

Changing Series: Narrative Models and the Role of the Viewer in Contemporary Television Seriality

Veronica Innocenti - Guglielmo Pescatore

The media are changing, as we have known for quite some time. Yet if there is one thing within the media that is metamorphosing right before our eyes, it is surely televised seriality. Of course, we are not always aware of this change, likely since serial phenomena are built on continuity, duration and a reassuring, constant presence within the structure of our media diet.

In recent years, American TV series in particular – though Italian products, too, following the public accolade of series like *Gomorra* (2014-in production) or *Romanzo criminale - La serie* (2008-2010) – have achieved great success. They have also garnered considerable critical attention from scholars of the audiovisual media, who have highlighted the importance of their experimental narrative forms and *mise-en-scène* and their complex production and promotional techniques, together with the significance of the audience responses that these products generate.

In this article, our focus will lie predominantly on narrative formulas and on the relationships that serial products establish with their users. Since the 1980s, a series of phenomena have radically altered the panorama of serial production and its consumption. Classical, self-contained forms of seriality, typical of the 1970s, later began to intertwine and hybridize with long and extremely long-term serials, such as soaps or telenovelas, generating a further phenomenon:

the so-called serialized series (Thompson 1997; Innocenti-Pescatore 2008: 18-22). Though the traditional, self-sufficient episodic form of TV shows has by no means disappeared – suffice it to recall, for example, products like *NCIS* (2003-in production) or *Law&Order* (1990-2010) – narrative formulas have undergone a process of mutation, and many TV series have moved increasingly closer to the structure of the serial. Within this typology of products, single segments maintain a high degree of autonomy and thus episodes will include a central storyline that is concluded in the episode (called an *anthology plot*); however, there will also be a background context that pans episodes (the so-called *running plot*). The latter therefore adds an element of temporal progression and partial narrative aperture, that was absent from the traditional formula. Contemporary serial products avoid the risk of narrative atrophy by creating a diegetic world in which variations of every kind – characters, scenarios, narrative techniques – are constantly sought out, and indeed appreciated and celebrated by viewers. As such, today's serial texts stretch far beyond the confines imposed by their format, in order to extend their own potential into other fields of the cultural industry.

Variations on a Theme

These changes, as we mentioned, are numerous and have become very prominent in recent years. Narrative formulas and the models of composition of single episodes have gone through profound modification, as have production formats and distribution methods. The canonical form of new TV seriality from the 1990s onwards was the long series, usually 22/24 episodes of little more than 40 minutes, extensively serialized and often rich in narrative events and their ramifications. This structure characterized very successful and extremely long-running productions such as *E.R.* (1994-2009) or *24* (2001-2010, plus a series of 12 episodes, *24: Live Another Day*, broadcast on Fox in 2014). However, even if not in crisis per se, this model today is the preferred format of very few products, albeit those which remain decisively influenced by the market's perspective. We refer for instance

to stable, long established products such as *Grey's Anatomy* (2005-in production) and *The Good Wife* (2009-in production), or analogous products that reinvent the traditional formula of the drama. Free to air networks and particularly the Big Four have typically adopted the long form show. But even in their case, with products made for the summer period and other such programming demands the networks have often employed shorter forms. This was originally the case for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), whose first season lasted only 12 episodes, having been planned as a mid-season replacement for the show *Savannah* (1996-1997). This expansion of the production base has led to a tangible deregulation of show formats and lengths, and in fact the definitive affirmation of cable products and the emergence in the market of those operators that use the web to distribute their own content (generally called “Over the Top” providers) have brought about a substantial mutation in the field.

There is moreover an analogous mutation underway of modes of consumption. The ever-growing phenomenon of “binge watching” (see, among others, Poniewozik 2012; Pagels 2012; West 2014), i.e. consecutively viewing a certain number of episodes, lends itself easily to short formats and to the instantaneous release of entire seasons of shows – in other words the very formula employed by Netflix for *House of Cards* (2013-in production) and *Orange is the New Black* (2013-in production).

These format changes (of quantity, length, and periodicity of broadcast) have accompanied significant variations of narrative forms, too. While the typical shape of serial narratives in the last decade was multilinear, complex and ramified, reaching its apex in series such as *Lost* (2004-2010) or *Heroes* (2006-2010), in more recent seasons we have witnessed a notable increase in the diffusion of varied narrative models that seem to owe much to a less recent past. This is the case for the anthology format, which until a few years ago was considered an antiquated object but today is reaching an apogee: examples range from *American Horror Story* (2011-in production) to *Fargo* (2014-in production), but also *Black Mirror* (2011-in production), curiously consisting of just three one-hour episodes per season. In the context of

anthological seriality, the situation is rather peculiar. The model was amply used in the 1950s and 1960s, but abandoned shortly after in view of high production costs. In products like *The Twilight Zone* (1959-1964 with some revamps in the 1980s and 2000s) there was a need to offer the audience new characters and settings in every episode, therefore demanding elevated costs both for the creative part (every week a new story, with new characters and settings) and for its realization (new locations and casting each week). Today *Black Mirror* appears to be one of the few embodiments of the traditional anthology series in the guise to which *The Twilight Zone* or *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (1955-1962) made us accustomed, that is, a compact duration (three hours per season), and a common guiding thread: the extent to which technology has pervaded our life. Instead, in recent years we have witnessed the birth of a formula that we might define as “seasonal anthologies”, which is adopted by *Fargo*, *True Detective* (2014-in production) and *American Horror Story*. This appears to be a new phenomenon, apparently in debt to British shows that adopt the miniseries formula, yet perhaps also to the made-for-TV-movie, which constitutes a unique and original event on TV palimpsests, albeit often situated within thematic collections.

Another ‘return’ is to the period drama. In this case the forerunners have been two very different products: the British *Downton Abbey* (2010-in production) and the American *Mad Men* (2007-in production, at the time of writing the last seven episodes of the final season are being aired), both of which have established a significant and stable following. Other examples include *Peaky Blinders* (2013-in production); *Masters of Sex* (2013-in production) and *The Knick* (2014-in production), a metropolitan medical drama set between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

It is also worth recalling the new wave of crime series: at this point we have moved far from procedurals such as *CSI* and the likes, and instead learned from UK-based miniseries and many European products that have been remade in the USA. *Broadchurch* (2013-in production) is exemplary of both tendencies. Its first two seasons were composed of eight episodes each, and it was remade in the USA under

the title *Gracepoint* with the same male lead actor as the British version (though the latter has already been discontinued). *The Bridge* (2013-2014) has met a similar fate: it is an American remake of the Scandinavian series *Bron*, cancelled after two seasons while the original is still in production. We might also add to this ‘wave’ *Top of the Lake*, a 2013 miniseries of seven episodes directed by Jane Campion, but also *True Detective* whose second series, currently in production, is following in the wake of *American Horror Story* and new anthology format by telling an unrelated story with entirely new characters and settings.

Another sub-genre which appears to be a growing success is the ‘dramedy’: though the term stands for a fairly large and open container, in its most recent manifestations its focus appears to have shifted from group or family situations (such as *Six Feet Under*, 2001-2005, for example) to single characters. Instances include *Nurse Jackie* (2009-in production), one of the biggest successes of the genre whose final series is about to launch, and *Enlightened* (2011-2013), which was a vehicle for actor Laura Dern in the role of Amy Jellicoe, a 40 year old woman in crisis. *Orange is the New Black* can be at least partly assimilated within this sub-genre, though the series presents itself as a “hard” version of the classic women’s show in a move that has proved to be an extremely functional operational strategy from Netflix, which is situating itself in direct competition with premium cable channels (not least of all HBO).

Are we therefore at the end of the expansive and intricate narrative constructions to which we had become accustomed in the seriality of the past decade? Will new series still have the appearance of enlarged films distributed across several episodes? Is narrative complexity destined to give way to the linearization of stories, even if told through increasingly elaborate plots? It is thus far difficult to say, albeit many of the examples cited above appear to signal this direction.

There are nevertheless a significant number of series which have not renounced complex and structured universes, but instead have merged curiously the construction of articulated narrative worlds with the procedural formula. This was the case for the ill-fated *Alcatraz*

(2012, only one season) as well as f the intriguing *Warehouse 13* (2009-2014), a hybrid of different genres that staged a complex and flexible universe, engaging user interest thanks to a variety of narrative fragments including a web series. Though it has been subjected to some reshaping, the formula is therefore anything but dead: suffice it to consider examples such as *Blacklist* (2013-in production) or *Grimm* (2011-in production) which are horror/fantasy declinations of the same principle. The case of *The Blacklist* is interesting insofar as it is a peculiar instance of a crime show, centred on a single character played by a well-known actor (James Spader). Like *Grimm*, it merges the guaranteed viewer satisfaction of self-contained episodes, typical of the procedural format, with extremely complex running plots that span sets of episodes, entire seasons, or even from one season to the next.

In other cases narrative universes are concentrated within microcosms, that nevertheless do not renounce complex, mysterious and unfathomable plots: for example the French series *Les Revenants* (2012-in production, with an American remake *The Returned*, which debuted 9 March 2015), or its American equivalent *Resurrection* (2014-in production).

On further occasions, complexity is referred to the sphere of transmedial narrative aspects. The referral might be implicit, as in the case of the web series *The Confession* (2011). Being situated within a large content container like Hulu and thanks to its fast production, *The Confession* can be highly personalized, and connects to varied narrative universes depending on its modes of navigation and the habits of the single user. The referral is explicit, on the other hand, when the transmedial universe exists as a mythology that emerges from a comic book universe: this what DC comics are currently achieving, by reproducing their superheroes in one theoretically connected universe. Following a successful first bid with *Arrow* (2012-in production) it was then the turn of *Gotham* (2014-in production), *The Flash* (2014-in production) and *Constantine* (2014-in production), with further releases already confirmed for future months. Furthermore, *Arrow* and *The Flash* are both located on the palimpsest of The CW, a channel which overtly addresses young people, and the two shows are closely linked

with frequent crossovers – the same technique used regularly in the comic books, much to the appreciation of their readers. Perhaps the most significant case is *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (2013-in production), which is perfectly synchronized with the Marvel universe and connects to cinema releases too, in part through the figure of its creator Joss Whedon whose passion for narrative universes is well known. In fact, during the mid-season pause of *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* the mini-series *Marvel's Agent Carter* was televised. This constituted a mid-season replacement that revolved around the character Peggy Carter, the girlfriend of Captain America. Following the end of the Second World War and the presumed death of her boyfriend, Carter finds herself juggling her job at the Strategic Scientific Reserve (SSR) with the help she secretly provides to Howard Stark, himself framed for trading lethal weapons to the highest bidder. Peggy seeks to disprove the false accusation, and to locate the true culprits. Both Peggy Carter and Phil Coulson, protagonist of *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, come from the so-called Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), a film and TV media franchise created and produced by Marvel Studios and based on the characters who appear in Marvel Comics. The films and the other products that relate to this franchise share their settings and some of the characters, not to mention several plot elements that function as common guiding threads between them.

Narrative Universes

The serialization mechanisms that we have described here provide TV series with a modular structure that can be easily re-used even beyond the small screen. They moreover help us to redefine familiar concepts from narrative theory, and indeed notions such as “diegetic unity” and “furnished worlds” change or lose their standard meanings in light of these changes. A characteristic of closed texts is that they present perfectly furnished and unmodifiable worlds. The space of an audiovisual text is traditionally open to various possible combinations, but nevertheless remains complete, defined and stable. More recent seriality, however, tends to push beyond the traditional

confines of its original format in order to develop narratological matrices that are reproduced across various platforms, and to forge continuously expanding diegetic worlds within single series; in other words, they produce perfectly defined and furnished worlds which are nevertheless unstable. New seriality is characterized by innumerate possibilities of redefinition of the diegetic world. These series provide vast and detailed hyper-diegetic worlds, some of which is revealed from time to time while other parts are not, yet the latter remain constantly susceptible to enlargement and reconstruction: here we might consider the many forms of reboot, remake and reappropriation to which contemporary TV series are subjected. They have the potential to impose entirely new worlds that relate little to the precedent dominant narrative thread, or moreover introduce entirely new characters, while others will disappear, or undergo continued reconfigurations in their relationships. This happens, for example, in *Alias* (2001-2006), or more recently in *The Honorable Woman*, a 2014 British miniseries composed of eight episodes.

However, while the diegetic universes of recent TV series may be open to change, they are nonetheless durable. They mutate, certainly, but they take time in doing so. These are enduring universes, that last for long periods and have a material duration that is open to being conditioned by the time resources of its users. TV series accompany us, they assert viewing experiences that are long enough to cover entire cycles of some individuals' lives, and to characterize those experiences in transmedial terms. In the era of convergence, spectators are invited less to simply watch a TV series than to live an experience that transcends the limits of a predetermined consumption.

This produces a need to negotiate the period of viewing time itself. Depending whether they adopt traditional modes of access or more experimental ones, viewers can decide whether to accept the consumption time imposed by the medium, or redefine and modify it either slightly (perhaps postponing the viewing start time thanks to video recording systems) or drastically (which might occur when assuming a constricted mode of consumption or conversely an

extremely tempered one, such as 12 episodes in a single night or single episodes monthly).

The transformations outlined here, which have taken place in the last decades, are part of an overall process of de-institutionalization of the media and of television in particular. The traditional contours of the television medium, and above all its means of consumption, are changing. What was once a medium-based relationship is shifting to a serial one: once upon a time we watched television at home in the living room according to times defined by the palimpsest; now we follow specific series and we do so when we want, where we want, and with the apparatus that we want, irrespective of the medium and institutional modes of consumption. The habitual relationship that we once had with the television is crumbling and fracturing into the thousands of fragments that are the single series we follow, according to the ability of the latter to create stable relationships with their own audiences.

However, this is not enough, and things are still changing: both basic and premium cable networks have reached such qualitative and quantitative levels in the American market that they can now rival free-to-air networks. This has brought about new narrative formulas that are often characterized by continuity models which hark back to literary or cinematic traditions. We can take note of three formats in particular that have conquered domestic and international markets in recent years: first, those series that are organized like a novel or a very long film, for example *The Killing* (2011-2014 for the American remake, the original Danish version *Forbrydelsen* began production in 2007) or *The Bridge*. Second, we find seasonally-structured anthologies, such as *Fargo* and *American Horror Story*, as discussed above. And finally, those highly serialized series that follow a linear logic insofar as they narrate essentially a continuous story for relatively long periods, for instance *Game of Thrones* (2011-in production) or *The Walking Dead* (2010-in production). It is worth recalling, ultimately, that of the series mentioned here only *Game of Thrones* is produced by a premium cable network, while all of the others are produced by basic cable

equivalents and are therefore situated in a media context that positions itself in direct competition with the free-to-air networks.

Viewers value first and foremost the authors, actors and characters of these texts. They prioritize individuals over the offer of fully furnished words to interact with actively, or even just affectively. Quality television therefore takes the shape of a film that has been extended rather than expanded, that ought to be merely watched, rather than engaged with. Some of the most recent developments, which have seen the first signs of competition between network pays and Over the Top services such as Hulu and Netflix appear to confirm this direction. Consider *House of Cards*, the first of Netflix's major productions, which attracts appeal via the coupling of David Fincher and Kevin Spacey, and whose episodes were made available to the public instantaneously for the three seasons produced to date, as though a film divided in several parts.

Television seriality is therefore a fluid matter today; it is mobile, and difficult to define once and for all. And perhaps even more elusive are the choices of fans and audiences which transform some of these products into cult objects, as do the narrative formulas that can guide these choices.

New Viewers

All things considered, the consumption of contemporary serial products is no longer accomplished in the weekly viewing of an episode, but instead it is transformed into a durable process that is dislocated from the typical transmission timings of these products (one episode per week, on a specified day and time slot; precisely the kind of release system that Netflix has dismantled). The single episode is now little more than a departure point for the engagement of the user, who is increasingly asked to interact with the serial product in a participatory way.

The ritual that was ingrained in TV consumption via the palimpsest as well as the logic of the fixed appointment that determined the composition of a day of television in the past have been

undermined by new technology and by the new modes of relationality created between user and medium. Indeed, the relationship between medium and spectator is now built on a proximity and continuity that originates in the serial text itself, and the organization of the regulation and timings of consumption has become self-governing, particularly when compared to the rigid rules imposed by the television palimpsest. The spectator is an active viewer, inserted within an integrated and convergent media system. The medium retains the function of forging contact between the spectator/user and the textual object, but once this duty is completed such contact is guaranteed only by the serial concatenation that characterizes the products themselves. Therefore, it is a connection which has become disconnected from the medium, and which can be accomplished in the most varied of ways and with the highest level of spectator involvement precisely by virtue of the delocalization, digitalization and infrequency of an institutionalized consumption. It is clear, then, that not only have media platforms changed, along with the content that has been adapted to them, but audiences have changed too (Casetti, Fanchi 2006; Fanchi 2014), and become increasingly assumed into a dynamic relationship with a range of products of the entertainment industry. The relationship between spectator and the narrative ecosystem (Pescatore, Innocenti 2012; Bisoni, Innocenti 2013) is a direct relationship that is both engaging and proactive, and for the most part grounded in an idea of diffused textuality. The dominant forms of narration become centerless. This is a curious characteristic of serial products, which are categorized by an ever growing interactivity with regard to their narration. To experience the worlds and characters of seriality means to be in touch with products that take the form of inhabitable universes, while nevertheless remaining strongly connected to production models that maintain their own structure and autonomy (Barra, Scaglioni 2010: 33-56). Rather than being classifiable according to the customary models of communication, increasingly we are dealing with usable objects that can be adopted in an integrated way, that can be appropriated and made part of a lived experience. The user employs the textual objects of a series in an opportunistic and

situated manner, employing them according to her/his own ends and combining its various fragments according to the context of that use. The serial narrative ecosystem provides a pervasive experience, becoming the vehicle of many complex significations. The meaning of the show transcends its borders, and the TV programme becomes the result of a composite constellation of products, including spin-offs, comics, novels, internet sites, video games and much more.

Those programmes which generate intense forms of user engagement and become cult (Volli 2002; Gwennlian-Jones, Pearson 2004; Monteleone 2005; Scaglioni 2006) tend to export splinters and fragments of the narrative ecosystem into the lived sphere of their audience. The cultural consumption of TV series is therefore transformed from a divergent practice, and the collateral of traditional modes of consumption, to a canon of consumption that is desired and sought out by the television industry, in view of its capacity to create solid links between the serial product and its audiences. While the idea of trekkies once seemed like a folklore phenomenon, ultimately a little naive and marginal, today we are well aware that serial products are projected as inhabitable environments, in which spectators/users can circulate, gather information, play and develop affective bonds. They are real worlds, whose definition is partly left to the spectators, by means of fan fiction but also thanks to those communities that discuss, interpret and re-organize the 'knowing' of the narrative that the series proposes.

(Translated by Dom Holdaway)

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The authors

Veronica Innocenti

is assistant professor at the University of Bologna, where she teaches History of Broadcasting and Film Marketing. She is the author of several books, edited collections and essays, among others: *Le nuove forme della serialità televisiva* (Archetipo 2008, with Guglielmo Pescatore); *Factual, reality, makeover* (Bulzoni 2013, co-edited with Marta Perrotta) and *Media Mutations. Gli ecosistemi narrativi nello scenario mediale contemporaneo. Spazi, modelli, usi sociali* (Mucchi 2013, co-edited with Claudio Bioni).

Email: veronica.innocenti@unibo.it

Guglielmo Pescatore

is full professor at the University of Bologna, where he teaches courses on Film and Media Semiotics as well as Theory and

Techniques of New Media. He is the author of the books *L'ombra dell'autore. Teoria e storia dell'autore cinematografico* (Carocci 2006), *Le nuove forme della serialità televisiva* (Archetipo 2008, with Veronica Innocenti) and the editor of the collection of essays *Matrix. Uno studio di caso* (Hybris 2006). He is the coordinator of the Ph.D program in Visual, Performative and Media Arts of the University of Bologna.

Email: guglielmo.pescatore@unibo.it

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