's personality is promoted to the viewers) and the commentators usually also face the camera when they discuss particular matches or storyline developments.

Despite WWE's extensive use of live markers, there still is a difference between watching a live broadcast and watching a recorded version of the same programme. As Kavka and West (2004) put it, for certain programmes, there is a "zone of liveness" (p. 140). By that, they refer to the fact that while we may record the news, a sports event, or a reality TV programme, after a certain period of time, it becomes unlikely that we watch that programme because it has been "superseded by the next event-made-present" (Kavka and West, 2004, p. 140). WWE seems to be aware of this phenomenon, which is made clear by the company's continuous emphasis of the benefits of liveness for viewer engagement. In particular, the commentators often remind viewers that, instead of watching an event on demand, they need to watch it live because anything could happen. In addition, viewers are frequently reminded that they will only be able to enjoy the interactive elements of the programme (e.g. live tweeting) if they watch live. Referring to Marriott's work (2007), I have argued that watching a recorded version of a live broadcast does not automatically deprive it

of all its immediacy. Rather, the programme's live markers operate in a different context. For example, viewers watching a recording of a wrestling programme might still use the hashtags suggested during the live broadcast to discuss the event on social media although the online conversation might have changed significantly since the programme first aired. Similarly, since the commentary has been recorded during the live broadcast, the programme will have a sense of urgency that would be absent if it had not been recorded live. Liveness is an important aspect of viewer engagement with wrestling characters since the live aesthetic of wrestling programmes is inseparably intertwined with how viewers relate to the programme and its characters. At the same time, it is a somewhat subtle element of viewer engagement with wrestling characters since it does not generate a specific emotional response (e.g. joy, anger, hate) in the viewer. Instead, liveness primarily functions as an amplifier of the viewer's prevalent emotions by adding a sense of immediacy to what is happening on screen. This means the abundance of live markers in contemporary WWE programming first and foremost gets viewers more emotionally involved by continuously signalling that what they are watching 'is happening right now'.

One of the most common markers of liveness in any television genre is the play-by-play commentary. Although live commentary is used in various television genres, it has become synonymous with sports broadcasts. In wrestling programmes, the play-by-play commentary is not only an important narrative device when it comes establishing liveness or a sense of immediacy, but it also guides the viewer's emotional engagement with the characters.

3.3.3 The Role of Wrestling Commentary for Viewer Engagement

Aside from WWE's excessive use of visual live markers, it is primarily the commentary that links television wrestling to regular sports broadcasts. In addition, the commentary positions wrestling as a 'real' sport despite the fact that the outcome of the matches is predetermined. However, adding a sense of realism is not the only function of the commentary. In fact, the commentary in wrestling programmes is a crucial element of the overall narrative framework—primarily since the commentators know where the stories are going. Typically, wrestling commentators act as the intermediaries between the bookers/agents (who decide the outcome of the matches) and the audience, which distinguishes them from traditional sports commentators. Essentially, they add another layer

to the viewer/character relationship since the viewer's impression of the in-ring action is always filtered through the commentary. I have already pointed towards some of the differences between wrestling and sports commentary, but these two forms of voice-over narration are closely related. In their study on sports commentary, Bryant, Comisky, and Zillmann (1977) summarise the role of modern sports commentators as follows:

> The role of the contemporary sports commentator has expanded to include the responsibility of dramatizing the event, of creating suspense, sustaining tension, and enabling viewers to feel that they have participated in an important and fiercely contested event the fate of which was determined only in the climatic closing seconds of play. (p. 150)

It is noteworthy that Bryant, Comisky, and Zillmann (1977) identify dramatizing the events as one of the key responsibilities of a sports commentator since it implies that, even when they are watching a non-fictional event, viewers seem to expect a certain level of fictionalisation. This means sports commentators are largely responsible for turning a regular sporting event into a dramatic battle (Bryant, Comisky, and Zillmann, 1977). In addition, Bill Nichols (1991) has identified guiding the viewer's comprehension of the events as a key element of most types of commentary (p. 29). As Nichols (1991) states in his discussion of news programmes, "the argument will usually identify the important characters or forces involved and briefly indicate what kind of narrative-like event they contribute to" (p. 129). David Sullivan (1991) has studied this aspect of voice-over-narration in the context of sports broadcasts. He argues that sports commentators use a set of descriptive narrative modes (objective, judgmental, and historical) to tell a game's story (Sullivan, 1991, p. 488). According to Sullivan, in the objective mode, sports commentators complement the visual presentation by describing to the viewer what is happening on screen. In the judgemental mode, the commentators assign motivations to players and/or teams whereas in the historical mode they provide the viewer with biographical information about the players (Sullivan, 1991). Sullivan (1991) argues that these three modes blend together in the commentators' dramatization of an event (p. 488). In their study of sports commentaries, Bryant and Zillmann (2011) make clear study what it means exactly to dramatize an event through commentary. Based on their empirical work, they claim that the commentary of sports

broadcasts has the potential to significantly alter the viewer's perception of the events (Bryant and Zillmann, p. 202). For example, they have noticed that sports viewers who, guided by the commentary, believed that the opponents were "hated foes, rather than good friends" enjoyed the game more (Bryant and Zillmann, p. 203). Furthermore, "other indices of entertainment" (Bryant and Zillmann, p.203) such as "excitement, involvement, and interest" (p.203) were also significantly higher for those viewers who, based on the commentary, perceived the competition as more violent.

As previously indicated, the commentary in television wrestling fulfils some of the same functions as the commentary in sports broadcasts, yet it is not the same. Similar to regular sports announcers, wrestling commentators use different descriptive narrative modes. For example, they explain wrestling moves or holds to the audience (objective mode), comment on a wrestler's in-ring abilities (judgemental mode), and provide the viewer with information about a wrestler's past matches (historical mode). In wrestling, these different narrative modes are often divided between commentators. Typically, one commentator does the play-by-play commentary (which mostly corresponds to the objective mode) while either one or two other commentators add 'colour' (as it is referred to by wrestling experts) to the overall commentary. Adding colour may include anything from providing judgemental observations, making jokes or giving historical information. Often one objective commentator (who is usually responsible for the play-by-play commentary) is coupled with a heel and a babyface sidekick. Contemporary wrestling commentators usually perform their roles with more subtlety than in the past, yet it is remarkable that, aside from this fine-tuning, the basic model for wrestling commentary has not changed significantly over the years. For example, WWE still uses this format for most of their weekly television shows and their monthly pay-per-view events. Wrestling commentators typically highlight violence more than the commentators of regular sports programmes. For example, Messner et al. (2000) observe that wrestling commentators tend to highlight the performer's toughness and aggressive behaviour more than the commentators of sports broadcasts (p. 386). In addition, while sports commentators often use military jargon, this is more pronounced in wrestling programmes (Messner et al., 2000). To illustrate their argument, the authors point to WWE's flagship television show *Monday Night RAW*. According to Messner et al. (2000), the programme goes beyond the use of

war terminology of other sports broadcasts by offering its viewers a “continual flow of images and commentary that [reminds] the viewers that ‘RAW is WAR!’” (p. 389). The authors conclude that whereas in other sports broadcasts (e.g. basketball, football) violence is only one aspect of the commentary, it “makes up the entire fabric of the theatrical narrative of televised pro wrestling” (Messner et al., p. 391).

Based on this investigation of various studies on sports commentary, one might assume that the commentary in wrestling programmes largely represents an amplified version of regular sports commentary. And, while wrestling commentary somewhat functions as a spectacular form of sports commentary, this definition fails to acknowledge its central role within the overall narrative framework. One of the most distinct aspects of wrestling commentary is how the commentators dramatise the events. This is only logical, given that wrestling not only resembles sports broadcasts, but various other television genres such as scripted reality television and soap operas. Morton and O’Brien (1985) define the role of the wrestling commentator as follows:

> In Greek drama, the chorus was the vehicle through which the audience experienced the drama. The chorus gave the audience the knowledge they needed to fully comprehend the nature of the conflicts in the specific play. Also, the chorus gave insight into how the audience should react to certain situations. In essence the audience experienced the drama vicariously through the chorus. The wrestling commentator does just this for the professional wrestling fan. (p. 122)

Bryant, Comisky, and Zillmann (1977) have previously recognised that dramatizing the events is one of the key responsibilities of a sports commentator, but Morton and O’Brien’s definition of the role of a wrestling commentator goes beyond that. For example, they specifically link television wrestling to Greek drama and make clear that wrestling commentators are a substantial element of how viewers engage with the narrative and its characters. Morton and O’Brien (1985) further elaborate on their definition of the role of the wrestling commentator by discussing the work of Gordon Solie. Apart from pointing out that Solie fulfils the typical responsibilities of a sports commentator, they describe Solie’s commentary as follows:

> [Solie] tells us all we need to know to comprehend the drama taking place and to react to it. He tells us the reputations of the wrestlers and why they are combatting each other with such ferocity. He tells us about their families and their lives so that they become fully developed characters for us, not mere representations in the ring of some allegorical virtues or vices. When necessary to explain the conflict he shows films of recent matches so that our frame of reference is complete for us to understand the nature of a specific conflict. (Morton and O'Brien, p. 122)

This description sounds similar to what sports commentators do in general, but it takes on a different meaning in the context of wrestling—primarily because wrestling is fiction. Unlike regular sports commentators, who dramatize events of which they do not know the outcome, wrestling commentators know the winners of the matches in advance. Often, they do not only know the outcome of the single matches, but they are also aware of some of the future plot developments. A direct result of their awareness of future plot developments is that wrestling commentators can provide a more focused dramatization.

The WWE championship match between The Rock and Mankind that took place on *WWE Monday Night RAW* in January 1999 is a good example for this type of focused dramatization ('Episode #7.1'). I will focus on Mick Foley as a wrestling character in more detail later on in this chapter, but, at this point, it is only important to know that the match marked a milestone in Foley's career since it was the first time that he became the WWE champion. Of course, the commentators knew that Foley would win the match and this is directly reflected in the commentary. In particular, the babyface commentator Michael Cole builds a narrative around Foley's win. When Foley enters the ring, Cole introduces him as follows:

> And here's Mankind, Mick Foley . . .who played Cowboys and Indians as a kid. And he said he's always the Indian because he stood up for the underdog. And that's what he is in this matchup: an underdog. ('Episode #7.1')

Cole continues to develop this narrative throughout the match. He plays up Foley's role as the underdog, emphasises how much punishment he has taken over the course of his career, and points out that "Mankind's greatest attribute is his heart" ('Episode #7.1'). Meanwhile, Jerry Lawler, the heel commentator, pretends to be shocked at the prospect of Foley becoming the WWE champion. Lawler remarks that it would be a disgrace for the whole company if Mankind

would win the title. In addition, in the course of the match, Lawler refers to Foley as a freak, states that he is ugly, and calls him an idiot (‘Episode #7.1’). The commentators pay significantly less attention to Foley’s opponent. Basically, they only occasionally refer to The Rock to highlight the character’s persona. For example, they comment on his impressive in-ring skills, acknowledge his athleticism, and remark that he is rich and good-looking (‘Episode #7.1’). Yet, to some degree even these comments about The Rock feed into the narrative of Foley winning the title since they emphasise that he will have to overcome a number of physical disadvantages in order to beat The Rock. In the end, Foley wins the match with the help of Steve Austin. Lawler seemingly cannot believe that Mankind has succeeded and Cole is screaming at the top of his lungs as he informs the viewers that Mankind’s dream has finally come true (‘Episode #7.1’).

Figure 2 Mick Foley's title win on *Monday Night Raw*

He frames Mankind’s championship win as the crowning achievement of Foley’s career. As he puts it in the commentary:

> [Foley’s] come a long way since sleeping on the floors of Motel 6-es, from sleeping in his Ford Fairmont, learning to wrestle. He’s been known as Dude Love, Cactus Jack, Mankind. But tonight, and forever, Mick Foley will simply be known as WWF champion. (‘Episode #7.1’)

As this analysis indicates, wrestling commentators may use the same vernacular as sports commentators, but they only do so in order to create a sense of realism

while telling scripted stories more resemble television soap operas than sports programmes. In a recent interview (Shoemaker, 2014), Jim Ross, one of the most renowned wrestling commentators of all time, described modern wrestling commentary as follows:

> Today's trend in wrestling seems to be more narratives. A lot of the subtle, fine points of the art form, of applying holds and focusing on a body part and why are they doing something and what could this be leading to, are often ignored. But if you have movement on screen and you're talking about something else, there's a disconnect . . . I always wanted to create the ability to suspend the viewer's disbelief and get lost in the process of what these great athletes are doing. (Shoemaker, 2014)

Despite the fact that Ross is critical about the current state of wrestling commentary, his comments also further underline the commentary in television wrestling differs from regular sports commentary. Not only do wrestling commentators identify heroes and villains for the audience, provide the viewer with biographical information about each opponent, and comment on the action in the ring, but they also tell a scripted story. Thus, the commentary in wrestling programmes is geared towards moving plotlines forward. This means the information the commentators provide the audience with is almost at all times influenced by how a specific story or feud will develop in the future.

Again, the previously discussed championship match from *Monday Night RAW* provides a good example for this practice. Since the commentators know that Foley will win, they focus on him during the entire match and encourage viewers to engage with him. On a broader level, the main storyline of *RAW* as an episode of serialised television is that, against all odds, Mick Foley triumphantly wins the WWE championship. Thus, the commentators do not only focus on Foley during his match against The Rock, but they mention him throughout the episode to ensure that his dramatic title win at the end of the episode has maximum emotional impact ('Episode #7.1').

As this analysis has shown, wrestling commentators are an essential element of the viewer/character relationship in television wrestling. To some degree, wrestling commentary can be regarded as an amplified version of sports commentary. In particular, similar to sports commentators, wrestling commentators emphasise competition, establish wrestlers as heroes or villains, and stress the most violent aspects of the performances to get viewers more

emotionally invested. Yet, when it comes to the dramatization of the events on screen, wrestling commentary differs significantly from sports broadcasts. The main reason for this is that wrestling is a form of serialised fiction. Wrestling commentators do not only dramatise the events, but they act as intermediaries between the writers and the viewers. Thus, they are a key element of the entire narrative framework. For example, they partially set up rivalries between the characters, they are responsible for presenting wrestlers in a certain way (depending on what the current story demands), and they often plant the seeds for heel or babyface 'turns' (wrestlers changing from a good guy into a bad guy and vice versa) far in advance.

3.3.4 Television Wrestling and Emotional Realism

As I have discussed earlier in this chapter, wrestling can be viewed as a masculine soap opera. In fact, when taking a closer look at the weekly plotlines in WWE programmes, the similarities between wrestling and soap operas become almost undeniable. Although some scholars (e.g. Jenkins, 2005) have acknowledged the similarities between WWE programming and soap operas, there are barely any works that analyse to what degree the genre's 'soapy-ness' affects the viewer's relationship with the characters. In her work on *Dallas* (1978 - 1991), Ien Ang (1985) examines viewer engagement with soap opera characters in detail. As I have noted in chapter two, a key concept of Ang's work is emotional realism. While I have already briefly discussed emotional realism in chapter two, I want to elaborate on the term here since it directly relates to how viewers relate to wrestling characters on an emotional level. Emotional realism is tied to Ang's (1985) discovery that viewers respond to *Dallas* on at least two different levels. On a denotative level, they realise that *Dallas* is fictional, but, on connotative level, they praise the show for its resemblance of humanity (Ang, 1985, p. 42). Ang states that, although the audience knows that they enter a fictional world when they watch *Dallas*, they still feel most drawn to the realistic elements of that fictional world. The fictional world of *Dallas* is highly stylised and displays an excess of luxury, which invites the question as to what the realistic elements of *Dallas* actually are. According to Ang, the answer to this question relates to the emotions depicted on the show. More specifically, viewers interpret the heightened dramatic situations that are depicted on *Dallas* as symbolic for more general living conditions (Ang, 1985, pp. 44-45). As Ang

(1985) puts it, “what is recognized as real is not knowledge of the world, but a subjective experience of the world: ‘a structure of feeling’” (p. 45). This means, although viewers recognise the fictional world of *Dallas* as exaggerated, they still regard the feelings that are conveyed as real. Thus, Dallas can be seen as a combination of “external unrealism” (Ang, 1985, p. 47) and “inner realism” (p. 47).

I argue that viewer engagement in television wrestling functions similarly. Like *Dallas*, or soap operas in general, WWE programmes invite viewers into a carnivalesque fictional world and offer them a spectacle of excess. Furthermore, wrestling programmes also combine external unrealism with inner realism. For example, in the world of wrestling, external unrealism refers to the simple, larger-than-life characters, the performers’ exaggerated gestures and movements, and the highly stylised fashion. In contrast, inner realism refers to the stories that television wrestling tells. According to Jenkins (2005), the stories in pro wrestling are “ongoing narratives of professional ambition, personal suffering, friendship and alliance, betrayal and reversal of fortune” (p. 34). Yet, wrestling not only engages viewers on an emotional level as a result of its emotional realism. Instead, by combining soap opera-esque storylines with real athletic performances, wrestling programmes add another layer to the viewer’s emotional engagement with the characters that is primarily based on the tension between reality and fiction.

According to Sharon Mazer (2005), the tension between the fake and the real is largely what creates excitement in wrestling viewers (p. 68). As Mazer (2005) claims, “the pleasure for wrestlers and spectators alike may be found in the expressive tension between the spontaneous and the rehearsed, in the anticipation of, and acute desire for, the moment when the real breaks through the pretended” (p. 68).[11] This means wrestling fans not only react to the intended emotional realism of wrestling storylines, but they find emotional catharsis in those elements of a wrestling performance that they consider real. In other words, any time the viewers perceive a wrestling move as real, it has an influence on their emotional engagement. Yet, the viewer’s emotional response is also related to the nature of the move. For example, if it looks as if a wrestler

[11] It should be noted that this idea of the real breaking through a staged performance has been acknowledged previously in studies on television performance and reality television (e.g Lury; Roscoe; Holmes).

has injured himself, viewers might become concerned or experience feelings of anxiety. In contrast, viewers might experience joy and excitement if a wrestling move is particularly well executed. Of course, many wrestling performers have noticed the impact of perceived reality on viewer engagement and have adjusted their performances accordingly. In fact, Mazer (2005) implies that the fans' longing to experience something real within staged wrestling performances has led to the popularity of hard-core wrestling. This style of wrestling is typically more violent and often involves actual bloodshed since the performers are allowed to use so-called 'foreign objects' (e.g. chairs, tables, thumbtacks, kendo sticks, baseball bats).

Figure 3 Mick Foley performing as Cactus Jack in 2004

Among others, Mick Foley has become famous for his realistic and emotionally-engaging wrestling performances. In the course of his career, Foley has wrestled for a variety of wrestling promotions including WCW, ECW, and WWE. He has been active from the early nineteen eighties until 2013. A key aspect of Foley's success as a wrestler and his ongoing popularity among fans has been his determination to make his wrestling performances as realistic as possible. For example, Foley was known for frequently taking dangerous 'bumps' (falls from great height), getting hit over the head with variety of objects, and letting himself get body-slammed onto objects such as steel chairs or thumbtacks. This

high-risk performance style resulted in Foley suffering from various injuries over the course of his career, one of which forced him to retire in 2013.

Foley's high-risk performance style also gained him the favour of the fans and resulted in speculations that his matches were not scripted. This is exemplified in the viewer response to 'King of the Ring 1998', a pay-per-view event that featured a steel cage match between Foley and The Undertaker. During this match, which has since become one of the most famous wrestling matches of all time, Foley took two dangerous falls from the top of the steel cage and let himself get body-slammed into hundreds of thumbtacks. The viewer reaction to this match is closely tied to Mazer's arguments on how the perceived reality within a wrestling performance can intensify viewer engagement. For example, user steel77 describes her experience of watching 'King of the Ring 1998' as follows: "I won't lie. If it was ever 'real' to me, it was the day I saw this happen. I honestly thought Foley was dead" (Featherstone, 2018). The same user claims that the Foley/Undertaker match even affected her experience of future wrestling matches by stating that "wrestling was 'real' to me for a long time after" (Featherstone, 2018). Meanwhile, another viewer praises Foley's performance by arguing that "no human can fake what just happened" (Fox, 2018). Of course, the outcome of Foley's matches was as pre-determined as the outcome of any other wrestling match, but it is still remarkable that many viewers would specifically comment on the realism within Foley's performance.

As Mazer (2005) points out, the interplay between reality and fiction even has an effect on the emotional engagement of those viewers who are well aware of the fact that wrestling matches are scripted. Mazer notes that dedicated wrestling fans often revel in exposing the fakery of wrestling. For example, they often analyse wrestling matches meticulously in order to be able to point out which elements of the performance are scripted and which elements are improvised. At the same time, fans want to suspend their disbelief while watching wrestling because they are yearning for the illusion to be real (Mazer, 2005, p. 82). As Mazer (2005) puts it, "the phantom of the real is at the heart of pro wrestling's appeal. It keeps the fans coming back for another look, keeps them reading into and through performances and predicting future events for each other" (p. 82). Referring again to Mick Foley and similar performers, it is this "phantom of the real" which gives their performances and added layer of

meaning and enables viewers to engage with their performances on a different emotional level.

3.3.5 From WWE Attitude to the Reality Era

From the mid-nineteen nineties until today, wrestling programmes have become increasingly realistic. This trend has led to critics and fans referring to the current era of wrestling as the 'reality era'. I believe that this move towards more realism is not a coincidence, but works to intensify the viewer's engagement with wrestling characters. To a certain extent, the reality era is rooted in cultural changes since many of the storylines and gimmicks that had been popular decades ago would simply seem out of place in the current media landscape. Yet, cultural changes alone do not explain the evolution from the hyperbolic nineteen eighties to the raunchy attitude era of the nineteen nineties to today's comparatively nuanced reality era. One of the main reasons for the slow but steady shift in television wrestling's narrative setup is that once wrestling promoters had realised that "the phantom of the real is at the heart of pro wrestling's appeal," (Mazer, 2005, p. 82) they adjusted their programmes to make them more realistic. However, I am not arguing that an increased level of realism is the most important element of viewer engagement with contemporary wrestling characters. Rather, I am well aware that, even in the reality era, the viewer's craving for spectacle remains one of television wrestling's main appeals. Thus, I argue that beyond their fascination with spectacle, viewers also get emotionally invested in wrestling characters and storylines as a result of the genre's constant oscillation between reality and fiction.

The tension between reality and fiction has always been an integral part of pro wrestling's appeal, but the origin of that tension has shifted throughout the history of wrestling. For example, from the nineteen fifties until the nineteen eighties it has primarily revolved around one question: Is wrestling a legitimate sport or a form of performance art? Today it is difficult to imagine how concerned promoters used to be about upholding the image of wrestling as a legitimate sport. Even up until the late nineteen seventies, promoters were afraid that they would lose their audience if the 'fakery' of wrestling was exposed. In fact, the promoters were so concerned that most wrestling promotions had strict rules in place to protect pro-wrestling's biggest secret. For example, some promoters forbade babyface wrestlers to socialise with heels

outside of the ring while others expected wrestlers to stay in character anytime they made a public appearance—simply to uphold the illusion that the in-ring fights were real. In an interview on *The Ross Report* (Ross, 2017) wrestling legend Paul Ellering talks in more detail about the seriousness with which promoters tried to hide the fact that wrestling matches are staged. In the nineteen eighties, after a number of investigative reports and television documentaries had confirmed that the outcome of pro wrestling matches is predetermined, the dynamic between viewers and wrestling programmes changed. A small percentage of the audience still insisted that wrestling was a legitimate sport whereas the so-called smart fans accepted that wrestling programme were as much a work of fiction as any daytime soap opera or drama series. Nevertheless, even viewers who accepted wrestling as a form of serialised fiction would still gravitate towards those aspects of a wrestling performance that they considered most realistic—the underlying logic being that while the outcome of the matches was predetermined, the athletic performances were still real. Starting in the mid nineteen nineties, the plotlines of wrestling programmes increasingly blurred the line between fact and fiction. The idea behind this new storytelling strategy was to re-emphasise wrestling's inherent tension between fact and fiction. In particular, wrestling programmes tried to get viewers emotionally invested by making them wonder about the extent to which what they saw on screen was fictional. Although it is difficult to point to one specific plotline that started this trend, there are a few plotlines that stand out for their realistic approach to wrestling storytelling.

The NWO (New World Order) storyline, which put WCW ahead in the ratings war with WWE and is widely considered one of the most successful storylines in the history of pro wrestling, mainly generated viewer interest by blurring the line between fact and fiction. The plotline was orchestrated by Eric Bischoff (WCW's head of creative at the time) and involved a heel formation invading the WCW with the goal to defeat every babyface and take over the whole company. At the core of the NWO storyline were the Outsiders, a heel tag-team that consisted of Scott Hall and Kevin Nash, both of whom had been big WWE stars in the past. The NWO story began with Hall showing up at WCW's prime time show *Nitro* (1995 – 2001), implying that he had been sent over by WWE to invade the WCW (in reality, Hall had just signed a contract with WCW). Yet, apart from changing his name and a slight change of appearance, Hall still

portrayed Razor Ramon—the character that had made him famous in WWE: He spotted the same hairstyle and spoke with the same cadence as Razor, and kept a toothpick in his mouth at all times, which had been a trademark of his WWE character. By doing so, WCW created the illusion that WWE had sent over one of their employees to invade their main competitor. In fact, the similarities between the two characters were so obvious that WWE sued WCW for trademark infringement. WWE claimed that their rival company was using a character that had been created in WWE to deliberately mislead viewers into thinking that Hall was still employed with WWE ('The Rise of the NWO'). One week after Hall's first appearance, Kevin Nash showed up on Nitro and proclaimed that he and Hall would bring down WCW together. Like Hall, he also insinuated that he was sent over from WWE to destroy WCW. The presentation of the NWO storyline further added to its sense of realism. For example, during their first appearances, the Outsiders were shown sitting among the audience, eating popcorn and enjoying soft drinks. Typically, at some point of the show, they would climb over the barricade, enter the ring, and beat up random WCW wrestlers. In addition, The Outsiders bullied the commentators and broke into the production trailers to taunt the helpless technicians. Although all of the NWO's attacks were represented in a realistic manner, one instance stands out.

Figure 4 Medical staff attending to the wrestlers after the NWO's attack

Arguably, the *Monday Nitro* episode ('Episode #1.46', 1996) that originally aired on July 29th, 1996 featured the NWO's most vicious and most realistic attack.

The attack begins when manager Jimmy Hart interrupts a six-man tag team match and tells everyone involved in the match to follow him backstage. The programme then cuts to a chaotic backstage brawl in a parking lot that has the Outsiders beating up other wrestlers with a baseball bat (‘Episode #1.46’). In the course of the fight, fan-favourite Rey Mysterio (Óscar Gutiérrez Rubio) shows up on the steps of one of the crew’s trailers. He climbs on the guardrail and jumps at Nash, who simply catches him in mid-air and throws him against the side of the trailer. Soon after, the Outsiders drive away in a limousine while the Macho Man (Randy Poffo) is holding on to the top of the car. After the limousine has left, the camera pans around the backstage area and reveals that a number of WCW superstars are rolling around on the floor in pain (‘Episode #1.46’). The episode spends a remarkable ten minutes to depict the aftermath of the attack. Viewers are shown shaky camera images of wrestlers trying to help each other, security personal attempting to secure the scene, and paramedics putting neck braces on wrestlers and loading them onto stretchers. (‘Episode #1.46’). In addition, the commentators stress the seriousness of the situation and apologise to the viewers at home for the shocking imagery. (‘Episode #1.46’). They also stress that they do not know if and how the show will continue and explain that what has happened here goes beyond the animosities some of the wrestlers might have had in the ring (‘Episode #1.46’).

Today it is normal for wrestling programmes to present their storylines in a realistic manner, but when this episode of *Nitro* originally aired, this was a completely new approach to wrestling storytelling. Eric Bischoff states that the NWO plotline was the direct result of him trying to do the opposite of what WWE was doing at the time. In particular, since many WWE characters had outlandish gimmicks and the plotlines in WWE often contained elements of horror and fantasy, Bischoff decided to make his own characters and stories as realistic as possible (‘The Rise of the NWO’). As Bischoff (2014) notes: “There were enough unique elements within Nitro where even the most jaded fan went, ‘You know, I know the rest of that stuff’s all scripted, but that wasn’t supposed to happen’” (‘The Rise of the NWO’). In addition, Bischoff states that up to the mid-nineties, most of the matches in pro wrestling took place inside the arena. Thus, simply extending the fights to the backstage area peaked the viewers’ interest and made them doubt whether or not what they were watching was a staged performance (‘The Rise of the NWO’, 2014). Bischoff (2014) argues that simply

by taking the fans backstage, he "achieved that sense of 'Whoa, wait a minute. I've never seen that before, therefore it must be real'" ('The Rise of the NWO'). According to Kevin Nash (2014), the high level of violence the NWO brought to the weekly WCW shows further added to the perceived reality of this plotline ('The Rise of the NWO'). In fact, when the previously discussed backstage attack first aired, it was so convincing that viewers in the surrounding Orlando area called the police to inform them about a gang attack. Moreover, the day after the programme originally aired, Disney (who were involved in producing Nitro) contacted WCW to make sure that nobody got hurt because they had heard that a 'real' wrestling match had been taking place at *Nitro* the night before ('The Rise of the NWO').

My extended analysis of the NWO plotline highlights that blurring the line between fact and fiction can intensify the viewer's emotional engagement with wrestling programmes and the characters featured on these programmes. Former WWE superstar Cody Rhodes (Cody Runnels) comments on this element of viewer engagement by stating that not knowing to what degree the storylines were fictional added a sense of excitement to watching *Nitro* ('The Rise of the NWO'). Meanwhile, ex-WCW star Lex Luger (Lawrence Phohl) goes so far as to compare the NWO storyline to modern reality television programmes. In particular, Luger refers to the storyline as "a precursor for how perceived reality can create a tremendous interest" ('The Rise of the NWO'). In contemporary television wrestling, the trend towards realistic characters and storylines is stronger than ever before. Today, the tension between reality and fiction is not only prevalent in the characters the wrestlers portray but also in the wrestling performances and in the stories that wrestling programmes tell.

Exploring how perceived reality affects the ways in which viewers relate to wrestling characters on an emotional level is a crucial aspect of the study of viewer engagement—especially since the influence of perceived reality is not closely tied to a specific cognitive or emotional response. My study of television wrestling suggests that perceived reality acts like an amplifier of the viewer's already existing emotions. For example, if a viewer would watch the previously discussed episode of *Monday Nitro* today, she might experience feelings of anger and frustration, but these feelings are likely to be less intense than when the programme originally aired. The main reason for this is that there is no

ambiguity about the degree to which the events that take place in the episode are real or scripted.

Instead, since modern viewers are more accustomed to programmes that blend reality and fiction, the audience is likely to assume that everything they see is part of a staged performance. Thus, one might argue that perceived reality does not factor into viewer engagement with characters from modern wrestling programmes. Yet, I believe that thinking along those lines simplifies viewer engagement with wrestling characters. Moreover, as I have discussed earlier in this chapter, viewers still respond emotionally to the perceived reality within staged a wrestling performance since they are yearning for the illusion to be real. Kavka (2005) notes with regard to reality TV that "the appeal of reality TV lies precisely in its performance of reality in a way that *matters*" (2005, p. 94). I believe that this is also true for television wrestling. In particular, according to Kavka (2005, p.95), when it comes to how viewers respond to a programme on an emotional level, it is not primarily important if that programme portrays something that is 'real'. Rather, the viewer's emotional response to a programme is shaped by how realistic the events are rendered within. Ultimately, television wrestling mixes fact and fiction on multiple levels (performance, visual presentation, plot) in order to intensify character engagement. In this section, I have mainly discussed the NWO storyline to make clear how presenting a scripted plotline in a realistic way can add a sense of immediacy to the viewer's engagement with wrestling characters.

Yet, it should be noted that WWE also often mixes reality and fiction in subtle ways. A good example for this are the weekly superstar promos/interviews during which the wrestlers often add real information to the scripted plotlines in order to make their appearances more emotionally spectacular (see Kavka, 2005, p. 94). For example, it is effective storytelling when Daniel Bryan (Bryan Danielson) tells the fans that Vince McMahon never gave him a chance because there had been rumours for years that McMahon did in fact not believe that Bryan had superstar potential. Similarly, when Kevin Owens (Kevin Steen) insults John Cena by telling him that his superman routine is getting old, that he only uses stock answers in his interviews, and that viewers are sick and tired of seeing him opening *Monday Night RAW*, it works because these insults are based on actual frustrations that viewers have voiced about John Cena.

3.3.6 Long-term Viewer Engagement with Wrestling Characters

Despite the fact that wrestling programmes have often been linked to the soap opera, a genre that is famous for its prolonged storylines, there are no studies that examine long-term viewer engagement with wrestling characters. This is somewhat surprising, especially considering that most wrestlers are active for decades, which means they are involved in a wide range of storylines over the years. Robert Blanchet and Margrethe Bruun Vaage (2012) have previously investigated the effects of long-term engagement with television characters. Blanchet and Vaage (2012) argue that the viewer's strong emotional response to television programmes is often not the result of their universal themes or their expertly crafted narratives but can be traced back to the viewer's long-term engagement with the characters. For example, simply being exposed to a character for an extended period of time can increase the viewer's interest in, or liking of a character, a phenomenon that Blanchet and Vaage (2012) refer to as the "familiarity or exposure effect" (p. 22). In addition, Blanchet and Vaage (2012) argue that viewers feel emotionally connected to television characters as a result of "the shared history account" (28). Following this theoretical concept, viewers feel connected to television characters simply based on the time they have spent with them (Blanchet and Vaage, 2012, p. 28). The shared history account defines an aspect of viewer engagement with television characters that cannot be simply described with empathy or sympathy since the audience might also experience these feelings towards strangers. In contrast, the shared history account recognises the longer screen duration of a television series and takes into consideration that television series progress alongside viewers' lives (Blanchet and Vaage, 2012, p. 28). This means while the audience might not necessarily feel sympathetic towards a certain character, they might at least feel somewhat favourable towards them as a result of the history they share with them. (Blanchet and Vaage, 2012).

Blanchet and Vaage (2012) further argue that long-term engagement with television characters enables television programmes to employ unique storytelling techniques such as "instant intensity" (p. 32) and "surprise by familiarity" (p. 34). Instant intensity means that television programmes can create emotionally intense situations at any given point in the story because the viewers are already familiar with the characters and their relationships

(Blanchet and Vaage, 2012, p. 33) By contrast, films (if they are not part of an ongoing series) have to establish the characters and their relationships within a self-enclosed narrative. This is a different engagement process since the viewer does not have the chance to spent an extended period of time with the characters and get to know them (Blanchet and Vaage, 2012, p. 33). Surprise, or surprise through familiarity, means that television narratives can create emotionally affecting situations by subverting those viewer expectations that are primarily based on the viewer's familiarity with the characters and the programme (Blanchet and Vaage, 2012, p. 34). For example, if a character's behaviour suddenly changes from what has been established as her normal behaviour over the course of multiple seasons, then this can lead to an intense emotional response on the viewer's side (Blanchet and Vaage, 2012, p. 34). While Blanchet and Vaage's (2012) theory on long-term viewer engagement focuses on contemporary television dramas, I believe that it can also applied to television wrestling. As previously discussed, the ways in which wrestling storylines are structured is in many ways similar to soap operas. For example, soaps explore topics such as love, friendship, loyalty, and betrayal through the relationships between the characters. The same is true for wrestling, but wrestling programmes typically explore these themes through matches and out-of-the-ring segments (e.g. interviews, backstage encounters, promos) that have been designed to build up the rivalries between the wrestlers.

The main event of 'WCW Bash at the Beach 1996' primarily relies on the viewer's long-term engagement with Hulk Hogan (Terry Bolea) to increase emotional impact. The match was billed as a tag-team match between the villainous Outsiders (Kevin Nash, Scott Hall, and a mystery partner) and a team of babyfaces consisting of Randy 'Macho Man' Savage, Sting (Steve Borden), and Lex Luger. At the end of the match, Hulk Hogan runs to the ring, presumably to help the babyface team. However, instead of helping the good guys, Hogan surprisingly attacks Savage and with that reveals that he is the third member of the Outsiders ('WCW Bash at the Beach 1996').

In pro wrestling, babyfaces frequently turn into heels (and vice versa). Yet Hogan's heel-turn is remarkable for how it utilises the long-term viewer engagement to elicit an intense emotional response. It should be noted that that up until 'WCW Bash at the Beach 1996', Hogan had been one of the major good guys in the wrestling industry. For decades, the character defended America

against foreign invaders in the ring while reminding his fans, the so-called ‘Hulkamaniacs’, to “eat their vitamins and say their prayers”.

Figure 5 Terry Bollea’s transformation from ‘Hulk’ to ‘Hollywood’ Hogan

When looking at viewer responses to Hogan’s heel turn, it immediately becomes clear that many viewers responded strongly to this plotline as a result of their long-term engagement with Hogan. For example, one Reddit user states that “adults wanted to fight Hogan over his betrayal” and claims that “when Hogan leg-dropped Macho Man, it shattered the innocence for many children (and even some adults) (‘Twenty Years Ago’, 2016). Meanwhile, another user in the same thread points even more specifically to her long-term engagement with Hogan when she recounts the experience of watching ‘WCW Bash at the Beach 1996’:

> I was 21 at the time so I grew up in the 80s with Hogan telling me to take my vitamins, say a prayer, and believe in yourself…the betrayal felt personal to me. My reaction was ‘HOW COULD YOU???’ I would imagine younger kids across America who felt the same way tore down Hulk Hogan posters. It wouldn’t shock me if someone out there burned Hulk Hogan in effigy. (‘Twenty Years Ago’, 2016)

Based on the success that the Hulk Hogan character enjoyed over the years, it is safe to assume that most viewers were not expecting that WCW would turn him into a heel. Arguably, Hogan’s heel-turn makes full use of the viewer’s shared history and familiarity with the character. Over the years, viewers have watched Hogan fight and beat countless bad guys while their own lives have progressed alongside Hogan’s fictional life. At ‘WCW Bash at the Beach 1996’, by joining the NWO and insulting his fans in the post-match interview, Hogan completely subverted a character he had developed for decades. His transformation into the

villainous Hollywood Hogan is a prime example for surprise through familiarity since it employs the audience's familiarity with Hogan to elicit an intense emotional reaction.

3.4 Conclusion

Wrestling programmes do not adhere to any existing television genre. Instead, they adopt a number of narrative characteristics from various genres and reinterpret them in the context of pro wrestling. This does not only make wrestling an intriguing mix of different genres, but it directly affects the viewer's relationship with the characters. More specifically, any time viewers engage with wrestling characters, they rely on engagement patterns from a variety of television genres. As I have argued throughout this chapter, the viewer/character relationship in television wrestling is characterised by the emotional clarity of sports programmes, the emotional realism of soap operas, and the ambiguity of reality TV. My analysis in this chapter has also shown that viewer engagement with wrestling characters is defined by a high degree of intensity. Wrestling programmes intensify viewer engagement by employing an abundance of live markers, enhancing the viewer's sense of perceived reality, and utilising the viewer's long-term engagement with the characters. In particular, as I have emphasised in my discussion of Mick Foley's title win on *Monday Night RAW*, the commentary plays a central role when it comes to creating a sense of liveness and maximising the emotional impact of the stories that are told in the ring. Moreover, the commentators constantly re-establish the characters, remind the audience of the emotional stakes, and guide the viewer's understanding of past and future plot developments. In contrast, it is largely the responsibility of the writers to create plotlines that utilise the viewer's long-term engagement with the characters. As I have indicated in my discussion of Hulk Hogan's heel turn, wrestling plotlines that seek to engage viewers based on their familiarity with the characters often include a popular wrestler turning from babyface to heel (or vice versa). Yet, there are other narrative situations that rely on the viewer's familiarity with the characters. For example, these include a wrestler winning a championship title after an extended period of time or two wrestlers ending a rivalry on a mutual showing of respect.

Perhaps the most complicated element of viewer engagement with wrestling characters is perceived reality. The main reason for this is that, to some extent, all wrestling performances are realistic since the athletic performances that lie at the core of the scripted wrestling matches are real. However, the viewer's perceived level of reality can be further enhanced by storylines that blur the line between reality and fiction (e.g. NWO storyline), hyper-realistic wrestling performances (e.g. Mick Foley), and match types that highlight the most realistic elements of wrestling (e.g. hard-core matches, street fights). In the broader context of this research project, wrestling programmes provide a unique case study since they utilise models of character engagement from various television genres (e.g. sports, soap opera, scripted reality TV) to amplify the viewer's emotional engagement with the characters.

Over the course of this chapter, I have argued that part of the appeal of wrestling heels is that they provide viewers with an outlet for their negative emotions. For example, most heel types (e.g. foreign invader, evil businessman) have been specifically designed to offend viewers. In addition, heels often insult the audience and typically win their matches by breaking the rules. The next chapter focuses on viewer antipathy in contemporary television drama. And while there are some similarities between viewer antipathy in wrestling and drama[12], hating a character from a television drama is distinct from hating a wrestling heel as a result of the different narrative context. In particular, hating a heel is largely the result of the emotional clarity of the stories that television wrestling tells. Moreover, in television wrestling, viewer antipathy is closely tied to the genre's inherent sense of immediacy. In contrast, hating a character from contemporary television drama has the potential to be a more nuanced cognitive process since, in this genre, the characters and the storytelling are typically more multifaceted.

[12] For example, in many ways, the villainous characters on contemporary television dramas perform similar to wrestling heels.

4 Antipathetic Characters in Contemporary Television Drama

Within the last decade, contemporary television dramas such as *The Sopranos* (1999 – 2007), *Mad Men* (2007 – 15), and *Breaking Bad* (2008 – 13) have provided the basis for a number of studies on viewer engagement with television characters. Above all, cognitive media theorists and television scholars (e.g. Smith, 2011; Vaage, 2015; Mittell, 2015) have developed a fascination with the antihero protagonists of modern television dramas. Despite the fact that these studies have led to valuable insights as to how viewers relate to television characters on an emotional level, they examine viewer engagement primarily in relation to morality. As a result of the focus on morality in recent studies on television characters, other potential modes of viewer engagement have been less frequently explored. One of these options is antipathy. Of course, antipathy is not the only element of the viewer/character relationship that has not been studied in detail. However, in the current television landscape, which is populated with morally ambiguous characters, the lack of research on antipathy is particularly striking. It is moreover surprising that only a few studies that focus on morally corrupt characters recognise antipathy as a legitimate option for viewer engagement.

Antipathy is one of the most multifaceted elements of viewer engagement with television characters since it is contingent on the narrative context and the temporal structure of a television narrative. Furthermore, it is closely tied to other types of emotional engagement with fictional characters. In the context of this chapter, I regard antipathy as any form of dislike. This includes anything from feeling irritated by or disliking a character to outright hating a character. In this chapter, I argue that viewers do not only reject television characters based on various amoral character traits, but on their moral virtues as well. Among others, such character traits include a character's appearance, her social behaviour, and inconsistent character growth. Moreover, I argue that reacting to a character with antipathy also has the potential to elicit pleasurable emotional responses in the viewer. In particular, in the course of this chapter, I discuss the phenomenon of viewers who 'love to hate' certain characters and analyse how a disliked character's misfortune can elicit pleasure in the viewer.

Of course, viewers are free to dislike characters from any television genre, which elicits the question as to why I have chosen to exclusively investigate antipathy in television drama. The main reason for this is that contemporary television dramas feature more morally corrupt characters than any other television genre. And, although I am not interested in solely investigating antipathy in relation to morality, the already existing work on viewer engagement with morally ambiguous characters from this genre still provides a logical starting point for my own study. Another reason for focusing on antipathetic characters in contemporary television drama is that this genre has traditionally been heavily serialised. As a result, studying antipathy in this genre highlights the influence of certain temporal and structural elements that have become synonymous with television narration (e.g. character fragmentation, seriality) on viewer antipathy.

I begin this chapter with a discussion of existing studies on viewer engagement with morally ambiguous characters from modern television drama. Based on existing studies on viewer engagement from cognitive media theory, I investigate if disliking a television character should be primarily regarded as a question of morality. Part of this investigation is a re-evaluation of the—in cognitive media theory—widespread assumption that all viewers share a common sense of morality. Referring to Vaage's (2013) work on fictional reliefs, I challenge this assumption by arguing that viewers are free to hate any fictional television character without having to fear moral repercussions. In the following section, I explore the origins of viewer antipathy in more detail. In particular, I discuss the relationship between a character's traits (e.g. appearance, facial expressions, and speech pattern) and her antipathetic potential. In the final theoretical part of the chapter, referring to Roberta Pearson's (2007) work on character fragmentation, I explore how the structural and temporal aspects of television narration affect the viewer's hatred of television characters. I should note that I am aware of the fact that antipathy is one of the most subjective elements of viewer engagement with fictional characters. For instance, some viewers' hatred of a character might be based on prejudice or misogyny—yet this is not the type of antipathy I investigate in this chapter. Instead, in accordance with the overall focus of this thesis, this chapter provides a text-based investigation of viewer antipathy with television characters. Thus, in my analysis of viewer antipathy, I primarily explore to what degree the narrative context of

a television programme and the temporal attributes of television narration shape a character's antipathetic potential.

The main part of this chapter is a detailed analysis of two antipathetic characters from contemporary television drama. Firstly, I discuss viewer engagement with Joffrey Baratheon from the HBO series *Game of Thrones*. In my analysis of Joffrey, I primarily focus on how the series establishes him as an antipathetic character and what his role in the series is with regard to viewer engagement. For example, I discuss how every element of Joffrey's characterisation is geared towards making him as unlikeable as possible. Moreover, I argue that, despite the fact that Joffrey almost has no redeemable character traits, engaging with this character has the potential to be a pleasurable experience for the viewer.

The second case study of this chapter is Andrea Harrison from *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010 –). With regard to viewer antipathy, Andrea represents a more complicated example than Joffrey since the character was not intended to be disliked by the creators of the programme. Yet, I argue that as a result of various narrative elements (e.g. inconsistent writing, Andrea's character traits and social behaviour), this character has a high potential to be disliked. Furthermore, I argue that since the viewer's antipathy towards Andrea is not intended by the authors of the text, it becomes more difficult for the audience to take pleasure in their hatred of Andrea. More specifically, since Andrea is overall a morally virtuous character, engaging with her does not give viewers the chance to experience a sense of transgressive pleasure.

At various points in this chapter, I refer to examples in which viewers voice their hatred towards a particular television character to illustrate my argument. Thus, one might argue that, despite claiming that my argument is largely rooted in cognitive media and television studies, I also take a reception studies approach. However, this would be inaccurate since I only use these examples as an initial indicator of viewer antipathy. This means I am not primarily interested in how viewers react towards particular characters on an emotional level. Instead, the main research question underlying this chapter is: To what degree do the textual (e.g. character traits, narrative context) and temporal features (e.g. serial storytelling, character fragmentation) of television narration affect a character's antipathetic potential?

4.1 Sympathising with Antiheroes

The strong focus on antiheroes in current academic writing is not a coincidence, but the result of the abundance of contemporary television dramas that feature antihero protagonists. In the context of this work, studies on antiheroes are particularly important since many of them investigate the relationship between viewer engagement and morality. For example, previous studies have explored viewer engagement with morally corrupt characters like Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini, *The Sopranos*), Dexter Morgan (Michael C.Hall, *Dexter*), and Walter White (Bryan Cranston, *Breaking Bad*). One of the key findings of studies on antiheroes has been that viewers generally seem to have few objections when it comes to sympathising with characters that continuously act in ways that are morally reprehensible. In particular, Murray Smith (2011, 2014), Noël Carroll (2004), and Jason Mittell (2015) suggest that engaging with an antihero-protagonist functions as sort of a moral test for the audience in which each viewer has to decide for herself how far a character can go until they are unable to engage with her. The key research question that underlies most studies on antiheroes is: what is it that makes viewers sympathise with a fictional character that they would most likely despise in real life?

Noël Carroll (2004) argues that Tony Soprano is "undeniably a fascinating character—one whose doings frequently strike us with their unprecedented juxtapositions of elements and their continuing potential to take us by surprise" (p. 124). Carroll elaborates on this argument by discussing the elements in Tony's life that frequently clash with each other and with that elicit amazement or fascination in the viewer. For example, according to Carroll, Tony's unexceptional family life is continuously juxtaposed with his exceptional position as the boss of the New Jersey mafia. Moreover, as Carroll points out, watching how Tony justifies his behaviour in his psychiatry sessions with Dr.Melfi (Lorraine Bracco) further adds to the viewer's fascination. Yet being fascinated with Tony does not explain why viewers do not reject him—especially since the world of *The Sopranos* is populated with other fascinating characters. Thus, Carroll claims one crucial element that prevents viewers from rejecting a character is sympathy. Carroll describes Tony as an "oxymoron" (2004, p. 124) since he is "a ruthless Mafia chieftain with a soft spot in his heart for ducks" (p. 124). This means, while viewers might feel conflicted about sympathising with Tony, the

programme gives the audience reasons to care for him. Similarly, Murray Smith argues that Tony's everydayness is a crucial element of his characterisation since it encourages viewers to form a sympathetic bond with him. Smith (2011) argues that "to the extent that the show gives Soprano's self-perception some salience and legitimacy—which it does—Soprano can be understood as a 'regular guy', (p. 12) subject to pressures and responsibilities that any ordinary Joe can appreciate, including moral ones. Essentially, this means the more reasons a programme gives the audience to care for a character (e.g. by playing up her everydayness), the less likely viewers will be to reject that character.

According to Carroll (2004), another reason for viewers tending to side with Tony is that, within the narrative context of *The Sopranos,* he provides one of the best possible options for allegiance. As Carroll (2004) puts it:

> Compared to the other mobsters, especially to the more maniacal ones (like Ralph, Richie, Paulie, Furio), Tony seems *relatively* less volatile and sadistic, and more judicious and prosocial. Within the bounds of the Mafia code, he appears to be the fairest gangster (not absolutely fair, but relatively fair) and he has a capacity for compassion (albeit not fully developed). (p. 130)

Carroll here mainly stresses the importance of the narrative context for the viewer's sympathetic engagement with television characters. He suggests that any time viewers evaluate a television character, they do so in relation to the other characters in the narrative (Carroll, 2011). This means a narrative such as *The Sopranos*, which features a variety of morally corrupt characters, enables viewers to sympathise with a protagonist who most viewers would probably regard as a monster in real life.

In a more recent essay, Smith (2014) puts forth another simple but convincing argument for why viewers are able to sympathise with antiheroes: they are still heroes. For example, Smith (2014, para. 14) claims that viewers retain some degree of sympathy with Walter White until the end of *Breaking Bad* since—no matter how bad he has become—Walt still tries to protect his family and rescues his partner Jesse (Aaron Paul) from a rival drug gang. In addition, according to Smith, antihero narratives are still moral tales, albeit they "are fictions for a morally disabused age, conscious of the reality and demands of ethics, but weary and wary of tabloid moralism, and sceptical of conventional heroism" (2014, para. 12.). Finally, the possibility of redemption factors into

why viewers engage with antiheroes in a sympathetic manner since, no matter how bad an antihero has become, there is always the possibility of redemption (Smith, 2014, para. 15).

So, why are these findings relevant for a study that is concerned with how viewers develop feelings of antipathy towards television characters? Most importantly, I believe that investigating which traits a character needs to possess and how a television narrative needs to position a character to encourage sympathetic viewer engagement draws attention to what antipathetic characters might be missing. This means throughout my examination of antipathy, I will investigate if characters that are widely disliked by the audience lack the narrative support or character traits that make antiheroes more relatable.

Furthermore, I have discussed viewer engagement with antiheroes in detail here to draw attention to the fact that recent theories on this subject have a tendency to view antipathy strictly as a matter of morality. For example, Smith (2011) states that "it is hard to think of cases in which powerful antipathy is generated by amoral traits" (p.23) since "inarticulacy and dullness are not hanging crimes" (p. 23). He elaborates on this point by suggesting that inarticulate or dull characters are more likely to generate indifference and irritation in the viewer rather than antipathy (Smith, 2011, p. 23). Undoubtedly, morality is a crucial element of viewer engagement with television characters from any genre. Yet I want to challenge the assumption that it is the only relevant factor for viewers when they decide if they like or dislike a character. Moreover, in contrast to Smith, I believe that there are instances in which viewers reject characters for seemingly trivial reasons. In other words, when it comes to viewer engagement with television characters, inarticulacy and dullness might very well be hanging crimes.

4.2 The Freedom to Hate

Although various recent studies on viewer engagement indicate that engaging with a television character in a sympathetic manner is largely a matter of morality, this argument remains problematic—especially in the context of fictional television genres. Margrethe Bruun Vaage (2013) has previously discussed this phenomenon. Vaage (2013) argues that, since film and television series are fictional, viewers are somewhat relieved from the moral obligations

they might feel towards non-fictional characters (pp. 218-19). She elaborates on this argument in her examination of viewer engagement with perverse (or morally flawed) characters:

> The fictional context simplifies engagement with perverse characters. The spectator is relieved of certain elements of moral reasoning when engaging with fiction, such as imagining the universalization of the character's actions or their consequences. This could be one way we as spectators ignore moral limits to a greater degree when engaging with fiction than when engaging with nonfiction. (Vaage, 2013, p. 228)

Vaage here argues that viewers are able to engage with perverse television characters without experiencing feelings of guilt because these characters are fictional. I believe that a similar argument applies to viewer antipathy. Some of the most widely-hated television characters, including Andrea Harrison (*The Walking Dead*), who represents one of the two main case studies of this chapter, possess a wide array of moral virtues.[13] Yet, the antipathy towards these characters suggests that viewers are willing to ignore their moral virtues in order to hate them. Of course, this is only true for viewers whose hatred is not based on prejudice or misogyny. I have already pointed towards the subjective nature of hatred and stated that this is not the type of antipathy that I investigate in this chapter. Yet, I still feel the need to highlight it again since the fact that many widely-despised television characters are female indicates that misogyny is a key element of viewer antipathy. According to Vaage (2013), when engaging with fictional characters on an emotional level, viewers still maintain a basic moral compass—albeit this moral compass might be regarded as a simplified version of the one they use to navigate the real world (p. 228). For example, viewers might be able to sympathise with Tony Soprano despite his transgressive behaviour. However, even with lowered moral obligations, most viewers are unlikely to sympathise with Ramsay Bolton (Iwan Rheon, *Game of Thrones*) since the character's moral transgressions are simply too severe. While fictional reliefs are a key element of viewer antipathy in contemporary television drama, having the moral freedom to hate a character still does not explain which narrative elements elicit hatred.

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[13] Other examples include Skyler White (Anna Gunn, *Breaking Bad*), Dana Brody (Morgan Saylor, *Homeland*), Marnie Michaels (Allison Williams, *Girls*), and Carl Grimes (Chandler Riggs, *The Walking Dead*).

In contrast to Vaage (2013), who revaluates the role of morality for viewer engagement with television characters, Carl Plantinga (2009) argues that in some cases morality barely factors into how viewers engage with fictional characters. While Plantinga acknowledges the usefulness of theories on viewer engagement that are centred around morality, he points towards other narrative elements that might influence the viewer's engagement with a fictional character. Plantinga (2009) states:

> I would maintain that the audience may give its allegiance to a character (thus harmonizing its goals and desires with the character) or maintain an oppositional stance for reasons other than moral approval or disapproval, in some cases lending allegiance, for example, because the actor is attractive, or the character small (we find children or small animated characters to be inherently sympathetic). (p. 108)

Plantinga (2009) further claims that viewers might sympathise with a character based on familiarity or because they share some sort of similarity or affiliation with them (e.g. race, class, ethnicity, gender). According to Plantinga, in some cases, the reason for forming an allegiance with a character might even be more simplistic. For example, some viewers might just have a tendency to root for the underdog. (Plantinga, 2009, p 108).

Beyond their overall physical appearance, Plantinga (1999) claims that facial expressions are crucial for how viewers engage with fictional characters on an emotional level. According to Plantinga (1999), many films feature "scenes of empathy," (p. 239) in which the camera—typically in close-up—lingers on a character's face. These scenes are meant to communicate character emotion and elicit empathy. Plantinga (1999) states that in such scenes the viewer not only understands a character's emotions, but catches it via "affective mimicry" (p. 242) and "facial feedback" (p. 242). Affective mimicry is based on the idea that we tend to mimic the facial expressions of those around us in our daily lives (Plantinga, 1999). For example, Plantinga states that if someone smiles at us, we tend to smile back. With the scene of empathy, Plantinga applies this idea to a fictional context. Facial feedback, the second component of emotional contagion, describes the process through which viewers convert the facial expressions they have caught via affective mimicry into subjective emotions (Plantinga, 1999). For example, according to Plantinga, a scene of empathy featuring a sad character can elicit a sad facial expression in the viewer which

the viewer might then convert into an actual feeling of sadness. There are a number of factors that influence to what degree the viewer will catch the emotions of a character in a scene of empathy. These include attention, duration, allegiance, and narrative context. In particular, for emotional contagion to occur, the scene of empathy needs to last a certain period of time and the spectator needs to pay close attention. In addition, viewers are more likely to catch the emotions of characters they regard as sympathetic. Furthermore, scenes of empathy have to be placed in the right narrative context since any scene of empathy will have less emotional impact if the audience feels that it has been misplaced (Plantinga, 1999, pp. 247-251).

Arguably, 'Phoenix' (2009), the penultimate episode of *Breaking Bad's* second season, provides a striking example for a scene of empathy in television. At the end of the episode, Walter White (Bryan Cranston) enters his partner Jesse's (Aaron Paul) apartment and finds Jesse and his girlfriend Jane (Krysten Ritter) asleep. The mise en scène indicates that Jesse and Jane have taken heroin before they went to sleep. It should also be noted that previous episodes of the series have made it clear that Walt disapproves of Jesse's drug use and believes that Jane has been a bad influence on his partner. All of a sudden, Jane begins to throw up in her sleep. Walt initially rushes to help her, but ultimately changes his mind and lets the young woman die. Specifically, Walt's decision to let Jane die is rendered as a scene of empathy. The camera lingers on Walt's face as he goes through a variety of emotions, which not only gives the viewer the chance to trace his thought process, but also creates the possibility of emotional contagion.

Thus far, I have argued that viewers do not only consider questions of morality when they evaluate television characters. Instead, the fictional context of television drama relieves them from the moral obligations of everyday life and allows them to sympathise with or reject characters based for seemingly trivial reasons such as, for example, their outward appearance or speech pattern. In addition, I have argued that scenes of empathy have the potential to elicit a strong emotional reaction in the viewer that might affect her character evaluation. Yet, while these claims provide a basic framework for the study of antipathy, this framework is not medium-specific. Consequently, for the remainder of this chapter, I will analyse antipathy in relation to the structural and temporal characteristics of television in order to highlight how hating a

television character is distinct from hating characters in other forms of storytelling.

4.3 Character Fragmentation & Antipathy

Roberta Pearson (2007) suggests that one does not need to examine specific scenes of a television programme in order to define what constitutes a character because television characters only exist as a whole in the minds of the writers or the audience. This means a single scene of an episode of a television programme will only contain character fragments. As Pearson (2007) states, "each tiny fragment does not contain the sum of the whole, but rather becomes fully intelligible only when juxtaposed with all the other tiny fragments in all the other scenes in all the other episodes in which the character appears" (p. 43). However, Pearson (2007, p. 42) also stresses that television narratives typically establish a character's main traits, behavioural patterns, and motivations within the first few episodes of their first appearance. In addition, Jason Mittell (2015) states that television characters rarely change on a fundamental level. According to Mittell (2015, p. 133), the reason for the stasis of many television characters is that often what first attracts viewers to a particular programme are the characters and their relationships. As a result, if a character changes significantly over the course of the narrative, this could have a ripple effect and alter the dynamic of the whole programme. The sort of character fragmentation that Pearson (2007) describes is not exclusive to television but can also be found in feature films. However, as a result of the difference in narrative structure, television allows for more nuanced character fragmentation. In particular, whereas films can only withhold or fragment information for a limited amount of time, television programmes can leave the audience uncertain about a character's motivations for several seasons. Character fragmentation can be a useful tool to get viewers emotionally invested in a character. For example, the way in which *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007 – 2015) disperses character information about Don Draper (Jon Hamm) over the course of the series keeps the audience interested in Don and intensifies their engagement with him. In particular, the series uses flashbacks to fill in gaps in Don's backstory such as the fact that he comes from a poor family or that he adopted another man's identity during the Second World War. Similarly, *Lost* (ABC, 2004 – 2010) relies heavily on character fragmentation. In particular, each episode uses flashbacks to highlight the

backstory of a specific character. These flashbacks are not only effective in keeping the cast interesting, but they also encourage viewers to constantly re-evaluate their relationship with the characters based on the information that has been revealed in the flashbacks.

Other contemporary television dramas such as *Lost*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *Game of Thrones,* and *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011 -) feature characters whose characterisation is fragmented over an extended period of time, which leaves viewers uncertain as to how to engage with them. Throughout seasons one and two of *Homeland*, Nicholas Brody's (Damien Lewis) motivations are unclear. The writers refuse to answer the question if war veteran Brody, who is returning home at the beginning of the series, has been brainwashed while being held in captivity or has willingly joined a terrorist cell that is planning an attack on the United States. While the series generally portrays Brody as sympathetic, the possibility of him being a terrorist might prevent viewers from engaging with him in a sympathetic manner. The same is true for Lord Varys (Conleth Hill), the leader of the King's spy network in *Game of Thrones*. Varys is charismatic and entertaining, but he does not reveal his true motives until season five. As a result, viewers might be unsure as to how they are supposed to relate to this character. For example, while some viewers might be able to sympathise with Varys based on his superficial charisma, others might want to reserve judgement until they know more about his motivations.

As I have indicated here, one possible outcome of extended character fragmentation is that the viewer's engagement with that character is also prolonged. In other words, viewers could refrain from fully engaging with a character until the series has given them enough information to make an informed decision. While this would certainly be a valid viewer response, it also closely follows models of viewer engagement that are primarily concerned with questions of morality. Arguably, another possible outcome of extended character fragmentation is antipathy. More specifically, any time the creators of a television series choose to fragment character information over an extended period of time, they risk that the audience gets frustrated or bored—both of which are feelings that can easily turn into antipathy.

While the theories on viewer engagement and television narration that I have discussed in the first section of this chapter provide a basic framework for the study of viewer antipathy in contemporary television, one also need to

investigate this element of viewer engagement in relation to a number of case studies since every television drama is structured slightly differently and elicits viewer antipathy in distinct ways. Examining antipathy in the context of different television programmes particularly draws attention to the fact that the viewer's emotional reaction to antipathetic characters is tied to the narrative context. For example, in the context of one series, the viewer's hatred of a character might only generate negative feelings while, in the context of another series, viewers might find some sense of pleasure in their hatred of a character.

4.4 Case Study: Joffrey Baratheon

The second episode of *Game of Thrones'* (2011 -) fourth season ('The Lion and the Rose', 2014) devotes almost its entire second half to the wedding of Joffrey Baratheon and Margaery Tyrell (Natalie Dormer). At this point in the series, Joffrey is the king of the fictional kingdom of Westeros. As the creators of the series point out, the wedding feast is designed to remind viewers that Joffrey is a terrible human being (GameofThrones, 2014).

Figure 6 Close-up shot of Joffrey's dead body

For example, Joffrey is delighted by a tasteless theatre performance that involves only little people and accidentally kills a number of doves that were intended to fly out of the wedding cake. Furthermore, he uses his wedding to embarrass his uncle Tyrion (Peter Dinklage) in front of the whole wedding party.

All of a sudden, Joffrey begins to cough after drinking some wine. His cough quickly turns into him throwing up and gasping for air. The episode cuts back and forth between close-ups of Joffrey's face, reaction shots of wedding guests, and close-ups of the worried face of his mother Cersei (Lena Headey). Ultimately, Joffrey dies in the arms of Cersei and the episode ends with a close up of his lifeless face which, after his death, has turned into a blood-stained grimace (see fig. 6). Despite the fact that Joffrey has been portrayed as a merciless ruler and a terrible human being throughout the series, the level to which viewers celebrated his death is still astonishing. For example, in the comments section of the popular culture website The AV Club, user KrakenNiz responds to Joffrey's death as follows:

> DING DONG, THE BITCH IS DEAD. Holy shit, a death to [sic] immediate but it look[ed] absurdly painful. My mouth is agape in horror but I cannot stop laughing when I think about it. FUCK YOU, JOFFREY. (Adams, 2014)

At the time of this writing, other users have up-voted this comment over three-hundred times to show their support. In the same thread, user Jaimes Right Hand summarises his experience of Joffrey's death like this:

> . . . And man, did I love every second of that scene. I know he's a kid, but I couldn't help but crack a smile (okay, a big smile along with a loud FUCK YES) once I picked my jaw off of the floor. (Adams, 2014)

These are only two examples from a comment section that largely reads like a celebration of a fictional character's death. In addition, even The AV Club's official episode recap begins with a gleeful remark about Joffrey's death. Reviewer Erik Adams (2014) states:

> His grace, Joffrey of Houses Baratheon and Lannister, first of his name, King of the Andals and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms, and Protector of the Realm, is dead. The exact cause of death is unknown, but early evidence indicates poisoning. He was 19. He will be mourned by no one. (para. 1)

Comments and reviews like these, which highlight the general satisfaction over Joffrey's death, invite the question as to why this character was so uniformly

hated by television viewers.[14] Arguably, Joffrey represents the perfect case study for this chapter since he is not only widely despised by television audiences, but he has been designed to be hated by the creators of the series. In order to answer the question as to how exactly the series generates antipathy towards Joffrey, one needs to look no further than his introduction in the second episode of the series ('The Kingsroad', 2011) In particular, one scene early on in the episode is crucial in establishing Joffrey as antipathetic character.

Figure 7 Joffrey (centre) talking to his uncle Tyrion (right)

At the beginning of the episode, Tyrion wakes up in the stables at castle Winterfell after a night of drinking. Joffrey greets his uncle by telling him that the dogs he has spent the night with are "better-looking bitches than [he is] used to" ('The Kingsroad'). Tyrion answers Joffrey's insults by telling his nephew to extend his sympathies to Catelyn (Michelle Fairley) and Ned Stark (Sean Bean), whose son Bran (Isaac Hempstead Wright) has fallen out of a window and might die from his injuries. Yet, Joffrey does not see the point of his uncle's request. He argues that the "the boy means nothing to [me]" ('The Kingsroad') and does not want to see Catelyn since he cannot "stand the wailing of women" ('The Kingsroad')—a comment for which he receives a slap in the face from Tyrion. Joffrey has barely time to voice a threat against his uncle when Tyrion

[14] For more examples, see Hooton, 2014; Hibberd, 2014.

hits him again. Joffrey protests and, as a result, gets slapped in the face for the third time in a row. Finally, Joffrey walks away, presumably to extend his sympathies to the Stark family.

How is this scene from 'The Kingsroad' crucial in establishing Joffrey as an antipathetic character? Firstly, Jack Gleeson's performance is a key element of Joffrey's characterisation, in particular his speech pattern. Like all members of the Lannister family, Joffrey speaks with a Received Pronunciation accent. This accent sets him apart from other characters in the series (especially the generally more positively portrayed Northerners) and functions as a way to emphasise his class and aristocracy. The same is true for his body language. As the scene progresses, Joffrey arrogantly leans on his sword and looks quite pleased with himself. Furthermore, right before Tyrion slaps him in the face, Joffrey proudly turns to Sandor 'The Hound' Clegane (Rory McCann) to see his bodyguard's reaction to his misogynistic remarks. Aside from Gleeson's performance, the content of Joffrey's conversation with Tyrion is crucial in establishing him as an antipathetic character since most of what Joffrey says during this scene makes him seem unsympathetic or is offensive in some way. Not only does Joffrey start the conversation by insulting his uncle, but he also casually compares the dogs in the stables to prostitutes and refuses to extend his sympathies to the Stark family. While the way in which he casually compares the stable dogs to prostitutes and complains about wailing women establishes Joffrey's misogyny, his disinterest in a dying child emphasises his lack of empathy. In addition, the way in which the scene is shot adds to Joffrey's characterisation. Throughout the entire scene, the camera looks down on Tyrion whereas Joffrey is almost entirely shot from the bottom. This evokes the feeling of Joffrey towering over Tyrion which highlights how he sees himself in relation to other characters. This division of camera angles is even left intact when Tyrion starts to hit Joffrey in the face, implying that Tyrion's punishment will not have any lasting effect on their relationship.

Joffrey Baratheon is one of the prime examples for character stasis in contemporary television drama. While Joffrey progresses on a plot level, he remains a fairly static character with regard to his characterisation. For example, it does not come as a surprise when, later on in the series, he mistreats Sansa Stark (Sophie Turner) or acts superior towards everyone around him once he has become king since this behaviour is in line with how the

character is established at the beginning of the series. Similarly, Joffrey's gleeful torturing of prostitutes later on in the series is foreshadowed by his misogynistic remarks in episode two. In addition, Joffrey's behaviour in the battle of 'Blackwater' (2012), during which he leaves his troops alone and runs away, is reminiscent of the cowardly way in which he threatens Tyrion to tell his mother about his uncle's physical abuse in 'The Kingsroad' (2011).

The main consequence of Joffrey's static villainous behaviour is that viewers can hate him without reservations. This is particularly noteworthy in the contemporary television landscape, which, as earlier discussed, is populated with morally ambiguous antiheroes and sympathetic villains. Joffrey does not fit either of these descriptions. He is a morally corrupt character, but he does not possess enough sympathetic character traits to complicate the viewer's engagement with him. For example, Joffrey's only redeeming qualities include caring for his family (especially his mother) and lacking life experience. Yet, while these character traits might be enough to complicate some viewers' reaction to Joffrey's death, the series only refers to them so sparingly that they do not cancel out his antipathetic potential.

Joffrey's consistent villainous behaviour fulfils various different functions with regard to viewer engagement. First of all, it preserves the initial character dynamic of the programme. That is to say, since he does not significantly change over the course of the narrative, Joffrey's behaviour towards other characters in the series also does not change. Thus, for example, viewers who were initially fascinated by Joffrey's relationship with Tyrion are likely to be invested in this relationship until Joffrey's death since it remains based on the fact that they despise each other. The consistent villainous characterisation of Joffrey also provides the viewer with a sense of emotional clarity. This is especially important in the fictional world of *Game of Thrones* which features a wide array of morally ambiguous characters and constantly shifting alliances. In other words, in a series that continuously expects viewers to re-evaluate their sympathies toward the characters, Joffrey's consistent evil behaviour becomes reassuring. Arguably this is also the reason why so many television soap operas feature the character type of the villainess. Modleski (2008) describes this character type as a well-informed, masterful schemer who operates in the background and causes problems for other characters in the narrative (p. 94). The villainess typically never entirely succeeds in her endeavours, but she also

does not completely fail. In *Game of Thrones*, the character that perhaps comes closest to what Modleski describes as a villainess is Cersei Lannister, who literally can be described as a bad mother. Joffrey does not entirely fit Modleski's definition of the villainess, since he is not much of a schemer, but he is still similar to this type of character in that he frequently causes problems for other characters and provides the audience with a sense of emotional clarity by consistently acting evil.

4.4.1 The Pleasure of Hatred

One element of antipathy that I have so far only hinted at is that hating a television character can be a pleasurable emotional experience for the viewer. Initially, this might seem like a questionable argument since pleasure is commonly associated with sympathy. Yet, as Plantinga (2009) notes, "strong sympathy is not a necessary element in the mix of audience pleasures" (p. 31). In his study of *The Sopranos*, Noël Carroll (2004) goes even further and suggests that viewers find pleasure in Tony Soprano's transgressive behaviour. Similarly, Murray Smith (2011) claims that viewers enjoy transgressive behaviour as longs as it has some sort of moral underpinning. According to Smith (2011), for the audience, one of the most appealing aspects of engaging with the transgressive behaviour of a fictional character is that it evokes feelings of power.

As I have stated at the beginning of this chapter, I generally agree with these observations, but I also believe that morality and transgressive pleasure might not be as closely related as Carroll (2004) and Smith (2011) suggest in their studies. For example, I am convinced that there are instances in which viewers take pleasure in Joffrey Baratheon's villainous behaviour that are not immediately tied to morality. This means the way in which viewers engage with an antipathetic character like Joffrey is much more closely tied to Vaage's (2013) idea of fictional reliefs. I have already stated that fictional reliefs enable viewers to dislike any character in a television narrative, regardless of how virtuous they are, but I have not discussed in detail how fictional reliefs also enable viewers to find pleasure in a character's transgressive behaviour.

Unlike antiheroes, who cannot continuously participate in transgressive behaviour because they somewhat have to maintain the viewer's sympathy, villains are free to act in transgressive ways at any point of the narrative. Consequently, even an antipathetic character like Joffrey still frequently offers

the viewer the chance to experience transgressive pleasure. In principle, viewers are free to take pleasure in any of Joffrey's transgressive behaviour, regardless of how transgressive it is. Yet, it is likely their moral conscience will at some point prevent them from doing so. However, the point at which the spectator becomes unable to find pleasure in a character's transgressive behaviour differs from viewer to viewer. For example, despite disliking Joffrey as a character, viewers might still enjoy that he acts like an entitled, spoiled brat, simply because on an instinctual level it is fun to watch someone behave condescendingly towards others. Following this line of thought, some viewers might even enjoy some of Joffrey's more extreme transgressions such as the scene in which he confronts Sansa Stark with the severed head of her father Ned (Sean Bean), whom he ordered to be executed. It is safe to assume that the majority of the audience will be horrified by Joffrey's behaviour in this scene, yet it cannot be ruled out that some viewers will be bemused by the child-like excitement that Joffrey inappropriately displays in this scene. Ultimately, the question as to if there is a limit to the kind of transgressive behaviour that viewers can take pleasure in is difficult to answer since it is tied to each viewer's personal moral compass.

The degree to which spectators might be able to enjoy the transgressive behaviour of a character is not strictly a matter of each viewer's personal sense of morality, but it is also determined by their relationship with the other characters in the narrative.[15] In particular, viewers are arguably able to take more pleasure in a character's transgressive behaviour if it is not aimed at a character they strongly sympathise with. For example, most viewers will probably not enjoy Joffrey's constant mistreatment of Sansa Stark since the series consistently presents her as one of the most sympathetic character on the programme. Yet, I should also note that, while almost all contemporary television dramas encourage certain engagement patterns, the viewer still decides for herself which character she wants to sympathise with. This means, ultimately the degree to which the viewer is able to enjoy one character's mistreatment of another character is determined by which characters she has chosen to sympathise with.

[15] I have already briefly acknowledged this aspect of viewer engagement in chapter three. I have argued that the viewer's engagement with wrestling heels (villains) and babyfaces (heroes) is partially shaped by the way in which these two character types relate to each other.

Finally, moving away from the idea of pleasure and transgression, engaging with a television villain can be enjoyable for the audience because it heightens the viewer's focus on narrative outcome and amplifies feelings of Schadenfreude. Plantinga (2009) notes that "viewers seem to take inherent pleasure in strongly desiring various outcomes for the central characters of a narrative" and emphasises that with central characters he not only refers to sympathetic, but also antipathetic characters (p. 31). Moreover, according to Plantinga (2009), "strong antipathies often result in a desire for vengeance, harm, retribution, punishment" in the viewer (p. 32). I believe that Plantinga's argument directly applies to Joffrey Baratheon. Among the most obvious evidence for this assumption is the anticipation of Joffrey's demise among fans and critics and, ultimately, the celebration of his death, which I have referred to earlier in this chapter. However, while the pleasure of anticipating a narrative outcome for a character might be similar for both film and television characters, television narration arguably amplifies this aspect of viewer engagement.

More specifically, the serial structure of contemporary television drama invites viewers to speculate about a character's fate more than most feature films (perhaps with the exception of a continuing series of films such as *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, and the Marvel films). Yet, for the most part, even the single entries in a continuing series of films provide viewers with a more satisfying sense of narrative closure than most continuous serials. In particular, this is true for a series such as *Game of Thrones* which features a wide array of characters and advances a multitude of plotlines in each episode. One consequence of this mode of storytelling is that the plotlines of each character only advance slowly. This gives viewers more freedom to imagine a possible narrative outcome for particular characters and builds a stronger sense of anticipation. In some cases, this increased sense of anticipation manifests itself in fan theories that speculate on what might happen next to a character. However, I am more concerned with how the sense of anticipation that continuous television serials generate influences each spectator's viewing experience on a cognitive and emotional level. Referring back to Joffrey Baratheon, I think that the viewer derives pleasure out of the hope that he will eventually get the punishment he deserves. In addition, I believe that the anticipation of his punishment and demise also enables viewers to find more

pleasure in his transgressive behaviour. To be more specific, viewers might be able to enjoy Joffrey's continuous transgressive behaviour because they assume that he will be held responsible for these transgressions at some point in the future. Arguably, viewer anticipation is further heightened by the fact that Joffrey's transgressive behaviour accumulates over an extended period of time. To put it differently, the more Joffrey transgresses, the more viewers might get excited about his potential demise.

In addition to deriving pleasure from envisioning a narrative outcome for characters they hate, viewers might also enjoy it if such characters are faced with temporary defeat. In particular, I am referring to the phenomenon of Schadenfreude here—a German term that describes experiencing pleasure at the misfortune of others. Television scholars have previously referred to this term when describing the viewer's relationship with celebrity participants on reality television programmes.[16] For example, Cross and Littler (2010) state that the enjoyment of celebrity misfortune provides "vicarious pleasure in the witnessing of the powerful being made less powerful," adding that this is "an attempt to address or deal with a severe imbalance of power" (p. 399). Meanwhile, other studies that analyse the function of Schadenfreude for viewer engagement with television characters emphasise that this feeling often occurs when viewers compare themselves to the characters on screen. In her article on the viewing pleasures of reality television, Jen Doll (2012) highlights this particular element of Schadenfreude. Specifically referring to the various incarnations of *The Real Housewives*, Doll (2012) states: "They make us feel better about ourselves at the same time that they make us feel worse, and they also prove that money does not buy happiness" (para. 6).[17] These observations on schadenfreude give some insight as to why viewers might find joy in Joffrey's misfortunes, but they are not immediately tied to antipathy. However, hating a character foregrounds certain elements of Schadenfreude. For example, I agree with Hareli and Weiner (2002), who argue that hating a person can intensify feelings of Schadenfreude. The simple logic behind this argument is that if a person dislikes another person, she might find more pleasure in the other person's suffering (Hareli and Weiner, 2009). Furthermore, in their study of Schadenfreude, R. H. Smith et al. (2009)

[16] For example, see Deery, 2015; Dijk et. al., 2012; A. Hall, 2006.

[17] For a more in-depth analysis of the relationship between Schadenfreude and self-evaluation, see Dijk et. al, 2012.

note that there are three primary instances that may elicit feelings of Schadenfreude in a person. The first instance links Schadenfreude to personal gain, the second instance describes envy as a trigger for Schadenfreude, and the third instance refers to situations in which a person experiences Schadenfreude because she perceives the misfortune of the other person as deserved (Smith et al, R. H., 2009, p. 543).

The online reception of widely-hated television characters such as Joffrey indicates that deservingness is one of the main catalysts of Schadenfreude with antipathetic television characters. For instance, as I have noted earlier in this chapter, many viewers gleefully anticipated Joffrey's demise, mainly because they believed that he deserved to die. Yet not only Joffrey's death invites viewers to experience Schadenfreude on his behalf. Instead, the first four seasons of *Game of Thrones* feature a number of scenes that give viewers the chance to take pleasure in Joffrey's misfortunes. For instance, the scene I discussed earlier in this chapter is a prime example for how Schadenfreude functions in *Game of Thrones* since Tyrion immediately punishes Joffrey for behaving inappropriately ('The Kingsroad'). Another example in which *Game of Thrones* invites viewers to feel pleasure at Joffrey's misfortune is when he throws a temper tantrum in front of the small council and his grandfather Tywin (Charles Dance) puts him in his place by informing everyone attending the meeting that "the king is tired" and needs to go to bed ('Myhsa', 2013).

Throughout my examination of Joffrey, I have argued that he represents a prime example of an antipathetic character in contemporary television. Moreover, I have argued that the character's high antipathetic potential has a number of implications for the viewer's engagement with him. For example, viewers might respond to his frequent amoral behaviour with disdain, imagine a negative narrative outcome for him or develop a strong sympathetic bond with character that stand in opposition to Joffrey's villainy. Furthermore, viewers might feel a sense of transgressive pleasure as a result of Joffrey's amoral behaviour or experience feelings of schadenfreude at his misfortune. In the context of this chapter, I specifically emphasise the clarity of Joffrey's characterisation. To put it differently, although each viewer has to decide for themselves if they like or dislike Joffrey, it would be difficult to argue that the character does not have a high antipathetic potential since the entire narrative context works towards making him more unlikeable. Yet, as I examine in the

next section of this chapter at length, widely disliked television characters do not necessarily have to be clear-cut villains like Joffrey Baratheon.

4.5 Case study: Andrea Harrison

The fact that television villains like Joffrey Baratheon have the potential to elicit the viewer's antipathy is not surprising. However, as I have indicated throughout this chapter, viewer antipathy is not restricted to villains. For example, contemporary television characters such as Dana Brody, Carl Grimes, and—to a lesser degree—Skyler White have all been conceived as sympathetic characters, yet the viewer response towards them has been largely negative. For example, Andrew Romano (2013) went so far as to refer to *Homeland's* Dana Brody as television's most hated character. Characters that are disliked by a large parts of the audience, despite the fact that they have been conceived as sympathetic characters, evoke crucial questions about viewer engagement. Indeed, the existence of this type of antipathetic character puts basic elements of characterisation into question by highlighting that the viewer does not automatically sympathise with 'good' characters. The viewer's hatred of 'good' characters also emphasises that—contrary to previous studies on viewer engagement—the audience's sympathetic engagement with a television character is not solely based on questions of morality. Yet, if morality is not as closely linked to antipathy as previously assumed, then which traits does a character have to possess and what kind of behaviour do characters need to display to generate antipathy? Before discussing these questions in more detail, I need to briefly address the complicated relationship between viewer antipathy and gender.

As I have stated earlier on in this chapter, viewers are free to dislike characters based on a wide range of amoral character attributes. These include outward appearance, race, class, and gender. Based on this logic, it is not surprising that some (predominantly male) viewers might be less likely to form a sympathetic bond with female television characters. Yet, the level of hatred that female television characters such as, for example, Betty Draper (January Jones, *Mad Men*), Lori Grimes (Sarah Wayne Callies, *The Walking Dead*), and Skyler White (Anna Gunn, *Breaking Bad*) have elicited in some viewers is alarming. A blog post written by Anna Gunn, who has portrayed Skyler White on *Breaking Bad*, indicates that this issue goes far beyond viewers simply disliking a

fictional character. For instance, Gunn (2013) states that she received death threats based on her portrayal of Skyler and had to take steps to ensure her personal safety (para. 12). In a response to Gunn's blog post, Andy Greenwald (2013) notes that one of the most obvious reasons for the widespread hatred towards female television characters is misogyny. Greenwald (2013) states:

> Fans come in all shapes and sizes, some passionate, others terrifying. Everyone brings their own baggage to the shows they love and some of those have packed great suitcases full of misogyny. Noticeably absent from those bulging wheelies is any sense of perspective, the power of words […], or, indeed, the difference between fiction and reality. (para. 2)

As I have noted at the beginning of this chapter, the large number of widely-despised female characters signals that this issue needs to be further analysed.[18] The main reason for why the influence of misogyny on viewer antipathy is not an integral part of my analysis of Andrea Harrison's antipathetic potential in this chapter is that this would clash with my methodological approach in this chapter and the larger methodological approach of my thesis. In particular, I have argued throughout this chapter that, despite the fact that hating a character is one of the most subjective elements of viewer engagement, the way in which a character is presented within the narrative context of a television narrative can increase her antipathetic potential. Of course, I am aware of the fact that my case study cannot be completely removed from the gender debate. For example, there are various examples in which a female character's high antipathetic potential is the result of how the character has been written and—more often than not—female TV characters are written by male writers.[19] And, while the negative portrayal of female characters and the lack of television programmes that are written and produced by women are some of the biggest problems of contemporary television production, this does not render the high antipathetic potential of female characters such as Andrea Harrison a fluke. It should also be noted that I am not going to argue in favour of or against the widespread hatred against Andrea. Instead, the final section of this chapter provides a text-based

[18] The recent discourse around the role of female heroes and antiheroes in contemporary television provides more insight on the relationship between misogyny and viewer engagement. For example, see Geraghty, 2013; Kelly, 2013; Nussbaum, 2013.

[19] For example, Lori Grimes (Sarah Wayne Callies, *The Walking Dead*), Dana Brody (Morgan Saylor, *Homeland*), and, to some degree, Skyler White (Anna Gunn, *Breaking Bad*).

examination of the character's antipathetic potential that specifically focuses on the influence of the narrative characteristics of television on the viewer/character relationship.

In the fictional universe of *The Walking Dead,* the majority of humanity has been killed by a virus and the dead come back to life as flesh-eating zombies or, as they are frequently referred to in the series, "walkers". The series follows a group of survivors led by former policeman Rick Grimes (Andrew Lincoln). The zombies pose a constant threat to the group and the plot is typically structured around their attempts to find food, shelter, and their ultimate goal: find a cure for the virus. *The Walking Dead* has featured a number of characters (e.g. Lori Grimes, Carl Grimes) that, despite being positioned as sympathetic characters, have failed to connect with television audiences, yet none of these characters has been as uniformly rejected as Andrea Harrison. Among the first search results that come up when typing the character's name into an online search engine are memes that highlight the widespread antipathy towards Andrea. Furthermore, there are numerous blog posts and articles in which viewers voice their criticism of the character.

For example, user 'Miss Anonymous hp' discusses her problems with Andrea in detail on the Walking Dead Wiki (2013). The blogger traces the character's development throughout the series and argues that Andrea's lack of intelligence and pride prevent viewers from engaging with her in a sympathetic manner (Walking Dead Wiki, 2013). 'Miss Anonymous hp' also realises that the series expects viewers to sympathise with Andrea. This becomes clear at the end of her post in which she justifies her dislike of Andrea by stating: "I prefer liking the characters I watch on my television. I like them flawed, and I like them diverse. But I do not like them annoying or stupid" (Walking Dead Wiki, 2013).[20] Television critic Zack Handlen (2013) has also frequently commented on the problematic characterisation of Andrea and, at one point, even began to include a "THIS WEEK IN ANDREA IS THE WORST" section in his weekly reviews of *The Walking Dead* (2010 -) (Stray observations section, para. 3). In contrast to articles that view the character critically, some viewers are just trying to make sense of the widespread hatred against Andrea. For example, there is a Reddit (2014) discussion in which the thread starter ('FR33CANDY') is investigating why

[20] For more articles in which viewers voice their antipathy for Andrea see Kain, 2012; Tyley, 2013; Stopera, 2013.

so many viewers hate Andrea. Similarly, user ‘Joshua’ on the The Walking Dead Forum (2012) asks the other members of the community to explain why Andrea is dislikeable.

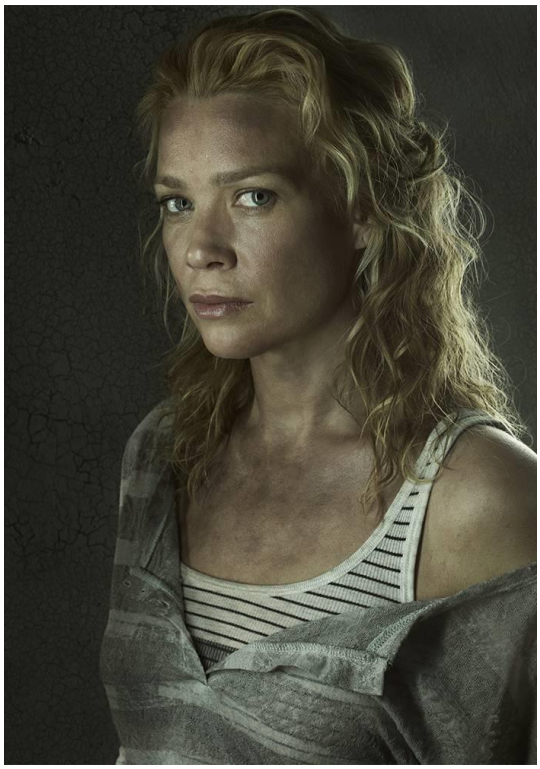

Figure 8 Promotional image of Andrea Harrison (Laurie Hold)

Andrea first appears in ‘Guts’ (2010), the second episode of the series. She is introduced as a member of a group of survivors that is hiding in a department store surrounded by zombies. When *The Walking Dead’s* main protagonist Rick enters the store, Andrea threatens him with a gun. She holds Rick responsible for leading the zombies towards her group and claims that everyone will die as a result of his actions (‘Guts’). Their exchange also draws attention to the fact that Andrea does not have any experience with guns since, as Rick points out later on in the episode, she forgot to unlock the safety switch. Andrea’s introduction already hints at the character’s antipathetic potential. While her scepticism towards Rick in the scene is warranted, she also threatens the only character that viewers had the chance to sympathise with at this point of the story. Moreover, some viewers might categorise the intensity with which she threatens Rick and her claim that everyone will die as a result of his actions as irrational behaviour. While the degree to which Andrea is established as antipathetic in her introduction is debatable, the way in which she reacts to her sister’s death arguably increases her antipathetic potential significantly.

After Andrea's sister Amy has been killed in a zombie attack, Rick attempts to convince Andrea that, for safety reasons, the group has to deal with Amy's body quickly ('Wildfire', 2010). However, the grieving Andrea does not to listen to him. Instead, she again threatens Rick and ensures him that she did not forget to unlock the safety switch on her gun this time. The only member of the group who manages to talk to Andrea is Dale (Jeffrey DeMunn). While holding on to Amy's dead body, Andrea reveals to him that her sister died on her birthday and admits to feeling guilty about having missed many of Amy's birthdays in the past. Yet, even Dale cannot convince Andrea to let go of her sister's body and ultimately Amy comes back to life as a zombie, which forces Andrea to shoot her in the head ('Wildfire').

Figure 9 Andrea mourning for her sister Amy

'Wildfire' (2010) suggests that the creators of *The Walking Dead* regard Andrea as a complicated, but sympathetic character. This is especially emphasised by the close-up shots of her face throughout the episode. For example, when Andrea sends Rick away, her facial expression signals to the viewer that she feels conflicted about this decision. Moreover, the scene in which Andrea puts a necklace on her sister's dead body is rendered as a scene of empathy: it features a number of lingering close-ups of Andrea's face that give viewers the chance to interpret her emotions (fig.9). Arguably, the authorial intent of these scenes is to present Andrea as a valuable option for sympathetic viewer engagement. Yet,

while some viewers might engage with Andrea as it was intended by the writers, the character's portrayal in this episode also has the potential to increase viewer antipathy. For example, it makes sense that Andrea is deeply affected by the death of her sister, but viewers might be irritated by the fact that she is willing to put the entire group in danger to mourn Amy. In addition, given the immediate threat of her sister turning into a zombie, the audience might interpret Andrea's behaviour in this instance as foolish.

However, most importantly, the creators of the series seem to have misjudged the emotional impact of Amy's death on the viewer. Although up until her death Amy has been presented as a sympathetic character, she dies in episode four which means viewers did not have much time to get emotionally attached to this character. This might result in an emotional disconnect when it comes to viewer engagement. Viewers might be able to understand the emotional impact that Amy's death has on the group, but it is unlikely that her death will affect them on an emotional level. In particular, despite Laurie Holden's convincing performance, the prolonged scenes of empathy in which Andrea mourns her sister seem out of place at this point of the narrative. Because viewers did not have the chance to get to know Amy and have only known Andrea for a limited amount of time, they might feel unsure about how to react to these scenes on an emotional level. According to Smith (1995), any time viewers watch a film or television series, they keep track of each character's behaviour on a conscious or subconscious level in order to decide if they want to form a sympathetic allegiance with that character (pp. 84-86). The problem with the scenes of empathy in 'Wildfire' is that the series seems to assume that the audience has already formed a sympathetic bond with Andrea when a large part of the audience might not have completed their evaluation of her.

In retrospect, the first season of *The Walking Dead* might be regarded as the origin of viewer antipathy towards Andrea. Yet it was not until season two of the series originally aired that more and more viewers began to voice their criticism of Andrea online. Arguably, the event that cemented many viewers' hatred of Andrea occurs in 'Chupacabra' (2011). At this point of the series, Shane (Jon Bernthal) has begun to teach Andrea how to properly shoot a gun. When, in 'Chupacabra', Andrea spots what she believes to be a zombie coming out of the woods, her instinct is to shoot it. However, the rest of the group convinces her to hold off until they have taken a closer look at the presumed

zombie. It then turns out that the blood-stained figure stumbling out of the woods is not a zombie, but Daryl (Norman Reedus)—a member of the main cast who had left to find a missing member of the group. When Daryl stumbles out of the woods, Andrea ignores the group's advice, picks up her sniper rifle, and shoots what she believes to be a zombie. Although Andrea's shot hits Daryl in the head, he is only wounded.

Figure 10 Andrea shooting Daryl

In many ways, this scene is emblematic for the problematic characterisation of Andrea. Firstly, her decision to shoot at the presumed zombie seems foolish given that, only a few moments before, a number of people asked her to hold off on shooting anyone. However, Andrea completely ignores this advice. In addition, the scene defies the internal logic of the series. Andrea only needs one shot to hit Daryl in the head despite the fact that she just learned how to properly shoot a gun. This means within a few episodes she has turned from not knowing how to handle a gun into an expert sniper. Furthermore, it is especially noteworthy that Andrea shoots Daryl in this instance since he is commonly referred to as one of the most beloved characters of the series. Thus, Andrea shooting Daryl is likely to facilitate the antipathy of a substantial part of the audience, namely those viewers who have formed a sympathetic bond with Daryl.

4.5.1 Hating Andrea

My analysis of Andrea's antipathetic potential stresses the importance of the narrative context for viewer antipathy. Of course, some viewers might dislike Andrea based on exterior character traits such as, for example, her gender or her appearance, but I do not believe that this identifies her as a character with high antipathetic potential. Rather, Andrea has a high antipathetic potential as a result of how she is presented within the narrative context of *The Walking Dead*. Interestingly enough, when viewed from a strictly moral standpoint, Andrea is a virtuous character. She has a strong sense of right and wrong and apart from killing zombies, which in the post-apocalyptic world of the series has become a necessity, she usually does not participate in transgressive behaviour.

However, aside from her morally virtuous behaviour, *The Walking Dead* also does not give the audience many reasons to care for Andrea. She is neither presented as fascinating nor does the programme manage to successfully equip her with character traits that make her more relatable. Instead, Andrea is mainly presented as prideful and stubborn. In itself this would not be a problem, but the series often pairs Andrea's prideful attitude and stubborn behaviour with what can only be described as foolishness. Television critic Maureen Ryan (2013) notes that many of the character problems of modern female television characters begin on a writing level. Referring to *Breaking Bad's* two main female characters, Ryan (2013) states: "Their behaviors and reactions were easy to predict, and if the writers didn't show consistent interest in their emotional lives and the women's inner depths, why would viewers care about them, let alone have positive responses to them?" (para. 6). However, Ryan (2013) also acknowledges that these shortcomings on a writing level do not render the antipathy some viewers might feel towards these character a "fluke" (para. 7). Arguably Ryan's observations fit in with how *The Walking Dead* characterises Andrea. The creators of series seem to insist that Andrea possesses an internal complexity and is a character worth rooting for. At the same time, her characterisation is frequently undermined by instances in which she behaves inconsistently or her behaviour, rather than being internally-motivated, is motivated by the show's plot.

Andrea's antipathetic potential is further increased by the fact that she is frequently featured in plotlines that lack the emotional impact that the creators

of the series seem to have intended. For example, at the end of season one, Andrea attempts to commit suicide. Ideally, the scene in which she contemplates if she wants to live or die in an explosion should elicit the sympathy of the viewer. Yet, by the end of season one, the audience still has not been given many reasons to care for Andrea. I regard Andrea's mourning for her sister in 'Guts' and her suicidal episode in the season finale ('TS-19', 2010) as misplaced scenes of empathy since their lack of emotional impact is largely the result of their misplacement within the narrative context. Arguably, misplaced scenes of empathy are also characterised by a lack of emotional clarity. This means viewers who are not emotionally invested in Andrea might be unable to infer a distinct emotional response into the prolonged close-up shots of her face. Ultimately, although these misplaced scenes of empathy do not present Andrea in a negative way, they still indirectly increase the character's antipathetic potential by undermining sympathetic engagement with her.

The narrative element that increases Andrea's antipathetic potential the most is how she is presented in relation to the other characters of the show. For example, as previously mentioned, Andrea repeatedly threatens Rick, and when she shoots Daryl, she almost kills one of the series' most-beloved characters by accident. One can find similar examples throughout the series. For example, in season three when Michonne (Danai Gurira) asks Andrea to leave Woodbury ('Say the Word', 2012) because she does not trust the governor (David Morrissey), Andrea dismisses her in a condescending manner. Given that the programme makes it clear to the audience that the governor is evil, Andrea's dismissal of Michonne makes her seem foolish. In addition, Andrea's distrust of Michonne is unwarranted since, at this point of the story, Michonne has proven numerous times that Andrea can trust her.

Finally, Andrea's choice of romantic partners might increase her antipathetic potential. Her two main love interests in the series are Shane Walsh and the governor, both of which turn out to be villains. At the beginning of the series, Shane is portrayed as hot-tempered, but sympathetic. However, in the course of season two, he turns into the series' main antagonist ('Better Angels', 2012). Andrea and Shane's relationship is perhaps better described as an affair rather than a long-term relationship, but Andrea still sympathises with Shane and the show makes it clear that she would prefer Shane over Rick as the leader of the group. Thus, while Andrea does not actively take part in any of Shane's

transgressive behaviour, her association with Shane might make it more difficult for viewers to sympathise with her. This is even more the case for her relationship with the governor in season three. In theory, it should be tragic that Andrea is in a relationship with the governor without realising that he is psychopath, but the series makes it so obvious that he is a villain that Andrea comes across as foolish for not realising that he is evil. Thus, instead of sympathising with Andrea for being stuck in a horrible situation, viewers might feel annoyed at her since it takes her an entire season to realise that the governor is not what he pretends to be.

4.6 Conclusion

Earlier on in this chapter, I have argued that fictional television narratives somewhat relieve the audience from the moral obligations of everyday life. As a result, viewers have the moral freedom to sympathise with or reject characters based on both interior (behavioural patterns, character motivations) and exterior character traits (e.g. appearance, race, gender). However, although the exterior traits of a television character influence the viewer's character evaluation to some degree, they are not strong markers for antipathy. The main reason for this is that disliking a character based on exterior character traits is highly subjective. Consequently, this aspect of viewer engagement cannot be easily incorporated into a comprehensive theoretical model on viewer antipathy. Furthermore, any theoretical model on viewer antipathy that relies strongly on the emotional responses of individual viewers cannot account for the phenomenon of widely-disliked characters. In contrast, as I have argued throughout this chapter, any comprehensive theoretical model of viewer antipathy needs to pay close attention to the narrative context.

For example, the narrative context of *Game of Thrones* encourages viewers to hate Joffrey Baratheon. This means everything from Jack Gleeson's performance to the way in which Joffrey interacts with other characters in the narrative has been designed to increase the viewer's dislike of him. Similarly, the widespread hatred towards Andrea emphasises the importance of the narrative context for a character's antipathetic potential despite the fact that she is a much more morally virtuous character than Joffrey. More specifically, *The Walking Dead* insists that it is worth it for the audience to sympathise with Andrea. At the same time, this character constantly makes questionable

decisions, associates herself with the most villainous characters in the series, and frequently mistreats some of the series' most sympathetic characters. Furthermore, engaging with a villain enables viewers to enjoy their hatred. In particular, the assumption that Joffrey will eventually be held accountable for his behaviour enables the audience to find pleasure in his transgressions, especially if his transgressive behaviour is not directed at characters the viewer sympathises with. In contrast, disliking characters who are intended to be sympathetic does not provide the viewer with the possibility to experience the same kind of transgressive pleasure. Of course, like sympathy or empathy, antipathy remains a highly subjective element of viewer engagement with television characters. Thus, in the course of this chapter, I have mainly referred to how the narrative context of a television text can increase a character's antipathetic potential. Ultimately, I regard my work on antipathetic characters in this chapter only as a starting point for further studies on viewer antipathy in contemporary television. My research suggests that viewer antipathy towards television characters does not rely as heavily as previously assumed on questions of morality and is more closely tied to the narrative context, yet these outcomes need to be tested in different television genres and in relation to various types of television characters.

The following chapter focuses on viewer engagement with animated television characters. Although the storytelling (e.g. narrative structure) of animated television largely corresponds to the storytelling of television drama, viewer engagement with animated television characters is distinct in that it is strongly shaped by the visual style of each programme. Thus, more than any other case study in this thesis, animated television foregrounds an aspect of viewer engagement that Smith (1995) has defined as recognition. Furthermore, the following chapter represents somewhat of a shift of focus since it is specifically concerned with the relationship between performance and viewer engagement. In particular, I argue in chapter five that the distinct visual style of each animated programme, its narrative structure (e.g. episodic, serial), and the mode of performance it subscribes to (e.g. figurative, embodied) are crucial elements of the viewer/character relationship.

5 Viewer Engagement with Animated Television Characters

This chapter focuses on viewer engagement with animated television characters. In the course of this chapter, I identify some of the distinct characteristics of viewer engagement with animated characters and examine them within the context of television narration. Referring to studies from animation studies, television studies, and cognitive media theory, I investigate the viewer's emotional engagement with characters from two contemporary animated television programmes: *The Legend of Korra* (2012 – 2014) and *South Park* (1997 –). Throughout this study, I have explored different elements of the viewer/character relationship in a variety of television genres. One of the overarching arguments that underlies all chapters of this dissertation is that viewer engagement with television characters is a complex cognitive process that is not only shaped by the distinct characteristics of television narration, but also by the narrative design of each television genre. In this chapter, I take a slightly different approach. The main reason for this is that animated television is not a genre. It is rather a television mode that consists of programmes from a wide range of genres. More specifically, although the programmes that I discuss in the course of this chapter are exemplary for two particular genres, namely drama and comedy, my focus is not primarily on how the genre-specific elements of each programme influence the viewer's relationship with the characters. Instead, I analyse the animation style, the animated performances, and the narrative structure of each programme and investigate how the combination of these elements affects the viewer's engagement with the characters.

I begin this chapter with an examination of existing studies on animated characters. In this section, I discuss the work of animation scholars such as Scott McCloud (1994), Alan Cholodenko (2007), Scott Bukatman (2012), and Paul Wells (1998). In addition, in order to establish the differences between cinematic and television animation, I refer to Jason Mittell's (2003) historical study of Saturday morning cartoons in America and discuss Kevin S. Sandler's (2003) study on "Brand Synergy" in television animation. Most importantly, in the first section of this chapter I discuss Donald Crafton's (2013) "Performance in and of Animation" in detail. In many ways, I regard Crafton's (2013) theory on animated

performances as the foundation for my own work on animated characters in this chapter. In his study, Crafton establishes two different modes of animated performances: figurative and embodied. And although Crafton hints at the potential effects that each of these modes of performance might have for viewer engagement, he does not discuss them in the context of television narration. Thus, aside from investigating viewer engagement with animated television characters on a stylistic level, one of my main aims in this chapter is to examine how the interplay between these two modes of animated performances and the distinct narrative qualities of television narration affects how viewers react to animated television characters on a cognitive and emotional level.

The first section of this chapter provides the theoretical basis for the remainder of the chapter which is a detailed investigation of the viewer/character relationship in *The Legend of Korra* and *South Park*. In my analysis of each programme, I focus on two aspects that I consider to be essential for viewer engagement in animated television: Firstly, the way in which the animation style shapes the viewer's relationship with the characters and, secondly, the influence that the structural and temporal characteristics of the TV medium have on this relationship. More specifically, I investigate the different ways in which *The Legend of Korra* uses the animated format and serial storytelling to increase the viewer's engagement with the characters. For example, I examine how the show uses visual humour and spectacular action sequences to elicit an emotional response from the viewer and I discuss the character development of the main character over the course of the series in relation to viewer engagement. Moreover, I discuss the change of animation style that the programme underwent at the beginning of its second season in relation to the viewer's long-term engagement with the characters. In my examination of *South Park*, I discuss the crucial role that the show's simplistic animation style plays for the viewer's emotional engagement with the characters. This discussion is based on the idea that *South Park's* often extreme visual humour is primarily enjoyable for the viewer as a result of the programme's simplistic animation style. Furthermore, I examine the effects of *South Park's* playful approach to seriality on the viewer's relationship with the characters. In particular, I analyse if *South Park's* animated performances and the way in which the show uses animation to elicit an emotional response from

the viewer have changed as a result of the show's recent introduction of serial storytelling.

5.1 Animated Characters, Animated Performances

Perhaps the most obvious difference between live action and animated characters is that animated characters do not exist outside of the narrative they inhabit. In contrast to characters from live action film and television, who are always bound to the body of a particular actor (although that body might be obscured in some way), animated characters do not dispose of a physical body. Murray Smith has previously analysed this phenomenon in his discussion of the role of recognition for viewer engagement. He states that "recognition describes the spectator's construction of character: the perception of a set of textual elements, in film typically cohering around the image of a body, as an individuated and continuous human agent" (Smith, 1995, 82). Smith further argues the bodily attributes of a character are often closely tied to her traits. As Smith (1995) states, "the traits and occurrent states of characters are available to spectators principally through performative factors: the body, the face, the voice, and the actions performed through these physical attributes" (p. 113). This is particularly important for viewer engagement with animated characters since, in contrast to live action, the animators are in complete control of every detail of how a character looks and performs. Moreover, in animation, the physical attributes of a character can be easily altered to highlight particular traits of a character.

Another unique quality of animation that shapes viewer engagement is a character's level of detail or potential lack of detail. Scholars have been fascinated with the viewer's ability to engage with comic and animated characters on an emotional level despite the fact that their design is often fairly simplistic. For example, Carl Plantinga (2009) notes:

> The very possibility of the audience's engagement with fictional characters rests in part on the human tendency to personify and respond to abstract, nonhuman entities, especially in the context of visual representations. Psychologists have demonstrated this in some intriguing experiments involving animated geometric representations. Subjects who are shown a short movie depicting triangles and circles on a surface nearly always interpret these movements as the interactions of intentional agents. The subjects attribute intentions to

> the triangles and circles, seeing their activity as self-directed. Small wonder, then, that audiences respond to animated characters such as Shrek or Snow White as though they were persons. (pp. 97-98)

In his theory on comic books, Scott McCloud (1994) also poses the question as to why comic book readers are so enthralled with the simplified reality of cartoons (p. 30). According to McCloud (1994), any form of viewer engagement with comic characters relies on a process he refers to as "amplification through simplification" (p. 30). The idea behind this process is that the meaning of any image can be amplified by stripping it down to its most essential elements. McCloud (1994) argues that as a result of this process viewers of live action films sometimes refer to specific elements of the film as cartoonish to indicate the heightened intensity of the story or the visuals (p. 31). More importantly, similarly to Plantinga, he states that readers will typically ascribe a human face even to the most abstract arrangements of dots and lines such as, for example, the drawing of a smiley face (McCloud, 1994, p. 31). Following this logic, McCloud argues that the simpler the drawing of a face is, the easier it will be for the reader to engage with that face since they can project themselves onto it. In contrast, if a face is drawn in a realistic style, then this can lead to a more distanced form of reader engagement because the reader will perceive it as the face of another (McCloud, 1994, p. 36).

The theories I have discussed so far already indicate that the discourse on viewer engagement with animated characters is often tied to the medium's ability to disregard the rules of reality. Animation expert Paul Wells (1998) states that live action films are often discussed in terms of how real the events and characters depicted on screen are or how real they might seem to the viewer. However, this is not necessarily the case for animation. According to Wells (1998), this is because animation as a medium is already "informed by self-evident principles of construction" (p. 25). Wells further argues that animation does not take the same approach to reality as live action. Instead, it "prioritises its capacity to resist 'realism' as a mode of representation and uses its various techniques to create numerous styles which are fundamentally about 'realism'" (Wells, 1998, p. 25). There is an ongoing discourse around realism in animation. This discourse is, however, different from the discourse on realism in live action.

In animation, the discussion on realism is often less about how realistic a particular work of animation is and more about why and to what degree it adheres to the rules of the physical world. Disney has been a cornerstone of this discourse since, early on in the twentieth century, the studio established a house style that was more realistic than most other works of animation that were released at that time. Applying Umberto Eco's (1986) concept of "hyper-realism" (p.7) to animation, Wells (1998) describes the difference between Disney and other works of animation as follows: "For Disney, and others working in this way, to connote 'reality', however, the construction of, and the contexts created within, the films, must necessarily aspire to verisimilitude, even when making with fairytale narratives or using animals or caricatured humans as the main characters" (p. 25). The Disney approach, which meant striving for a certain amount of reality in a medium that gives creators the freedom to completely break with the rules of the physical world, is still a frequent subject in recent academic works on animation. In the context of this chapter, the most important outcome of Disney's hyper-realistic approach to animation is that it had a lasting effect on animated performance.

Some of the differences between animated and non-animated performances are rooted in the general differences between live action and animation that I have already discussed in this chapter. For example, the simplicity of the design of many animated characters and the fact that most of them are hand-drawn or computer-generated influence their performance and affect the viewer's engagement with them. At the same time, as Donald Crafton (2013) points out in his influential study on animation and performance, to most viewers animated characters "still seem normal, like other screen actors" (p. 17). Reflecting on his own reaction to animated characters, Crafton (2013) states: "Watching them, I enjoy a powerful sensation of recognition and a potent sense of their presence. They are drawings, but are they also movie stars? This dissonance is the most fundamental conundrum. How can inanimate drawings or objects act, or perform at all?" (p. 17). Crafton is fascinated with the spectator's cognitive ability to perceive animated and non-animated characters in a similar way, but he also acknowledges that animated performance functions differently. In particular, he argues that animated performances consist of different layers, a performance *in* animation and a performance *of* animation (Crafton, 2013, p. 17).

According to Crafton (2013), performance in animation primarily refers to the "behaviors, actions, and expressivity of the actors, as well as the dramatic situations, narrative flow, plots, and depictions presented in the film" (p. 17). Thus, the performance in animation is fairly similar to the performance of actors in live action narratives—aside from the fact that in animation a performance only takes place if that which is animated (e.g. drawing, clay model, computer-generated model) begins to move (Crafton, 2013, p. 17). In contrast, the performance of animation describes the "continuously unfolding processes that begin before the film is made and continue after its first performance" (Crafton, 2013, p. 17). This does not only include the work of the animators during the making of the film, but also the response of the audience to the finished product. Crafton (2013) regards the work of the animators as a performance in itself, albeit this performance is conditional since it relies on the condition that the work of animation will be finished and projected to an audience (p. 17). Ultimately then, these two processes of animated performance are closely related since the performance *in* animation is both "a springboard and a result" (Crafton, 2013, p. 17) of the performance *of* animation, yet, at the same time, they are still separate processes.

Aside from distinguishing between the performance *in* and *of* animation, Crafton claims that there are two different approaches to animation: embodied and figurative (2013, p. 22). Although most works of animation adhere to one of these two performance styles, they are not exclusive. For example, embodied performances might feature some elements of figurative performances and vice versa (Crafton, 2013). According to Crafton (2013), figurative performances prioritise "movement that conveys signifying gestures and pantomime typical of broad humor and slapstick rather than emotive personality, character nuance, and emotional expression" (p. 23). Crafton uses the example of Betty Boop, one of the most famous characters from early animation, to further distinguish between figurative and embodied modes of performance. Although Betty features some traces of embodied animated performances, Crafton regards her as a predominantly figurative performer since "her personality is an infectious composite of acquired details, more like a collection of poached traits than a complex expression of inner drives and motives" (2013, p. 27-28). Furthermore, according to Crafton, narratives that primarily feature figurative performances typically do not consider questions of morality or provide the viewer deeper

insight into a character's psyche. Instead, they rely more strongly on symbolism and repetition (Crafton, 2013, p. 32).

As previously noted, in the nineteen thirties, Disney established an animation style that was characterised by a high level of verisimilitude. Embodied animated performances are a direct result of the studio's approach to animation. Crafton (2013) notes that embodied animated performances are based on what is today referred to as method acting—an acting technique that was first developed by Stanislavsky in the early twentieth century. In contrast to figurative performances, which are typically extroverted, embodied acting is introverted. According to Crafton (2013), "it is the philosophy and practice of creating imaginatively realized beings with individuality, depth, and internal complexity" (p. 36). The idea behind embodied acting is that an actor internalises the role they are playing to shift the viewer's focus from them to the character they are playing. Among the most prominent actors who follow or have followed Stanislavsky's method are Marlon Brando, Meryl Streep, and Daniel Day-Lewis. And while some viewers might have an idea of what an embodied performance in live action film encompasses (e.g. actors staying 'in character' between takes), this is arguably not as clear in the case of animation. Crafton (2013) explains that many Disney animators were required to study Stanislavsky's writings and think of ways to translate his style of acting into animation. Crafton cites the character of Donald Duck as an example for embodied acting since his behaviour and movements are generally internally-motivated and consistent across different narratives. Of course, Donald's often angry gestures might seem similar to figurative animated performances, yet his movements are rarely gratuitous (Crafton, 2013, pp. 38-40). In other words, Donald is not only behaving the way he does in order to elicit a particular response from the viewer, but also because that is how he is as a character. As I have already indicated, Disney's demand for embodied animated performances had an immense impact on the work flow of the studio's animators. In particular, in addition to drawing a character, the animators now also had to have an understanding of the character's feelings, motives, and emotions (Crafton, 2013, pp. 38-40).

However, embodied performances do not represent an evolution of figurative performances. While this might seem obvious, I still believe that it is noteworthy, especially given that embodied performances are synonymous with

what, today is often referred to as “complex” (Mittell, 2015) characters. More specifically, when discussing these two modes of performance in a television context, it might be tempting to link figurative performances to episodic television narratives and embodied performances to serial television narratives. This is due to the fact that Crafton’s (2013) distinction between figurative and embodied animated performances somewhat resembles the way in which some television scholars distinguish between episodic and serial television narratives. For example, Mittell (2015) has argued that episodic television programmes are largely defined by a lack of narrative consequences and a reliance on repetitive plot elements (p. 18). In contrast, serial television narratives are defined by an emphasis of narrative consequences and plotlines that accumulate over an extended period of time. Based on these definitions, it becomes clear how one might equate figurative animated performances, which accentuate the immediate aspects of a performance (e.g. movement and action), with episodic television, and embodied performances, which are characterised by a sense of verisimilitude and internal complexity, with serial television narratives. However, I believe that such a categorisation would be too simplistic since, as Crafton (2013) notes, even early cinematic animated shorts, which were typically episodic in nature, often featured performances that were partially figurative and partially embodied.

In other words, the line between figurative and embodied animated performances is not static, but fluid. Of course, some works of animation might still adhere to one particular mode of performance, but others might switch back and forth between the two. Thus, instead of viewing figurative and embodied performances as two completely separate approaches to performance in animation, it makes more sense to view them as two fluid modes of animated performance that highlight different aspects of a performance. In the context of this chapter, Crafton’s (2013) performance model is particularly valuable because it indicates how a work of animation seeks to elicit an emotional response from the viewer at specific points of the story. For example, figurative performances are better equipped to elicit visceral emotional responses (e.g. laughter, disgust) in the viewer whereas embodied performances typically generate more nuanced emotional responses (e.g. sympathy, antipathy). Yet, as I discuss in more detail in the second half of this chapter, the way in which these modes of animated performance seek to involve viewers on an emotional level is

also affected by their narrative context. In particular, both figurative and embodied animated performances function slightly differently based on if they operate within an episodic or a serial narrative.

Crafton (2013) also notes that, when creating animated characters, the Disney animators had to be careful to strike the right balance between realism and cartoonish-ness since they discovered that animated performances that were too life-like had the potential to affect viewer engagement in a negative way. Today, this element of viewer engagement is commonly referred to as the uncanny valley effect (Crafton, 2013, p. 43). Paradoxically, the uncanny valley is characterised by feelings of closeness and distance. Typically, characters that elicit the uncanny valley effect in the viewer are CG creations that exist somewhere between cartoon character and real human being and are defined by that in-betweenness. Alan Cholodenko (2007) has argued that animated characters fit in perfectly with Freud's definition of the uncanny experience. He argues that the "animated automaton," (2007, p. 503) which is how Cholodenko refers to both animated objects and characters, induces uncertainty and undecidability in the viewer as to whether it is living or dead. The options the viewer is faced with is that the automaton either appears to be alive but is dead or it is dead and appears to be alive. Regardless of what scenario the viewer believes in, both of them create an uncanny experience for the viewer (Cholodenko, 2007, p 503). According to Cholodenko, the result of this uncanny experience is that viewers often have conflicted feelings about animated characters. As he puts it, the animated automaton will seem "at once strangely familiar and familiarly strange, frighteningly delightful and delightfully frightening, malignly benign and benignly malign" (Cholodenko, 2007, p. 503).

Before moving into an analysis of animated television, I want to make clear that I do not believe that all of the elements of viewer engagement with animated characters that I have investigated up to this point affect the viewer's relationship with animated characters in equal measure. For example, while some viewers might register that their reaction to animated character differs from how they react to live action characters, I believe that this is primarily a subconscious process. Similarly, I am convinced that the uncanny nature of animated characters only rarely becomes the focal point of the viewer's engagement with them. In other words, I regard the unique aspects of engaging with animated characters as another layer of the viewer/character relationship

that might influence more typical engagement patterns such as, for example, antipathy or sympathy.

As I have argued at the beginning of this chapter, animated television is not one specific television genre, but rather a television format that consists of a variety of genres. Thus, it would go beyond the scope of this chapter to provide the reader with a comprehensive history of animated television programmes. However, before examining the viewer/character relationship in *The Legend of Korra* and *South Park* in detail, it is necessary to provide some historical context on animated television programmes. Most of the theories I have discussed in the first half of this chapter have been concerned with cinematic animation. The reason for this is that cinematic animation and televisual animation are closely related, in particular with regard to performance. Mark Harrison and Carol A. Stabile (2003) argue that cinematic animation in many ways represents a pre-history of televisual animation. They point out that especially at the beginning of the nineteen fifties, the early days of animated television, there was a lot of overlap between cinematic and televisual animation. The main reason for this is that television animation largely consisted of animated shorts that were originally intended for theatrical distribution, but ended up being shown on television (Harrison and Stable, 2003, p. 3).

Harrison and Stable (2003) further emphasise that Disney's approach to animation had an immense impact on animation in general. In addition to Disney's goal to create a certain sense of verisimilitude within their works of animation, "the precedents set by the Disney Studios all tended toward containment—the streamlining of the production process via compartmentalization, the standardization of character's features and traits and the movement away from visual excess and toward narrative clarity" (Harrison and Stable, 2003, p. 6). This means Disney not only had great influence on the creative approach to animation, but also functioned as a role model for how animation production could be made more effective. Jason Mittell (2003) notes that, although the content of the cinematic cartoons did not change when they were shown on television, they were still affected by the "textual transformations" (p. 36) of the different medium. For example, they were usually bundled together in half-hour programme blocks, which affected how viewers experienced them. More specifically, on television, for the first time

ever, the cartoons became the main attraction, which stood in direct contrast to how they had been consumed previously (Mittell, 2003, p. 36). One of the problems of early television animation was that the production of animated shorts was so expensive that producing original animated content proved to be a challenge. The result of this dilemma was that the television industry moved toward a more cost-effective animation production technique.

Today, this technique is often referred to as "limited animation" (Mittell, 2003, p. 38). This new form of animation, which would soon become the standard for television animation, was characterised by "minimal visual variety, emphasis on dialogue and verbal humor, and repetitive situations and narratives" (Mittell, 2003, p.38). Although many television cartoons followed this template, limited animation became particularly associated with those cartoons that had been produced by the Hanna-Barbera studios. Among others, these include *The Huckleberry Hound Show* (1958 – 62), *The Flintstones* (1960 – 66), and *The Yogi Bear Show* (1961 – 62). The success of *The Flintstones* led to an animation boom that resulted in a number of animation shows that tried to emulate the programme's aesthetic and narrative style. Yet, many of these programmes were of sub-par quality.

Ultimately, this led to the belief that television animation programmes, with their repetitive storylines and limited visual style, were only appealing to children. As Mittell (2003) puts it: "Cartoons shifted from a mass audience theatrical label to a 'lowest common denominator' category, implying shoddy production values, formulaic stories and gags, hyper-commercialization, and limited appeals to anyone except children" (p. 51). In fact, after *The Flintstones*, it would take over twenty years until with *The Simpsons* (1989 –) another animated programme would air on prime time television in the US (Mittell, 2003). While this brief history of animated television is incomprehensive, I still believe that having a basic understanding of the similarities and differences between cinematic and television animation is a necessary precursor for any investigation on viewer engagement with animated television characters. Moreover, I believe that it is crucial to recognise the effects that the television medium has had on the development of animation before investigating viewer engagement with animated television characters.

5.2 Embodied Animated Performances in *The Legend of Korra*

Nickelodeon's *The Legend of Korra* is a prime example of serialised animated television. The series is a spin-off to the highly successful *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2005 – 08) and was created by Michael Dante DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko, who previously had been the showrunners on *Airbender*. Both shows takes place in an ancient fictional universe in which the world is divided into four nations, each of which represent one of the four elements—air, fire, earth, and water. Some people in this universe are born with the ability to control or, as it is referred to in the series, bend an element. Yet only the avatar, whose responsibility it is to bring balance to the world, is able to control all four elements. Both *Airbender* and *Korra* are American programmes, but they are heavily influenced by Eastern mythology. The Eastern influence on both programmes is not only apparent in the character design, which is reminiscent of Japanese animation, but also in the themes they explore. For example, in both shows, friendship, spirituality, and destiny are recurrent themes.

Korra, which is set seventy years after *Airbender*, follows Korra (Janet Varney), a rebellious teenager from the water tribe, on her quest to become the new avatar. Other notable characters include Korra's friends Mako (David Faustino), Bolin (P.J. Byrne), Asami (Seychelle Gabrielle), and her uncle, and airbending master, Tenzin (J.K. Simmons). The characters and their relationships progress throughout the series, but each season is structured around a specific theme (Air, Spirits, Change, Balance).

Figure 11 Korra (right) talking to Bolin (centre) and Mako (left)

Korra premiered to high ratings in 2012 but lost viewers with every subsequent season. As a result, Nickelodeon made the second half of season four only available online. Despite its diminishing viewership the series remained a critical success until its final season. In particular, reviewers frequently praised the series' ability to tackle complicated subjects like segregation, terrorism, and sexuality in a way that appeals to both children and adult viewers.

From its very first episode, *Korra* put an emphasis on serial storytelling. Even in the first few episodes, which the show primarily uses to introduce its main characters and establish its fictional world, viewer who have previously seen *Airbender* will be able to experience narrative pleasures that are distinct for the serial format. More specifically, the series invites viewers to spot the differences between Korra and its predecessor and even resolves plotlines that originated in *Airbender*. For example, early on in the first season it is revealed that Korra's airbending master Tenzin is the son of Katara (Eva Marie Saint) and Aang (D.B. Sweeney), both of whom are main characters in *Airbender*. In addition, only fans of the previous series will recognise and be able to appreciate the appearances of other *Airbender* characters such as Toph (Kate Higgins, Philece Sampler), Zuko (Bruce Davison), and Iroh (Greg Baldwin). Similarly, the revelation that, since the ending of *Airbender*, its main character Aang has died will only have emotional resonance for those viewers who have followed him over the course of three seasons. *The Legend of Korra* primarily

features embodied animated performances. The actions of the main characters are internally motivated and the series suggests an emotional depth beyond what is shown on screen for all of them. However, before examining in detail how the series' embodied animated performances and its serial format affect viewer engagement, I want to briefly discuss an element of animated performances that I have not mentioned so far: voice acting.

The main reason for why I have not discussed the relationship between vocal performances and viewer engagement earlier on in this chapter is that most theories on animation tend to focus on the visual component of animated performances. In contrast, in her study of vocal performances in Pixar films, Colleen Montgomery (2016) provides a historical overview of existing theories on vocal performances in animation. Montgomery (2016) states that Hollywood stars who lend their voices to animated characters challenge the concept of the acousmatic voice (p. 7). The acousmatic voice, a theoretical concept developed by Michel Chion, describes "a filmic character or figure whose voice is not attributable to a material body or other onscreen source" (Montgomery, 2016, p. 7). This is an accurate definition of vocal performances in early animation in which the voice actors were mostly unknown, but Montgomery (2016) argues that once the voice of a widely-known actor or celebrity is attached to an animated character, the vocal performance becomes de-acousmatised (pp. 6-8). Thus, according to Montgomery (2016), in contrast to the acousmatic voice, which is commonly associated with an aura of mystery, the de-acousmatised voice is tied to a distinct physical body. As Montgomery (2016) notes, "animated films obviate the corporeality of the star performer from the image track," (p.8) yet the star's voice still is a distinct element of an animated character's persona since it is inscribed on the soundtrack (8).

It would go beyond the scope of this chapter to investigate all the ways in which the vocal performances in animation affect viewer engagement with animated characters, but it should be acknowledged that vocal performances do influence the viewer's engagement with animated characters. In particular, it can add a layer of intertextuality to the viewer's engagement with animated characters if a character is voiced by a star. Although most of *The Legend of Korra's* vocal performers are well-established actors, arguably only a few of them might be considered stars. For example, the lesser-known members of the series' voice cast include Janet Varney (Korra), P.J. Byrne (Bolin), and Seychelle

Gabriel (Asami). In contrast, J.K. Simmons (Tenzin), Aubrey Plaza (Eska), and Henry Rollins (Zaheer) are among *Korra's* vocal star performers. More specifically, Plaza's performance is clearly based on her previous performance in *Parks and Recreation* (2009 – 15) while Henry Rollins' performance draws from his real-life background as the singer of Black Flag and The Rollins Band. Thus, while all of the main characters in *Korra* give embodied animated performances, those characters who are voiced by stars arguably benefit from an added layer of intertextual depth. While *Korra's* vocal performances primarily help to establish the characters' emotional depth, the existence of narrative consequences draws the viewer's attention to the character's progression throughout the series. This means ideally viewers are not only emotionally-invested in present narrative events, but they also engage with the programme by speculating about how an event might affect the characters and their relationships. Looking at Korra's character progress throughout season one underlines how much the series is indebted to the embodied animated performance style.

Korra is introduced in the first episode of the series ('Welcome to Republic City', 2012) when members of the Order of the White Lotus travel to the Southern water tribe because they have heard rumours about a little girl who might be the new avatar. When they ask Korra's parents what it is that makes them so sure that their daughter is the new avatar, they get their answer in the form of Korra, who enters the room and immediately demonstrates her ability to control all four elements. She bends her way through the room and tells them: "I'm the avatar. You got to deal with it" ('Welcome to Republic City'). Korra's introduction is only a short scene, but it perfectly encapsulates her character. She is presented as confident, hot-headed, stubborn, and funny. Although some of these character traits get redefined over the course of four seasons, it is still remarkable that many of the series' plotlines can be traced back to Korra's introduction. More specifically, almost all of Korra's struggles throughout the series are closely related to her personality. This first becomes apparent in 'A Leaf in the Wind' (2012), in which Korra is shown to be unable to airbend during her training with master Tenzin. Korra gets frustrated and Tenzin specifically refers to her impulsive personality as he tells her that "often the element that's the most difficult for the avatar to master is the one most opposite to his personality" ('A Leaf in the Wind'). It takes Korra until the final episode of season one to become more patient and selfless, which finally

enables her to master airbending. Similar examples for serial storytelling can be found in *Korra's* subsequent seasons. For example, in the final season, the programme resolves the underlying tension between Korra and Asami (Seychelle Gabriel) by suggesting the beginning of a romantic relationship between the two young women ('The Last Stand', 2014). In many ways, this plot development is exemplary for the programme's strong emphasis of serial narration. The revelation that Korra and Asami are in love is not only emotionally satisfying because it subverts viewer expectations, but it also makes sense within the historical context of the series. More specifically, despite the fact that in the course of the series Korra and Asami have repeatedly competed for Mako's affection, the show has also made it clear that they like and respect each other. As a result, the reveal of their feelings for each other does not seem out of character, but provides the viewer with one of the main pleasures of serial narration—the resolution of a plotline that has slowly accumulated over time and signals character growth.

Thus far, I have primarily discussed how *The Legend of Korra* uses serialised storytelling and embodied animated performances to engage viewers on an emotional level. Yet, the animated performances in *Korra* are not devoid of figurative performance elements. In fact, most performances in the series might be best described as embodied animated performances that occasionally embrace figurative performance elements. More specifically, while all of the series' main characters have an emotional depth to them, they sometimes act in ways that are reminiscent of figurative animated performances. For example, the creators of the programme clearly revel in the freedom that the animated format gives them when it comes to telling visual gags. This becomes apparent in 'When Extremes Meet' (2012), in which Korra reveals to her friends that she is not sure if she can save Republic City from the threat of Amon (Steve Blum) and his group of separatists. Just as Korra's friends assure her that they will stand by her side during her fight against Amon, the scene is interrupted by Meelo (Logan Wells) who airbends into the frame and lets off gas before pledging his allegiance to Korra.

Figure 12 Use of visual gags in *The Legend of Korra*

The series features various similar scenes in which a dramatic moment is interrupted by a visual gag. However, more notable than the show's use of visual gags is the way in which Korra utilises figurative performance elements during its frequent action scenes. While *The Legend of Korra* is not the only animated television programme that features action scenes on a regular basis, the meticulous direction and choreography of the fights makes the show stand out from other action-oriented animated programmes. As television critic Matt Patches (2012) puts it in his review of the series' first season:

> When you have element-bending at your disposal, the possibilities are endless. Every episode features another ingenious use of adrenaline-infused animation; from police captain Lin Beifong's Spider-man-like attacks on Amon's airship fleet or an intimate battle between Korra and Amon's right-hand man, the electricity-enhanced Lieutenant, no show matches the intensity and grit of a *Legend of Korra* action sequence. (para. 10)

While Patches (2012) acknowledges the show's impressive storytelling in his review, he argues that it is *Korra's* action direction which pushes the series "into greatness" (para. 10). Arguably, in comparison to the more subdued satisfaction that viewers might feel as a result of the resolution of a plotline that has accumulated for an extended period of time, action scenes engage the audience in a much more immediate way. However, the distinct pleasures of serial storytelling and the more visceral pleasures that an action scene can provide are

not mutually exclusive. For example, the previously discussed fight scene in which Korra defeats Amon by mastering airbending provides the viewer with both serial and visceral pleasure.

Up until this point, I have mainly discussed the differences and similarities between animated and non-animated television programmes and pointed towards some of the unique elements of viewer engagement with animated television characters. Before moving on to my second case study, I want to briefly examine a possible complication of viewer engagement with animated characters that I have only hinted at in the first section of this chapter, namely the uncanny potential of viewer's relationship with animated television characters. Arguably one of the most fascinating elements of the viewer's relationship with animated characters is how fragile that relationship is. Emily Guendelsberger (2013b) specifically refers to this aspect of viewer engagement in her review of *Korra's* second season:

> This season, it's so clear that while everybody remembers the cool fights, it's the less-flashy everyday stuff — the small changes in facial expression and shifts in posture — that quietly make a watcher believe that a bunch of lines on a screen are a human being with feelings. It's a brain thing, I think: The more "alive" characters look, the easier it is to forget they're not real and feel empathy for them; the more empathy you feel for a character, the more you experience/feel/live his or her story rather than just watching it. (para. 8)

These observations are a continuation of Guendelsberger's analysis of the series' animation style in earlier episodes of the second season. More specifically, Guendelsberger (2013a) has criticised 'Civil Wars, Part 2' (2013) for its subpar character animation in comparison to the show's first season (para. 6). The differences between the animation in this episode and the animation in *Korra's* first season are striking. While the overall animation style of the show is still the same, the characters' performances in this episode seem far less animated or life-like. As Guendelsberger (2013a) notes, the change in animation becomes immediately obvious in the first scene of the episode which is a conversation between Korra and her uncle Unalaq (Adrian LaTourelle). During their conversation, the two characters barely move at all. In fact, the most notable movements are the characters' mouths and eyes although even the eye animations are mostly limited to Korra conveying a sense of doubt at the end of the scene. Guendelsberger (2013a) acknowledges this lack of eye movement and

refers to earlier episodes of the series in which the character animation comes across as much more lifelike. According to Guendelsberger (2013a), this is particularly obvious in a scene from 'The Spirit of Competition' (2012) in which Mako, Korra, Bolin, and Asami meet in the change room of the pro-bending arena. Looking closely at this scene, I agree with Guendelsberger's assessment. Throughout the entire scene, the characters' facial expressions are much more animated. In particular, the characters constantly blink or use their eyebrows to emote in subtle ways. In addition, they simply emote more. For example, when Korra reveals her feelings to Mako, her performance indicates that she is nervous: she holds her body like an awkward teenager, smiles uncontrollably, and her face turns red when she talks to Mako ('The Spirit of Competition'). Furthermore, there is a shot later on in the scene that places Mako in the foreground, which indicates that he is secretly listening to Bolin and Korra's conversation. Although Mako is rendered in soft focus, his eyebrows are visibly raised and he clenches his teeth, which makes clear that he does not approve of the fact that his brother is asking Korra out on a date ('The Spirit of Competition', 2012).

This comparison between the animated performances in 'Civil Wars, Part 2' (2013) and 'The Spirit of Competition' highlights the degree to which the animation shapes the viewer's engagement with the characters. In the case of *Korra*, the lifelessness of the animated performances in some of the episodes of the second season introduces a distance between the viewer and the characters that is presumably unintentional since it stands in contrast to how the series typically encourages viewers to engage with the characters on an intimate emotional level. More specifically, as a result of *Korra's* strong focus on serialised storytelling, the sudden change in the characters' expressiveness might for some viewers lead to a collapse of their character recognition. Guendelsberger (2013a) hints at this possibility when she points out how drastically the design of Asami's eyes has changed from season one to season two.

While I agree with Guendelsberger that the animation in the second season of *Korra* is subpar, I believe it is still consistent enough to prevent viewers from having difficulties to recognise the characters. The subpar animation might, however, still cause a disruption in the audience's long-term engagement with the characters and elicit feelings of uncanniness in some

viewers. This means while viewers might notice that their relationship with the characters has somewhat changed, they might not be able to point to the reason for this change. The main focus of my analysis of *The Legend of Korra* has been on how the serial narrative structure and the series' animation style influence the viewer's engagement with the characters. The second case study of this chapter has a similar focus. At the same time, viewer engagement in *South Park* functions differently as a result of the show's simplistic animation style, its different approach to animated performance, and its playful approach to television storytelling.

5.3 Figurative Animated Performances and Seriality in *South Park*

At the time of this writing, *South Park* has just finished its twentieth season. This makes it the second longest-running animated television programme in television history, only topped by *The Simpsons*. The series, which was co-created by Trey Parker and Matt Stone, follows the lives of four fourth graders in the fictional town of South Park, Colorado. Parker and Stone have remained the main creative force behind *South Park* throughout its entire run. They are not only the showrunners and head writers of the series, but they also provide the voices for most of the shows' characters. When *South Park* first premiered in 1997, the show was an instant hit for Comedy Central. It became mainly known for its crude sense of humour and quickly developed a cult-following that eventually turned into a worldwide phenomenon. Today, the show does not enjoy the same level of popularity it enjoyed in the late nineties, but it still has a dedicated following. Furthermore, although *South Park's* popularity has waned over the years, the programme seems to have become more popular among television critics. In particular, in recent years, critics have repeatedly praised *South Park* for its ability to reinvent itself and complimented the show for continuing to offer viewers a satirical look at life in modern America.

With regard to its animation style, tone, and narrative format, *South Park* provides a stark contrast to *The Legend of Korra*. While *Korra* is characterised by its intricate animation style, a kid-friendly atmosphere, and primarily focuses on serial storytelling, *South Park* is defined by a simplistic animation style, crude adolescent humour, and exists somewhere between episodic and serial storytelling. Furthermore, whereas the voice-cast of *Korra* is a mix between

established actors and Hollywood stars, Trey Parker and Matt Stone provide most of voices for *South Park*. Furthermore, many of the vocal performances in *South Park* have been computer-processed in order to sound more high-pitched. Arguably, this post-processing highlights the artifice of the narrative and introduces a level of distance to the viewer's engagement with the characters. Again, this stands in direct to contrast to Korra, in which the vocal performances primarily add depth to the embodied animated performances.

South Park is also the second longest-running animated programme in television history. Thus, it has a richer history than most other animated television programmes which is crucial for the viewer's familiarity and long-term engagement with the characters. My analysis of *South Park* focuses on the interplay of the programme's animation style and the distinct temporal features of the television medium. More specifically, I examine how the interplay between these two elements shapes the viewer's engagement with the characters. I begin my analysis by briefly discussing *South Park's* animation style and the tone of its humour before examining in more detail how the show uses figurative animated performances and crude visual humour to elicit laughter from the viewer. Part of this examination is a discussion of the way in which the show uses celebrity characters. I argue that, in contrast to *South Park's* main cast, most of the celebrity characters that appear on *South Park* are not fully-developed characters. Instead, the show largely uses these characters as a way to add an intertextual layer to its crude visual gags. Finally, the main part of this case study focuses on the relationship between *South Park* as a work of animation and *South Park* as a television text. In this section, I examine viewer engagement with *South Park's* characters and discuss to what the degree the show's playful use of seriality affects the viewer/character relationship.

Although *South Park* has received some academic attention in the past (e.g. Johnson-Woods, 2007; Strayner and Keller, 2009; Weinstock, 2008), there are not any existing studies that specifically focus on viewer engagement in *South Park*. Arguably a key component of the viewer's engagement with the programme and its characters is *South Park's* animation style. From its very first episode the show has been combining a simplistic cutout animation style that is reminiscent of television programmes aimed at young children, with drastic lowbrow humour that primarily appeals to adolescent viewers. Throughout its twenty-season run, *South Park* has largely adhered to the simplistic animation

style that it established during its first season. However, the pilot remains the only episode of the programme that was shot using actual paper-cutouts (*6 Days to Air: The Making of South Park*, 2011). While every subsequent episode of the programme was produced using computer animation, *South Park* has always maintained the look of animated paper-cutouts even when the production switched from full-frame standard definition to high-definition widescreen in 2009.

Figure 13 Limited animation in *South Park*

South Park is clearly reminiscent of what Mittell refers to as limited animation. As previously discussed, limited animation is largely characterised by a minimal visual variety, a focus on verbal humour, and a reliance on repetitive situation and plots. Aside from often employing visual gags, *South Park*—in particular in its early incarnation—fits this description. However, the crucial difference between *South Park* and the type of limited animation that Mittell (2003) discusses in his study is that *South Park* is limited animation on purpose. As producer Eric Stough states: "[Trey Parker] would just draw our characters and some of the comedy comes from the crudeness of the animation" (*6 Days to Air: The Making of South Park*, 2011). Essentially, *South Park* evokes the aesthetic of classic Saturday morning cartoons, but undermines this aesthetic with its subversive sense of humour.

As Kevin S. Sandler (2003) states in his work on branding and cable animation, the late nineteen nineties were a time "where it was believed that the animated form, more than live-action, was a safer way to push the envelope of acceptable television fare, a line continually being shattered and redefined by cable television series such as HBO's *Sex and the City* and E!'s *Howard Stern*" (p. 90). Referring to a quote from Mike Darnell, the Fox executive vice-president of Alternative Series and Specials at the time, Sandler (2003) argues that *South Park* was at the forefront of these boundary-pushing animated programmes.

In comparison to other contemporary animated programmes, the satire in *South Park* has often been described as more extreme. For example, in his comparison of the use of satire in *The Simpsons* and *South Park*, David A. Janssen (2003) argues that "despite some obvious similarities, [the two programmes] do not inhabit the same satiric territory" (p. 30). According to Janssen (2003), the most striking difference between the two programmes is that the satire in *South Park* lacks "any comfortable moral foundation" (p. 30). Janssen here refers to an element of *South Park's* humour that some critics of the series have found to be frustrating in the past, namely that the show often pokes fun at persons or issues without taking sides. This stands in direct opposition to *The Simpsons* which often ends its episodes with a heartfelt moralising message. During its first few seasons, *South Park* emphasised the amoral nature of its humour by turning its parody of moralising television narratives (e.g. *The Cosby Show* [1984 – 92], *The Wonder Years* [1988 – 93], *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* [1983 – 85]) into a running gag. More specifically, at the end of many early episodes of the show, Kyle or Stan (both voiced by Trey Parker) often summarise the moral lesson of the episode with the phrase: "You know, I learned something today". However, this phrase is never followed by an actual educational message, but rather a moral conclusion that is either nonsensical or troubling. With regard to viewer engagement, this example makes clear that viewers need to maintain a cynical distance to the proceedings on screen and have a certain level of intertextual knowledge of television storytelling tropes in order to fully appreciate the programme's humour.

The amoral and extreme nature of *South Park's* humour is particularly noteworthy for how it is reflected in the show's use of visual gags. Earlier in this chapter, I have referred to a wide range of theories on animation. While each of these theories focuses on a different element of animation, almost all of them

acknowledge that animation is characterised by a sense of freedom. Since *South Park* is a comedy, the programme primarily uses the freedom of the animated format to elicit laughter in the viewer. In the course of this chapter, I have already briefly discussed the use of visual gags in *The Legend of Korra*. However, *South Park's* visual gags are entirely different in tone and play a more important role when it comes to viewer engagement.

For example, there is a joke that involves Kyle kicking his little brother Ike into a mailbox as he exclaims "Kick the baby!" within the first two minutes of *South Park's* pilot episode ('Cartman gets an Anal Probe', 1997). While this might already seem extreme in comparison to other television programmes, the episode features much more excessive visual gags such as, for example, the titular anal probe coming out of Cartman's butt and turning into a large satellite dish. Yet, perhaps the most extreme visual gag in 'Cartman gets an Anal Probe' is the death of Kenny McCormick (Matt Stone). First, aliens shoot at Kenny, then he gets trampled over by a herd of cows, and finally a police car runs over him. Yet, the show does not even stop there. As the other kids discuss what to do next, Kenny's bloody corpse is devoured by a pack of rats who eventually manage to bite his head off and carry it away. Not only is it difficult to imagine the same jokes in a non-animated programme, but they would most likely not elicit the same reaction from the viewer. As previously indicated, the visual jokes in *South Park* largely derive their humour from the way in which the show's misleadingly kid-friendly animation style clashes with the extreme disposition of its comedy. For example, the comedic impact of Kenny's death is intensified by the crude way in which the scene is animated. In particular, when Kenny gets shot by the aliens, his whole body rotates through the air and randomly lands in the middle of a nearby road. Yet, as he flies through the air, Kenny barely moves any of his extremities. In fact, the most notable difference with regard to the character's animation is that his facial expression changes from open to closed eyes. The fact that, even when faced with death, Kenny's movements remain restricted as a result of the inherent limitations of *South Park's* animation style arguably makes the sequence more amusing.

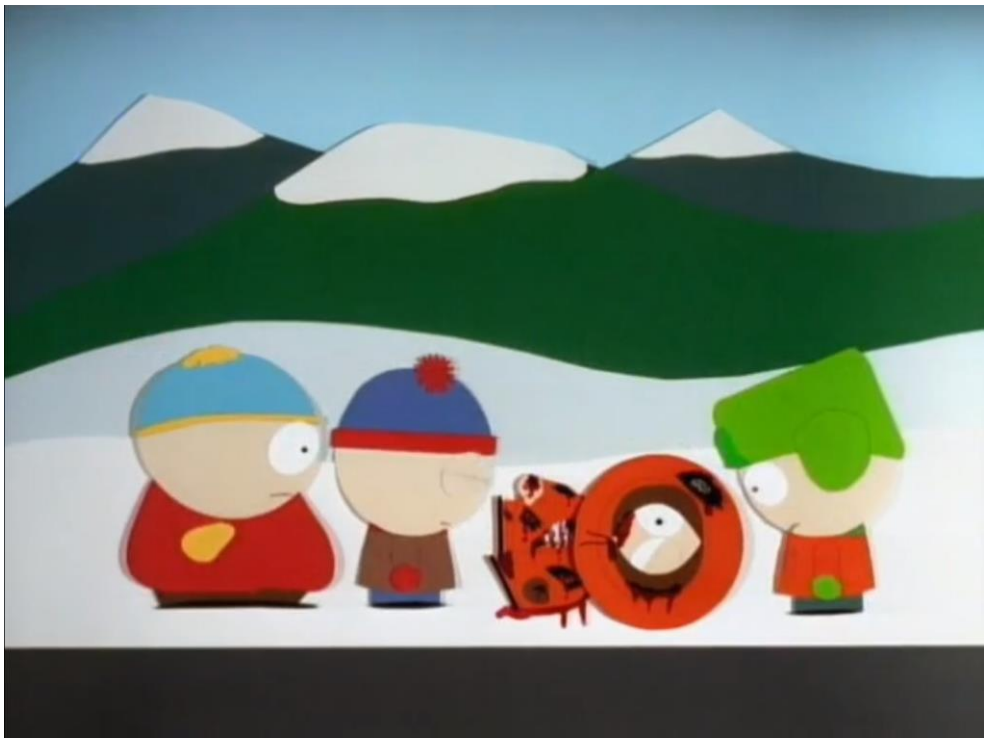

Figure 14 Kenny's first death in the pilot episode of *South Park*

Yet, perhaps the most significant way in which the show heightens the comedic impact of Kenny's death is through combining simplistic animation with over-the-top violence. The gruesome detail with which *South Park* depicts Kenny's wounds as his dead body lies motionless at the side of the road is arguably equal parts shocking and amusing. For example, while Kenny's dead body still resembles the two-dimensional shape of a crude paper-cutout, he now has a hole in his stomach that reveals his ribs. In addition, his entire body is covered in blood and bruises. Furthermore, when, in order to prove to Cartman that Kenny is really dead, Kyle pulls at Kenny's head, he almost manages to rip it off and exposes Kenny's spine in the process. Finally, when the rats eventually run away with Kenny's head, it rolls out of the frame in a cartoonish way that again accentuates the limited animation style of the show.

Thus far, my discussion of Kenny's death in the pilot episode of the show has mainly focused on how *South Park* combines a limited animation style that is reminiscent of classic Saturday morning cartoons with an extreme sense of humour to evoke laughter from the audience. However, on a more general level, this still does not fully explain why the often extreme nature of the visual gags in *South Park* primarily induces laughter and not shock or disgust in the viewer. One explanation for this is that even the most extreme visual gags that are featured on *South Park* are firmly rooted in what Crafton (2013) defines as

figurative animated performances. According to Crafton (2013), figurative performers usually behave as "a recognizable 'type'" (p. 23). Furthermore, they "rehearse their distinctive movements and characteristic gags in film after film" (Crafton, 2013, p. 23) and "elicit surprise and shock but mostly laughs as they move the gag-laden story along (p. 23). Most of the performances of *South Park's* main cast represent figurative performances that incorporate elements of embodied performances. However, any time it uses visual gags, the programme emphasises the figurative elements of its performances. For example, this is true for Kenny's death in the pilot episode of the show. *South Park's* crude animation style and Kenny's lack of movement as he gets killed not only counterbalance the violent depiction of his death, but they also place his performance within the tradition of slapstick comedy. This impression is further heightened by the repetitive nature of Kenny's death. In fact, during the first few seasons of the programme, Kenny is so much defined by his recurrent deaths that the audience expects to see him die any time they watch *South Park*.

Another explanation for why *South Park's* often extreme visual gags are primarily amusing instead of shocking is that animation adds a layer of distance to what is represented on screen. Jonathan Gray (2006) discusses this phenomenon, which he refers to as "defamiliarization" (p. 66) in his study of *The Simpsons*. Gray (2006) states:

> When, for instance, we see a character deeply upset, we are faced not with a real person (acting) in despair, just a rather crudely drawn cartoon image. This distance can therefore turn what might otherwise be a touching or sad moment into a humorous one. To say animation restricts identification with characters would be inaccurate; however, it certainly constricts identification: Homer can cry and bemoan his life, the 'camera' can begin a slow close-up, and sad music can accompany, yet often this only looks funny, and turns our attention to the mechanisms by which live action shows call for our sympathy. (p. 66)

While Gray's observations are particularly noteworthy with regard to animated parody, defamiliarization also factors into how viewers react to extreme visual gags on an emotional level. In particular, *South Park's* animation style is so crude that, even when the show depicts the killing of a character in graphic detail, the viewer is always aware of the artifice of this portrayal. Therefore, in the narrative context of *South Park*, the defamiliarization effect that is integral to all works of animation mainly overrides potential feelings of shock and disgust

and enables viewers to find pleasure in even the most extreme visual gags. Furthermore, defamiliarization and figurative performances are crucial components of the way in which the show portrays celebrities.

From the appearance of 'Mecha-Streisand' (1997) in the first season of the show to Caitlyn Jenner becoming the vice president of the United States in its most recent season, *South Park* has had a long history of making fun of celebrities. Some of *South Park's* most famous celebrity take-downs include Mel Gibson, who in 'The Passion of the Jew' (2004) is presented as an anti-Semitic lunatic, and Tom Cruise, who went so far as to threaten to sue the creators of the programme for being depicted as a delusional Scientologist who refuses to admit to his own homosexuality in 'Trapped in the Closet' (2005). For the most part, *South Park* pokes fun at celebrities from the film and music industry, but occasionally the programme also features depictions of other types of celebrities such as politicians or television personalities. As has probably already become clear, *South Park* rarely portray celebrities in a positive way. If a celebrity is featured on *South Park*, they are usually ridiculed in an extreme way that fits in with the show's boundary-pushing juvenile humour. Again, this stands in direct contrast to a programme like *The Simpsons* which typically only pokes light fun at the celebrity guests, who in return often lend their voices to their animated selves.

More than any other type of character in *South Park*, the celebrity characters fall into the category of figurative performances. All performances in *South Park* are mainly figurative, yet, when it comes to the main characters, the show occasionally hints at the potential of a deeper characterisation. However, this is not true for the celebrity characters. Typically, *South Park* distils the real-life persona of a celebrity into one or two character traits and then amplifies these character traits for comedic value. For example, the *South Park*-version of Russell Crowe is an aggressive bar brawler, Paris Hilton is presented as a "stupid spoiled whore" ('Stupid Spoiled Whore Video Playset', 2004) and Bill Clinton is portrayed as a mild-mannered pedophile. As previously discussed, if a *South Park* character is part of a visual gag, the programme will usually amplify the figurative elements of that character's performance for the duration of the gag to elicit a more visceral emotional response from the viewer. However, with the celebrity characters, *South Park* takes this concept to the extreme. More specifically, most of the celebrities that are featured on *South Park* give

quintessential figurative performances. Aside from being defined by a limited number of character traits, this means they usually move in a distinct way and their performances rely heavily on repetition. In addition, as is typical for figurative performances, *South Park's* celebrity appearances are primarily designed to elicit surprise, shock, and laughter in the viewer.

Figure 15 Russell Crowe in *South Park*

For example, Russell Crowe is permanently aggressive, only moves around in a fighting stance, and punches almost everybody he comes across in the stomach (see fig.19). Meanwhile, Paris Hilton is mainly defined by a sense of entitlement and a lack of intelligence, mostly stumbles around drunk, and constantly coughs up alcohol or semen ('The New Terrance and Phillip Movie Trailer', 2002; 'Stupid Spoiled Whore Video Playset'). In comparison to other characters on the programme, the celebrity characters typically lack any sense of emotional depth, which encourages viewers to engage with them on a more visceral level. In fact, as I have implied here, many of the celebrities that are featured on *South Park* are characterised in such a simplistic way that their appearances essentially function like an extended visual gag. Yet, making a celebrity the target of a visual gag can increase its shock value and add a layer of intertextual pleasure to the viewer's engagement with the characters. At the same time, the defamiliarization effect that is inherent to all works of animation arguably

becomes even more important for viewer engagement when the target of the visual gag is a well-known celebrity. Discussing the role of parody in *The Simpsons*, Gray (2006) argues:

> When *The Simpsons* takes *any* visual trope from live action and turns it into a cartoon, it therefore removes that trope a few steps from us, potentially allowing us to see the trope with fresh eyes, defamiliarized. Bizarre camera angles; traditional ways of shooting a given scene or genre; devices such as fast editing; panning; close-ups; and montage; and even how people move or make facial expressions all become defamiliarized in cartoon form. This is part of the magic and wonder of animation, but also part of what allows animated parodies particular powers to comment on and render obvious general strategies of filmic television and storytelling. (p. 66)

The kind of defamiliarisation that Gray discusses here is a key element of how viewers react to *South Park's* celebrity characters on an emotional level. Although most celebrities that appear on *South Park* can be easily recognised, primarily based on their facial features, their appearance is also defamiliarised by the programme's limited animation style. Arguably defamiliarisation is especially important for a programme such as *South Park* since the celebrities that appear on the show are often featured in the show's most extreme visual gags. For example, 'The China Problem' (2008) features a subplot in which Kyle is traumatised by his experience of watching *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008). Throughout the episode, Kyle and some of the other children in South Park are haunted by nightmares in which Steven Spielberg and George Lucas, the creators of the Indiana Jones franchise, sexually abuse Indiana Jones ('The China Problem', 2008). Unsurprisingly, *South Park* renders these nightmares in graphic detail. This example highlights the importance of defamiliarization for *South Park's* use of celebrities. More specifically, the show's depiction of Lucas and Spielberg is so extreme that it relies on a certain level of defamiliarization to become funny. Referring back to chapter five, it should also be noted that *South Park's* defamiliarization of celebrities stands in direct contrast to the way in late-night chat programmes aim to increase the viewer's emotional engagement with the celebrity guests by presenting them as relatable.

Up until this point, my analysis of the viewer/character relationship in *South Park* has been primarily concerned with the show's animation style. Yet, although *South Park* almost exclusively features figurative animated

performances, these performances exist within a narrative framework that oscillates between episodic and serial storytelling. This complicates the viewer's engagement with the characters. More specifically, while the figurative performances aim to draw a visceral reaction from the viewer, there are numerous points at which the show's eclectic storytelling hints at the fact that the characters possess a deeper emotional complexity than their performances let on. Of course, *South Park* is not the only modern animated programme that utilises serial storytelling[21], yet it is one of only a few animated programme that combine figurative animated performances with narrative consequences. Arguably, this has significant consequences for the audience's engagement with the characters. In particular, it encourages viewers to engage with the characters on a visceral level while, at the same time, it asks them to entertain the possibility that a more complicated character might exist beyond a figurative animated performance. In the last section of this chapter, I focus on how the interplay between *South Park's* animation style and the distinct narrative characteristics of television shape the viewer's relationship with the characters.

Over the years, *South Park*'s storytelling has changed. Previously, scholars have referred to *South Park* as a prime example for non-serialised storytelling since, when it first premiered, the show told one self-contained story per week. For example, Ted Nannicelli (2016) describes *South Park* as "not typical serial in nature" (p.110) and argues that "the lack of seriality in this case should make it uncontroversial to say that normally the object of our appreciative focus is the individual episode" (p. 110). In his study of complex television narration, Jason Mittell (2015) also uses *South Park* as an example for self-contained television storytelling, but positions the programme slightly differently. In particular, Mittell (2015) argues *South Park* is "more playfully reflexive" (p. 23) than classic episodic television programmes since it at least acknowledges its "lack of even serialization" (p. 23). It should be noted that Nannicelli's and Mittell's respective studies were published before *South Park's* nineteenth season aired. This is significant since season nineteen was the first time that the show entirely abandoned non-serial storytelling in favour of season-long story arcs. Yet, it is still somewhat surprising that both Mittell and Nannicelli cite *South Park* as a

[21] Other recent examples include *The Legend of Korra*, *BoJack Horseman* (Netflix, 2014 –), and *Star Wars: Rebels* (Disney XD, 2014 -).

prime example for episodic storytelling since, even before it became fully serialised, the show has frequently experimented with its narrative format.

One explanation for the common categorisation of *South Park* as a strictly episodic television programme might be that for its first three seasons the programme primarily told one self-contained story per week. However, in the course of its twenty-season-run, *South Park* has become more playful with regard to its narrative format. For example, as early as in season four, some of *South Park's* plotlines would begin to carry over between episodes. More significant examples of seriality throughout *South Park's* history include the three-part 'Imaginationland' (2007) saga in season eleven and the show's extended *Game of Thrones* spoof in season seventeen. However, in the context of this chapter, *South Park's* recent shift from episodic storytelling to season-long story arcs is more noteworthy than its willingness to adopt seriality for a limited number of episodes.

The narrative shift at the beginning of season nineteen of *South Park* does not significantly changed the tone of the show, but it alters how viewers engage with the programme and its characters. Glen Creeber (2004) highlights the degree to which the narrative structure of any television narrative affects how viewers engage with the programme. In his analysis of the differences and similarities between the single play, the series, and the serial, Greeber (2004) states that "unlike the single play the episodic nature of the serial form means that it also shares important characteristics with the series. This means that the serial can frequently break free of the narrative limitations of single drama and exploit some of the most seductive elements of serialisation" (p. 9). With the "most seductive elements of serialisation" (2004, p.9), Greeber mainly refers to the idea that serial narratives offer viewers the possibility to engage with the story and the characters on a deeper level. More specifically, Greeber argues that the serial "allows television to exploit its tendency towards 'intimacy' and 'continuity'" (2004, p. 9). Yet, at the same time, the serial is characterised by a gradual movement towards some sort of narrative resolution (Greeber, 2004, p 9). In the case of *South Park*, the narrative switch from series to serial arguably gives viewers a chance to recalibrate their focus. More specifically, while in the early seasons of the show, the audience's engagement with the programme was largely determined by its narrative format, the introduction of seriality gives them a choice: They can either continue to primarily engage with the more

figurative elements of *South Park's* comedy such as the show's extreme visual jokes or they can embrace the viewing pleasures of serialised television which include following a plotline for numerous episodes or watching a character grow over an extended period of time. Of course, the audience does not have necessarily have to choose one of these options. In fact, many viewers might find *South Park's* narrative hybridity exciting. At this point, it should also be noted that *South Park* is not the only contemporary television programme qualifies as a narrative hybrid. Other examples include *The X-Files* (1993 –), *The Shield* (2002 – 08), and *Justified* (2010 – 15). Yet, *South Park* might be the only example of a television programme that has drastically changed its narrative format after eighteen seasons.

One of the main effects of *South Park's* narrative flexibility is that the characters exist somewhere between stasis and character growth. This becomes clear when looking closely at how some of the performances of the main characters have changed over the years. Although *South Park's* switch from series to serial has, for some characters, led to a deeper and more nuanced characterisation (e.g. Mr.Garrison, Randy Marsh, Cartman), the programme has also hinted at introducing the type of accumulative character development that is common for serial television when it was still largely operating as a series. For example, at the end of season five, the creators let go of one of their most successful character-related running jokes—the weekly death of Kenny McCormick.

The episode 'Kenny Dies' (2001), in which the character's death becomes the main catalyst for the story, marks the end of Kenny's weekly deaths. In the episode, Kenny is hospitalised for an unspecified terminal disease which eventually leads to his death. In contrast to previous episodes of the show, in which the character's death was usually played for laughs, Kenny's death in this episode is presented as a major event in the lives of the other characters. Of course, given the satirical tone of *South Park*, the sudden self-seriousness with which Kenny's death is presented in 'Kenny Dies' partially functions as a gag. After 'Kenny Dies' it took almost a year until Kenny would show up again on the programme.[22] Thus, this particular death encouraged viewers to get used to the idea of narrative consequences in *South Park*. After his reappearance in 'Red

[22] Claiming that he was in fact not dead, but had just been standing "over here" ('Red Sleigh Down' 2002).

Sleigh Down' (2002) Kenny still dies occasionally, but his deaths are not solely played for laughs anymore. For example, in 'Best Friends Forever' (2005), Kenny is run-over by an ice-cream truck. This accident leaves him in a coma, but the doctors decide to keep him alive by feeding him through a feeding tube.

Figure 16 Kenny as Mysterion

In addition to finding new ways to use Kenny's death, the episode 'Mysterion Rises' (2010) is crucial with regard to *South Park's* transformation from an episodic to a serial narrative. In this episode, it is revealed that Kenny is the super-hero vigilante Mysterion. Equally important in the context of this chapter is the revelation of his superpower: Mysterion is unable to die. In fact, any time he dies he just magically wakes up in his bed unharmed while the citizens of *South Park* have no memory of his death ('Mysterion Rises'). Of course, this explanation represents an implausible 'retcon' of prior seasons of the show, but it also encourages viewers to engage with Kenny on a deeper level. For example, the viewer's knowledge of Kenny's inability to die might to some degree inform how they react to his death in future episodes of the show.

Kenny essentially started out as a running joke, but over the course of the series the character developed into a fully fleshed-out character. However, as a result of the programme's elusive narrative structure, the way in which *South Park's* characters develop is not always linear. Despite the fact that, up until its two most recent seasons, the programme has primarily relied on episodic

storytelling, many characters still have a history that has slowly developed across the self-contained episodes. In addition, some of the narrative events that occur in *South Park's* episodic seasons still have consequences for future episodes of the show. One of the most striking examples for this is the death of Chef in 'The Return of Chef'. After Isaac Hayes, the voice actor for Chef, publicly criticised *South Park's* depiction of Scientology, the creators of the series used this episode to get rid of the character in a spectacular way. Since Hayes refused to lend his voice to Chef, the character's entire dialogue in 'The Return of Chef' is pieced together from Hayes' previous vocal performances in the show. The plot of the episode revolves around Chef coming back to South Park after having been brainwashed by the so-called Super Adventure Club. The disturbing result of the Super Adventure Club's influence on Chef is that he is obsessed with wanting to have sex with the four main children. Over the course of the episode, the children desperately try to help Chef to return to his former self. However, they do not succeed and the episode ends with him getting killed in an over-the-top violent way ('The Return of Chef', 2006).

What is most notable about Kenny's character development and the death of Chef in the context of this chapter is that both examples operate on two different levels when it comes to viewer engagement. In particular, even as *South Park* increasingly employs narrative strategies that are typical for serial television, the programme still relies on figurative animated performances. As discussed earlier on in this chapter, figurative performances mainly encourage viewers to engage with the characters on a visceral level. Yet, at the same time, by employing narrative strategies that are typical for serial narration, *South Park* encourages viewers to engage with the characters on a more intimate level. While it might seem contradictory at first, it is arguably this dualism that defines *South Park* not only a work of animation, but as a work of television animation in particular. To be more specific, by employing figurative animated performances within an increasingly serialised narrative context, *South Park* utilises the advantages of the animated format and the television medium to increase viewer engagement.

Viewed in isolation, Chef's death in 'The Return of Chef' does not significantly differ from other extreme visual gags that are featured on *South Park*. As Chef makes his way over a suspension bridge, lightning strikes and sets the bridge on fire. Although Chef tries to hold on to the bridge, he eventually

catches fire, falls down the bridge, and is impaled by a tree. Immediately after getting impaled, Chef gets attacked by a mountain lion, who tries to rip his arm out. At the same time, his body is hit by misfired bullets from members of the Super Adventure Club, who are trying to save him from the wild animal. Finally, the mountain lion is joined by a grizzly bear and, after fighting each other for a brief moment, the two animals tear Chef into pieces. The mountain lion rips Chef's entire face from his skull while the grizzly bear bites off random body parts. Pointing out the similarities between Kenny's multiple deaths in the series and Chef's shocking demise, Stan, who has been witnessing the entire scene from the other side of the bridge, exclaims "Oh My God, they killed Chef!" ('The Return of Chef').

Figure 17 Chef's violent demise

As with most visual gags that are featured on *South Park*, the extreme violence that is on display in 'The Return of Chef' (2006) is softened by the defamiliarisation effect, the show's simplistic animation style, and the figurative performances. In particular, the overly cartoonish way in which Chef helplessly waves his arms as his chubby, burning body bounces down the canyon provides a striking contrast to the image of the character's bloody, half-eaten corpse at the end of the scene. Earlier in this chapter, I have already discussed how *South Park* enables viewers to find pleasure in its most extreme visual gags by amplifying a character's figurative performance. However, in addition to

providing the audience with a sense of instant visceral pleasure, Chef's death utilises the viewer's long-term engagement with the character to increase emotional engagement.

In her study of television soap operas, Christine Geraghty (1991) argues that "one of soap's most striking qualities is the way in which the audience becomes familiar with the history of certain characters and has access to knowledge which is well beyond that given in a particular episode" (p. 14). According to Geraghty (1991), "familiarity with the characters allows the viewer to bring meaning to the narrative rather than having to rely on what is shown in a particular episode" (p. 15). Moreover, while the typically well-established characters in soaps accustom viewers to value "familiarity and predictability" (Geraghty, 1991, p. 15), they also encourage the audience to "relish change and disruption" (p. 15). Despite the fact that in season ten *South Park* still largely operates within an episodic narrative framework, Chef's death fits in with Geraghty's observations on viewer engagement in television soap operas. In fact, although the narrative fate of Chef was influenced by external circumstances even Chef's character arc mirrors that of a soap opera character: For nine seasons, Chef has been the children's closest friend among *South Park's* adult population, but, after having been brainwashed by the Super Adventure Club, he suddenly becomes a threat to them and dies tragically. As previously discussed, casual viewers of *South Park* might mainly experience a visceral sense of pleasure at the absurdly violent depiction of Chef's death, but long-term viewers are likely to have a more complicated emotional reaction to the character's demise.

Chef's death is a prime example for the kind of narrative disruption that Geraghty (1991) mentions in her study of soap operas. Thus, for long-time viewers, it stands out as an exciting moment of narrative resolution that has consequences for the future of the entire programme. It should be noted that at the very end of 'The Return of Chef', the Super Adventure Club actually manages to resurrect Chef, yet this scene mainly functions as a spoof of *Star Wars Episode III – Revenge of the Sith* (2005) and, as of this writing, the resurrected version of Chef has not made any further appearances on the programme. As I have discussed in chapter two, Blanchet and Vaage (2012) argue that familiarity can intensify the audience's emotional reaction to a narrative and its characters. Specifically, they claim that simply spending an extended

period of time with a character can intensify the viewer's emotional engagement with that character—a process to which they refer to as the shared history account (Blanchet and Vaage, 2012, p. 27). In addition, Blanchet and Vaage believe that long-term engagement with a programme can intensify the viewer's sense of surprise at unforeseen plot developments. Similar to the shared history account, this concept is primarily based on the passage of time, the idea being that if a programme subverts viewer expectations after several seasons, the emotional impact of this subversion will be greater than if it had occurred at an earlier point of the programme (Blanchet and Vaage, 2012, pp. 34-35).

The comedic tone of *South Park* makes it unlikely that viewers will be as emotionally affected by Chef's death as they would be affected by the death of a beloved character in a television drama, but this narrative event arguably still carries more emotional weight for long-viewers. In particular, not only does the revelation that Chef—who for nine seasons has been presented as one of the most sympathetic characters—has suddenly turned into a brainwashed pedophile drastically subvert viewer expectations, but his death provides a surprising disruption of the show's typical lack of narrative consequences. Admittedly, the character arcs of most of the other characters on the show are not as definitive as Chef's, but many of the other characters still have a rich history that has gradually developed over the course of twenty seasons. Of course, casual viewers might not even recognise the gradual progression of these characters, but long-term viewers will find pleasure in their development over an extended period of time. While some characters (e.g. Kenny, Stan) have developed throughout *South Park's* entire history, even across its non-serialised seasons, other characters have only recently show signs of character growth (e.g. Gerald Broflovski). In addition, there are characters that fall somewhere in between, meaning while they might have shown signs of character growth throughout the course of the series, their development has been accelerated by *South Park's* embrace of serial storytelling (e.g. Randy, Cartman).

5.4 Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have analysed how the aesthetic style and the narrative structure of animated television programmes can affect the viewer's engagement with the characters. More specifically, I have argued that in the

context of television narration, figurative and embodied animated performances can lead to unique engagement patterns. In his work on animated performance, Crafton (2013) indicates that figurative animated performances are better suited to elicit a visceral emotional reaction in the viewer (e.g. laughter, disgust) whereas embodied animated performances are better suited to elicit intricate emotional responses in the viewer (e.g. empathy, sympathy). Yet, my analysis of viewer engagement with characters from *The Legend of Korra* and *South Park* has shown that this argument becomes more complicated if the performances are placed within a television context. In particular, while the embodied animated performances in *Korra* encourage viewers to engage with the characters on a deep emotional level, which is further encouraged by the programme's serial format, the series also frequently features action scenes that emphasise figurative performance elements and invite the audience to primarily marvel and be exhilarated by the movements of the characters. Similarly, *South Park* employs figurative animated performances to elicit a visceral emotional response in the viewer, but does so in a narrative framework that starts out as episodic and only gradually, over the course of twenty-seasons, becomes fully-serialised. For example, as previously discussed, Chef's death is remarkable for the way in which *South Park* combines a figurative performance with narrative consequences. Chef's death functions as one of *South Park's* signature visual gags, but, at the same time, it encourages a deeper emotional response from long-time viewers of the show. That is to say, the show uses a mode of performance that is primarily known for its effectiveness in eliciting a visceral emotional response from the audience, but filters this performance through serial narration. By doing so, *South Park* highlights how figurative and embodied animated performances can lead to unique patterns of viewer engagement with animated characters when they are placed within the context of television narration.

The next chapter of this thesis focuses on the viewer/character relationship in late-night chat programmes. In some ways, this final case study represents a continuation of my analysis of viewer engagement with animated television characters in this chapter. For example, chapter six is also concerned with the degree to which a character's performance style can shape the viewer's engagement with them. Yet, the narrative setup of late-night chat programmes is distinct from any other case study in this thesis. Specifically, up until this

point, this thesis has mainly investigated viewer engagement with fictional television characters that exist within an episodic or serial narrative structure. In contrast, late-night chat is a factual television genre that is characterised by a lack of narrative drive and mainly features characters that play versions of themselves. As a result, the viewer's relationship with characters from this genre strongly relies on the perceived level of intimacy and authenticity of their performances. On a broader level, I argue that late-night chat programmes aim to create the illusion of a shared social space between hosts, guests, and the television audience which acts as the backdrop for any other type of viewer engagement.

6 A Longing for Belonging: Viewer Engagement in the Late-Night Chat Show

Thus far, I have largely investigated viewer engagement with characters from plot-driven fictional programmes. In many ways, this chapter provides a counterexample to these case studies. I have specifically chosen to investigate viewer engagement in late-night chat shows since this type of programme prioritises characters over plot, is characterised by a formulaic narrative structure, and foregrounds performances. In particular, I argue that the performances of and the interactions between the characters on late-night chat shows seek to establish a sense of community. This sense of community provides the basis for the viewer's relationship with the characters.

To clarify my argument, I want to refer to an appearance that Daniel Craig made on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* (2015 -). As Craig enters the studio, the host walks up to him and greets him with: "Hello, Daniel Craig. Hello, sir. Good to see you. Thanks for being here" ('Episode #2.202', 2017). Craig responds to Colbert's greeting by smiling and shaking his hand. Before sitting down, Craig turns to the studio audience and waves at them, which prompts cheers of excitement from the audience. The camera then cuts to the audience, revealing that many audience members are giving Craig a standing ovation. Colbert and Craig begin their talk by briefly discussing the actor's prior appearance on the programme and Colbert states that he believes Craig is "the greatest Bond" ('Episode #2.202') ever, a notion that again prompts cheers and applause from the audience. This is followed by the most striking part of the interview, a discussion between Colbert and Craig on the future of the James Bond franchise. The discussion unfolds as follows:

> COLBERT. I truly—I remember the first time—the first time, *Casino Royale* at the end it said, you know "James Bond will return". I went: he better.
>
> CRAIG. Thank you very much.
>
> COLBERT. I would see another—I would see another Daniel Craig James Bond movie in a minute.
>
> CRAIG. Right.

> COLBERT: Now, you've been reported to have accepted the role of James Bond again, in *The New York Times*, back in July. They said that you are going to be the next James Bond.
>
> CRAIG. Yeah…
>
> COLBERT. And people have been asking about it all day.
>
> CRAIG. Yes, they have. (inaudible) I've been quite cagey about it. I've been doing interviews all day and people have been asking me and I think I've been rather coy, but I kind of felt like, you know, if I was going to speak the truth, I should speak the truth to you.
>
> (Cheers and Applause)
>
> COLBERT. Daniel Craig, we could use some good news here. Daniel Craig, will you return as James Bond?
>
> CRAIG: Yes.
>
> (Cheers and Applause)
>
> COLBERT. Thanks so much. Daniel Craig, everybody!
>
> CRAIG. Do I leave now?
>
> ('Episode #2.202')

By revealing exclusively on *The Late Show* that he will reprise his role as James Bond, Craig signals a high level of intimacy with Colbert and his audience. More specifically, he establishes Colbert, the studio audience, and the viewers at home as an intimate social group, one with which he feels comfortable enough to share the news of his recasting as James Bond. It is safe to assume that this reveal has been planned far in advance and might have been the result of a complicated negotiation process, however, in the context of this study, it is more important how it is rendered for the viewer. Throughout the interview, Colbert and Craig demonstrate their familiarity with each other, which is fairly typical behaviour for late-night chat interviews. However, the tone becomes more intimate when Craig reveals that he will indeed reprise his role as James Bond.

Craig makes clear that he regards *The Late Show* as different from other media outlets by stating that, when he was previously asked by journalists if he

would play James Bond again, he refused to give them a clear answer ('Episode #2.202'). The actor then goes on to highlight the special relationship that he has with Colbert and *The Late Show* audience by stating: "I kind of felt like, you know, if I was going to speak the truth, I should speak the truth to you" ('Episode #2.202'). The language that Craig uses here is notable since it is reminiscent of the way in which close friends or romantic partners might talk to each other. Moreover, the underlying notion that, although Craig might have been able to lie to other media outlets, but cannot lie to Colbert further heightens his demonstration of intimacy. Although Craig's appearance on *The Late Show* is an extreme example of how late-night chat shows aim to establish the illusion that the viewer is part of an exclusive community, late-night chat shows always rely heavily on the characters and their interactions to intensify viewer engagement.

In the course of this chapter, I take a closer look at the different narrative components of late-night chat shows and analyse how, in combination, these components create the illusion that by watching a particular late-night chat show the viewer becomes part of an exclusive community. I begin this chapter with a definition of the late-night chat genre and investigate how late-night programmes establish an intimate atmosphere that functions as a backdrop for the parasocial performances of the characters. Following this definition of the format, I focus on the role of the host. I argue that one of the main responsibilities of the host is to establish the rules of the late-night party. I also examine how the way in which late-night hosts interact with the studio audience and the viewers at home heightens the illusion of the late-night chat show as an intimate social gathering. Furthermore, I look more closely at the performances of late-night guests. I argue that whereas hosts mainly establish the rules of the late-night party, the guests primarily have to adhere to these rules. Most importantly, the guests have to honour the casual atmosphere of late-chat shows by being willing to disclose private anecdotes with the host and the viewers. In exchange for sharing these private anecdotes, the guests are allowed to use the late-night chat show as a promotional platform.

In the second part of the chapter, I mainly focus on host/guest interactions from contemporary late-night chat shows such as *Conan* (2010 –) and *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* (2014 –). Referring to examples from a number of late-night chat programmes, I investigate the interactions between

hosts and guests in detail. I particularly focus on the role of celebrity party games for viewer engagement since these party games have become one of the most popular segments of contemporary late-night chat show. Most of the examples I discuss in the course of this chapter are from American late-night programmes. This is mainly due to the fact that the late-night chat format originates from the United States. Thus, American late-night chat shows typically provide the structural and stylistic template for their international counterparts.[23] In addition, despite the fact that today almost any country in the world has its own late-night chat show, the format remains most popular in the United States.[24] Finally, I need to acknowledge that this chapter signifies a slight shift of focus from the earlier chapters of this study since it focuses more explicitly on performance. However, I believe this shift of focus is only natural, given that late-night chat shows emphasise performances more than those television programmes that are more plot-driven.

6.1 Defining Late-Night Chat

Late-night chat is a sub-category of the broader chat/talk show genre. As Wayne Munson (1993) states, "the talkshow 'genre'—to the degree that it even *is* a single category—has come to assume many 'messy,' hybridized variations in the thousands of talk shows that air locally and nationally—even internationally—in any given week" (p. 7). As a result of this 'messy' nature of talk-shows, finding a general definition of the format can be difficult. For example, most viewers would likely agree that *Good Morning America* (1975 –), *Ellen: The Ellen DeGeneres Show* (2003 –), and *The Tonight Show* are chat shows, yet these programmes have little in common aside from the fact that they feature a lot of talking. In particular, *Good Morning America* is a cross between chat show and

[23] For example, the German *Die Harald Schmidt Show* (1995 – 2004) was almost an exact copy of *The Tonight Show* whereas contemporary British late-night talk shows such as *The Graham Norton Show* (2007 –) and *The Jonathan Ross Show* (2011 –) are also clearly modelled after American late-night programming.

[24] A quick look at the large number of late-night chat shows that currently air in the US underlines the ongoing popularity of this type of programme in North America. For example, a non-exhaustive list includes *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* (2014 –), *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* (2003 –), *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, *Late Night with Seth Meyers* (2014 –), *The Late Late Show with James Corden* (2015 –), and *Conan* (2010 –).

news programme, *Ellen* is a confessional talk-show with game show elements, and *The Tonight Show* is a classic late-night chat show. On the one hand, these shows are similar in that they primarily rely on the characters and their interactions with each other to engage viewers on an emotional level. On the other hand, the viewer's relationship with the characters is also shaped by the distinct narrative setup of each programme. This poses the question as to what exactly the narrative framework of a late-night chat show looks like and how, collectively, the different elements of this framework create a sense of community that heightens the viewer's engagement with the characters.

In her work on the celebrity chat show, Jane Shattuc (2008) credits *The Tonight Show,* which originally premiered on NBC in September 1954, with establishing the structural template for the late-night chat genre. This template consists of "an opening monologue by the host, a segment with the studio audience (interviews and games), and a set of interviews and performances with well-known guests on stage" (Shattuc, 2008, p. 166). This template has not significantly changed since the 1950s. In fact, it is still followed by many modern late-night chat shows (e.g. *The Tonight Starring Jimmy Fallon*, *Conan, Jimmy Kimmel Live!*) (Shattuc, 2008, p 166). Shattuc (2008) states that, for the most part, the guests on late-night chat shows are performers who work in the entertainment industry. Other common types of guests include politicians, authors, and ordinary citizens. Late-night chat show interviews are usually casual in tone and structured around a particular promotional item (e.g. film, book, performance). A defining characteristic of the late-night chat show is that, in exchange for being given a platform for self-promotion, celebrity guests are expected to tell an anecdote that reveals some previously unknown detail about their private life (Shattuc, 2008, p. 166). Furthermore, according to Shattuc (2008), late-night chat shows regularly feature segments in which the host directly interacts with the studio audience. For example, the host might ask the audience questions or invite audience members onto the stage to play a game with her. Shattuc (2008) notes that these interactions with the audience fulfil numerous functions. For instance, they create a democratic moment because the host treats the studio guests in the same way as the celebrity guests (Shattuc, 2008). Thus, the interactive segments particularly strengthen the impression that the host, the studio audience, and the viewers at home are part of the same community. This impression is further encouraged by the fact that

the host is often placed among the audience for the duration of these interactive segments (Shattuc, 2008, p. 166).

Shattuc's (2008) work primarily provides an overview of the structural setup of late-night chat shows. In contrast, Mittell's (2004) empirical study on talk-shows gives further insight as to what exactly sets apart late-night chat shows from their daytime counterparts. When asked if they would categorise *The Late Show with David Letterman* (1993 – 2015) as a talk show, most participants of Mittell's survey responded positively (Mittell, 2004). The reasons participants gave for why they categorised *Letterman* as a chat show are noteworthy in the context of this study since they indicate which narrative elements viewers regard as characteristic for a chat show. For example, some participants claimed that *Letterman* qualifies as a chat show because it features "guests, hosts, an interviews" (Mittell, 2004, p. 107) whereas other stated that the show qualifies as a chat show because it is "based in reality" (p.107) while also being "informative and entertaining" (p. 107). Some of the answers that the respondents of Mittell's survey gave also point towards the key differences between daytime and late-night chat shows. In particular, respondents argued that, in comparison with daytime chat shows, *Letterman* was "'classier,' less motivated by 'spectacle,' and more focused on 'entertainment' and 'Hollywood' than 'everyday people'" (Mittell, 2004, p. 107). Respondents of Mittell's (2004) study further claimed that late-night chat shows are different from other types of talk-shows in that they primarily seek to entertain the audience (p. 107).

Since the current television landscape is populated by political late-night programmes (e.g. *The Daily Show* [1996 -], *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* [2014 -], *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee* [2016 –]), one might argue that the idea that late-night chat shows primarily seek to entertain viewers has become obsolete. However, despite the fact that modern late-night chat shows tend to discuss politics more frequently than most of their predecessors, I believe the primary goal of these shows still maintains to entertain the audience. Of course, for those viewers who do not follow the news on a regular basis, a late-night chat show might function as a source of information, yet conveying the news is rarely the main objective of a late-night chat show. Rather, late-night chat is concerned with commenting on the news or putting a satirical spin on it. Ultimately, while I do acknowledge that it might somewhat influence the viewer's engagement with the characters if a late-night chat show follows a

political agenda, this is not my main interest in this chapter. Instead, I am more concerned with how the narrative context and the performances of and interactions between the characters aim to increase viewer engagement.

6.2 Priming the Viewer's Sense of Community

Before discussing late-night chat characters, I need to briefly discuss the narrative setup of late-night chat and acknowledge how the distribution of programmes from this genre has evolved over the years. Late-night chat shows are characterised by their static narrative structure. This means when tuning into a late-night programme, viewers can expect an opening monologue, one or two celebrity interviews, an interactive segment, and a musical performance at the end of the show. Some shows differ from this structural template (e.g. *The Daily Show*, *Last Week Tonight*), yet, if they do, they typically adhere to their own variation of the format. For example, *The Daily Show* commonly starts out with a brief satirical overview of the news of the day, then focuses on a particular topic, and ends on a celebrity interview. Of course, most fictional television programmes also follow a specific narrative structure, yet this structure leaves more room for surprises than the static framework of late-night chat shows. For example, television dramas often feature unforeseen story developments (e.g. a beloved character's death), which can be demanding when it comes to the viewer's emotional engagement. The static structure of late-night chat shows has the opposite effect: it cultivates the audience's "ritualistic relationship" (Jones, 2009, p. 18) with the format. The static, familiar structure of late-night chat also ties in with its content. As Jones (2009) notes, while late-night characters occasionally "engage in spectacle" (p. 18) or "shock comedy," (p. 18) their material is rarely unscripted or controversial. Instead, late-night chat shows primarily consist of "segmented light-entertainment content" (Jones, 2009, p. 18) that aims to "amuse rather than bemuse the viewer" (p. 18). However, it is not solely their static structure or their lack of narrative drive that characterises late-night chat shows as light entertainment.

The visual style of late-night chat also mirrors their light entertainment content. Most late-night chat programmes also share a similar visual style. These aesthetic similarities between late-night chat shows are noteworthy because they prime the viewer's engagement with the characters. More generally speaking, every film or television programme has its own mood, which may be

viewed as the combination of all of its narrative components (e.g. visual style, characters, structure). Carl Plantinga (2014) and Robert Sinnerbrink (2012) have previously studied this phenomenon in feature films. Plantinga takes a response-oriented approach to mood, arguing that mood is transmitted from the text to the viewer. He defines mood as a "schema" (Plantinga, 2014) through which viewers experience the actual world and the fictional world of a work of art. According to Plantinga (2014), this schema influences the viewer's affective and cognitive experience of a narrative. In particular, mood can influence the viewer's memory, attention, and analytical thinking (Plantinga, 2014, pp. 148-49). I disagree with Plantinga's argument that mood is something that is directly transmitted to the viewer, yet his theory is still noteworthy since it highlights the strong influence that mood can have on viewer engagement.

In contrast, Sinnerbrink (2012) defines mood as a primarily aesthetic element of narration that also influences viewer engagement. As he puts it, mood "is not simply a subjective experience or a private state of mind; it describes, rather, how a (fictional) world is expressed or disclosed via a shared affective attunement orienting the spectator within that world" (Sinnerbrink, 2012, p. 148). Sinnerbrink further argues that mood affects both the image itself and the viewer's reaction to it. Following this logic, I regard mood as an aesthetic backdrop that facilitates cognitive, affective, and emotional engagement. Sinnerbrink's key argument is that, contrary to what most cognitive film theorists argue, emotions are not only elicited cognitively, but also aesthetically (2012, p. 152). As Sinnerbrink (2012) states:

> Films do not simply present characters in discrete emotional states in order to convey narrative information. Rather, their aesthetic effect depends on the sensuous-affective background or encompassing 'mood' against which our complex flow of emotional responsiveness becomes manifest: the background against which we are able to recognize, align and ally ourselves with particular characters within narrative scenarios. (p. 152)

In cognitive film theory, mood is often presented as an active element of the narrative framework, similar to a signal that is sent to the viewer and affects her engagement with the unfolding story. In contrast, Sinnerbrink renders mood as crucial to establishing fictional worlds and creating an aesthetic framework that facilitates distinct types of viewer engagement.

The reason why mood has not factored more into previous chapters of this work is that it is somewhat of an elusive narrative phenomenon. For example, since mood is the result of the combination of a number of narrative components, it can change rapidly. However, in late-night chat, the mood is much more consistent than in other TV genres. For example, while the mood of *The Walking Dead* (2010 -) might be described as bleak, this description does not describe every moment of every episode of the series. However, the mood of almost any moment in any episode of *The Tonight Show* can be described as intimate, light, and casual. One of the keys ways in which late-night chat shows create an intimate mood is their visual style. Typically, in late-night chat shows, the mise en scène features "domestic furniture, potted plants, framed family photographs, coffee tables, sofas, cushions, rugs" (Rojek, 2015, p. 14) to evoke an intimate atmosphere. For example, the set of *Conan* primarily consists of the host's desk and a couch for the guests. Placed behind the couch is a plant and next to guests is a side table that gives them the chance to put down their coffee mugs. O'Brien's desk features a microphone, some cue cards, and the host's coffee mug. The most noticeable item on the desk is a mug modelled after the likeness of Dwight D. Eisenhower that O'Brien has repurposed as a pencil holder. The backdrop behind the desk shows an image of the moonlit night sky night over the ocean. On the edges of the backdrop, the shoreline and houses are visible. At this point, it should be noted that the mise en scène of most late-night talk shows is very similar. For instance, the visual presentation of *The Tonight Show* is almost identical to *Conan*. In fact, the most notable differences between the two programmes are that *The Tonight Show* uses a different, more urban looking backdrop and features less plants.

Although both daytime and late-night chat shows are characterised by a domestic mise en scène, they do not share the exact same visual style. In particular, the domestic look of daytime chat shows, with their comfy sofas and soft-furnishings, is more causal than the urban, borderline corporate look of late-night chat programmes. These differences in presentation fit in with the slightly different viewer response each type of chat show seeks to elicit from the viewer. Of course, almost all chat shows aim to establish a welcoming, communal atmosphere, yet, at the same time, the urbanised domestic look of late-night chat shows also reminds viewers that they are engaging with professionals. This impression is further emphasised by the fact that late-night

chat hosts typically dress more formally than their daytime colleagues. Thus, the visual presentation of late-night chat functions both as an extension of the viewer's own domestic space while also evoking the sense of a workplace environment.

The mise en scène of late-night programmes is typically also consistent. This means once a programme has established a certain look, this look rarely changes significantly. One of the main reasons for this is that intimacy is closely tied to familiarity and any variation of a late-night talk show's visual style could disrupt the viewer's sense of familiarity. Furthermore, since most late-night talk-shows share a similar look, even the slightest differences in the mise en scène help to establish each programme's identity. For example, a different backdrop might indicate the programme's locale while objects placed within the mise en scène often help to establish the host's personality. A good example for this is Conan O'Brien's coffee mug, which is distinct from the coffee mugs his guests use. This is only a subtle visual variation, but it plays into the idea of the late-night chat show as an extension of the host's domestic space.

Although this study is not primarily concerned with audience reception, I want to briefly acknowledge that, in recent years, the way in which viewers watch late-night chat shows has evolved since these changes in consumption directly feed into the sense of community late-night chat seeks to establish. For example, in his study on the reception of chat shows, Jones makes clear how the relationship between television networks and audiences has changed over the years. According to Jones (2009), while in the past the primary task of television network was to produce content, today the "the network may be doing little more than facilitating interactions around its brand in its efforts to draw and sustain audience attention" (p. 23). Jones (2009) further notes that although chat shows typically do not generate the same kind of buzz as other prime time programmes, their content "can be easily distributed to dispersed audiences in a variety of contexts" (p. 24). In addition, "both the humorous and lifestyle aspects of late-night and morning talk, respectively, provide opportunities for engagement and community" (Jones, 2009, p. 24). Jones here refers to the fact that, since chat shows typically consist of a number of self-contained segments, they can be easily distributed via online streaming platforms such as BBC iPlayer, Youtube or Hulu. The segmented distribution model is particularly important for late-night chat shows since their humorous segmented content is

more attractive to viewers than the segmented content of daytime talk shows. Jones (2009) cites Letterman's "Top Ten List" as an example for a particularly attractive late-night segment (p. 29). Other, more recent examples for popular late-night segments include the "Mean Tweets" that are featured on *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* and the *Tonight Show's* "Lip Sync Battles". In fact, this segment has become so successful that it has been turned into a television programme of its own. According to Jones, the interactive act of sharing and the viewer's desire to do so create communal moments of sharing. In particular, instead of retelling a joke that they have seen in a late-night chat show, modern viewers are more likely to share the segment containing that joke with other people. While I am primarily concerned with examining the textual elements of late-night chat in relation to viewer engagement, I still believe that these changes in consumption are noteworthy because they highlight that the idea of community permeates every element of late-night chat.

6.3 Hosts

The narrative simplicity of late-night chat results in a stronger focus on the characters and their interactions. As I have previously indicated, spending time with a distinct cast of characters is one of the main appeals of any television programme. However, Mittell (2015) claims that modern television audiences are also attracted by other elements of television storytelling. For example, viewers enjoy deciphering the intricate plotting of television dramas and derive pleasure from watching the ripple effects that the narrative events in this genre have on the characters and their relationships (Mittell, 2015, p. 24). In contrast, viewers do not tune into a late-night chat show for its plot. They rather tune into a late-night chat programme based on their relationship with the host, the guests, and the cast of supporting characters. As I have stressed throughout this chapter, the performances in late-night chat programmes aim to establish a sense of community. Late-night hosts are crucial for establishing this sense of community since they act as the mediator between the studio audience, the viewers at home, the guests, and the supporting characters.

While late-night chat hosts represent a specific type of television host, there are certain attributes that they share with other types of television hosts. For example, one of the main responsibilities of the host in any television format is to act as the mediator between the programme and the audience. This idea of

the television host as a mediator is closely tied the concept of sociability. The term sociability, which Paddy Scannell (1996) and Frances Bonner (2011) highlight in their respective studies on television presenters, refers to the host's ability to establish a programme as an illusionary social space in which the host, the studio audience, the viewers at home, and the guests can interact for the duration of the programme. According to Bonner (2011), sociability becomes particularly important when a host addresses a large audience since, in those instances, "the presenters are the figures who address viewers directly, establishing the strongest illusion of a personal relationship with the medium" (p. 17). Before examining how exactly television hosts use sociability and parasocial interaction to create a sense of community, I want to stress that television hosts are still playing a role, albeit this role is characterised by a high level of verisimilitude. For example, Lury (1995) notes that despite the fact that the performances of breakfast show presenters "are more relaxed than their journalistic contemporaries," (p. 122) they are also somewhat of a "cover-up" (p. 122). More specifically, Lury (1995) states that these performances "embody contradictions" (p. 122) since they are "at once both knowing and friendly, open and polished, they both include and charm the audience" (p. 122). Lury here acknowledges sociability as a key element of the performance of television presenters, but she also makes clear that it always remains a professional form of sociability.

In previous studies on television performance, the performance style of hosts has frequently been referred to as parasocial interaction. The term was first coined by sociologists Horton and Wohl (2006) in the nineteen fifties and refers to one-sided social relationships between mass media consumers and performers. In his re-evaluation of parasocial interaction, media psychologist David C. Giles (2010) describes it as "the feeling of knowing that comes from media use or cultural activity" (p. 443). In their initial definition of the term, Horton and Wohl (2006) cite television performers who, despite the lack of reciprocity, directly address the viewers at home as a prime example for parasocial interaction. They further argue that the television medium particularly lends itself to parasocial interaction since "the image which is presented makes available nuances of appearance and gesture to which ordinary social perception is attentive and to which interaction is cued" (Horton and Wohl, 2006). Ultimately then, parasocial interaction represents a paradox since

the audience is encouraged to engage with a television character while, at the same time, that relationship can never become truly reciprocal. In fact, according to Horton and Wohl (2006), there are only two instances in which the relationship between viewer and character becomes truly reciprocal. One of them is the moment when the viewer decides to enter a parasocial relationship with a character and the other one is the moment the viewer decides to withdraw from that relationship (Horton and Wohl, 2006). Of course, viewers can also contact a television performer directly. Yet, if they receive an answer, the relationship ceases to be parasocial.

Since Horton and Wohl's (2006) study has been first published, it has been widely accepted that parasocial interaction is the dominant way in which viewers relate to television hosts. While I am convinced that parasocial interaction remains a crucial element of how viewers relate to late-night chat show hosts, I also believe that the term is so narrowly defined that it cannot encompass every element of the viewer's relationship with television hosts or, more generally speaking, the characters that are typically featured on late-night chat programmes. In particular, parasocial interaction is based on the idea that mass media products such as a radio or television programme simulate face-to-face encounters to intensify the viewer's engagement with the programme and its characters. Late-night chat shows go further than that. As I have argued throughout this chapter, late-night chat shows aim to intensify the viewers' relationship with the characters by evoking the impression that the viewer is part of the same community as the characters that are featured on the programme. Of course, parasocial interaction is an important element of achieving this illusion, yet it is not the only element.

As previously discussed, most late-night programmes begin with an opening monologue during which the host tells jokes about current news and events. These opening monologues are characterised by a high degree of sociability and parasocial interaction. For example, the *Conan* episode that originally on September 15, 2016 features a typical late-night monologue. In the course of this monologue, Conan O' Brien tells jokes about the medical records of then presidential candidate Donald Trump, the Syrian refugee crisis, and the American fast-food chain Chipotle ('Episode #6.131', 2016). However, in the context of this study, not primarily the content of the monologue is important, but the way in which O'Brien interacts with the audience while delivering it. For

example, O'Brien begins a joke about the fact that Donald Trump revealed his medical records on *The Dr.Oz Show* (2009 –) by asking the audience "Did you hear about this?"('Episode #6.131'). Through his informal, everyday way of addressing the audience, O'Brien immediately aims to evoke a sense of familiarity between him, the studio audience, and the viewers at home. Although the studio audience does not respond to his rhetorical question, O'Brien keeps interacting with them. He answers his own question with "Good, that's why I'm here" and pretends to be surprised about the fact that no one in the audience has heard about Trump's appearance on *Dr.Oz* given that he is "a good doctor" ('Episode #6.131', 2016). The ironic delivery of this joke is noteworthy since it is based on O'Brien's assumption that him and his audience share the belief that Dr. Oz is, in fact, not a "good doctor," ('Episode #6.131') but a shady businessman. By taking on this position, O'Brien firmly establishes himself as part of the same social group as his audience. In addition, the reaction of the studio audience functions as an indicator for the viewers at home as to how they are expected to react to the programme.

Figure 18 Conan O'Brien during his opening monologue

Throughout the monologue, O'Brien either addresses the camera directly, makes eye contact with the studio audience or communicates with his sidekick Andy Richter. Aside from mediating between the different members of the late-night party, it is particularly important for late-night hosts to establish a sense of

community during the opening segment since it sets the tone for the rest of the show. In O'Brien's monologue, the illusion of interactivity becomes strongest when he tells a joke about Ivanka Trump. When the joke does not elicit a strong reaction from the audience, O'Brien reacts by personally thanking one audience member for laughing at his failed joke. The audience greets this improvisation with laughter which leads O'Brien to expand on his improvised punchline by noting that "it just took that one guy, he turned it all around" ('Episode #6.131'). O'Brien's spontaneity in this instance ensures that the casual atmosphere the programme seeks to establish does not become too artificial/scripted. More specifically, by immediately acknowledging that his joke failed, O'Brien puts himself into the positon of the audience. This impression is further strengthened later on in the monologue when another joke fails to evoke a strong reaction from the audience. Again, O'Brien improvises to save the joke, but this time he interacts with the audience in a different way. When the audience does not laugh at his joke, O'Brien briefly takes on the role of an unimpressed audience member who politely claps in appreciation of the host's effort. In contrast to the previous example, O'Brien in this instance not only acknowledges that his joke did not work, but he actually pretends to be a part of the audience.

The way in which O'Brien constantly mediates between the different members of the late-night party is particularly noteworthy in the context of this study. For example, O'Brien alters his performance based on the responses of the studio audience and frequently contextualises these responses for the viewers at home. At the same time, the reactions of the studio audience function as a guideline for the viewers at home because they indicate what the appropriate/desired emotional response to the present narrative situation is. Aside from playing these two types of audience off against each other, O'Brien adopts a casual, everyday mode of address to intensify viewer engagement. As Rojek (2015) notes, television hosts often use wise-cracks, catch-phrases, deadpan jokes, off-the-cuff remarks, self-deprecation, and share apparently private thoughts to strengthen the illusion that the viewer is part of a face-to-face encounter from everyday life (p. 14). By adopting such a mode of address, they "alter the balance of emotional attachment we have with others" and increase the viewer's identification with the characters (Rojek, 2015, p. 14).

Another important aspect of the host's parasocial performance is the supporting cast. Late-night hosts typically treat their supporting characters as close friends and engage with them frequently. For example, they might ask them for their opinion or engage with them in friendly banter. The most common type of supporting character that featured on most late-night chat shows is the sidekick. For example, Andy Richter on *Conan* and Steve Higgins on *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* are classic sidekick characters.
Although the viewer cannot actively influence the exchanges between the host and the supporting characters, these exchanges still increase the viewer's feelings of intimacy since the audience assumes that they get a sense of the real people behind the performances. Moreover, viewers assume that "the fellowship" between the host and his supporting characters "includes [them] by extension" (Horton and Wohl, 2006). This means despite their lack of influence the audience largely still considers themselves to be part of the same social group as the host and the supporting characters (Horton and Wohl, 2006). In the next section, I focus on late-night guests. Like the performances of the host and the supporting characters, the performances of late-night guests are supposed to add to the illusion that that, by watching a late-night chat show, the viewer becomes part of an exclusive community. Yet, late-night guests establish this illusion in a different way.

6.4 Guests

As I have stated at the beginning of this chapter, the most common type of late-night chat guest are celebrities from the entertainment industry. Other, less common late-night guests include politicians and ordinary citizens.
Despite the fact that both late-night hosts and guests interact with the studio audience and the viewers at home on a parasocial level, each type of character plays a distinct role within the narrative framework of late-night chat. As previously discussed, late-night chat hosts are primarily responsible for mediating between the different members of the late-night party. In contrast, guests have to adhere to the rules of the particular late-night chat programme they are appearing on. Typically, this means that they have to be willing to share private anecdotes with the host. In addition, they have to be willing to interact with the studio audience and the television viewers on a parasocial level.

In her work on the celebrity talk show, Shattuc (2008) describes the appearances of celebrity guests on late-night programmes as a transaction: The celebrity appears on the programme in order to promote a product or an event and is in exchange expected to reveal some previously unknown detail about their private life (p. 166). Meanwhile, Skeggs and Wood (2012) claim that, in reality TV, "intimate performances are converted into economic capital" (p. 64). I believe that, although late-night chat shows do not operate in the exact same way as reality TV, Skeggs and Wood's argument is still noteworthy in this context. Skeggs and Wood (2014) specifically argue that in reality TV, the more 'spectacular' a performance is, the more easily it can be converted into economic value (p. 64). This logic also applies to the celebrity appearances on late-night chat shows. Similar to the contestants on reality TV programmes, the celebrity guests on late-night chat shows aim to form an intimate connection with the audience. However, in contrast to reality TV, late-night chat performances might rely more strongly on sympathy, the logic being that the more likeable a celebrity is, the more likely it is that viewers will take an interest in the product/event they are promoting.

At first glance, this argument might somewhat seem outdated, yet I believe that it still applies to most contemporary late-night chat programmes. For example, my discussion of Daniel Craig's appearance on *The Late Show* at the beginning of this chapter indicates that the celebrity interviews on late-night chat shows are still characterised by their transactional nature. While the transactional nature of the celebrity interview is still intact, it has evolved over the years. Perhaps the most notable difference between classic and modern late-night interviews is that modern late-night interviews often do not clearly focus on a promotional item. Instead, the private life of the celebrity has become the main focus of most modern late-night interviews. Alternatively, the private anecdotes the guests tell are often interwoven with the item or event they are promoting.

For example, when Aaron Eckhart appeared on *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* to promote *Sully* (2016), the host asked him about the experience of working with the legendary Clint Eastwood. Eckhart answered: "I still really can't believe I worked with him. You know he's always been a hero of mine—as an actor, a director—he's an icon in this business" ('Episode #14.120', 2016). Furthermore, Eckhart states that he approached Eastwood years before working with him on

Sully to tell that he would love to work him with him one day. According to the actor, Eastwood simply replied with "We'll see what's shakin'" ('Episode #14.120'). This example shows how, in contemporary late-night chat programmes, private and promotional questions are often interrelated. Kimmel gives Eckhart the chance to promote *Sully* while also providing the audience with a glimpse of the experience of shooting a movie with Clint Eastwood. Consequently, even those viewers who are not interested in *Sully* might be inclined to watch the film after watching this interview, simply because they got invested in Eckhart's uplifting anecdote about his dream of working with Eastwood finally coming true in the form of *Sully*.

While, for the celebrity guests, promoting a product is typically the main reason to appear on a late-night programme, self-promotion is equally important. This is especially true for modern late-night chat shows in which promotion and self-promotion have become almost indistinguishable. In the context of late-night chat programmes, self-promotion means that the celebrity guest has to appear approachable so the viewer can engage with her on a parasocial level. Referring to Misha Kavka's (2012) work on reality television, this is more easily achieved with television performers than movie stars. As Kavka (2012) argues, fame functions differently in film and television (p. 166). In contrast to the film industry, in which "unattainability" (Kavka, 2012, p. 166) is one of the most important elements of fame, television performers become stars based on the viewer's familiarity with them. Kavka's argument is based Marshall's (1997) work on celebrities, who claims that "the television celebrity embodies the characteristics of familiarity and mass acceptability (p. 119). He elaborates on this argument by stating that "whereas the film celebrity maintains an aura of distinction, the television celebrity's aura of distinction is continually broken by the myriad messages and products that surround any television text" (Marshall, 1997, p. 121). Essentially, Marshall here claims that the flow of television emphasises the ordinariness of television personalities. The concept of film stars as opposed to television personalities is not new, yet it takes on a slightly different meaning in the context of late-night chat shows. The main reason for this is that the celebrity guests who appear on late-night chat shows are often movie stars who only turn into television characters for the duration of their appearance. Yet, recently, more and more movie stars have transitioned from film to television and vice versa (e.g. Benedict Cumberbatch,

Eva Green, Jon Hamm). Thus, these performers might be equally considered movie stars and television personalities. Arguably television personalities and performers who frequently transition between film and television can be more easily established as approachable personalities since the viewer is already more familiar with them. In contrast, it can be a difficult task to establish a movie star as an approachable personality while also giving her the chance to promote her newest film within the context of the late-night chat shows, especially given the temporal constraints of the celebrity interview. Yet the *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* segment I discussed earlier achieves both of these tasks. Not only does Aaron Eckhart become more relatable through the anecdote he shares, but it also highlights the film he is promoting.

The viewer's engagement with late-night guests might also be influenced by her intertextual knowledge of that guest. John Fiske (1987) briefly comments on this phenomenon in his discussion of what he terms "horizontal intertextuality" (p. 87). Fiske (1987) refers to the example of Mr.T, who has famously portrayed B.A. Baracus in *The A-Team* (1983 – 87). He argues that while Mr. T has appeared on various television programmes over the years, many of these appearances are related to this performance as B.A. Baracus (Fiske, 1997, p. 87). Thus "the meaning of Mr.T/B.A. (for the character and actor are almost indistinguishable) does not reside in any of his screen appearances but in the intertextuality that is aggregate of all and an essential part of any one" (Fiske, 1997, p. 87). While it would go beyond the scope of this chapter to investigate intertextual viewer engagement at length, I agree with Fiske's argument that the viewer's emotional reaction to a late-night guest is somewhat shaped by intertextual knowledge. For example, Lena Headey, who portrays the evil queen Cersei Lannister on *Game of Thrones* (2011 –), has told Conan O'Brien that fans of the series often approach her and tell how much they hate her ('Episode #3.94', 2013). At the same time, in the YouTube comment section of the clip in which Heady tells this anecdote, viewers voice their surprise at how sympathetic she comes across in her *Conan* appearance, given how villainous her *Game of Thrones* character is (Team Coco, 2013).

It might be too simplistic to argue that the viewer's emotional engagement with a character carries over between different programmes, but this example shows that the idea of intertextual engagement cannot be entirely dismissed. In particular, it highlights that celebrity appearances on late-night

chat shows give viewers the chance to re-evaluate their initial opinion of a celebrity, which might have been based on the celebrity's performance of a fictional character. As previously noted, one of the main appeals of watching a late-night chat show interview is to get a glimpse of the 'real' person behind the celebrity. The seemingly interactive social space of the late-night chat show provides the ideal backdrop to satisfy the viewer's longing for authenticity. This becomes even more clear if we think of the late-night chat show as similar to a social event in everyday life. For example, just as talking to a colleague from work at a party gives us the chance to get to know a different side of that person, late-night chat shows seek to appeal to viewers by giving them the chance to get to know a celebrity on a more intimate level.

One of the most effective ways for chat show guests to establish a high level of intimacy is the confession. Rojek (2015) has previously analysed the role of para-confessions for parasocial interaction. The term para-confession, which was first introduced by Barry King (2008), essentially refers to the institutionalised revelation of celebrity secrets in contemporary television programmes (Rojek, 2015, p 14). Of course, certain types of television programmes (e.g. daytime chat shows, scripted reality TV) also feature para-confessions from non-celebrity guests. Yet, with regard to viewer engagement, para-confessions become particularly important if the confessor is a celebrity. The reason for this is that para-confessions immediately humanise the confessor in the eyes of the audience or, as Rojek (2015) puts it, "the ethos of the para-confession is to magically transform a star in trouble into a friend in need" (p. 14). This means para-confessions are an effective way to quickly eradicate the emotional barriers between celebrities and accelerate intimate emotional engagement (Rojek, 2015, p. 15).

Of course, the glimpses of the real persona behind the celebrity that late-night chat shows promise their viewers might just be considered as another layer of performance. As Rojek (2015) has noted, "the photo play, the memoir, the candid interview, and the para-confessional" (p. 85) are often used in the contemporary media landscape to establish "lifies" (p. 85). The term lifies refers to the "insertion of the details of the private lives of celebrities into popular culture" (Rojek, 2015, p. 84). Rojek (2015) argues that lifies do not actually give viewers a sense of the real person behind the celebrity, but rather represent "an exercise in self promotion and exposure management" (2015, p.

85). Thus, Rojek suggests that there is no circumstance in which the viewer gets to see the real person behind the celebrity. In her discussion of celebrity and DIY digital culture, Akane Kanai (2015) expands on what Rojek defines as lifies. Using actress Jennifer Lawrence as her main example, Kanai argues that in today's media landscape online memes and GIF images have become a crucial element of how a celebrity's star persona is constructed. These DIY artefacts, many of which originate from television interviews, often help to further establish a celebrity's authenticity and make them more approachable (Kanai, 2015).

While I do agree with Rojek that self-promotion and exposure management are important elements of the public celebrity performances, I do find his definition somewhat cynical. Particularly, I am not convinced that every private anecdote a celebrity shares on a late-night chat show is part of their desire to fabricate a particular image. Furthermore, to what degree a lifie is fabricated or not only plays a minor role when it comes to viewer engagement. Rather, for the viewer/character relationship, how authentic a celebrity's chat show appearance comes across is the most important factor.

Thus far, I have primarily discussed the similarities and differences between late-night chat show hosts and guests. Similar to hosts, late-night guests adopt a casual tone, typically address the studio audience and the viewers at home directly, and interact with the other characters on the show in a way that suggests a high level of intimacy. Whereas hosts are responsible for establishing the rules of the late-night party and constantly have to mediate between the different types of characters that are featured on late-night programmes, the guests primarily have to adhere to the rules that have been set up by the host. Furthermore, at their core, the celebrity interviews on late-night chat shows are a transaction since the guests are granted airtime to promote a certain item in exchange for sharing private anecdotes with the audience. Late-night chat show hosts used to distinguish between promotional and private questions, but in modern late-night programmes the two have increasingly become interwoven. For the audience, the main appeal of the late-night chat show interview is to get a glimpse of the real persona behind the celebrity. I discuss this aspect of the performances of late-night guests in more detail in the last section of this chapter, which specifically focuses on the role that the

interactions between late-night hosts and guests play for the viewer's engagement with the characters.

6.5 Host/Guest Interaction

Up until this point, my discussion of viewer engagement in the late-night chat show has largely been divided by character type. For instance, I have discussed how the host, the supporting characters, and the guests interact with the audience on a parasocial level to intensify the viewer's engagement with them. Moreover, I have emphasised how the narrative framework of late-night chat shows primes viewers to engage with the characters on an intimate level. And while I have also indicated that the interactions between late-night chat show characters are an integral element of the party atmosphere these programmes seek to establish, I have not yet examined this aspect of viewer engagement in detail. Thus, in this section, I exclusively investigate the interactions of late-night chat show characters with regard to viewer engagement.

Scott Bakula's 2016 appearance on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* arguably represents a typical late-night chat show celebrity interview ('Episode #2.10'). The interview begins with Colbert introducing Bakula, who enters the studio to a jazz song that the band plays as a references to his role on *NCIS: New Orleans* (2014 –). Colbert walks towards Bakula, embraces him, and starts a private conversation as the two walk back to his desk. Bakula's entrance is noteworthy for the efficiency with which the programme creates a casual mood and encourages viewers to engage with the characters. In particular, the upbeat jazz song that plays as Bakula enters the studio sets a joyful, casual mood and reminds viewers of one of Bakula's most famous performances. Moreover, the way in which Bakula and Colbert embrace each other signals to the viewers at home that the two must know each other well. The illusion of a shared community between host, guest, studio audience, and television viewers is further heightened by the extended period of time that Bakula spends to greet the studio audience (and, by extension, the viewers at home). Despite the fact that both Colbert and Bakula constantly interact with the audience, their performances also correspond to their respective roles within the late-night party. For example, Colbert greets Bakula and offers him a seat whereas the actor greets Colbert with "Nice to see you again," ('Episode #2.10') signalling to the viewer that the two are already familiar with each other each.

Figure 19 Scott Bakula (left) talking to Stephen Colbert

Colbert eases into the interview by starting with some small talk before changing the subject to *Quantum Leap* (1989 - 93), the cult science fiction series Bakula famously starred in. Colbert recalls his personal experience of watching *Quantum Leap* marathons on CBS: "I was so unemployed, I'd watch you all day long" ('Episode #2.10'). He then asks Bakula to talk about his role as Captain Jonathan Archer on *Star Trek: Enterprise* (2001 – 05) to which Bakula responds by telling a number of anecdotes. He tells a story about being confronted with tattoos modelled after his own likeness at *Star Trek* fan conventions and talks about a photoshoot he once did for *Playgirl*. The *Playgirl* anecdote is significant in the context of this study for the way in which it is framed. Bakula begins telling the story, but then suddenly stops and says "No, I'm not gonna tell" to which Colbert reacts by exclaiming "What?" ('Episode #2.10') as the studio audience lets out an audible sigh. Eventually Bakula tells the anecdote, but not before pointing out that it is "not very smart" ('Episode #2.10') of him to do so. The two then proceed to have a humorous conversation about Bakula's *Playgirl* photoshoot during which Colbert admits that he also did a nude scene on stage when he was younger. At the end of the interview, Bakula joins the band for the traditional American folk song "Little Liza Jane" as Colbert reminds viewers of the return date of the new season of *NCIS: New Orleans*.

Figure 20 Scott Bakula (left) joins the Late Show band

Throughout the interview, Bakula and Colbert perfectly play their roles as host and guest: Colbert guides the viewer through the interview while Bakula follows Colbert's lead and willingly shares private anecdotes in exchange for the opportunity to promote the return of *NCIS: New Orleans*. Moreover, their interactions with each other and the studio audience effectively strengthens the illusion of the late-night chat show as a social gathering. For example, Colbert subtly makes himself more relatable for the audience by revealing that he used to watch marathons of *Quantum Leap* when he was unemployed. Similarly, Bakula positions himself as a regular family man by telling Colbert that it brings him joy when Star Trek fans tell him stories about bonding with their family over *Enterprise*.

Yet, most noteworthy with regard to viewer engagement is Bakula's *Playgirl* anecdote. It is not only a prime example for a celebrity sharing an intriguing 'secret' with the audience, but it also highlights that the feeling of being part of an exclusive group is a crucial element of the viewer/character relationship in the late-night chat show. The fact that Bakula seemingly does not want to tell the *Playgirl* anecdote until Colbert and the studio audience convince him otherwise strengthens this impression. The back and forth between Colbert and Bakula suggests that although the actor initially did not want to talk about his *Playgirl* photoshoot, he ultimately feels comfortable to share this anecdote because he is among a group of friends. In addition, Colbert's own reveal further

adds to the intimacy of the moment. Finally, Bakula joining the band is a prime example for the evolution of promotion in the late-night chat show. More specifically, aside from reminding viewers about the return date of *NCIS: New Orleans*, Colbert does not ask Bakula a question about the show he is promoting. Instead, the promotion mainly consists of *The Late Show* band playing a jazz song when Bakula first enters the studio and him joining them for a song at the end of the interview.

Earlier in this chapter I have argued that, while parasocial interaction is a key element of viewer engagement in the late-night chat show, the term does not encapsulate every aspect of the viewer's relationship with the characters from this television subgenre. I want to briefly elaborate on this argument since specifically the interactions between late-night hosts and guests highlight that viewer engagement in the late-night chat show is not limited to parasocial interaction. The beginning of most late-night chat shows typically features a high degree of parasocial interaction. For example, during the opening segment, the host often addresses the studio and television audience directly and poses questions at them to encourage viewer engagement. As previously discussed, there are also instances in which the guests interact with the viewers on a parasocial level. For example, the guests tend to directly address the audience when they first enter the studio. At the same time, the actual interviews and most other late-night chat segments that prominently feature host/guest interaction are not characterised by a high degree of parasocial interaction.

Of course, guests are expected to maintain an illusion of intimacy throughout their appearance. This is, however, not the same as mimicking a face-to-face encounter with the viewer. In addition, late-night chat shows regularly feature segments in which there is a clear divide between host, guest, and television audience. A good example for this are the occasional private conversations between host and guest which often take place when the host welcomes her guest and walks her over to his desk. Similarly, late-night hosts frequently refer to private situations in which they have spent time with their guests. While these anecdotes of a shared past between the host and the guest add to the intimate atmosphere of the late-night chat interview, they also act as a reminder for the audience that they do not exist on the same level as the characters within the diegesis. Yet, simply because viewers are made aware of the divide between them and the characters on screen does not mean that they

do not enjoy the high level of intimacy that the host and their guests typically put on display during their interactions. In contrast, it might disrupt the viewer's engagement with the characters if a guest disobeys the social rules of a late-night chat show because this betrays the sense of community that late-night chat shows promise to provide for their audience.

For example, Burt Reynold's 1994 appearance on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* (NBC, 1992 – 2014) makes clear that if a late-night guest is unwilling to adhere to the social rules of a late-night programme, then this can have a negative effect on the communal atmosphere that late-night chat shows seek to establish ('Episode #3.186'). The problems begin when Jay Leno talks to Marc Summers, who appeared on the same episode of *The Tonight Show* to promote his own show on Nickelodeon. Reynolds interrupts the conversation because he feels insulted by the fact that Summers has his back turned to him while talking to Leno. At this point, the conversation slowly escalates and culminates in an unplanned cake-fight between Summers and Reynolds ('Episode #3.186'). The segment, apart from being bizarre, showcases the importance of the guests' willingness to adapt to the tone of a programme. As the situation slowly escalates, Leno is visibly struggling to maintain the casual, friendly atmosphere. Although Reynolds and Summers begrudgingly shake hands at the end of the programme, the segment does not give viewers much of a chance to engage with the characters on a parasocial level, primarily because the guests sabotage the illusion of intimacy through their behaviour. Thus, this example demonstrates how any time a guest fails or refuses to adhere to the social norms established by a programme it can immediately impair the viewer's engagement with the programme and its characters.

Late-night chat shows have always tried to evoke the illusion of a shared social space between the on-screen characters and the viewers at home, yet contemporary late-night chat shows push this idea to the extreme. For example, in addition to the traditional celebrity interview, modern late-night chat shows often feature other segments that give viewers the chance to get a glimpse of the real person behind the celebrity. Often, these segments take the shape of common party games. While a number of late-night chat shows have adopted this idea, *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* has started this trend. For example, aside from popular party games such as Catchphrase, Charades, and Would You Rather?, Jimmy Fallon also frequently play games that have been

specifically created for *The Tonight Show* with his celebrity guests. These include Water War, Egg Russian Roulette, Word Sneak, Phone Both, and Box of Lies. Yet, the most popular of these games has been *Lip Sync Battle* (2015 -) which in fact has been so popular that it has been turned into a television show in its own right (Spike, 2015-). While these games fulfil a similar purpose as the celebrity interview, namely they strengthen the illusion of the late-night party as a social event, they emphasise different elements of the viewer/character relationship.

For example, in October 2016, host Jimmy Fallon played a game called Box of Lies with his guest Emily Blunt ('Episode #4.20'). The rules of the game are as follows: The contestants take turns in picking a random box. With their opponent unable to see them, the first contestant opens the box which typically contains a bizarre item (e.g. a spring roll in a bird's nest). The player then has to describe the item to her opponent, yet they can decide for themselves if they want to lie or tell the truth. If the other player catches them lying, they get a point. However, if the liar manages to fool his opponent, she gets a point. The players are separated by a wall that contains only a small window through which they can see and communicate with each other.

Figure 21 Emily Blunt and Jimmy Fallon playing Box of Lies

At the beginning of the game, Fallon asks his guest what her strategy to win the game is to which Blunt replies: "Why would I tell you my strategy? That's my

strategy…is to not strategise with you" ('Episode #4.20'). She then asks the studio audience which box to pick, who overwhelmingly cheer in favour of box number four. The box contains a mini-record player with a spinning pepperoni pizza on it. The game starts when Fallon asks Blunt what she found inside the box. After thinking about her answer for a moment, Blunt tells Fallon: "It's a…uhm…it's an interesting thing. So…uhm…it actually happens to be. It's a record player with…with a pizza on it. And the pizza's…uhm, spinning" ('Episode #4.20'). Testing if the actress is lying, Fallon tries to clarify her answer. He asks: "So you pulled a record player out of the box with a pizza that's on it and it's spinning?" ('Episode #4.20'). Smiling, his guest confirms her answer and clarifies that the pizza is actually a pepperoni pizza. The studio audience reacts with laughter to her answer which leads Fallon to guess that Blunt is lying. In a gesture of victory, Blunt picks up the record player with the spinning pizza on it, shows it to Fallon through the window and exclaims: "You suck!" ('Episode #4.20'). Fallon seems impressed by his guests' ability to trick him and acknowledges that he had underestimated her by pointing his finger at her while repeatedly saying: "You're good" ('Episode #4.20'). Meanwhile, the audience cheers as Blunt is celebrating her point.

As Shattuc (2008) notes, interactive segments have been a staple of late-night chat shows for decades. Yet, the party games that Fallon frequently plays with his guests are slightly different from the interactive segments that are usually featured on late-night programmes. Traditionally, if late-night hosts would play games with their guests, these games would be incorporated into the celebrity interview and last only a few minutes. In contrast, the games Fallon plays with his guests are usually marked as their own segments, take place in another part of the studio, and often involve elaborate set designs. Furthermore, these games rarely replace the traditional celebrity interview. Instead, they viewers the chance to engage with the host and the guest in a different way. Most notably, these segments exist completely removed from the guest's need to promote something, which means, even more so than the celebrity interview, they give the guests a chance to showcase their personality.

For example, the Box of Lies game that Fallon plays with Emily Blunt has clearly been designed to give viewers the chance to get to know the host and the celebrity on a more intimate level. This becomes immediately apparent at the beginning of the game when the content of the first box is revealed to the

audience. At this point, viewers are encouraged to ask themselves if Blunt will lie or tell Fallon the truth. Arguably, the viewer's judgement of Blunt will depend on her familiarity with the actor. For example, some viewers might have seen a number of interviews with her while others might only know Blunt from her feature film performances. Meanwhile, some viewers might not be familiar with her at all. In contrast to the players of Box of Lies, the viewer always knows if the contestants are lying or not which means from the spectator's point of view the main attraction of the game is to spend an extended period of time with the host and the guest and get a glimpse of their personalities. In addition, Box of Lies functions as an exercise in reading characters. For example, viewers are encouraged to ask themselves how they would have reacted to Blunt's purposely suspicious telling of the truth if they had been in Fallon's position. The viewer's engagement with the characters also always remains playful. For example, it might elicit a strong negative reaction from the viewer if the characters in a television drama are lying to each other, but in the context of the non-consequential nature of late-night chat ensures that viewers are engaging with the characters in a casual manner.

Of course, it is no coincidence that the games played on late-night programmes are either actual party games or closely resemble party games since most viewers will associate these games with spending time with their friends and family which emphasises the idea of the host and the guest as ordinary people and enhances the illusion of reciprocity. This party atmosphere is especially evoked when audience members are asked to join the host and his guests for a game. Furthermore, the way in which *The Tonight Show* uses these games to promote itself makes clear that the creators of the programme also view them as an important tool to get viewers invested in the programme. For example, the celebrity game segments can usually be viewed on the show's YouTube channel the day after the episode has aired and *The Tonight Show* also promotes them online with blog posts such as "How to Play Your Favourite Tonight Show Game at Home!" (NBC, 2015) in the past. The high number of views and comments these party game segments get on YouTube emphasises the degree to which viewers enjoy watching celebrities in an everyday situation. Furthermore, the comment sections of these videos suggests that segments that simply give viewers a chance to spend an extended period of time with a celebrity have become one of the main attractions of late-night chat. For

example, in the comments to these videos, viewers frequently praise if a celebrity guest comes across as particularly witty or clever. At the same time, viewers often voice their disappointment if a celebrity fails to live up to their expectations of how that person would behave in a non-scripted environment (The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon, 2016).

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that, taken altogether, the different narrative elements of the late-night chat show aim to establish a sense of community that provides the basis for the viewer's engagement with the characters. While the social element of late-night chat can also be seen in the individual performances of host and guests, it mostly becomes apparent in the interactions between the characters. I have also argued that the interactions between late-night hosts and guest interactions cannot simply be defined as parasocial interaction. More specifically, rather than mimicking a face-to-face encounter from everyday life, these interactions primarily aim to evoke the atmosphere of a social gathering from everyday life. This means while viewers are invited to get to know the characters better, they are also always aware that they exist on a different level as the host, the guests, and the studio audience.

6.6 Conclusion

Existing studies on late-night chat tend to focus exclusively on the figure of the host and often equate viewer engagement with parasocial interaction. Over the course of this chapter, I have challenged this idea, by arguing that parasocial interaction only represents one element of late-night chat's intimate narrative framework. Other key elements of this framework include a domestic mise en scène and the high level of intimacy that the host puts on display when they interact with the supporting characters and the guests. Furthermore, I have argued that, rather than simply mimicking a face-to-face encounter, late-night chat shows aim to intensify viewer engagement by establishing a sense of community.

In this chapter, I have been less interested in exploring particular emotional responses that late-night chat shows might elicit in the viewer. The main reason for this is that I consider the performance style of the characters and their interactions with each other as more significant for viewer engagement since they provide the foundation for distinct emotional responses. In other television genres, the type of emotional response that the characters are able to

elicit in the viewer are an integral part of their appeal. For example, when watching *Game of Thrones* or *Breaking Bad*, viewers might enjoy the challenge of having to engage with characters that exist in a moral grey area. This is not the case for late-night chat. Instead, viewers watch late-night chat shows to be entertained, spend time with a familiar group of characters, and get to know celebrities on a more intimate level. Of course, this does not mean that viewers cannot have a strong emotional reaction when watching a late-night chat show. Yet, the light-entertainment nature of these programmes makes it less likely for the viewer's emotional reaction to be negative. In fact, it is one of the responsibilities of the host to maintain a friendly atmosphere that minimises the chance of the audience reacting to the characters that are featured on the programme in a negative way.

The lack of narrative consequences and character growth means that the viewer's emotional reaction to late-night chat show characters is characterised by a sense of immediacy. This stands in contrast to serial television narratives in which the viewer's emotional reaction to a character is partially based on that character's history within the programme. An exception to this rule are the celebrity guests since the viewer's reaction to them might be influenced by the viewer's intertextual knowledge. At the same time, one of the main purposes of the celebrity appearances on late-night chat shows is to somewhat disentangle them from their celebrity status and integrate them into the intimate narrative framework of late-night television. This is not only achieved through maintaining a casual, familiar tone throughout the interviews, but also by including celebrity guests in a range of interactive activities that further highlight their ordinariness. Moreover, the products or events the celebrity guests are promoting during their appearances on late-night programmes are also closely tied to the idea of intimacy. In particular, the guests are allowed to use their appearances for promotional purposes in exchange for revealing private information. Ultimately, the intimate narrative framework of late-night chat and the sense of community that these programmes aim to establish function as an amplifier for the viewer's emotional response to the characters that are featured on these programmes.

7 Conclusion

One of the main aims of this thesis has been to challenge existing approaches to the study of viewer engagement with television characters. More specifically, as I have argued at the beginning of this study, I believe that the current discourse around viewer engagement with television characters needs to expand to include a greater variety of characters and different modes of engagement. Reflecting on the research that I have conducted over the past three years, I am convinced that taking an interdisciplinary approach to the study of television characters that is primarily rooted in cognitive media and television theory has been the right approach to achieve these aims. Particularly, this thesis marks an important step in the development of a text-based model of viewer engagement with television characters that is programme-specific and closely tied to the narrative characteristics of the television medium.

One of my main criticisms of prior studies on viewer engagement with television characters that originate from cognitive media theory (e.g. Smith, 2011, 2014; Carroll, 2004) has been that these works often apply theoretical approaches developed for the study of film to television without acknowledging that these mediums, though similar, employ unique modes of storytelling. In contrast, throughout this thesis, I combined various cognitive studies on viewer engagement with a wide range of theories from other disciplines (e.g. television studies, psychology, sociology, animation studies) to answer the main research question underlying this thesis: to what degree does the narrative context of a television programme shape character engagement?

In this final chapter, I will attempt to provide a more concise answer to this question by summarising the arguments that I have made over the course of this thesis. Furthermore, I discuss the findings of this thesis within a broader context, acknowledge some of the shortcomings of my methodological approach, and point towards potential future research projects on the viewer/character relationship in contemporary television.

In the second chapter of this thesis, I defined the key terms of this study, formulated my methodology, and provided an analysis of previous studies on viewer engagement with fictional characters in general and television characters in particular. Throughout that chapter, I highlighted some of the gaps in the current discourse on viewer engagement with television characters. For

example, I criticised existing cognition-based studies on viewer engagement with television characters for their lack of medium specificity. For example, I criticised Smith's *Engaging Characters* (1995) and Mittell's *Complex TV* (2015) for rendering the process of viewer engagement with fictional characters primarily as a question of morality. Furthermore, I pointed towards existing studies on viewer engagement with television characters that recognise the influence that television's unique narrative environment has on the viewer/character relationship. I argued that such studies, which include Kristyn Gorton's (2009) work on emotional strands and Blanchet and Vaage's (2012) study on long-term viewer engagement in contemporary television drama, indicate what a more far-reaching, cognition-based theoretical model of viewer engagement with television characters could look like. Throughout this thesis, I further developed this idea of a medium-specific, text-based approach to the study of viewer engagement with television characters that is largely rooted in cognitive media theory and television studies.

The first case study of this thesis, my analysis of viewer engagement with characters from contemporary television wrestling (chapter three), accentuated some of the difficulties of developing a theoretical model of viewer engagement that recognises the narrative characteristics of different television genres. Television wrestling proved to be a particularly challenging case study since it does not conform to the narrative framework of one particular television genre. Instead, it combines elements of a variety of genres including sports, soap opera, and reality television. My research showed that this genre-hybridity directly affects the viewer's relationship with wrestling characters. In particular, I argued that wrestling programmes possess the emotional clarity of sports broadcasts, the emotional realism of soap operas, and, like most reality television programmes, leave some ambiguity as to the degree to which wrestling performances are staged. I further argued that the serial structure of wrestling programmes, which encourages viewers to engage with the characters over an extended period of time, can also lead to intense emotional responses (see my discussion of Hulk Hogan's heel turn in chapter three).

The second case study of this thesis, my investigation of antipathetic characters in contemporary television drama, also largely focused on the viewer's emotional engagement with television characters. Yet, in order to avoid following the same theoretical patterns of existing studies, I deliberately

analysed an element of viewer engagement that has previously received less scholarly attention: antipathy. One of the main findings of this chapter was that the viewer's engagement with television characters might be less closely related to questions of morality than has been suggested by previous scholarly studies on this subject. Referring to Vaage's (2013) theory on fictional reliefs, I re-evaluated prior cognition-based studies on viewer engagement with Tony Soprano (Smith, 2011; Carroll, 2004) and argued that engaging with a morally corrupt television character does not necessarily pose a moral challenge to the audience. I further claimed that, since engaging with a fictional character somewhat relieves viewers from the moral obligations of everyday life, viewers are free to sympathise with characters they would normally despise. In my investigation of viewer engagement with Andrea Harrison, I argued that this moral freedom also allows viewers to dislike characters that act morally virtuous. Furthermore, using *Game of Thrones'* (2011 -) Joffrey Baratheon as an example, I contented that, despite the common negative connotations of antipathy, hating a television character has the potential to be a pleasurable experience for the viewer. For example, viewers might feel a sense of transgressive pleasure as a result of a villain's morally corrupt behaviour or experience Schadenfreude as result of their misfortune.

On a broader level, my research in this chapter emphasised that the viewer's engagement with a television character is equally shaped by her personal subjective experience and the narrative context. For example, I found that Andrea Harrison possesses a higher antipathetic potential than other characters in *The Walking Dead* (2010 -) as a result of how the character is presented within the narrative context. However, just as not all viewers will sympathise with a morally corrupt character like Tony Soprano, not all viewers will hate Andrea since *The Walking Dead* generally positions her as a sympathetic character. Ultimately, I found that hating a television character is equally a cognitive and emotional process that is strongly shaped by the degree to which the viewer embraces the concept of fictional reliefs. For example, while some viewers might apply the same moral compass they rely on in their everyday lives when watching television, others might use the moral freedom that engaging with a fictional character allows to dislike a character for trivial reasons.

The second half of this thesis focused more specifically on the influence of performance on the viewer/character relationship. However, this shift in focus was not the result of a change in my methodology. It was rather due to the programmes that I investigate in chapters five and six, which foreground this element of viewer engagement more strongly than my earlier case studies.

My investigation of viewer engagement with animated characters particularly focused on the link between performance and viewer engagement. In the first half of chapter five, I mainly distinguished between viewer engagement with animated characters versus viewer engagement with non-animated characters. Moreover, referring to Crafton's (2013) concept of figurative and embodied animated performances, I explored how these two types of animated performance operate within a television context. Specifically, I investigated embodied animated performances in *The Legend of Korra* (2012 – 14) and figurative animated performances in *South Park* (1997 -). One of the main findings of this chapter was that recognition plays a more crucial role for the viewer's engagement with animated characters. In particular, my analysis of *The Legend of Korra* showed that the viewer's long-term engagement with a character can easily be disrupted if the animation style of a programme is not consistent. Another key finding of this chapter was that the viewer's relationship with animated television characters is shaped by their animated nature and the narrative context. My close textual analysis of *South Park* demonstrated that, despite the fact that the programme relies exclusively on figurative animated performances, its elusive narrative format, which frequently oscillates between episodic and serial narration, enables viewers to engage with the characters on multiple levels. For instance, for those viewers who are familiar with the history of the programme, the figurative animated performances might take on a deeper meaning which can lead to a more layered emotional response. I acknowledge that a fluctuating narrative structure can affect viewer engagement with characters from any television genre, however, my analysis of *South Park* emphasised the degree to which a change in a programme's narrative format can alter the viewer's relationship with a television character. Specifically, I argued that if a programme switches its narrative format from episodic to serial, this might add a level of embodiment to performances that are otherwise entirely figurative (especially for long-time viewers of the programme).

My primary argument in chapter six was that late-night chat programmes aim to engage viewers by creating a sense of community. Thus, instead of focusing on a particular element of viewer engagement, I took a more general look at how the different narrative elements of late-night chat come together to create the illusion of an interactive social space in which the viewer can directly engage with the characters. In previous studies on late-night chat, the performances of the characters in this genre have been linked to the sociological concept of parasocial interaction (Horton and Wohl, 2006), yet I contended that the viewer's relationship with late-night characters is not limited to this engagement pattern. Late-night chat shows have recently begun to feature more interactive segments that are primarily meant to give viewers the opportunity to spend time with the host and the celebrity guests. I have argued that these interactive segments make clear that the viewer's relationship with late-night characters is not limited to parasocial interaction. These segments often resemble party games which further feeds into the idea of the late-night chat show as a communal space. Of course, the viewer's engagement with late-night characters is not limited to becoming part of the late-night party. For example, viewers will still sympathise with or reject the featured characters (e.g. guests, hosts etc.) based on their performances. However, these other types of engagement typically take place within a larger narrative framework that aims to engage viewers by establishing a sense of community.

This overview of the main findings of this thesis underlined that the viewer's relationship with a television character is not only shaped by the inherent narrative characteristics of the television medium, but also closely tied to each programme's narrative context. For example, I found that the viewer's emotional engagement with television wrestling is not only influenced by the narrative format, but also the sports-like presentation and the veracious ambiguity of the performances. In the same way, my analysis of viewer engagement with animated characters demonstrated that the unique temporal aspects of television narration (e.g. seriality, long-term viewer engagement) work alongside the aesthetic elements of each television programme to shape the viewer's relationship with the characters.

Furthermore, this thesis revealed some of the previously untapped potential of cognition-based approaches to the study of viewer engagement with television characters. In order to gain more insight into how viewers relate to

television characters on a cognitive and emotional level, one needs to pay close attention to the narrative context of each television genre and focus on distinct types of engagement. This is particularly true with regard to genres like television drama, which have already been extensively studied in the past. By focusing on the less-explored topic of viewer antipathy in television drama, I found that morality might not factor as strongly into viewer/character engagement as previously assumed. Similarly, my study of late-night chat made clear that the viewer's engagement with characters from this type of programme is not limited to parasocial interaction.

While I am certain that the methodological approach that I have taken in this thesis has led to a deeper understanding of how viewers relate to television characters, I want to briefly acknowledge some of the potential shortcomings of my approach. My research on viewer antipathy in contemporary television drama showed that employing a broad definition of 'the viewer' that does not distinguish between the individual viewer characteristics such as gender, race, age, and class can easily become complicated. While I still believe that, in the context of this thesis, it was necessary to define the viewers in such broad terms, I would be interested in developing a methodological approach that combines the findings of this study with a more differentiated definition of the viewer. For example, while I believe that the way in which a character is presented within the narrative context can increase their antipathetic potential, it would have gone beyond the scope of this study to examine how different types of viewers might react to characters that possesses a high antipathetic potential. I also believe that there is potential for future research projects to investigate whether there are notable differences in the ways in which viewers relate to fictional as opposed to non-fictional television characters. In particular, while the research I conducted over the course of this thesis (specifically chapters three and five) indicates that viewers might engage somewhat differently with non-fictional television characters, I believe that a more detailed study on this subject might reveal aspects of the viewer/character relationship that have not yet been discovered.

Partially as a result of the popularity of television antihero narratives at the turn of the century, there has been a new-found interest in the behaviour and the motivations of television characters. This increased interest is particularly apparent in the online discourse around television characters and

the recap culture that has developed around many contemporary television narratives (observable on sites like The AV Club, Uproxx, IndieWire). On a daily basis, viewers discuss the behaviour of television characters online, compare the actions of television characters to the behaviour of people from their everyday lives, and listen to podcasts that focus on the fictional lives of television characters. However, although in the current media landscape the lives of viewers and television characters are more interwoven than ever before, the details of this relationship still remain somewhat elusive. Employing a cognition-based, interdisciplinary approach to the study of television characters can help us gain a deeper understanding of this relationship, which has become one of the essential aspects of the overall experience of watching television and will only grow more multifaceted as time goes on and new types of programmes raise new aspects of engagement.

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