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# The Life Cycle of *Transparent*: Envisioning Queer Space, Time and Business Practice

Justin Wyatt

***Abstract***: *The queerness of the series* Transparent *(2014–2019), both textually and extratextually, offers a paradigm for understanding just how flexible and revolutionary digital TV can be. Queerness becomes a mechanism freeing both the television text and the business practices supporting it. The result is a radically reformed life cycle for both the television text and the attendant commercial structures. Launched in 2014 from Amazon Studios, Jill Soloway's* Transparent *suggests that narrative ruptures in the life cycle are as significant as the technological or business shifts. Unlike the traditional US broadcast/cable model, the economics of the show merely reflect Amazon Prime's desire to be both a means of delivery and an original content provider. In this way, original series add value to the company and hopefully the stock price. Business practice, methods and revenue are reformed, allowing for television "product" that need not adhere to the traditional models of commercial television. Narratively, the radical way through which Soloway connects the two disparate stories in Season Two requires viewers to set aside their expectations on cause and effect in television storytelling. Time, space, and causation are also altered within Soloway's text. Certainly, there are specific links in terms of the characters' lineage, but the creators of* Transparent *also seemingly want us to consider "life cycle" in a much different and queerer way than is usual for television programming.*

The landscape for queer television has been narrow, to say the least. Institutionally, the opportunities increased somewhat in the 1990s, with the occasional show serving the lesbian and gay market and being careful not to alienate other potential viewers in the process.[1] Lisa Henderson accurately describes the process as "exploiting historical deprivation of images and recognition and catering to deprived audiences at a moment when the industrial risk is worth it" (158). Extending this trajectory, Hollis Griffin considers a series of gay- and lesbian-oriented sitcoms from the early 2000s which garnered little attention within the mainstream press.[2] Looking at shows with limited "exchange value" for the industry helps to create a narrative of queer television history outside the familiar of terrain of success, failure and "evolution". Griffin's analysis reminds us that the narrative of queer television has largely been written around those breakthrough shows, privileging the commercial and critical shows that bridge an LGBTQ audience and a straight demographic.[3]

Apart from the success/failure and evolutionary models of gay television, queer media industry scholarship has also foregrounded the alternative ways through which queer media can be placed into the market. The intersection of "queer" and "media industries" tends to focus on the means through which queer texts can either circumvent or rework traditional media industry structures. Candace Moore, for instance, in 2013's "Distribution Is Queen: LGBTQ Media on

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Demand", posits specific digital strategies and viewer engagement used to bolster meagre marketing dollars for queer media product. Our current era of "portal television", to use Amanda Lotz's useful term for the Internet-distributed TV, complicates the television landscape considerably (*Portals*). Consequently, the space for a (queer) television show to make an intervention, socially and aesthetically, has been multiplied by these structural changes. Therefore, the life cycle of the television text should be reconceived, allowing for a space for a productive and queer identity and viewpoint to be explored in depth.

The "product life cycle" is a traditional term from management describing the birth, development and maturation of a product, along with the attendant business strategies seeking to prolong its economic life. When looking at the entertainment "product" of television, for several decades the life cycle of a television show was fairly consistent across programmes. In the past decade, however, the life cycle suggested by portal television has altered dramatically. And, as always, the business life cycle for a television show is augmented by its narrative life cycle, which includes the life cycle of the characters and their relationships.

Jill Soloway's *Transparent* (2014–2019) presents as one of the first opportunities for representing queerness in portal television. The queerness of the series, both textually and extra-textually, offers a paradigm for understanding just how flexible digital TV can be. Queerness becomes a mechanism freeing both the television text and the business practices supporting it. The result is a radically reformed life cycle for both the television text and its attendant commercial structures. Launched in 2014 from Amazon Studios and winner of the Best Comedy Series at the Golden Globes in 2015, Soloway's *Transparent* also suggests that narrative ruptures in the television life cycle are just as significant as the technological or business shifts.[4] As evidenced by *Transparent*, the new "one-season-at-a-time" format allows for queer time and space, and, in particular, permits an exploration of a spectrum of gender, sexuality and queer placement. Rethinking the life cycle of characters, season and series in both narrative and business terms is the real "game changer" in terms of queer interventions in television form.

## The TV Life Cycle: Old and New

Television's original life cycle can be traced back to the commercial basis of early television programmes and networks. In commercial terms, the most desirable lifeline for a show was based on the promise of off-network syndication, that is, a programme playing outside its original broadcast network airing. The traditional life cycle of a thirty-minute sitcom depended on a programme content provider—a production company or studio—licensing the initial rights for broadcast to a network. Revenues were accrued through the licensing, but more significant cash flow depended on the off-network life of the show. If a sitcom lasted more than four seasons (equivalent to about a hundred episodes), it could be sold for off-network syndication (Curtin and Shattuc 75). Since the off-network life could extend for years, or even decades, beyond the original broadcast airing, the financial benefits of reaching the off-network market were considerable.

With the explosion during the 1980s of basic cable networks seeking to fill programming hours, syndication became even more lucrative as a means to recoup production costs.[5] Pay cable networks developed an alternate source of finance through paid subscription, allowing for "program content deemed too risky or unacceptable for mainstream audiences in the era of spot advertising and channel scarcity" (Lotz, "What" 54). Of course, many broadcast programmes fail

to capture interest in their original airings, leaving the possibility of off-network syndication unlikely as a revenue source. The addition of new revenue opportunities in the past decade, such as web streaming and the cable VOD business, has shifted the equation so some content providers are willing to forego the potential higher revenue from syndication for short-term gains.

Extending a television programme's life cycle has also been facilitated by network strategies to link shows and characters outside their domain. As Mimi White describes it, the networks focused on "an obvious commercial-promotional strategy with a textual effect of an increasingly hermetic, self-encompassing world on television" (52). This could involve characters crossing from one show to the next, making guest appearances, and creating a somewhat self-contained world of television populated by a finite number of characters. Linking the action show to the sitcom, for example, suggests that the life cycles within the worlds of these television programmes are linked. The benefits are cross-promotional in nature, yet these intertextual strategies reinforce the ways that many seemingly unrelated shows can create a television universe that we are only slowly discovering thanks to the work of network marketing and production teams. Spin-offs, franchising and cross-promotional strategies serve to bolster the life cycle of shows within the network world. Additionally, marketing strategies also strengthen the networks' ability to extend the life cycle and create an all-encompassing world of television. Most notably, during the 1990s, ABC's TGIF (Thank Goodness It's Funny) and NBC's Must See TV created programming blocks of similar shows, targeting a set family audience demographic. Marketing strategies within each block furthered the idea that a world of network television existed. During TGIF's most popular years, for instance, one character from a TGIF sitcom would step beyond the diegetic confines of the programme to act as host during the block. The continuing power of this last marketing strategy can be evidenced through Hulu recreating the ABC TGIF line-up through its programme schedule in 2017 (Littleton). The goal is not just to promote but also to extend the life cycle of each of these ABC sitcoms. Short-term ratings gain and long-term syndication success are the desired outcomes for all of these content and marketing activities.

In the digital era, the television life cycle has mutated so much that it is only a distant relative of the earlier broadcast model. While broadcast and cable networks are still bound by schedules, premieres, and, in many instances, Nielsen ratings, portal television providers—particularly Netflix and Amazon Prime—produce new shows that they released an entire season at one time. The key differences between digital era and earlier television are linked to the altered means of delivery, including on-demand and time-shifted viewing, and the ability for viewers to consume television episodes in a large variety of different "bites", from "tasting" a single episode to "bingeing" on an entire season in one sitting. Cultural anthropologist Grant McCracken proposes that binge watching allows viewers to alter space and time of the narrative development, "to fashion an immersive near-world with special properties." While critics usually stress the differences between these new television seasons and previous models, there is, in fact, a closer parallel in television history. In many respects, the nearest connection to the shows that are released an entire season at a time is the television miniseries, which reached peak popularity between the late 1970s and the mid-1980s. As John Devito and Frank Tropea argue in their genre analysis of the miniseries, the form depended on "complex, multi-layered plot humming along at a swift, often cliffhanger-filled pace" (1). The miniseries relied frequently on melodrama, ensemble casts, and a vast canvas of chronology and geography. In this respect, the new "one season at a time" does parallel certain aspects of the miniseries. Generally critics and viewers talk of a story arc in these shows, suggesting the import of the programme's broader scope and clear narrative trajectory.

Ensemble casts and cliffhangers of portal TV are also a common element in both the miniseries and the new digital show seasons.

Rather than trusting traditional marketing strategies, portal television providers have benefited considerably from social media. Everyday viewers are the new marketing experts, allowing for immediate and continued dialogue on a new season of a series. In "The Netflix Effect: Teens, Binge Watching, and On-Demand Digital Media Trends", Sidneyeve Matrix locates the key attribute differentiating the Netflix model directly in the social media exchange crucial to the viewing and reception of these shows. As Matrix comments on the trend, "the water cooler has been digitized" (126). In this way, the life cycle of a portal television show has shifted across multiple parameters: the presentation and development of characters, viewers' ability to consume larger chunks of a show (and its characters) in a single viewing, and the realisation that social media reaction may be even more significant than external marketing and public relations in establishing and influencing a connection to the characters and the show. All of these characteristics apply to portal television shows, but queer television can occupy a special place in this landscape, given these disruptions and reorientations. Writing in 2014, Lynne Joyrich accurately pinpoints this shift: "Thus, at the same time more queers are making it to television, television itself is being remade, some might say, as more queer: more eccentric and playful, more connective and transformative, with more stand-out strangeness than just stand-up straightness" (135).

Consider, for example, the queer possibilities offered by *American Horror Story* (2011–). Brenda Geller and Anna Marie Banker trace the connections between *American Horror Story*'s structure, disruptive imagery and queer iconography and characters.[6] Invoking Elizabeth Freeman, they argue that a "temporal drag" characterises the queerness of the show overall: the show examines the historicity of its diegetic present by enchaining it within the historical past. Anchored through queer iconography and characters, *American Horror Story* pictures queerness itself as temporality. The show continually invokes the past, in haphazard and disruptive ways, so that the future is refuted at every turn. For Geller and Banker, this quality makes *American Horror Story* a key example of "radical antisocial queerness" that helps to conceptualise a queer theory of television (36). Looked at through a slightly different lens, Joyrich suggests that the Ryan Murphy shows, including *American Horror Story*, place narrative coherence aside in favour of "full obsessional fantasy" (138). Jill Soloway uses time in just as radical and iconoclastic way as *American Horror Story*. Whereas *American Horror Story* appears to disrupt time to divert interest to the spectacle, horror and transgression, however, time plays out much differently in *Transparent*.

## Time and Hardly Transparent Storytelling

*Transparent* tells of the Pfefferman family, an upper-middle-class Jewish family composed of husband Mort (Jeffrey Tambor), ex-wife Shelly (Judith Light) and three grown children: Sarah (Amy Landecker), unhappily married and angry over lost time, Josh (Jay Duplass), a music executive with a very chequered romantic past, and Ali (Gaby Hoffmann), an under-achieving thirty-something searching desperately for meaning. The title conveys the premise of the show: initially the programme is situated around Mort coming out as transsexual and dealing with this gender confirmation in his late sixties. Like so much else about the show, though, the title also teasingly provokes the viewer. Very little about Mort, his situation, his family, or their lives is

actually transparent. In fact, the storytelling is structured to undermine viewer expectations and orientations. This is evident even in the first episode: the family is gathered around the dinner table ready for their father's revelation, but all three adult children are so self-obsessed and impatient that Mort/Maura chooses to skip telling her children this important news. The big reveal—a moment with the potential for great emotional and narrative significance—is scratched, and life plays out in uneven, mundane and unexpected ways instead.

*Transparent*'s presentation of character is guided by the larger premise that queer lives cannot be contained by traditional storytelling methods. The life cycle of the characters is played out in unconventional ways, as the narrative often withholds information from the viewer rather than allowing them to be fully informed. Most vivid is the repeated juxtaposition of past and present. In the first season, the show flashes back to scenes of Mort and his businessman friend Mark (Bradley Whitford) cross-dressing as younger adults. The scenes function to deepen the character of Maura and to show the complexity of her relationship with then-wife Shelly. In that respect, past and present are employed in fairly traditional ways to give the premise that queer lives are complex and evolving texture and depth.

**Figure 1: The Pfefferman family gathers for Sarah's wedding.**
**"Kina Hora", *Transparent*, Season 2, Episode 1 (2015). Screenshot.**

In the first episode of the second season, however, *Transparent* makes a much more significant leap, especially in configuring its queer characters. The episode, titled "Kina Hora", is

cantered on daughter Sarah's wedding to her partner Tammy. In the middle of a wedding dance, a character swings his shirt in the air to the music. The show cuts on this action to another character doing the same action. This time, the scene is labelled "Berlin 1933". An array of beautiful men, women and transgender characters dance, celebrate and revel in the music and the sensuality. Bradley Whitford, the actor who plays Maura's cross-dressing friend, Marcy, appears as one of the characters in this scene, confounding consistency of characterisation. After a minute of this parallel scene, the show cuts back to the Pfefferman wedding in 2015 Los Angeles. The connection is left for viewers to consider without any immediate explanation.

As the second season continues, there are longer glimpses of the characters in 1933 Berlin. They are connected to a centre clearly based on Magnus Hirschfeld's Institute for Sexual Science, established in Berlin in 1919. Over the course of the second season's ten episodes, viewers are asked to make the leap between the Berlin characters and the continuing story of the Pfefferman family in contemporary Los Angeles. The Berlin characters are enjoying their LGBTQ moments of freedom despite the looming threat of Nazi dominance. The contemporary story illustrates the continuing negotiation of sexual fluidity and variations in LGBTQ identity. The threats symbolised by the Nazis are still present in our current time, but the show foregrounds characters' self-sabotage in terms of happiness as much as it deals with ongoing social disapproval and judgment. The end of the second season reveals that the Pfefferman family left Berlin and emigrated to the USA. The season culminates with the birth of the show's central character, Maura.

This opaque storytelling practice no doubt proves challenging to some viewers. Jason Mittell suggests that viewers "learn" the rules of storytelling for a particular series: "We gain operational knowledge as we learn the intrinsic storytelling norms of a series and extrinsic information about the genre, creative team, network or codes of the television medium itself" (167). In this sense, Mittell is treating Bordwell's model of classical Hollywood storytelling as the key element added to the paratexts surrounding the TV show. A series like *Transparent* is aligned with Bordwell's art-cinema narration model of storytelling rather than traditional, "transparent" storytelling practices on film or television. In the art cinema, cues and schemata are presented but they can contradict each other, thwarting meaning creation by the viewer. As Bordwell clarifies, the art cinema model privileges "subjective vision and authorial address" which become more important than the creation of cognitive hypotheses that lead you through a narrative (205).

The art cinema, complex TV and the devices associated with them are helpful in accounting for the storytelling within *Transparent*. In fact, many of *Transparent*'s narrative strategies—complexity in character development, misleading narrative cues, ambiguity and gaps in narrative logic, casting actors in multiple roles within the show, and, of course, the breaks and fissures in chronology—match key examples of the classical art cinema of directors such as Alain Resnais and Michelangelo Antonioni. And whereas the miniseries may serve as a parallel to the newer show in terms of length, narrative concentration and ensemble, the nonlinear storytelling in *Transparent* is most definitely an innovation. The movement between past and present is a structuring device in *Transparent*, but Soloway leaves the viewer purposefully unmoored in time. The shifts in temporal frameworks are driven back to character. Time—of the character, their past, their family and even their lineage—is used to incrementally paint a more nuanced picture of the characters, their motivations and their drives. The "Kina Hora" episode sets up the most dramatic juxtaposition between past and present, with the viewer needing to see most of the episodes in that season to make the intellectual and emotional connections between the Weimar events and the current Pfefferman family.

Subsequent seasons also offer glimpses into past lives and legacies. In Season Three, the life of teenage Maura in Los Angeles appears as a critical subplot. Season Four is centred on a family trip to Israel inspired by meeting Maura's long-lost father. This trip starts to sew together events across generations in the Pfefferman family as well as to suggest the role that Israel might play for each character in terms of identity. Describing the use of time in these capsule forms in *Transparent* fails to represent the show fairly. Part of *Transparent*'s accomplishment is the ability to create characters who are influenced by a number of times and places in ways that they may not even realise.

The Pfefferman family continually demonstrates that identity of any kind is always in flux, never fully recouped by past or present action. Time becomes one more factor that refuses to be reconciled to conventional storytelling techniques. Similarly, for Soloway, queerness cannot be contained by conventional identity politics. Matriarch Maura is rarely portrayed as a selfless figure finally coming to terms with her gender identity. Instead, Maura/Mort has been operating from a complex set of motivations that are arguably at odds with the role of parent and caregiver: think, for instance, of his willingness to cancel daughter Ali's bat mitzvah so he can secretly attend a cross-dressing retreat. In one major subplot, an academic ex-colleague of Mort/Maura, Leslie, played by Cherry Jones, eventually becomes Ali's mentor and lover, while remembering how Mort had blocked advances for female academics decades before. Maura, like her children and ex-wife, is so focused on self-actualisation that she is often blind to the role that time, history, and past action play as precursors to the present. In this way, *Transparent* offers a remarkably complex and temporally layered view of the characters. Soloway withholds typical dramatic arcs and character breakthroughs. Queer identity is never affirmed or even located. In fact, the storytelling and character identity formation might well be the queerest elements of the show.

The ways in which Soloway connects the two stories in Season Two requires viewers to set aside their expectations regarding cause and effect in television storytelling. While more accessible, Seasons Three and Four of the show similarly move between a more recent past and the present. Time, space, and causation are transformed within Soloway's text and viewers are left to make sense of how the past informs the present. Certainly, there are specific links in terms of the characters' lineage, but the creators of *Transparent* also present the audience with opportunities to consider "life cycle" in a much different and queerer way than is usual in television programming. *Transparent* severs viewers' expectations in multiple ways. Rather than fulfil generic expectations, *Transparent* sets them aside. Michael Renov and Vincent Brook view *Transparent* as challenging established sitcom tropes, through "blending pathos and melodrama with formal experimentation" (78). Jill Soloway explains that her approach to storytelling did not fall within the realm of TV. She explains that, "for me, it was like making a five hour film with distribution built in" (qtd. in Mitchell). In another interview, Soloway gestures toward the unusual formal qualities in her definition of the programme: "It's so much more than TV to us, it's our version of the most ambitious streaming art we can conjure" (qtd. in Birnbaum).

## The Industrial Context of Transparent

This approach to constructing queer characters and lives cannot be separated from the larger industrial space occupied by *Transparent*. While the show adheres to the thirty-minute sitcom format (albeit without commercial interruption), making the complete ten-episode season available at once creates a new temporal dimension.[7] This is augmented by viewer consumption

of the show. Amazon Prime reports that eighty per cent of all viewers binged on two or more episodes of the series in the same day.

Unchained to both Nielsen ratings and the world of syndication, the economic model for portal television embraces rather than erases the difference of *Transparent*. In fact, viewed under the conventional criteria of audience size, *Transparent* fails to lead Amazon Prime's offerings, and falls behind popular original shows on Netflix and Hulu (Holloway). Commercially, Amazon Prime is attempting to build its library of titles, with its original shows being the most important point of product differentiation. This differentiation marks a potential site for queer television, in form, content and storytelling. Being free from the tyranny of audience size, and advertiser demand, recreates the model for television programming in a "post-network" world that is grappling with cord cutting and cord shaving for cable channels.

Amazon Prime Video as a subscription video on-demand service cannot be separated from its commercial behemoth retailer parent, Amazon. In Amazon's online space, the network model of the programme schedule is forfeited for the model of on-demand product choice. The value of Amazon Prime Video is based partly on the library of movies, pre-existing TV shows, and original shows specifically produced for Amazon. The latter category has the greatest impact as a driver for the service. As Amanda Lotz explains it, "[t]he most value is from content exclusive to their libraries. This forces those who desire the content to subscribe to their services" (*Portals* 28–9). The business model is centred on the premise that Amazon Prime Video is useful for converting online viewers into shoppers. Those who watch Amazon Prime must subscribe to the club that offers two-day package delivery for the annual membership fee (Dastin). Original shows have the greatest potential to create buzz for Amazon Prime since the content cannot be seen anywhere else. With the goal to entice the potential viewer to try Amazon Prime, it is hardly surprising that the original titles tend to be skewed toward high-end provocative premises (e.g., *The Man in the High Castle* imagines an America in which the Nazis prevailed in the Second World War) and/or those with bold, uncompromising themes (e.g., *Transparent*, *One Mississippi*, *Fleabag*). This attention-grabbing content hopefully draws interested potential viewers to Amazon Prime, and, more significantly, to the ongoing commerce attached to it. In an industry seminar in 2016, Amazon Chief Executive Jeff Bezos described this strategy in the following terms:

> We get to monetize [our subscription video] in a very unusual way. When we win a Golden Globe, it helps us sell more shoes. And it does that in a very direct way. Because if you look at Prime members, they buy more on Amazon than non-Prime members, and one of the reasons they do that is once they pay their annual fee, they're looking around to see, "How can I get more value out of the program?" And so they look across more categories—they shop more. (Qtd. in McAlone)

Two years later, Bezos underlined this approach in his letter to shareholders: "Prime Video continues to drive Prime member adoption and retention" (Spangler).

Amazon also prides itself on being consumer-centric. The move into television production reflects just the same ethos. Rather than market testing show pilots with test audiences and using data for greenlight decisions, Amazon relies instead on posting pilots online and soliciting feedback from their viewers. This practice started in February 2014 with Amazon posting ten original pilots online in its streaming service and asking viewers which one Amazon should make as their next show (Stein). In this way, the value of crowdsourcing and big data outweighs the

input of creative and executive guidance and direction. Business practice, methods and revenue are reformed, allowing for television product that need not adhere to the traditional models of commercial television. Roy Price, former head of Amazon Studios, explains the strategy for Amazon Prime in terms of quality programming (to be expected) and the direct connection to the viewers (more unexpected):

> [My mandate is] to create fantastic content that Amazon customers will love, that will make Prime more fantastic and desirable. That is really goal number one. We also think that as you look forward into the media business, the distance from creators to customers or viewers or whatever is going to get a lot shorter. It's going to be more common for creators to be able to reach out and directly interact with their audience. (Jarvey)

While the gesture of privileging public opinion is an ongoing strand in the Amazon narrative, it is interesting to note that *Transparent* apparently did not test among the highest scoring pilots in its season. It did garner significant critical praise, however, during this public pilot testing (Whitney). The life cycle of an original show on Amazon Prime thus becomes an ongoing dialogue between the company and the public sphere, not just the viewers.

Unlike the traditional US broadcast/cable model, original shows like *Transparent* reflect Amazon's desire to be both a means of delivery and an original content provider. In this way, original series add value to the company and hopefully the stock price. After-market value of the series is of a much lesser concern. The most important aspect for the original series is the short-term ability to pique interest in a consumer/viewer base. The LGBTQ market has frequently been characterised as an attractive consumer market; as a Nielsen demographics report claims, LGBT households make ten percent more shopping trips than non-LGBT households, with total spending in these trips also higher (+7%).

With these elements, the logic of Amazon Prime supporting queer television, such as *Transparent*, becomes clearer. Without the traditional business model of maximising viewership in the short run (first run) and long run (syndication), the life cycle of the Amazon Prime show is predicated on the likelihood of its hooking a potential viewer who then is available to become a consumer across the portfolio of Amazon categories. The queerness of *Transparent* is matched by a queerness in the business practices that place the show into the marketplace. Free from Nielsen ratings, syndication requirements, and the vagaries of network series maintenance over the years, Amazon Prime series like *Transparent* are afforded much greater flexibility. *Sui generis* concepts and an appeal to LGBTQ audiences represent provocative invitations to Amazon Prime, attracting LGBTQ and LGBTQ-friendly audiences with a higher yield as consumers of the Amazon product, including everything from shows to shoes.[8]

## Queerness, "Time Gone Awry" and the New TV Life Cycle

*Transparent* can be seen as a paradigm for the opportunities in the new queer life TV cycle. A full exploration of a queer voice in television is much more of a possibility given the shift in commercial and structural parameters within the media industry. While some of these shifts impact all television product and offerings, queer television, in particular, can benefit from the transformations. Among the industrial changes impacting all, certainly, in the era of portal television, there is now a far greater range of possibilities for extending the life of a show. The

spin-off and franchise model from broadcast television is still in effect: derivative programmes seek to bolster the original franchise while sprouting new spin-offs. Shows can also be configured outside the conventional time frames and release calendars, without the commercial or structural limitations of the broadcast or cable life cycle.

The television life cycle shifts in more fundamental ways for a queer show through the use of character and time. The queerest aspect of *Transparent* may be its ability not to labelled as a success within conventional genre definitions: LGBTQ friendly, family sitcom, dramedy, a tale of a dynasty, an intimate human portrait. *Transparent* fits all these tags, and several more. The result is a show that maps characters who cannot be reconciled within a single episode, season or even across the entire scope of the series. To that end, *Transparent* is devoted to the fragility of our identity formation. If the pilot suggests that the show will concern Maura's decision to transition later in life, much of *Transparent* places that story as just one of the many identity transformations, real and imagined, for each member of the Pfefferman family. Amy Villarejo speaks of "how dispersed and contradictory is the serial's sense of queerness" (15). Characters may seek the "safety" of a gender/sexuality label, but these are illustrated to be just as fluid and transitory as any other social or institutional affiliation. Unlike many LGBTQ series, *Transparent* is not centred on social acceptance or rejection of queer individuals. Rather Soloway's boldness comes through in the difficulty of self-acceptance of gender and sexuality labels. Villarejo astutely sums this up through one lens in the second season: "Lesbianism is rendered as fraught across a range of characters and situations, both sympathetic and unsympathetic, and no longer enjoys the aesthetic care Soloway devotes to Maura in the first season" (15).

*Transparent* does not minimise gender and sexual roles, but instead forces the viewer to consider these as just one part of identity formation. Further, *Transparent* places these specific roles in dialogue with time, history, and larger social determinants. Unlike the evolutionary model of gay television so evident through much of TV history, *Transparent* presents the most radical view yet: perhaps gender and sexuality can never be a place for self-acceptance and pride. They are, instead, simply part of the larger fabric of human nature, nothing more. Queerness is not reduced to a marketing strategy or a pro-social point of reference.[9]

The appeal of "time gone awry" for queer texts has been explored in depth by Valerie Rohy. Her argument is centred on rethinking the ahistorical in queer texts; as Rohy describes the path to this project: "Revisiting anachronism, scholars seek to open a space for temporal variation in queer methodologies by recognising the fictional status of linear time and the fact of our retrospective investment in the past" (70). This temporal dislocation can be assimilated by the process of nostalgia or sentimental identification with the past. Rohy makes a key distinction, however, that the power of the ahistorical moment is located outside these forms of recuperation. In other words, the efficacy of this strategy resides in the ways that ahistorical work can liberate rather than constrain. Rohy clarifies her mission in this way: "Instead, the critical engagement with historical anamorphosis can open our own queer moment to alterity, serving the 'denaturalization of the present' promised by Halberstam's theory of perverse presentism" (77). Similarly, Lucas Hilderbrand makes a strong claim for the project of "retrospeculation": "of seeing a different historical narrative that was not bound to separation of fact and fiction or between past and present" (302).

*Transparent* is able to tap into this ahistorical strategy through its character construction, displaced time structure, and, of course, the ability of the viewer to build their own engagement

with varying amounts of text. The different forms of viewer engagement—from a single episode to a full season in one sitting—destabilises the reception of already fractured temporal dimension in the text. In this way, sketching the complexity of queer identity has been facilitated not just by the creative impulse of Jill Soloway and her writings but also by the larger shift in the industrial fabric. Queer time is therefore crucial to the functioning of *Transparent* through the splintering of time in single episodes and across episodes, and also in a more global sense. Soloway presents queer identity as the product of multiple forces, many beyond the strict heteronormative domestic family. Time becomes a way to expand the definition and meaning of queerness; in fact, fissures in time, inside and outside the show, yield the most radical ways that *Transparent* can make a cultural and social intervention.

**Figure 2: Hari Nef as Gittel. "Kina Hora", *Transparent* Season 2, Episode 1 (2015). Screenshot.**

While *Transparent*'s severing of timelines and deliberate matching of the present with multiple and shifting pasts represent a major shift in the life cycle, other current queer shows, to varying degrees, also use the expansiveness of "one season at a time" to explore the links between past and present in our lives. *Orange Is the New Black*, *Sense8* and *One Mississippi* are other examples of this storytelling strategy.[10] These shows illustrate that current queer television, respecting the fluidity and complexity of identity formation, has been fostered considerably by our era of portal television. In turn, the space was created through disintegrating accepted business models and practices of broadcast and cable television. The new life cycle for portal television has created fertile ground for the exploration of queer identities. These explorations have largely been apart from the success/failure model or the outsider model associated with queer television texts. Economic disruption of the television industry through technology and new methods of media

consumption has provided, almost as an ancillary benefit, the room for queer television to grow. As one small measure of this development, at least the life cycle for queer television thankfully no longer depends on being defined in relation to mainstream (i.e., straight) television texts and audiences.

**Notes**

[1] Looking at the issue through the television industry of that decade, Ron Becker connects the narrowcasting of niche cable networks and the targeting of "slumpy" (socially liberal, urban minded professionals) demographics in broadcast and cable television to the mining of gay and lesbian audiences (81).

[2] The shows are *Normal, Ohio*, *The Ellen Show*, *Some of My Best Friends*, *It's All Relative*.

[3] A useful parallel exists to the world of independent film which has employed a very similar strategy to the one identified by Griffin. In "Overcoming the Stigma: The Queer Denial of Indiewood", Stuart Richards makes a convincing argument that paratexts centered on "quality" tend to dominate those indie films with queer subject matters. This method allows these queer films to be more palatable to a mainstream audience.

[4] Despite the progressive and insightful nature of *Transparent*, two key creative individuals (actor Jeffrey Tambor, Amazon executive Roy Price) left working on the programme due to sexual harassment claims (Astor; Koblin). *Transparent* producer Our Lady J commented on the Tambor harassment allegation, "We cannot let trans content be taken down by a single cis man" (Patten).

[5] For a review of the basic structure of syndication, first run and off-network, see Karen Petruska.

[6] It is worth noting that *American Horror Story* appears on FX Networks, and is therefore still bound to the schedule of a cable network. The possibility for greater experimentation in distribution through Netflix, Hulu or Amazon Prime therefore does not apply to this series.

[7] For an interesting discussion of classifying the show as a comedy, see Reilly.

[8] In 2018, internal metrics from Amazon were made available in a Reuters article by Jeffrey Dastin. A "Cost Per First Stream" data point gauges the cost of luring one new subscriber to Amazon compared to the cost of production. This metric gives Amazon a way to understand both which shows were driving subscription and the cost to lure these viewers. For example, *The Man in the High Castle* attracted eight million viewers by 2017, including 1.15 million new subscribers. Amazon's math placed the cost of getting new subscribers via the show at $63/subscriber which is far below the $99 yearly fee for Amazon Prime. At the other end of the spectrum, *Good Girls Revolt*, a period show about female journalists, had a total viewership of 1.6 million with a cost of $81 million. The show's cost per new customer was a staggering $1560 according to internal documents.

[9] There is a connection between the ways that *Transparent* engages queerness and Jewishness. Roberta Rosenberg makes a compelling argument for the ways in which the Pfefferman family

selectively uses Jewish rituals, traditions and historical markers: "The Pfefferman use of innovative ritual saves their situation from becoming bleak. Indeed, they are standard-bearers for a segment of the contemporary Jewish population that seeks to revitalize or rewrite religious rituals by reinterpreting them for their own purposes and on their own terms" (78). Similarly, queerness, its markers and its history are appropriated selectively in terms of identity formation and definition. Sexuality and spirituality refuse simple codification for the characters in *Transparent*.

[10] Consider, for example, Netflix's *Orange Is the New Black*. While the first season maps closely to the novel's story of Piper Chapman (Taylor Schilling) and her experiences with incarceration for the first time, each subsequent season expands the vision of the show considerably. The inmates at Litchfield Prison are essentially supporting or bit players in the first season, but after the show expands to an ensemble drama. Each of the subsequent seasons concerns a wide variety of these characters, along with an overarching structure (i.e., the prison being sold to private company MCC in season three of the show). What started as an adaptation of Piper Kerman's 2010 memoir became an ensemble (comic) melodrama with interlocking plotlines, cliffhangers and a structure suggesting high stakes and dramatic odds.

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