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Say It Again: Aaron Sorkin and Dialogue Repetition on The West Wing

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Panel 29: Kearney 323

Start Date

27-10-2012 3:00 PM

End Date

27-10-2012 4:30 PM

Description

Screenwriter Aaron Sorkin, who recently won an Academy Award and a Golden Globe for *The Social Network* and earned nominations for co-writing *Moneyball*, premiered his new television series, *The Newsroom*, on HBO at the end of June 2012. However, the series for which he is most widely known is *The West Wing* (NBC, 1999-2006), which debuted less than one year after U.S. President Bill Clinton was impeached on charges of perjury and obstruction of justice and four years after the release of the successful film. *The American President*, for which Sorkin wrote the screenplay. *The West Wing* (*TWW*) presented an idealistic, sometimes-glamorous look at public service by the fictional president's executive staff. Defying the tradition that political series on television are anathema, *TWW* won the Emmy Award for Outstanding Drama Series its first four years on the air—not coincidentally, the four years that Sorkin wrote for the show—and ultimately earned 26 Emmys, the eighth most in TV history. The series joined pressing and complicated political issues with compelling stories and believable characters.

Since the turn of the new century, serialized television programs have grown in number and in sophistication. Some of these "narratively complex" series (Mittell, 2006), which include *The West Wing*, *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Lost*, *Breaking Bad*, and *Game of Thrones*, have rarely used what Steven Johnson calls "flashing arrows" to "help the audience keep track of what's going on" across episodes and seasons (Johnson, 2005, p. 73). Johnson, who contends that these complex forms of popular culture (television, film, video games, etc.) have made us smarter in recent years, attributes the "murkiness" of *TWW* to Sorkin's "cunning refusal" to include these aids (Ibid., p. 77).

This paper, however, challenges Johnson's claim about flashing arrows. Through a close reading of Emmy-winning and Emmy-nominated episodes of *TWW* written by Sorkin, I examine how the creator stealthily embraces yet subverts this traditional narrative device through his own unconventional yet familiar technique. More specifically, this essay looks at how dialogue repetition complicates the notion that *TWW* was narratively complex.

Following an initial discussion of narrative complexity, this paper will then detail various functions of repetition in television (and film) and how they are used in *TWW*. For instance, through dialogue repetition, Sorkin obviates the need for exposition that often dumbs down stories and their potential for authenticity. He sometimes reveals expository dialogue, though, by having one character repeat important information to another.

Sorkin's characters deliver rapid-fire dialogue, whose meanings often are not understood by the viewer until later in a scene or episode. Such moments maintain momentum that suits the fast-paced workplace cultivated aurally by Sorkin and visually by director Thomas Schlamme's famous "walk-and-talks," in which characters converse while they walk and are sometimes joined—or replaced—by another along the way to a different location. They also demonstrate the frenetic pace of working inside the executive branch of the U.S. government. Conversely—and perhaps surprisingly—these moments of repetition can, to borrow a phrase that Sarah Cardwell used in a similar context, "stall the narrative" (2005, 191); that is, the characters who repeat the same lines (usually verbatim) to each other and who contribute to the excitement and tension in these

scenes tend not to advance the plot or overload the viewer with much new information. Sometimes Sorkin tantalizes the viewer with ambiguous, repeated lines that open dialogue-heavy scenes, and so she or he must pay closer attention to what characters are discussing. However, because these moments do not include much new dialogue, the repetition serves as an aural transition between the last scene and the next one, which gives the viewer time to catch up and to pay attention. These dialogues often accentuate themes within story lines that traverse episodes and seasons as well as develop characters further.

Sorkin's use of repetition often produces great comedy, as in the case of one character repeatedly admonishing another to "avert [his] eyes" after she falls into her swimming pool and steps out with her clothes unflatteringly stuck to her body. It can also stir emotions, as in the case of one character who, in describing how her young sons were killed in the Vietnam War, begins and ends her story with the same phrase, "I miss my boys."

Finally, this essay examines plant and payoff, a popular literary device that Sorkin uses masterfully to foreshadow and call back critical moments in *TWW*'s diegesis. This technique can "increase the audience's feeling of involvement in the story, for we have special, inside information, we know secrets and have discovered new or hidden meanings in the very fabric of the story" (Howard & Mabley, 1993, p. 73).

Plant and payoff serves as a microcosm for what Sorkin does so effectively with repetition: he increases audience involvement in the story, allows them to uncover new meanings, accentuates what is most important, but does not insult viewer intelligence.

The West Wing is justly recognized as one of the most well-crafted series in television history. This paper briefly acknowledges that *TWW* exemplified narrative complexity, but it will describe in detail how creator Aaron Sorkin developed a unique writing technique by modifying an old-fashioned trope often used to minimize it.

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Studies in the detailed analysis of film. Gibbs, J. & D. Pye (Eds.). Manchester University Press.

Howard, D. & E. Mabley. (1993). *The tools of screenwriting.* New York: St. Martin's Press.

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Mittell, J. (Fall 2006). Narrative complexity in contemporary American television. *The velvet light trap*, 58, 29-40.