Hidden Agendas, Endless Investigations, and the Dynamics of Complexity: The Conspiratorial Mode of Storytelling in Contemporary American Television Series[1]

Felix Brinker
Hannover, Germany

Abstract: In this paper, I explore a particular kind of narrative construction pervasive in contemporary American television series. Popular shows such as *Lost*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *24*, *Alias*, or *Fringe* all similarly construct long-running narratives around their protagonists' attempts to solve central underlying mysteries. By doing so, these series amass ever more complex backstories and perpetually complicate their individual webs of intersecting subplots and long-term story arcs. Drawing on narratology, concepts developed in television studies, and Mark Fenster's work on *Conspiracy Theories*, I argue that the series' success is indebted to a particular way of telling their stories—which I call the 'conspiratorial mode'—that makes them ideally suited to operate within the competitive environment of post-network television. This article sketches the narrative structure of these conspiratorial shows, situates them in the context of contemporary television, and considers their curious dynamics of narrative progression and deferral. Finally, its goals are to suggest reasons for the recent resurgence of conspiracy narratives in television beyond and apart from a paranoia that is supposedly widespread in contemporary American culture.

Terrorist attacks, mysterious men in black appearing at the sites of unexplained phenomena, alien invaders posing as humans in order to prepare large-scale invasions, inexplicable events that turn out to be connected to age-old conspiracies, and federal agents uncovering plots directed against the very core of American civilization—the amount of network and cable television shows preoccupied with the theme of conspiracy produced in post-9/11 America is striking. Be it the

1 I would like to thank Florian Groß and Ilka Brasch for providing insightful feedback on earlier drafts of this article.

perpetual patriotic prowess of Jack Bauer's attempts to foil terrorist plots on Fox's *24* (2001-2010); the post-apocalyptic scenario of CBS's *Jericho* (2006-2008), in which a conspiracy succeeds in nuking twenty-three of the largest cities in the United States to dust; the robotic terrorists whose sleeper cells work toward the destruction of all humanity on *Battlestar Galactica* (Sci-Fi/SyFy, 2003-2009); or the nefarious actions of *Fringe*'s (Fox, premiered in 2008) mad scientists, who overturn the laws of physics on a weekly basis: On television, the American order of things seems to be under a continual threat.

Surveying contemporary American television shows in a recent article on ABC's *V* (2009-2011), Steffen Hantke detects "a massive resurgence of paranoia as the engine of popular fiction" in American culture during the time of George W. Bush's presidency, which forcefully expressed itself on TV (143):

> Serving not only as a space for the public debate and examination of anxieties revolving around domestic and global terrorism and uncertainty about the mission and standing of the U.S. within the international community, television also served as the space where such anxieties were formulated, reified, encouraged, disseminated and instrumentalized. In contrast to the U.S. film industry, which by and large responded more slowly and with greater caution [to the events and aftermath of 9/11] [...], television proved its ability of taking on the issues of the day with speed, acuity, and daring. (144)

Hantke goes on to explore *V*'s treatment of the themes of alien invasion and infiltration by reading the show as an allegory of American anxieties about the 'War on Terror' and the debates about the reform of the US health care system under President Barack Obama. He concludes that the appeal of shows like *V*—which operate in a field he labels "paranoid television"—lies in their ability to address hotly debated political issues while allowing for a number of different, possibly even diametrically opposed, partisan readings (147, cf. 157-63).[2]

While Hantke's argument is compelling, my interest here is to address another question which the paragraph quoted above raises implicitly: Why is it that these

2 In what follows, instead of adopting Hantke's terminology of "paranoid television," I will use the terms 'conspiracy narrative,' 'conspiratorial mode,' and similar constructions to refer to the kind of shows under scrutiny here. While his terminology might be useful to capture the tone and thematic preoccupations of certain texts, the way in which Hantke (along with others indebted to Richard Hofstadter's 1964 essay "The Paranoid Style in American Politics") employs the notion of paranoia carries certain unfortunate connotations, as it might imply some kind of pathology or abnormality (cf. Fenster 8-12, 82-90; Knight 14-18). Following Mark Fenster, I consider the paranoid style—which expresses itself similarly in fiction and political discourse—not as an anomalous pathology, not as "external to American politics and culture but instead [as] an integral aspect of American, and perhaps modern and postmodern, life" (9).

narratives about conspiracy and paranoia have appeared this prominently *on television*? Is there something specific about the possibilities of televisual form that makes the TV series a particularly apt vehicle for telling stories about conspiracy? Or is it the other way around? Is there something that makes conspiracy narratives particularly well suited to be told serially, on television?

One of the appeals of contemporary television series is their potential to tell complex, long-running stories that often develop across several seasons or entire runs. Many shows not only encourage their audiences to follow increasingly complex relationships between characters as they unfold across seasons along multiple intertwined character arcs but also invite them to keep track of a convoluted web of connected overarching story arcs and ongoing subplots. Television series have traditionally aimed to foster audiences' long-term investment in their narratives in order to be economically viable, but more recent shows have shifted the emphasis from episodic closure to an almost open-ended, perpetually developing narrative (delivered in weekly installments) to do so. Television scholar Jason Mittell has sketched the preconditions and implications of this shift under the heading of "Narrative Complexity," offering a helpful framework to understand how shows such as *Fringe*, *Heroes* (NBC, 2006-2010), *24*, *Alias* (ABC, 2001-2006), *V*, or *Battlestar Galactica* devote large portions of their run—at times even the entire series—to the development of an underlying conflict that becomes the central raison d'être of all diegetic activity.

Building on his and other concepts from television studies, Tzvetan Todorov's typology of detective fiction, as well as Fenster's work on *Conspiracy Theories*, I will explore why these series so often engage with the theme of conspiracy and how they employ a particular way of telling their stories, which I call the 'conspiratorial mode.' I argue that the resurgence of conspiracy narratives on American television should not exclusively be understood as a reflection of widespread anxieties about the state of the nation in the wake of 9/11 and the 'War on Terror' but also in terms of the challenges TV series face in the post-network era. I claim that the conspiracy tale offers a specific way to construct narratives that is well suited to respond to these challenges.

I will begin by considering conspiracy as a narrative structure, go on to situate conspiracy shows within the contemporary American television landscape, and finally outline the conspiratorial mode on television and its specific appeals. The goal of this paper is to supplement existing academic work on conspiracy narratives with a perspective that takes recent developments within the medium of television into account. Current work on televisual conspiracy narratives usually fails to address how recent changes within the entertainment industries have had a profound impact on the

way in which television series tell their stories.[3] Consequently, I will not offer new readings of shows like *Lost*, *The X-Files*, *Fringe*, or *24* here. Instead, this paper brings together an understanding of conspiracy as a narrative form and recent work from the area of television studies to suggest reasons why such programming has become so prominent in recent years. Finally, it proposes a new category—the conspiratorial mode in contemporary American television series—that might help us to a better understanding of how these shows operate and of what kind of stories they tell.

Conspiracy as Narrative

Conspiracy narratives are stories about an unjust, undemocratic, and secret acquisition and exertion of power by malevolent cabals who clandestinely manipulate the course of world history. They are also stories about secret plots against a fundamentally good social order and about hidden and often esoteric knowledge whose acquisition would provide a new and better understanding of world events. While, as Fenster points out, it might be tempting to consider these narratives as "circulat[ing] solely on the margins of society" (1), the widespread proliferation of such texts across contemporary popular culture complicates such a view: "The specter of conspiracy," he argues, "circulates in the fictional trappings of movies, television shows, popular novels, video games, comic books, and even in an increasingly gullible and market-driven news media" (1). For Peter Knight, conspiracy similarly "has become a ready source of scenarios for both entertainment and literary culture" (3). Accordingly, in order to grasp the appeals and logics of conspiracy narratives, it does not suffice to consider them merely as phenomena from the fringes of accepted political discourse. Instead, the pervasiveness of these narratives across different formats, media, and cultural fields calls for a perspective that takes shared features, storytelling strategies, and formal devices into account.

3 A 1999 article by Douglas Kellner on "*The X-Files* and Conspiracy" may serve as an example for this tendency. Similar to Hantke's reading of *V*, Kellner reads the show's engagement with conspiracy symptomatically as an expression of larger trends within (1990s) American culture. Such readings are certainly instructive, but they usually fail to explain why widespread anxieties about the status of knowledge and power express themselves in the particular form of conspiracy narratives (and not in a different way). Kellner does not discuss issues of televisual form in detail either, but he relies on notions of genre and aesthetic norms derived from film studies (cf. 205-18). Consequently, he fails to consider the show as an (early) example of a larger trend within television.

Conspiracy Fictions in Popular Culture

Due to their latent political content and themes, conspiracy narratives do resonate and interact with larger trends in American culture. They circulate, however, not just because they invite politicized readings but also because they provide specific narrative appeals. Instead of simply relating the popularity of conspiracy fictions symptomatically to the broader state of affairs in contemporary America, I would like to consider these stories as narratives, as tales that share, as Fenster suggests, a compelling narrative structure. "[A] gripping, dramatic story," he points out,

> is, ultimately, at the heart of conspiracy theory [...]. The conspiracy narrative is compelling in its rapid, global movement, its focus on the actions of both the perpetrators of the evil conspiracy and the defenders of the moral order, and its attempt to explain a wide range of seemingly disparate past and present events and structures within a relatively coherent framework. "Conspiracy" is [...] a generic, stock narrative whose dynamic and trajectory allow it to be both a shorthand and a culturally and politically compelling framework for filmmakers, conspiracy theorists, and audiences alike. (119)

As such, Fenster argues, conspiracy should be understood as "a recurring explanatory and organizational logic" at work in texts of different media. This logic provides "cause and effect that propel a narrative forward, [...] [as well as] a particular set of challenges for the central protagonist" (123). These shared structural features set the ground rules for the unfolding of conspiratorial plots.

Fenster bases his discussion of the formal aspects of conspiracy narratives on an insight that warrants further scrutiny: They adhere to a "traditional logic of conventional popular narratives" (122), and they are, accordingly, organized by classical principles of character-centered causality and motivation, consequence, and a drive toward the resolution of conflicts. For Fenster, despite specific, shared "basic narrative structures and stylistic elements" that differentiate these stories from other popular fictions (123), conspiracy does not constitute a culturally accepted, distinct category. Instead, it exists as a narrative logic that operates in texts of different genres but "tend[s] to be more prevalent [...] (especially [in] thrillers)" (123). Fenster does not dwell further on issues of genre; instead, he locates conspiracy narratives within the broader tradition of popular narrative forms. Shifting the focus, I argue that the relationship between the structure of the conspiracy narrative and the tradition of crime fiction (of which the thriller genre, whose overlap with conspiracy Fenster observes, is a part) goes beyond mere affinity. The motif of investigation, central to Fenster's study of conspiracy as a narrative form, has been put forward as a pivotal element of crime fiction in typological accounts of the genre, which suggests a closer

relationship between the texts subsumed under these two categories. While Fenster's understanding of conspiracy as an organizational narrative logic is helpful, his localization of the form within the broad tradition of popular narratives does not immediately explain the specific appeals that are unique to this particular kind of story. I therefore argue that we might arrive at a more precise understanding of the conspiracy narrative and its appeals if we consider it as a variation on the structure of the classical detective story.[4] To do so, I will supplement Fenster's account of conspiracy as narrative with some aspects of Tzvetan Todorov's typology of crime fiction.

The Narrative Structure of Conspiracy

What most saliently links the structure of the conspiracy narrative with that of the classical detective story is the fact that both derive their forward momentum from the investigative efforts of their protagonists. Conspiracy narratives feature one or more protagonists who set out to restore order to a world that has been thrown into turmoil by the criminal actions of undisclosed perpetrators for initially unknown reasons. The ensuing investigation becomes the attempt to uncover the hidden scheme behind the sorry state of the world and ultimately aims to bring the perpetrators to justice. It proceeds as the protagonists unearth clues about the conspiracy, connect seemingly disparate events, and interpret a body of evidence (cf. Fenster 125). In conspiracy narratives as well as in the detective story the world is conceived as a criminal case, as a crime scene to be examined, deciphered, and interpreted in order to arrive at an underlying truth, which can then be acted upon (cf. Fenster 125; Meyhoff 76; Sanders 399).

In the classical "whodunit," as Todorov points out (227), the investigation typically begins after the crime has been committed—and the narrative thus provides the detective with a fixed, stable body of evidence from whose interpretation she can

4 As noted, Fenster makes no concrete claims about the generic allegiances of conspiracy fictions —probably due to the insight that genre terms are cultural categories whose usage is not delimited by textual features alone but also by their cultural context (cf. Mittell, "A Cultural Approach" for an elaboration of this view). Similarly, I do not intend to make ahistorical claims about the essential features of every conspiracy narrative imaginable here. Instead, my goal is to arrive—starting from Fenster's thoughts about conspiracy as narrative—at a working definition that broadly sketches the "narrative process and the [narrative] framework" of those conspiratorial television shows which I will discuss below (Fenster 121, cf. 118-54). Furthermore, when I refer to the appeals of certain narrative forms, I do not wish to suggest that these appeals are the only ones available in the texts discussed in this paper. Instead, the appeals I refer to are specific narrative appeals that may exist alongside others but are foregrounded through the employment of certain textual features.

make her case (227-28). In classics like Edgar Allan Poe's stories about C. Auguste Dupin, the actual crime is absent—except for the deductions of the detective, which are relayed to the reader by the narrator who frames his story as an eyewitness account of the investigation (cf. Todorov 228). Since the investigation occurs after the crime, "[n]othing can happen" to the investigator-protagonist, whose sole function is to learn about the criminal acts committed earlier (227). The appeals of the classical detective story thus chiefly lie in its piquing of the reader's curiosity about the narrative's central mystery (hence the term 'whodunit') and in the display of the investigator's deductive skills and methods (229; cf. Harris 85-88).

Similarly, a central mystery is at the core of conspiracy fictions, irrespective of the medium in which they appear. An unsolved murder stands at the beginning of Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), an unsatisfactory account of President John F. Kennedy's murder prompts the protagonist of Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991) to start his own investigation, just as information about the planned assassination of a US senator initiates Jack Bauer's exploits in the first season of *24* (2001-2002). In the conspiracy tale, however, the ensuing investigation is more than just an interpretation of past events. The initially established mystery turns out to be just a minor detail in the greater scheme of things to be connected to a sinister plot that is still unfolding as the narrative progresses.

In this respect, the conspiracy tale is more akin to what Todorov calls the "suspense novel" (231). In the latter, the protagonist investigates a crime that is still ongoing as crime and investigation become intertwined. In contrast to the classical detective story, the investigator here no longer is an "independent observer" temporally removed from the criminal case but instead stumbles onto its existence and winds up in an effort to expose and stop the crime while it is being committed (231, cf. 231-32). While it is the protagonist's investigation of a past crime that fuels the narrative progress in the classical detective story, here the forward momentum is provided by the fact that both crime and investigation are ongoing. Through this, Todorov argues, the suspense novel foregrounds two distinct kinds of narrative appeal. First, it aims at piquing the reader's interest in the underlying cause of its central mystery, an aspect it shares with the classical detective story (229). A second appeal of such texts is what lends this subgenre of crime fiction its name: its potential to create suspense, which Todorov terms the "interest [...] sustained by the expectation of what will happen [next]" (229, cf. 231). Suspense, according to Todorov, is created through a dramatic unfolding of the protagonists' investigation, which is bound to result in dangerous confrontations with the criminals (231). While the interest in the solution of the mystery is central to the classical detective story, it constitutes an appeal somewhat distinct from the unfolding of the thrilling narrative of investigation and serves mostly

as a "point of departure" for the adventure of the protagonists in the suspense novel (231). I argue that this combination of appeals is also available to the audiences of conspiracy fictions.

Like the suspense novel, the conspiracy narrative advances not only through the investigator's interpretation of gathered evidence or history (i.e., the slow progression toward the resolution of the mystery) but also through more perilous direct confrontations with the conspirators in the attempt to thwart their plans (cf. Fenster 125). As in the suspense novel, the initial mystery here provides an absent (since yet unexplained) cause for the unfolding narrative that progresses as the central conflict between investigation and conspiracy is being played out. In contrast to the suspense novel, however, this constellation soon becomes problematic and tends to result in a curious dynamic of narrative progression and deferral in the conspiracy tale.

Progress, Deferral, and Closure in the Conspiracy Narrative

In his chapter on the interpretive practices of conspiracy theorists, Fenster describes the parallel construction of investigation and conspiratorial activity as one of the "basic assumption[s]" of conspiracy narratives (101).[5] Like crime and investigation in the suspense novel, here conspirators and protagonists act against each other (101). This juxtaposition of "a conspiracy that hides [and] interpretive practices that unmask" complicates the tasks of both real-life conspiracy theorists and their fictional counterparts (101). In conspiracy narratives, the investigators appear to be always one step behind, always on the trail of conspirators whose nefarious actions are often uncovered but rarely stopped for good; every thwarted scheme is soon followed by the conspirators' attempts to realize the next sinister plan.

Accordingly, the act of "[a]ssembling [the] pieces of evidence into the coherent whole of the conspiracy's design" is made problematic by the constant activity of the conspiracy as there is no fixed, stable body of evidence that the investigator could

5 Although this part of Fenster's argument refers to the interpretive practices of conspiracy theorists, the narrative structure underlying openly fictional and allegedly nonfictional conspiracy narratives is similar. The crime novel constructs its diegetic world as a case to be solved. Similarly, real-life conspiracy theorists, as Fenster echoes Hofstadter, "view current and historical events as a series of plots to undermine a rightful order by an enemy on whom they project their own anxieties and desires" (95). For the conspiracy theorist, potentially nothing is outside of, or unconnected to, the conspiracy; every detail signifies (or does not signify) only with reference to the perceived conspiratorial plot (cf. 93-96). In addition, putatively "[n]onfictional [conspiracy] narratives employ a conventional narrative and causal structure for their description of the 'real' of history" (123). In this respect, both fictional and putatively nonfictional accounts of conspiracy share a narrative structure akin to that of the suspense novel and crime fiction in general (cf. Sanders 399).

draw conclusions from (Fenster 101, cf. 133-34). The conspiracy still being active while the investigation seeks to catch up with it, evidence multiplies perpetually, and the protagonists cannot complete their deductions simply by piecing together all the hints and clues. Consequently, the breadth of the conspiracy refuses be revealed (cf. 132-33). The enormous amounts of data that the protagonists uncover during their investigation, therefore, pose a paradoxical challenge for the narrative structure of the conspiracy tale. As more and more details about the conspiracy are brought to light, the narrative becomes increasingly complex, and the construction as a whole reveals a "tendency to careen toward incoherence" (122). The central problematic of the conspiracy tale, therefore, lies in "resolving the excesses of [its] narrative elements," in comprehensively presenting the details of the narrative to the reader without surrendering its complexity (122).[6]

This dynamic most clearly differentiates the structure of the conspiracy narrative from that of Todorov's suspense novel. While the latter usually covers a single criminal case and its investigation, the protagonists of the conspiracy narrative typically encounter a series of plots that connect to an overarching scheme. Since the conspiracy is typically presented as widespread, pervasive, all-powerful, and active long before the protagonists begin their investigation, each conspiratorial plot, once uncovered, gives way to the next, and each answer raises more questions. In the conspiracy narrative, scheming cabals are a driving force behind (story-)world history, and thus it presents itself as a cautionary tale about the hidden machinations of power; simultaneously, its aspirations inadvertently threaten narrative coherence (cf. Fenster 121-22).

Conspiracy fictions, nonetheless, move toward an ending by progressing through "significant narrative turning points," or "narrative pivot[s]" (Fenster 135). At these points in the narrative, typically

> information [about the conspiracy] emerges and converges as the protagonist (and, in many narratives, the audience as well) finally makes the correct interpretive conclusions necessary to integrate the overwhelming amount of relatively incomprehensible data about seemingly disparate events that has previously confounded him. At this

6 This tendency to become incoherent is arguably most salient in putatively nonfictional conspiracy narratives. In his three books on 'secret societies,' for example, the German conspiracy theorist Jan Udo Holey (under his pen name Jan van Helsing) manages to construct a narrative in which Zionist plots, the Illuminati, the Bilderberg Group, a race of Nordic superhumans from outer space, a secret Nazi fleet of flying saucers, a Hitler who survived the end of the Second World War in South America, the hollow Earth, and other conspiracy favorites melt into a cover-it-all hodgepodge of anti-Semitic paranoia (cf. Egenberger; Barth). However, due to their shared structure, fictional conspiracy narratives similarly face the threat of incoherence—an issue I will discuss below.

> moment, the momentum shifts [...], and the hero can finally move toward resolving the violence and deception that caused the narrative's central conflicts. [...] The conspiracy narrative's speed and velocity [...] move more rapidly both toward the moment of uncovering [...] and then toward the narrative's resolution. (136)

These moments can advance the narrative in several ways: The protagonist might decide to take up the investigation of the conspiracy, surprising new details may shed new light on the story told so far (a plot behind the known plot might be discovered), or the protagonist might finally be in the position to stop the conspiratorial plot.

A pivotal scene from *Black Dynamite* (2009)—an over-the-top spoof of 1970s Blaxploitation films—might serve as an example for the function of these turning points. Toward the end of the movie, the eponymous protagonist has already busted a cartel that was selling drugs in his community and avenged the death of his brother. Although all of the major villains seem to have been brought to justice at this point, Dynamite suddenly experiences an epiphanic moment in which he connects the preceding events to a larger conspiracy aimed at emasculating African American men through the distribution of a government-produced brand of poisonous malt liquor. In a meeting with his allies, the protagonist unexpectedly formulates a seemingly far-fetched conspiracy theory that quite arbitrarily connects the name of the liquor brand with Roman mythology, information gathered from a secret government dossier, and rock and roll singer Little Richard (*Black Dynamite* 0:56:00-0:59:00). Eventually, he is able to identify US President Richard Nixon as the mastermind behind the scheme, and the film soon culminates in a dramatic showdown at the White House. The exaggerated, parodic way in which *Black Dynamite* represents the process of interpreting evidence not only mirrors the irrational hermeneutics of real-life conspiracy theorists but also highlights the narrative function of such scenes. Although the initial conflict of the movie (the murder of Dynamite's brother by the drug cartel and his succeeding quest for revenge) has already been solved at this point, the protagonist's deductions allow the narrative to continue with a confrontation between Dynamite and Nixon. *Black Dynamite*'s first climactic scene, in which the head of the drug cartel is killed, can thus be followed by a second climax in the Oval Office—which exemplifies the curious logic of conspiracy narratives in which each solved conflict or mystery gives way to the next.

The example above also points to another feature of conspiracy fiction that Fenster describes: its tendency to resist narrative closure. Since it presupposes the existence of a powerful, active conspiracy and forcefully demonstrates its almost unlimited agency, scope, and reach across history throughout the narrative, any attempt to achieve a convincing resolution of the conspiracy narrative might appear

"incomplete and disquieting" (Fenster 140). Accordingly, these narratives tend to deliver only limited closure, and, indeed, many conspiracy narratives 'end' without bringing all the culprits to justice and without stopping the conspiratorial activity for good (140). In Alan Pakula's film *The Parallax View* (1974), for example, the protagonist is eventually killed and framed for the murder of a presidential candidate, and in Stone's *JFK*, Kevin Costner's Jim Garrison is allowed to present his evidence about the Kennedy murder to the public, but the guilty go unpunished. In other media, the conspiracy also has a tendency to continue its activity: The final episode of *The X-Files* (1993-2002) leaves Mulder and Scully awaiting a future invasion of the Earth by extraterrestrials, and the last level of *Deus Ex* (2000)—the first entry in a successful franchise of conspiracy-themed video games—even offers its player the choice to claim world domination for herself. Similarly, *Black Dynamite* allows Nixon to stay in office, although not without receiving a good beating by the protagonist. "[T]he more [...] the conspiracy has been able to consolidate power and hide its existence," Fenster points out, "the more difficult it is for the conspiracy text to contain the narrative's conflicts and resolve its complex plot" (140). Thus, the story may end, but the scheming will continue.

The structure of the conspiracy narrative provides a useful starting point to understand what kind of stories conspiratorial television series tell. The parallel construction of investigation and conspiratorial scheming, as well as the unceasing activity of both; the serial nature of the conspiracy's crimes; the reliance on dramatic narrative pivots; and the tendency to become overly complex and careen toward incoherence are central to the kind of long-running television narratives I discuss.[7] Like other conspiracy narratives, these shows foreground the narrative appeals derived from suspenseful plotting and the promise of the eventual revelation of a central mystery. For a number of reasons, which I will discuss in detail below, the narrative structure of conspiracy can easily accommodate the needs of serial television drama (and vice versa). Before I turn to a discussion of televisual conspiracy narratives, I will sketch recent changes in the American television landscape.

7 The concepts of (over)complexity and (in)coherence carry normative implications and might suggest an underlying allegiance to classical conceptions of art that privilege (among other things) textual unity. To avoid such an implicit evaluation, one could also describe the structural potential to become incoherent as a tendency to create an abundance of so-called dangling causes and hanging narrative threads.

Narratively Complex Television and the Challenges of the Post-Network Era

In his 2006 essay "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television," Mittell sets out to sketch a "distinct narrational mode" that has come to redefine the storytelling possibilities of prime-time television series (29). Mittell dubs this mode "narrative complexity" and suggests that in recent years, series have begun to tell complex, long-running stories that are less confined by the demand for episodic closure traditionally associated with the medium ("Narrative Complexity" 32). Pioneered by 1990s cult favorites like, among others, *The X-Files* and *Twin Peaks* (ABC, 1990-1991), this mode has since become widespread. Television series nowadays can rely on long-running, complex story arcs that stretch out across episodes, seasons, or even entire runs (cf. "Narrative Complexity" 32-33).[8] Mittell notes that series like "*The X-Files*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel*, and *The Sopranos*" are examples of such "[c]omplex dramas" that have moved away from earlier norms of episodic closure, albeit without giving them up completely ("Narrative Complexity" 33).

Watching these shows offers its own pleasures and appeals. While not every episode might be relevant for the greater ongoing story, within the elaborate, long-running story arcs of narratively complex shows, any episode nonetheless potentially helps to "cultivate a central narrative enigma" designed to transform casual viewers into committed regulars (Sconce 107). Be it the unsolved murder of Laura Palmer on *Twin Peaks*, the unknown agendas of alien invaders and government officials on *The X-Files* (Sconce 107), the inexplicable events on *Lost*'s (ABC, 2004-2010) island, or the perpetrators behind the terrorist plots on each season of *24*: Narratively complex shows reward a steady, long-term investment by their audiences through the unfolding of long-running story arcs, inviting their audiences to join the protagonists as they progress toward the revelation of the truth behind the mystery.

8 While classic prime-time shows such as *Star Trek* (NBC, 1966-1969) or *Gilligan's Island* (CBS, 1964-1967) presented a new adventure each week, by the end of each episode, the program would have returned to the status quo. In prime-time dramas of this era, plot and character developments typically did not carry over from one episode to the next; relationships between characters did not evolve nor did the adventures of one week have any impact on those of the next (cf. Sconce 96-97, 100-01). At the same time, the soap opera genre already delivered "in weekly or daily installments an ongoing story that refuse[d] definitive closure" (Sconce 97), but such a "cumulative" model of storytelling did not prominently appear in other genres before the late 1970s and early 1980s (100). In this cumulative format, relationships and characters were allowed to evolve across seasons, while each installment nonetheless provided narrative closure—e.g., through presenting a central conflict each week that would be solved by the end of the episode (cf. Sconce 97; Mittell, "Narrative Complexity" 32-33).

Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Television

Narrative complexity, however, does not simply denote the weaving of long-running story arcs but, in Mittell's understanding, also encompasses the frequent employment of a number of storytelling devices that complicate the straightforward progression of the narrative. For Mittell, narratively complex programs do not shy away from the repeated (and often unsignalled) employment of "[a]nalepses, or alterations in chronology, [...] flashbacks serving either to recount crucial narrative backstory [...] or to frame an entire episode's action in the past tense" or from a "retelling [of] the same story from multiple perspectives" ("Narrative Complexity" 36, 37). Some complex shows—*Lost* or *Fringe*, for example—not only feature several different narrative strands that present their characters at several points in the past, present, or future of the diegetic 'now' but even include alternate timelines that are developed alongside each other. In addition, they frequently jump between these different levels without immediate signaling. By creating such moments of disorientation, Mittell points out, complex shows "[ask] viewers to engage more actively to comprehend the story and [reward] regular viewers who have mastered each program's internal conventions" (37). Accordingly, these shows invite attentive audiences to "build up their comprehension skills through long-term viewing and active engagement" (37).

Following Jeffrey Sconce, Mittell understands narrative complexity as a self-reflexive engagement with the formal conventions of television. Through their complex seriality, current dramas foreground stylistic and narrational strategies without completely distancing or alienating the viewers from the unfolding story, inviting them to appreciate formal aspects of storytelling as well as diegetic events ("Narrative Complexity" 35). As Mittell notes, the appeals of such an "operational aesthetic" become particularly salient in spectacular moments that stand out from the rest of the narrative, for example in surprising plot twists (35). The unexpected turning point might highlight the meticulous plotting that leads up to the twist, the carefully orchestrated buildup to the sudden revelation or action that will allow the narrative to go off in new directions.

Significantly, the conceptualizations of contemporary television narratives presented above evoke the aesthetics of conspiracy. In fact, I argue that narrative complexity invites a narrative construction that adheres to a conspiratorial organizational logic. With their long-running story arcs constructed around the unfolding of a central conflict or enigma, their preference for the parallel development of several storylines, their tendency to amass complex backstories, their frequent use of suspenseful buildups and surprising plot twists that allow the narrative to explore new directions, and their readiness to employ devices that cause disorientation and

confusion, narratively complex dramas exhibit a structural similarity to conspiracy narratives. Accordingly, I understand conspiratorial television series as a subset of complex shows; and while, by no means, every complex series presents itself as a conspiracy narrative,[9] the recent proliferation of such conspiracy narratives on television seems to be indebted as much to the advent of complex shows as to the pervasiveness of conspiracy theories and paranoia in contemporary American culture in general.

Post-Network Television and the Logics of Media Convergence

The emergence of narrative complexity cannot be attributed to a single cause; however, changing practices within the industry and technological innovations in consumer electronics have had a lasting impact on the way in which contemporary television series tell their stories (cf. Mittell, "Narrative Complexity" 30-31). While only four networks provided programming for the American television market until the 1980s, the advent of cable and satellite television alongside the introduction of additional networks has exploded the choice of programming offered to the viewer. Simultaneously, the widespread availability of new technology like remote controls, time-shifting devices such as the VCR (and, later, hard-disk recorders; e.g., TiVo), and the release of films and series on VHS and DVD has changed the way audiences engage with television programming (Spigel 2; cf. Mittell, "Narrative Complexity" 31; Lotz 13-15). During the heyday of television's network era, the viewer's choice of programming was restricted to the schedules of ABC, NBC, CBS, and PBS—nowadays, one can not only choose between the offerings of hundreds of different channels, but the (legal and illegal) access to content via the Internet makes it possible to follow programming without even turning on the TV (and without having to sit through commercial breaks). Communication studies scholar Amanda D. Lotz

9 Narratively complex shows that do not employ the conspiratorial mode are, for example, CBS's *How I Met Your Mother* (2005 to present), and AMC's *Breaking Bad* (2008 to present). These series do rely on the devices described above but do not construct their story worlds as singular criminal cases that need to be solved. *How I Met Your Mother* strongly relies on prolepses, analepses, and other potentially disorienting devices and constructs its longer narrative around the arc that gives the show its title, but it does not present itself as a story about crime and investigation. In this case, the ongoing arc functions as a framing device for somewhat loosely related, more conventionally episodic installments. *Breaking Bad*, on the other hand, toys with a parallel construction of crime and investigation but backgrounds this constellation in favor of character drama and social critique. These shows arguably do not feature the juxtaposition of a group of investigators and a cabal of conspirators whose conflict frames the entire series-spanning story and is the main source of narrative forward momentum.

describes these developments as the "post-network era" of television in order to emphasize

> the break from a dominant network-era experience in which viewers lacked much control over when and where to view and chose among a limited selection of externally determined linear viewing options [...]. Such constraints are not part of the post-network television experience in which viewers now increasingly select what, when, and where to view from abundant options. (15)

The changed environment of the post-network period has posed challenges for the established business model of television producers. Today, most television shows still remain intermediaries in the attempt to sell audiences to advertisers, but the way industry executives conceptualize and target these audiences has changed substantially. While television creators during the network era typically aimed to produce programming that would appeal to a mass audience, an increasingly competitive environment has since given rise to the practice of so-called narrowcasting—a model in which programs are designed to appeal to specific "niche demographics" (Spigel 2; cf. Mittell, "Why Television" 11). Through such direct targeting of specific audience groups, time can be sold to advertisers who aim to reach a particular set of consumers rather than the entirety of the American populace.

This practice has its bearing on the overall design of television scheduling and programming. While narrowcasting predates the era of post-network television, the need to target specific demographics has increased in the age of media convergence.[10] In order to counter "the migratory behavior of media audiences" that can choose from countless different entertainment options, contemporary television shows are designed to foster a long-term relationship with their viewers (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 2, cf. 74-79). Jenkins describes this as the attempt to recruit a steady number of committed "[l]oyals," or fans, who "give themselves over fully to [those shows that best satisfy their interests]; [who] tape them and may watch them more than one time; [who] spend more of their social time talking about them; and [who] are more likely to pursue content across media channels" (*Convergence Culture* 74). Networks and basic cable stations in particular are eager to reach out to such committed audiences as they

10 The concept of media convergence has been brought to widespread attention in Henry Jenkins's 2006 book *Convergence Culture*. For Jenkins, it describes "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want" (*Convergence Culture* 2). The emergence of media convergence poses particular challenges to the entertainment industries; for television, these challenges can be equated with those of the post-network era sketched above. Accordingly, Mittell uses the term "convergence television" to refer to the television landscape after the transitional era of the 1980s ("Why Television" 11).

are more likely to engage with their favorite series on a regular basis and thereby help to maximize advertising revenues.

In this respect, the emergence of narratively complex shows is best understood as the attempt to produce programming that achieves a high degree of audience commitment and loyalty. The frequency in which narratively complex shows rely on the structure and theme of conspiracy, however, calls for a closer look. Therefore, I will outline the features and specific appeals of the conspiratorial mode in American television series.

The Conspiratorial Mode in Contemporary American Television Series

The conspiratorial mode encompasses shows that adapt the structure of the conspiracy narrative in order to meet the demands of television's post-network era. Like conspiracy narratives in other media, these shows tell stories about the "distribution of power," about hidden, malevolent forces that plot the course of history and those who oppose them; by doing so, they frequently allude to real-world events or historical figures (Fenster 120).[11] Conspiratorial television series use their central conflict between protagonists and conspirators as the engine that provides the narrative with its forward momentum, and a good deal, if not all, of their episodes are devoted to the development of each show's narrative enigma. The latter can be understood as a central question that each show promises to answer eventually, such as *V*'s 'What do the Visitors want?'; *Fringe*'s 'What is the pattern?'; *Jericho*'s 'Who is behind the attacks?'; or *Lost*'s 'What is the island?'[12] In the conspiratorial mode, the unfolding

11 As a result, they invite allegorical readings that map real-life political constellations onto those featured in their story worlds. While the relevance of such readings might be self-evident for shows such as *24* or *Jericho*, whose generic allegiance and overall presentation would suggest a reception along the lines of political allegory (cf. Koch or Hark as examples for *24*), similar readings have also been put forward for conspiratorial science-fiction shows like *Battlestar Galactica* (cf. Dzialo) or *V* (cf. Hantke). This 'political edge' of conspiracy narratives constitutes a kind of secondary attraction that narratively complex programs of a different kind typically do not exhibit (at least not in terms of their allegorical qualities).

12 The degree to which conspiratorial shows alternate between stories that advance the overarching storyline and self-contained episodes is—even within the broader mode of narrative complexity—historically variable. *The X-Files*, for example, scatters a relatively small number of arc-centric episodes across its entire run; as Reeves, Rodgers, and Epstein note, it does so to not "alienate new viewers who lack knowledge of events in previous episodes" (33). In the age of media convergence, where time-shifting devices and the streaming of digital video are commonplace, series can more heavily rely on the narrative possibilities of their seriality without risking to alienate audiences. Accordingly, *24* or *Alias* develop their central storyline in every episode.

narrative promises to deliver an answer to this question, an enterprise whose completion is perpetually deferred as the series progresses.

It is worth noting that, invariably, the protagonists of these shows become entangled in the affairs of the conspiracy during the first episode—either through strange luck or in their professional capacity as investigators of some kind. The conspiratorial plot soon turns out to be intimately connected to their private lives and usually involves characters with whom they are closely associated, like family members or friends (demonstrating the breadth of the conspiracy as well as setting the stage for dramatic situations and complicated character relationships in the future). Motivated by these personal concerns, the protagonists begin their investigations, with whose progression the overarching series narrative will unfold. Over the course of a season, the conspiratorial story arc (accompanied by a number of ongoing subplots, some of which turn out to be closely connected to the central narrative enigma) progresses through dramatic plot twists (narrative pivots) that shed new light on the hidden agenda of the conspiracy.

The conspiratorial television show often starts on a small scale—with the investigation of an isolated event, for example—but from this initial point of departure, the narrative soon expands its scope. Like other narratively complex series, it has a tendency toward the inclusion of several parallel storylines, often scattered across past, present, and future, which soon collide and become entangled. In mid-season or season finales, the narrative typically picks up speed and velocity (building on events developed in the preceding episodes), and the protagonists' pursuit of the conspirators is bound to result in a dramatic confrontation with one or several prominent figures involved in the conspiratorial scheme. The dramatic events of these episodes (i.e., the specific narrative pivots around which these are constructed) usually produce lasting effects and might rewrite the internal rules and conventions of the series. As Mittell puts it with reference to such a moment in the second season of *Alias*, "the entire scenario [of the show] [may] 'reboot,' changing the professional and interpersonal dynamics of nearly every character," though typically without resolving the show's central conflict ("Narrative Complexity" 36).[13]

Individual episodes might still provide closure; usually, however, several causes are left dangling in order to be taken up again later in the series.

13 In *Battlestar Galactica*, for example, such a moment occurs in the last minutes of the second season finale, in which the formerly space-bound surviving members of the colonial fleet abandon the eponymous starship and settle down on a recently discovered planet—only to be invaded and occupied by their Cylon enemies, turning the space opera into a tale of occupation and resistance ("Lay Down Your Burdens" 0:44:50-1:06:51). In a similar manner, *Fringe*, *Lost*, *24*, *Alias*, and *Prison Break* (Fox, 2005-2009) typically end their seasons with dramatic cliffhangers and go off in unexpected directions afterward.

For the conspiratorial television narrative, the inclusion of such dramatic twists, aside from the creation of suspense, serves two more functions: On the one hand, plot twists provide an opportunity for new audiences to become more invested in the story-world once the series continues, as both casual and loyal viewers now similarly have to try to adapt to the changes in the show's internal rules. On the other hand, such narrative pivots allow the show to foreclose the resolution of its central conflict; they stall the uncovering of the conspiracy's hidden agenda by taking the series into a new direction. The aftermath of such narrative pivots is crucial to the particular narrative dynamics of conspiratorial television series. As plot twists reshuffle the narrative ground rules of each show, some questions are answered, but the central conflict remains unsolved. At the same time, the audience is left uncertain about the consequences of the events, and their continued investment in the narrative is an attempt to clear up these uncertainties.

Such "hanging threads," Susan Clerc notes, "are both a source of pleasure and a source of frustration for fans" (38). While the narrative pivot usually provides long-awaited revelations about the conspiracy, it also obscures the overall scheme, as it typically serves to introduce new plotlines (which, nonetheless, invariably connect to the central arc) and thus further defers narrative closure. However, the resulting "frustration of not having all the threads tied together," Clerc maintains, "is also a source of pleasure," as it invites the viewer to engage in "speculation and analysis of the gaps in the narrative" (38). Because of its specific narrative structure, the conspiratorial television series is bound to repeat such deferrals of closure; the resulting gaps invite fan speculation and, therefore, constitute the specific appeal of conspiratorial narratives.[14]

Shows that adhere to different organizational logics might employ similar devices, but the basic construction underlying the conspiracy narrative more prominently and regularly frames the potentially frustrating hanging threads as intriguing puzzles to be solved. Central to this are the opposition of investigating protagonists and conspirators whose agenda perpetually eludes the former's grasp and a trajectory that nevertheless promises the eventual resolution of this mystery as the narrative

14 In an article on online fan discussions about *Twin Peaks*, Jenkins notes that speculation "is the logical response to a mystery, part of the typical reception of any whodunit," which underscores the structural similarities between conspiratorial television narratives and crime fiction I outlined above ("Do You Enjoy" 124). What distinguishes speculation about the mystery in a detective novel from fans' speculations about those of television series, however, is the latter's social character. In the age of widespread Internet access, avid fans can share their speculations with countless like-minded viewers, whereby the reception of television shows can become a communally shared experience, providing pleasures and appeals unavailable to earlier audiences of conspiratorial texts (124-33).

progresses through spectacular twists and turns.[15] The serial chain of succeeding mysteries in *Lost* perhaps most saliently demonstrates the specific appeal of this strategy: Here, the speculation about the identity of the smoke monster, the mysterious properties of the island, or the role of the mysterious Dharma Initiative fueled online and offline fan discussions, and it invited viewers to scour the show and its paratexts— such as the alternate-reality game *The Lost Experience* or the tie-in novel *Bad Twin*—for clues (cf. Mittell, "Sites of Participation").

An examination of these narrative dynamics can also explain why the unfolding plot of conspiratorial television series reveals a tendency to resist closure. Their excessive reliance on plot twists repeatedly creates an abundance of dangling causes, hanging threads, and unanswered questions—all of which the eventual ending of the show can hardly contain. Series finales of conspiratorial television shows, therefore, often fail to meet the expectations of their fans, as their conclusions cannot resolve all of the dangling plotlines (cf. Jenkins, "Do You Enjoy" 128-30).[16] The overall commercial success of *24*, *Battlestar Galactica*, or *Lost*, however, suggests that the pleasures derived from watching conspiratorial shows outweigh such frustrations and disappointments. After all, the narrative dynamics of the conspiratorial mode succeed in their attempt to get viewers hooked on the unfolding enigma at the heart of each series and thereby encourage regular viewing and further strong audience commitment.

The existence of websites like *Alias Wiki*, *Lostpedia*, *Fringepedia*, *Wiki 24*, or *Battlestar Wiki* might be the best indicator for the high degree of audience commitment that conspiratorial television shows inspire. On these sites, dedicated fans not only engage in speculations about each show's mysteries but also create and share detailed plot synopses, transcripts of individual episodes, and profiles of major and minor characters. By relying on the structure of conspiracy narratives, complex shows manage to recruit a steadily growing, dedicated core audience whose commitment and engagement with each franchise's text and paratexts help foster revenue streams that keep them afloat in the troubled waters of post-network television.

15 Naturally, such a progression along dramatic plot twists and cliffhangers is nothing unique to conspiratorial shows but has been a staple of television dramas for a long time. Among narratively complex shows, however, series that operate in the conspiratorial mode rely on such twists with unprecedented frequency and use them almost exclusively for the development of a central conflict that plays out across seasons or even their entire run.

16 As noted above, Jenkins discusses fan speculations about the mysteries on *Twin Peaks*; cf. Newitz as well as Anders for reviews of *Battlestar Galactica*'s and *Lost*'s series finales, respectively. These two blog posts not only highlight the shortcomings of each conclusion, but their commentary sections also include responses by fans that voice dissatisfaction.

Conclusion

As I have shown, an understanding of conspiracy as a narrative structure helps explain the recent resurgence of conspiracy narratives on American television. Their current pervasiveness cannot be disconnected from the emergence of narrative complexity as a historically distinct mode of storytelling on television. In fact, conspiratorial television shows helped inaugurate this mode as a popular and commercially successful model, and the success of early innovators like *The X-Files* and later examples such as *24* (which premiered while *The X-Files* was still running) attests to their formative role in this respect. Central to the success of the conspiratorial mode on television is the narrative structure outlined above. Their dynamic of closure and deferral is arguably the most salient reason why conspiracy narratives lend themselves to an implementation in the serial format of prime-time television. Television shows become more profitable the longer they remain on air, and the logic of conspiracy presents itself as a robust framework for the construction of narratives whose closure might be almost endlessly deferred. A potential seriality (of crimes, plots, investigations, revelations, and cover-ups) is at the heart of conspiracy narratives, which, accordingly, invite a serial narration across episodes and seasons, text and paratexts.

The tendency of conspiracy narratives to resist narrative closure ultimately fuels ongoing fan speculation, as these shows rarely manage to tie up all of their loose ends. Conspiratorial television shows encourage committed audiences to scour their diegetic realms and paratexts for answers that their narratives continually promise and perpetually withhold or obscure, for clues that might help solve mysteries that are set up and deconstructed on a weekly basis. Television shows that employ the conspiratorial mode combine the appeals of suspenseful plotting, intriguing narrative enigmas, and the operational aesthetic. Despite (or, perhaps, because of) their tendency to become incoherent and the frustrations arising from their resistance to narrative closure, these shows manage to recruit large numbers of committed viewers. These fans anxiously await every new installment, eagerly join their heroes on the quest to uncover the ultimate truths behind it all, and, while they are at it, might even enjoy chronicling each show's failures and inconsistencies as much as marveling at the unfolding of spectacular plot twists.

An understanding of the narrative logic of these programs might remind us that conspiracy and paranoia do not float freely and immaterially in culture. Instead, they are disseminated in narrative texts of different media and formats. Critical approaches to conspiracy and paranoia have differed in their evaluation of such texts—have either condemned them for their fundamentally conservative outlook, attested a subversive potential, or demonstrated their political ambiguity. Without attention to the specific

rules and needs of the medium of television, however, any attempt to explain the pervasiveness of conspiratorial series must remain incomplete; similarly, without an understanding of the appeals of conspiracy narratives in general, any attempt to explain their popularity must remain limited.

Works Cited

"12:00 a.m.-1:00 a.m." Dir. Stephen Hopkins. *24*. Perf. Kiefer Sutherland, Leslie Hope, Elisha Cuthbert, Sarah Clarke, and Carlos Bernard. Fox. 6 Nov. 2001. Television.

Alias Wiki. Wikia, 20 Nov. 2011. Web. 22 Jan. 2012.

Anders, Charlie Jane. "*Lost* Was the Ultimate Long Con." *io9.com*. io9, 23 May 2010. Web. 28 Oct. 2011.

Barth, T. H. "Litanei der Weltverschwörung." *Telepolis*. Heise, 24 Oct. 2000. Web. 28 Oct. 2011.

Battlestar Wiki. FrakMedia, 19 Sep. 2011. Web. 22 Jan. 2012.

Black Dynamite. Dir. Scott Sanders. Perf. Michael Jai White, Salli Richardson, Arsenio Hall, Kevin Chapman, and Tommy Davidson. Apparition, 2009. DVD.

Brown, Dan. *The Da Vinci Code*. London: Corgi, 2004. Print.

Clerc, Susan J. "DDEB, GATB, and Ratboy: *The X-Files*' Media Fandom, Online and Off." Lavery, Hague, and Cartwright 36-51.

Deus Ex. Ion Storm. Eidos, 2000. Video game.

Dzialo, Chris. "When Balance Goes Bad: How *Battlestar Galactica* Says Everything and Nothing." *Cylons in America: Critical Studies in Battlestar Galactica*. Ed. Tiffany Potter and C. W. Marshall. New York: Continuum, 2008. 171-84. Print.

Egenberger, Christopher. "Die Protokolle der Weisen von Zion." *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*. Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 16 June 2008. Web. 28 Oct. 2011.

Fenster, Mark. *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*. Rev. and updated ed. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2008. Print.

Fringepedia: The Fringe Wiki. Dennis Acevedo, 21 Jan. 2012. Web. 22 Jan. 2012.

Hantke, Steffen. "'We Are of Peace, Always': ABC's Remake of *V*, Alien Invasion Television, and American Paranoia after Bush." *Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 35.2 (2010): 143-63. Print.

Hark, Ina Rae. "'Today Is the Longest Day of My Life': *24* as Mirror Narrative of 9/11." *Film and Television after 9/11*. Ed. Wheeler Winston Dixon. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2004. 121-41. Print.

Harris, Neil. "The Operational Aesthetic." *Humbug: The Art of P. T. Barnum*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981. 59-89. Print.

Hofstadter, Richard. "The Paranoid Style in American Politics." *The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays*. New York: Knopf, 1965. 3-40. Print.

Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York UP, 2006. Print.

---. "'Do You Enjoy Making the Rest of Us Feel Stupid?': *alt.tv.twinpeaks*, the Trickster Author, and Viewer Mastery." *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*. New York: New York UP, 2006. 115-33. Print.

JFK: The Director's Cut. Dir. Oliver Stone. Perf. Kevin Costner, Kevin Bacon, Tommy Lee Jones, and Laurie Metcalf. Warner, 1991. Videocassette.

Kellner, Douglas. "*The X-Files* and Conspiracy: A Diagnostic Critique." 1999. *Conspiracy Nation: The Politics of Paranoia in Postwar America*. Ed. Peter Knight. New York: New York UP, 2002. 205-32. Print.

Knight, Peter. *Conspiracy Culture: From the Kennedy Assassination to* The X-Files. London: Routledge, 2000. Print.

Koch, Lars. "'It Will Get Even Worse': Zur Ökologie der Angst in der US-amerikanischen Fernsehserie *24*." *Was bisher geschah: Serielles Erzählen im zeitgenössischen amerikanischen Fernsehen*. Ed. Sascha Seiler. Cologne: Schnitt, 2008. 98-115. Print.

Lavery, David, Angela Hague, and Marla Cartwright, eds. *Deny All Knowledge: Reading* The X-Files. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1996. Print.

"Lay Down Your Burdens (Part 2)." Dir. Michael Rymer. *Battlestar Galactica*. Perf. Edward James Olmos, Mary McDonnell, Katee Sackhoff, James Callis, and Jamie Bamber. NBC. 10 Mar. 2006. Television.

Lostpedia. Wikia, 18 Jan. 2012. Web. 22 Jan. 2012.

Lotz, Amanda D. Introduction. *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*. New York: New York UP, 2007. 1-25. Print.

Meyhoff, Karsten Wind. "Kontrafaktische Kartierungen: Verschwörungstheorie und der 11. September." *9/11 als kulturelle Zäsur: Repräsentationen des 11. September 2001 in kulturellen Diskursen, Literatur und visuellen Medien*. Ed. Sandra Poppe, Thorsten Schüller, and Sascha Seiler. Bielefeld: transcript, 2009. 61-79. Print.

Mittell, Jason. "A Cultural Approach to Television Genre Theory." *Cinema Journal* 40.3 (2001): 3-24. Print.

---. "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television." *The Velvet Light Trap* 58 (2006): 29-40. Print.

---. "Sites of Participation: Wiki Fandom and the Case of *Lostpedia*." *Transformative Works and Cultures* 3 (2009): n. pag. Web. 28 Oct. 2011.

---. "Why Television?" Introduction. *Television and American Culture*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010. 1-13. Print.

Newitz, Annalee. "As *Battlestar* Ends, God Is in the Details." *io9.com*. io9, 21 Mar. 2009. Web. 28 Oct. 2011.

The Parallax View. Dir. Alan J. Pakula. Perf. Warren Beatty, Paula Prentiss, Hume Cronyn, William Daniels, and Anthony Zerbe. Paramount, 1974. Film.

Reeves, Jimmie L., Marc C. Rodgers, and Michael Epstein. "Rewriting Popularity: The Cult Files." Lavery, Hague, and Cartwright 22-35.

Sanders, Hans. "Die Welt ist, was der Fall ist: Poetologische Randnotizen zum Kriminalroman." *Romanistische Zeitschrift für Literaturgeschichte* 17.3-4 (1993): 387-403. Print.

Sconce, Jeffrey. "What If? Charting Television's New Textual Boundaries." Spigel and Olsson 93-112.

Spigel, Lynn. Introduction. Spigel and Olsson 1-39.

Spigel, Lynn, and Jan Olsson, eds. *Television after TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*. Durham: Duke UP, 2004. Print.

Todorov, Tzvetan. "The Typology of Detective Fiction." 1966. *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*. Ed. David Lodge and Nigel Wood. 3rd ed. Harlow: Pearson, 2008. 226-32. Print.

"The Truth." Dir. Kim Manners. *The X-Files*. Perf. David Duchovny, Gillian Anderson, Robert Patrick, Annabeth Gish, and Nicholas Lea. Fox. 19 May 2002. Television.

Wiki 24: The Premier Source for Complete Episode, Season, and Character Guides. Wikia, 18 Jan. 2012. Web. 22 Jan. 2012.