

THE LOST TRADITION OF MAKING QUALITY SERIES. LATVIAN CASE

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to discuss the concept of quality TV series in the context of Latvian film history and contemporary practice.

Lately, the so-called quality TV series have been extremely successful, especially when it comes to the series offered by global streaming companies. Contemporary TV series made in Latvia have not been noticed internationally yet, although there are examples in the history of Latvian cinema that confirm that Latvian filmmakers have created quality series as early as the 1980s. What is a high-quality series in the context of modern Latvian cinema and why have the traditions of making quality series been lost?

Keywords: *series, quality series, Latvian film, Latvian series.*

During the last five or seven years we have encountered the phenomenon that watching series from a habit that does not demonstrate cultivated intellectual taste and having high quality criteria has grown into a popular and accepted practice by intellectuals.

“Suddenly in academic circles it seems to be chic to watch television. [...] The appropriation of TV series has become a sign of “good taste” and contributes to the social and cultural distinction of its recipients” [Kumpf 2011].

The popularity of the series and their diverse distribution – not only on classical linear TV, but also on-line platforms – has prompted academics to define the term “quality series” as a culturally bound, discursive construct, which functions as a meta-genre with concrete implications for selection, experience, and possible effects of entertaining quality TV [Schluetz 2016].

First, it must be established what the term “quality TV series” stands for and why the author proposes to put the term “TV” into brackets. Before trying to find out how this concept of “quality TV series” applies to the past and present of Latvian cinema and film production practice, the history of development of the concept “quality TV series” has to be briefly touched upon.

In the field of film theory, “quality TV” has been a subject gaining increasing attention. As emphasized by the scholars, quality TV is complex television. It is demanding in terms of content, aesthetically ambitious and therefore attractive for certain target groups – it is both art and merchandise [Bignell 2007].

“Quality TV is demanding on several levels: It is innovative and complex both in terms of content and form. It challenges viewing habits and genre expectations by breaking taboos, violating television customs, and expanding narrative rules. Quality TV series has high production values and a distinct visual style. [...] Quality serial television is complex in terms of storytelling, cast, narrative ambiguity, and intertextuality. [...] Moreover, they stand out because of a signature style composed of high production values, distinctive visual style, and techniques fostering reflexivity. Quality serial television offers a cognitively and affectively challenging entertainment experience with added symbolic value” [Schluetz 2016].

The label “quality television” was coined by US-American TV-critics in the mid-1970s with regard to particular shows like “Rich Man, Poor Man” and “Hill Street Blues” which stood out next to their generic contemporaries. According to Robert J. Thompson the first phase of the quality television in the USA stretched from the debut of “Hill Street Blues” in 1981 to the cancelation of “Twin Peaks” in 1991. In early 1990s with the shows “NYPD Blue” and “ER” the “quality TV aesthetic [...] started spreading like a virus:

“By the turn of the century, quality was busting out all over the networks. As far as hour-long dramas were concerned, it was hard to find a show in the autumn of 2000 that wouldn't have fallen into the category of ‘quality TV’ as defined in the 1980s. The Practice, Ally McBeal and Boston Public; Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Angel and The X-Files; Once and Again, Judging Amy and Providence; Law & Order, The West Wing and City of Angels: the quality style was everywhere” [Thompson 2007, XVII].

Quality TV as of today marks a specific cultural status of television content as opposed to conventional television. The growth of the pay TV channels had a significant impact on the development of quality series, allowing more artistically

diverse content to appear in the offer of TV series. Namely, the rise of the pay TV channels (first and foremost HBO) was of paramount importance for the advent of quality TV productions like “The Sopranos” or “The Wire”. “The audience (or certain segments) gained autonomy in terms of time, space, and content” [Schluetz 2016].

In American TV, the development of the concept of quality series is related to the so-called post-network era (ca. 1995–2010) characterized by digitalization and media convergence. The worldwide triumph of quality series is closely linked to the development of digital technologies that “*undoubtedly blurred the boundary between film and television in terms of both production processes and technical quality of product. Thus, the former denigration of television in the face of cinema has itself been revalued and established film directors who earlier would not have worked in television, now frequently opt to do so*” [Nelson 2007: 43].

A significant milestone was the appearance and growth of online platforms, diversifying the offer of quality series. “House of Cards” (2013–2018), the first series produced by the global streaming service *Netflix*, was launched eight years ago and it started *Netflix*’s expansion into the global market of quality series. Since 2013, *Netflix* has produced approximately 400 original series and movies each year available exclusively on the online platform [Variety 2019]. Undoubtedly *Netflix* is the most powerful player in the market of online streaming platforms – both the streaming platform and the production company but there are other significant competitors such as *Amazon Prime*, *Hulu* etc.

Therefore, when speaking about the concept of “quality TV series”, one can surely put the term “TV” in brackets. Part of the audience consumes high-quality series on online platforms, enjoying watching new series and the freedom of consuming them. Online platforms created new reception mode: episodes can be viewed repeatedly, numerous times or *binge-watched*.

What does Latvia look like in this global context of quality TV series? It has to be said that the term “quality series” has appeared in use in Latvia only recently. Up to this point the term has been mainly used to describe the operation of global online platforms such as *Netflix* and is used in texts written about the products they offer and not so much about the offer of country-specific TV channels and platforms. At the moment, one of the strongest players in the production of the quality series *Netflix* does not offer any audio-visual content made in Latvia for that matter, nor any series produced in the Baltics. One can list many reasons why this is so, but the most prominent are the insignificant size of the market, the restricted language area, as well as the limited capacity of the audio-visual productions made in Latvia and, possibly, non-compliance with *Netflix* criteria.

Does Latvia have, is producing and has produced series that could meet the criteria of a quality series? To answer this, it is necessary to look back at the history of Latvian cinema and production practice in the second half of the 20th century.

Undoubtedly, the parallels between Latvian media history and US media history are nearly impossible to draw. This can be explained by different socio-political circumstances and a different course of history including the history of media. What is “quality TV” and “quality TV series” in the history of Latvian media is the topic of complex research.

It is important to emphasize one of the categories of a quality series – visual quality, which depends on the industrial and technological conditions of the production. Jonathan Bignell in his analyses of quality TV series made in the USA during the 1980s and 1990s states:

“While made for television, the emphasis on mise-en-scène associated with the greater depth of colour, contrastive lighting and more elaborate camera movement of production on film is responsible for much of the aesthetic quality attributed to these programmes” [Bignell 2007].

Before the rapid advances of digital technology in the past few decades, which have blurred the boundaries between film and high-quality TV productions, quality TV series in the USA were mainly shot on 35 mm film. It provided an image quality that is visually equivalent to that of movies. During the Soviet era, Latvian films were made in the Riga Film Studio, which was integrated into the centralized Soviet film production system. 35 mm film stock was particularly used in Riga Film Studio, which was the only studio able to operate with such high-value production. Therefore, the few examples of the quality TV series made in Latvia in the 1980s, were produced particularly in this studio. Since the 1970s, the Riga Film Studio also regularly produced two-episode and multi-episode films commissioned by Moscow Central TV and Radio. Nobody called these films series, but some were quite successful productions of the Riga Film Studio. (The term used during the Soviet era was “multi-episode feature film”.)

For example, in 1978, there was the two-episode film “Theatre” (*Teātris*) – a screen adaptation of Somerset Maugham’s “Theatre” by director Jānis Streičs. Two-episode films were made regularly also in the 1980s. The first multi-episode film produced in the Riga Film Studio that possibly meets the criteria of a quality series in a modern sense is “The Long Road in the Dunes” (*Ilgais ceļš kāpās*, 1981) by director Aloizs Brenčs. This seven-episode film was made respecting the rules of historical drama and melodrama, and it also touched on important periods of Latvian history (deportations). “The Long Road in the Dunes” became extremely popular throughout the USSR, proving the skills of Latvian filmmakers to make multi-episode films.

In 1989, Aloizis Brenčš made another historical multi-episode film – the six-episode drama “The Old Sailor’s Nest”, aka “Zītars Family” (*Vecā jūrnieku ligzda / Zītaru dzimta*). Brenčš’ three-episode film “Mirage” (*Mirāža*) also gained popularity; he used heist-movie motifs in this production. “Mirage” also fulfilled the “ideological counter-propaganda goal”, while interpreting a genre popular in both US and European film practice.

Brenčš’ multi-episode films are *continuous series* and generally meet the criteria for a quality series. Namely, they were innovative, complex, challenged viewing habits and genre expectations by breaking thematic taboos. For example, the topic – deportations – used in the series “The Long Road in the Dunes” was extremely sensitive during the Soviet occupation, even at the beginning of the 1980s. Additionally, “The Long Road in the Dunes” and two other series directed by Brenčš had high production values and a distinct visual style.

After 1991, when Latvia regained its independence, the film financing and production system changed. Films were no longer centrally funded, and the Riga Film Studio ceased to operate as a regular film production base. In the 1990s, funding was extremely limited, few films were made, and series had to be forgotten for a long time.

Since early 1990s, the production and financing of TV series in Latvia has been separated from the film production. Since 1991 the main institution for the financing film productions in Latvia has been the National Film centre – a state institution of direct administration under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture, which implements the national policy in the cinema and film industry. For the last 30 years, the production of TV series has been the responsibility of TV companies – both public and commercial TVs. Unfortunately, during this period, there have been no artistically lasting productions (series) that would stand out in the offer of low-budget productions – mainly sitcoms and adapted formats.

Between 1990 and 2020, the Latvian Television occasionally produced some multi-episode films (series) that exceed ordinary TV products in terms of storytelling and visual quality. However, there are very few such examples. It’s worth mentioning the series “Rulers of Destiny” (*Likteņa lidumnieki*, 2003–2008) – 4 seasons, 56 episodes produced by the Latvian Television. However, the visual and production qualities of the series are modest in comparison with the multi-episode films made at the Riga Film Studio.

In preparation for the Centenary of Latvia additional funding (EUR 700,000) was allocated by the Ministry of Culture for the production of the historical series. In 2016 Latvian Television launched a call for the creation of TV series dedicated to the Centenary of Latvia. The objective was to create a series “with high importance for the society and emphasize the topics of Latvia’s history, statehood, culture, politics

and national identity, thus strengthening the understanding of national identity and Latvia's historical development" [NKC 2016].

The historical drama "Red Forest" (*Sarkanais mežs*) produced by *Red Dot Media* was the winner of the call announced by the Latvian Television. The twelve-episode series premiered in the spring of 2019. Its production value, theme – the resistance movement in Latvia after the Second World War and the involvement of the British secret service – as well as storytelling quality allow to describe it as probably the first high-quality Latvian series made since the early 1990s. Digital technologies allowed creating convincing visual style comparable with the production qualities of the features.

The National Film Centre (NFC), established in 1991, distributes state funding for film production through calls for applications. However, the opportunity to announce the first NFC call for applications to produce a quality series arose only recently, thanks to emergency funding to mitigate the effects of Covid-19. In 2020, for the first time, the NFC, allocating one million euro for the shooting of the series, provided funding for two quality series. The money comes from the emergency funding to mitigate the effects of Covid-19. The keywords "quality" and "multi-episode film" mentioned in the regulations of the call for applications show the efforts of officials to emphasize the connection between the present and the 1970s–1980s, when multi-episode films were produced in the Riga Film Studio [NKC 2020]. Two series received funding: "Emīlija: The Press Queen" (based on the biography of Emīlija Benjamiņa – one of the most influential Latvian publishers in the 1920s and 1930s) and the crime series *Cherchez la femme* ("Look for the Woman") in which the action takes place at the beginning of the 1990s. Both series are dealing with historical material. This can raise the question if the "quality series" is limited to only "historical series" in the realm of Latvian media? Both productions will be premiered in the end of 2021, both series are produced by independent production companies *Mistrus Media* ("Emīlija: The Press Queen") and *Red Dot Media & Kultfilma* (*Cherchez la femme*), and both will be screened on Latvian TV and local VOD companies, which contributed with co-financing of the productions. The series "Emīlija: The Press Queen" is a seven-episode drama – the final episode is a documentary about Emīlija Benjamiņa directed by Gints Grūbe, who is also the co-producer of the series, the other six episodes are the features directed by three directors Kristīne Želve, Andis Mizišs and Dāvis Sīmanis. Additionally, the team of two directors – Armands Zvirbulis and Dzintars Dreibergs – are the creators of the six-episode series *Cherchez la femme*. The extremely demanding production schedule of both series, stipulated by additional funding conditions, which required the completion of the main shooting period by the end of 2020, motivated Latvian

filmmakers to create a creative team of directors, which is not a common practice in Latvian or even European film industry.

Positive tendencies in demand for Latvian-produced content, including series, have increased rapidly in the last four years since the advent of local online (VOD) platforms. Probably this period can be called the “golden age of VOD platforms” in Latvia. Several platforms, such as *TET*, *LMT Straume*, etc. are actively purchasing local content – films made in Latvia. The competition between two telecommunication companies, trying to divide the Latvian market, has created a demand for domestic content created in Latvia, also for series that these telecommunication companies are trying to produce themselves. It is debatable whether the term “quality” can be applied to these series, but some series have been produced. For example, “There” (*Tur*) produced by LMT (dir. Uldis Cipsts, 2019) is an ambitious attempt to master the genre of science fiction, ignoring the budget constraints and the weak traditions of the genre in Latvia. Recently the competing telecommunication platform TET has offered its own detective series “Lost” (*Bezvēsts pazudušās*, dir. Vlads Kovaļovs, 2020), which premiered in the fall of 2020. It should be noted that both directors had not worked in Latvian film productions before directing these series.

The most internationally known Latvian theatre – the New Riga Theatre – has also started making a series and has filmed a ten-episode series “Agency” during the lockdown of 2020 from May to September. For his contemporary story about a Riga-based advertising agency director Alvis Hermanis has chosen black-and-white aesthetics, which, in his opinion, is reminiscent of the fragility and naivety of movies of the 1960s. All NRT actors have participated in the filming of the series and they are also co-authors of the screenplay. In the series, Alvis Hermanis uses the same method that also characterizes his theatrical productions – actors are involved in creating the dramaturgy of the play or in this case – dramaturgy of the series. It is significant that in numerous interviews Alvis Hermanis characterized “Agency” as a “multi-episode feature film” (*daudzsēriju mākslas filma*). He used the same term which was common during the 1970s–80s in the practice of Riga Film Studio, when “The Long Road in the Dunes” and other quality TV series or “multi-episode feature films” were made in Latvia.

This independent experiment also complements the understanding of the concept of “quality series” in the Latvian context: a famous director-author, popular actors, and unusual production practice.

Alvis Hermanis has refused to co-operate with TV companies and existing VODs, and the series was made available on the New Riga Theatre’s own online platform in autumn of 2020. It must be said that “Agency”, the series created by Alvis

Hermanis, received mixed reviews. The method of improvisation, which was used to create the dramatic basis of the series, hindered the development of a convincing narrative. The series was characterized by an overemphasis on fragmentation. However, in general, “Agency” can be considered a stylistically peculiar experiment both in visual style and production practice. The New Riga Theatre produced the series using their own resources, without attempts to attract additional funding from film funds, TV companies, distributors, or streaming services.

It can be concluded that the concept of “quality series” is very fragile in the context of Latvia media landscape. It is possible that tracking a quality series in the Latvian audio-visual experience is more of a desire of scholars who long to see the reflections of an internationally approbated meta-genre in the local practice. The tradition and ability to create high-quality multi-episode stories was cut short in the 1990s due to socio-political changes and lack of funding, as well as segregation of funding for TV and cinema productions. Predictable and planned funding granted to independent film production companies to make high-quality series would provide serious support for the development of this “meta-genre”. The qualitative development of series is largely related to the amount of funding, its regularity, and sources. National Film Centre of Latvia cannot currently guarantee whether and when there will be the next call for applications to support TV series. Other players with limited financial capacity such as TV companies and VOD platforms are left to take care of the development of series. The quality of series in general is related to the production value and the chance to tell complex multi-layered stories. Let us hope that the lost link between the multi-episode film/series culture of Latvian cinema in the 1980s and today will be restored.

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