

# A Storytelling Machine: The Complexity and Revolution of Narrative Television

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After asking his students to work on *The Awakening*, by Kate Chopin, Creighton Bernette takes his leave with this declaration at the end of the first season of *Treme* (HBO, 2010-2013):

I want you to take your time with it. Pay attention to the language itself. The ideas. Don't think in terms of a beginning and an end. Because unlike some plot-driven entertainments, there is no closure in real life. Not really. («Wish Someone Would Care», 9.1)

Employing an air of realism, the series created by David Simon intones a harmonious ballad about regeneration of New Orleans, adopting a slow, measured pace and a contemplative tone that allows the locales and music of the city to breathe freely. Diametrically opposed in style is *Community* (NBC, 2009-2015), a crazy, intertextual sitcom replete with metafictional winks. In the most famous episode of the third season, all the characters are gathered around a table for a game of Yahtzee. Before throwing the dice in order to decide which player must abandon the game, Abed Nadir warns, «Just so you know, Jeff, you are now creating six different timelines» («Remedial Chaos Theory», 4.3).

In both the scene that reveals the premise of the episode «Remedial Chaos Theory»—six variations on a single story—as well as in the subtly self-referential commentary of the tragic protagonist of

*Treme*, the evolution that television narrative has undergone in the last fifteen years is condensed: sophisticated, innovative, complex, long-term and aimed at a viewer schooled in narratology. From complementary, though sometimes conflicting, perspectives, gambles such as *24* (FOX, 2001-10), *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-08), *Arrested Development* (FOX, 2003-06; Netflix, 2013), *Lost* (ABC, 2004-10), *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007-15), *Fringe* (FOX, 2008-13), *Louie* (FX, 2010-) or *Fargo* (FX, 2014-) have boosted the Anglo-Saxon television to the top of the narrative Olympus, converting it into a privileged, constantly-evolving mechanism – a perfect storytelling machine. Throughout the course of this analysis we will examine how and why this has occurred.

## 1. Narrative in the Golden Age of Television

Contemporary American and British TV fiction has achieved an exemplary balance between art and industry, including products that combine a density of plot, aesthetics and even ethics with a handcrafted flavor accessible to every type of public. Economic success, massive public response and high critical recognition marry the current golden age of television series with the Hollywood classic.

The elements which explain the current prominence of the Anglo-Saxon series include, first of all, «industrial ingredients» (Lotz 2007) such as an increase in competition and the consequent need to find a brand image through its own productions. There have also been revolutions in the distribution of content: packs of DVDs, online streaming platforms and downloads that individualized the collective viewing experience and unidirectional pace set by the networks. And, finally, the configuration of a complex story<sup>1</sup> unequalled in mass culture. This latter provides the focus of this article, which will be divided into two parts. In the first, armed with narratological and poetic elements, we will define the serial story, stripping away the husk of its principal forms and explain why it is the best media for telling lengthy stories. In the second part we will pause to examine

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr. Mittel 2015.

specifically variations on the traditional story: alternate universes, time jumps, coincidence between diegetic time in the story and real time and other mechanisms that have made television fiction the most daring way for telling stories.

## **2. The specific nature of TV narrative**

In order to frame the specificity of television narrative, it is worth noting two elements which make it unique when compared to other types of narrative: the rigidity of the format and the structural possibility of lengthy, serialized stories. Unlike film and current literature, TV fiction has very strict institutional constraints which, while there are variations from one country to another, condition and unify the way its stories are told. In the United States, a comedy broadcast on any one of the major networks lasts 22 minutes, while dramas last 43 (47 on some basic cable channels like AMC or FX). The rest of the time is for commercial breaks, which also serve to structure the story into the usual four acts<sup>2</sup>. Only the premium cable channels (which now include Netflix or Amazon) can play with making the length of their episodes as long as they wish, although the margin is not very broad: an episode of an HBO drama usually lasts from 50 to 60 minutes. In addition to their duration, the number of episodes produced per year—something that is being questioned more often<sup>3</sup>—is also regulated: 22-24 episodes for series on broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX, The CW), and 10-13 for both basic and

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<sup>2</sup> Cfr. Newman 2006: 21.

<sup>3</sup> The ability to capitalize on a product with international sales as well as the constant competition between the cable and commercial broadcast networks has led it to become increasingly more common to find, on the traditional networks, 13-episode seasons, anthology series and even miniseries such as *24: Live Another Day* (FOX, 2014), *Rosemary's Baby* (NBC, 2014) and *The X-Files Miniseries* (FOX, 2016).

premium cable.<sup>4</sup> This institutional rigidity, contrary to what it may seem, has spurred creators to develop new narrative formulas, stretching their creativity to the limit to attract and maintain consumer interest.

Alongside these 'limitations', the other big difference with the rest of the narrative arts lies in the systematization of the expanded story, which is applied in films only occasionally: sagas such as *Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Rings* or *Harry Potter*, or long-form episodes of the *James Bond* series and the recent, stand-alone superhero films. By its very nature, television allows for a narrative that can unfold over many hours, something which also gives it the freedom to develop a plot density that is unique among the visual arts. This enables the medium to delve into narratological territories that had previously been explored only in comics and graphic novels

## 2.1. Sherezade and the forms of seriality

To prevent having his head cut off, Sherazade invented seriality in the *One Thousand and One Nights* (Ros 2011: 23-24). The narrative anxiety that distinguishes modern tele-fiction—the 'I-need-to-see-another-episode' sensation – connects with this story halfway through when maid ensures she has the attention of the sultan and one more day of life. As Xavier Pérez has studied, it is possible to trace a genealogy of seriality that, based on Greek myths and biblical figures, was born in the Arthurian world of Chretien de Troyes, traverses the *Commedia dell' Arte* and the Shakespearean dramas, and leads to the nineteenth-century melodrama that serialized literature proper to an industrial and urban society (Pérez 2011: 13-19). By then, the two basic structures of the serialized story could already be found: the stand-

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<sup>4</sup> In Britain, television series are usually shorter; it is rare to find one longer than ten episodes. In addition, it is relevant to note the fondness of the British for the television miniseries format. To learn more about the peculiarities of the production system of the British television drama, see Arthurs (2010) and Dickason (2010).

alone series and the continuous narrative (serial)<sup>5</sup>. That is, Conan Doyle as opposed to Charles Dickens; *The Adventures of Arsene Lupin* versus Balzac's *Human Comedy*; *CSI* (CBS, 2000-15) versus *The Wire*.

Transferred to the television format, the former is born of a balance that is broken at the beginning of each episode, so that the *peripeteia* of the protagonists involves restoring the lost order: solving a riddle, finding a culprit, curing a patient, winning a court case or learning a lesson. Each of the cases solved by the hero of Baker Street offers the same type of closure as an episode of *House M.D.* (FOX, 2004-12). As a result, in series with stand-alone stories

each episode is relatively independent – characters, settings and relationships carry over across episodes, but the plots stand on their own, requiring little need for consistent viewing or knowledge of diegetic history to comprehend the narrative [itself]. (Mittell 2007: 163)

This does not imply that episodic series make a clean sweep of what happened in previous chapters and lack memory. The important thing is not a character's memory which, although it may be very slight, obviously has to exist in order to ensure the internal coherence of the text, but of the spectators, who «need no memory of the previous episodes to understand and appreciate the present one» (Newman 2006: 23).

The Dickensian model, linear and cumulative, stands in contrast to this cyclical structure, in which the episode is a measure of length, never a reset. On television, this protracted narrative, with extensive arcs divided over several chapters, was traditionally reserved for the miniseries and, from a 'low-brow' perspective, reached its culmination in the British soap opera, with a potentially infinite number of

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<sup>5</sup> «*Series* refers to those shows whose characters and setting are recycled, but the story concludes in each individual episode. By contrast, in a *serial* the story and discourse do not come to a conclusion during an episode, and the threads are picked up again after a given hiatus» (Kozloff 1992: 91).

episodes. However, in the last fifteen years – without disdaining the pioneering advances of *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981-87), *St. Elsewhere* (NBC, 1982-88) and *Twin Peaks* (ABC, 1990-91) – the ‘soap-operization’ of American primetime has been taken even further, leading to a much more convoluted and challenging narrative form for the discerning consumer. The serial story, explains Mittell, provides «continuing story lines traversing multiple episodes, with an ongoing diegesis that demands viewers to construct an overarching storyworld using information gathered from their full history of viewing» (Mittell 2007: 164). In short, stories with the «ability to construct ‘open’, rather than ‘closed’, narrative forms» with each episode (Creeber 2004: 4).

Today it is almost impossible to find these two narrative structures in all their purity. Even the legal and crime dramas contain conflicts which cross episodes, advancing slightly in each season or even throughout the entire series: in *CSI*, for example, Grissom is facing increasing deafness and Warrick amasses a number of problems relating to a gambling that will eventually lead to his death in the eighth season. In *The Mentalist* (CBS, 2008-15) the ghost of Red John, Patrick Jane’s traumatic nemesis, makes occasional, recurring appearances. Similar reflections can be found in the *Law & Order* franchise, in *Without a Trace* (CBS, 2002-09), *Cold Case* (CBS, 2003-10), *Bones* (FOX, 2005-) and many other legal and crime series. Not surprisingly, in a show as resoundingly successful as *House M.D.*, a series with a markedly episodic content, House’s relations with Cuddy and Wilson were one of the keys to its success, an emotional cut and thrust which the cumbersome and tormented personality of the protagonist could play. In the last several seasons, while the cases suffered an obvious narrative fatigue, it was the aforementioned emotional triangle that – along with the irresistible aura created by Hugh Laurie’s performance – kept the series alive.

At the other extreme, we find shows with a strong serial component. *The Wire* would be the epitome of such examples: an anticlimactic story that transcends the detective genre to establish itself as a sociopolitical portrait. The tragedy of David Simon and Ed Burns presents the viewer with a single case per season and a naturalist

attempt to reflect the everyday life of a contemporary Western city, as if aspiring to be a 60-hour film divided into episodes. But even in a proposal as 'novelistic' in its approach it is possible to find—beyond the narrative and aesthetic unity tying each episode together—plots limited to a single installment (a paradigmatic example from the first season is that of Santangelo in «One Arrest», 7.1).

In addition to the series and serials, there is a third possibility proper to the television narrative: the anthology and its comedic offspring, the *vignette* or comedic sketch. Despite such notable precedents such as *The Twilight Zone* (CBS, 1959-64) and *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (CBS/NBC, 1955-65; NBC/USA Network, 1985-89), the anthology is quite rare in contemporary television, due especially to the production demands of the format: each chapter requires a new stage, actors and plot. Still, one of the surprises of recent years on British television—*Black Mirror* (Channel 4, 2011-), a dystopia imagined by Charlie Brooker—offers a collection of three separate stories each season, united only by certain generic theme and feel.

However, in recent years a new combination of the characteristics of the anthology and traditional seriality has erupted on television: a 'miniseries-series' or 'anthology series'. *American Horror Story* (FX, 2011), *True Detective* (HBO, 2014-), *Fargo* and *American Crime* (ABC, 2015-) are the most successful examples of this trend. The novelty of this format lies in three elements: a stand-alone story that opens and closes in 8 to 10 chapters, to make way for a full reset of the plot and the acting cast the following year; a story that, as a result, does not require a commitment of several years that other series do; and the exhibition of several generic characteristics – visually, thematically, and narratively – which act to link and unify each of its seasons.

## 2.2. Elasticity and the flexi-narrative

*Dates* (Channel 4, 2013) is an unusual hybrid of the three great possibilities offered by the medium: the serial story, the stand-alone episode and the anthology. That is, a slight continuity is maintained in the background stories of some of the characters (Mia, David, Jenny),

there are conflicts that open and close each installment (the dates themselves) and, finally, the constant variation of settings and characters that characterizes television anthology. For its part, the unclassifiable *Louie* mixes fragments of stand-up comedy with a couple of stories in each chapter. However, this constant break in continuity, where there is even an actor changing characters from one episode to another, clashes with a third season in which the same story extends for six chapters («Elevator», 4.6-9.6).

Without reaching the organized chaos of *Dates* or *Louie*, it is customary that the most ambitious contemporary series combine, from an artistic point of view, elements of both the serial and stand-alone episodes. Robin Nelson has called this hybridization «flexi-narrative», and Jason Mittell has studied it under the category of «Complex-TV». Both authors examine the prevailing narrative architecture of contemporary narrative seriality, knowing that some lean more towards the serial in nature and others the stand-alone episode. Thus, the current television narrative—if we may be permitted the metaphor—resembles a cyclist's racing tour: there are stages (seasons) which, in turn, have several goals and mountain passes (episodes), in which the immediate effort of the sprint is rewarded, without losing sight of the ultimate victory at the end of the course, after all of the stages have been run (the series finale).

There are currently several series with an atmosphere similar to that of *The Wire*, series that favor backstory and utilize the entire season as the main narrative unit, such as *Friday Night Lights* (NBC/Direct TV, 2006-11), *Sons of Anarchy* (FX, 2008-14), *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-13), *Boardwalk Empire* (HBO, 2010-14), *Downton Abbey* (ITV, 2010-15), *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010-), *The Hour* (BBC, 2011-12), *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-) or *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011-). Some stand-alone plots can be found in all of them, but their approach is novelistic, and their explicit goals from the pilot onwards is that of a long-distance runner.

By way of contrast, there are a handful of top-tier series which give considerable weight to their episodic elements without neglecting strong serial conflicts, unlike shows such *CSI*, *NCIS* (CBS, 2003-) and



the like, where they are very secondary. As Innocenti and Pescatore explain, «narrative formulas now go through a process of mutation and hybridization, and many series [the stand-alone ones] are ‘serialized’, moving closer to the structure of the serial» (2011: 34). This twist, they assert, creates a kind of story in which «there is always a central story that concludes in the episode (the so-called ‘anthology plot’), but also a framework (known as the ‘running plot’) prolongs itself over many episodes» (*ibid.*). Thus «a non-permanent progression and partial opening narrative absent in the traditional formula is added» (*ibid.*).

The series that took this hybridization to the limit was *The Shield* (FX, 2002-08): the adventures of Vic Mackey fascinated viewers with their careful narrative composition, one of the most refined examples of the stand-alone narrative, combined with extensive story arcs. The police officers of the Farmington district are faced with cases that last a single episode, stories that run for three or four episodes, seasonal villains and a conflict that crawls along, twisting and turning, for the show’s entire seven season run, from the mark of Cain in the explosive pilot episode.

This mixture of the two narrative axes was also employed to great effect on *Dexter* (Showtime, 2006-13). Showtime’s serial-killer exhibited an iterative cadence by means of two elements: the victims the protagonist has to execute each day, and the villain that refreshes the plot each year by offering a new season arc. *Southland* (NBC/USA Network, 2009-13) also exemplified this narrative elasticity, offering viewers another novelty. To the traditional two or three cases per week and the handful of transverse lines that unfold in full each season, were added the brief vignettes of everyday police life: minor clashes with crime in a city wounded by fear and filled with nutcases. Naturally, the larger conflicts of the protagonists are settled in the season-long arcs, but are suitably spiced up by the other two narrative structures present in the series.

Among the arsenal available, there are two series that stand out for the elasticity of their narrative structure, which can vary greatly from one season to another without losing the hallmarks of identity of

the story they are telling: *Justified* (FX, 2010-15), and *Hannibal* (NBC, 2013-15). The first, a kind of western-noir, managed to oil the episodic elements with the background pattern, making both elements feed back into one another. So, the first season was, above all, a crime drama that hinted at the painful background conflicts in Harlan County, Kentucky: an ecosystem of ancient quarrels, parent-child struggles, impossible redemptions, racial tensions and coal-mining corruption. In the second, third and fifth season, without ignoring the case of the week, there were large background villains to be fought every year. In the fourth, they went with a mystery to be solved, and finally, in the sixth season, the story confronted the love-hate triangle between Boyd, Ava, and Raylan Givens, paying back debts and bringing to a close latent conflicts in an agonizing and vibrant manner. The riveting *Hannibal*, meanwhile, spent two seasons following the same formula: the murder of the week overlapping with the game of cat and mouse that Will Graham and Jack Crawford fought with Dr. Lecter in Baltimore. However, the third season dynamited the formula and opted for seven chapters set in Italy, and six dedicated to a single case: the Red Dragon.

In order to complete the possibilities of the flexi-narrative, it is necessary to refer to a final group. These are products that are procedural in principle, but which, as their stories progress and a considerable degree of viewer loyalty builds, progressively become more serial in nature, allowing them to delve into the mythology of the series. *The X-Files* (Fox, 1993-02), to recover one mythic example, devoted barely three episodes of its first season (including the pilot) to investigate an alleged plot by the US government related to the abduction of the Agent Mulder's sister. However, in later rounds, the monsters-of-the-week took a back seat in favor of conspiracy theories. Something similar happened with *Supernatural* (The CW, 2005-), originally a horror and adventure road-movie. As the story progressed, the number of episodes devoted to a direct struggle between the Winchesters, Lucifer and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse increased, to the point that the fifth season (the last commanded by

Eric Kripke) spent more than half of its episodes widening this diabolical conflict.

### 2.3. The wound of time

Later we will examine how *Lost*, *24*, *Heroes* (NBC, 2006-10) or *Prison Break* (FOX, 2005-09) favor the serial over the episodic, in the process winning the devotion of fervent viewers by putting pressure on their narrative commitment with the promise of solving the riddle at the end of the road. However, as already described in the shows mentioned above in order to explain the flexi-narrative, the medium of television has also learned how to evolve toward narrative forms separated from the agitation caused by events, at the relentless speed of vicissitude. A considerable portion of the best contemporary TV fiction stands out for its simmering narrative, proposing a different pact with a viewer, who is more committed and intellectually engaged. Series like *Mad Men*, the hermetic *Luck* or the poetic *Rectify* (Sundance Channel, 2013-) exhibit a story where the 'how' is imposed on the 'what', shows whose storylines unfold without haste, looking for the hint hidden in a look, the key contained in a revealing gesture or the violence of a landscape; proposals that transform «action» into something «less significant than reaction and interaction» (Newman 2006: 19). Thus, contemplation becomes, at the same time, a characteristic style and narrative device. The viewer enters into the downtime, in intimate setting, shaping a universal, naturalistic story which aims to capture «the wounds of time» in the lives of the characters, according to the felicitous expression of Xavier Pérez (2011: 27). Creeber sums it up in this way:

With its combination of a continuous narrative structure contained within a clearly defined narrative, it [the hybrid series-serial] allows television to exploit its tendency towards 'intimacy' and 'continuity' yet without dispensing with the power and possibilities offered by its gradual movement and progression towards narrative closure and conclusion (2004: 9).

The term TV novels has been minted for series such as these. The hive of characters, relationships, political alliances, family lines and conflicts of all kinds in premium products like *Deadwood* (HBO, 2004-07), *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007) or *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-) would have been unthinkable twenty years ago. Consistent with their artistic ambitions, these series can develop over ten plot lines per episode, exhibiting an overwhelming narrative flow that recalls elements of nineteenth-century literature. In addition, by having more footage to develop plots and without having to spend time on repeating intrigues and motifs, conflicts and dilemmas multiply, enriching the moral and political diversity of the stories. As Nelson writes, this longer time to develop the narrative «allows for more complex storytelling and character-developing in relation to changing circumstances; it can, in short, deal with shifts in fortune and the consequences of actions over time» (2007: 121).

Along with the ability to deepen plots, themes and characters, the other grand narrative novelty that seriality provides regards the form, as we will discuss in the second part of this article.

### **3. Playing games with the story**

As we have noted, narrative anxiety is a characteristic of serial fiction. Following the structural and rhetorical strategies of literary melodrama from the nineteenth century, numerous cathodic fictions become addictive by exhibiting interwoven stories: monumental cliffhangers, dramatic effects, unexpected characters, narrative traps, endless novelties and impossible twists. One of the major discoveries of fiction 'made in the USA' has been to domesticate and popularize playing with the story, elevating narrative experiments to become the most sophisticated expression in contemporary popular culture. The constant boil in narrative forms has generated a virtuous circle: viewers are becoming ever more erudite in dealing with daring puzzles. Pilots such as *Revenge* (ABC, 2011-15) and *The Event* (NBC, 2010-11) were criticized for being 'predictable' despite the deranged temporality they employed. What was once surprising has now

become merely a formula, a soggy *déjà vu*. This vitality spurs on creators who want to take risks, since narrative originality is now much more difficult to achieve. Let's examine one by one the most successful and daring breaks with formula.

### 3.1. «I am we»: the multiverse

One classic narrative device of science fiction and fantasy involves parallel universes, a sort of warped mirror in which the events in a second possible world (universe B) present us with variations on facts and historical figures already known to the viewer in the universe A. On television, with the permission of incombustible *Dr. Who* (BBC, 1963-89; 2005-) the purest example this device was found on *Fringe* (FOX, 2008-13), J.J. Abrams' most sci-fi offering to date. Among the hidden premises tapped by the story, we find that, following the death of his son Peter, the scientist Walter Bishop (the protagonist of the series) manages to travel to a neighboring universe and steal 'his' firstborn from there, in the process releasing an unforeseen chain of destruction on the other side which, from the pilot onwards, also has unforeseen consequences in universe A.

The best stretch of *Fringe* – from «Jacksonville» (15.2) to «Marionette» (9.3) – develops a highly serialized storyline: a battle of mirrors and espionage between the two parallel universes, with the story acting as a hinge between the two worlds. The characters in each universe maintain some of the same features and deform others, making the reflection a delightful, comparative puzzle. The fourth season<sup>6</sup> alerts us to the problems in this narrative strategy: confusion. Given the need to innovate to meet the narrative demands of each episode, the writers end up confronted with the rules of the game their narrative has created, and find their premises self-destructing in the

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<sup>6</sup> To further complicate the possibilities, the fourth season introduces a variation which doubles the narrative universes: both of the known worlds adopt a new version where a key character (Peter Bishop) has never existed, causing events to vary considerably once more.

process. This renegotiation of the «spectator's contract» (Krutnik 2006: 5) is a flammable strategy: it produces a very attractive flash of ingenuity in the beginning but, ultimately, it is extremely toxic to the internal coherence of the plot, as with this science fiction series from FOX. The limitations of the multiverse for serial narrative also demarcated the narrative path of *Awake* (NBC, 2012). Detective Michael Britten suffered a car accident while traveling with his wife and son. Upon awakening, he sometimes appears in a world where his wife has survived, and other times in one in which it is his son who has. Confused and mourning in two parallel realities, Britten uses his position in the gap between realities to solve crimes on both sides, obtaining information in one that complements the other. If the hairstyles and sets on *Fringe* help distinguish the narrative universes, in this paranormal crime drama the chromatic palette serves as a mooring: the reality in which his wife has survived adopts the hue of a reddish photograph, while the universe of Britten with his son is colored blue. The series was canceled after thirteen episodes, 'avoiding' the greatest difficulty of a product with these characteristics: the survival over time of such a bold premise, which, as we have seen, took its toll on *Fringe*.

Similar problems threaten one of the most successful premieres of 2014: *The Affair* (Showtime, 2014-). In its premise, this award-winning Showtime series proposed a variation of the idea of the multiverse: viewers witnessed an act of adultery and the collapse of two marriages; the touch of originality is that the story is brought into focus from two different points of view (those of Noah Solloway and Allison Bayley). In a *tour-de-force*, the 'Rashomon style' of the series multiplies in the second season, in which the viewpoints of the protagonists' spouses regarding the events are also seen.

### 3.2. Back to the future: time jumps

If viewers find the multiverse challenging, more daring still have been experiences with narrative temporality. According to Gennette, every narrative work has narrative time (the events as they are

presented to the viewer) and the ideal time of the story (ordered chronologically, without ellipses, which has to be reconstructed by the viewer in accord with the data that provided by the story)<sup>7</sup>. Playing with these two variables, series like *Lost*, *Damages* (FX/Direct TV, 2007-12), or *Flashforward* (ABC, 2009-10) have stylized television narrative, leading it to peaks as refined as they are devilish.

The rapidly-cancelled *Boomtown* (NBC, 2002-03), by reclaiming a little known precedent, builds a fragmented narrative that, in addition to disrupting perspective when confronting the crime of the week, proposes truth as a puzzle that always starts with a flash-forward (travelling to the future). *Damages* manipulated two time periods that advanced in parallel, thus establishing a perverse text that robs the viewer of details and saturates the story with narrative landmines. The frenetic pace of *Breaking Bad* also makes use of these narrative jumps to generate tension. Emulating the opening sequence of the series, the fifth season begins with a trip to the future that shows its protagonist in such a surprising situation that the viewers' anxiety to know how he got there serves as the narrative lever.

The most paradigmatic example of this was *Lost*, which created a narrative maze that used temporal leaps as a structural element in each episode, via flashbacks that allowed us to discover more about the characters. Following the finale at the end of the third season, the puzzle was further enriched with flash-forwards and, as if that were not enough, the whole plot upset and the show's narrative universe relocated to the seventies. In its sixth and final season, the narration plays with the multiverse, replacing the trips to the future and journeys to the past with flash-sideways: stories of the characters in an alternate world. Ultimately, *Lost* ended up creating a hellish labyrinth of sweeping scope, creating one of the most sophisticated narratological hieroglyphs in pop culture and forming a riddle to which every one of its devoted viewers wanted to bring order.

Many other writers have sought to imitate *Lost* without success, offering series that propose unfathomable, prolonged mysteries; an

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<sup>7</sup> Cfr. Gennette 2007.

ensemble cast; an eclectic mythology and a mixture of genres (thriller, fantasy, sci-fi); a conspiratorial perspective, and, the thing which most interests us here, a story peppered with temporal shifts. In the U.S., the failed *Day Break* (ABC, 2006), which barely lasted for six episodes when it aired, told the story of a detective accused of murdering the D.A. who relives the same day over and over again, *à la Groundhog Day*.

*Flashforward* got somewhat more mileage when it aired. The series began with a collective swoon in which people got a glimpse eight months into the future, launching the series with an explosion of narrative tension, temporal paradoxes and self-fulfilling prophecies. However, despite its seductive parting shot, the show stumbled on one dimensional characters and dispensable conflicts that spiraled pointlessly without advancing or resolving dramatically. Even more striking was the case of *The Event*. The first three minutes of the network's big gamble for that year (2010) turned out to be paradigmatic of narratological shipwreck: a confused present and two entirely capricious flashbacks artificially breathing life into a plot that had no clear dramatic conflict beyond the temporal leaps themselves. There is a lesson to be drawn from these latter two failures: a conflict must be based on the characters, not the narrative device.

### 3.3. Tick, tick, tick: action in real time

If *Lost* is a kind of generic hybridization that owes an enormous debt to David Lynch's *Twin Peaks*, then, from a narrative point of view, it is difficult to fully comprehend the tremendous tsunami triggered by Abrams' castaways without reference to the audacity of *24*. From its inception, the series established an unbreakable covenant with its viewing audience: 24 chapters in which diegetic time aligned faithfully with real time. Accompanied by clocks insistently reminding the viewer of the millimetric importance of time in the series and the threat



of the deadline, every hour of the adventures of Jack Bauer was equivalent to an hour of viewing<sup>8</sup>.

From a completely opposite generic and formal conception, *In Treatment* (HBO, 2008-10) also conveys the sense of 'real-time action.' However, the biggest novelty of this psychotherapeutic HBO drama was to embrace a radical, implacable form, never before attempted in American television fiction: it presented a story that could be followed either horizontally or vertically. Employing an unhurried pace and a frugal *mise-en-scène*—two people talking in a room—each episode featured half an hour in the life of Dr. Paul Weston. The show's peculiarity is that it was a daily prime-time series, and featured the same patient every day for 43 episodes, from Monday through Friday, for nine weeks. Thus, the viewer could follow the story linearly, from Monday to Friday, or choose the verticality of skipping a more uncomfortable or less interesting character, or follow just one of the characters in a second viewing.

### 3.4. «Listen, but do not believe me»: storytellers who swindle and cheat

Among the tools that audiovisual creators have at their disposal, one of the most fertile is to play with the voice of the explicit narrator, something that has been employed with remarkable success in so-called «puzzle films» such as *Fight Club*, *The Usual Suspects*, and *Memento* (Buckland: 2009). Television drama has seldom used this off-

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<sup>8</sup> This idea of aligning diegetic time with real time had already been played out on film. The best-known example of this is *High Noon*. On television, another example comes from an episode of the 1990s comedy series *Mad About You* (NBC, 1992-99), entitled «The Conversation» (9.6). In a 22-minute scene that was, moreover, taped entirely in a single take, Paul and Jamie Buchman (the series' main characters) hover anxiously outside the door of the baby's bedroom for 22 minutes, waiting for her to fall asleep.

screen voice as freely or skillfully as cinema has. There have been examples of nostalgic remembrance as an excuse (*The Wonder Years*, ABC, 1988-93), the cadaver that comments with gentle sarcasm on the bourgeois customs of her former neighbors (*Desperate Housewives*, ABC, 2004-12), the foreigner who recounts, in documentary style, the war against drugs in Colombia (*Narcos*, Netflix, 2015-), the interior monologue as a tool to humanize initially surly or negative characters – the humorous Marshall of *In Plain Sight* (USA Network, 2008-12) and, above all, the serial killer who is the protagonist of *Dexter*. But, apart from the voice of Mary Alice in *Desperate Housewives*, some timely joke on the part of Dexter Morgan, or the obsessive and unhealthy narration of Elliot in *Mr. Robot* (USA Network, 2015-), TV narrators are usually not storytellers who play with the details of the story, but internal voices who complete the psychology of the characters or provide color to the narrative.

These are comedies that provide their stories with an explosive spark by playing freely with the narrators. The father on *How I Met Your Mother* (CBS, 2005-14) who regales his teenage children with the story of how he and their mother first met, from the perspective of 2030, engages in a constant duel with a succession of flashbacks and flash-forwards, tricks in the show's point of view, or the ironic counterpoint between the voice-over and the actual events. For example, point of view is the key to episode «Ted Mosby, Architect» (4.2), in which the excesses of the protagonist in a particular instance are recounted. By the end of the episode, we are forced to re-interpret the events and discover that Barney had usurped the identity of Ted. There are other occasions in which it is not necessary to employ such tricks; we know from the outset we are dealing with a narrator who is eccentric and unreliable:

Oh, right, the goat! So funny! You're going to love this. So later in that night, the goat locked himself in the bathroom and was eating one of Robin's washcloths and wait, hold on. Robin wasn't living here on my 30th birthday. When did this happen? Oh, wait,

the goat was there on my 31st birthday! Sorry, I totally got that wrong. («The Goat», 17.3).

On *Scrubs* (NBC, 2001-10), the wild imagination of the anti-heroic resident doctor who stars on the show mixes with surrealistic dreams, creating hilarious versions of the events taking place at the hospital where he works. In JD's imagination, the main characters appear dressed as Batman and Robin («My Fifteen Minutes», 8.1), converts the story into a traditional sit-com episode («My Life in Four Cameras», 17.4), or find in a patient's illness an excuse to tell the story in the style of a Broadway musical («My Musical», 6.6).

A final kind of 'prank' that plays with narrative possibilities is provided by Ron Howard of *Arrested Development* (FOX, 2003-06). His parody of the expository documentary employs an omniscient off-screen narration that transports us to the intimate past of the characters by inserting still images, false archival footage, and even graphics explaining parent-child relationships! Besides ingenious and surreal occurrences that collide with some of the essential features of the documentary genre, breaking the narrative credibility also occurs by inserting false progress on the part of the narrator: the spoken phrase «on the next *Arrested Development*» is nothing more than a way to close storylines opened during the episode while also breaking the expectation of the viewer and classic TV convention.

### 3.5. Other narrative tricks

*Community* is the most ambitious and cutting-edge of contemporary's television programs, constantly tackling the 'ever-more-difficult'. Created by Dan Harmon, this sitcom tells the stories of a group of seven characters of different ages, faiths and races, attending a local community college. With a tone that establishes itself as a combination of witty jokes, physical comedy and rampant surrealism, *Community* stands out for the lush degree of intertextuality of its episodes. This pressure cooker of cultural tributes and pop references makes its formula—that is, what any spectator would call

the 'normal' episodes—the exception rather than the rule of the narrative. *Community* dynamites the usual aesthetic and narrative coordinates of the television sitcom in favor of pastiche, parody, re-reading and narrative somersaults.

Among the different narrative options available, *Community* has employed fresh, brilliant new ways of presenting some of the most extravagant episodes ever offered on television in the last few years. In «The Psychology of Letting Go» (3.2), one of the subplots involving Abed helping a woman to give birth develops with the characters in the background of which an inattentive viewer might otherwise not be aware. Towards the end of the second season, *Community* makes use of the 'clip show', a format that had previously been used on *Friends* once a year. These are episodes in which the characters recall past events via fragments from previous episodes (textual flashbacks, strictly speaking), serving as a sort of reminder of what has previously happened on the show. Harmon applies a twist, however, inventing completely new flashbacks in the episode «Paradigms of Human Memory» (21.2), so that the viewer returns to events not seen previously in the series. In its third season, the narrative contortions of *Community* include, among others, an emulation of Ken Burns' didactic documentary style («Pillows and Blankets», 14.3), later an interactive narrative, with characters stuck in a game of 8-bit animation («Digital Estate Planning», 20.3) and, in the most sophisticated episode of the season, the same story told from six different points of view («Remedial Chaos Theory», 4.3). This last episode—referenced at the beginning of this essay—involves a variation called the '*Rashomon* effect', involving slight variations in the plot as told from the perspective of each character.

These narrative adornments in *Community* are nothing more than a systematic use of the so-called 'special episodes', true exercises in style that have produced very flamboyant results. It is customary for TV series, particularly those that employ narratives that are more self-contained, to 'reward' the faithful viewers with an upset of their expectations. Coinciding with the sweeps, special episodes also allow creators to escape from a rut and experiment with the format,

aesthetics or the narrative of the series. It would be impossible to detail all the antics that have been tried; the list would be endless. But, as a sample, let us highlight some especially audacious examples of the kinds of narrative somersaults that have been performed. In the episode «The Betrayal» (8.9), the creators of *Seinfeld* (NBC, 1989-98) choose to rewind the story, in small scenes of less than two minutes each that, following a completely new logic, starts the episode with the closing credits (*Memento*-style). Another clever kick-off was the third season of *Coupling* (BBC2, 2000-04): involving the breakup of the show's protagonists, the episode «The Split» (1.3) presents the entire story with the frame divided into two (split screen), so viewers can follow the reactions of the boy and the girl at the same time. Joss Whedon, for example, used such devices with great success on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (The WB/UPN, 1997-2003). Particularly memorable were a musical episode («Once More, with Feeling», 7.6) and one that was almost completely devoid of dialogue («Hush», 10.4), like a silent film from the early days of cinema. In *Supernatural*, there are pastiches of horror films or complex meta-fictional exercises in which fictional characters are involved in filming a series called *Supernatural* («The French Mistake», 15.6). On *The X-Files* an entire episode adopted the visual style and narrative anarchy of the reality TV show *Cops* («X-Cops», 12.7). *E.R.* took a risk with an episode filmed in documentary style («Ambush», 1.4), which *Grey's Anatomy* later emulated («These Arms of Mine», 6.7). And even in a traditional comedy such as *Modern Family* they broadcast an episode in which all the characters interacted from the screen of a computer («Connection Lost», 16.6).

#### 4. Conclusion

«I can tell the difference between life and television, Jeff. Television makes sense: it has a structure, logic, rules...» (Abed Nadir in «Anthropology 101», 1.2). Throughout these pages we have tried to describe the logic that Abed claims for television narrative in *Community*, mapping out the types of fictional narrative has on offer on the small screen. As if he were the alter ego of Creighton Bernette of

*Treme*, when David Simon bellowed his now-famous «fuck the average viewer» before Nick Hornby (2007), he was unwittingly defining the latest stage of in the history of television fiction. It is a stage in which this 'perfect storytelling machine' has squeezed out, in the most lucid and entertaining way imaginable, all the narrative possibilities of the television story, with the result that the average viewer has become accustomed to much more stringent narrative standards. Moreover, technology is not only altering the way stories are told, it is altering the way they are received: it is now possible to view and re-view a scene, contrasting your ideas with your friends on Twitter, or contributing to a blog post or wiki where thousands of people, in what Mittell has dubbed «forensic fandom» (2015: 288-91); it is also possible to provide data clarifying the intrigue or unexpected twists of last night's episode. This forces creators to refine their craft: any story, subject to overexposure on the web, forces anticipation of even the smallest details, since any inconsistency or slip will be quickly discovered and disseminated. Because intelligent audiences not only demand clever stories; they are also creating them.

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