

## **Premature Withdrawal: Searching for Satisfaction in the endings of *Pushing Daisies* and *Carnivale***

Martin A. Zeller-Jacques

“I know that there’s a lot of trepidation among the viewers because the last thing you want to do is get to page 450 in a nine-hundred page novel and have some clown in an expensive suit with capped teeth pull it out of your hand and throw it out the car window. Thank god we’re not dealing with people like that.

HBO is committed to telling the story to the bitter end.”

[Dan Knauf, writer and producer of *Carnivale*, speaking at the Paley Television Festival – March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2004]

The commercial climate of contemporary television drama is a fiercely Darwinian environment. For every intelligently written, high-concept drama which amasses scores of episodes and a passionate following, there are dozens which fail at the pilot stage, or after a timid, half-length first season. For every *The Sopranos*, there is a *Carnivale*; for every *Desperate Housewives*, there is a *Pushing Daisies*. The commercial failure of so many new shows is the inevitable consequence of the industrial logic of TV3, in which “... today’s production circumstances, highly commercialised as they are, ironically appear to have yielded a context facilitating creativity and distinctive product, indeed “quality television”, at the “high end” of the industry, in TV drama.” (Nelson, 2007: 161) The attempt to provide new and distinctive examples of “quality” programming encourages experimentation with the content and form of television drama, as program makers seek to attract and maintain a share of an ever more fragmented audience. However, the risk and expense involved in the production of high-end television drama also often leads to the abrupt cancellation of shows which fail to fulfill their economic imperative by attracting a diverse and lucrative audience. As early as 1995, J.T. Caldwell was already able to write that:

It has become an almost obligatory mid-season rite for critics and producers of low-rated (but quality) shows that face cancellation to whine that ABC, CBS, and/or NBC are no longer acting in good faith; that the challenging and serious show in question could find a long-term and valuable audience if the network number crunchers were not so obsessed with the impact of this week’s bottom line. (Caldwell, 1995: 63)

While the production and distribution of high-end television shows on subscription channels like HBO and Showtime may allow more leeway for shows which fail immediately to find an audience, even these channels have a bottom line to defend. Nevertheless, this room to manoeuvre has allowed such channels to lead the way in the production of increasingly complex television narratives which demand concerted attention and intellectual investment from their viewers. Narratively complex shows like *The Sopranos*, and *Six Feet Under*, on HBO, as well as *Lost* and *24* on network television, and, of course, *Pushing Daisies* and *Carnivale*, are indicative of a

general trend in high-end television narrative – one which has become so pronounced that Jason Mittel (2006: 29-30) has dubbed this period “the era of television complexity.” Mittel contends that narratively complex shows invoke an “operational aesthetic”, whereby a moment of especially intricate or self-conscious storytelling may function as a “narrative special-effect”, soliciting the viewer’s attention and admiration for the virtuosity of the storytelling as much as for the story being told. Importantly, the attention paid to the process of narration does not, according to Mittel, detract from the emotional engagement of the audience, and may even intensify it, by inviting an active mode of engagement with the narrative. Whether narratively complex shows are built around a central enigma, like *Lost* or *Heroes*, or a complex set of character relationships, like *The Sopranos* or *Desperate Housewives*, their final episodes invariably invoke the operational aesthetic as they encourage speculation on how their numerous plot threads will be resolved. However, when such shows are cut short, the invitation to intense intellectual and emotional engagement is swiftly revoked, as events are either rushed to a speedy semblance of “closure”, or else left on a permanent cliffhanger. As a result, one of the byproducts of the production culture of TV3 is an ever growing number of disappointed audiences lured into viewing new series by the promise of complex, long-form narratives, only to have their viewing cut short – to have the novel pulled out of their hands, as Dan Knauf puts it in the epigraph to this chapter. The emotional aspect of viewers’ engagement with complex narratives, whether before or after cancellation, is particularly crucial, as it functions in the manner of what Henry Jenkins (2006: 20) has called “affective economics”. This new model of advertising and broadcasting practice encourages strong, personal relationships between consumers and media texts, inviting viewers “inside the brand community.” Although this “personal” relationship between consumer and brand may explain why tempers can run hot over the cancellation of a favourite television show, as we will see, the finale does not necessarily signal the end of the audience’s engagement with the brand.

The audience, however, is only one of the parties involved in the cancellation of a television show. For the companies which produce television, early cancellation may represent a cessation of investment in a show, but it does not signal the end of the show’s utility as a commodity. For example, John Caldwell has argued that *Quantum Leap* used its finale in order to position reposition the show as a potential asset for the future:

Choreographed by network press-releases, the media ran with the story that this final destination was actually the childhood hometown of series producer Donald Bellasario. ... viewers are *taught* not about Sam, but about the origins of *Quantum Leap*’s producer and creative source. What possible function could the exhibition of Bellasario’s authorial backstory fulfill in this primetime science-fiction? As *Quantum Leap* headed for syndication, this episode’s display of authorial intentionality gave the series package a very lucrative spin – one that aimed to motivate interest in the show’s afterlife. (Caldwell, 1995: 109)

Caldwell suggests that *Quantum Leap*’s finale retroactively restructures everything which has come before as a highly personal, idiosyncratic text, in a way which encourages re-viewing of the series even on the part of those who were already dedicated audience members. Similarly, the “premature” ending of a television show encourages the re-viewing of what has come

before, now restructured in light of its conclusion. And of course, even a truncated series may still be packaged and sold, whether in domestic or foreign syndication, or in the form of DVDs which, Matt Hills (2005: 58; 54) suggests make “television collectable as a material artefact which promises not only “curatorial consumption”, but also a sense of textual completeness.” In particular, Hills notes that the DVD release of Joss Whedon’s prematurely cancelled *Firefly*, was “targeted far more directly and self-reflexively at the fan market”, as Fox, the show’s parent channel, attempted to take advantage of the fans’ instinct towards “curatorial consumption”. Cancelled shows, such as *Pushing Daisies* and *Carnivale*, encourage fans to engage with them based upon their complexity while they are on air, and then repackage themselves after cancellation, when the value of a “complete boxed set” is at a premium. And if, as Jenkins (2006: 20) suggests, “According to the logic of affective economics, the ideal consumer is active, emotionally engaged, and socially networked,” then the disappointed fans who turn towards internet activism in order to save their favourite shows may, ironically, make even better potential consumers after cancellation.

In the rest of this chapter, I will treat both the audience reaction to, and production contexts of, prematurely cancelled television shows through an examination of critical, popular and industry discourse surrounding the finales of *Pushing Daisies* and *Carnivale*. Initially, I will map the territory with a discussion of the popular construct of a satisfying or natural ending, in order to show, through contrast, the lineaments of the premature ending. I will then offer a brief case study of the “natural” ending of *The Sopranos*, and through this, establish a rounded critical vocabulary with which to examine the more partial and disjointed discourse around the endings of *Pushing Daisies* and *Carnivale*. Discussion of the way audiences react to and engage with premature endings will largely be drawn from comments on *Pushing Daisies*, while *Carnivale* will serve to illuminate the way a channel attempts to position a prematurely cancelled show in order to continue drawing value from it.

### **The “Natural” Assumption**

The critical and popular discourse around the idea of a satisfying or natural ending, or, indeed, their opposite, the premature ending, share one fundamental assumption: that there is some way in which a text is supposed to end – that it should satisfy the desires of a reader, or fulfill a purpose mandated by its creator, or both. Yet the final shape of a text is mediated by more than the intentions of its author or creator and the desires of its readers or viewers. A television text, in particular, may be subject to some or all of the competing, and sometimes contradictory forces of ratings, sponsorship, subscriptions, content restriction, scheduling and more. These are not the spontaneous overflowings of a poet in a garret, but texts produced from within a nexus of personal, cultural and commercial concerns. Yet they arouse passion and narrative desire in their viewers just as surely as the most idiosyncratic of artistic expressions.

Narrative desire the force which keeps us returning to fiction, whether on the page or the screen. And a large part of our desire is for a ‘satisfying ending’, what Peter Brooks (1984: 19) describes as, “the active quest of the reader for those shaping ends that, terminating the dynamic process

of reading, promise to bestow meaning and significance on the beginning and the middle.” By implication, the ending of a narrative which does not “bestow meaning” upon what has come before is likely to be read, by some, at least, as unsatisfying. By contrast, Catherine Belsey (1994: 35, 37) sees the approaching ending of a realist narrative in highly emotional terms, describing a reader approaching the end as, “Breathless with excitement, thrilled, curious and fearful at the same time... transported out of time and place, immersed in the fictional world and involved with increasing intensity in feelings of increasing tension.” Yet even as the reader is carried away at the close of the narrative, Belsey acknowledges the almost impossible task of providing a truly satisfying ending, writing that, “The last page of a book which has been a really good read can break hearts, because it compels us to recognize what, of course, we have really known all along (and what the self-reflexive postmodern text triumphantly keeps reminding us), that it wasn’t *true*, that the whole experience was a textually induced illusion. The end of the story is desolate, with or without a happy ending, because it reaffirms the textuality of the text.” Between their two approaches Brooks and Belsey draw attention to the concurrent, and potentially contradictory, desires of readers for endings to be both logical and cathartic, even as they acknowledge the disappointment which necessarily comes with the end of a loved story. In the case of a text which is brought to a sudden end, typically through cancellation in the case of a television narrative, these desires are no less strong, but the text may have no opportunity to attempt to meet them. Nevertheless, as Jostein Gripsrud (1995: 248-9) writes, “Endings are happy, or unhappy, abrupt or well prepared, logically satisfactory or unsatisfactory. But as long as an ending is there, the text invites sense-making reflection.” The purpose of this chapter, then, is to examine the kind of ‘sense-making reflection’ which goes on in the aftermath of a television narrative’s ending, and through this, to determine the structures which underlie the popular and critical conception of the satisfying ending.

As we have already noted, the idea of a natural or satisfying ending is problematic. From an industrial perspective, the most natural conclusion of a television series comes at the moment when it seems likely to stop earning the financial income and brand capital on which its value rests. Even more than the ‘satisfying ending’ the idea of a series having a “natural ending” is dependent upon the assumption that a television series is organised by an authoritative personality – often one who has had a clear notion of the ending in mind from the beginning. Dan Knauf, for example, originally conceived of *Carnivale* as three “books”, each of which would consist of two seasons

(<http://carnivaleshow.wetpaint.com/thread/3538523/no+third+season>), while Amy Sherman-Palladino claims to have known which words would end *The Gilmore Girls* from the moment she created the show. (<http://www.gilmoregirls.org/spoilers.html>) Of course, the work of a show’s creator is not the only thing that sustains a television drama, and whatever claims to authorship the originator of a show might once have had are likely to become more attenuated over a long production history. Nevertheless, in popular discourse, the idea of a natural ending seems to equate roughly to an ending which a show’s producers or creators choose, rather than one forced upon them by the network. Within the artificial binary of art and commerce, the “natural

ending” positions itself entirely on the side of “art”. If this makes the concept of a natural ending a dubious one if used to explain the actual workings of a television finale, it remains a useful touchstone when examining premature endings, since it represents the ideal to which fans of prematurely cancelled shows aspire. With this in mind, a brief look at the discourse surrounding the “natural” ending of *The Sopranos* should help us to establish a set of ideas with which to examine the “premature” endings of *Carnivale* and *Pushing Daisies*.

The final episode of *The Sopranos* was aired on HBO, on the 10<sup>th</sup> of June, 2007, and ended on a notorious blackout in the middle of a tense scene which seemed to suggest that Tony Soprano was about to be assassinated. This capped a run of eight episodes which had been ordered after the final ‘season’ had already been announced, and statements made on behalf of HBO emphasised that the choice to continue with the show rested with its creator, David Chase:

Brad Grey, the new Paramount studio chief, who retained his title of executive producer on “The Sopranos,” said that Mr. Chase, when he got into the storytelling for the coming season, decided it was still so rich it could be continued, a decision Mr. Grey said was endorsed by everyone involved in the production. (Carter, 2005)

In the terms discussed above, then, the ending to *The Sopranos* represents an exemplary “natural ending”. Not only did the show’s author choose the moment the show would finish, but, in the kind of industry-effacing discourse typical of HBO’s brand strategy, the reasons given for his choice are purely creative, constructed as a natural imperative of the story being told. This acts as a public guarantee of the artistic integrity of the ending, and extends to *The Sopranos* the protected status afforded to an art object, defending the decision to end the show on a blackout by aligning it with Chase’s status as the author. The critical and popular response to the ending of *The Sopranos*, can thus act as a kind of control against which to examine the response to endings which audiences or critics deem to be “premature”. Although the range of responses to the ending of a show with as large and vocal a following as *The Sopranos* is intimidatingly large, in general, opinions tend to draw on elements of three relatively distinct discourses which I will call the platonic, the melodramatic and the industrial. Each of these discourses corresponds to the expectations of the ending held by a particular commentator, but they are also typically visible in the text itself, as the show’s producers attempt to answer, and manipulate, the expectations of their audience.

The platonic discourse assumes that there is an “ideal” show and assesses the success and satisfaction of the ending in relation to how “true” or “authentic” it appears in relation to that ideal. From this “Platonic” discourse, we get comments relating finales to the endings of earlier episodes or narrative arcs, often celebrating circularity rather than advocating the closing of narrative hermeneutics. Alan Sepinwall, the New Jersey Star-Ledger’s dedicated *Sopranos* blogger, offers an emblematic example:

And yet the finale, both the first 55 minutes of it and that sadistic last scene, fit perfectly with everything Chase has done on this show before. Did we get the violent fireworks of last week? Absolutely not, as the only deaths of the hour were Phil Leotardo ... and A.J.’s SUV... But that’s been the pattern of every season: the major action goes in the penultimate episode, while the finale

## PREVIOUSLY ON

is saved for quiet reflection and the odd whacking or two. (Sepinwall, 2007)

In this appreciative review written several months after initial reactions to the finale had passed, Sepinwall is implicitly validating the choice to end on a blackout based on its intrinsic *Sopranos*-ness. He invokes earlier season endings as precedents, but importantly also appeals to David Chase as the figure of authorship, and thus authority, behind the show. This combination of strategies attempts to ally the ending with those qualities Sepinwall sees as the most important to *The Sopranos* as a whole – and it seems likely that these same motivating factors underlay the production of the finale. Hence AJ's repetition of a line Tony spoke in the finale of the first season, reminding the family to "Focus on the good times", and the return of David Chase as both writer and director for the only time since the pilot episode.

The melodramatic discourse evaluates the success of an ending in terms of the degree of dramatic resolution, closure or emotional reward it offers to its viewers, and expects the text achieve the "heroic confrontation, purgation, purification [and] recognition" which Peter Brooks (1976/1995: 204-5) sees as the function of popular melodrama. For an audience member who engages with television primarily as melodrama, narrative desire can only be satisfied when the ending seems to explain or justify previous events, and when the characters have met the fates their actions have merited. Mary McNamara's article in the LA times offers a particularly cogent example of this discourse:

While it is one thing to flout the conventions of television, it's another to flip dramatic tradition, not to mention your audience, the bird. No, he [David Chase] didn't owe us any neat endings, nor some sort of final word on the nature of good and evil. But after eight years, he did owe us catharsis, some sort of emotional experience that would, if not sum up the entire eight years, leave us with something more meaningful than instant panic and lingering irritation. (McNamara, 2007: 3)

Particularly in her invocation of the catharsis she expected from the series ending, McNamara draws upon the melodramatic discourse, foregrounding the need to have her narrative desire satisfied by an emotional experience engendered by the final moments of *The Sopranos*. And yet it does seem that, for producers too, the satisfaction of viewers' melodramatic expectations is an important consideration – hence the number of hermeneutics which are closed at the end of *The Sopranos*. Phil Leotardo is dead and his feud with the Soprano family effectively ended; Tony and Carmela appear reconciled; Tony's therapy with Dr. Melfi comes to an end; etc.

The third discourse, the industrial, makes itself felt through the comments of savvy viewers and industry commentators. Less emotive than either the platonic or the melodramatic, the industrial discourse offsets narrative desire with knowledge of the conditions of production which may impinge upon the ending of a series. In the case of *The Sopranos* this discourse is most commonly heard in the assertion that the ending was left open to make room for a feature film based on the series, but also appears in Martin Miller's column on the release of the complete boxed set of *The Sopranos*:

## PREVIOUSLY ON

... an absence of upcoming “sopranos” stories on the small or big screen hardly constitutes an end in the digital age. For years, individual-season DVD sets of the show have rocketed to the top of the sales charts, and there’s little reason to believe -- despite its heavy price tag at \$399.99 -- that “The Sopranos: The Complete Series” will be much different. (Miller, 2008)

Whatever Miller’s personal response to the end of *The Sopranos*, then, his narrative desire is qualified by his awareness that *The Sopranos* is as much a commodity as a text. At the same time, the existence of a “Complete Series” boxed set is a testament to the producers’ faith in the show as both commodity and text – their certainty that it will continue to provoke narrative desire in viewers both old and new.

The examples provided here are deliberately simple ones. In most audience and critical responses, all three discourses are in evidence, working in tension with one another to structure the complex assumptions underlying each commentator’s conception of a “satisfying ending”. It is important to note this balance because, as we will see, it is seldom present in responses to shows which have suffered from a “premature” ending. As the following discussion of *Pushing Daisies* will show, in these cases, the industrial discourse emerges as dominant, and both critical and popular comments tend to focus on the extra-textual reasons for cancellation, or else on general dissatisfaction with the industrial conditions surrounding contemporary television production.

### ***Pushing Daisies***

Long before its second season cancellation, *Pushing Daisies* already showed signs of the strain involved in producing distinctive television drama in TV3. Although heavily promoted by ABC as a new tent-pole drama, joining a heavy-weight stable of shows including *Desperate Housewives*, *Lost*, and *Ugly Betty*, *Pushing Daisies* was immediately plagued by production delays resulting from its lavish visuals, and midway through its first season, became one of the shows to fall afoul of the 2007-8 Hollywood writers’ strike. As a result, the first season of *Pushing Daisies* consists of only nine episodes and ends on a cliff-hanger originally meant to be the end of a mid-season arc. Although ABC guaranteed a renewal for the next season, there were worries that the hiatus might cause the show to lose the audience it had only just started to attract. (Schneider, 2008) Ultimately, only a short second season of thirteen episodes were produced, and the final three episodes were not initially aired. These were unveiled at the 2009 Paley Television Festival on the 19<sup>th</sup> of April, and were eventually shown to the general public later in March. The ending of *Pushing Daisies*, then, was not just premature, but was difficult to access. Comments from fans on the most prominent of the many Facebook groups attempting to save the show (Save Pushing Daisies 2008-2009: 11,325 members) repeatedly emphasise their disappointment at not being able to view these final episodes in their normal running order. One commentator opines that: “I just read that ABC is not even going to air the last three episodes that Fuller worked so hard on so fans would not be left in limbo. If you want to see these episodes you will have to buy the DVD.....I am so sad.” (Save Pushing Daisies 2008-2009)

Even before they have had a chance to see the ending of the series, fans like this one are

preparing to receive it in terms of the industrial discourse – commenting on the network’s decision not to air the episodes, and complaining about having to buy the DVD. For viewers who feel that a beloved show has ended prematurely, the art/commerce binary, visible enough in a “natural” ending like that of *The Sopranos*, becomes more prominent, and concerns about aesthetic quality and narrative satisfaction are filtered through a hyper-industrial discourse. Even fans who invoke the concepts we have identified with the platonic and the melodramatic discourses tend to do so in the context of an awareness of the industrial factors which have qualified the ending, as exemplified by another comment from the same message board:

I miss this show so much. I finally found a show I liked and it's gone. We fans also need “closure” and need to see the final episodes. I am happy that the cast got jobs elsewhere but really who cares, it's not on *Pushing Daisies*. It wouldn't be the same. So glad I have Season One. Can't it for Season Two to come out. I am so sad :(!” (*Save Pushing Daisies 2008-2009*)

Just as the previous commentator’s reference to [Brian] Fuller’s work on the final episodes recalls the authorial intentionality common to the platonic discourse, this one’s desire for “closure” echoes the language we’ve seen in the melodramatic discourse. Yet both qualify their narrative desire with reference to their frustration at not being able to access the ending.

When fans finally did get their opportunity to view the ending, it came with a final two-minute montage assembled entirely from digital images and previously used footage, which attempted to wrap up as many plot threads as possible. The finale was originally designed to end on a cliffhanger, as one of the central characters revealed to the aunts who had brought her up that she had returned from the grave. However, once Fuller learned that the show had been cancelled, he used shots donated by several visual effects houses in order to create the final montage. (IGN.com, 2009) This montage works to precisely the opposite effect of the hyper-industrial fan discourse produced around the ending, emphasising the platonic and melodramatic aspects of the ending in the hop of creating a satisfying, if not a natural, ending for the viewers. The sequence is dominated by the lush visuals and obtrusive voiceover which are the distinguishing traits of the series, thus helping to reinforce the Fuller’s authorial signature in the manner of the platonic discourse. Moreover, it appeals to the melodramatic discourse by offering a degree of resolution to almost every character, as the aunts resume their synchronised swimming career, Olive finds a lover and Emerson is reunited with his missing daughter, all within a few short moments. Even Ned and Chuck, a romantic pairing so star-crossed that they cannot touch without Chuck dying, find a degree of closure, posing on the doorstep of the Aunts as if beneath a wedding bower. Thus, while fans bemoaned the impossibility of closure, or narrative satisfaction due to the show’s truncated run, the cast and crew of *Pushing Daisies* worked especially hard to provide exactly those features. Despite these efforts, however, fan discussion largely continued to centre upon the industrial discourse surrounding the ending, and particularly on villainizing ABC for cancelling the show, rather than on engaging with the textual qualities of the actual ending. The comments page dealing with the finale on the fan-site “thepiemaker.com” is filled with fans excoriating ABC for cancelling the show while keeping others on the air, but relatively few people discussing their opinion of the ending:



## PREVIOUSLY ON

# Anna1212 on 06 Jun 2009 at 7:01 pm

Catherine- Me too! Every single time they get a really good show they have to go and cancel it!!! I'm sooo done with ABC. I dc if its bad economic times if anything Pushing Daises would help with raising spirits

# Daisiesrules on 13 Jun 2009 at 11:46 pm

I did not expect to see Chuck reuniting with her aunts (mom). That was the most shocking thing to have happened to me in the entire series and I was left breathless. I couldn't help but cry my eyes out, and I still am. The ending with the showing off of the windmills, lighthouse, and the rest was beautiful. Again this show was the best show ever and will always be the best show ever. There was so much good about it, it was amazing. Now that it is done, I can go back to not watching TV again.

This show is definately the next Firefly, Futurama, etc. It will be remembered and who knows, Family Guy and Futurama came back, so could Pushing Daises. It all depends on when Ned will touch it.

# laura on 14 Jun 2009 at 12:59 am

Seriously, where's the petition, I'll sign it!! Where's the message board to ABC, why aren't they listening? So many trash shows, and here's a gem! 12 Emmys and they still cancel it???? Something is wrong! Isn't there any way to let them know directly that we want it back!?!

(<http://www.thepiemaker.com/episode-213-kerplunk/>)

As these examples show, relatively few of the comments made explicit mention of the events of the finale, instead appealing to extra-textual factors such as award nominations and wins, and denigrating other shows in comparison to *Daisies*. Even in the second comment, which does mention the events of the finale, the viewer's satisfaction with the ending is qualified in terms of the industrial situation surrounding *Pushing Daises*, the hope of a future comic book rendering the finale less final than it might appear on its own. Many other fans comment on their anticipation of a comic book or movie which might tie up the loose ends. Still others state their intention to purchase the existing series on DVD and to watch it over again. Nearly all, however, engage with the ending of *Pushing Daises* first through the lens of its enforced cancellation, an awareness of the commercial conditions which have shaped the text supplanting a direct reading of the text itself.

In contrast to the "natural" ending of *The Sopranos*, around which there was a remarkable consonance of purpose in evidence between producers and fans as both deployed platonic and melodramatic discourses around the finale, the ending of *Pushing Daises* sees producers and fans working at cross-purposes, with the producers attempting to manufacture an approximation of a narratively satisfying ending despite the premature cancellation of the show, while fans seem almost to avoid engaging actively with the end of the narrative, instead focusing their attention and efforts on the industrial factors which are responsible for the ending itself. Despite their different approaches, however, both the producers "mobilization of the platonic and melodramatic discourses, and the fans" of the industrial have the potential to lead to the same result. By providing *Pushing Daises* with a degree of finality or closure in its narrative, Fuller

and co, reinforce their authorial signature over the show, effectively sealing it as a complete text, which can then be marketed directly to the audience disappointed with that the show has ended, but still emotionally and intellectually involved with the narrative. As we will see below, this strategy is even more apparent in the case of *Carnivale*, as their parent channel, HBO, consciously works to position the cancelled text as still valuable and whole in order to maintain its hold on the audience.

## **Carnivale**

As we have already discussed, the industrial climate of TV3 encourages the emergence of distinctive television shows, while also demanding that they achieve financial and critical success and necessitating their cancellation should they fail in either or both goals. However, a subscription service such as HBO, the channel which commissioned and broadcast *Carnivale*, has a greater degree of leeway to define the sort of success required to justify the continuation of an expensive, high-end series. In theory, HBO's business model insulates it from the kind of external pressures which often lead to the cancellation of network television shows, as Tony Kelso suggests:

Because HBO is dependent on subscribers rather than advertisers for its main source of revenue, it can take risks without fear of upsetting sponsors. Not only does HBO not have to worry about offending corporate backers, it can also produce plots that develop slowly instead of building toward mini-climaxes before commercial interruptions. Furthermore, as a pay service, HBO does not have to contend with government censorship violations or the public service requirements that other networks, at least in theory, must fulfill. (Kelso, 2008: 49)

From the point of view of critics and fans, HBO's insulation from the kind of obvious market forces which shape the content of other television channels only serves to make their decisions less transparent. In many cases this may serve to add to the channel's mystique, to the sense which Kelso expresses, that they have built risk into the way they operate. However, when HBO does cancel a show, it can be hard to pinpoint a precise reason why. Fan comments often focus on what they perceive as the channel's hypocrisy, and just as with *Pushing Daisies*, more time is spent bemoaning the fact of cancellation than discussing the textual qualities of the ending:

Thanks a lot HBO (sarcasm intended)

Jul 31 2010, 4:46 AM EDT

Why is it that so many crappy, shallow supernatural themed series last for at least three seasons on tv then as soon as a decent, thoughtful one comes along it gets cancelled? Are viewers so out of touch that they can't deal with anything that delves a bit more deeply into the darker aspects of the human condition? It's such a shame that the market can dictate which stories are told and which are not. The cultural production industries have been significantly undermined and are no longer able to produce work that does not cater to the mindless masses who feed the pocket of the advertising industry. ... Nice one HBO! tease us with the first two series of a decent story, cancel it, then stop anyone else from being able to tell it.

<http://carnivaleshow.wetpaint.com/thread/4122385/Thanks+alot+HBO+%28sarcasm+intended%29>

## PREVIOUSLY ON

Although more articulate than many public comments on *Carnivale*'s cancellation, this anonymous posting touches on most of the common points, sticking firmly within the industrial discourse by attacking the general state of contemporary television before rounding on HBO for its role in the cancellation. Dan Knauf, the show's creator, provided a better informed, but fundamentally similar comment when news of the *Carnivale*'s cancellation went public:

Do I think their decision was boneheaded? Yes, absolutely. Do I understand why they made it? Again, yes, absolutely. *Carnivale* was an expensive show. Costs-per-episode have been guessed at on this board, and in every case those estimations have been low. Way low. *Carnivale*, in fact, represented one of the most costly—if not \*the\* most costly—pattern-budget ever invested in a weekly series in television history. If anybody has any resentment toward HBO executives, consider this:

- They have a fiduciary responsibility toward their stock-holders.
- The show was hugely expensive.
- The reviews were mixed.
- The audience was not large enough to support it.

Game. Set. Match.

(Knauf, 2005)

Knauf's comments remind us that, despite the persistent posturing of HBO, the criteria they use to determine whether or not a show remains on the air are qualitatively the same as those used by other television networks. HBO's ultimate responsibility, he points out, is still to make money, and secondarily to tell interesting stories. Critical acclaim and audience size are important elements in making money over the long term, especially in the secondary markets of syndication and DVD sales, and so without enough of either, even HBO struggles to justify keeping a show on the air. Despite this, HBO's comments on the cancellation often continued to draw on platonic and melodramatic discourses around endings, and often pointedly avoided the industrial reasons. Reporting on the cancellation for *Variety.com*, Joseph Adalian writes:

HBO entertainment prexy Carolyn Strauss said the net had "decided not to renew "*Carnivale*"" because the series had come to a natural end. "We feel the two seasons we had on the air told the story very well, and we're proud of what everyone associated with the show accomplished," Strauss said in a statement released by the cabler. (Adalian, 2005)

Just as we saw with the montage used to end *Pushing Daisies*, Strauss' emphasis on the ending of *Carnivale* as natural and her effacement of the commercial realities which necessitated the show's cancellation both work to salvage the truncated series, and to repackage it as a viable commodity/text. Whether fortuitously or deliberately, this strategy allows HBO to take full advantage of the existing attachment of *Carnivale*'s fans, encouraging them to continue consuming *Carnivale* and related products. For their part, the fans are trapped between disapproval of HBO's decision and continued desire for HBO's product, a dilemma dramatised by a website posting advice on how to get *Carnivale* back on the air:

## PREVIOUSLY ON

- ... Cancel your subscription to the network [HBO] and let your cable company know why!
- ... Buy a copy of the season 1 DVD and have a viewing party for those who haven't seen the show.
- ... Donate a copy of the season 1 DVDs to your local library!
- ... Buy HBO *Carnivale* merchandise!<sup>13</sup>

[<http://savecarnivale.org/html/ten-in-one.htm>]

Paradoxically, then, disappointed *Carnivale* fans are advised both to cancel their HBO subscription and to purchase HBO products. Their affective relationship with the show limits the scope of the actions they can take, since to truly punish HBO, they would also have to abstain from purchasing any further HBO services – i.e., *Carnivale* DVDs. Summarising the trap which affective economics can spring upon fan cultures, Henry Jenkins writes:

“...to be desired by the networks it to have your tastes commodified. On the one hand, to be commodified expands a group's cultural visibility... That said, commodification is also a form of exploitation. Those groups that are commodified find themselves targeted more aggressively by marketers and often feel they have lost control over their own culture, since it is mass produced and mass marketed.” (Jenkins, 2006: 62-3)

Certainly, *Carnivale*'s fans have lost whatever semblance of control they might have had over the show while it was on the air, since their consumption, the primary tool through which they can exercise power, remains firmly oriented towards HBO. Despite relating to the show's ending primarily through an industrial discourse and being aware of the reasons for its cancellation, they remain affectively linked to the text and thus contained within its brand.

### Conclusion

The competitive commercial climate of TV3 ensures that we will continue to see many television series cancelled early in their runs for years to come. Far from representing true commercial failures, however, once repackaged for secondary markets these shows can continue to be assets for their parent channels, taking advantage of fan communities whose affective relationship to these shows may actually be enhanced by cancellation. Despite the hyper-industrial discourse which surrounds abruptly cancelled series, they retain the power to provoke narrative desire and to keep their audiences coming back for more, despite the disappointment of premature withdrawal.

### Works Cited

Adalian, J. (2005) “*Carnivale* Packing Up” *Variety.com*.

[Online: <http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117922539?categoryid=1417&cs=1&s=h&p=0>] [Accessed: 02/12/2010]

---

<sup>13</sup> This last is hyperlinked to a now defunct part of HBO's official website, presumably once a place to buy branded *Carnivale* products.

PREVIOUSLY ON

- Belsey, C. (1994) *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture*. Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Brooks, P. (1976/1995) *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Brooks, P. (1984) *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press.
- Caldwell, J. (1995) *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television*. Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick, NJ.
- Carter, B. (2005) "HBO Pushes End of *The Sopranos* to 2007" in *The New York Times*. August 11<sup>th</sup>, 2005. [Online: <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/11/arts/television/11cnd-sopranos.html>] Accessed: 02/12/2010.
- Gripsrud, J. (1995) *The Dynasty Years: Hollywood Television and Critical Media Studies*. Routledge: London and New York.
- Hills, M. (2007) "From the Box in the Corner to the Box Set on the Shelf"; *New Review of Film and Television Studies*. 5:1; 41-60.
- Jenkins, H. (2006) *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York and London: New York University Press.
- Kelso, T. (2008) "And now no word from our sponsor: How HBO puts the risk back into television" in Leverette, M., Ott, B., and Buckley, C. (Eds.) *It's Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era*. New York and London: Routledge. Pp. 46-64.
- Knauf, D. (2005) "Dan Knauf Speaks about *Carnivale's* Cancellation" *Save Carnivale!* [Online: <http://savecarnivale.blogspot.com/2005/05/dan-knauf-speaks-about-carnivales.html>] [Accessed: 02/12/2010]
- McNamara, M. (2007) 'sopranos: What was all that about?' *LA Times*. June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2007. Online: <http://articles.latimes.com/2007/jun/11/entertainment/et-sopranosreview11> [Accessed: 14<sup>th</sup> October, 2010]
- Miller, M. (2008) "On 'sopranos' Closure, Chase Resists the Mob" *LA Times*. November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2008. Online: <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/nov/09/entertainment/ca-davidchase9> [Accessed: 14<sup>th</sup> October, 2010]
- Mittell, J. (2006) "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television" in *The Velvet Light Trap*, Number 58, Fall 2006. Pp. 29-40.
- Nelson, R. (2007) *State of Play: Contemporary "high-end" TV drama*. Manchester University Press: Manchester and New York.
- Schneider, M. (2008) "Fall's frosh take a dramatic pause" in *Variety*. Mar. 10<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup>. 410, 4. Pp.

12, 14.

Sepinwall, A. (2007) 'sopranos Rewind: Made in America" June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2007. Online: [http://blog.nj.com/alltv/2007/06/sopranos\\_rewind\\_made\\_in\\_america.html](http://blog.nj.com/alltv/2007/06/sopranos_rewind_made_in_america.html) [Accessed: 14th October, 2010]

### **Web.**

Carnivale. [Online: <http://carnivaleshow.wetpaint.com/> ] [Accessed: 02/12/2010]

Gilmoregirls.org [Online: <http://www.gilmoregirls.org/spoilers.html>] Accessed: 02/12/2010.

IGN.com (2009) "Pushing Daisies: Finale Episodes Screened" *IGN.Com*. [Online: <http://uk.tv.ign.com/articles/974/974474p1.html>] [Accessed: 25/11/2010]

savecarnivale.org "The Ten in One: the top ten things you can do right now and more" [Online: <http://savecarnivale.org/html/ten-in-one.htm>] [Accessed: 02/12/2010]

Save Pushing Daisies 2008-2009 [Online: <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=30237424757#!/topic.php?uid=30237424757&topic=5746>] [Accessed: 02/12/2010]

[thepiemaker.com](http://www.thepiemaker.com) "Episode 2.13: Kerplunk" [Online: <http://www.thepiemaker.com/episode-213-kerplunk/>] Accessed: 25/11/2010.

### **TV series.**

*Carnivale*. (2003-2005) [HBO Television]

*Desperate Housewives* (2004-?) [ABC Television]

*Gilmore Girls, The*. (2000-2007) [WB Television / CW Television]

*Lost* (2004-2010) [ABC Television]

*Pushing Daisies* (2007-2008) [ABC Television]

*Six Feet Under* (2001-2005) (HBO Television)

*Sopranos, The*. (1999-2007) [HBO Television]

*Ugly Betty*. (2006-2010) [ABC Television]

*24* (2001-2010) [FOX Television]