## Chapter 2 – Television

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<Fig. 2.1 here> *Photo by Esther Vargas. CC BY-ND 2.0.*

Why study television? For starters, television is everywhere. While you probably think of TV primarily in your living room and bedroom, you can also find TV screens in bars, salons, stores, airports, waiting rooms, and many other public places. Moreover, you can access TV content virtually anywhere from your smartphone. In other words, TV undeniably enters people's everyday lives in different spaces and multiple times a day. Today, US adults spend an average of 4.2 hours watching TV each day, with people spending more time watching TV on phones, tablets, and laptops than in front of traditional TV screens ([Nielsen Total Audience Report](https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/report/2020/the-nielsen-total-audience-report-august-2020/)). As of 2021, half of US Latinx adults still use traditional cable and satellite services, with more and more Latinx people opting for on-demand streaming platforms, like Netflix and Hulu ([Horowitz Research](https://www.horowitzresearch.com/press/the-latinx-millennial-love-affair-with-netflix-new-horowitz-research/)). By thinking of television as something that is everywhere in our culture and on different types of screens, we can start to understand how television continues to shift and change, and with it social and cultural impacts.

 As a form of mass communication, television is a place where ideas about Latinx people and culture are present. Fictional and nonfictional forms of TV representation —whether a Latina news anchor on the evening news or a Latino comedian on a sitcom—can reinforce or challenge mainstream notions of what it means to be a Latinx person in the United States. Representation matters to people. Portrayals of Latinxs on television not only affect how others see Latinx people, but it affects how Latinx people see themselves. Across broadcast, cable, and streaming services, on-screen Latinx TV representation makes up less than 6% compared to 18.5% of Latinx people that make up the US population ([2020 Nielsen Inclusion on TV](https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/report/2020/being-seen-on-screen-diverse-representation-and-inclusion-on-tv/)). The lack of Latinx portrayal on television gets discussed on popular culture sites, newspapers, and social media platforms like Twitter. People are often outraged that the TV industry underrepresents Latinx communities compared to other racial and ethnic groups, namely white, non-Latinx Americans. Yet, the underrepresentation of Latinx people and culture on television is not a new phenomenon.

The struggle for more Latinx TV representation can be traced back to the late 1960s and early 1970s during the peak of Chicana/o and Puerto Rican movements. These activists fought for improvements in Latinx representation in both film and TV and the hiring of Latinx talent in various production roles in the media industry (Noriega 2000). More than six decades later, the National Hispanic Media Council and other advocacy organizations address the similar lack of employment and portrayal of Latinx people on and behind the television screen that early Chicana/o and Latinx media activists highlighted in their ongoing struggle for Latinx representation on television (Beltrán 2016).

<Fig. 2.2 here> *A billboard for the hit TV show* Jane the Virgin *(CW, 2014-2019) in New York City in 2014. Photo by Mike Steele. CC BY-ND 2.0.*

The ubiquity of television, the intricate ways it is woven into everyday life, and its complicated relationship with Latinx people and culture can make the study of TV seem challenging to analyze. What follows in this chapter will provide you with new ways to critically think about television and begin to account for its unique relationship to Latinx people and representation. In the next pages, keywords and major concepts from the academic study of television will provide a foundation for interrogating four elements of television studies: the historical evolution of TV, TV production, narrative structure, and aesthetics.

One popular approach to the study of television is the content of TV shows themselves. For example, the aesthetics and visual styles used in a TV text or the representations of race and gender we see on the screen. Another popular approach is the examination of industrial practices and structures that produce such TV shows. For example, one might consider the role of the show's writer-producer or the costs of acquiring the rights to a remake/reboot TV series, such as in the case of the Latinx-led *One Day at a Time* (Netflix, 2017 – 2019; Pop 2020). Studying television audiences, specifically how viewers react and relate to TV texts, is yet another approach to TV analysis. This method might consider if and how Latinx queer people relate to Latinx queer representation in *Love, Victor* (Hulu, 2020 -), or *Vida* (Starz, 2018-2019).

Lastly, you can consider the broader cultural and societal impacts of television itself. TV addresses and comments on ongoing political and societal debates, for example, family separation and deportation. You can see this political issue reflected in fictional and non-fictional TV series that premiered in 2020, such as the remake of *Party of Five* (Freeform, 2020) that was centered on everyday struggles of family separation, and the documentary series *Deportation Nation* that examines the bureaucracy of US immigration enforcement (Netflix, 2020). You should keep in mind that these four ways of analyzing TV do not in any way do justice to the complexities of these or describe other TV approaches. Keep in mind that these four approaches to TV analysis are only four of many, and their complexities have been simplified for this explanation.

### Brief Overview of US Televisual Landscape

When the US English-language television industry began in the late 1940s and early 1950s, there were only four major television networks: ABC, CBS, NBC, and the DuMont Television Network (DuMont only lasted for a couple of years.) In addition to purchasing their first TV set, Americans only required electricity and an antenna to tune into these 3-4 channels for free. This was because TV followed a similar business model to radio broadcasting, where television networks covered the cost of programming and its distribution by selling commercial airtime to advertisers to promote their products and services. Until the mid-1980s, these three robust networks (ABC, CBS, NBC) controlled US television’s commercial market, creation, and distribution. This period is called the “Network Era” of television.

As early work on US Latinx television demonstrates, Latinx representation during the "Network Era" was limited and marginalized. Despite the television industry's location in Los Angeles—the nation’s largest Mexican American community—Latinx people did not occupy creative roles in television for decades, except for Cuban Desi Arnaz in *I Love Lucy* (CBS,1951-1957) (Beltrán 2022). As the first Latinx person to co-produce, write, and star in their own TV show, Arnaz was not joined by other Latinx producers and writers until the 1970s. These first programs were created and produced by Latinxs, predominately Chicanos and Puerto Ricans, aired on American publicly funded broadcast television, and not on a Big Three Networks (Beltrán 2022 and Noriega 2000). Broadcast television did not see another Latinx star a scripted TV show for another twenty years until Puerto-Rican-Hungarian, Freddie Prinze, starred as a Chicano in East Los Angeles in NBC’s *Chico and the Man* (NBC, 1974 – 1977).

Due to technological changes impacting the transmission of television, US TV transitioned from a business model controlled by only a few networks into a “Post-Network Era.” In this “Post-Network Era,” television became multi-channeled with a shift from “free” broadcast television to paid commercial content. Through the expansion of **cable equipment** in the late 1980s and the development of **Digital Video Recorder** (DVR) in the early 2000s, television has had multiple iterations of the “Post-Network Era,” impacting the content available and the timing/airing of such programming. Gone are the days of only having access to three networks and local public television stations. Now viewers have more than 50 national TV networks that air for free, hundreds of TV channels to view with paid cable and satellite services, and nearly 200 on-demand streaming services.

According to TV scholar Amanda Lotz, who popularized the term “Post-Network Era,” television in the 21st century is marked by digital technologies and devices, such as the rise of video on demand services (e.g., Netflix and Hulu) and mobile telephone/tablet viewing (Lotz 2014). With limited options, TV viewers used to watch the same shows at the same times. Now, with thousands of TV shows available, worldwide programming, and video on demand content, TV viewers rarely watch the same programs at the same time. Even when you *do* watch the same programs as your friends and family, such as the ten-most-watched media texts on Netflix, you might view them in different contexts (home vs. on a plane) and devices (TV screen vs. cellphone).

While you may think Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Video, YouTube, and many other streaming services are similar, they all have a different business model in paying or not paying for content. For example, **subscription video on demand** (SVOD), such as Netflix, HBO Max, and Disney +, has a flat rate per month, allowing the viewer to self-determine how much content they want to view each month. On the other hand, **transactional video-on-demand** (TVOD) is the opposite of monthly subscription video. Here consumers can purchase content on a pay-per-view basis, such as buying a TV series episode or a film. In addition, much like broadcast television, **advertising-based video demand** (AVOD) is free to consumers if they sit and watch short ad commercials. An example of AVOD is IMBd, whose TV and movies are available for free and include several commercials throughout each episode and film viewing. Whether SVOD, TVOD, or AVOD, all streaming platforms have incorporated a wide range of TV shows and films, transforming how we access both television and film under one viewing location.

<Fig. 2.3 here> *Latinx TV shows and films that appear when searching “Latino” on Netflix.*

Unlike the Big Three Networks, whose content targeted middle-class white Americans, multi-channels in the "Post-Network Era" offer programming for **niche audiences** which has impacted Latinx representation. A niche audience refers to a particular subset of an audience, like women, Latinx, or queer folks. The focus on smaller audiences, such as the Latinx community, diversified the Latinx representation in the last two decades (2000-2010). For example, the early 2000s saw the first nationwide scripted TV shows produced by Latinx people and centered on Latino and Latina lead characters: *George Lopez* and *Ugly Betty* (Beltrán 2021). While these early shows premiered on the network television (NBC, CBS, ABC), the shift to multi-channel and niche audiences transformed the televisual landscape to include diverse, multicultural programming. Due to this shift, the 2010s witnessed a proliferation of Latinx representation on television, amongst other economic reasons. These Latinx-led TV series were produced by the first Latinx, namely Latinas, co-producers, showrunners, and writers (Beltrán 2021). Additionally, with the introduction of digital platforms, such as Netflix and Hulu, the early 2020s have increasingly become “the” place for Latinx TV representation. For example, *One Day at a Time*, *Gentefied* (2020 – 2021), *On My Block* (2019 – 2021) all premiered on Netflix. Essentially, in the “Post-Network Era,” television has seen a diversification of programing targeting a wide range of Latinx communities.

### TV Production: Showrunner

Every television show has a creative voice that guides the series from the inception of each episode idea to the finished product we watch. In film, this person is called the director, whereas the TV industry calls this person a showrunner. A **showrunner** is the person who has overall creative authority and management responsibility for a TV program. This person (or persons) are responsible for overseeing all areas of writing and production on a television series, ensuring that each episode is delivered on time and on a budget for the production studio that produces the show and the network or platform that airs it. The word showrunner is often used synonymously with writer-producer or creator of a TV series, but these three terms are different. A **writer-producer** is a person who helps write and produce a TV show. For example, the showrunner is always (or nearly always a writer-producer) of the show; however, a writer-producer is not always a showrunner. Furthermore, each show has multiple executive producers, helping with writing, producing, post-production, and managerial roles. Still, they are not necessarily involved with every aspect in the way that a showrunner is. A TV show **creator** is a person or persons who developed the idea for the series but may or may not be the show's showrunner. The creator is often an executive producer and maybe a writer-producer.

Are you confused yet? If so, that is okay. These are complex industrial terms. For example, *One Day at a Time* (*ODAAT*) —a sitcom about a Cuban American single-mother raising a teenage daughter and a middle-school son with her Cuban émigré mother in Los Angeles— is a great example of these similar and yet different TV industrial positions. It is also a sitcom based on the 1975 series of the same name created by Norman Lear. In the contemporary version of *ODAAT* that reimagines the original series with a Cuban family instead of a white American family, Norman Lear is an executive producer and original creator, but he is not a showrunner. Instead, Gloria Calderón-Kellett and Mike Royce are the showrunners who oversee the sitcom’s creative authority and management responsibility on each workday. Calderón-Kellett and Royce are also writer-producers of the sitcom remake. Lear is still involved with the series, but he is not involved with everyday aspects of the financial, creative, and collaborative nature of running the TV show. He might be involved with specific aspects of the series but does not deal with the budget and production hassles that Calderón-Kellett and Royce do.

Overall, showrunners have become central figures in the evolution of television as a medium. Combining managerial and creative roles, a showrunner functions as television auteurs/directors in complex and rapidly evolving ways, illustrating what it takes to create, write, and run a scripted TV series in today’s televisual landscape (Bennett, 2014). For starters, they shape the artistic content and style of TV series. Both Calderón-Kellett and Royce shaped the Latinx, queer, and veteran focus of *ODAAT*, adding a new direction that the original 1975 did not focus on. Showrunners learn to operate all business aspects of the television industry, even in extreme circumstances. After Netflix canceled *ODAAT,* Calderón-Kellett and Royce worked around their Netflix contract that prevented them from airing the series on a broadcast network and instead found a new home on another on-demand streaming service instead.

Lastly, the work of showrunners has become a platform for discussing larger socio-cultural issues — such as gender, race and representation, and politics – both in and through television. Calderón-Kellett and Royce have received appraisals for their dedication to diversity in front of and behind the camera. In the second season of *ODAAT*, 50% of writing staff were female and 50% were people of color, higher than the national average, where women made 44% of all TV writers while people of color made only 35% ([WAG](https://www.wga.org/uploadedfiles/the-guild/inclusion-and-equity/WGAW_Inclusion_Report_20.pdf)). Furthermore, Calderón-Kellett and Royce lead a team of writers and actors to shed light on LGBTQ issues, immigration and deportation issues, and veteran issues on television. For example, Elena (played by Isabella Gomez) is the first Latina character to come out as queer on a sitcom. Calderón-Kellett and Royce indirectly made television history by in influencing Latinx representation.

### TV Style: Narrative Structure and Aesthetics

Like cinema, television is a story machine where you too can analyze visual and acoustic elements, such as mise-en-scène and editing, as described in the previous chapter. However, there are stylistic elements and narrative differences between the television show and the film. In media studies, we refer to these differences as **medium specificity**. Film, television, and digital media allow for different forms of storytelling that are particular to the stylistic and narrative properties of that medium. For example, a feature film can present a situation/circumstance, a disruption of that situation, and then a resolution of that disruption, all within a two-hour frame. While a film can belong to a trilogy or franchise, it always presents some form of narrative conclusion. Television, on the other hand, does not have to obey those rules or restrictions of a film. A 24-episode season, for example, allows for a different type of storytelling, one where character development, conflicts, and resolutions can develop over several episodes or even seasons. This section will discuss key narrative forms and TV aesthetics specific to television itself, illustrating how these television forms are crucial to our understanding of television content.

Two types of narratives forms that contribute to television storytelling are serial and episodic structures. **Serial television** is when a show’s story unfolds over multiple episodes, seasons, or even during the duration of an entire series. Serials are a descendant of radio soaps and have been a staple of TV storytelling for over six decades. A television series may reveal “parts” of plot, conflict, or character developments in each new episode. Sometimes this occurs weekly or daily in a soap opera or telenovela, depending on the genre's format. TV serials disclose essential information piece by piece while relying on heavy repetition, allowing viewers to remember information from the previous episodes while making sense of the new clues and information they are receiving.

Latinx-centered shows like *East Los High* (Hulu, 2013-2017), *Jane the Virgin* (CW, 2014-2019), *Love, Victor,* (Hulu, 2020-), *On My Block* (Netflix, 2019-2021), and *Ugly Betty* (ABC, 2006-2010) are all examples of TV serials. In the case of *Jane the Virgin* — a US remake of a Venezuelan telenovela about Jane, a devoted Catholic and virgin who gets artificially inseminated— the series relies on a narrator to provide seriality. This off-screen, omniscient narrator recaps essential details from the previous episode, providing heavy repetition while narrating new information through the series’ beloved characters, conflict, and resolutions. However, many TV series do not rely on narrators like *Jane the Virgin* and instead provide seriality in different ways. For example, *Love, Victor* is a coming-of-age story about a half Puerto Rican and half Colombian American teen struggling with his sexual orientation. Due to the premise of the series, *Love, Victor* explores different aspects of Victor’s gay identity, from questioning his identity to coming out first to his best friend and later to his parents, all in the first season. In this example, seriality is provided by the coming-of-age/out genre.

**Episodic television** is when a TV show’s plot, conflict, and resolution unfold in a single episode in a three-act structure. Episodic is the opposite of seriality. The TV show will reveal all the necessary information to understand the situation or conflict at hand and solve it all in one episode. Unlike **TV anthologies**, such as *Black Mirror* (Netflix, 2011-2019), whose situation, conflict, and resolution also happen in one episode but each with a different set of characters, episodic series showcase the same set of primary characters in the duration of the series. We commonly see this narrative form in sitcoms. Short for situation comedy, a **sitcom** is a distinctive TV genre primarily defined by its structure and the central role of comedy. Each episode is built around a particular situation or problem, often centered on a family or close groups of friends. Historically speaking, sitcoms were the first TV fictional genre to discuss openly race, reproductive rights, and wartime conflict. Due to their episodic form, centrality of comedy, and their historical focus on families, sitcoms can introduce a wide range of opinions through various characters on issues that were once taboo.

The sitcom occupies an important place in the construction of Latinidad in popular culture, as the sitcom was one of the first TV genres to include Latinx representation in the 1950s. Television scholars have examined significant moments in the history of Latinx representation in sitcoms, such as the role of Chicano/a activism *in Chico and the Man* (NBC, 1974-1978) (Noriega, 2000) or the influence of Cuban television in the first bilingual sitcom, *¿Qué Pasa, USA?*(PBS, 1977-1980) (Rivero, 2013 ). Latinx comedians, such as Paul Rodriguez, John Leguizamo, George Lopez, Cristela Alonzo, and Gabriel Iglesias, have also transitioned from stand-up comedy to TV sitcoms often starring themselves.

<Fig. 2.4 here> *The cast of ABC’s sitcom Cristela at Disney, starring stand-up comedian Cristela Alonzo (center) as co-creator/executive producer and actress. Courtesy Walt Disney Television, CC BY-ND 2.0*.

Serial and episodic television allows for two distinct types of storytelling to occur on television. For example, serialization rewards loyal viewers who tune into each episode as these series tend to reveal little bits and pieces of the plot and situation over various episodes. On the other hand, episodic provides everything from laying out the main story and conflict to solution in a tight episode due to narrative structure. As a result, viewers are not enticed in the same way as seriality as they are in episodic television. For example, you could miss an episode from a sitcom or procedural crime show, such as *Law and Order: Special Victim Unit* (NBC, 1999 -), and not miss any crucial information since each episode introduces the plot, situation, and resolution. If you skipped or missed the following episode from a serial TV show, however, you might miss out on tidbits to help you further understand the plot or a particular character's persona. To be sure, you can find elements of seriality in episodic television and vice versa. These narrative forms are not fixed or static categories as the evolution of television is changing how stories are being told. For example, *One Day at a Time*, a sitcom, serializes Elena’s coming-out story arch over the first season instead of having one special episode that focused on her queer identity.

 Aesthetics, such as the use of a close-up on a beloved character’s silly face, also enhance the pleasure and emotional engagement of television. The use of visual and sonic aesthetics on television can be thematic or a stylistic choice influenced by a TV genre. For example, sitcoms tend to use a three-camera studio set up and can be filmed in front of a large audience (Dalton and Linder, 2005). **Three-camera setup**, also known as multiple-camera setup, is a method of TV production commonly used in sports events, news, soap operas, talk and games show, and most sitcoms. It involves using three simultaneously recording cameras instead of one, taking footage from various angles, and maximizing filming time, which is essential when recording shows with a live audience like talk and game shows.

A multi-camera show, such as a sitcom, is often accompanied by a live audience or laugh track. The origins of live audiences on television stems from the desire of creating a theatre-like, communal feeling from the comfort of someone’s couch. A **laugh track** is a pre-recorded soundtrack that contains the laughter of an audience. In some productions, a live audience might be used while others might opt for artificial laughter. In both cases, a live audience or a laugh track guides your reaction to the performances you see on screen. The loudness or duration of a laugh indirectly cues how funny a joke or situation is, which scholars have argued can construct biases around race, gender, and sexuality. For example, Alfred Martin found that Black-cast sitcoms use more laugh tracks with Black gay characters than Black straight male ones (Martin, 2021). Sitcoms can add, subtract, or entirely reconstitute laughter based on the producers’ aim or goal in a scene or episode. In the case of a live audience, cue cards are used to encourage the live audience to laugh at particular times.

The examples in this chapter have provided a basic understanding of television, highlighting some of the industry barriers and achievements of Latinx professionals. By examining how the US television industry has evolved, the role of a showrunner, and specific TV narrative structure and aesthetics, this chapter introduces several tools and perspectives to analyze Latinx production and representation. Later chapters will continue to explore Latinx representation, history, and industry politics through various lenses, such as queer identity and US Spanish-language television.

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