

Television's Aesthetic of Efficiency: Convergence Television and the Digital Short
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“The two-minute webisode is a very strange beast. Two minutes to a cliffhanger. I don't know if webisodes are going to be around long-term.”

—Ronald D. Moore, Executive Producer, *Battlestar Galactica*¹

“Our goal is to take the content and use it any way we can. How do we do a two-minute version of *CSI* and get paid for it?”

—Leslie Moonves, President and Chief Executive Officer, CBS Corporation²

Following an extended period during which the research priorities of the discipline of television studies were oriented around audiences and reception practices, since the 1990s television scholars have “returned” to the television text.³ In conjunction with this aesthetic (re)turn, scholars have undertaken to map the shifting horizons of the television text, revisiting and revising foundational models of television's textuality in ways which account for dispersals, extensions, and expansions of the medium's narratives and storyworlds across media. For instance, Will Brooker has documented how the diegesis of the series *Dawson's Creek* “overflows” television's boundaries, spilling out into immersive websites that merge television “with the vast diversity of the internet.”⁴ Along similar lines, Jamie Sexton writes of the “leakiness” of television's texts, and Matt Hills of the “hyperdiegeses,” or “vast and detailed narrative space[s],” constructed by cult television series.⁵ In dialogue with these projects of diegetic cartography, critics have plotted out the contours of the narratives that unfold within these expansive spaces. Hence Jason Mittell details the “narrative complexity,” and Jeffrey Sconce the narrational metareflexivity, of series such as *The X-Files* and *The*

Simpsons.⁶ Taken together, these studies make a compelling and nuanced argument for the connection between developments in television narration and visual form and contemporary processes of technological and industrial convergence, an argument which in turn has illuminated historical links between technology, political economy, and aesthetics.

Though it is less often noted, the same processes of convergence which have facilitated the dilation of television's intricate narratives and their dispersal across vast "transmedia" storyworlds also give rise to short-form web and mobile video formats which aggressively *contract* the scale of television and the stories that it tells.⁷ Shorts of no more than a few minutes in length have assumed prominent places within U.S. television networks' and studios' multiplatform programming strategies, and moreover have come to factor prominently in many television industry workers' understandings of television's future. According to one industry journalist, digital shorts—the short-form ancillary texts produced by television networks, studios, or independent producers as digital extensions of present or past television series for commercial and/or promotional purposes—represent “the future of television—or at least, one of the futures of television: freestanding, not time-sensitive, short enough to engage and enjoy comfortably.”⁸ “Over the long-long-long-term, generationally long,” explained the head of Lionsgate, the studio responsible for such prestige dramas as *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad*, “it's very likely that the genre—which I'll call short-form, truly short-form of five minutes—may be the way in which people consume a lot of entertainment media, putting movies aside.”⁹

Not content to watch this “generational” shift from the sidelines, television networks and studios have adapted their programs for viewing on digital platforms. To bring television programs to PCs and mobile devices, networks and studios clip, condense, and distil thirty- and sixty-minute long episodes until they fit into containers of between one and five minutes in duration. These digital shorts comprise a significant portion of the content available on networks’ and studios’ websites, on video aggregation websites like YouTube.com, and on portable devices such as iPods and mobile phones. At Apple’s iTunes store, for instance, viewers may download free video “Starter Kits” for the ABC series *Grey’s Anatomy*, which promise to fill us in on “everything [we] need to know” about the happenings at Seattle Grace Hospital in a matter of minutes. For a monthly fee of \$15, the Verizon VCast service delivers to subscribers’ handsets two-minute *Lost* “mobisodes,” recaps of the CBS daytime stalwart *The Young and the Restless*, and clips from Comedy Central’s fake-news shows. At the commercial content aggregation website Hulu.com, clips from *Saturday Night Live* and *The Family Guy* consistently rank amongst the most watched videos, in many cases outperforming full length episodes of the same programs.

Despite the pronounced emphasis websites and mobile video services place on recycled and adapted materials, television’s digital shorts have developed their own aesthetic, an *aesthetic of efficiency* characterized by streamlined exposition, discontinuous montage and ellipsis, and decontextualized narrative or visual spectacle.¹⁰ This aesthetic tracks across the diverse collection of narrative and non-narrative shorts that television networks and studios present on digital platforms. Many shorts start *in media res*, with no indications of their spatial or temporal context, and end abruptly, prior

to the resolution of their dramatic tension. Some perform virtuosic feats of synopsis, reducing entire seasons or series to rapid-fire montages, as is the case of “*Lost in 8:15*,” a promotional video recapping the first three seasons of the labyrinthine *Lost*. Many are synecdochal, and distil vast and complex source texts to their most recognizable elements. And like “*Lost in 8:15*,” which announced its duration in its title, many make it a priority to brandish their economy, using on-screen clocks, progress bars, diegetic references to duration or deadlines, or other conspicuous temporal cues to assure viewers that, despite all indications to the contrary, a four minute webisode is not a waste of time, but rather a marvel of efficiency.¹¹ This fetish for brevity carries over to the streamlined *portmanteaus* and trademarked brand names media conglomerates’ marketing divisions have coined to identify their digital shorts, names like “minisodes” (Sony Pictures Television), “mobisodes” (News Corp.), and “Two-Minute Replays” (NBC Universal).

This chapter examines the terms of the digital short’s aesthetic of efficiency, the presumptions which shaped it during its formative moment, and how creative professionals, industry executives, and cultural intermediaries have subsequently applied it within increasingly de-differentiated spheres of production and consumption. In the process, it endeavors to contribute new perspectives to a growing body of scholarship situated at the intersection of political economic, formalist, and aesthetic traditions. Television studies’ (re)turn to the television text has produced an abundance of valuable scholarship on television’s most ambitious serial dramas, including numerous studies of *Lost*, *The Sopranos*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. But for all the attention television studies scholars devote to these and other similarly ambitious series, we have allowed the opposite end of television’s narrative scale to slip through the

cracks.¹² As a result, we know shocking little about the digital short, a form of television which has played an instrumental role in television's merger with digital media, and which looms large in the industry's projections of its own future.

What follows is an attempt to submit television's digital shorts to a "critical pressure" every bit as firm as that which television critics have recently applied to the medium's most complex narratives.¹³ I propose that despite their obvious derivativeness and the larger commercial instrumentalities which they so baldly serve, digital shorts are every bit as worthy of—and capable of rewarding—these pressures as are the television programs which are their sources. To begin, I locate the emergence of the digital short during the late 1990s, and trace its metamorphosis from ad hoc response to the properties of first-generation digital hardware and infrastructure to archetype for a new aesthetic. Next, I examine some of the ways in which television networks and studios have promoted and strategically appropriated the digital short's aesthetic of efficiency in the context of their dealings with their partners and contractors. I conclude this chapter with a few brief remarks relating the digital short to television studies' own recent aesthetic (re)turn. Behind this renewed interest in television form lie unaddressed questions of value and judgment, specifically questions about which kinds of texts we believe warrant serious evaluation in the first place. My final section closes in on these questions, and outlines criteria against which we might evaluate television's digital shorts.

From Hardware Aesthetic to Aesthetic of Efficiency

The digital short's aesthetic of efficiency has been shaped by technological, institutional, and cultural forces which have grown thoroughly convoluted over the

course of the last two decades. One way we might begin to untangle this complicated weave is by tracing out the history of the U.S. television networks' forays into web and mobile distribution and exhibition, paying special attention to the ways in which digital shorts have factored in the industrial predicaments that have arisen along the way. From videotape to cable to digital downloads, the advent of new technologies of distribution and exhibition has repeatedly necessitated the renegotiation of formal and tacit agreements governing transactions of capital and intellectual property between television networks, studios, syndicators, and industry workers. The struggles that flare up at these moments have implications for the balance of power between the numerous factions that make up the U.S. television industry, but also for the content and form of programming as it moves between television's proliferating sites and screens.

The first experiments with exhibiting films, videos, and television programs on the web occurred in the late 1990s, at a time when the limited capacities of computer hardware and restrictions on Internet bandwidth required would-be exhibitors to keep the sizes of digital video files to an absolute minimum. Shorter videos meant smaller files, which in turn meant faster load times, better image and sound quality, and (potentially) more pleasurable experiences for viewers. As Barbara Klinger has explained, these requirements were instrumental to the coalescence of a *hardware aesthetic*, or a set of evaluative criteria organized around popular understandings of the web's properties as a venue for motion picture exhibition. This hardware aesthetic made a virtue of technological necessity, elevating the compromises necessitated by hardware and infrastructure to the status of a medium-specific formal language.¹⁴ As audiences grew more accustomed to watching shorts on the web, they came to recognize brevity as a

desirable quality of web video, to the degree that, as Daniel Chamberlain has noted, *duration* emerged as one of the primary criteria on which the merits of videos are evaluated on the web.¹⁵

In the 1990s, U.S. television networks and studios moved quickly to establish web presences, and were early investors in a number of the dot-com video ventures.¹⁶ But before they could fully exploit the commercial opportunities presented by digital platforms, networks and studios were required to revisit the terms under which they conducted business with each other and with their respective partners and contractors. For decades, the business of television had been organized temporally, in accordance with conventionalized sequences of production, promotion, exhibition, and distribution, so that the initial broadcast presentation of a program was followed by between two and three network re-runs, off-network syndication, overseas distribution, and, in some rare instances, the collection of programs onto physical media for distribution to viewers via rental and/or retail channels. By introducing new distribution and exhibition opportunities into this established schema, digital platforms threatened to unsettle many of the arrangements, relationships, and practices that it structures, including networks' licensing deals with studios, network-affiliate exclusivity arrangements, agreements governing the distribution of profits generated through syndication, rental, and sell-through markets, and networks' and studios' relations with the industry's workforce.

It was in this context that television networks and studios discovered in digital shorts short-term aesthetic solutions to industrial predicaments with long-term repercussions. The digital short's hardware aesthetic allowed television companies to simultaneously confront and avoid convergence's consequences, to convey to viewers,

shareholders, advertisers, and the trade press that they were adapting to new technologies, evolving audience tastes, and a shifting competitive landscape while scrambling behind the scenes to do everything possible to avoid altering the terms of their relationships with their partners and contractors. By withholding full-length programming from the web in favor of brief clips, trailers, recaps, behind-the-scenes footage, and other repurposed materials, networks established web presences without incurring substantial startup costs, and without making their programming vulnerable to digital piracy. Shorts likewise bought networks time to negotiate new arrangements with affiliates, syndicators, distributors, and studios over distribution and exhibition windows and the disbursement of future revenues generated by digital sales, rental, syndication, and advertising. Similar delay tactics enabled networks and studios to put off inevitable arbitration with Hollywood unions, as loopholes in guild contracts allowed networks to repurpose brief excerpts of programs for promotional purposes.

Television networks' strategic embrace of short-form video's hardware aesthetic occurred against the backdrop of technological developments which removed many of the hurdles which had initially restricted the durations of web videos. Thanks to the increased penetration of broadband Internet access and the introduction of high speed mobile data networks, by 2005 it was possible to distribute full-length television programs via digital networks. With Apple's introduction of a video iPod in October of that year, U.S. television networks and studios made their first forays into distributing their programming via the web, offering \$1.99 downloads of episodes of their primetime series via Apple's iTunes storefront. Soon after, networks began offering advertiser-supported streams of select primetime series on their homepages, and later via video

aggregators like Google Video and the joint NBC Universal-News Corp. venture Hulu.com. Though rights disputes with studios occasionally prevented networks from releasing some of their programs to digital platforms, by 2007 it had become standard for U.S. television networks to offer digital downloads and streams of recent episodes of their entire primetime lineups.

With the elimination of the technical barriers which had initially kept the durations of web and mobile videos to a few minutes or less, digital video's *hardware aesthetic* mutated into an *aesthetic of efficiency* oriented around conspicuous displays of temporal economy. Digital shorts were no longer short because technology dictated they *must be*. Rather, this brevity was transformed into an aesthetic signature that cemented their place alongside the 140-character Twitter tweet, the Flash microgame, and the viral video in what *Wired* in 2007 called the "new world of one-minute media."¹⁷ Ironically, the digital short's aesthetic of efficiency emerged as an emblem of web and mobile video's novelty and distinctiveness from the "old" medium of television precisely as U.S. media companies were using shorts created from recycled broadcast content to put off making changes to their programming strategies and business models. The sheen of novelty associated with this emergent aesthetic thus masked the reactionary tendencies of the media companies which were promoting the digital short as television reborn for the digital age.

The conditions this transition from hardware aesthetic to aesthetic of efficiency took place under illustrate the magnitude of networks' and studios' ongoing investments in short-form video. These investments were and remain at once economic and ideological in nature. Even with the widespread availability of full-length television

episodes on digital platforms, the economic value of digital shorts remains undiminished: relative to full-length television programming, shorts are cheaper to produce and distribute, and generate multiple opportunities for sponsorship, synergy, and brand extension. As a result, networks and studios continue to rely on shorts as low-cost, low-risk solutions to the challenges associated with programming a proliferating array of digital platforms.

Shorts likewise fit snugly within television industry *doxa*, and in particular within media companies' preferred models of the differences between television and new media and their respective audiences. As I have noted elsewhere, television networks and studios have since the 1990s approached the task of programming digital platforms via an axiomatic theory of medium specificity which dictate a rather rigid schema for assigning content to specific media platforms.¹⁸ Lisa Gersh, the president of the Oxygen cable network, summarized this theory in an interview with the trade journal *Multichannel News*: "Every platform is made to do different things—radio did one thing before television came along, which did another thing.... The broadband platform is the place for short-form programming, while most long-form content lives on television."¹⁹ Similar attitudes are shared by networks' and studios' partners in the telecommunications and consumer electronics industries. According to one telecommunications analyst, "diminutive screens make long-term, non-stop viewing unappealing, not a wonderful user experience. ... The most likely mobile TV applications will ... need to fit in about a 3-to-20-minute time frame ... Most people won't watch TV on a cell phone for much longer than that, except for some special, out-of-the-mainstream reasons."²⁰

The theory of medium specificity disseminated by the major stakeholders in web and mobile television complement and are complemented by an equally axiomatic set of assumptions about the tastes and tolerances of new media audiences. For instance, many industry professionals and professional industry watchers marshal consumer research on “millennials” or “digital natives” (those born since 1982) along with decades-old arguments about the impact of electronic media upon young people’s cognitive capacities to portray web viewers as serial multitaskers capable of focusing their attention for only short periods of time.²¹ As one cable executive explained, “we’re serving the YouTube generation ... so even if the economics are not aligned yet, you still want to be trafficking in the culture and content of your audience.”²² Along similar lines, a Sony Pictures Television executive described its miniseries as an effort to “[t]ake classic shows and, rather than try to jam them into the digital world, look at what the consumer wants.”²³

The notion that the digital short’s aesthetic of efficiency reflects (for better or for worse) nothing more nor less than the television industry’s desire to give web viewers what they want (or what programming executives surmise they are cognitively equipped to handle after years of exposure to MTV, cable news crawls, video games, and viral videos) exercises powerful influence on both the industrial and the popular understandings of TV-digital media convergence.²⁴ This *doxa* is strategically incomplete, and conceals the significant sway industrial imperatives—namely the imperative of preserving established arrangements between networks and studios and their various partners and contractors—exert on digital television narration and form. To be sure, in programming digital platforms, television networks and studios take cues from their audiences, or at the very least from their audience research departments. Yet we may be

equally certain that media companies would not continue to make digital shorts such prominent components of their multiplatform programming strategies if doing so did not make economic sense. Television networks program their digital outposts with shorts because, to paraphrase the cable executive quoted above, they remain an effective means of bringing culture, content, and commerce into alignment. The prominent place digital shorts occupy within television networks' and studios' multiplatform initiatives is first and foremost a testament to the *efficiencies* shorts afford to television networks and studios as they attempt to address—or delay addressing—the industrial predicaments wrought by convergence.

Renegotiating the Boundary between Content and Promotion

The nature and extent of the U.S. television networks' and studios' reliance upon digital shorts was underscored by the 2007-8 Writers Guild of America (WGA) strike. A central point of contention between the WGA and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) was the compensation of guild members for programming delivered on digital platforms. At the commencement of the strike in November 2007, writers' compensation rates for digital media were based on a formula set at the dawn of the home video era which made generous allowances to cover the high costs of manufacturing and distributing videocassettes. With the advent of DVD, these costs plummeted, and studio profit margins skyrocketed. But writers' residual rates remained the same, meaning that writers continued to receive only a small fraction of wholesale revenues of DVD sales, “or about 4 to 6 cents for every DVD sold.”²⁵ Even this rate was better than what writers received for digital downloads and streams. Many

networks balked at compensating writers for programs distributed via digital networks, reasoning that as they were not required to compensate writers for the use of their intellectual property for promotional purposes, they were under no obligation to share with writers the revenues generated by digital downloads and streams, provided they designated these presentations as promotions.

The clash over new media compensation came to a head in *The Accountants*, a short-form web serial spun-off of the NBC sitcom *The Office*. One of the first web shorts to be scripted by a primetime series' writing staff, *The Accountants* appeared in ten advertiser-supported installments over the course of the summer of 2006 at NBC.com, and was later packaged as a special feature on the DVD release of *The Office*'s second season. The series was deemed a commercial success by the network, and won its writers an Emmy in the new category of outstanding broadband comedy. Yet it also provoked an acrimonious dispute over the location of the boundary separating digital content from television promotion. This dispute illustrated the degree to which questions about digital television narration and form have become embedded within labor politics, as both NBC and the web series' writers attempted to use digital shorts to achieve favorable bargaining positions in negotiations over the television industry's divisions of profits generated by digital shorts. In these negotiations, digital shorts took on a double significance, at once factoring as points of contention in struggles between capital and labor and as important weapons in these struggles.

The dispute over *The Accountants* stemmed from NBC's equivocation on the question of whether the webisodes were web promos for *The Office* or an original series in their own right. Publicly, to audiences and sponsors, the network promoted *The*

Accountants as “original, exclusive,” and advertiser-supported content. To launch the webisodes, NBC mounted a public relations push which highlighted the participation of Greg Daniels, the series’ head writer and executive producer, and described *The Accountants* as a “serialized,” “edge-of-your-ergonomically-designed-seat whodunit” which extended the broadcast series’ storylines while the program was on summer hiatus.²⁶ As is typical of original web programming, NBC presented *The Accountants* in streaming format with advertiser support. Viewers accessed the webisodes via a video player surrounded by banner advertisements and a graphic reminding viewers of *The Office*’s timeslot. Each installment was preceded by a brief “pre-roll” commercial for Toyota. **IMAGE 1**

The participation of *The Office*’s cast and writers and the presence of these ads suggested that *The Accountants* was indeed an original short-form web series. NBC took a contradictory stance in its dealings with the webisodes’ writers and actors and the Hollywood guilds representing them, and categorized *The Accountants* as a promotion for *The Office*. “NBC Universal has a contract in place with its TV series producers to create promotional, made-for-internet content, which include Webisodes,” explained a spokesperson for the network’s parent conglomerate. “We’re asking our producers to fulfill their obligations in creating these materials...”²⁷ This was not the first time that writers challenged NBC Universal over the placement of the boundary between content and promotion; during the summer of 2006, NBC Universal subsidiary The Sci Fi Network went through difficult negotiations with the producers of *Battlestar Galactica* over a similar matter. Following this earlier incident, the WGA asked its members to not participate in the production of web and mobile content for NBC Universal subsidiaries

until the guild had reached an agreement with the AMPTP over compensation. NBC Universal responded by filing a grievance with the National Labor Relations Board, charging that the WGA's actions violated of labor laws.²⁸

The dispute between the guild and NBC Universal carried over into the 2007-8 WGA strike. During the strike, NBC stocked its website and digital outposts with deleted scenes, alternative takes, cast interviews, making-of documentaries, behind-the-scenes footage, clips, trailers, and recaps. Explained one NBC executive, ““We’re trying to do lots of online videos, just not ones written by a writer on the show.”” NBC had offered similar shorts on its website prior to the strike. But with all production on hold, the network turned to recycled materials to sustain its multiplatform programming initiatives and to consolidate its bargaining power. Further muddying the distinctions between television promos and digital video content, NBC and its affiliated cable networks packaged deleted scenes and cast interviews as “unscripted webisodes,” clips as “episode highlights,” and recaps as “Two-Minute Replays.” In an article in the trade publication *TelevisionWeek* titled “NBC Finds Webisode Workaround,” network executives boasted they would program digital platforms, with or without the WGA’s cooperation.²⁹

On the other side of the picket line, striking writers turned to digital shorts as well, using short-form web videos to explain and publicize the WGA’s platform. Prior to the strike, many guild members had made public their disdain for digital shorts and the restrictions short-form programming placed on their craft.³⁰ In one noteworthy instance, the writers of the comedy *30 Rock* used their scripts to take shots at NBC Universal’s digital ambitions, making the nemesis of protagonist and fictional NBC president Jack Donaghy a vapid west coast network executive responsible for green-lighting an inane

“ten-second Internet sitcom.” But many of these reservations seemed to evaporate over the course of the 100-day strike. At the start of the strike the WGA launched its own dedicated YouTube.com channel, which became a repository for more than 100 short videos featuring WGA members and their supporters. Meanwhile, writers left without work by the strike workshopped original concepts for short-form series at the website Strike.tv.

In the WGA’s YouTube uploads, questions of value were never far from the surface. In one of these shorts, titled “*The Office* Is Closed,” picketing members of the cast and writing staff of *The Office* discuss the Emmy they were awarded for their work on *The Accountants*, and express their frustrations at NBC’s refusal to acknowledge the economic and aesthetic value of the webisodes. In the video, cast and crew members engage in an impromptu comedy bit in which they push NBC’s reasoning to its illogical fruition, describing *all* television programming as promotion. “You know what my favorite promotion is?” writer-actor Mike Schur asks. “*Lost!*” “That’s such a good promotion,” agrees writer-actress Mindy Kaling, before launching into a discussion of some of her other favorite television “promos.” The video concludes with Greg Daniels issuing NBC management a challenge: “I encourage the company to send the lawyers in to write the episodes, because the lawyers are very creative. Terming a full-length airing of an episode with paid-for commercials online a promo is a really a good example of creativity and imagination.”³¹ **IMAGE 2**

The videos appearing on the WGA’s YouTube channel offer an alternative perspective to the hackneyed democratic rhetoric, pseudo-scientific cognitivism, and specious medium theory industry executives and trade journalists disseminate as they

attempt to rationalize television networks' and studios' digital programming strategies. In videos like "*The Office Is Closed*," striking writers cast the networks' and studio's deployments of digital shorts in an altogether different light. Instead of portraying shorts as the outcome of television companies' attempts to discover the aesthetic possibilities of a new medium, or as components of producers' efforts to cater their content to the web audience's degenerative attention span, writers identified digital shorts as cynical gambits on the part of greedy media conglomerates to extract additional productivity from the labors of creative professionals. As an example of what John Caldwell has termed "ground-up worker ephemera," "*The Office Is Closed*" provides an indication of the strategic importance shorts assumed on both sides of the picket line. If for networks and studios shorts represented a way of avoiding change, to striking guild members they offered a means of inciting it by forcing closed-door labor disputes into the public eye.³² Digital shorts enabled writers to make visible an unglamorous but nonetheless crucial aspect of creative labor that remains absent from behind-the-scenes documentaries, self-reflexive scripted dramas and comedies, and other "insider" accounts of television's production processes: the negotiations that establish the terms under which creativity is commodified within the U.S. television industry.³³

At the conclusion of the strike, the WGA and AMPTP reached a compromise over where networks, studios, and creative professionals would draw the boundary between television promotion and digital content. But the notion that promotion and programming might be designated absolute categories, and that promos and content (and the individuals who create them) might be segregated from one another, seems disconnected from, if not antithetical to, the conditions created by the forms of industrial, technological, and

cultural convergence which provoked the strike in the first place. The webisodes produced since the conclusion of the strike attest to the impossibility of keeping these categories distinct. Nearly all of the digital shorts found on television networks' and studios' websites and mobile portals promote *something*, be it the products of a sponsor who has underwritten a mobisode's production, an upcoming season premier or DVD box set release, a high concept primetime brand, or all of the above.

The compound promotional functions carried out by digital shorts are well illustrated by *The Rookie*, a short-form serialized spin-off of the espionage drama *24* which debuted on the web in 2007. *The Rookie* was produced by a division of the multinational consumer products conglomerate Unilever in cooperation with Twentieth Century Fox Television, the studio which produces *24* for FOX, and promoted Unilever's Degree for Men deodorant. To recreate *24*'s distinctive style, Unilever licensed the series' digital countdown graphics, score, and sound effects, and hired *24*'s director of photography to direct. Each of its three- to five-minute long webisodes served triple duty, functioning as an installment in a serialized drama about a rookie Counter Terrorist Unit agent, a promo for the sixth season of *24*, and a deodorant commercial. Degree commercials aired during primetime episodes of *24* and in-store *24*-themed Degree promotions alerted audience members to the existence of the web serial, which was simultaneously aired as a series of episodic commercials on News Corp.'s networks.³⁴

Not every digital short features brand integrations as comprehensive as *The Rookie*'s. That said, *all* digital shorts are branded entertainment, so to speak, in that they function as advertisements for the brands of the television series on which they are based.³⁵ Thus while an unambiguous contractual distinction between promotion and

content may be desirable from the standpoint of WGA members, it can become an impediment to a critical engagement with the forms and functions of television's digital shorts. In making this argument, my intention is not to endorse the AMPTP's pre-strike platform. Quite the contrary, the divide erected under the concessions won by the WGA serves a necessary purpose within the context of the U.S. television industry's volatile labor market. That said, the designation is ultimately limiting, as it obscures what is perhaps the major accomplishment of a short like *The Accountants* or *The Rookie*: to blend promotion and content in a way that television itself seldom can.

Aspirations and Aesthetics

At the start of this chapter I proposed that digital shorts are every bit as capable of withstanding our "critical pressure" as are the programs that are their sources. In fact, they would appear to confirm James Walters' contention that digital media invite and reward the form of "interpretative or 'text'-led" aesthetic analysis that has gained traction within television studies since the 1990s.³⁶ Digital shorts readily submit themselves to a "forensic" mode of television spectatorship: their web and mobile interfaces allow us to view and review them, to step through them one frame at a time, and to freeze or reverse the flow of their diegetic time.³⁷ Moreover, shorts may highlight and intensify fleeting moments, isolating clips as short as a few shots and as long as an entire scene from the narratives in which they appear, and from television's broader textual flows. Shorts nominate particular moments or sequences of moments of television as important and worthy of analysis, and provide critics and viewers with the technical means of carrying out close readings. In this respect, they carry out a task that is an essential prerequisite of

aesthetic criticism: the identification of bounded textual elements that are at once exemplary and representative of a greater whole for which they can be asked to stand.³⁸

Granted, the acts of nomination that shorts carry out are inseparable from the commercial objectives of the media companies that commission, produce, or distribute them. Shorts are often called upon to fulfill multiple commercial functions, to at once promote programs, networks, stars, and ancillary products, and to garner advertiser support or retail revenues. Thus a single webisode may hype the appearance of a sweeps period guest star, the release of a DVD box set, and a new deodorant spray, while a network-produced recap may play up storylines involving one cast member in coordination with an actor's appearance in a feature film being released by an affiliated movie studio. But a recognition of these promotional functions need not discount the insights that close analysis of television's digital shorts may yield. Quite the contrary, it is the brazen fashion in which shorts carry out their commercial obligations that make them so revealing. As highly-concentrated versions of television programs designed to compel viewers towards full-length, advertiser-supported or pay-per-view presentations or retail opportunities, digital shorts disclose a great deal about the U.S. television industry's conceptions of its programs and audiences. Shorts' inclusions and omissions reveal those aspects of a program's storyworld which a short's producers and/or distributors believe are and are not important, as well as what they believe is and is not important to that program's "ideal" viewer. Along similar lines, as digital adaptations of texts originating in what was until recently an analog medium, shorts are revealing of television companies' conceptions of what digital media are, the kinds of stories they are equipped to tell, and the audiences they address. Digital shorts thus offer a privileged vantage point

through which we may apprehend specific television programs, as well as the industry which produces, promotes, and presents them.

Thus far, however, television studies has yet to capitalize on these insights. What little attention television's digital shorts have received has come mainly from an unsympathetic popular press that is far more at ease with questions of value and judgment than the field of television studies. The same entertainment beat reporters, media bloggers, and newspaper television critics who have marveled at the immediacy and authenticity of the webcam serial *lonelygirl15* or the ingenuity of the latest "Chocolate Rain" remix have been merciless in their assessments of television's digital shorts.³⁹ For example, a review of the 2009 *Heroes* web spinoff *Nowhere Man* on AOL's TV Squad blog began with this diatribe:

Need a laugh? Watch the new *Heroes* web series. And yes, you'll be laughing at it, not with it. Mostly because it's awfully unoriginal, unfunny, and it revolves around two of the most useless characters in the *Heroes* universe ... The five-and-a-half minute opener, which premiered Monday, is mostly laughably bad, forgettable and uninspired.⁴⁰

Popular critics have dismissed television's digital shorts as crass and misguided attempts to cash-in on the short-form web video craze. In many respects, they are not wrong: many digital shorts *are* horribly "unoriginal, unfunny, and...uninspired." Many shamelessly shill for sponsors, cramming their flimsy narratives with excruciatingly long close ups of cell phones, hood ornaments, or soft drink cans. Many appear to have been carelessly edited, and confusingly fade in or out in the middle of dialogue. And many sacrifice ambiguity and complexity for painful obviousness and redundancy, addressing audiences as if they were too distracted to follow anything but the simplest of stories.

In light of the suspect quality of many digital shorts, it would be easy to write off television's digital shorts as television for those who, as one reporter put it, "find thirty minute sitcoms too deep and drawn out."⁴¹ But to do so would mean to forgo the considerable insights which the digital short's aesthetic of efficiency yields into the connections between new media form and old media political economy. In this concluding section, I want to outline an alternative set of criteria for evaluating television's digital shorts, criteria which might enable us not simply to learn live with digital shorts, but also to appreciate the quite considerable aesthetic accomplishments I believe they are capable of.

In an important article on television and aesthetic criticism, Jason Jacobs argues that in order for aesthetic criticism to be effective and relevant television critics must ask questions "about the different aspirations of different kinds of television, which ultimately requires thinking less about 'television' and more about particular genres and programmes."⁴² While Jacobs originally made this point in reference to the challenges of evaluating examples of different generic traditions, his argument is equally relevant to television's digital shorts. That is, if ancillary digital shorts like *The Accountants* or *The Rookie* are in fact a form of television—and this is certainly a matter we will debate further—then the basis of our evaluations of them should be their successes and failures at realizing their own aspirations, as opposed to their adherence to standards devised for the evaluation of television or other media forms.

What are the aspirations of television's digital shorts? Clearly, they are multiple. Much in the same way as different television genres and programs aspire to different goals, so too, must individual digital shorts possess their own individual purposes. For

instance, the aspirations of freestanding “unbundled” clips, which offer themselves to viewers as synecdochal figures for the much larger text from which they have been drawn, would certainly be different from those of synoptic Two-Minute Replays, which must contend with the challenge of managing the memories of audience members with varying levels of knowledge of a series’ past.⁴³ But while the aspirations of television’s digital shorts may be diverse, all digital shorts contend with the same core problematic: that of encompassing and reconciling the tension between television’s artistic and commercial functions.

On television, this tension is dispersed across the timetable and across the dial, where it plays out between the medium’s texts, paratexts, advertisements, and interstitials. With digital shorts, by contrast, television’s fundamental contradictions are concentrated and intensified. Expected to carry out the functions of promos, content, and commercials all at once, shorts visibly strain under the pressure of containing these antagonistic demands within themselves. This strain surfaces on the screen in identity crises of the type outlined above. Is *The Rookie* a deodorant commercial, or a minor chapter in the narrative of *24*? Is *The Accountants* a promo for *The Office*, or an original web series? Is the *Heroes* spinoff *Going Postal* a transmedia extension of the superhero drama, or a product placement showcase? **IMAGE 3**

As these examples suggest, digital shorts rarely realize this aspiration. Far more often it is the case that they implode under the pressures of balancing their promotional and commercial obligations with any narrative ambitions they might harbor. YouTube is a graveyard of failed mobisodes, incomprehensible clips, and incomprehensible recaps. However, when digital shorts do manage to bring their creators’, distributors’, and

audiences' demands into alignment, the effect can be quite powerful. In the lead up to the debut of the seventh and final season of the series *The Shield*, the cable channel FX posted at Hulu.com short clips from upcoming episodes. Included amongst these clips was "Vic versus Shane," an excerpt from the season premiere. Of the many varieties of digital shorts, unbundled clips like "Vic versus Shane" would appear to be the least ambitious. The clip makes no attempt to overflow *The Shield's* narratives or diegesis. It does not introduce new characters, initiate new storylines, fill in gaps in past plotlines, or deepen viewers' connections with peripheral characters. Put bluntly, it does not claim to be anything other than a promo. That said, "Vic versus Shane" succeeds where many original web and mobile series fail. In seventy seconds, the clip draws its audience into the convoluted story of *The Shield's* crooked cops, ensnaring viewers in a moment of disorienting yet breathtaking drama. Then, as quickly as it drew them in, the clip ends, directing viewers to FX for the resolution and context it has denied them. **IMAGE 4**

"Vic versus Shane" opens with chaos, a black screen cutting to a jumpy handheld shot of Detective Shane Vendrell as he attempts to pacify a bound and gagged woman. This shot—and the loud and disorienting music that accompanies it—is almost immediately interrupted by jarring cut to a reverse shot of the butt of a pistol smashing down on Shane's head. The next shot reveals that Shane's assailant is Vic Mackey, the chief protagonist of *The Shield* and Shane's former partner. Vic and a fellow cop drag Shane into another room, pummeling him with kicks and punches as he frantically struggles to explain that the Armenian gangsters that the trio had robbed during the series' second season had put a hit on Vic's wife and daughter, and that to protect them Shane has played warring factions of mob against one another. Following Shane's

confession, a horrified Vic backs off. Looking up at his former partner from the ground, Shane moans, “I’m paying off your debt in favors.” The clip ends abruptly, fading to a silent title card advertising the date of the episode’s debut on FX.

In a matter of seconds, Shane’s confession races through six seasons and more than seventy hours worth of the series’ epic history, rattling off a barrage of names, alliances, and double crosses, all without the benefit of explanation or context. As is the case with many contemporary prestige television dramas, *The Shield* carefully cultivates viewer loyalty by reducing to a bare minimum the expository redundancies television writers have long relied on to bring new or lapsed viewers up to speed on serial narratives. Viewers are thus required to watch each of the series’ episodes in order to keep track and make sense of its multiple multi-season story arcs. “Vic Versus Shane” foregrounds and amplifies this ambiguity via the rough, jarring edits that mark the clip’s beginning and ending. The two edits made to excise “Vic Versus Shane” from this episode’s narrative come at particularly inopportune moments, denying viewers cues that might help them place the events it depicts within the larger narrative to which it belongs. The full scene as aired on FX opens with a series of shots following Shane from his car to the interior of his apartment, where he finds his wife bound and gagged. In the clip, however, this sequence has been eliminated. The scene’s dramatic climax been omitted as well: in the uncut version aired on television, Shane apologizes to Vic once again, assuring him that “I would never do anything to hurt your family.” Vic’s reply—“Lem was family”—penetrates to the origin of the animosity between the former partners, alluding to Shane’s murder of a fellow member of their unit.

Absent these critical cues, “Vic Versus Shane” lacks context and closure. It is incomplete and can be disorienting to a viewer who is unfamiliar with the series’ history. The only background information for the clip comes from Shane’s confession, and from the terse (and decidedly vague) synopsis that accompanies it on Hulu.com. The viewer is told that this clip is from the first episode of the series’ seventh season, but is given no cue as to where in the episode this scene falls, or how much time has elapsed between this scene and the events depicted in the prior season’s finale. Likewise, there is no establishing shot to anchor the clip in space: from the frantic sequence of shots that precede Vic’s appearance, it is unclear where Shane is, and who is the bound and gagged woman on the couch. With only two edits, “Vic Versus Shane” translates the opening scene of *The Shield*’s final season into a powerfully enigmatic fragment that can only be reconciled by tuning in to the episode’s premiere on FX. The elliptical editing of the standalone clip becomes a means of inducing viewers to enter into and move through the circuit that links the various wings of the News Corp. empire to which both Hulu.com and FX belong. “Vic Versus Shane” is thus a promo for *The Shield*, and an incitement to consume across media platforms.

By traditional measures, “Vic Versus Shane’s” accomplishments pale when held against those of *The Shield*. However, when we take a clip such as this one on its own terms, as I have attempted to do here, we stand to appreciate that “Vic Versus Shane” is every bit as worthy an object of analysis as is *The Shield*. Recognizing the accomplishments of this or any other digital short requires that we move beyond the simple dualism of the distinction between promo and content. But perhaps even more crucially, it requires that we look beyond television studies’ traditional standards of

excellence or quality: in other words, those standards which recognize and reward, for instance, cinematic visuals, literate dialogue, rounded characters, generic hybridity, narrative complexity, or social realism. This need not mean lowering our standards lightening up on the “pressure” that we place on these texts; rather, I simply mean to suggest that we would be better served by adjusting our evaluative criteria to reflect the political economic conditions under which digital shorts are produced and the interlocking narrative, commercial, and promotional imperatives they are expected to carry out. As television’s convergence with digital media approaches critical mass, making digital shorts a more commonplace component of audiences’ media diets, required is an aesthetic that is as open to the artistry of the seventy-second promo as it is to that of the seventy-hour serial.

¹ James Hibberd, "NBC Finds Webisode Workaround," *TelevisionWeek*, March 26, 2007, 1.

² John M. Higgins "TV To Go," *Broadcasting & Cable*, September 26, 2005, 12.

³ John Corner, "Television Studies and the Idea of Criticism" *Screen* 48 (2007): 366. For additional remarks on television studies' recent return to questions of aesthetics, see Jason Jacobs, "Television Aesthetics: An Infantile Disorder," *Journal of British Cinema and Television* 3 (2006): 18-33.

⁴ Will Brooker, "Living on Dawson's Creek: Teen Viewers, Cultural Convergence, and Textual Overflow," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 4 (2001): 457.

⁵ Jamie Sexton, "Case Study: Television and Convergence," in *Tele-Visions*, ed. Glen Creeber (London: BFI, 2006), 160-168; Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2002), 137. See also John T. Caldwell, "Convergence Television: Aggregating Form and Repurposing Content in the Culture of Conglomeration," in *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*, eds. Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 53; Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 255; Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in Film and Television: Understanding Classical Narrative Technique* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

⁶ Jason Mittell, "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television," *Velvet Light Trap* 58 (2004): 29-40; Jeffrey Sconce, "What If? Charting Television's New Textual Boundaries" in *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*, eds. Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 93-112.

⁷ Henry Jenkins, "Transmedia Storytelling," <http://www.technologyreview.com/Biotech/13052/> (Accessed May 4, 2006).

⁸ Robert Keating, "The Future of Media: Television," <http://www.mediapost.com/publications/?fa=Articles.san&s=91780&Nid=47867&p=302321> (accessed October 13, 2008).

⁹ Kevin Beggs, quoted in Keating.

¹⁰ In some respects, this aesthetic is not unlike that of motion picture trailers. However, contrary to trailers, which trumpet their status as advertisements via the use of direct address, most digital shorts go to great lengths to obscure their purpose or provenance. In addition, unlike trailers, web shorts are presented to the audience as "authored" texts. For more on the unique aesthetic of motion picture trailers, see Lisa Kernan, *Coming Attractions: Reading American Movie Trailers* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004).

¹¹ Daniel Chamberlain terms this phenomenon "temporal conspicuity." See Daniel Chamberlain, "Watching Time on Television," <http://flowtv.org/?p=615> (accessed August 9, 2008).

¹² This is despite the fact that there is a large body of scholarship on fan-created digital ephemera and user-generated video.

¹³ Jason Jacobs, "Issues of Judgment and Value in Television Studies," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 4 (2001): 443.

¹⁴ Barbara Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 196, 75.

¹⁵ Chamberlain, "Watching Time on Television."

¹⁶ Ellen Seiter, "Television and the Internet" in *Electronic Media and Technoculture*, ed. John T. Caldwell (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 227-45.

¹⁷ "Snack Attack!" *Wired* 15 (March 2007): 125.

¹⁸ Max Dawson, "Little Players, Big Shows: Format, Narration, and Style on Television's New Smaller Screens," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 13: 3 (2007): 234-5.

¹⁹ R. Thomas Umstead, "Broadband Channels: Ready for Primetime," <http://www.multichannel.com/article/CA6340644.html> (accessed November 1, 2008).

²⁰ Roman Polz, "Ten Predictions about the Cell Phone Industry in 2007," <http://www.convergedigest.com/bp-bbw/bp1.asp?id=444&ctgy=home> (Accessed December 17, 2008).

²¹ See, for instance, David E. Mumford, "Make a Connection With Tech-Savvy Millennials," *TelevisionWeek*, November 13, 2006, 11. For more on the history of these tropes, see Michael Z. Newman, "From *Sesame Street* to Snack Culture: The 'Short Attention Span' in American Media History," *Media, Culture, & Society* (forthcoming, 2009).

²² Brian Graden, quoted in James Hibberd, "Shorter Shows for New Media," *TelevisionWeek*, October 9, 2006, 18.

²³ Steve Mosko, quoted in Bill Carter, "Coming Online Soon: The Five-Minute *Charlie's Angels*," *New York Times*, April 30, 2007.

²⁴ So axiomatic is the notion that the online and mobile audiences are only willing to watch or capable of watching in increments of a few minutes (or seconds) that in 2007 one industry trade magazine instructed aspiring multimedia producers to regard ninety seconds as the upper limit for the duration for web videos, as "Web viewers have much shorter attention spans" than television audiences. Daisy Whitney, "Top Five Tips for Would-Be Web Video Producers," *TelevisionWeek*, October 8, 2007, 12.

²⁵ Richard Verrier and Meg James, "What's making writers and studios so nervous?" <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/news/business/la-fi-newmedia19nov19,0,1734291,full.story> (Accessed April 12, 2009).

²⁶ "No Summer Vacation for NBC's *The Office*," http://www.nbcumv.com/entertainment/release_detail.nbc/entertainment-20060316000000-nosummervacationf.html (Accessed March 12, 2008).

²⁷ Dave McNary, "NBC brings feds into fight," <http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117948657.html?categoryid=14&cs=1> (Accessed September 5, 2006).

²⁸ James Hibberd, "NBCU Files Labor Complaint Against WGA," http://www.tvweek.com/news/2006/08/nbcu_files_labor_complaint_aga.php (Accessed November 13, 2008).

²⁹ Vivi Zigler, NBC Executive VP of Digital Entertainment and New Media, quoted in Hibberd, "NBC Finds Webisode Workaround."

³⁰ One notable exception in this regard is writer-producer Joss Whedon, who during the strike self-financed and produced the three-part web "Internet miniseries event" *Dr. Horrible's Singalong Blog*. Contrary to many other show runners, Whedon rhapsodized about the freedoms that the digital short afforded to him as a creator. See, for instance, Matt Rousch, "Exclusive: First Look at Joss Whedon's 'Dr. Horrible,'"

<http://community.tvguide.com/blog-entry/TVGuide-Editors-Blog/Roush-Dispatch/Joss-Whedon-Dr/800042425> (accessed November 7, 2008).

³¹ “*The Office* is Closed,” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b6hqP0c0_gw (Accessed May 13, 2008).

³² John Caldwell, “The Insider’s Promotional Surround: Rationing Production Knowledge, Managing Unruly Machines, and Worker Buy-In” (paper presented at The Promotional Surround Workshop, Nottingham, U.K., July 20, 2009).

³³ Lest this account of the strike appear to romanticize the WGA’s noble fight against the evil AMPTP, it bears noting the strike was also about policing professional boundaries, especially those separating guild members from amateur video bloggers, advertising copywriters, new media hyphenates, reality TV segment producers, and any other individuals who write for television and/or digital media platforms without credit (and often without compensation). The new basic agreement put in place at the resolution of the strike in February 2008 established the terms under which these individuals could be denied compensation and credit at the same time as it put in place protections to safeguard the interests of guild members. The agreement established that writing for new media platforms including the web and mobile devices would be covered by the guild’s contract if “(1) it is written by a ‘professional writer’ or (2) the program is derivative of an MBA-covered program or (3) if the budget is above any of three thresholds: \$15,000 per minute; \$300,000 per program; or \$500,000 per series order.” These qualifications essentially amount to an attempt to codify the designation of authorship in the face of technological, cultural, and institutional developments which have collapsed longstanding distinctions between producers and consumers—in other words, to designate what is and is not an authored text, and, by extension, who is and is not an author. From the perspective of writers, then, the digital short was an important weapon in a battle waged on two fronts: on one hand, against the networks and studios, and on the other, against an encroaching horde of amateur or non-union producers. See

http://www.wga.org/contract_07/mba_summary.pdf (Accessed July 28, 2009).

³⁴ “24 Spinoff Deal Is No Sweat for Fox,” *Hollywood Reporter*, January 19, 2007, 42.

³⁵ This is clearly the case with regards to *24: Conspiracy*, another short-form spinoff of *24*. Each minute-long *24: Conspiracy* mobisode concentrates the basic arc of a typical hour-long episode of *24* to a recap, one or two high-intensity narrative clinches, an instance of threatened, implied, or actual torture, and a cliffhanger ending, before concluding with a sneak preview of the following installment. It would appear that all that is missing is a commercial, until one realizes that the serial itself consists of twenty-four minute-long commercials for the *24* franchise.

³⁶ James Walters, “Repeat Viewings: Television Analysis in the DVD Age,” in *Film and Television After DVD*, eds. James Bennett and Tom Brown (London: Routledge, 2008), 65.

³⁷ Here I am adapting Jason Mittell’s notion of forensic fandom, a mode of fannish engagement “that encourages viewers to dig deeper, probing beneath the surface to understand the complexity of a story and its telling,” to describe the viewing style that shorts encourage. See Jason Mitell, “To Spread or To Drill?,” <http://justtv.wordpress.com/2009/02/25/to-spread-or-to-drill/> (Accessed July 18, 2009).

³⁸ Jonathan Bignell, "Exemplarity, Pedagogy, and Television Studies," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 3 (May 2005): 15-32.

³⁹ *lonelygirl15*, <http://www.youtube.com/user/lonelygirl15?blend=1&ob=4> (Accessed May 22, 2009); "Chocolate Rain," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EwTZ2xpQwpA> (Accessed May 22, 2009).

⁴⁰ Mike Moody, "Need a laugh? Watch the new *Heroes* web series" <http://www.tvsquad.com/2009/04/21/need-a-laugh-watch-the-new-heroes-web-series/> (Accessed July 30, 2009).

⁴¹ Mick Farren, "Attention Span Threatened by Advancing Minisodes!" <http://www.lacitybeat.com/article.php?id=5597&IssueNum=208> (Accessed August 7, 2007); Josh Wolf, "Minisodes: For those who find 30-minute sitcoms too deep and drawn out" http://www.cnet.com/8301-13508_1-9748620-19.html (Accessed August 3, 2007).

⁴² Jacobs, "Issues of Quality and Judgment," 430.

⁴³ Unbundled clips are short excerpts produced by dismantling integral television texts into fragmentary, yet self-contained, segments. See Dawson, "Little Players, Big Shows," 233-4.