

# Seriality

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## Introduction

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The Centre for Literary and Intermedial Crossings (CLIC) organizes an annual thematic study day, with the original purpose of providing an opportunity to present research to colleagues and to acquaint students with scientific research. The study day on seriality, held in December 2020, was conducted online due to the known COVID-19 pandemic circumstances. The event was organized as a collaboration between CLIC and the Research Group "New Dramaturgy in Audiovisual Fiction" of RITCS-School of Arts, Cultural Studies, and the Doctoral School for the Humanities and Social Sciences of KULeuven. Prior collaborations between these institutions already occurred in the context of the "Are You Series?" festival at Bozar in 2019 on the theme of "The Serial Self. The influence of autobiography on contemporary television and internet series". 2023 sees this collaboration continued with the study day "Sois-belle et tais-toi. On women in audiovisual media."

The one-day conference that took place on December 11, 2020, explored the theme of "seriality" and its diverse expressions. Although seriality has frequently been associated with popular culture (Kelleter, 2017), recent trends across all narrative art forms have shown an increased interest in "seriality as a strategy". In contemporary literature, theatre, television series, feature films, narrative games, podcasts, YouTube channels, TikTok and Instagram posts, seriality has emerged as a dominant characteristic of storytelling. Historically, seriality was often linked to repetition and variation; however, the present interest has shifted towards the dynamic qualities of

seriality, focusing on the evolution and development of longstanding storylines, rather than repetition. This development gave additional significance to the role of characters, especially ambivalent and complex main characters and a cast of characters, not just in fiction but also in formats that reflect reality. Consequently, the intricate relation of seriality and 'storytelling' came to serve as a broad umbrella term in which the narrator and the cast of characters play key roles in the narrative construction.

The conference was honored to host two distinguished keynote speakers representing academia and the arts, respectively, Jason Mittell and Adil El Arbi. Mittell's presentation on "The Chemistry of Character in *Breaking Bad*" had a double objective. Firstly, it aimed to shed light on the intricate thought processes of the characters and how these are manifested and interwoven into the plot. Secondly, it explored the potential of the audiovisual essay as an effective medium for scholarly communication. Interested readers may compare Mittell's academic article, "Lengthy Interactions with Hideous Men: The Serial Poetics of Television Antiheroes," published in *Complex TV*, with its corresponding audiovisual essay titled "What's Walt Thinking? Mind Reading & Serialised Memory in *Breaking Bad*," which is available for viewing on Vimeo (<https://vimeo.com/277901900>).

Adil El Arbi shared his insights about working —with Bilal Fallah— within the context of serial production, particularly in relation to franchising which provides a specific template or framework that sets distinct boundaries for makers to operate within. El Arbi highlighted his experiences with the successful film *Bad Boys for Life* (2020) which paved the way for international productions such as the *Ms Marvel* (2022) series and *Batgirl*. In the interim, it is noteworthy to mention a distinctive follow-up to El Arbi's testimonial which proves that the production of a successful series is not an automatic or self-propelled process. In mid-2022, despite being in the final stages of production, the *Batgirl* project was unexpectedly terminated by the production company

Warner/HBOMax, leading to widespread consternation that resonated within the global film community and among critics.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the keynote speakers, several scholars and artists presented their research and reflection on seriality. While some of these contributions are featured in enhanced article form in this issue, others are briefly reported on here. It should be noted that certain conference presenters either elected not to or were unable to adapt their contributions into full-fledged articles.

In her presentation, Saddle Choua provided an extensive account of her ongoing autoethnographical narrative project, *The Chouas*, describing her family history. The story applies an audiovisual format, with each installment serving as an episode of a soap opera, of sorts. This 'meta-soap' invites viewers to scrutinize the structures of stereotypical images, dominant codes, and partial histories that are often present in narratives, particularly those that center on immigrant experiences. Choua employs narrative strategies of seriality, commonly used in both fiction, such as soap operas, and non-fiction, such as documentaries, to deconstruct these received narratives. While typically presented as an installation, *The Chouas* is also available for online viewing as a serialized soap opera via the following link: <https://vimeo.com/472984013>.

Ruth Mellaerts in her talk raised the question if *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017-) should be categorized as a character-driven show, where Offred/June functions as the protagonist. As the series progressed beyond its source material, Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel, and evolved into a serial narrative the arena, the dystopian society in which the story develops, assumed a more central role. Consequently, *The Handmaid's Tale's*

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<sup>1</sup> For some context, see : Couch, Aaron. "Behind the Cancellation of 'Batgirl'. The HBO Max film fell victim to a change in corporate strategy." *The Hollywood Reporter*, Aug 3 2022. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/batgirl-hbo-max-movie-dc-canceled-1235191932/> and Cain, Sian. "'Irredeemable' *Batgirl* movie unexpectedly cancelled despite being in final stages." *The Guardian*, 3 Aug 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2022/aug/03/irredeemable-batgirl-movie-unexpectedly-cancelled-despite-being-in-final-stages> and Lang, Brent. "Brendan Fraser Opens Up About 'Tragic' 'Batgirl' Cancellation" *Variety* Oct 12, 2022. <https://variety.com/2022/film/news/brendan-fraser-batgirl-cancelled-darren-aronofsky-batman-year-one-wolverine-1235399658/>

focal point shifted from Offred/June as the protagonist to the portrayal of the community as a whole. Mellaerts' argument finds an echo in the vestimentary strategy of using the anonymizing but oh so meaningful red dressing gowns and white bonnets in women's and civil rights protests (which disregarded or ignored the lack of diversity and inclusion, criticism that already was leveled at the novel as being rooted in 1970s and 80s white feminism).

In their analysis, Fernanda Nunes Menegotto and Elaine Barros Indrusiak examined the impact of the serialisation of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* on the dystopian nature of the original work. Menegotto and Indrusiak claim that conventional features of melodramatic storytelling, such as heightened emotional intensity resulting from serialisation in the narrative construction, contribute to the creation of a nostalgic depiction of a lost Eden contrasts to the dystopian reality of Gilead.

In Lena Meyskens' analysis of Céline Sciamma's *Portrait d'une jeune fille en feu* (2019), the characters are contextualized within the framework of "gender as seriality", a concept developed by Iris Marion Young. The analysis asserts that the female characters rather function as a group, (an argument that echoes Mellaerts' view) and this portrayal is a means of challenging the asymmetrical power dynamics that exist between them. By functioning as a "sorority" within a male-dominated society, the female characters adopt a strategic approach that challenges the asymmetrical power dynamics that exist between them and dismantles these power relations.

In her paper on the adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-03, Peter Jackson), Stefanie Johnstone delves into an exploration of the divergence between the novel, a continuous narrative published in three parts, and its adaptation, which is constructed as a trilogy consisting of three interconnected narratives. Employing the lens of seriality, Johnstone calls into question and ultimately reevaluates the concepts of trilogy and series. She argues that compared to the novels the adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*

represents a modified narrative construction, comprised of three more or less autonomous stories that are bound together and operationalized by way of an overarching fourth structure.

Oliver Kroener's contribution discusses how viewers engage with non-fictional 'characters' in the context of serial broadcasting, including genres such as documentaries, news broadcasts, and sports programmes. Kroener contends that narrative strategies derived from fictional serial narratives are employed to facilitate viewers to engage in relationships with 'real' people who appear as 'characters' within sports broadcasts. The coverage of the transfer of footballer Lionel Messi from FC Barcelona to Paris Saint-Germain is used by Kroener as case, as Messi's 'story' was narratively constructed in sports broadcasts using a soap opera-esque narrative framework and strategies. It should come as no surprise that the Messi-series continues with expected 'unexpected' plot twists as "It was the transfer that shocked world football in 2021 — but could Lionel Messi now be making a return journey from Paris Saint-Germain to Barcelona?"<sup>2</sup>

By a comparative close reading of selected scenes from the popular Quebec sitcom series *Un gars / Une fille*, which has been remade in over twenty-nine countries, Edward Larkey analyzes the bridging of sketches within an episode and the employment of diverse diegetic and non-diegetic storytelling techniques, with a focus on investigating their effects on playing out the characters and their interrelationships.

As the closing speaker at the one-day conference, Bart Nuyens posed a compelling question: "how to end?". Nuyens explored the intricacies involved in crafting a satisfying ending, given the audience's inclination to anticipate and predict the culmination of a story. Specifically, he focuses on the deft use of mirrored (or not?) scenes

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<sup>2</sup> Cervelló Herrero, Laia & Ballús, Pol. "Lionel Messi to Barcelona: Is it even viable or just a convenient distraction?" *The Athletic*, Mar 27, 2023. [https://theathletic.com/4348239/2023/03/27/lionel-messi-barcelona-transfer-psg/?te=1&nl=from-the-times&emc=edit\\_ufn\\_20230328](https://theathletic.com/4348239/2023/03/27/lionel-messi-barcelona-transfer-psg/?te=1&nl=from-the-times&emc=edit_ufn_20230328)



by the creators of *The Leftovers* (Damon Lindelof & Tom Perrotta, 2014-2017), which — in stark contrast to the negative response generated by the conclusion of *Lost* (Damon Lindelof, J.J. Abrams & Carlton Cuse, 2004-2010) — led to an acclaimed conclusion embraced by viewers and critics alike.

Some aspects of seriality are fleshed out and complemented in various ways in the contributions in this JLIC-issue which, needless to say, merely aim to add and show some possible ways to explore seriality in arts and media.

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# Reshaping the Dystopia through Seriality and the Sentimental Narrative in Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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## Introduction

After the critical and commercial success of television series such as Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017) and Channel 4/Netflix's *Black Mirror* (2011-2019), both of which scored top prizes at the 2017 Emmy Awards, several commentators in magazines, newspapers and Internet portals addressed the recent popularity of what they commonly referred to as "dystopian television"<sup>1</sup>. These articles and lists engaged with a wide variety of television series and serials, with topics ranging from the more far-fetched extra-terrestrial wars, zombie apocalypses and android revolutions to the seemingly more reality-like takes on the rise of fascism in the twenty-first century and on extreme inequality in the distribution of wealth. Rarely did such writing problematize the meaning of the word "dystopia" and whether it was in fact adequately used when attached to those narratives. For scholars of dystopia, too, the word—a modification of Thomas More's sixteenth-century neologism "utopia"—poses a problem, and there is disagreement as to where to place its potential boundaries<sup>2</sup>. In this article, we are interested, in particular, in the case of the Hulu serial *The Handmaid's Tale* and how it

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<sup>1</sup> This trend in writing is exemplified by the following articles and lists, all published between 2017 and 2019: Hudson, 2017; Kindley, 2018; Maloney, 2018; Ariano, 2019; Adegoke, 2019; Sturges, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> As a brief illustration, in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, edited by Gregory Claeys, for example, Claeys's own contribution stresses the notion of "feasibility" as a central source for differentiation between dystopia and science fiction and, under his argument, a piece of writing such as H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895) is a work of science fiction, rather than a dystopia. Yet his chapter is followed by the disagreeing Peter Fitting, who argues that the time machine in this story serves simply as a form of transportation: "The novel is not about the impact of technology, although it certainly could be called a dystopia – it is a vision of the future in which class division and conflict have led to a degraded society" (Fitting 139). Such dissent surrounding a single novel demonstrates that the problem of definition remains important to the study of dystopian writing and of what is or not to be understood as part of the field.

transforms the core characteristics that shape the homonymous 1985 novel by Margaret Atwood that it adapts (and, as an ongoing serial, continues to expand<sup>3</sup>), particularly when understood as an inheritor of the early and influential writings of Aldous Huxley, George Orwell and Yevgeny Zamyatin. Our main interest in this discussion lies in how longform serial storytelling, as the form that is preferred in American television, comes to affect the narrative.

Despite the alleged popularity that so-called dystopian television has achieved through a variety of productions in recent years, scholarly engagement with this notion remains sparse, and the entanglement of the forms and patterns of television storytelling with the characteristics of dystopia—even when they remain debatable—has only been briefly sketched in popular reception. For some critics, it is the success of the dystopia in a form that demands long-term commitment on the part of the viewer—the television series—that is most worthy of attention, for it has not escaped them that this union is not always an easy one. Evan Kindley argues, for instance, that while television seems to have become more hospitable than it had ever been to the dystopian genre, the latter “poses specific problems” for the former due to the difficulty involved in

finding a way to tell an ongoing serialized story set in a dystopian world that’s not unremittingly depressing or, worse, didactic. Dystopias rarely have happy endings, but they do have endings: They’re a species of morality play, which means that sooner or later they need to deliver a moral. (Kindley)

Devon Maloney defends a similar point, arguing that “the genre’s most affecting stories have always been highly concentrated, discrete doses of horror”. According to Jason Mittell, however, American television is predicated on an “infinite model” of storytelling, meaning that serials tend to continue for as long as audiences are interested in watching (33)—this narrative form, thus, is in direct opposition to the notion of *concentrated doses*

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<sup>3</sup> As of 2022, Hulu has released four seasons, totalizing forty-six episodes so far, with a fifth season already confirmed but neither released nor completed.

*of horror* suggested by Maloney, since the horror in a successful serial, rather than being concentrated, would be extended through weeks and months with every new instalment, and throughout several years as it came back for more seasons.

And yet, as the examples cited above demonstrate, commentators everywhere would have us believe that dystopia has been thriving on television. It is debatable whether all the examples commonly listed as reflecting this trend are, indeed, dystopias<sup>4</sup>. It would perhaps be more accurate to consider that we have been witnessing a growing interest in television that explores negative visions for the future of humanity. Whether these are dystopian will depend on one's understanding of what dystopia means. Following the origin of the term as one of the many modifications to More's "Utopia", as well as its placement within the larger phenomenon of utopianism as defined by a shared notion of "social dreaming" that is defended by Lyman Tower Sargent (3), we argue for an understanding of the dystopia, *pace* the previously cited Kindley, as an inherently didactic form of warning in that it mirrors, in a distorted and exacerbated yet recognizable way, tendencies that the author of a dystopian text perceives in his or her own surroundings—it demands, then, a certain *feasibility*, as defended by Gregory Claeys (109). Scenarios focusing on apocalyptic futures of alien invasion or zombification might be understood as dystopian if we take them metaphorically, as does Gabriela Sanseverino in arguing that zombie narratives can lead to a reflection about economic recession and mass layoffs, for example (132). But this requires an initial interpretive leap that might or might not be taken, while the dystopia's intersection with what is perceived as the present that originated such a narrative is traditionally more directly clear—as exemplified by the many claims made, especially in 2017, that *The Handmaid's Tale* was

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<sup>4</sup> Along with *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Black Mirror*, *Battlestar Galactica* (Syfy, 2004-2009), *Fringe* (Fox, 2008-2013), *The Man in the High Castle* (Prime Video, 2015-2019), *3%* (Netflix, 2016-2020), *Colony* (USA, 2016-2018), *Westworld* (HBO, 2016-), *Electric Dreams* (Prime Video, 2017), *Altered Carbon* (Netflix, 2018-2020) and *Years and Years* (BBC/HBO, 2019) all appear more than once in the limited sample listed in note 1.

"Trump's America", or paralleled it too closely<sup>5</sup>. In order to examine how dystopia and television seriality interact, which this article will do by examining one of its most prominent examples, it will be useful to first clarify what we take "dystopia" to mean within a tradition that Atwood's novel followed and, in some ways, transformed.

### **Dystopia: The Literature of Warning**

Although the term "utopia" was famously coined by Thomas More to name both his 1516 book and the fictional island that is described in it, scholars of utopianism (such as Vieira, Sargent, and Mohr) point out that *Utopia* can be understood as being inserted in a much older tradition of which Plato's *Republic* is an important early example. As conceived in More's writing, however, the utopia can be understood in the context of "a humanist logic, based on the discovery that the human being did not exist simply to accept his or her fate, but to use reason in order to build the future" (Vieira 4). With the navigations expanding boundaries, Europeans found fertile ground to imagine potentially very different (and better) forms of social organization. As this literary tradition developed, it also changed with the times; with the Enlightenment and new scientific discoveries, utopian writing took an euchronian turn, especially in France: rather than being imagined in distant, imaginary places, utopias were then imagined in the future, seeing history "as a process of infinite improvement" (Vieira 10). This was not the only transformation that the sixteenth-century utopia experienced; in Britain, a new anti-utopian tradition flourished, as satirical texts took as their target utopian thinking itself.

As a new development in this history of many ramifications, the term "dystopia" was first used by John Stuart Mill in 1868, but it is generally agreed that the dystopia as a

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<sup>5</sup> For a few examples of this trend in popular reception, see Bradley, 2017; Weigel, 2017; Moscatello, 2017. On the other hand, others have felt the need to argue that "Trump's America" was, in fact, *not* Gilead—not in order to defend Trump or the Republican party's politics, but due to the problematic aspects of the comparison itself—, already in 2017 and later as the serial continued (and Trump was unsuccessful in his attempt at re-election); see Crispin, 2017; Young, 2019; Colombo, 2021. Here, we are less interested in the arguments that are defended by either side than in the very existence of a debate held in those terms.

literary genre truly developed in the twentieth century (Vieira 17-18, Claeys 107-108, Fitting 139-40, Baccolini and Moylan 1, Mohr 21, 27-29, Ferns 105), particularly in the writings of Yevgeny Zamyatin (*We*, 1924), Aldous Huxley (*Brave New World*, 1932), and George Orwell (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 1949). As a modification of the word “utopia”, the dystopia is inherently connected to it; they serve as opposites, however, in that the projections that they cast are radically different. Dunja Mohr argues that both forms of writing ultimately point to the present, but they do so through different strategies: the utopia seeks to create recognizable difference between present reality and the fictional world represented in the work, while the dystopia thrives when it manages to create a sense of shared similarities between our present and an imagined (and appalling) vision for the future. Mohr’s argument is that, with different strategies, they have similar objectives nonetheless: “sociopolitical change by means of the aesthetic representation of a paradigm change” (28). This is ultimately why Sargent, for example, considers dystopia to be fully situated within the realm of utopianism, a phenomenon that, in its different manifestations, has at its core the “dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives and which usually envision a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live” (3). His point is that dystopias are meant as an effort on the writer’s part to warn readers; to warn someone of something implies that “choice, and therefore hope, are still possible” (26)—otherwise, there would be no point to the warning.

In what we might now call, following theorists such as Tom Moylan, Raffaella Baccolini and Dunja Mohr, a “classical dystopia” (of which Zamyatin, Huxley and Orwell are representative), such hope lies in an extratextual level—in the act of communication established between author and reader. Baccolini and Moylan argue that classical dystopias have definitive closures, ending with the subjugation of the individual. In their category of the “critical dystopia”, however, the argument is that these new fictional

writings maintain utopian hope within the boundaries of the work itself through “ambiguous, open endings” (Baccolini and Moylan 7). Positioning Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* within this category is not fully agreed upon by Baccolini and Moylan, who argue in the introduction to the essay collection *Dark Horizons*, that this novel “directly drew on the classical dystopian narrative even as it interrogated its limits and suggested new directions” (3); in their individual works, however, they take their approaches in separate, if related, lines. Baccolini, for instance, suggests that Atwood’s novel outrightly rejects “the subjugation of the individual at the end of the novel” (520), while Moylan’s assessment, considers its ultimate ambiguity central in that it represents both a continuation and a challenge to the classical dystopia that it follows in both structural terms and tone (see Moylan 103-108). He argues that it presents a “counternarrative” (103) in the many forms of transgression committed by the Handmaids, in the direct action of a resistance group and in the suggestion of the existence of an “outside” world (104), and it also presents a more fractured surface for the dystopian state than that found in the previous classical dystopias. This state is never defeated, but the epilogue of the novel, an academic conference taking place in a post-Gilead world, suggests that it *did* come to an end; but even this ending reinforces ambiguity, Moylan argues, in that the tone of the academics reinforces certain misogynistic ideas. Ultimately, we would suggest, the hope in Atwood’s novel remains firmly connected to the act of communication between writer and reader—the difference is that the potentiality of such an act of communication is mirrored within the storyworld itself, where the Handmaid’s act of narration survives into the future and continues to exist, in 2195, as counternarrative (now to the misogyny of the very researchers who unearthed the tapes in which her oral narration was recorded, and are introducing the transcript to a larger audience).



The epilogue can be read as didactic in yet another sense in that it can teach readers, who have witnessed Offred's suffering and her transformed consciousness throughout the novel, how *not* to read her tale, as argued by David Hogsette. Offred's act of narration should not be disregarded as something minor—but it remains true, nonetheless, that Gilead is still firmly in place by the time her narration is finished, and misogyny seems to stand just as firmly in place by the time the transcript of her recorded tapes becomes public in the twenty-second century. The gap between Offred's experiences in Gilead — which end with her stepping into a van that is to take her to an unknown future, her oral narration of them that is registered in the tapes, and the year 2195 — is left unexplored in the text. The Hulu serial concludes its first season with the same imagery of the protagonist stepping into a van, thus repeating Offred's words from the novel with few modifications; the adaptation in a strict sense, then, is mostly concluded by the end of season one — from season two onwards, the writing of the show is primarily inventive, not adaptive, and it could be said to be exploring the gap left open by Atwood (at least before she published the sequel *The Testaments* in 2019). However, considerable modifications have been imposed on Atwood's narrative beginning with season one — which adds, subtracts, and reinterprets events originally found in that text, as exemplified by the depiction of the "Salvaging" and "Particution" ceremonies that are included in episodes one and ten and in part XV of the novel (see Menegotto, "You Don't Own Me" 251-2 for a discussion of this aspect).

Atwood's novel interrogates the form that she inherited from Huxley and especially Orwell (see Atwood, "George Orwell") in a series of narrative choices beyond the obvious emphasis on gender: she treats rebellion on the collective front (Mayday) and the sexual (the Handmaid's affair with the household driver) as separate from one another; she never inserts her protagonist fully into the realm of organized resistance; she makes sure that the contrary voice that is represented in Offred's narration survives well into the

(post-Gilead) future; we are never allowed to be certain whether the protagonist survived, escaped or was captured—only that the tapes she recorded made it to 2195. These are important transformations in the classical dystopian form. Yet, as even Dunja Mohr, for whom *The Handmaid's Tale* is to be placed outside the classification of classical exactly because of Offred's act of narrating, "the novel lacks any suggestion of where—beyond survival—this poetic discourse leads" the protagonist (260).

While Atwood presents a dystopia that provides the reader with more potential openings, she nonetheless remains much closer to the classical form, in which hope is primarily to be found in the act of communication between writer and reader, than to the critical dystopia that presents a more direct utopian project, or alternative, within its pages. With the epilogue, we are not presented any alternative, only the notion of a wake-up call to be perceived in the Handmaid's narration. In 2195, her voice *could* certainly effect change, but it remains unknown what kind of impact the publication of the "Handmaid's tale" would go on to have, or not have; just like ourselves, the people of Nunavit would first have to listen and then act. With Offred leaving the stage, and perhaps leaving Gilead behind as well, as uninvolved in any organized movements of resistance or utopian projects as she was when the narrative began, the novel's epilogue forces readers to turn their attention back to themselves, and to their own time.

### **Television Storytelling: Episodes, Seasons, and the Melodramatic Mode**

In *Descriptive Adaptation Studies*, Patrick Cattrysse argues for a research program on adaptation that is target-oriented in two ways: because the investigation departs from "the adaptation as and end product" and because "it postulates that the adaptation process is teleological, i.e. that it is determined by both source (con)text and target (con)text conditioners, and that in terms of final decision-making, the latter may be more

important than the former" (12). It was following this research program that we sought to explore whether understanding the serial format of contemporary American television could help explain some of the choices that were made in the Hulu adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Our focus was on how the dystopian genre that the serial subscribes to by virtue of it being an adaptation of Atwood's novel pertaining to that genre interacts with the rhythms and characteristics of American serial television.

An initial issue in that sense involved referring to a serial produced for a streaming platform as "television". Amanda Lotz, who has been chronicling shifts in industrial practices in U.S. television for many years, describes the *transformation* of the medium with the appearance and spread of original programming on cable channels and follows it up with the notion of a *revolution* caused by internet-distributed content (Lotz, *We Now Disrupt...*). For the scholar, original content released by streaming services is still understood as television mainly due to the format of episodes that are distributed across seasons—thus, it is television when the content is serialized. Even so, streaming significantly alters the patterns of distribution when compared to traditional television, as the researcher herself argues elsewhere (Lotz, *Portals*) highlighting that on traditional television the practice of scheduling is central, while internet distribution usually allows a user to purchase access to an entire library of content at once.

Even if the practice of scheduling is ultimately disrupted by streaming platforms, however, different services have been testing diverse approaches to the distribution of their original content. Netflix, the pioneer, has transformed it significantly as it suggested that complete first seasons, released all at once, should be understood as the "pilot" of a series (Castellano and Meimaridis 201). Milly Buonanno argues that this strategy effectively "undermines defining features of narrative seriality, as historically conceptualised, enacted and experienced"—meaning, as a narrative that unfolds over time with enforced interruptions that look the same for every viewer or reader (194). But

the strategy adopted by Hulu with the release of *The Handmaid's Tale* in some ways still resembles the patterns of traditional seriality, as the platform releases new episodes weekly—the “airing” of this serial is not as disruptive as that championed by Netflix. Evidently, alternative modes of viewing would be made possible by Hulu’s adoption of the “library” model, but older options, like DVD boxsets or the DVR, would equally allow it.

We adopt here, then, a rationale that remains primarily tied to more traditional television, since our previous investigation has suggested that although there *are* differences between the rhythms of *The Handmaid's Tale* and of those serials produced for broadcast channels that Michael Newman analyzes, such as the duration of individual scenes—which tend to be longer in the Hulu serial (cf. Menegotto, “From Offred” 158), the differences seem less significant than the similarities. The resemblances are represented by the designing of intra-episodic storylines or the distribution of screen time between different characters in each episode, following the traditional A/B/C plot structure of American television (Newman 18, Thompson 31), especially from season two onwards, as our attention is requested by ancillary developments that centralize experiences beyond those of the titular Handmaid<sup>6</sup>. Newman argues that television writers are “under an obligation constantly to arouse and rearouse our interest” (20), and, further, that the writing of television is thought out with “a strong rhetorical force, giving us reasons to care about characters and to want to know more” (20), for seriality requires that our interest is peaked enough for us to come back for the next instalment—Sean O’Sullivan refers to this as serials building “momentum” (“Six Elements” 55).

Other approaches, such as Kathryn VanArendonk’s, have focused on the ability that television episodes must have to stand on their own, and she argues that “an episode’s constituent pieces have the power to speak more meaningfully to each other than they do to continuing plotlines in subsequent weeks” (“Theorizing” 67)—by nature,

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<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed examination, see Menegotto, “From Offred” 159-69.

episodes are always one out of many, but she argues that they never disappear as part of a whole. This differs slightly from the argument made by O’Sullivan, for whom the short television season, aired uninterruptedly over the course of several weeks, is itself a unit of meaning, which he compares to the structure of a poem that, with verses and stanzas, is “broken on purpose”. In that sense, he argues that these shows operate “from season to season—runs of episodes marked off by significant gaps” (“Broken on Purpose” 60). We argue that this pattern can be perceived, thematically, in the seasons of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, but that the episodic storytelling VanArendonk refers to is equally apparent. She makes a strong argument about serials usually resting on an unknown future, and thus

it’s important to provide access to some form of satisfaction, be it thematic, narrative, or aesthetic, on a week-by-week basis. [...] Series that do not reward audiences early are rarely given the chance to exist long enough to reward them later. (*The Episode* 54)

We should also notice that serial television requires that “we care about the drama”, for it demands a long engagement on the part of the viewer (Mittell 244). Mittell suggests that one of the ways in which serial television seeks our continued engagement is through “serial melodrama”; drawing from Linda Williams, here melodrama is not understood as a film genre, but as a mode: “an approach to emotion, storytelling, and morality that cuts across numerous genres and media forms” (Mittell 233). For Williams, as for other television scholars (besides Mittell himself, 233-60, see Casey et al 170), melodrama is the predominant mode in American television. She does not think of melodrama in terms of necessary stylistic “excess”, as do some of its most important theorists such as Peter Brooks and Thomas Elsaesser (see Gledhill and Williams 6), but rather as a combination of affect and moral legibility that seeks to create a shared sense of “felt good” with the viewer (“Mega-Melodrama!” 529). We are asked to share in this *felt good* (meaning the “need to locate the goodness that deserves to live in a home ‘space of innocence’”) even if upon a closer look the flaws of this alleged space of innocence become evident (525). E.

Deidre Pribram argues that in melodrama “immediate emotional engagement” has prevalence over solely cognitive or rational terms (39), and she examines television seriality and its narrative movement as based on jumping from emotion to emotion, purposefully varied in their nature.

The notions of affect and contrasting emotions are also central to Robyn Warhol’s discussion of what she refers to as the “good cry” of sentimental narratives, also adopted by Mittell in his discussion of the serial melodrama. Warhol is interested in describing what she refers to as “technologies of affect” and argues that reading and watching are processes that create physical reactions in the body and that “certain genres invoke these physical responses in predictable, formulaic patterns” (7), as exemplified by her discussion of sentimentalism. While such narratives—and the physical reactions they induce—are, in American culture, ascribed to “femininity”, she prefers the term “effeminate” to indicate that anyone can perform these physical reactions that are not culturally understood as “masculine”. Mittell connects Williams’s and Warhol’s discussions in order to suggest that “the melodramatic pathos that suffuses most television serials can work to evoke effeminate feelings, even outside the traditionally female soap operas” (248), offering *Lost* (ABC, 2004-2010) as an example of seriality that invites a traditionally “masculine” mode of engagement with its emphasis on “forensic fandom” (247) while also prominently adopting throughout its storytelling the seven techniques that Warhol describes in her “narratology of the good cry” (see Warhol 41-50). For Warhol, the good cry arises through the application of a variety of tools: the use of “poetic devices” to heighten emotion (41); the appeal to the idea that certain emotions cannot be fully expressed in language and are more powerfully left unnarrated; the adoption of the point of view of either “victims” or “triumphant figures who have formerly been represented as oppressed” (45); the direct addressing of the narratee (the one technique Warhol does not believe to have moved from sentimental literature to

sentimental film); the use of “close calls and last-minute reversals” and “emotional jolts” (47); characters that come to act against type established either by the text itself or culture at large; the counterbalancing of “grief and suffering” and “joy and triumph, albeit bittersweet” (49).

Gledhill and Williams seek to surpass the obsession of critics of melodrama with its “suffering side” (1), with Gledhill also pointing out the “optimism, individual striving, and ‘can-do’ orientation to the future” (xix) that is characteristic of Hollywood melodrama, while Warhol argues that sentimentality is crucially intertwined both with “tears of defeat” and, just as importantly, with “tears of triumph” (40). We argue that both these characteristics are central to Hulu’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, in which the “good-cry techniques” are constantly used, and especially to its structuring of season-long meaningful units composed of individual episodes, in a way that serves to continually reassert an idea of “can-do” Americanness. In this way, the dystopian genre, in its classical expression, which Atwood’s ambiguity slightly alters without fully subverting, as previously argued following Moylan’s reading, is significantly transformed, or perhaps de-characterized, in the serial.

### ***The Handmaid’s Tale* as American Television Narrative**

As the title of Atwood’s novel indicates, *The Handmaid’s Tale* tells the life of one woman, a Handmaid known as Offred, and is dominated by her thoughts, feelings, memories, and perceptions of both Gilead and the “time before” that led to it, which reinforces the limited scope of her life in the dystopia. Longform television, however, does not usually rely solely on the experiences of a single character “for both practical and production reasons (as it is too inefficient to require an actor to be present for every scene)” (Mittell 129). Although the Hulu serial remains primarily the Handmaid’s tale, as only June Osborne’s voice is employed in voiceover, perspective is gradually expanded as we leave June behind to

follow other characters. As of season two, the episodic structure often has one or more characters sharing the spotlight with June, in an example of what Mittell refers to as “centrifugal complexity”, in which “the ongoing narrative pushes outward, spreading characters across an expanding storyworld” (222). Although June has more freedom to act than the Offred in the novel, as a Handmaid she faces many limitations, especially early in the serial; for that reason, to elicit the “tears of triumph” and the “can-do” orientation that Warhol and Gledhill highlight, the narrative often relies on other characters to perform this function.

If we think of O’Sullivan’s notion of the short television season working as a meaningful unit, a pattern emerges throughout the seasons of *The Handmaid’s Tale* that is in close connection with the argument that moments of “grief and suffering” and “joy and triumph” necessarily take turns in the sentimental narrative (Warhol 49). The second season of the serial was much criticized for its brutality and the excess of torture it depicted. But even that season ends triumphantly (albeit, as also put by Warhol, with a “bittersweet” tone), with several women selflessly risking themselves to get June and her newborn baby to Canada. If there is immense suffering in the serial, it is never relentless: instead, it serves to make victories more triumphant and risks more significant.

Taking a closer look at the structure of season one, we can perceive how the sentimental narrative arises. The season can be divided in three distinct moments, characterized by loss and despair (episodes 1-3), growing hope (4-6) and courage and action (8-10), with episode 7, which focuses exclusively on June’s husband’s plot of survival and escape, representing a “jarring interruption” (O’Sullivan, “Broken on Purpose” 71) in the flow of the narrative that nevertheless serves as a transition between “growing hope” and “taking action”. Although most of the episodes do adopt the multiplot strategy that is common to serial television (see Newman 18, Thompson 31), focusing on other characters besides June, sometimes even without her presence, this season is still



centered on June's transformation from someone who only wants to find her daughter and survive into a rebel who realizes she must try to make the world a better place. Episodes two and three end, respectively, with June learning about her shopping partner Ofglen's disappearance right after discovering the existence of a resistance and with June being violently punished for something beyond her control, which is paralleled by Ofglen discovering, to her horror, that Gilead mutilated her because of her sexuality. The tone changes in the following three episodes, ending in (bittersweet) moments of joy: June is freed from imprisonment, chooses to defy Gilead's belief system by initiating an illicit affair, and learns that her husband, Luke, is alive in Canada. Episode seven provides her *and* the viewer with a story of survival and escape that segues into the final, and hopeful, "tercet" of the season, in which June decides to no longer accept her entrapment, she and Moira pair up to carry out a Mayday mission, and the Handmaids collectively refuse to stone a woman to death, leading June to reflect that mere survival is not enough.

The pattern of serial television is followed as the show relies on several narrative branches and has more self-contained storylines within individual episodes, functioning as their own entities. We can take a closer look at the "Mayday plot" in episodes nine and ten of the first season, as well as in the ninth of the second, to explore how *The Handmaid's Tale* interacts with seriality, episodic storytelling, "good cry techniques" and melodrama. In season one, episode nine, June is given her first mission as a member of the resistance but is unable to complete it. She asks for her friend Moira's help, but learns that, like her counterpart in the novel, this Moira is now resigned and has abandoned her former rebellious ways. June's approach to her friend's resignation is different from Offred's, as she urges Moira to react, but to no avail. As June leaves, the show makes use of the same piece of non-diegetic orchestral music that was played when the two friends were first separated in Gilead in a flashback from episode four; here the camera goes in for an extreme close-up of June's face as she breaks down into a full-body cry. June is

crushed, the tears are of defeat. The aesthetics of the scene relies heavily on “rendering emotion as something overtly visible” (Warhol 42), “emotionally excessive music cues” and on the perspective of an “emotionally vulnerable” character (Mittell 249). But the episode also makes use of the “last-minute reversals”, as well as of the counterbalancing of “grief and suffering” with “joy and triumph”, that Warhol (49) attributes to sentimental narratives. It ends with two wide smiles, June’s and Moira’s: in its very last sequence, we learn that Moira got the Mayday package for June, who receives it through another ally. We also learn that Moira has returned to her defiant self, stealing a car for another attempt at escaping. Episodically speaking, then, we have a complete storyline: the mission was taken care of, June’s desperate pleas to her friend worked and reawakened her former rebel.

As a testament to the serial aspect of the narrative, however, this package will continue to reverberate not only in the following episode but also throughout season two. Part of the inspiration for June’s rebellion in episode ten comes from getting in contact with the Mayday package containing dozens of letters by fellow enslaved Gilead women. These letters will reappear here and there in season two before accomplishing their goal: a traumatized June attempts to burn them, Nick, the man with whom she is having an affair, salvages them and takes them to Canada during a business trip in season two, episode nine. The unlikely scenario of Nick meeting with Luke once in Canada is fully motivated within the episode, and Luke receives the package, which he and Moira (now also in Canada) subsequently release to the press. The letters are responsible for closing the door to a potential business channel between Canada and Gilead being opened (a central episodic storyline), a hard blow to the Commander’s plans.

As the refugees of “Little America” in Toronto celebrate Gilead’s defeat, they spontaneously break into song, singing together “America the Beautiful”, a patriotic hymn for the country they lost, and that no longer exists. It might have been this same

"America" that gave rise to Gilead, but in instances such as this the serial establishes the dystopian scenario as no more than a detour in America's righteous path that must be recuperated, the "space of innocence" that melodrama demands. In Williams' discussion of *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008), she states that

we recognize the good that could be because, throughout the series, we have learned to recognize the good that has presumably been lost. This is the good home that Baltimore may never really have been but that melodrama must posit as its lost good. Ultimately, not to believe in this space of innocence, is not to love Baltimore, the love of which, in this series, is an unquestioned good—the good that melodrama invests in its victims. ("Mega-Melodrama!" 538)

If we exchange "Baltimore" for "the United States", this excerpt easily applies to Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale*. It is possible to argue that the very dystopian scenario that serves as the basis for the novel allows for the recognition of victimhood and villainy that is essential to melodrama. Yet although Atwood does not erase these notions, she blurs them by taking pains to humanize the Commander, who serves as one of the primary faces of Gilead for Offred, by emphasizing Offred's own complicit role in Gilead's system, which includes her ignoring her mother's and Moira's activism in the "time before", and by connecting through language all of the male characters, including the ones we might take as the "good ones" (see Miner); these patterns of connection, however, are either completely removed or ultimately deemphasized in the serial. Furthermore, Atwood's epilogue forces the reader to wonder whether recuperating the previous state of affairs would be enough, or if restoring this lost country would just lead to another version of Gilead. Atwood thus deeply complicates the shared notion of a felt good posited by melodrama. Offred's recognition of her role, and that of fellow American citizens, in Gilead's coming into existence is part of her growing consciousness about herself and the situation around her. In the serial, although June does state that people had been asleep facing the slowly transforming world they lived in, her personal interrogation of herself does not take place, and neither is it demanded, because she, unlike Offred, tried

to fight it, and we are given no information that suggests that her husband was against it—quite the contrary. In this way, the shared notion of a “felt good” does arise much more smoothly in the show.

The same June that fights before the authoritarian project of Gilead is materialized reawakens her inner fighter *in* Gilead, but she does not do it alone: Mayday, the fellow Handmaids, the Martha network, the frequent protests of the refugee community—these are all examples of resistance to Gilead in many fronts. The classical dystopia is not about the defeat of a fictional system, since these imagined systems serve primarily as a warning of where certain nations, or maybe humanity at large, could be leading to without change: they are meant as didactic extrapolations of current circumstances, not as predictions. These didactic warnings that classical dystopias ultimately are should ideally make readers aware of their surroundings before it is too late. Atwood argues that, by finishing *Nineteen Eighty-Four* with the appendix entitled “Principles of Newspeak”, Orwell shows more faith in the human spirit than is usually recognized, and she chose to close off her own novel in a similar way (Atwood, “George Orwell”). Significantly, however, neither author engages with ways of defeating the systems in place, and the ironic tone of Atwood’s epilogue makes her *Handmaid’s Tale* insolvably ambiguous.

The Hulu serial, on the other hand, does engage that idea, and organized resistance becomes a primary plot drive, especially with the third season—the overall story it tells increasingly becomes one of collective action, of its costs, its lows as well as its victories and possibilities. This exploration of collective action in the series, of which June becomes not only an integral part but often a leader, is one of the strategies that open the way for a sentimental narrative that is especially interested both in exploring “the subject-position of the oppressed, in the diegetic good times and the bad” (Warhol 45) and in working within an “emotional structuration” that thrives with the many “fluctuations” in emotions that are depicted (Pribram 42). We do not intend to suggest

that such fluctuations arise because the serial chooses to explore collective action, but rather that in this narrative the framework of a resistance movement proves useful to that end, and, in the end, for making successful longform television.

Scholars of utopianism such as Vieira and Sargent insistently argue that dystopian writing is bound to utopianism in that dystopias too involve the notion of hope. The major difference between the dystopian tradition of Zamyatin, Huxley and Orwell (and Atwood) and the Hulu serial is the locus of such hope: in the classical dystopia, it lies in the act of communication between writer and reader, outside the text, in the possibility of warning fellow humans to improve and prevent such a terrible future. The show, on the other hand, is dedicated to the exploration of the potentiality of collective action within the fictional world. Exploring this potentiality leads to an important transformation of the warning that the classical dystopia sounds to the reader, for these works seek to awaken readers when such a horrible scenario is only a possibility by casting “a shadow over our futures”, to quote Atwood herself (“Introduction” vii). After they came into being, these texts insist, these horrible visions for the future would be particularly difficult to defeat—so much so that even Atwood, whose novel sketches a post-Gilead world, does not attempt to describe the process of defeating it<sup>7</sup>.

Longform seriality, however, due to the very fact that *it is* longform, would demand this message to be reinforced repeatedly to exhaustion. Returning to Kindley, who attempts to provide an answer as to why dystopian narratives had never been as successful on television when compared to literature and film, we argue that becoming “didactic”, as he puts it, is not at the heart of the issue, since dystopias *are* inherently didactic. The difficulty in bringing dystopia to television is better explored through his following statement: that “after a while, you get the point already.” In that sense, the Hulu

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<sup>7</sup> We should point out, however, that Atwood does attempt to tackle that question in the 2019 sequel *The Testaments*, released in between season three and four of the serial, and taking place fifteen years after the events that are narrated by Offred.

serial finds more fertile ground for its ongoing storytelling in the combination of melodrama and sentimentalism that informs its episodic and seasonal narrative organization, with an approach that continuously alternates between sadness/defeat and joy/victory, and that, furthermore, insists on a quest for the recuperation of the “beautiful” America that once was through its righteous citizens (like June and her family and friends). Here, too, however, there is no suggestion of what “better” might look like beyond the reunion of the family; no utopian project or alternative is offered, only palliatives (meeting with one’s family or friends again, being conceded refugee status) that are nonetheless, and understandably, fully sentimentalized. Even so, we do not believe that this melodramatic appeal necessarily rules out the warning aspect of the dystopia, and the fact that the serial continues to be linked in its reception to discussions about reproductive rights or girls and women’s access to education and full citizenship demonstrates this.<sup>8</sup> But the warning sounded by the show is inevitably toned down in order for it to become more palatable to the serial engagement on the viewer’s part. This makes the serial television dystopia ultimately much more hopeful than its classic literary form was envisioned to be.

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8 For a very limited sample exemplifying the uses of *The Handmaid’s Tale* in this context, we can discuss the red uniform worn by Handmaids in the Hulu serial being adopted by protestors not only across the United States in order to defend the right to legal and safe abortion, but also abroad, in countries such as Brazil, Argentina and Northern Ireland, for example. See: Hauser, 2017; Marques, 2018; Carmo, 2018; Beaumont and Holpuch, 2018. *The Handmaid’s Tale* was also alluded to during both the 2017 and the 2018 Women’s Marches following Donald Trump’s inauguration as president of the U.S.—both before and after the serial premiered, that is—, or at the 2018 Golden Globes, following the widespread use of the hashtag #MeToo to discuss sexual harassment and assault in the workplace, and the #TimesUp initiative championed primarily by Hollywood actresses. See: Levine, 2017; Mayday, 2018; Perez, 2018.

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**“Nous sommes à la même place”, Gender as Seriality in Céline Sciamma’s  
*Portrait de la jeune fille en feu***

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Since Céline Sciamma’s *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* premiered in 2019, the film has been nominated for multiple Golden Palms, Golden Globes, BAFTA and César awards. The movie has also been awarded a great number of prizes: the Queer Palm and Best Screenplay at the Cannes Film Festival, a European University Film Award, and a César for best camerawork. The tremendous success of the film does not limit itself to professional or academic circles. Mainstream media praise the film as well.

The film is set at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in an old castle on an island at the French coast of the Atlantic Sea. Marianne, a young portraitist who has been invited to the castle, was assigned to paint the portrait of Héloïse without her knowing. While acting as Héloïse’s companion during the day, Marianne tries to observe her as closely as possible in order to paint the portrait at night. However, Marianne fails in keeping this a secret and comes clean to Héloïse. By then, the two already developed more than a friendship and Héloïse destroys the portrait so Marianne can stay longer. During their stay, they also find out that Sophie the maid is pregnant. Together they try to get her an abortion. Throughout the film, the quest for an abortion and the love story between Marianne and Héloïse are interwoven.

Veronica Esposito described the film as a “manifesto of the female gaze” (Esposito 8). However, Sciamma herself nuances the stateliness of the word “manifesto”: “I did not want to make a manifesto of the female gaze but make the gaze into the plot of the film” (Schuit, par 10, my translation). And thus, the gaze is not only a structural and formal approach throughout the film, but it is central to the narrative of the film as well. This begs

the question: how can we define this female gaze? In her book *Le Regard Féminin* (2020), Iris Brey discusses this concept at large : “un regard qui nous fait ressentir l’expérience d’un corps féminin à l’écran [...] c’est un regard qui adopte le point de vue d’un personnage féminin pour épouser son expérience” (Brey 12/1384). Nevertheless, for Sciamma the female gaze is not merely a reversal of the male gaze, or the embodiment of the female lived experience. The female gaze is also about sharing the experiences: “Si on me demande ce qu’est le female gaze, pour moi, c’est *partager*. Comment on partage l’expérience d’un sujet” (*Le Bleu du Miroir* 2019, my emphasis). Sharing an experience in this case, is not about dividing, but about the sum of all the individual lived experiences and can thus lead to collaboration and working together. Sciamma describes this as a “ronde de regards collaborative” which does not limit itself to the characters on screen but moves offscreen: “associés au sien les regards de ses comédiennes, de sa productrice, de son assistante à la mise en scène, de sa cheffe opératrice, de sa directrice de casting et de son monteur” (Brey 298-299/1384).

In this article, I would like to argue that it is not only the gaze that is collaborative. The physical embodiment of the female characters, the tropes and themes that are addressed are also collaborative, moreover, one could argue that these are *serial*. Serial in this context does not mean linear but plural. As I mentioned earlier, sharing adds up. In this way, seriality is introduced as a strategy to erase or temporarily suspend socio-economical differences between the three female protagonists.

### **Gender as seriality**

Gender as seriality has been and still is used in feminist theory as a strategy to overcome hierarchical power relations in different directions: man versus women, women versus class and among themselves, and the various ways of identifying and approaching women. In this article I will apply the critical strategy of gender as seriality to the film

*Portrait de la jeune fille en Feu*. To develop my point, I will draw on the work of political thinker, feminist, and activist Iris Marion Young, more specifically on her influential essay: "Gender as Seriality: Thinking about Women as a Social Collective" (1994). Her later work discusses both the individual experience and the undertaking collective action at large from a phenomenological perspective. Due to this double phenomenological reading of inequality, Sonia Kruks writes of Marion Young's "binocular view of injustices" (Kruks 340) which will serve as a tool to analyze the film. I will elaborate on Young's notions of individuality and collectivity and how seriality is a strategy that can transgress individual differences and even hierarchical structures, without rejecting the traits that make them into separate identities. I will also link these to feminist theory today. Even though these essays date from the early nineties, her writing is still contemporary, to say the least.

In my analysis, I will focus on two key sequences in the movie which are interrelated: the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice and the quest for an abortion. After introducing the plotline and some general observations of the film, I will discuss the love story between Héloïse and Marianne, which can be read as a phenomenological critique of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Secondly, I will analyze the abortion attempts, the abortion itself and its reenactment in which all three women are involved. These sequences illustrate how the individuality and class differences of the characters are transgressed in a serial connection without denying or erasing their identity.

### **Individuality**

Young's writing is so pertinent because it touches upon issues that are still at the heart of contemporary queer and feminist theory. At the end of the seventies, much critique surfaced regarding the generalization of 'the women's experience' since it was not taking class, income, ethnicity etc. in consideration. In her book: *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (1990), Young addressed the issue of identity politics. She discusses at large

how “the injustice of the cultural imperialism which marks and stereotypes of some groups at the same time that it silences their self-expression” (Young 1990, 24). On a side note, she pinpointed that when trying to move beyond this cultural imperialism and aiming to obtain equal rights, the marginalized identities are asked to conform to the norm (e.g., gay marriage) instead of making their own laws and structures adapted to their own socio-cultural situation. This issue is still uppermost in feminist and queer activism and discussed at large in *Queer Intentions*(2019) by Amalia Abraham where she explores the decline of queer underground clubs (i.e.) in relation to the acquisition of the right for gay people to marry. For example, the character of Marianne would not *want* to be in an arranged marriage. The fact that the women in the film come from different socio-economic backgrounds does not imply that they all prefer to be in the highest class.

Feminism does not address one single issue anymore but turns to multiple topics and matters. Whereas some women long for marriage and a family, other women are still pressured into it. For some, sex work is an emancipated and liberating job, however, for a considerable number of women it is the only way to earn a living. The same applies to the female characters in the film. They encounter different sorts of constraints imposed by the patriarchy, moreover, the patriarchy even divides them because it impacts each of them in a different way. As a result, an emancipated life will not look the same for all three of them.

Furthermore, Angela McRobbie writes of “female individuation” which characterizes post feminism as well: “Girls must have a life plan. They must become more reflexive in regard to every aspect of their lives, from making the right choice in marriage, to taking responsibility for their own working lives” (McRobbie 261). In this way, as Katherine Angel writes in her book *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again* (2021), women are



still charged with the responsibility for their own safety in the #MeToo discourse, be it in the guise of “the girlboss” who takes control of every aspect of her life.

The notion of ‘female individuation’ is enhanced to extreme proportions by social media and influencers who promote products by companies under the pretext of emancipation and feminism to such an extent that feminism and capitalism are no longer distinguishable: “the newest generation of feminists have never known a world different from the one in which the fight for our rights and the representation of our experiences is tied up with capitalism and our individual relationship to our bodies” (Gamble 599/1404).

The complexity resulting from this female individuation and how these complexities interact with each other, have already been illustrated by the series *Mrs. America* (2020) about the political battle between Phyllis Schlafly and Gloria Steinem and the film *Misbehaviour* (2020) which covers the boycotting of the miss world elections in 1970. These evolutions raise the question how to regard individual women as a group and talk about them as a group despite what separates them from each other. This burdened sense of responsibility is so deeply rooted in society that women reinforce this accountability upon each other which makes it even more challenging to dismantle the constraints.

## **Collectivity**

In 1994, Young wrote the essay “Gender as Seriality: thinking about women as a social collective” that was included in the anthology *Social Postmodernism, Beyond Identity Politics* the following year. Her point of departure was one of the pressing dilemmas of feminist theory at the time:

On the one hand, without some sense in which “woman” is the name of a social collective, there is nothing specific to feminist politics. On the other hand, any effort to identify the attributes of that collective appears to undermine feminist politics by leaving out some women whom feminists ought to include. (Young 1994, 714)

It goes without saying that this matter remains pertinent to intersectional feminism, which Young herself preludes in *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy* (1997). Whereas speaking of women in general is too nondescript, designating certain characteristics to a group of women will inevitably exclude other women and deny historical context. How, then, can we speak of women and identify them as a collective without assuming there is a universal or quintessential aspect that is inherent to being a woman? Can we speak of women and validate all identities that identify as such instead of categorizing them into smaller compartments? The danger of exclusion lurks around every corner when focusing on identity.

To avoid exclusion, Young proposed the concept of gender as seriality, drawing from Sartre's *Critique de la Raison Dialectique* (1960) and his notion of "groups". For Sartre, the members of a group must consciously identify with one another, recognize that they do indeed belong to the same group and that they are all about to undertake action towards a certain goal they have in common. In short, the identification process takes place amongst themselves during their intentional being towards action. The latter makes a group both mutually inclusive as exclusive at the same time.

Young, however, slightly deviates from Sartre's notion of groups. She writes: "A series [...] is not a mutually acknowledging identity with any common project or shared experience. Women need have nothing in common in their individual lives to be serialized as women" (Young 1994, 735). Women as a series do not have to share nor recognize mutual character traits<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, they do not need to have anything in common, it is about their intentionality and directiveness towards action: "'Woman' is a serial collective [...] it names a set of structural constraints and relations to practico-inert objects that condition action and its meaning" (737). A series of women is not a group of women which

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<sup>1</sup> Without historicizing the concept, Young seems to perceive womanhood as a universal human condition or more specifically as the feminine condition.

share a certain background or an identity trait. It is the individuality of each woman that makes a collective of women into a series. Also, her definition transcends the individual experience. It is about mutual intention and direction. A series of women can thus be defined by a certain situation or context that brings them together and by their state of being towards undertaking deliberate action towards a certain goal.

In her definition of women as a collective of a series, Young borrows another concept of Sartre, being the practico-inert: "Practico-inert meaning the matter with which praxis must work and Praxis being deliberate, goal-oriented human action" (Buchanan "pratico-inert"). In other words, her definition of a series focuses on certain structural constraints and relations to the matters of goal-orientated human action that brings a group of women together.

I would like to emphasize here, that Young's notion of seriality does neither deny nor undermine the individuality and identity that characterize post feminism. The aforementioned "*binocular view of injustices*" (Kruks 340) is what gives Young's feminist theory a phenomenological dimension. For Young, phenomenology is an instrument to explore the "'lived' side of women's involuntary location in gender (and other social) structures" (337). In her writing she pleads for styles and theoretical tools "that move back and forth, fluidly, between the large-scale 'structural' or 'poststructural' and the subjectively 'lived' aspects of women's subordination, between 'gender' and 'lived body'— until it may be seen how each twists into and comes to inhere in the other" (340). In my analysis, I aim to examine the three female characters of *Portrait d'une jeune fille en feu* through Young's "binocular vision". I will constantly move between the individual and the group of women to demonstrate how gender as seriality is used as a strategy to move beyond individual differences and make the whole more than its sum.

It should be noted that this idea of seriality or this sense of collectivity has been something that Sciamma has dealt with already in her previous movies. Whereas her

2017 movie *Bande des Filles (Girlhood)* was centered around the individual experience within a group, her movie *Portrait de la Jeune fille en feu* (2019) is about a collective experience that transgresses individual identity traits.

## The film

*Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* premiered in 2019 in France and has been produced, written, directed, and acted by a series of women. Adèle Haenel, Noémie Merlant and Lujan Bajrami play the leading roles under the direction of Céline Sciamma. Remarkably, there is no classical or tangible conflict throughout the film. As Batuman wrote in *The New Yorker*: "Sciamma increasingly doesn't care about antagonists. In "Portrait", she decided "not to tell about the obstacles, the enemies, the traps, men" (Batuman 24/30). The movie can be considered as an exploration of how "the character's desire is itself a source of conflict" (25/30).

Nevertheless, at the beginning and the end of the movie, another antagonist namely the patriarchy, is made tangible in the film. The men too are represented as a series, always *en masse* (e.g., the group of rowing men in the boat and the men visiting the exhibition at the museum). Furthermore, the presence of men is especially palpable due to their absence throughout the inner and middle part of the film. In this way, men and women are represented opposite from each other, not as individual characters but as series<sup>2</sup>; gender is represented as seriality.

The three female protagonists are vastly different when it comes to their social and economic status which resonates with McRobbie's notion of female individuation. They

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<sup>2</sup> I would like to make a difference here between serial and plural characters. Serial characters are a specific kind of plural characters. I am here referring to the forthcoming article: "The Plural Protagonist. Or: How to Be Many and Why" (2023) by Ronald Geerts in which he discusses plural characters at large. Plural characters find themselves in the same context whereas serial characters enter a goal-oriented relationship with each other.

are affected by the patriarchy in a different way and so are the practices to emancipate them. Héloïse comes from a wealthy family, she is the subject of Marianne's painting and represents the muse. Therefore, Héloïse is the subject of Marianne's painting, not the object. She has no agency over her future; her fate is sealed. Marianne belongs to the working class and is a portraitist who continues her father's business and as an employee of Héloïse's mother. She arrives at the island for a rather unusual assignment: to paint the portrait of Héloïse without her knowing. At the time, it was common to send a portrait of a young woman at marriageable age to the family of a potential husband. If the family approves of the painting, they can get married. The reason for the secrecy is that Héloïse refused to pose for the previous painter because she does not *want* to get married. She had witnessed how the thought of marriage had consumed her sister, who jumped off a cliff to escape from the restricting circumstances of matrimony. Therefore, Marianne must pretend to be a regular companion, invited to help her fight her loneliness and paint the portrait at night. When Héloïse's mother leaves the island to visit the potential in-law family, Héloïse and Marianne are left alone in the castle on the island, isolated from the rest of the world with Sophie, the maid of the household who finds out she is unintentionally pregnant.

By implementing gender as seriality as a strategy hierarchical power relation: poor-rich, artist-muse, servant-mistress, lover-beloved, life-death are temporarily suspended or transgressed from the moment they are alone at the castle. Their joint residency forms the heart of the movie and the focus of my analysis. Throughout their stay in isolation, two central plotlines develop: the love-story between Héloïse and Marianne and the abortion of Sophie. Both storylines are interwoven and have equal weight within the film. The storyline is not told from one perspective but shaped as a *series* of actions the women carry out.

### **Orpheus & Eurydice**



Fig. 1. Still from Sciamma, *Portrait* (0:02:05).

First, the viewer sees seven separate shots of young women who are sketching, attentively looking up and down from their sketchbooks. Only after a few shots, we see it is Marianne who is posing while giving directions to her students. Her attention is suddenly captured by a painting at the other side of the room. She breaks the shared concentration when she anxiously asks “Qui a mis là, ce tableau?”. The following moment the film reveals the entire class of students sitting next to each other, all shifting their attention from their individual sketches to the painting behind them (Fig. 1.). We see seven art students who tear their gaze away from their own work and simultaneously turn around to direct their attention to the same painting at the back of the class.

The opening scene already stresses both the individuality and the collectivity of the art students. Not only do they visually form a series across the screen, but all eyes also meet the same object at the same moment. Moreover, the dynamics between observing to draw someone and the model looking back or forward is a Leitmotiv throughout the whole movie that already echoes the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Consequently, the film starts with a reversal of the Orpheus-Eurydice or poet-muse relationship whereby the painter is drawn by a series of young girls. To show how relative or reversible this power dynamic is. It sets the tone for the rest of the movie.

In the next scene, we see Marianne at the back of a rowing boat. In front of her, four men are rowing with their backs turned towards her. When one of her trunks falls



Fig. 2. Still from Sciamma, *Portrait* (00:18:34).



Fig. 3. Still from Sciamma, *Portrait* (00:18:45).

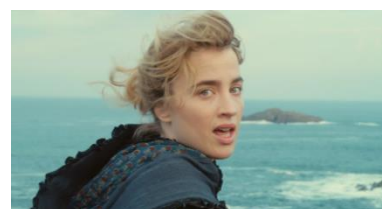


Fig. 4. Still from Sciamma, *Portrait* (00:19:14).

overboard, she jumps off the rowing boat to retrieve her luggage. She does this on her own initiative without asking or consulting the men rowing the boat, who are not helping her either.

Throughout these two scenes, Sciamma underlines the individuality of Marianne by not making her part of the series formed by her students and the men in the boat. By doing so, Marianne is represented as a highly independent character.

From the moment Marianne first meets Héloïse, this emphasis on Marianne's independence slowly fades away by merging her with the image of Héloïse, both emotionally and on-screen. When Marianne is about to see Héloïse for the first time, the camera alternates between how Marianne is looking out for Héloïse (Fig. 2.) and what Marianne is seeing in the moment (Fig. 3.). The constant switching accelerates as Héloïse goes outside and starts running towards the cliffs. Just in time she stops and turns around towards Marianne. Both women stand in front of the ocean in the wind and glance to each other without the other looking back until Héloïse does look back (Fig. 4.).

This scene contains a series of gazes and glances that starts bridging the gap between Marianne and Héloïse, and between character and spectator as well. The latter is an example of the aforementioned "ronde de regards collaborative" (Brey 298/1384); a succession of gazes that moves off screen from the viewer to Marianne, from Marianne to Héloïse and Héloïse who looks the spectator in the eye. Even though the women are looking at each other, within the shot they are depicted in the same direction. On the rocks, at the beach always facing the sea in similar postures. Only during these moments conversations take place, as if both women need to be directed towards the same object, namely the spectator, to be able have a profound dialogue.

Later in the film, when the portrait is almost finished, Marianne confesses to Héloïse that she is in fact a painter commissioned by Héloïse's mother to paint her picture. Héloïse then destroys the portrait. In this brief moment, when the painting is destroyed, their

painter-model hierarchy is being dissolved. What separated them from each other is literally erased. From this moment onwards hierarchical power relations will frequently be suspended for a short amount of time by replacing the non-reciprocal gazes by mutual ones.

In another scene, this suspension is more explicitly shown through dialogue. While Marianne is trying to paint Héloïse's face, she says that she would not want to change places with her. Héloïse answers: "Nous sommes à la même place, exactement la même place, venez ici" (01:02:00). Marianne stands next to Héloïse and is looking towards her usual position behind the easel which echoes the opening scene where a class of students was drawing Marianne. Héloïse, in turn, describes what she sees; how Marianne frowns when she is overwhelmed and how Marianne breathes through her mouth when she is troubled. Whereas the relation between painter and model is always represented and told from the perspective of the painter who is inspired by his or her muse, this short dialogue introduces the voice of the muse. Héloïse has been watching Marianne as well and describes what she saw. As a result, the painter and muse become each other's equal instead of each other's opposite.

Héloïse and Marianne finish the painting together. However, Sciamma suddenly reminds the spectator of the temporary nature of this harmony. Marianne admits that she would like to ruin this portrait as well because this means that the process of the arranged marriage is set into motion. Héloïse answers: "vous n'êtes plus de mon côté, vous me rapprochez la suite, mon mariage, vous n'êtes plus solidaire" (01:32:55). For a short inevitable moment, the two women are separated because their paths merely crossed and are now facing different futures. A breach emerges in the harmonical relationship.

This rupture does not last. After they reconcile, they spend one more night together. Marianne starts drawing a sketch of Héloïse. When she is finished, Héloïse asks Marianne to draw herself so she has a keepsake. Marianne does so on page 28 of her



book about Orpheus and Eurydice. Once again, without denying the different fates that lie ahead of them, the hierarchy between them is withheld. Contrary to the non-reciprocal approach of the Orpheus myth where the painter turns around to remember her and capture her in his poetry, both women can remember each other by means of the portraits. Consequently, the series of portraits of Héloïse that have been painted throughout the film in function of revealing and remembering, is expanded by a self-portrait of the painter so that the muse can remember the artist.

In another scene, Héloïse is reading aloud from *Orphée et Eurydice*. The attentive faces of the three women, lit by candles, are shown separately but quickly after one another. Each with their own individual thoughts but glancing at each other. When the ending of the story evokes the question: “why does Orpheus turn around?” Sophie thinks him to be transgressive, whereas Marianne argues that he chooses the memory over Eurydice over her real presence. Héloïse wonders: “peut-être c’était elle qui lui a dit: retourne-toi” (01:11:26). In this scene, the individuality of the three women is emphasized while simultaneously, they are represented as a series: each of them contemplating the myth from a different point of view, the images of their concentrated faces in rapid succession. This scene, which is very similar to the card scene I will discuss in the next section, clearly demonstrates Young’s binocular vision, constantly moving from their individual lived experience to the women as a series.

A few years later, we see Marianne at an exhibition where she has exhibited her own work under her father’s name. In a room full of men, Marianne stands in front of her painting in which Orpheus and Eurydice are turned towards each other, whereas they are normally shown one after another trying to escape the underworld (01:48:33). When suddenly Marianne cleaves through the room full of men to stand eye to eye with a portrait of Héloïse and her daughter where she holds a book open at page 28. In this way, the previous series of portraits, formed by the portrait of Héloïse, the sketch of Héloïse

and the self portrait of Marianne, continues and even communicates to Marianne. Through the portrait of Héloïse in the gallery, Héloïse tells Marianne she has a daughter and that she has not forgotten her by indicating the page number where Marianne sketched a self-portrait for her. Even after their love affair, the women keep reversing the hierarchical structures that are in place in the world they inhabit.

In another scene, in the concert hall, we see Marianne once again transgressing the territory of men in the same way as she walked through the museum. When she takes a seat, she notices Héloïse at the other side of the theater. This last series of gazes is not reciprocal. Marianne is closely watching Héloïse, who is paying attention to the orchestra and does not see Marianne. However, we hear the orchestra is playing the very same music on the harpsichord during their stay together. Based on the intense facial expressions and her accelerated breathing, the spectator can assume that she is remembering Marianne.

### **Abortion**

After Héloïse's mother has left for Italy, Héloïse, Marianne and Sophie are alone in the castle. It soon becomes clear that Sophie is unintentionally pregnant and that she does not want to keep the baby. Without using too many words, collective action is undertaken to prevent the baby from being born. As for a sidenote, throughout the film, the abortion is not a subject of discussion. Sophie simply tells Marianne that she does not want to keep it. Without uttering a word and sensing each other in a corporeal sense. All three of the women collectively engage in making sure that the baby is safely removed.



Fig. 5. Still from Sciamma, *Portrait* (00:54:30).

At first, they try to provoke an abortion themselves by having Sophie run back and forth on the beach (Fig. 5.) Because the running has no effect, they decide to prepare a potion. They go looking for the necessary herbs in the dunes (Fig. 6). The shot shows the three women crisscross across the screen,

each successively bowing down and disappearing, once more composed as a series. At night Sophie collapses because the potion made her sick. Marianne and Héloïse take her to bed (Fig. 7) and all sleep together in the same room. The other two women watch over her. During these



Fig. 6. Still from Sciamma, *Portrait* (00:55:24).

three scenes, Héloïse, Marianne and Sophie move towards the same goal and form a series as described by Young. The visual composition reflects the seriality through the positions of the three women on the screen: in a row, crisscross or as a cluster yet always sharing the same intention.

Because the potion did not have the desired effect, the three women go into the village (Fig. 8.) to make an appointment with the midwife. Once again, this becomes apparent without words or a dialogue but through a series of events and actions. The three women do not have to explain anything to each other. Instead, they intentionally undertake action. The spectator sees them gathering around a fire and after a while it becomes clear what they



Fig. 8. Still from Sciamma, *Portrait* (01:11:37)

are about to undertake. Suddenly, all the women of the village

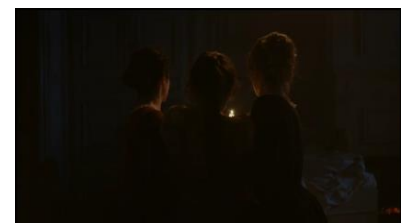


Fig. 7. Still from Sciamma, *Portrait* (00:57:51)

gather around the fire while producing humming sounds (Fig. 9). No further context is given, they simply start to

harmonize, or one could even say “to serialize”. Their singing drowns out the crackling



Fig. 9. Still from Sciamma, *Portrait* (1:13:56).

sounds of the fire. The women seem to perform a ritual, but it still comes across very improvised and intuitive. In addition, this choral series of women embraces the protagonists and encapsulates them in an even larger series of women(hood). The collective singing echoes and expand the working together of the three women to provoke an abortion and it embeds their mission in a community of women. Within this space the previously mentioned structural hierarchy disappears.



Fig.10. Still from Sciamma, *Portrait* (01:23:24).

When the actual abortion takes place, there is a shift in the way series are being represented. The abortion is not a collective experience. It is Sophie who has the abortion. While she is laying on the bed, another kind of series forms (Fig. 10). We see three generations of women represented around the bed: the midwife, Sophie and the two children. Héloïse and Marianne are present with her in the same room forming a series once again. During the abortion we see Sophie from above. While she is suffering from the discomfort and the pain on the bed, the baby next to her grabs her finger and touches her face. The baby confronts Sophie with what is; the life inside of her or what could have been; mothering a baby. When Marianne turns away, it is Héloïse who encourages her to turn around and watch: “regardez” (01:23:30) In this scene, they all must face the abortion, including Marianne and Heloise.

Later that very evening, after Sophie wakes up, they decide to recreate the abortion (Fig. 11.) It is especially important to note that even though “the action of the abortion itself” has been performed and their collective goal has been reached, the three women keep sticking together to deal with the emotional aftermath of the abortion. Héloïse and Sophie start to reenact or even dramatize the abortion and Marianne takes her sketchbook to

put it onto paper. Although Sophie is the one who undergoes the abortion, all three women participate in the process and attempt to collectively navigate the aftermath. In doing so, the focus shifts from the individual experience to how the three women, together, approach the situation. As a result, the film portrays a collective experience that momentarily suspends the socio-economic disparities that separate them. This quest for an abortion and its impact demonstrates Young's binocular vision the clearest. Despite being constrained by societal structures, Marianne, Héloïse, and the midwife collaborate to assist Sophie, and thus partake in a shared lived experience, depicted as a series.



Fig.11. Still from Sciamma, *Portrait* (01:25:58).

It is worth mentioning that abortion has, both historically and currently, been a factor that creates distinctions among women based on their social status. Nevertheless, Sciamma makes this conceivable by setting the film on an island, isolated from the inhabited world. By doing so, she gives women the utopian possibility to abolish the class differences. In addition, she makes the abortion into an option created by women themselves and not by the patriarchy.

In between their abortion attempts, the women practice other, more recreational activities such as playing cards and reading. The card scene is a variation on the theme of depicting the women as a series in a circle as it is shot in a circle panorama view. Alongside, the spectator sees their faces lighting up in the dark, watching the game and one another closely. In another shot of their hands laying cards on the table, whose hand belongs to whom is barely discernible to the viewer (Fig. 12.). This is the first light-hearted scene in the film, where the women laugh freely and simply



Fig.12. Still from Sciamma, *Portrait* (01:04:00).

“are” without any restraints because they are equal players in the game and represented as such.



Fig. 13. Still from Sciamma, *Portrait* (01:07:42).

The same applies for the shot where they are together in the kitchen. The lady of the house is preparing dinner whereas the maid is embroidering a piece of linen. Once again, the three women are portrayed in one line, emphasizing their collective seriality, although engaged in distinct activities

(Fig. 13).

## Conclusion

By analyzing the joint residency of the three main characters on the island through the lens of Young’s “binocular vision”, I have demonstrated how the women in the film form a series, without losing their individual identity traits or denying the structural differences that separate them. However, during certain scenes these traits and differences are interrupted, reversed, or equalized. The women form a series through the visual composition of the characters on the screen, the sequence of gazes connecting the viewer and the characters, the succession of different actions and activities, and the overlay image that equalizes the women and shows them identical in their identity but preserves the structural constraints and individual identity traits that make up their character. Even though the fate of the three main characters is controlled by a patriarchal society which prevents Héloïse and Marianne from being together and separates the three women in three different classes, by representing women as a series in these various ways, Sciamma transgresses hierarchical power relations between painter and muse, maid and lady of the house, lover, social and economic classes. Consequently, representing gender as seriality becomes a strategy to move beyond class-related politics or representations of women. Instead of focusing on the individual

experience i.e., the female individuation, yet without denying it and without bringing any discredit to it, the film moves beyond individuality and depicts a collectively lived experience. Employing seriality as a strategy to challenge hierarchies and structural positions proves ineffective if utilized only once in a work or a body of work. Demonstrating gender as seriality as a strategy is successful only when applied repeatedly and across diverse aspects of a work. This is precisely what Sciamma achieves in the film, incorporating a series of students, gazes, actions, portraits, bodies, and embodiments. Consequently, the movie explores unexplored terrain.

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## More than Three Times: *The Lord of The Rings* and the Fundamental Structure of the Trilogy Form

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J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is not a trilogy. It is a three-volume novel, written with a single narrative that is split into three volumes for publication purposes (Anderson xi; Tolkien 1981:161). Conversely, Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* film adaptations are a trilogy. But just what *is* a trilogy? Do we have a common understanding of its fundamental structure? The trilogy is an old storytelling form, its earliest known example dates back to Ancient Greece. Today numerous trilogies are produced in films and genre fiction. Despite its age and ubiquity, the form's structure has yet to be described or distinguished from other multi-text narratives, such as the three-volume novel, sequels, or series. Claire Perkins and Constantine Verevis champion a nominative approach to the form; they note that the "trilogy precisely demonstrates the conflicting impulses toward limitation and multiplication that characterises the field. The nomination distinguishes and limits a set of films in a manner that is more precise than either 'sequel' or 'series'" (3-4). Elsewhere, serial studies have attempted to define trilogy against other forms, but some are hesitant to make distinctions (Kelleter 129, Brinker 66) because new works contradict any rigid designations, or they do not define seriality as a narrative structure (Mittell, 2018:226). For Thompson, referring to the difference between serial and sequel, such distinctions are not trivial (2003:100) and this is true, particularly for filmmakers. It is important to know what the structural differences are between forms as "you have to know everything about the structure in order to move beyond it" (Dancyger and Rush, 1). A broad definition of the trilogy form is that it is constituted by the three individual texts

and a fourth overarching text. In this paper, I offer a new structural definition of trilogy that expands beyond the assumption of the number three and challenges the notion that the storytelling potential solely resides in its ability to expand a story beyond the bounds of a single text. I focus on the difference between a three-volume novel and trilogy using a single case study: *The Lord of the Rings*.

## Defining the trilogy

How can we define the trilogy form such that we also describe its fundamental structure? A very broad definition of a trilogy is a group of three related works. Like the three-volume novel, length is a feature. Perkins and Verevis note that trilogy can be used “to evade the time constraints of a standard feature film” (9). Alan Sommerstein holds that “trilogy, like epic, can stretch out its action” (39). However, both do not acknowledge the uniqueness of the trilogy compared to other tri-part forms and, in doing so, fail to elucidate its unique storytelling potential.

What makes this form distinct from other tripartite forms is its connective aspect, which can be viewed as a distinct structure in and of itself. Trilogy is at once three individual narratives that are connected by a fourth narrative. These represent Perkins and Verevis’ multiplication and limitation, respectively. The form is created by the dynamic interaction between the different structures. There are trilogies that are connected by other means, such as author, theme or technique, but these are beyond the scope of this paper.

Carolyn Jess-Cooke tacitly acknowledges this structure in stating that “the trilogy is often convoluted by the issue of balancing the films’ singular three-act structure with the larger three-acts of the trilogy” (5). Henderson uses terms derived from formalism, the “macro-syuzhet” and the “macro-fabula”, by which he means the individual and overarching structure, respectively (112). Tally notes that “a *trilogy*, properly speaking,

would require three related books or films that tell a single overarching story, but with the proviso that each book would also have to be 'intelligible on its own', to use Tolkien's language" (176).

### **The three-volume novel**

Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* exemplifies that what is called a trilogy may not be structured as one. But why does this distinction matter? For a creative practitioner, there are few resources on developing a novel series and trilogy. What resources there are reside online, and this advice often uses Tolkien's work as the main example for explaining trilogy structure (Dramatica, Keifer, Reedsy). However, there are key structural differences between the publishing format and the trilogy form. The first step in understanding these is to define and outline the provenance of each briefly.

The three-volume novel is a publishing format where a single novel is split into three. It was first popularised as a mode of production during the nineteenth century (Bassett 61). Novels were expensive to print and splitting a single novel into three parts allowed costs to be recuperated quicker and easier than publishing the entire novel (Bassett 61). After a time, "the dominant three-decker lending-library format was replaced by a cheaper one-volume format, and the modification of the 'inner form' of the novel itself" (Buurma 90). The difference between a three-volume novel as a *format* and the trilogy as a *form* is vital for creators to understand. The trilogy as a three-volume novel format is to think of the individual works as defined by their page length rather than narrative structures.

### **Provenance of Tolkien's novel**

Allen and Unwin suggested reviving the publishing format for Tolkien's work during the post-WWII paper shortages, and splitting the novel based on length, rather than narrative

structure, or as Mittell terms it “operational seriality” in his book chapter of the same name (2018:226). The author did not want to publish *The Lord of the Rings* as a three-volume novel. His letters detail his failed attempt to change publishers, from Allen and Unwin to Collins, to ensure it would be published as a single novel together with the second novel in the duology – *The Silmarillion*.

But the whole Saga of the Three Jewels and the Rings of Power has only one nature; division into two parts (each about 600,000 words): *The Silmarillion* and other legends; and *The Lord of the Rings*. The Latter is as indivisible and unified as I could make it. (161)

Tolkien continues:

It is, of course, divided into sections for narrative purposes (six of them) and two or three of these, which are more or less equal length, could be bound separately, but they are not in any sense self-contained. (161)

Tolkien was, however, unsuccessful. He stayed with Allen and Unwin and agreed to publish the work as a three-volume novel. This decision, Tally stresses, “has had lasting effects on both the text and its readers” (184). He discusses how this initial publishing format led to three *Lord of the Rings* films and three *The Hobbit* films. Yet, he does not discuss the specific additions, deletions, and alterations to *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy that render it distinct from the novel. Tolkien’s novel is structured using six “books,” two per novel volume and this is why the novel endures as a three-volume work. The same cannot be said for other novels which had a similar split, such as Shea and Wilson’s *Illuminatus! Trilogy* and Murakami’s *1Q84*, that are both now published without Mittell’s “gaps” (2018:229).

The internal structures of *The Lord of the Rings* novel are useful to understand the film adaptation. Jackson’s *The Two Towers* uses six of the eleven chapters from Book III and seven of the ten chapters from Book IV. The majority of the content is adapted in *The Return of the King*, with a single chapter, “The Departure of Boromir”, moved to *The Fellowship of the Ring*. These alterations are one example of the difference between the

novel format and trilogy form. A three-part split does not simply achieve a trilogy and changes to the narrative structure are required to facilitate the transformation.

### **The Lord of the Rings adaptation**

Peter Jackson's adaptation tells the same story of Tolkien's work with relatively few additions or deletions (to use Bluestone's terms). However, there are prominent deletions, plus the significant rearrangement of plot-points compared to the novel structure, demonstrating what trilogy structure entails. Bluestone's terms neatly encapsulate the key changes made to the story that altered a tri-part publishing format into a trilogy narrative form. In her book on the franchise, Thompson notes that Jackson "has continued to insist that, like Tolkien's novel, his version is one story told serially" (*Frodo Franchise*: 29). However, Jackson and his colleagues use rearrangements, additions, and deletions to alter *The Lord of the Rings* from a three-volume novel to a trilogy. Effectively, the adaptation creates three films with individual narratives from what was a single narrative. The single narrative remains within the adaptation as the fourth connecting structure. These changes include creating new character journeys, such as Aragorn's journey in *The Two Towers* and rearranging the plots from the last two novel volumes into two new narratives.

This case study takes the much-used fidelity approach and uses it to ask an important question: what can the differences between the films and novel tell us about the trilogy form? For Leitch, a "fidelity" understanding of *The Lord of the Rings* would be impossible:

the standard tactics of adaptation – selecting some obligatory speeches, characters, scenes, and plotlines and dropping others; compressing or combining several characters or scenes into one; streamlining the narrative by eliminating digressive episodes ... are clearly inadequate. (129)

However, this paper does not intend to discuss the inability of adaptation to remain faithful to the original work but rather to use these differences in telling the same story to understand how a trilogy can be structured from a single story. This analysis is limited to changes to the story structure, as opposed to aesthetic changes or heightened dramatic moments, such as the horrification or heightened monster interactions and changes to Gandalf's character, as Thompson describes (*Frodo Franchise*, 49–50). Additionally, my analysis is limited to the narrative choices made by the filmmakers rather than the franchising aspects of the films' development.<sup>1</sup>

### *The Fellowship of the Ring*

Of Bluestone's three aspects to adaptation, deletion is the most often used to describe the first film in this transformation from a three-volume novel to trilogy. Key characters are not included, such as Tom Bombadil and the elf Glorfindel. The Bombadil chapters are omitted entirely and Arwen replaces Glorfindel's ride with Frodo to Rivendell. These changes are the ones most often remarked upon by the fans. However, other subtle changes from the novel to the film are key to creating an individual narrative of the film and the two films that follow. Namely, changing the film to be more "Frodo-centric", a term borrowed from Paxson (85), and moving Boromir's death from Tolkien's *The Two Towers* volume to *The Fellowship of the Ring* film. In "From Book to Film", screenwriters Fran Walsh, Philippa Boyens and Peter Jackson note "the first one did not work until they focused on Frodo's point-of-view" (Jackson). Minor changes in the film evidence this change in perspective. In the film's opening sequence, Frodo and Gandalf are introduced before Bilbo. The Council of Elrond transforms from a lengthy discussion on the History of the Ring and Middle-earth to a key turning point in Frodo's journey. Amid the cacophony of arguing Elves, Men and Dwarves, Frodo exclaims, "I will take it," and volunteers to take

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<sup>1</sup> For an excellent overview of this part of the filmmaking process, see Thompson's *Frodo Franchise*.

the Ring to Mordor. Sam, Merry and Pippin burst in soon after and shout that they are “coming too”. As I will detail later, this becomes the midpoint of the film and the inciting incident of the fourth text. Additionally, in the film, Frodo is given more agency and choice than in the novel. He makes the decision to take the path through the Mines of Moria and he solves the riddle to open the door to the mine. In the book, Gandalf performs both actions.

In Syd Field’s influential book, *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*, he describes *The Lord of the Rings* film character plotting as such:

In *The Lord of the Rings*, do you know who the main character is? Is it Frodo, Sam, Gandalf, or Aragorn? Or is it all of them. If you aren’t sure, just ask yourself: Who is the story about? In *The Lord of the Rings*, you could say, with good cause, that Aragorn is the main character because he leads the Fellowship, makes the decisions, and becomes the king. But take away all the trappings and the story is really about returning the ring to its place of origin, Mount Doom, so it can be destroyed. That is what the story is about; therefore, Frodo is the main character. (47)

Field conflates the fourth plot, the destruction of The Ring, with the plot of *The Fellowship of the Ring*. This designation might seem like a slight distinction, but Field’s argument that only Frodo is the main character of the trilogy discounts the structural changes that the filmmakers made to *The Two Towers*, such as featuring Aragorn as the main character as opposed to Frodo. That said, Field’s manner of considering or conflating the main character of *The Fellowship of the Ring* as the main character of all structures within the trilogy is to think of the films as a three-volume novel. He does not reckon with a change in the story structure from a single story into a trilogy. As a trilogy, the decision to make Frodo the centre of the first film influences the structure of the other two films.

Nevertheless, Field’s analysis of the three-act structure of *The Fellowship of the Ring* provides a departure point from which to discuss the narrative arrangement or plotting of the trilogy, which is useful for creators or critics to understand the DNA of the form. Field’s model of *The Fellowship of the Ring* (2006:48) offers a concrete example of



Jess-Cooke's assertions on the act structures within trilogy (5) and provides a diagram through which the distinct structures can be visualised. Field's paradigm is not without its critics, Thompson is critical of the timings and suggests a four-act structure, splitting the second act into two (27) and Dancyger and Rush offer other ways to structure a screenplay. I do not suggest that the filmmakers use this structure, nor do I wish to imply that using the three-act paradigm is the only way to structure a narrative trilogy. Indeed, the filmmakers' approach is more akin to a sequence model, as Gulino suggests (199). In recognition of the limitations of the three-act structure, in my analysis of *The Two Towers* I also consider the addition of a hero's journey for Aragorn's character.

In Figure 1 below, I have used close readings of the film and novel volume and screenplays to map the first film using the three-act structure. I follow Field's structure for the most part, except that I include a midpoint as it serves an important function in distinguishing the first film's narrative structure from the overarching fourth narrative structure. Therefore, Field is a model through which to visualise the distinct and interacting structures within a trilogy and I counter his implied, and others' explicit assertions that there is nothing more to trilogy beyond the number three.

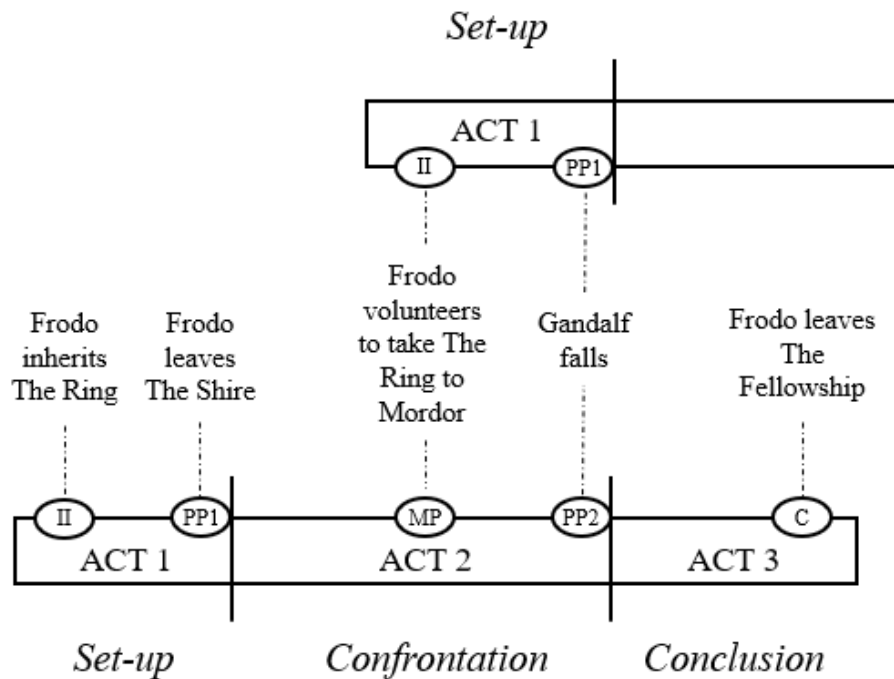


Fig 1.

Three-

act structures of *The Fellowship of the Ring*

For Field, the inciting incident is the film's prologue. This seven-minute prologue voiced by Galadriel relates some of the histories of the One Ring and Middle-earth. Conversely, this prologue is a very long narrative hook and the inciting incident (II), and the true beginning of the film is when Bilbo passes the Ring onto Frodo.

The prologue nevertheless serves an important function in the film and hence transforms it into a trilogy. Gandalf's battle with the Balrog forms the prologue to *The Two Towers*, the action of which culminates in three confrontations: Helm's Deep, Isengard, and Frodo and Sam at Osgiliath. Likewise, *The Return of the King* features the sequence of Sméagol murdering his friend for the Ring and becoming Gollum, which foreshadows Frodo succumbing to the power of the Ring and refusing to destroy it. Therefore, the prologues serve to underline an important facet of this adaptation from single narrative to four interlocking narratives.

I agree with Field that the first plot-point (PP1) is when the Hobbits leave The Shire. However, the film's midpoint, the Council of Elrond, with Frodo agreeing to take the One Ring to Mordor, is not considered in Field's structure. Partially due to the original Book I and Book II split in Tolkien's novel, the midpoint of the film version of *The Fellowship of the Ring* – the point on which the narrative hinges – can also be said to form the inciting incident of the trilogy's fourth narrative structure. These differences are subtle when considered in the first film, because Frodo's journey to Rivendell and the journey to Mordor are closely aligned. However, in the latter two films, the fourth structure will function as a subplot of *The Two Towers* and then forms the second climax in the latter half of *The Return of the King*.

The midpoint of the first film becomes the inciting incident of the fourth structure: Frodo's decision to take the One Ring to Mount Doom to destroy it. This fourth structure highlights that narrative plot-points in a trilogy can take on different meanings, depending on the structure in which the plot-point is acting. If Frodo's volunteering is part of the Fellowship, it is the midpoint. If it is considered as part of the fourth structure, it becomes the inciting incident. Not all plot-points or scenes in an individual film will be part of the fourth structure. This is a demonstration of the dynamic interplay between the individual structures and the fourth narrative. It also shows that the fourth narrative structure is distinct from the entire trilogy. The fourth structure here begins at the midpoint of the first film. Therefore, it does not span the entire length of the trilogy. It is an indication of the fourth narrative structure's distinction from the trilogy as a whole.

In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the distinction between the first and fourth structures can also be demonstrated with the scene at Weathertop, before Frodo arrives in Rivendell and the Council of Elrond. In this scene, the Nine Wraiths attack the Hobbits and Aragorn. Frodo is stabbed. This "death" moment or approach to the innermost cave, to use Campbell's hero's journey terminology, is repeated in the fourth narrative structure

when Frodo is attacked by Shelob (RotK). Frodo has two hero's journeys: from The Shire to Rivendell and from Rivendell to Mount Doom.

Field ends the second act with the Fellowship leaving Lothlórien. I disagree and mark the end of the second act as when Gandalf falls to his "death" at the Bridge of Khazad Dûm (PP2). It serves as a mini-climax, and there is a depression in the tension after this moment. The film then builds again to the true climax of Frodo leaving the Fellowship. The death of Gandalf presages the breaking of the Fellowship. Frodo loses his protection, and Gandalf's death exposes Frodo to the danger of Boromir.

Thus far, *The Fellowship of the Ring* film closely follows the novel volume, albeit with some deletions and minor rearrangements to present the film from Frodo's perspective. The climax of *The Fellowship of the Ring* presages more significant rearrangements and departures from the novel. The confrontation with the Uruk-hai, the death of Boromir and his funeral were related in the novel's second volume, but the screenwriters moved it to the end of the first film to form part of the climax. Likewise, Aragorn letting Frodo go, saying, "I would follow you to the end, my friend," is an addition to the film. These are both essential changes from the novel that mark the three films as a trilogy because, in a trilogy, each film must have a complete narrative of its own, with its own climax.

Here I am expanding on Jess-Cooke's assertion of the four distinct act structures. Moving Boromir's death into the first film bolsters a somewhat lesser climax of Frodo leaving the Fellowship. Doing so gives *The Fellowship of the Ring* a more satisfying ending, for the antagonists are not defeated, the Nine still ride, Saruman is not defeated, but the more immediate antagonist of Boromir is redeemed. He attempts to protect Merry and Pippin from the Uruks and admits his failings to Aragorn. Not only that, but he accepts Aragorn as his king, which forms a key aspect of Aragorn's journey. This rearrangement also frees the film *The Two Towers* from beginning on an anti-climax in the narrative

structure and allows it to focus on the coming war between Saruman and Rohan, and Aragorn's protagonist journey.

### *The Two Towers*

If *The Fellowship of the Ring* was "Frodo-centric", the adaptation of *The Two Towers* is transformed to be "Aragorn-centric". The addition of a hero's journey for Aragorn has faced criticism. However, this addition and its attendant drastic rearrangements of the plot from the novel, which contains just over half of the content from the volume, are essential to constructing the narrative of the film. They give the second film its narrative instead of just being a "bridge" between films one and three. In this trilogy, the fourth structure forms the subplot of the second film. The main plot of the film is given over to Aragorn and the events in Rohan. This can be demonstrated in the three-act structure mapping of the film, which is plotted below in Figure 2. The inciting incident, plot-point 1, midpoint, plot-point 2 and climax all focus on the events in Rohan. Aragorn is transformed into a key point-of-view character in this film and given a hero's journey.

Transforming the narrative to be Aragorn-centric encapsulates and in some way solves the issues that both Tolkien and the filmmakers had with the middle volume of their works. Tolkien's problem with his second volume was that there was "no real connecting link between Books III and IV" (1981:193). Book III follows Aragorn and takes place in Rohan and Book IV continues Frodo's journey. The filmmakers solved this issue by taking a similar approach to Sibly's BBC radio production (1981), they cut between the two storylines of Book III and Book IV. Aragorn's journey and the events of Rohan are used to build the act-structure of the film and Frodo and Sam's journey forms the subplot. That is to say, the fourth structure, the bridging elements of the trilogy, in this film does not drive the main action line.

The narrative elements contained within the second film that acts as a “bridge” between the first and third films are part of the fourth narrative structure, i.e., Frodo and Sam continuing their journey to Mount Doom. The act-structures of *The Two Towers* shows that the main action of the film centres on Rohan. It is almost as if Frodo’s overarching journey becomes the subplot of Aragorn’s second film. The main plot points – the attacks on Rohan, the return of Gandalf, the Battle of Helm’s Deep, and convincing Théoden to “ride out one last time” – are all functions of Aragorn’s story, not Frodo’s. Yet the midpoint of the fourth structure focuses on Frodo and Sam: Faramir captures them. This narrative subverting of the overarching structure into the subplot is skilful writing and leads the screenwriters and editors to move half of the novel volume into the third film. Philippa Boyens notes that Frodo’s climactic confrontation with Shelob at the end of Book IV was moved to the third film because if it were included at the end of *The Two Towers* film, it would have “cancelled out” the climax of the Battle of Helm’s Deep (DVD extras).

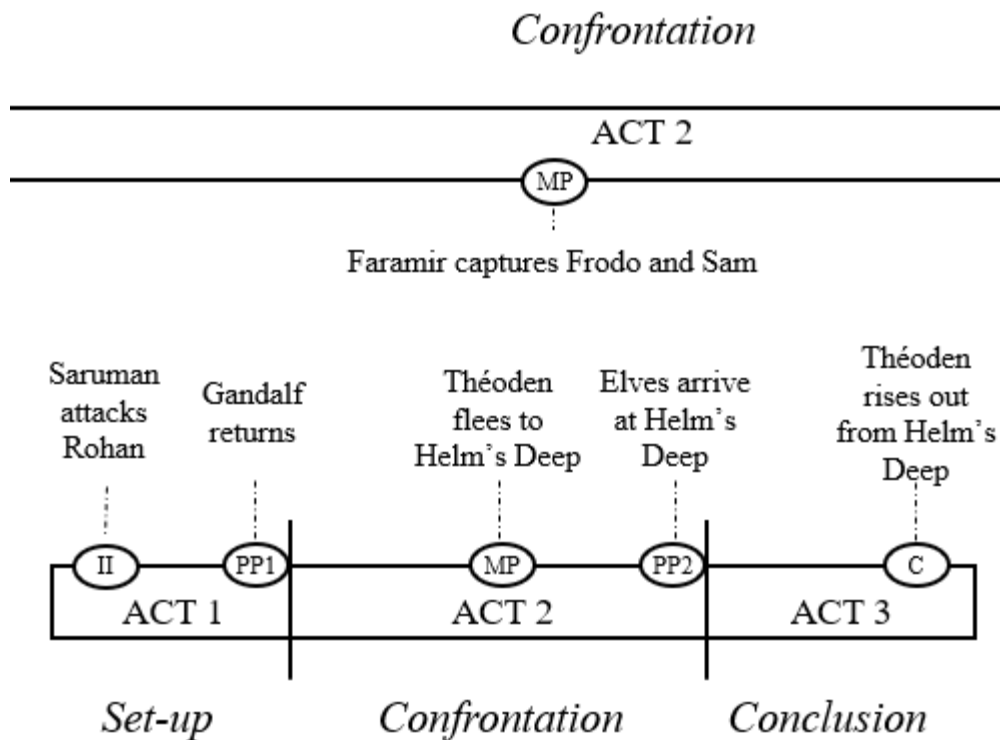


Fig. 2. Three-act structures of *The Two Towers*

Critics of the film have said that Aragorn holds less of a kingly stature compared to the novel. Ford and Reid compare the two Aragorns as a notion of medieval European kings, i.e., earning the right to be king via ability versus having the divine right to kingship through birth. They argue that Aragorn in the novel has a “narrative arc [that] traces his attempts to prove his luck and his supernatural qualities in order to be recognised as king” (75). Conversely, the film “is shown as fearing what he inherited from his lineage as a weakness that might render him unfit to rule” (78). This observation is because the filmmakers constructed a hero’s journey for Aragorn to take him from a wandering Ranger to the King of Gondor in *The Return of the King*.

I disagree that this makes Aragorn a “weaker” character, but rather see it as a difference in storytelling between Tolkien and the filmmakers. Both *The Hobbit* and *The*

*Lord of the Rings* form part of "The Red Book of Westmarch", a book in Middle-earth written by Bilbo and Frodo, with additions from Sam, which Tolkien wrote in the found manuscript style. Author and former student of Tolkien, Diana Wynne Jones, likens Tolkien's style to the medieval romances of King Arthur (10-11). Medieval tales are externally focused narratives and usually have little character introspection or opportunities to voice any inner doubts that a character may feel. This criticism or framing of Aragorn as a "weaker" character directly results from the filmmakers changing Aragorn's story. They use a hero's journey to structure that story in *The Two Towers* and the trilogy, but the main character development occurs in the second film and is essential to its structural success.

The change to make Aragorn the protagonist, or perspective character, is another means of tying the two separate storylines together. In the documentary "From Book to Screen", Fran Walsh comments that one of the changes to *The Two Towers* was to make Aragorn "more prominent" as a character (DVD extras). The films have key additions and rearrangements that point to Aragorn being given a hero's journey. Paxson notes the "evolution of the character of Aragorn offers a perfect opportunity to examine the process of revision in the book and film" and that "the film's increased emphasis on his actions and motivation provide one of the most significant changes in vision" (90).

The changes to make Aragorn "more prominent", as Walsh terms it, can be categorised as a hero's journey addition and first appear in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. In the novel, Aragorn departs from Rivendell and intends to follow Frodo as far as Gondor on his journey to Mordor. Aragorn carries the reforged shards of the sword with him, a symbol of kingship and acceptance of his birthright. Conversely, in the film, Aragorn rejects the path of kingship, his "refusal of the call." Elrond notes that "he turned from that path long ago" and Aragorn is given a foil in Boromir, son of the steward of Gondor, in saying, "Gondor has no King, Gondor needs no King." The reforged sword is brought to



Aragorn in *The Return of the King* after he has proved himself worthy of it by defending Helm's Deep an addition. It is with Boromir's death that Aragorn answers the call and begins his journey. As he lies dying, Boromir acknowledges Aragorn as "my King," and Aragorn takes Boromir's Gondorian arm guards symbolising that he is ready to take up his kingship.

At the first plot point of *The Two Towers*, Gandalf returns and sets Aragorn on a different path to finding the Hobbits (meeting the mentor). Gandalf says the Hobbits have their own path to walk and that Aragorn must travel to Edoras to help the King of Rohan, Théoden, defend against the turncoat Saruman. At the film's midpoint, Théoden evacuates Edoras with his people, travelling to Helm's Deep. On the way, they are attacked, and Aragorn falls from a cliff, presumed dead (approach to the innermost cave). Unconscious, he dreams of Arwen. This scene, along with other flashbacks in *The Two Towers*, inserts Aragorn and Arwen's love story into the main body of the film. The love story is an insertion developed from material in the novel appendices. On the way to Helm's Deep, Aragorn sees Saruman's army and brings this knowledge to Rohan and Théoden. When all seems lost, it is for Aragorn that the Elven army comes from Lothlórien (an addition). It is Aragorn who convinces Théoden to "ride out one more time" to meet the enemy. Encouraging and supporting Théoden in his time of need shows how Aragorn has grown as a leader.

Aragorn's hero's journey is not fully resolved in *The Two Towers*. There are still elements of his story that appear in *The Return of the King*, but he has little character development, considering the film is named after him. Changes in the third film include Elrond returning the reforged sword to him, in the novel it is Elrond's sons, and they bring a banner with the White Tree of Gondor (a symbol of the King). The key part of Aragorn's return is healing the sick and wounded which is diminished in the third film, but he plays a

crucial role in leading the remaining army to the Black Gates of Mordor to draw Sauron's eye away from Frodo and Sam.

### *The Return of the King*

The filmmakers' changes to *The Two Towers* dramatically alter the structure of the third and final film, *The Return of the King*. For Timmons, "Jackson diverges so extensively from the source text that comparative analysis is difficult" (141). His assertion assumes a direct mapping of the third film with the third novel volume, and this neglects the nature of the original novel and does not consider the changes already made to *The Two Towers*. If viewed through the lens of transforming a single narrative structure into four, comparative analysis of the source material is possible.

The changes made to *The Two Towers* film narrative change the nature of Aragorn's character, the climax of Helm's Deep, and render the fourth structure as a subplot; they also profoundly affect the structure of *The Return of the King*. The filmmakers use plot points from Book III and Book VI (at Isengard, the death of Saruman and Pippin looking into the Palantir) to craft the opening of a third film. They augment the new protagonist of Gandalf with a more significant foil in the Steward of Gondor, Denethor. Following the climax of the third film – the Siege of Gondor and Battle of Pelennor – the action turns again to the fourth structure and culminates in the destruction of The Ring. The material for the fourth narrative structure here is taken from Book IV and Book VI of the novel. To further discuss *The Return of the King's* structure, I have completed the plotting structure using the three-act structure. The tension between Gandalf and Denethor builds with the battle sequence of Pelennor Fields, and it culminates in Aragorn's arrival with the ghost army. This plot point is a useful reference marker to see how the third structure and conclusion of the fourth structure are arranged in the film.

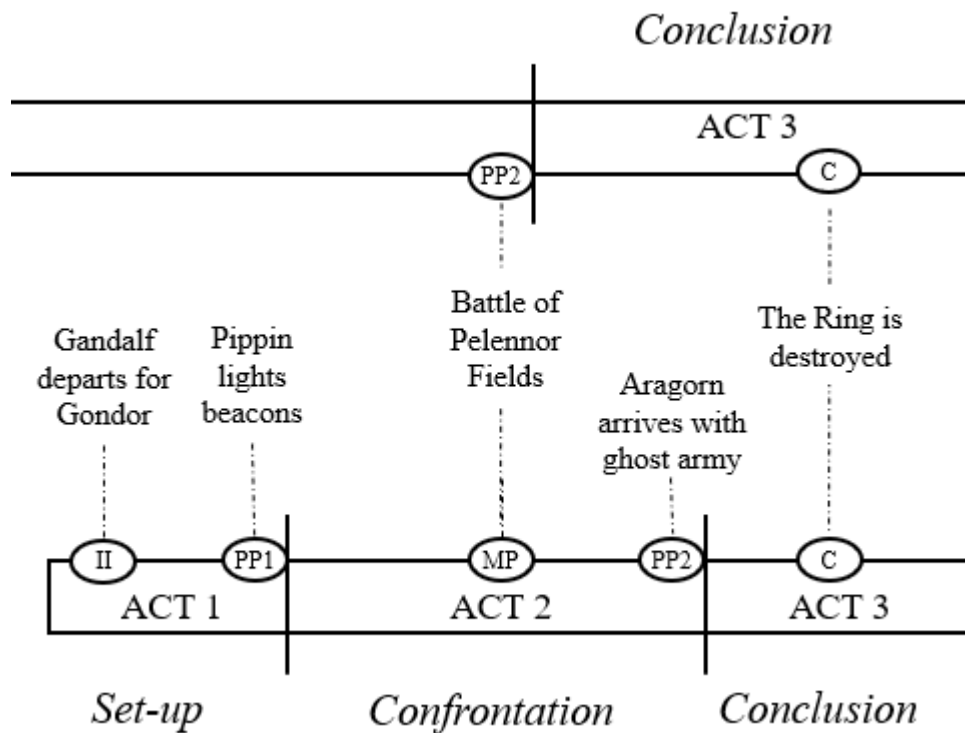


Fig. 3. Three-act structures of *The Return of the King*

After the death of Saruman at Isengard (an alteration), Pippin looks into the Palantír and sees the Eye of Sauron. This precipitates the inciting incident in which Gandalf departs from Edoras for Gondor, taking Pippin with him. These events are the last chapters from Book III and the opening chapters of Book V. The filmmakers developed these scenes into the inciting incident of the final film. The first act turns when Pippin defies Denethor and lights the Beacons of Gondor (calling for Rohan's aid). This film sequence is a cinematic alteration. The Beacons are already lit in the novel, and they send a red arrow to Rohan for assistance. However, this change also sets up Denethor as a more major foil or minor antagonist for Gandalf. The Siege of Gondor, and the Battle of Pelennor Fields, begin when Gandalf hits Denethor on the head with his staff. Denethor had finally seen the troops of Mordor at the gates of Gondor and sent his men into a minor panic. This event

is also the second plot point of the fourth structure. The construction of a third structure avoids the pitfall of the novel's third volume, which contains all endings if the novel is "read" as a trilogy instead of a three-volume novel.

The two plot points in this film are both additions: Pippin lighting the Beacons and Aragorn arriving at Gondor with the ghost army. These are both important augmentations by the filmmakers that give important narrative points to the third film. The ghosts are only used to destroy part of Saruman's army in the novel. The second plot point almost serves as a mini-climax. After the battle is concluded, the fourth narrative structure – the destruction of The Ring – reasserts itself from a subplot status to become the main narrative once more. The final climax of the film is a double climax, that of the third structure and that of the fourth structure. It is part of the storytelling potential of the trilogy. That potential is not determined by length but by the interaction between the four narrative structures.

## Conclusion

The adaptation of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* into a film trilogy demonstrates the difference between a three-volume publishing format and the trilogy form. While Tolkien's novel is structured in six books that allow it to be readily split into three volumes, key differences reveal the creation of individual narrative structures and transformation from a single novel into a trilogy of films. Splitting it into three films could be thought of in trilogy structures: the fourth structure was already present, and it was the individual film's structures themselves that needed to be created or plotted. The filmmakers used the adaptation techniques of deletion and minor additions and rearrangements in such a way as to create new narrative structures. To fulfil its narrative duties, each film within the trilogy must stand on its own, and it must have a beginning, middle and end *and*

accommodate the fourth structure. The combined three-act structures of *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy* are presented below.

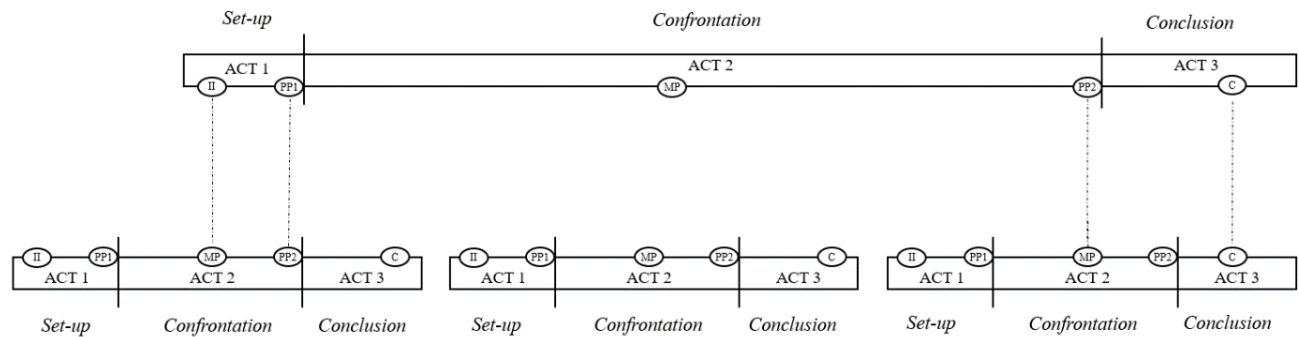


Fig. 4. *The Lord of the Rings* three-act structures

How does my structural definition fit within seriality studies more broadly? While Kelleter, Mittell and Brinkler resist narrative determinations of the form, when considering the development of story, understanding structural elements of trilogy are of vital importance. Speaking of US television series, Mittell suggests a privileged “narrative model in which a successful series never ends” (2007:16). I suggest that the power of the form lies in its duality of being constructed of both open-ended individual texts *and* an overarching text that does, in fact, end. It is this tension that creates the storytelling potential in the form. As a foundation text for modern fantasy and one that is sighted as a defining example of “trilogy” Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* that must be contended with. Both versions of *The Lord of the Rings* are unique works in their serialisation. Tolkien as a three-volume novel that retains, for the most part, its original distributed format, and Jackson’s films in how they were produced. My structural analysis using Field as a diagrammatical structure is intended to showcase the difference between a trilogy and three-volume work and demonstrate the proposed trilogy structure of three distinct narratives connected by a fourth structure.

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# To Be Continued...on the Football Pitch: Seriality, Transmedia Storytelling, and Viewer Engagement with Non-Fictional Television Characters

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## Introduction

In August 2021, FC Barcelona gave a press conference to bid farewell to Lionel Messi. The Argentinian is not only widely considered to be one of the greatest football players in the club's history, but also one of the greatest football players of all time<sup>1</sup> ("Leo Messi's"). The press conference begins with Messi making his way to a podium that prominently features the emblem of the club that over the years became inseparably associated with the football superstar. Before Messi addresses the audience, the broadcast cuts to images of his wife and three sons, who are seated directly in front of him. As the announcer declares that the press conference is about to begin, the audience erupts in applause, and Messi is overcome with emotion. He paces up and down the stage, visibly trying to contain his feelings as his wife hands him a tissue. While the announcer goes over the schedule of the press conference, Messi is struggling to retain a professional posture: he turns away from the cameras to blow his nose, wipes tears from his eyes, and looks distraught as he holds on to the podium. When he finally speaks, his voice sounds fragile, and his words are interrupted by audible sniffing sounds. Messi reflects on his history at FC Barcelona and declares his respect for the club, but ultimately announces that he will not be playing for Barcelona in the upcoming season since, as has been widely

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<sup>1</sup> With FC Barcelona, Messi has won Spain's top football League (La Liga) ten times and the Champions League, the highest club competition in Europe, four times. He has been the top goal scorer of La Liga eight times and across all top European football leagues six times. With seven wins, Messi is also the record holder of the Ballon d'Or, one of the most esteemed prizes in Football, which is annually given out by the magazine *France Football* to the best football player in the world.

publicised prior to the press conference, no agreement over his contract could be reached.

Messi's departure from FC Barcelona was a massive media event that was broadcast live on television and online to viewers around the world. The comment section and the chat transcript of FC Barcelona's official YouTube coverage of Messi's farewell indicate that long-term viewer engagement and serial storytelling are crucial aspects of the ways in which viewers relate to non-fictional television characters ("Leo Messi's"). While many viewers express their feelings towards Messi's departure simply by posting cry or heart emojis underneath the video or in the live chat, others explicitly refer to their own personal history with Messi and his history within the club in their responses. One user expresses their disappointment at Messi's departure by stating "I thought you started with Barcelona and you will end with it" while other viewers proclaim that they have been "following this genius since he started at Barcelona" and will "always support Messi, wherever he goes" (MIKEY; Ashe, 89; ROCKONbaby).

In recent years, there has been an increased interest in the study of fictional television characters, with media scholars being particularly fascinated with the relationship between television viewers and the protagonists of serialised "quality" television dramas (McCabe and Akass; Mittell, *Complex TV*; Schlütz). In comparison, there have not been many studies undertaken that examine the relationship between television viewers and sports stars, and the extent to which popular seriality might shape this relationship. This article will expand the ongoing discourse on television characters, seriality, and viewer engagement by investigating how viewers relate to characters from contemporary sports broadcasts. The article argues that current sports broadcasts frequently adopt narrative techniques that are commonly associated with fictional television formats (e.g., serial storytelling, transmedia storytelling) to increase the audience's engagement with the stories they tell and the characters that are featured on

them. The article begins with an overview of previous studies on television sports. This is followed by a discussion of serialised television storytelling, television characters, and viewer engagement. Using Lionel Messi's 2021 transfer from FC Barcelona to Paris Saint-Germain as a case study, the article will then show how modern sports broadcasts adopt elements of serial and transmedia storytelling and investigate this increasing implementation of seriality in the context of viewer engagement.

With regard to its methodology, the article uses an interdisciplinary approach that mainly draws on theories from sport studies, television studies, and cognitive media theory. While this article employs netnographic research methods to collect viewer responses to sports programmes, the arguments it makes are primarily based on a close-textual analysis of contemporary sports programmes and their transmedia extensions (Kozinets). In other words, the viewer responses that are referenced over the course of this article are meant to illustrate that transmedia seriality factors into how viewers relate to non-fictional television characters, but they cannot be regarded as empirical evidence. Ultimately, this article is concerned with developing a qualitative framework for the study of viewer engagement with non-fictional television characters that could be adopted by quantitative studies in the future.

### **Media Sports, Viewer Engagement, and Sports Stars**

When comparing studies on television sports with studies of other television genres, it immediately becomes clear that there still exists a gap regarding studies that approach television sports from a cultural studies perspective—which is somewhat surprising given how popular sports programmes are with television audiences all over the world. Yet, despite the overall lack of scholarly works on television sports, there are a few studies that have previously examined sports programmes in the context of narration and viewer engagement.

In his seminal work on television sports, Whannel uses the rivalry between British runners Sebastian Coe and Steve Ovett as his main case study to explore how television broadcasts fictionalise sporting events to appeal to the audience:

Clearly television did not invent this story, or create its importance within the scheme of things. It did, however, draw on it heavily as part of its appeal to viewers. In doing so it constantly foregrounded the events precisely as a story, which can be understood in terms of the workings of the hermeneutic code. The hermeneutic code poses the initial enigma of a narrative, and gives the text its forward progression towards the resolution of the enigma. So as not to answer the question too soon, a number of strategies are adopted. The most relevant here are constant reformulation of the question, the promise that there will be an answer, and the provision of a partial answer. (132)

As Whannel here highlights, sports programmes primarily fictionalise sports events by introducing narrative questions, thus increasing audience investment. Whannel's example underlines that the narrative enigma that sports programmes create can be simple questions that fit in with sports' competitive nature and focus on athletic ability such as "Who will win?" and "Who is the best?" Sports broadcasts further fictionalise the events they depict by ascribing a mythological quality to them. Perhaps most famously, Roland Barthes has argued in favour of the Tour de France as a modern epic, akin to Homer's *Odyssey* (75). Similarly, Whannel states that the way in which the Coe/Ovett rivalry was rendered in the media prior to their confrontation at the 1980 Olympic Games purposely recalled "gods, Titans and mythic confrontations" (138).

In addition to these fictionalization techniques, modern sports programmes have embraced serial and transmedia storytelling—both of which are narrative strategies most commonly associated with fictional storytelling. As a result, many of today's sports programmes resemble the narrative complexity of television drama (Mittell, *Complex TV*). Stauff uses the Tour de France to highlight this aspect of modern sports broadcasts:

To articulate their take on the disqualification of the Tour de France rider, fans refer to comparable past events, activate knowledge about rivalries between cyclists, or

note character traits that they condensed from the alleged perpetrator's prior appearances. Sport thus creates a continuously evolving and recursive storyworld that, like all popular seriality, proliferates across different media forms (texts, photos, films, etc.) and different media platforms (television, social media, etc.). (Stauff)

These observations highlight that the narration of modern sports programmes increasingly resembles the complex serialised storytelling of fictional television, extends across different types of media, and has changed how viewers interact with sports programmes. However, there has not been much research undertaken on how the evolution of sports programmes has affected viewer engagement with the characters that are featured on them. Before discussing this aspect in detail, it makes sense to look more generally at viewer engagement in television sports.

Wenner and Gantz argue that main motivators for watching television sports can be found at the "crossroads of identity and ambiguity" (234). What primarily distinguishes sports from fictional television genres is that it provides "live and unscripted drama, but one that guarantees resolution" (Wenner and Gantz 235). Following teams or players is consequently an essential aspect of watching sports since it provides the ideal combination of identification and ambiguity: the audience does not know if their favourite will succeed, which makes it particularly gratifying if they do (Wenner and Gantz 236).

With regard to viewer engagement, the genre that perhaps resembles sports most closely is reality television since both genres appeal to their viewers by combining constructed "storylines that pack an emotional punch" with "moments of real human experience" (Hill 122). Kavka highlights that 'feeling' is one of the main differences between fictional and factual television, arguing that "in terms of emotive function, feeling has no place in information programming" (94). In contrast, fictional programmes are largely concerned with eliciting emotional responses in the audience. According to Kavka, as a result of the ongoing "tabloidization" of television, fictional and factual television have begun to mix: fictional programmes have added a sense of reality to their

narratives to increase spectacle whereas factual programmes have adopted elements of fictional television to intensify emotional engagement (94). While my analysis of the Messi transfer saga in this article is primarily concerned with the impact of transmedia seriality on viewer engagement with non-fictional television characters, it should be noted that it also functions as a prime example for “tabloidization.”

As previously noted, many studies that have investigated athletes in relation to viewer engagement, have examined them through the lens of mythology. Yet modern celebrity culture has reshaped the audience’s relationship with sports stars. Marshall argues that, for the last two centuries, different types of media (e.g. books, newspapers, magazines, film)—the majority of which are controlled by large public and private media organisations—have represented culture. In our current age of convergence culture, a shift has been taking place towards presentational media, which is not controlled by media organisations, but individuals. This shift is noteworthy since it has reshaped our perception and engagement with contemporary sports stars. Cashmore claims that, unlike some modern celebrities who are simply famous for being famous, sport stars typically still become famous for their athletic abilities (136). Yet, he also notes that “celebrity culture is inclusive and rewards anything that fans find gratifying, whether a series of electrifying performances on the field of play, a lifestyle of excess or even an amusing Twitter account” (Cashmore 137). The most relevant aspect of the “proliferation of the public self” in the context of this article is that enables sports stars to actively shape the stories the media tells about them (Marshall). Messi’s transfer from FC Barcelona to Paris Saint-Germain F.C. in many ways encapsulates the shift from representational to presentational media since, as the story unfolded across different media, Messi directly intervened through social media (e.g. Twitter, Instagram) to control how it was being told.

### **Seriality, Character Arcs, and Viewer Engagement**

Television serials are primarily defined by their open-endedness. They typically tell a continuous story over multiple episodes or seasons of a programme. Since the story unfolds across multiple episodes, the audience has to construct the diegesis based on her knowledge of the entire history of the show, which—particularly in the case of long-running serials (e.g. soap operas, dramas)—can encompass a vast amount of narrative information. Allen acknowledges this aspect of serialised television narration by stating that, in the context of the serial, “each episode, each new character, each new plot becomes a ‘theme’ to be assessed against the horizon supplied by the reader’s perception of the text up to that point” (86). Similarly, Creeber asserts that, since television serials are able to develop their stories over an extended period of time, they are able to achieve a narrative scope and level of viewer engagement that is only equalled by few contemporary storytelling formats (4). In serial television, plotlines are rarely fully resolved, and if they are, they are immediately replaced by “more suspenseful or engrossing narrative enigmas to keep viewers watching” (Mittell, “Film” 164). Rather than providing an ultimate narrative telos, television serials usually feature a number of overlapping “mini-closures” that resolve a particular narrative question, but do not move the text closer to an ultimate resolution (Allen 75). Thus, serialised television narration might be best described as a cycle of interim questions and answers, in which current questions are emphasised while those already answered slowly fade and retreat into the background (Allen 76).

Serial television places more emphasis on characters than most other television formats. One of the main reasons for this is that “continuing stories make characters more likely to undergo significant live events and changes” which often leads to the characters themselves changing or at least growing (Newman 23). The potential for character change can increase the audience’s investment in the characters—viewers

are not only interested in how a story will develop, but they also want to see how characters will be affected by new plot developments.

In his work on television poetics, Michael Newman examines the notion of character arcs at length. He states that, since the plot of television serials slowly accumulates over time, viewers are meant to watch episodes in sequence in order to trace the progression of the plot and the characters (23). Newman stresses the crucial role that character arcs play for viewer engagement and clarifies how they relate to the plot of television serials:

The device that best ensures [the viewer's] commitment to the narrative is the character arc. Arc is to character as plot is to story. Put slightly differently, arc is plot stated in terms of character. An arc is a character's journey from A through B, C, and D to E [...] Character arcs may stretch across many episodes, seasons, and the entirety of a series. (23)

This means that, although character arcs are closely-tied to a television serial's story, they do not progress at the same pace, but climax or resolve at different points as plotlines. Character arcs are carefully planned out by television producers and usually include significant turning points—plot events that all further action of the character is based on. Moving a character's arc along too slowly may result in viewers getting bored with a character while moving an arc along too quickly suggests that a programme might not take advantage of the serial format's quality of imitating the "protracted rhythms of real life" (Smith 84).

Kelleter has argued that all forms of popular seriality (including television) are essentially capitalist since they are based on the belief of their continued existence (30). Character arcs are inseparably tied to the capitalist underpinnings of serial narratives since they create interest in the development of characters to convince viewers to come back to a programme (Newman 25). Yet, in addition to such commercial functions, character arcs also fulfil "aesthetic functions" such as "generating interest in character,



of engaging the audience in the struggles and discoveries, the lives and loves of their TV friends, and of maximizing formal unity” (Newman 25). In the context of this article, character arcs are relevant because they provide a character-based framework to organise the plot of a television serial and trace the audience’s engagement with the characters.

Providing a comprehensive overview of how the relationship between television viewers and characters has previously been theorised would go beyond the scope of this article. Thus, my discussion of television characters, viewer engagement, and serial television will largely focus on one key element, namely the extent to which the temporal setup of television serials shapes the viewer/character relationship. What primarily distinguishes characters from television serials from characters who exist within non-serialised stories is that they have histories and memories (Allen). When viewers relate to these characters, and their relationships with other characters, they read that relationship against its history up to that point in the story which, in the case of long-running soap operas, could span five, ten, or in some cases twenty years (Allen 72). The open-endedness of the serial encourages a more intimate relationship between viewers and characters through giving the audience “a sense of becoming part of the lives and actions of the characters they see” (Newcomb 253). Since television serials unfold over an extended period of time, they are able to provide viewers with an intimate, slow-building portrait of a person’s life that cannot be easily matched by other contemporary visual storytelling formats such as film (Gorton 124).

Harrington and Bielby have previously examined the complex ways in which fandom is intertwined with the different stages of a person’s life. In their work on life course and fandom, they argue that long-term fandom can “provide structure to life narratives, as fans employ specific cultural texts to segment or divide their lives into different periods” (Harrington and Bielby 438). The authors also indicate that long-term fandom can lead to

distinct types of emotional engagement— for example, viewers might not only feel sad at the end of a beloved television series as a result of their attachment to its characters, but also because the ending marks the end of an era in their own life (Harrington and Bielby 431). In their work on long-term viewer engagement with characters from contemporary television drama, Blanchet and Vaage echo this argument and develop it further. They argue that, based on the history viewers share with television characters, they form a bond with them that “cannot be reduced to the processes of empathy and sympathy” (Blanchet and Vaage 28). This “shared history account” enables television serials to create emotionally affecting character moments at any point in time since the audience is already familiar with the characters and the story world (Blanchet and Vaage 28; Warhol 110). The effects of seriality on viewer engagement have already been studied at length in the context of fictional television, but rarely in the context of non-fictional television such as sports broadcasts.

### **From FC Barcelona to Serialised Drama**

Various media outlets referred to Lionel Messi’s transfer from FC Barcelona to Paris Saint-Germain F.C. in the summer of 2021 as a soap opera. The use of the term is relevant in the context of this article since the soap opera is a television genre that is commonly associated with melodramatic serialised storytelling. The remainder of this article will trace Messi’s transfer and analyse it in the context of viewer engagement, arguing that it is a prime example for the impact that transmedia seriality has had on how viewers engage with non-fictional television characters.

Fractures between FC Barcelona and Lionel Messi first started to publicly show in early 2020 (“The Timeline”). In February, shortly after FC Barcelona’s team manager Ernesto Valverde was fired, the club’s sporting director Eric Abidal gave an interview to the Catalan publication *Sport* in which he stated that, among other reasons, the manager

was let go because some players weren't working hard enough. The following day, Messi publicly responded to Abidal's accusations via Twitter, defending the players and stating that "the sporting direction should also face up to their responsibilities and, above all, take charge of their own decisions" (@goal). Messi further demanded that Abidal should name names when making accusations since, otherwise, the image of every player would be tainted. In March 2020, at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, Messi again voiced his dissatisfaction with FC Barcelona's leadership—this time on Instagram. He confirmed that the club's players agreed to a seventy percent reduction in pay to combat FC Barcelona's financial losses during the pandemic, but also criticised the club for putting pressure on the players to comply with this drastic pay cut. In August 2020, Barcelona were eliminated from the Champions League, Europe's most prestigious club tournament, after losing 2-8 to Bayern Munich.<sup>2</sup>

After the defeat, which was portrayed in the media as one of the club's most humiliating losses, the events leading to Messi's departure accelerated within a span of days. Barcelona's manager and the club's sporting director were fired and Ronald Koeman, one of the club's legendary former players, took over as new manager. At this point in time, it was reported that Koeman had plans to radically restructure the club and told Messi during a private meeting that he does not have any privileges within the squad anymore. Upon the arrival of the new manager, Barcelona also released several star players including Messi's close friend Luis Suarez. On August 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020, Messi sent an official letter to the club leadership, informing them of his intention to leave FC Barcelona before the start of the new season in September. Messi and his legal staff claimed that a clause in his contract would allow him to leave on a free transfer immediately. However, LaLiga deemed that the 700 million Euro transfer fee that FC Barcelona set for Messi was

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<sup>2</sup><https://www.uefa.com/uefachampionsleague/news/0260-1020a197123b-5848d2b10d39-1000--barcelona-2-8-bayern-record-breaking-win-for-rampant-germans/>

valid, which essentially forced him to stay in Barcelona for another year since no football team in the world was willing or able to pay this excessive transfer fee. In September 2020, Messi gave a candid interview to the football fan site Goal in which he discussed his problems with FC Barcelona in detail while also confirming that he was going to remain at the club for another year. At the time of writing, the interview has been viewed over four million times (“Messi”).

Messi continued to play for Barcelona until his contract expired in June 2021, which officially made him a free agent and allowed him to move to another club without a transfer fee. Throughout the summer of 2021, FC Barcelona kept reassuring the public that—although no deal has been finalised—Messi was keen to stay in Barcelona. In August 2021, the club surprisingly announced that a deal between Messi and FC Barcelona could not be reached since the financial details of the deal both parties agreed-upon violate the rules of LaLiga. After giving an emotional farewell at a press conference, Messi joined Paris Saint-Germain on a two-year contract.

As mentioned above, the narrative structure of sports broadcasts is not exclusively episodic—for example, many popular team sports are divided by seasons, thereby encouraging viewers to view the current season in relation to prior seasons. Moreover, many sports offer viewers the chance to experience the sort of pleasures that are primarily reserved for serial storytelling in the form of cups or tournaments in which the winners progress and the losers are eliminated. Even more so than a season, this condensed format encourages viewers to trace the progress of a team or player and reflect on their progression throughout the tournament. However, unlike these serial elements that are interwoven into the fabric of television sports (e.g. seasons, cups), Messi’s transfer from FC Barcelona to Paris Saint-Germain more resembles the storylines of serialised television drama. In fact, it seems difficult to imagine how in a fictional context the ‘plotline’ of Messi’s transfer could have been played out more dramatically.

Similar to plotlines of serialised television drama, the story of Messi's transfer slowly accumulated over an extended period of time. It began in the summer of 2020, evolved over the course of an entire year, and culminated in Messi's transfer to Paris Saint-Germain in the summer of 2021. Yet, in true serial fashion, the ending to this story was not definitive. Rather, it functions as a "mini-closure" that ties up one plotline while posing new questions (e.g., Will Messi be able to repeat his successes in a completely different environment? How will FC Barcelona react to the loss of its biggest star player?) (Allen 75). In addition to the slow build-up and its open-endedness, the story of Messi's transfer resembles contemporary "complex" television in that it unfolded across different types of media (e.g. newspapers, fan sites, social media, television). Also, it is safe to assume that viewers who followed FC Barcelona during the 2020/21 season would be caught up on current developments in the Messi transfer saga during the team's weekly games by the game's commentators. For example, on the German iteration of the international sports streaming service DAZN, the commentary team frequently discussed FC Barcelona's performances in relation to the drama that was unfolding at the club behind the scenes. More specifically, many of Messi's actions during games—positive or negative—were filtered through the superstar's assumed feelings and motivations, thus providing viewers with an incentive to tune in on a weekly basis that went beyond FC Barcelona's success as a team. Yet, as with fictional transmedia stories, those viewers who were willing to follow the story across multiple platforms over an extended period of time would be rewarded with a more comprehensive experience.

Messi's departure from Barcelona and eventual transfer to Paris not only played out in serial fashion on a plot level, but it also featured a compelling character arc. Up until the events that led to his departure from FC Barcelona, Messi's public persona had been that of the ideal Barca player. He had spent most of his professional career at the club and emphasised on numerous occasions that he intended to finish his career in

Barcelona. Thus, when Barcelona's sporting director criticised the team's players for their attitude, and Messi shifted the blame for lacklustre performances to the club leadership and soon after handed in his resignation, this marked a significant change in attitude for the Argentinian superstar. Messi's eventual departure from FC Barcelona in 2021 can also be interpreted as a plot event that advanced his character arc. In contrast to the previous year, which was dominated by headlines stating that Messi had been forced to stay at FC Barcelona against his will, Messi claimed during his farewell press conference that things had changed for him from the previous year. He explained that, while he did want to leave in 2020, it was now his wish to stay at Barcelona—yet the financial regulations of LaLiga made it impossible for him to stay.

As with the overall story of Messi's transfer, which unfolded akin to fictional plotlines from serialised television drama, the character arc that progressed alongside this plot strongly resembles the sort of character development that television characters from fictional narratives typically undergo over the course of a season. Messi begins his arc as the loyal team captain of FC Barcelona, who has been with the club over twenty years. After a number of disagreements with the management, he wants to leave, but is forced to stay for contractual reasons. In what would be considered a poetic turnaround in a fictional context, Messi then claims that he has rediscovered his passion for FC Barcelona, but this time has to leave—again for contractual reasons.

The extent to which Messi's transfer from FC Barcelona to Paris Saint-Germain resembles the serialised storytelling of contemporary television drama is relevant since it offers audiences opportunities for viewer engagement that have historically not been associated with television sports. More traditional sports viewers might be mainly interested in the athletic performances of Messi or FC Barcelona. For such viewers, the viewing pleasures that have historically been associated with sports programmes—identifying with a team or player in the context of an athletic competition in which the

outcome is uncertain—are still dominant. However, as I have discussed over the course of this article, the serial nature of the story of Messi's transfer also offers viewers opportunities for engagement that are more commonly associated with fictional serial television narratives. As previously noted, what primarily distinguishes the audience's relationship with serial characters from their relationship with non-fictional characters is that serial characters have histories and memories, and the ability to change or, at least, grow (Mittell, "Complex TV" 133-42). The global online reception to Messi's transfer makes clear that viewers were engaged in this story based on a combination of their interest in how the story would resolve, their investment in the player's character arc, and their shared history with Messi. For example, in the YouTube comments to Messi's interview with Goal, user Shivam states that "at the end of the season, it would be very satisfying to see him leave for free" while Zizzy7 wishes for Messi to get "everything he wants and deserves at the end of the season" (Shivam; Zizzy7). Another viewer expresses their hopes that Messi "can find happiness in his football wearing a Barca shirt again" whereas Anonymous Boiii\_69 demands: "Let Messi out, he is being forced to stay" (No, I'm Spartacus; Anonymous Boiii\_69).

These responses mainly underline the audience's interest in the story of Messi's transfer and the arc of his public persona. Meanwhile, in their responses to Messi's farewell press conference, viewers frequently reflect on the player's transfer in relation to their own lives:

This is a wound that I'm afraid will never heal, Messi was the reason I became a fan of a wonderful club back in 09. Each week I would look forward to seeing him play for Barca. I never imagined I would be here watching this video, only when he retired as a Barca player. My heart is broken but it is what it is. Life is full of surprises, only way to deal with it is to move forward and be hopeful. Thank you Leo, for the wonderful memories you gave me, thank you for making me a fan, and thank you for all that you've done for this club and its fans. You'll be back, maybe not as a player but just know, we'll be waiting for your return. I guess it's true what they say, every journey has its end, and what a beautiful journey it has been. (Aaron Garcia)

This comment, which is exemplary for many of the responses that can be found in the comment section to Messi's farewell press conference, makes clear that the history viewers share with a character does not only guide viewer engagement with fictional television characters, but also affects how viewers relate to characters from non-fictional television programmes. It would go beyond the scope of this article to examine if long-term viewer engagement with non-fictional television characters from sports programmes leads to specific emotional responses, yet this overview of the reception of Messi's departure from FC Barcelona highlights the ability of serial storytelling to intensify the audience's emotional engagement with a story and its characters.

## **Conclusion**

My analysis of football superstar Lionel Messi's long-gestating transfer from FC Barcelona to Paris Saint-Germain in this article has shown that the serialisation of non-fictional sports events across different platforms offers sports viewers the opportunity to experience viewing pleasures that have in the past been primarily associated with fictional television storytelling. Of course, sport programmes have always featured serial elements (e.g. tournaments, seasons). However, with regard to viewer engagement, these serial elements have historically been dominated by what might be considered more traditional appeals of watching television sports such as identifying with a team or player and watching them compete in unscripted athletic competitions. These viewing pleasures of sports programmes still remain intact, but the ongoing trend towards the serialisation of non-fictional television programmes (e.g. true crime documentaries) provides viewers with more options to engage with their favourite athletes on and off the pitch. More specifically, while some viewers might still choose to engage with sports programmes in a more traditional sense (e.g. only following the weekly games), other viewers might get more emotionally invested in the performance of a player based on



their knowledge of off-pitch plotlines, their shared history with a player, or their interest in her character arc. Within the broader discourse on seriality and non-fiction, my analysis in this article is meant to be understood as an initial step. I also want to acknowledge that the main case study of this article provided an ideal example for how transmedia seriality can enhance viewer engagement with non-fictional television characters. The reason for this is that Messi's transfer from FC Barcelona to Paris Saint-Germain essentially unfolded like a fictional storyline and even included a clear character arc. Thus, future research on this subject needs to investigate how it affects viewer engagement if the 'plot' of a non-fictional television programmes does not develop or resolve in a way that exactly resembles the carefully constructed plots of fictional serial television. Additionally, future studies on this subject need to examine if the increasing serialisation of non-fictional events elicits distinct emotional responses (e.g. sympathy, antipathy) in viewers and pay more attention to the extent to which the interweaving of on and off-pitch plotlines (e.g. How much does the drama surrounding Messi's transfer affect his performances in individual games?) shapes viewer engagement.

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# Seriality and Bridging Gaps in Interrupted Narrative Linearity

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This article will discuss how gaps in a putative linear narrative have been bridged in a transnationally distributed television sketch comedy series, which has been transformed into an episodic situation comedy. Within a dialectic of narrative continuity and interruption exhibited by the television series *Un Gars, Une Fille* (Quebec CA, 1997-2002), I will multimodally examine primarily the original version of this series to illustrate how setting, characters, and storyworld configuration, along with formal devices such as credits, logos, transition graphics, camera position, and music cues serve to bridge gaps in a presumptive narrative linearity. The investigation will focus on a series of segments in which the main characters, a young-ish heterosexual couple, i.e., the only permanent cast members representing the main protagonists of the entire series, pays a conflict-laden visit to the mother-in-law of the boyfriend/husband staged in two separate episodes. Narrative ruptures, along with the above-mentioned interwoven narrative continuity devices, achieve a tenuous interplay whereby time and space for audience interaction and interpretation are opened up in anticipation of evolving opportunities for digital interventions of audiences throughout the 20 years of continuing transnational productions.

## The dialectics of continuity and gaps in serialized narratives

Jason Mittell (*Complex TV* 10) defines seriality as serial storytelling with 1) a narrative world, 2) a consistent set of characters, who 3) experience a chain of events, 4) over time. Mittell further elaborates that series cohesion is undermined by “gaps, leading to temporal ruptures, narrmarcative anticipation, moments for viewer productivity,

opportunities for feedback between producers and consumers, and a structured system for a shared cultural conversation" ("Operational Seriality" 228). Mittell reminds us that serialized gaps are structured and contain "unavoidable fissures that force readers or viewers to disengage from the narrative before moving onward." Arguing against the notion of a serial defined by formal elements, Mittell emphasizes that seriality should be considered a "dynamic cultural practice" which arises from the "mandated gap between installments within a continuous narrative."

Serial continuity, on the other hand, is achieved by consistent accumulation of events that can be read by viewers who have been "taught how to read narrative events as self-contained or cumulative" ("Operational Seriality" 231). Mittell proposes that *setting* and *storyworld* are key factors in upholding narrative continuity in serialized narratives, as are *characters*. Mittell urges seriality scholars to investigate the "multiple forms of continuities and various structures of gaps" (237). Transnationally produced sketch comedy adaptations combining sketch modules into a sitcom series such as the television format adaptations of *Un Gars, Une Fille* offer appropriate objects for investigating the dialectics of continuity and gaps in the narrative sequencing and linearity.

Sketches have a short length of between one and ten minutes with a scripted and rehearsed production, along with the comedic exploration of a concept, character, or situation (Wikipedia). Due to their duration and content, shorter modules of comedy sketches easily combine to create single episodes of longer, i.e., half hour, situation comedy (sitcom) series. Script, rehearsal, and stage direction distinguish a sketch from the more improvisational skit. For the purposes of this article I consider the sketches in *Un Gars, Une Fille* to be narrative modules, whose linear sequencing can be shifted and re-configured as they are combined into situation comedies. According to Cameron , narrative modules are the result of a "database aesthetic" at the heart of recent complex

film narratives. Narrative modularity is characterized by dividing the narrative into “discrete segments” which are “subjected to complex articulations.” They suggest that time is divisible and “subject to manipulation” (1) For the purposes of this article, the sitcom *Un Gars, Une Fille* represents “a series of disarticulated narrative pieces” arranged with temporal indeterminacy. Hanne Bruun posits that sketch comedies have a socially critical function by analyzing a “presumably shared socio-political and cultural reality” (725), whereby “viewers are presumed to be knowledgeable about social and political issues, stereotypes, mentalities and narratives” of their societies and their societies’ normative frameworks. *Un Gars, Une Fille* diverges in many ways from what Poulaki critiques as the “chronological sequentiality” underlying conventional narrative theory, in which both causal linearity and linear temporality of the beginning-middle-end structure are *apriori* assumptions. Different kinds of gaps in narrative linearity are discernible in *Un Gars, Une Fille*, and I will demonstrate in this article how the narrative structure contains temporal, spatial, thematic/topical, affective, and causal-logical gaps which delay or divert narrative progression and sequentiality.

A roundtable discussion of contemporary seriality provides evidence of how narrative modules, i.e, sketches, might be strung together to form a situation comedy. In this roundtable discussion, author and screenwriter Lev Grossman indicated that serial authors strive to divide an episode, as the “maximum narrative unit size for a serial narrative”, into smaller segments with their own “miniature narrative arc” ( 110). These narrative arcs are characterized by an anticipated suspense, whereby “the viewer knows that the surprise is on its way” without the primary domination of the suspense. According to Grossman (Roundtable, 120), serial storytelling stretches out the narrative, so that the viewer almost “fall[s] into step with the people” they read about. The roundtable discussion returned repeatedly to the question of suspense as a primary factor in serial storytelling. According to literary scholar Sharon Marcus, another discussant at the



roundtable, suspense “involves guessing what’s going to happen” (120) but being wrong about it half the time. Lev Grossman picks up on Mittell’s mention of the storyworld as a factor in narrative cohesion and continuity by emphasizing that viewers strive to remain in the narrative universe of the characters (120). Discussant and film critic A.O. Scott concurred with Grossman by pointing to the desire of viewers to “spend more time with the people” in these storyworlds, a product of the character-driven nature of serial narratives (125) which invite identification with, dislike, or are able to induce the audience members to “just want to be with these people who become a circle of friends and intimates and familiars (125).

Kelleter (101) points to this and other kinds of “incessant continuity management” of popular series, which entail a recursive “pruning and coherence building within the ongoing narrative itself.” Kelleter characterized the storytelling market as an ongoing struggle to continually reposition “every single series” within the context of competing series (102). Furthermore, in the interests of maintaining future profitability the “entire field of serial entertainment” is involved in multiplying generic and “transgeneric” repertoires of similar productions.

### **Television Format Adaptations as Transcultural Series: The Case of *Un Gars, Une Fille***

This article considers television adaptations as a “show based on the format rights of an existing show (Chalaby 8) or, a “remake produced under license” (source). Referencing Michel Rodrigue, the original producer of *Un Gars, Une Fille*, Chalaby calls a format a “recipe” with an unchanging “kernel of rules and principles,” as well as adaptable components which are modified as the show moves from one market to another (10), involving an interplay between the local and the global. One of the primary concerns of televisual adaptations is to achieve an optimal degree of cultural (Straubhaar ), aesthetic

(Van Keulen ), or discursive (Uribe-Jongbloed and Medina ) proximity as the driving force for audience identification and loyalty. This study will focus on scripted drama and comedies in the discussion of the continuities and interruptions of *Un Gars, Une Fille* as a sketch comedy-based sitcom series.

Television adaptation studies avoid the pitfalls of fidelity theories underlying conventional intermedial adaptation studies by embedding televisual narratives within a historically, culturally, socially, and politically specific discursive context directed to realizing the greatest possible cultural proximity, based on the assumption that countries and cultures

prefer their own local or national production first due to factors such as the appeal of local stars, the local knowledge required to understand much television humor, the appeal of local themes and issues, the appeal of similar looking ethnic faces, and the familiarity of local styles and locales (cited in Straubhaar "World Television," 91; cf. La Pastina and Straubhaar "Multiple Proximities," 273).

This study will investigate the attributes of the narrative structure and sequencing common to most adaptations by examining the interplay of narrative linearity and sequencing of sketch segments as modules in the episodes of the primary original version. However, at times I will point to divergencies from, or conformity to the original to point out alternative or deviating structurations of the narrative to illustrate potential points of culturally specific interventions. It will, however, in the space of this article, not be possible to culturally, historically, or socio-politically contextualize these cultural differences inherent in the different versions.

*Un Gars, Une Fille* is a good example of a transnationally adapted television series with a lengthy history of official adaptations, currently numbering over 30. This series is also aligned with Kelleter's above-mentioned remarks on the generic and transgeneric repertoires of series in the face of market positionings in the field of social entertainment. Most officially sanctioned versions of *Un Gars, Une Fille* exhibit a stringent adherence to

common format rules laid down by the producers. These adaptations display slightly differently configured dialectically interwoven elements of narrative continuity and interruptions. All versions of *Un Gars, Une Fille* feature a heterosexual couple between their mid-20s to 40s as the primary, and recurring characters in the series, corresponding to the notion of sketch comedy described above. Other non-regular characters may appear in other episodes, but they are largely kept out of frame. The couple's interactions in the series take place in a variety of public and private spaces: bedrooms, bathrooms, living rooms, dining rooms, kitchens; shopping malls, government offices, doctors' and psychologists' offices, in moving cars, at the mother-in-law's apartment or house, in restaurants, on a camping trip, etc. With the exception of the French, Italian, and Spanish versions, which retain the original short sketch comedy format, each episode is usually less than 30 minutes long and contains three 5-7 minute sketches that may or may not be arranged in linear chronological order. Each sketch, or even series of sketches comprising the episodes, may be considered such a "mini narrative arc" as module mentioned by Grossman. Stringing together three sketch segments into a sitcom functions as a "schema" for "interpreting and organizing experiences, expectations and understandings" (Bruun 726).

Title Images Officially Adapted Versions of *Un Gars, Une Fille* (Selection)



Figure 1: Title images from a variety of official adaptations of *Un Gars, Une Fille*. Notice the common gendered color combination, the split color screen, and the images of the two main characters in most of the adaptations.

In addition to the two main protagonists, a large majority of narrative gaps are achieved by the sonic and graphic transitions between the shots, which bookend the mini narrative arcs of the sketches, while the sketch portions are separated by logos and music based

on the credit title graphics at the beginning and end of the episode. These transitions have a dual role to play as both emotional or affective gaps in the contested interactions between protagonists and antagonists. Mroz (2012) points out how affective devices such as these transitions function as “intensifiers” and move beyond meaning while also disrupting it (5). The audio and visual transitions in *Un Gars, Une Fille* represent just such “moments or images which suspend linear temporality and don’t necessarily fit into narrative progression” (5). In addition these transitions link the disparate modules of shots and scenes together as an aesthetically cohesive unit of the episode and series by means of their repetitions throughout the episode.

In my descriptions of the storyworld and the activities of the characters in each episode, I will label “scenes” those segments, which are located in a specific space or room in which a variety of interactions, discussions, and activities may transpire in a series of shots. These scenes contain the two major narrative arcs, the first extending from the beginning of part 1 until its final shot. The other major narrative arc traverses the entirety of part 2, as I will later illustrate in the Tables 1 and 2. The two tables contain the list of shots in each part of the scenes, and my descriptions and analyses will make reference to the shot numbers in these tables throughout this paper.

“Shots” are those shorter segments of narrative arcs separated by the graphic and sonic transitions mentioned above, in which specific discussion topics, movements, or actions take place. Every single version of the series configures the conversations between the couple and the mother-in-law not as a reverse-angle, back-and-forth close-up camera shot of all the dialog participants as is customary filming intense dialogs among protagonists and antagonists in films and most television series. Instead, the couple converses with the mother-in-law as a head-on point-of-view interaction in which the mother is never completely in the frame, if at all, as can be seen in the examples of Fig. 2.

The current study will scrutinize one scene in official adaptations of *Un Gars, Une Fille*, which exemplifies a particular kind of seriality constructed in this series combining continuous and interrupted narrative elements. Previous studies of this series (Larkey 2019; Larkey 2018) have focused on narrative content, structure, and sequencing of this scene, whereby similarities and differences of multiple versions were multimodally compared and culturally contextualized. I will therefore not be dwelling on the differences in this case.

This study will re-produce the story, the *fabula*, on the basis of a three-part, *syuzhet*-based, loosely structured narrative sequencing of the original version emerging from the sketch-derived scene and shot modules in the episodes. The *fabula* revolves around the competition for affection of both the mother-in-law and the boyfriend toward the daughter, ultimately “won” by the boyfriend. It will analyze the placement and function of the different narrative gaps exhibited in the episodes by the graphic and musical transitions separating each sketch segment. There is an indeterminate temporal and spatial gap between the previsit segments and the following 2-part segments of the actual visit at the mother-in-law’s home. These gaps interrupt and reset the emotional-affective linear and sequential temporality of the modules as the antagonistic emotions between the mother-in-law and the boyfriend evolve from the beginning in each shot.

### **Finding the *Fabula* (1): The Mother-in-Law Scene(s) –**

**Previsit: The “good” daughter’s sexual bribery of her partner to visit her mother**

The mother-in-law scene, characterized by its sole location in her dining room in most versions is divided into two distinct parts, with a pre-visit segment spatially located in the couple's own bathroom, and temporally separated from the actual visit (an indeterminately short while later), but in most versions positioned in the same episode as the first part of the visit. The second part of the visit to the mother-in-law is filmed in the same dining room space – thus not a spatial gap – but in a completely different episode, which connotes a further and longer indeterminate temporal gap. The combined visit(s)



Video Clip 1: The Seduction Shot-Greek Version. Notice how the music “completes” the implied sex act along with the camera, which captures the face of the boyfriend on the receiving end of the pleasure.

to the mother-in-law, totaling between 44 and 52 minutes depending on the version, terminates at the end of the second part when the couple leaves the mother-in-law's

apartment/house with leftovers from the (second) dinner meal. The general structure of linear narrative cohesion and sequentiality – with its beginning, middle, and end – is thus maintained, albeit loosely and ambiguously constructed on the basis of a thematic and spatial continuity. It is possible to illustrate the underlying basic narrative cohesion and sequentiality of the first and second parts – which we might call the syuzhet configuration – which can be televisually re-constructed by editorially recombining all three segments into a linear narrative with video editing software as evident in the previously mentioned studies.

The pre-visit segment is situated in the bathroom of the couple's residence, with the female protagonist informing her partner that both of them will be visiting her mother in a couple of days. Her partner protests, stating that her mother hates him, and he hates her mother and therefore he will not be visiting her mother. During his protests, however, his partner proceeds to initiate oral sex, indicated both by a camera movement drawing away and upward from her going down, and a music cue which sonically continues the sex act out of frame without an explicit visual staging. During this pre-visit seduction, the audience learns about the antagonistic relationship between the male protagonist and her mother, which raises the question (in the interrupted narrative later in the episode) about why the mother-in-law hates the boyfriend. This is one of the first spatial, temporal, and thematic gaps in the mother-in-law narrative, since a further bathroom sketch is subsequently inserted into the episode before the couple is seated in the mother-in-law's dining room to initiate part 1 of the actual visit.

In addition, the audience experiences the insincere protests of the male protagonist about not visiting her mother as he is on the receiving end of – the obviously pleasurable – oral sex and while proclaiming that “men have no principles.” This can be seen in the video clip 1 below in the Greek version of the series. This segment is just one of a series of shots in which the couple is interacting in the setting of their bathroom. Other



shots include the woman taking a shower, the man sitting on the toilet and either shaving, brushing his teeth, or cutting his nose hair.

### **Finding the *Fabula* (2): The Mother-in-Law Scene(s) Part 1:**

#### **The “good” daughter, the “bad” son-in-law and the cantankerous mother-in-law**

This multi-shot segment in the dining room of the mother begins with the aforementioned question lurking in the background, “Why does her mother hate the boyfriend?” In addition to the aforementioned temporal gap, a topical-thematic and spatial narrative gap is placed between the previsit and the first shot of the visit itself since the viewer does not witness the travel to the mother-in-law’s residence nor the entrance to her home. The audience is reminded of the question of the mutual animosity at the very beginning of the visit (shot 1B) when in spite of the seemingly friendly reception by the mother, the mother spitefully serves her daughter and her boyfriend one or two different varieties of cake (depending on the version) that the boyfriend is either allergic to or is known to dislike, a fact that the mother, in most versions, not only openly acknowledges, but also reveals that it was an intentional affront to the boyfriend, thus performing the very animosity that the protagonists had alluded to in the earlier previsit bathroom scene. The answer to the question about the cause of the mother-in-law’s animosity is delivered in the final shot of Part 1 (Shot 7A), approximately 5 minutes later, when the mother accuses the boyfriend of being a “polygamist”, even though the couple has been together for several years and seems dedicated to each other. Thus, at the outset of the visit the viewer is immediately confronted by the stereotypical depiction of the “bad” boyfriend and the spiteful mother-in-law.

## The Duality of Graphics and Music Transitions: Narrative Gaps and Narrative Cohesion

The repetitive and aesthetically uniform sonic and visual transitions separating each shot, in which different activities and conversation topics are staged, indicate on the one hand thematic-topical narrative interruption and temporal indeterminacy, but also the successive repetitive appearance of these transitions contributes to the episode's narrative cohesion and sequentiality on the other. The transitions therefore assume a dual but contradictory role of both an interruption as well as establishing a temporally loose narrative cohesion.

Each of the 8 different shots in the first part of the mother-in-law visit is separated by a fade in/fade out graphics of white text scratchings on a black background in the frame (see illustrations, Figure 2), accompanied by several bars of a signature music cue that is affective/emotionally, sonically and textually related to the previous topic of conversation in the segment. Each different official version of the series displays single words in the local language(s) in the textual fade out/fade in interjections. In addition, the staging of the segment in most versions of the series features an over-the-shoulder point-of-view (from the perspective of the mother-in-law) mostly stationary camera facing the young couple. Depending on the version, the eye-level medium close-up camera shot either excludes the mother-in-law in the frame entirely, or includes only partial facial or other features from behind. The illustrations of the mothers' position in the frames of the various versions can be seen in Figure 3.

The final shot (shot 7A) in Part 1 of the mother-in-law visit finally addresses the question raised in the pre-visit bathroom scene. The daughter's trip to the toilet (and thus

**Un Gars, Une Fille** Shot and Scene Transitions Part 1

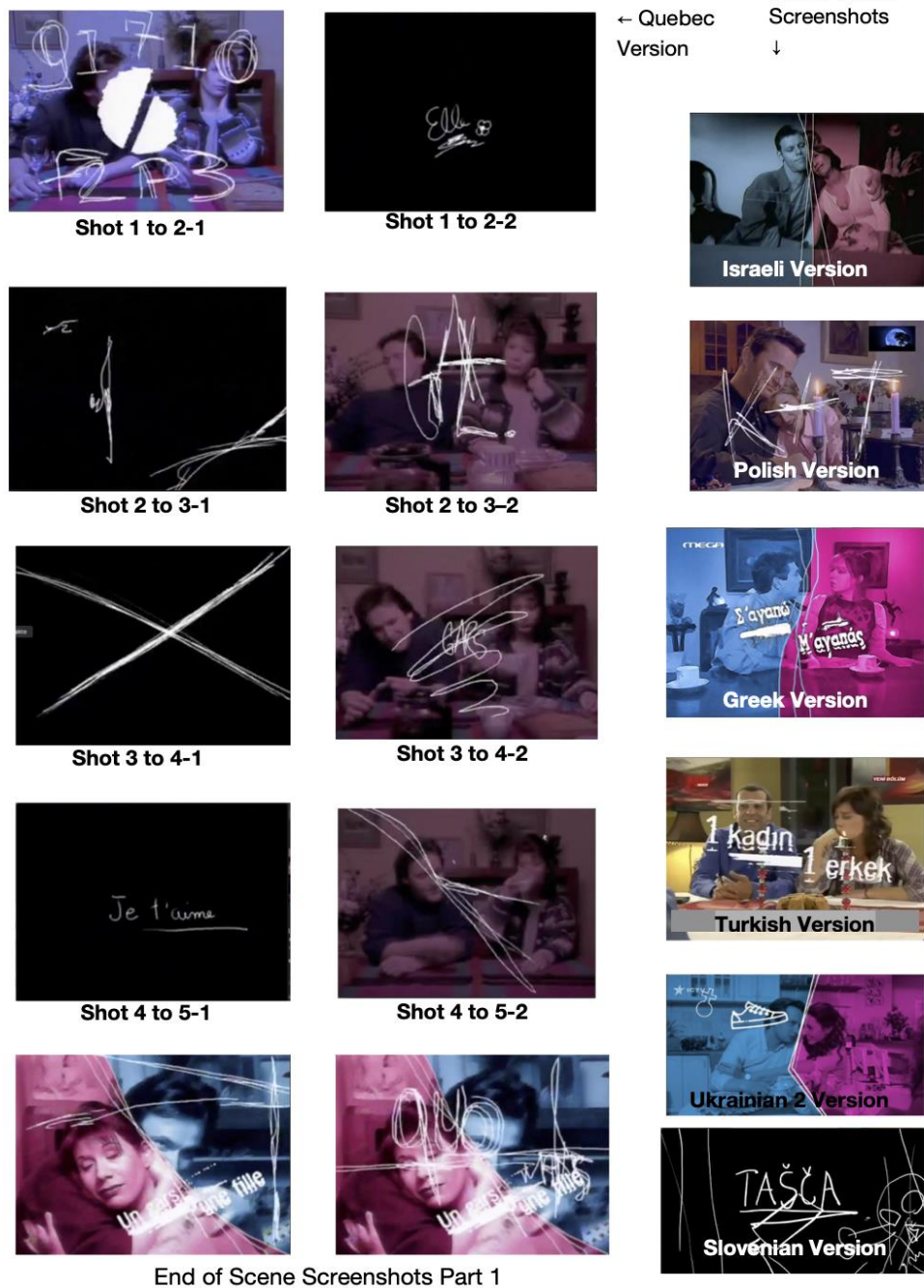


Figure 2: The left two columns are the shot transitions for the Quebec version of the mother-in-law scene, part 1, displaying the two images in each transition. The initial one is the fade to black with graphics, the second image is the fade to new shot. The end of the part 1 scene is depicted at the bottom of display. On the right column are end of scene screenshots for other adaptations.

absence from the frame) gives the boyfriend an opportunity to goad the mother to reveal

the reason for her hatred of him. In the daughter's absence from the table, the mother states that she suspects the boyfriend of being a "polygamist," an obsolete term which serves to discredit the mother-in-law as impartial arbiter of her daughter's relationship to him, signaling the stereotype of the conservative, distrustful and out-of-touch mother-in-law. However, the shocked incredulity of the boyfriend's response also reflects the audience's emotions upon hearing the – patently outrageous – justification for the mother-in-law's hostilities toward the boyfriend. However, this also sets up the subsequent, more analytical clarification in part 2 of the mother-in-law scene (shot 10) in the contentious conversation between the mother and her daughter.

This shot featuring the conflict between the boyfriend and his mother-in-law closes out this first part of the visit, during which several segments are recursively devoted to the daughter's and mother's wish for family offspring and the hope that the daughter might become pregnant. Several times during the different shots in the dining room during the visit the issue of the daughter's pregnancy is raised, first by the daughter, who – unpleasantly – surprises her boyfriend with her conjecture that her period is (four hours) late and she could be pregnant, prompting hopeful and approving comments from her mother, while the surprised boyfriend is decidedly less enthused about the prospect (shot 2). Throughout this part 1, the daughter performs the "good daughter" role by intimating that she is pregnant and thus starting a family for her mother to joyfully become a grandmother. In the final shot of the first part of the scene, the daughter ultimately returns to the table from the bathroom to announce with great disappointment and sadness that she is not pregnant. Her boyfriend's casual and insincere gesture of consolation provokes a negative comment by the mother confronted with the couple's public display of affection to close out both



Figure 3: Part 1 official versions of mother-in-law scene in which the couple is sitting across from the mother in a point-of-view shot. This illustrates how the mother is literally “out of the picture” of the couple’s life. The red rectangles or squares indicate the position of the mother. Rectangles surrounding the entire frame indicate that the mother is not visible at all.

the first part of the visit and the entire episode (shot 7B). The recursive references in the potential pregnancy story arc (shots 2 and 3) helps maintain suspense and anticipation throughout the scene, which emphasizes the emotional affinity between the

mother and daughter. During this scene, the boyfriend is relegated to a peripheral and ultimately antagonistic role (shots 5 and 6) until the final shot in which he superficially consoles his non-pregnant partner in shot 7B.

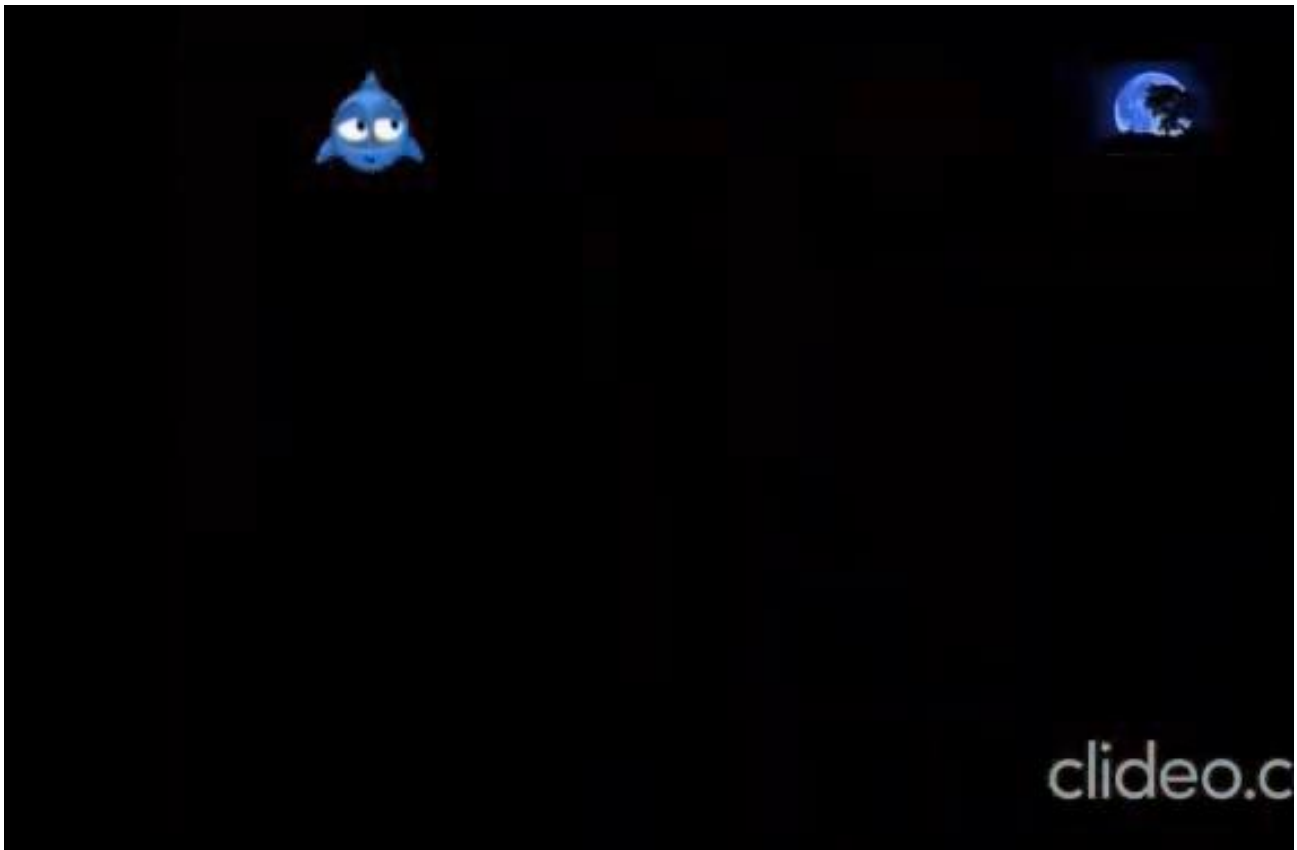
**Finding the *Fabula* (3): The Mother-in-Law Scene(s) Part 2: Mother loses the battle for the daughter's affection and intimacy.**

The final, negative comment by the mother witnessing the displays of affection between the boyfriend and her daughter in part 1 (shot 7B) prepares the audience for the continuation of the rancorous conflict between the boyfriend and the mother in part 2 several episodes later. While there is a temporal and topical gap between parts one and two, there is no spatial gap between the two parts since both scenes take place in the mother-in-law's dining room with a similar POV shot. This lack of spatial gap underscores the linear narrative continuity with the previously broadcast part 1 of the mother-in-law visit. Toward the end of part 2 it becomes clear that the boyfriend and the mother are engaged in a competitive battle for the emotional attraction and affection of the daughter. Depending on the culturally specific orientation of each different version (which to further explicate would go well beyond the scope of this paper), each specific version of the mother-in-law generates a certain degree of emotional sympathy for her. In her battle against the boyfriend, the mother is locked in an ultimately futile battle to maintain equal levels of intimacy and affection as in earlier phases of the girl's childhood in which the boyfriend had no role to play. The daughter's pregnancy hopes, which reflect a desire to renew the intimate relationship of her daughter's childhood, are disappointed, even if the mother and her daughter achieve partial success in performing this intimacy for the audience as well as the boyfriend in several shots in parts 1 and part 2. This happens with a segment in part 1 in which the boyfriend loudly fakes an emergency phone call on his

cell phone while the mother and daughter are engaged in a lively conversation about photos from the daughter's childhood, completely ignoring the boyfriend's attempt to garner attention from either of them (shot 5).

The boyfriend, however, whose sexual relations with the daughter are not only a topic of conversation between the boyfriend and the mother in several shots in part 1, but are also vigorously performed in the pre-visit seduction scene, represent the unsurmountable barriers to the intimacy and affection with her daughter against which the mother is powerless. This is an attitude shared transculturally throughout most of the adaptations. This ultimately prevents the mother from obtaining that same or similar level of intimacy with her daughter, which she nostalgically but futilely seeks. That is at the root of her antagonism against the boyfriend. This is evident in several shots, particularly the previously mentioned final shot of part 1 in which the boyfriend, while consoling his partner in a close and tender embrace, glares back at the mother in triumph at the very end. This is also confirmed in part 2 by the mother's efforts to rent out the daughter's bedroom against the protests and nostalgic desires of the daughter to at least maintain the formal trappings of past intimacy and affections of childhood (shot 11). The penultimate shot of part 2 (shot 12) finalizes this conclusion during a game of monopoly in which the mother is triumphant over the boyfriend and refuses to bend the rules of the game so that he can continue playing. Since the boyfriend has won "the game" of affection, sexuality and intimacy in real life, his willingness to be a loser at a monopoly game seems like a generous concession.

Despite the stationary camera in the dining room in most Part 2 versions, there are several narrative gaps in the segments based on spatial, temporal, and thematic criteria.

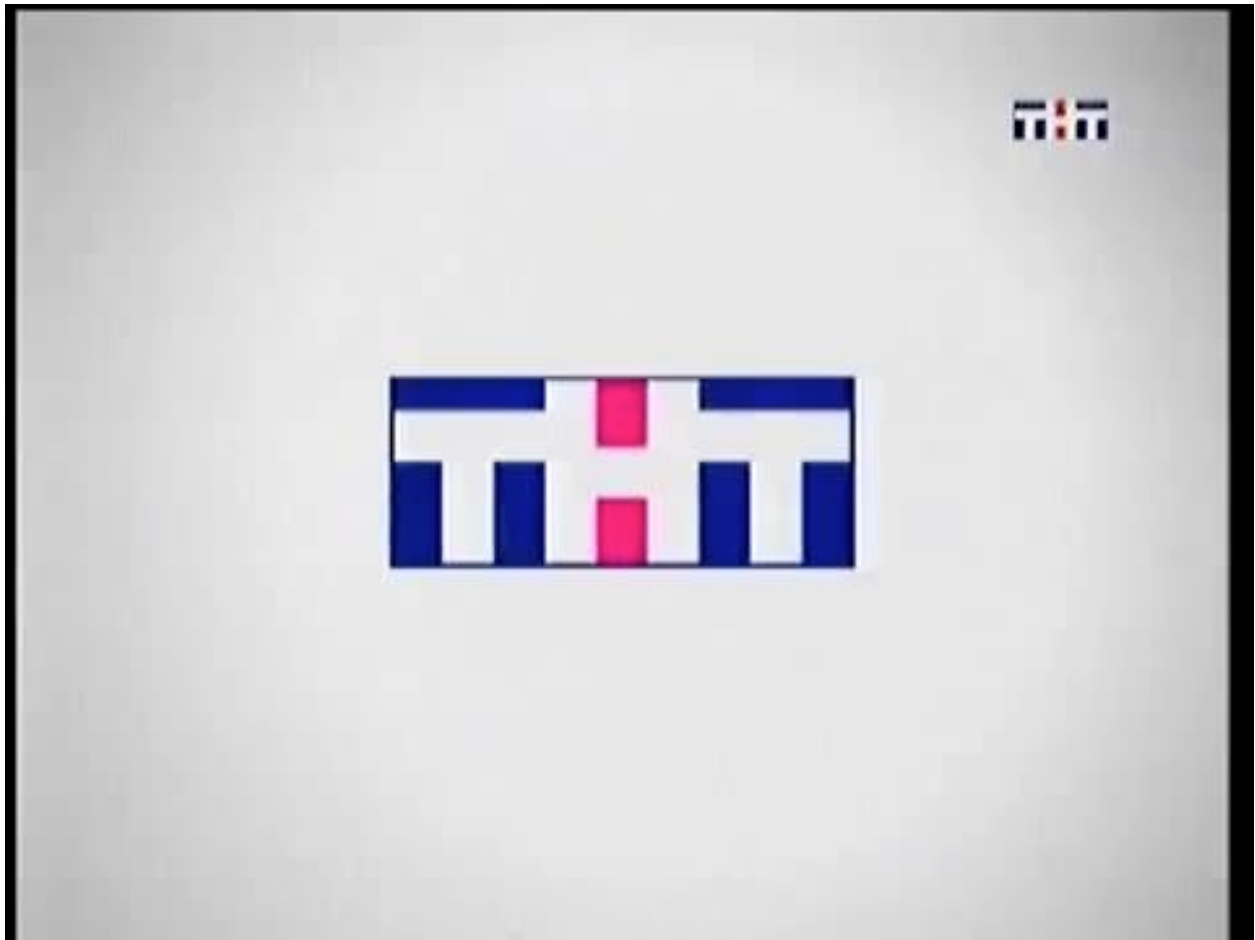


Video Clip 2: The leaving scene at the end of part 2 as staged in the Polish version in which the mother rambles on about the food she is giving to the couple to take home and emphasizing that the daughter should maintain close contact by calling the mother very often.

The most conspicuous are the changes in clothing that only become immediately evident when the two parts are viewed consecutively. This indicates a temporal gap of unknown and indeterminate duration between the first and second visits. The temporal gap is implicitly indicated in the fact that the viewer does not witness any departure of the couple from the mother-in-law's residence in the first part. Also, the second part of the visit starts with the couple seated in the same dining room as in part 1, but with different clothing. In some of the versions, the seating of the protagonists is also changed, such



that they have switched places in front of the camera. Also, the type of meal changes, since the couple will be eating dinner at the mother-in-law's house/apartment in part 2 while part 1 features coffee and cake. Conspicuous is also the change in topics of discussion, especially since the narrative arc relating to pregnancy spanning the first part does not return in the second. It is only mentioned by the mother in the context of contraception and inquiries about the sex habits of the couple in shot 9. There is no more explicit mention of a pregnancy either by the daughter or the mother. In addition, the male protagonist insultingly openly criticizes the mother's cooking in one part 2 segment in most versions, and she complains bitterly to her daughter about that (Shot 8C). Furthermore, in several initial segments of part 2, the meal is delayed by the forgetfulness of the mother, who twice keeps returning to the kitchen to retrieve condiments she neglected to place on the table earlier. Meanwhile, the boyfriend is getting increasingly impatient to start the meal, while the daughter prevents her partner from eating the food already on the table citing formal politeness and deference towards her mother (shots 8A, 8B, 8C). However, after the mother's final return to the dinner table the mother chastises the boyfriend for not starting to eat without her (shot 8C and video clip 3 of the Russian version). Moreover, there is an intriguing and friendly exchange between the mother-in-law and the daughter's boyfriend, with the mother-in-law apologizing to him for her daughter's messy habits (shot 9), while the boyfriend replies that he enjoys the sex with his partner very much and isn't concerned about such trivial concerns as the lack of order. This is also evident when the mother-in-law gleefully vanquishes the boyfriend in the congenially staged monopoly game (shot 12), while dismissing the daughter's efforts to help the boyfriend continue the game.



Video Clip 3: The Russian adaptation showing an extended credit sequence (shots 8A, 8B, 8C in the Quebec version) in which the mother first forgets the sauce, then she launches into an explanation of an aunt who has been involved in a gory car accident, followed by retrieving salt from the kitchen. Finally the mother chastises the boyfriend for not eating, after the “polite” waiting at the request of the daughter.

Finally, the most drastic alliance breakdown occurs when her mother announces that she wants to rent out the daughter’s former bedroom (shot 11) in the mother’s residence. The daughter finds herself isolated with her protest that her mother is violating the daughter’s family history and legacy. Instead of expressing solidarity with his girlfriend, the boyfriend agrees with the mother, who is striving to assume complete control over her own living space, and thus achieve greater autonomy in her own, i.e., the mother’s life. This

unexpected turn of events – the support of the mother’s autonomy by the boyfriend – is so shocking to the daughter that the conversation immediately stops.

The pivotal shot and climax of the conflict between mother-in-law and boyfriend performed in the story arc in part 1 (shot 7A), is the corollary major conflict between mother and daughter in part 2. The conflict is initiated by the daughter (shot 10) who, in doing so, makes explicit reference to a book globally popular in the 1980s and 1990s by psychoanalyst Nancy Friday entitled *My Mother, My Self*. This book explains the complicated competitive and manipulative relationship between mother and daughter in their contradictory roles as asexual caregivers and cultivators of warmth and affection for all family members on the one hand, and as attractive and even autonomous sexual partners for their spouses on the other. In the part 2 conflict segment the daughter speaks of her ambivalence and confusion while growing up at discerning whether the mother considered herself the (asexual) family’s affectionate caregiver and thus the “mother” authority figure, or if the mother was trying to be the (presumably) sexual trainer and educator acting like an autonomously directed, but not as emotionally accessible friend and thus equal to the daughter.

The screenshots in figure 2 for the part 1 segments, but also in part 2 of the mother-in-law scene, visually indicate to the audience that the mother, by being out of frame, is also largely “out of the picture” in the relationship with the protagonist couple. This also lays the visual foundation for the ultimate role of the mother, especially in her relationship with the daughter and the conflict in part 2. The lack of a father figure in the scene – the fathers are not only absent in the frame, but are removed from the family altogether in a backstory that refers to his death earlier in the scene (part 1) – underscores the same co-dependent competitive and guilt-ridden, but repressed anger underlying the daughter’s relationship toward her mother that also drives Friday’s (self-) analysis of her own relationship with her single mother in the book.

Friday's book offers an analytical blueprint for the topically arbitrary and seemingly random but contentiously depicted narrative modules depicting the tense but emotionally close relationship between mother and daughter. Friday's ideas explicitly undergird most versions of the sitcom and provide an analytical framework for unravelling the complicated relationship in the sitcom segments between the mother and daughter. Friday's theories afford insights into both the combative relationship between the boyfriend and his mother-in-law, as well as his occasional emphatic indifference toward, and marginalization within that relationship. The visit of the daughter to her mother reveals elements of what Friday calls the symbiotic relationship between mother and daughter (83) first emergent at four or five years old when the child initiates her journey towards a separate identity, autonomy, and selfhood, but is also terrified of a separation that might endanger the care and affection from the mother that such a separation would entail. This contradictory pressure may be maintained throughout the relationship into adulthood and manifests itself in a competition around sexuality, manipulated feelings of anger and guilt toward the mother, and displaced projections of anger towards others as illustrated in shot 8A-C in part 2.

The modularity of the sketch segments, the temporally indeterminate gaps in the narrative indicated by the change of topics, and the visual and sonic cues separating each segment contribute to a mitigation of the emotional and affective intensity created in each segment. They allow the audience members to self-construct the interpersonal relationship between the characters and establish emotional bonds with positive aspects as well as negative aspects of each character's personality without jeopardizing or rejecting any character out of hand.

This scene reveals to the audience the manipulative co-dependency of the mother-daughter relationship in spite of the daughter's path toward greater autonomy with her boyfriend. In this context, the daughter's initial efforts to induce the boyfriend to

visit her mother through sexual bribery in the pre-visit scene, which the audience might assume would be motivated purely by feelings of affection for the mother, also entails vestiges of guilt at not having visited her mother for many months and rejecting or not reciprocating the mother's affection. In the first shot of the part 1 visit (shot 1), after mentioning to the mother that the couple will be going on vacation for a week or two (depending on the version), the mother speaks of her isolation and lack of travel and pleasure since the father had passed away. While the mother is in the kitchen and out of voice range, the daughter then suggests to the boyfriend that the couple take the mother with them on their vacation, a suggestion that the boyfriend vehemently rejects under his breath. The guilt-producing mother reproduces the daughter's bribery on another level during the final shot of the scene part 2 (see video clip 2), during which the mother relentlessly and demonstratively gives the couple the leftovers from that meal and several others until the boyfriend, sometimes with, sometimes without the daughter depending on the version, storms out of the house or apartment in frustration, while muttering that by the time they are finished, it will be winter. The procrastination of the guilt-laden daughter is caused by the mother pleading desperately with the daughter to call her up by telephone every day.

The boyfriend's insistence on the pleasurable sexual nature of his relationship with the daughter underscores for the viewer and the mother the boundary of her relationship to her daughter (shot 9), and provides a redemptive quality to the boyfriend's relationship with the daughter in a changing patriarchal society. Nancy Friday emphasizes the importance of the security offered by the relationship in releasing tension compared to the woman achieving orgasm with her partner as a factor in whether the male partner remains or leaves:

We come to find more release in the certainty that he will never leave us than in having him inside us. *That certainty becomes more important than orgasm ever can be...*[italics in the original, EL]

The real thing, the penis inside, for many women never does live up to that early substitute: security. And tight security – control – is the antithesis of orgasm – letting go...Who he is, what he wants – *sex itself* [italics in the original, EL]– is never so important as the fantasy of permanent security he gives us (235).

Friday explains that men may contribute affection, intimacy and “moments in which they remind us so much of the love we once had with mother” but that women were “afraid to recognize it” (237). The relationship with men had the added advantage of sex, which the mother was striving to repress while the daughter was growing up, but with the partner this was no longer the object of prohibition.

It is easy to be unconscious of the fact that the feelings of tenderness we find with men are rooted in our earliest experiences with mother, when our present, and equally real feelings of sexual excitement are rooted very much in the now – this man, this moment, his arms and body. The difference between the two ideas is important.

The two major shots in both of the mother-in-law scenes (part 1 and part 2) illustrate this emotional closeness and autonomy of the relationship between the daughter and her mother when the boyfriend consoles her in the face of the failed pregnancy in part 1, and again after she breaks down in the conflict with her mother in part 2. In both shots, he is performing and demonstrating his capacity for affection and consolation as a form of emotional security.

### **Conclusion: Creating and Bridging Narrative and Temporal Gaps**

By deconstructing the narrative sequencing of the mother-in-law scenes and reconstructing the story, or *fabula*, we have on the one hand, reconstructed the narrative cohesion and continuity of that scene which began with the pre-visit seduction of the boyfriend and concluded with the couple leaving the mother-in-law residence in the final

shot (shot 13) in part 2. This has allowed us to make visible the patterns and instances of creating and bridging temporal, spatial, topical, affective, and sequential narrative gaps in producing the series. The analyses of the narrative arc continuities reveal different quantities and qualities of gaps, temporal and narrative, which are bridged by the transitions between the “mini-arcs” in the shots on the one hand, and the larger scene division between parts 1 and 2 on the other. Two main arcs emerge from the two parts of the mother-in-law scene: the first one concerns the competition and conflict between the mother/daughter alliance and the boyfriend and his partner. The various mini-arcs in part 1 highlight efforts by the daughter to perform being the “good” daughter to obtain the nostalgically recalled affection of the mother during her childhood. The pregnancy arc follows these conflicts through to the end of part 1 in which the daughter reveals her non-pregnancy and is consoled by the boyfriend, generating the pointed chagrin of the mother.

The mother-daughter alliance continues, but also dissolves in the course of the scene in part two with the first shot during the dinner, in which the daughter seems to assume the (displaced) role of the mother authority vis-à-vis the boyfriend to prevent a violation of an assumed politeness rule of her mother. However, here the first fissures in this alliance emerge during these segments when the mother chastises the boyfriend for not beginning to eat while she was in the kitchen. The embarrassing and inappropriate (for both daughter and boyfriend) sex inquiry of the mother-in-law points to a further breach between the two female characters. The transparent effort of the mother to paint the boyfriend as a manipulative and unsuitable partner for the daughter during the tarot card reading is countered by a snide remark of the boyfriend (shot 6) about the mother’s own manipulation of the card reading. The mother’s monopoly game win also contributes to undermining the alliance of the women in part 1, and this is cemented and widened by the intention of the mother to rent out the daughter’s former bedroom to increase the

mother's own autonomy and self-realization. The corresponding disappointment of the daughter with the mother points to the underlying contradiction between the two women from the beginning of the entire visit. This situation is contextualized by the mother-daughter conflict in shot 10, which also marks a turning point in the relationship in part 2.

Despite these conflicts, the animosity and emotional atmosphere in each mini-arc shot does not carry over into the following shot(s) in the great majority of cases, with the possible exception of the part 2 meal in which the mother successively retrieves condiments from the kitchen while the boyfriend seeks to start eating. Even after the emotionally bruising conversation and conflict between the mother and daughter in part 2, the following three shots begin without animosity by any of the three characters, and each shot develops its own hostile outcome separately to maintain or widen the emotional gap between the two women. This has the effect of minimizing the overall emotional impact of the mother-daughter conflict in the episode.

The topical and temporally indeterminate transition gaps between the shots therefore wipe the emotional slate clean from one shot to the other, as does the separation of parts 1 and 2 into different episodes weeks apart. This is especially highlighted in shot 1 of part 2 in which the boyfriend speaks at first approvingly of the dinner served by the mother, even though in a later shot he criticizes her food for being too dry. The "additive" and non-continuous nature of the modular shots in both parts 1 and 2 are bridged by the transitions, which seem to reset the affective-emotional "clock" between the three characters in the scenes, while contributing to the anticipation and suspense that the audience is trained to expect from each single shot and mini-arc. This emotional reset is directed to the audience, which, at the very least, expects a continuation of the previous shot's emotional context. However, with the end of the previous shot, this atmospheric affective context has disappeared in the subsequent shot. In addition, the shots are almost able to stand alone as narratives. The almost



random sequencing of shots made possible through the additive nature of the individual modular shots enables a *temporally* very loose, but also a *narrative* non-linear continuity based on the underlying contentious relationship between the three main characters.

Since there are no spatial gaps in the two major narrative arcs, the temporal, topical-thematic, and affective narrative arcs based explicitly on the Nancy Friday gender ideology ideas become primary in a putative linear cohesion of the story, although there is no clear linear narrative and the temporal continuity is explicitly indicated only by the re-edited sequencing of the pre-visit shot, the cake/coffee meals, and the leaving shot at the end of part 2.

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## Video Clips

Σ'αγαπώ μ'αγαπάς Ε 03: 05:33-06:31/23:07

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?=FB92Kehuht08ab\\_channel=ΕλληνικέςΣειρεςκαιΤαινι](https://www.youtube.com/watch?=FB92Kehuht08ab_channel=ΕλληνικέςΣειρεςκαιΤαινι)

[εξ](#)

Accessed on 28 November 2021

*Саша и Маша*, 9 серия: 00:11-01:15/22:53

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bGXjEq7Zfiw8ab\\_channel=%D0%A1%D0%BC%D](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bGXjEq7Zfiw8ab_channel=%D0%A1%D0%BC%D)

[0%BE%D1%82%D1%80%D0%B8TV](#)

Accessed on 28 November 2021

*Kasia i Tomek*, odc. 11-12, 06:40-07:30/21:02

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sB-McUaedzc8ab\\_channel=Moon](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sB-McUaedzc8ab_channel=Moon)

Accessed on 28 November 2021

Shot #	Time Code In Episode			Content Description of Conversation in Shot		
	Shot Start mm:ss	Shot End mm:ss	Shot Duration m:ss	Color Key:		
				Boyfriend "wins"	Mother and daughter "win"	Pivotal Shot in Scene Part 1
1A	08:39	09:32	0:33	Daughter mentions going on week vacation; mother mentions how lonely she feels since death of husband; daughter suggests to boyfriend to invite mother along; boyfriend strenuously rejects idea.		
1B	09:33	09:48	0:15	Mother intentionally serves cake boyfriend can't eat; Boyfriend spitefully rejects mother's offer of coffee.		
2	09:50	10:38	0:48	Daughter surprises boyfriend about pregnancy; mother enthused, boyfriend not enthused.		
3	10:40	10:58	0:18	Daughter complains of heartburn, suggests cause is pregnancy.		
4	11:00	11:43	0:43	Mother inquires about former boyfriend; daughter protests against topic; current boyfriend suggests he is gay for maintaining contact to mother.		
5	12:17	13:22	1:05	While mother and daughter are preoccupied with family photos, boyfriend fakes emergency phone call to gain attention; mother and daughter ignore him.		
6	13:25	14:41	1:16	Mother reads tarot cards indicating boyfriend is cheating and manipulating daughter; boyfriend sees through trick and turns the tables on the mother.		
7A	14:42	15:30	0:48	Daughter leaves to go to bathroom, boyfriend goads mother to revealing reason for animosity; accuses boyfriend of polygamy.		
7B	15:31	16:02	0:31	Return of daughter announcing she is not pregnant; boyfriend consoles daughter; mother complains about public display of affection.		

Table 1: Shot sequences and durations of mother-in-law scene(s), part 1 showing the pattern of conflicts and their "winners." Also shows position and duration of the pivotal shot in part 1 of the scene in episode 3, season 1: the conflict between the mother and the boyfriend.

Shot #	Time Code in Episode			Content Description of Conversation in Shot		
	Shot Start mm:ss	Shot End mm:ss	Shot duration m:ss	Color Key:		
				Daughter "wins"	Boyfriend "wins"	Pivotal Shot in Scene Part 2
8A	00:01	00:23	0:22	Boyfriend wants to start dinner after being served by mother; daughter stops him as mother goes to fetch salt;		
8B	00:23	00:40	0:17	Mother returns to table; describes in appetite-destroying detail horribly disfiguring accident of an aunt; goes to fetch dressing from kitchen; daughter prevents boyfriend from eating again.		
8C	00:40	01:08	0:28	Upon return of mother boyfriend wants to start eating; mother chastises boyfriend for not having already started, embarrassing daughter.		
9	01:12	01:42	0:30	Mother starts conversation about grandson and if the couple uses anti-baby pill; boyfriend mentions that preventing pregnancy is easy because of the "telephone method" in which the couple is always interrupted during sex by the mother's phone calls.		
10	02:28	03:58	1:30	Mother-daughter conversation about daughter's mother-induced trauma as "friend" or "mother"; boyfriend sits largely disinterested until daughter breaks down in tears; boyfriend consoles daughter.		
11	04:00	04:58	0:58	Mother announces that she wants to rent out daughter's room; daughter protests against removal of vestiges of her previous life with mother; boyfriend agrees with mother's efforts at autonomy against daughter.		
12	05:00	05:47	00:47	Monopoly game; mother beats boyfriend; daughter fails to get mother to bend rules to allow boyfriend to continue; mother gloats about her apparent business acumen; daughter demands part of her inheritance out of spite.		
13	05:49	07:04	01:11	Getting leftovers before leaving: Mother hands one container of leftovers after another to daughter; boyfriend impatient to leave; mother tells daughter to call up every day for a talk on the telephone, even if she isn't at home; boyfriend storms out in frustration of waiting for both mother and daughter to end the farewell ritual.		

Table 2: Shot sequences and durations of mother-in-law scene(s), part 2 showing the pattern of conflicts and their "winners." This shows the position and duration of the pivotal shot in part 2 of the scene in episode 2, season 2: the conflict between the mother and the daughter.

# How to End Complex Serial Drama?

## Mystery and Monologues in *The Leftovers*

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*Art in its endless search for perfection knows only one thing – not how to end, but how to see.* (Viktor Shklovsky)<sup>1</sup>

*By the same token, narrative is a resource for closure. Any particular telling of a narrative has to end, even if the narrative being told is presented as unfinished or unfinishable.* (David Herman)<sup>2</sup>

How do creators end a complex serial drama series in a satisfying manner, offering a fitting finale that says goodbye to the characters, addressing central questions without closing the story completely, keeping dedicated viewers engaged until the end, and making them believe the creators are knowing what they're doing? In other words, how do they stick to landing, how do they create closure? This question troubles writers all over the world, and it certainly troubled Damon Lindelof while creating the final season of the HBO series *The Leftovers* (2014-2017). According to the critics Lindelof and co-writer-showrunner Tom Perrotta, on whose book the series is based, and the rest of the team, formulated an adequate answer to this convoluted question. Unlike the finale of Lindelof's first series *Lost* (2004-2010), the final season of *The Leftovers* was unanimously praised by professional reviewers, and the entire show ended up on top of many best-of-the-decade lists, before *Fleabag*, *Game of Thrones* and *Breaking Bad*. (Dietz)

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<sup>1</sup> Shklovsky 109

<sup>2</sup> Herman 173

Closure isn't a synonym for ending or dénouement, rather it "refers to the satisfaction of expectations and answers of questions raised over the course of any narrative." (Abbott 65–66) Narratives that sustain closure offer a kind of completeness, as first expressed in Aristotle's paradigm of the story as an imitation of a whole and complete action with a beginning-middle-end structure. This paradigm is so much about closure that you could say that the end gets the lion's share of the attention: "For what Aristotle actually has in mind as the imitation of a complete action is a representation of an action where the representation itself excites the apprehension of closure." (Carroll 3) In other words, the story is designed in such a manner that the end is weaved into it. In literary and screenwriting practices, creating closure is often dubbed as 'landing' (Wintersgill), and Lindelof in particular expresses the difficulty to "stick to landing" in numerous interviews.

The promise of closure, however, is particularly hard to fulfil in complex serial drama because the "redefinition of episodic forms under the influence of serial narration" (Mittell, 'Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television' 32) accumulates so much story information and plot twists throughout many seasons. Bruun Vaage sketches the reasons why it's difficult for creators of complex serial drama to design a satisfying ending, given the formal features of serial television drama. (Vaage 131–40) Firstly, the ensemble cast and multiple plotlines makes it challenging to present a coherent and unified resolution that does justice to every character and its arc. (132-133) Secondly, the complex morality of the often disturbed or villainous characters and their fascinating immoral behaviour can't be sustained until the end without compromising the author's own moral opinion. (134) Thirdly, the mixing of genres complicates the viewer's expectations about the resolution because the inherent logic of one genre demands a different ending than another. (135) Fourthly, complex serial drama's intermediate position between art and commerce demands the creators to cater diverse audiences,



with most viewers demanding answers, and a substantial minority appreciating an (artistic) open or ambiguous ending. (137) And lastly, the viewer's long-standing relationship with the characters makes it much harder to part with than shorter fiction formats like movies. (140)

In the following paragraphs, I will explore the extent to which the finale *The Leftovers* successfully addressed these design challenges and problems without alienating a vociferous part of the viewers, as happened with the ABC-series *Lost*. In her review of the final season of *The Leftovers* Maureen Ryan asserted that the "new season of *The Leftovers* is spectacular, in every sense of that word."<sup>3</sup> (Ryan, 'TV Review') I want to unravel some aspects of this spectacular storytelling and the way the narrative and audio-visual plotting in the final episode offers closure and ambiguity, evoking that distinct kind of viewer sensation Jason Mittell calls "the narrative special effect", that moment of amazement, "calling attention to the narration's construction and asking us to marvel at how the writers pulled it off". (43–44) To this end, I will analyse the audiovisual text on the one hand and the creative process and the production on the other.

### Trauma therapy

Like *Lost* – and Lindelofs third (mini) series *Watchmen* (HBO, 2019) – *The Leftovers* is "about a society struggling with unresolved trauma." (Nussbaum) Yet from the start *The Leftovers* presented itself as an antithesis of the SF adventure series *Lost*: it is not about surviving the jungle, mythical monsters, or time-travel, but about trying to cope with and make sense of everyday life in a recognizable, real world three years after the overwhelmingly mysterious event of the so-called Sudden Departure, the disappearance

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<sup>3</sup> In another much-discussed article, Ryan writes how much the series has touched her personally and even helped her cope with the grief and loss of her own mother. (Ryan, "The Leftovers," Life, Death, Einstein and Time Travel')

of 2% of the world's population.<sup>4</sup> The show is not about the people who disappeared, but who were left behind. It's not about unravelling the mystery, but how the mystery affects the psyche and the worldview of the main characters, notably a police chief, Kevin Garvey (Justin Theroux), his broken-down family, and his new girlfriend, Nora (Carrie Coon), a grieving widow who has suffered disproportionately, losing her husband and two children in the Sudden Departure. In short, *The Leftovers* is not a story about mystery solving, but about trauma treatment.

The move away from mystery was "almost in direct response to the way that *Lost* ended," Lindelof explained, referring to the negative reviews his first series had received. (Betancourt) Within the scope of this article, we cannot elaborate on the reception of *Lost*, but in short, a small and vocal section of the viewers was so dissatisfied with the sentimental ending of the series that it infuriated them.<sup>5</sup> Unlike co-showrunner Carlton Cuse, Lindelof took this criticism very much to heart, so much so that he was obsessed with it and returned to it in dozens of interviews. Although he stood by his artistic choices and repeatedly claimed that he would never have wanted *Lost* to end any other way, the vociferous, negative criticism continued to torment him for years. *The Leftovers*, in other words, is not only a TV show about trauma, but it's also written by a traumatised showrunner.

## Mystery and romance

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<sup>4</sup> The handling of dogs in the pilot episode also underlines the contrast with *Lost*: in both series, the protagonists meet a dog in the first scene, but in *The Leftovers*, the dog is shot by the tobacco chewing gunman Dean (Michael Gaston).

<sup>5</sup> For more on the critical reception of *Lost*, cf. (Sepinwall, *The Revolution Was Televised* 172–93; Mittell, *Complex TV* 323–29)

By the time Lindelof started writing the HBO series he fully realised that “[t]he problem of answering mysteries is there’s always some level of dissatisfaction and unhappiness—because it’s never as exciting as the mystery itself. ‘The Leftovers’ openly embraced that idea.”(Betancourt) In this, he follows in the footsteps of J.J. Abrams, who co-created *Lost* and revealed his poetics of mystery in a TED talk in 2007, stating that it is better to leave questions unanswered and “keep the mystery box [...] closed” (Abrams).

Most of the storylines in the first season are therefore not about where the 2% went, but about how those left behind try to pick up their lives and deal with a life-changing event like the Sudden Departure. Kevin is trying to protect his hometown Mappleton from the impending outbreak of violence from or against the Guilty Remnant, the cult his wife Laurie (Amy Brenneman) joined, while his son Tom (Chris Zylka) is trying to help one of the partners of the leader of another cult, and his teenage daughter Jill (Margaret Qualley) struggles with the abandonment of her mother and with Kevin’s parental authority and inability to communicate. All these broken people are struggling with pain, grief and mental problems, and the narrative turns are long confined to character revelations, time jumps and retardation of information that explains the relation between the characters before the Sudden Departure. I can't delve into it here, but the penultimate episode of the first season, for example, is almost an integral flashback to the days before the Sudden Departure and a narrative spectacle in itself.

The second season is set in the small town of Jarden, Texas, which is called Miracle because it was miraculously spared by the Sudden Departure. Kevin and Nora try to build a new life there, but their traumas continue to haunt them while the Guilty Remnant conspires to unmask the town's miracle and plunge it into chaos. In the course of the story, bizarre things happen to Kevin: he dies, ends up in a kind of purgatory world where he has to solve an espionage adventure, and comes back to life. Kevin's resurrection from the dead is not necessarily an act of magic or religious faith, since the possibility is kept

open that he was only on the verge of death, either way his resurrection follows the uncommon narrative logic of the TV show with its ambiguous twists and turns.

The setting changes even more radically in the third season when Nora travels to Australia to meet a secret scientific group that claims to have found a way for people to travel to their beloved departed. Unsuspecting, Kevin travels with her, but again his old demons resurface.

The third season is perhaps even more complex than the first two, the narrative twists are numerous, and the viewer is immersed in more outlandish worlds. The first episode, however, begins with a long prologue about a woman who is estranged from her family and community because she is the only one who stubbornly believes in the prophecy of doom of a minister. The theme of the extraordinary power and pull of belief systems is thus being infused into the final season. The rest of the episode, 'The Book of Kevin', reveals that Nora's brother, reverend Matt Jamison (Christopher Eccleston), is writing some sort of New Testament about Kevin, considering him a new prophet because of his resurrections. The subsequent story development and character revelation is so complex, even more than the previous ones, that I will refrain from summarising it here, but the dramatic crisis (or mid-point) of the season is Kevin and Nora's break up in a hotel room in Australia. Their relationship finally snaps after being put to the test over the course of the three seasons by their suppressed self-destructive and suicidal tendencies, and their mutual inability to choose life and each other. Kevin and Nora do not display immoral behaviour towards others, like the anti-heroes in many other complex drama series, but the regular outburst of violent behaviour towards themselves, often unexpected to the viewer, is probably just as fascinating.

After the breakup Kevin is further drawn into his father's and Matt's delusions that he might be the saviour. In the penultimate episode, on the day of the seventh anniversary of the Sudden Departure, Kevin enters the world of purgatory one last time and accepts

a weird quest. At the end of this tragicomic espionage dream-episode he gains insight in his core problem (or *need*, in scriptwriting terminology) and finally realises he messed up with Nora out of fear of commitment – like he did before with his wife Laura and his children – and didn't do enough to save their relationship.

In the final episode of this genre-mixing TV show, the romance genre begins to emerge, and the story focuses almost exclusively on Nora and Kevin. The episode is remarkable since it is largely plotted in a classical narrative structure: boy meets girls (again), boy loses girl (again), boy gets girl. The choice of the genre does not come out of the blue: despite the series' ensemble cast and multi-plot narrative, Kevin's prominent role as *the* protagonist had always been clear, as had his defining and troublesome relationship with Nora. The first two seasons ended with them coming together at the doorstep or in the living room of their home. Concluding the hybrid series as a love story in the confines of Nora's Australian home is therefore in the line of the earlier endings.

### **Alternate worlds**

However, the spectacular story and the narrative special effect (Mittell) are not so much in this generic choice as such, but in the way the final scene simultaneously provides closure and disrupts it. The two pressing questions of the series – where has the 2% gone (the mystery) and will Kevin and Nora go on with life and each other (the romance) – are explicitly answered and subtly contradicted in the final scene of the show. In this scene Nora is sitting down over tea with Kevin and she tells him in a seven-minute monologue the story of how she was transported by an experimental scientific apparatus to an alternate, dystopian reality where 98% of the world's population disappeared instead of just 2%. After a long journey back to her (parallel) hometown Mapleton, she discovered that her husband had remarried, and her children were surprisingly cheerful because

they belonged to the happy few of that alternate world where most people had lost all their relatives and friends. Not wanting to disturb this happy new family, Nora tells Kevin imperturbably, she traced the inventor of the machine, who had been the first to be transported, and had him make a new machine to return to the 'normal' world. Once back in the ordinary world, Nora retreated to Australia and sought no further contact with Kevin, allegedly because she feared not being believed. After which Kevin sincerely claims to believe her.

The happy ending to this episode not only lives up to genre expectations, meeting Vaage's third challenge, but also ends the pending issues of behaviour, psyche, and morality. The destructive way in which Kevin and Nora dealt with themselves, which fascinated us viewers for a long time and prevented them from building a stable relationship, has now come to an end; they can finally open their hearts to each other and reconcile. The characters always relapsed into their problematic but compelling behaviour, and now the makers put an end to that once and for all, by making them choose life and each other, and thus "morality is restored" (Vaage 134).

Apart from a few reaction shots from Kevin, who only get to see Nora talking during the seven whole minutes of this monologue: her incredible, and highly questionable story is not visualised. We don't get to see the corroborating images that could confirm her story. The convention states that film and television rarely withhold these images. Peter Verstraten, using the case study of Christopher Walken's long monologue *The Comfort of Strangers* (P. Schrader, 1990), points out how uncommon it is for film characters to describe scenes from their past vividly and at length without depicting them. Another 'logic' then emerges, in the case of Schrader's film one that creates ambiguity about whether the entire film should be considered a flashback or not. (Verstraten 126, 145) Moreover, Charles Forceville, in his comparative study of the novel and the film, notes how

various objects in the mis-en-scene of that monologue thematically foreshadow the gruesome ending of *The Comfort of Strangers*. (Forceville 129).

Putting aside convention, within the context of the narrative style of *The Leftovers*, we would also expect to see flashback images in the final scene. In episode 6 of the first season, for example, we have some brief flashbacks of Nora's family as she stares at the empty kitchen roll (2'50"). And although we had to wait until the montage sequence at the end of the ninth episode to see the entire scene of her husband and children disappearing, it was shown to us by the cinematic narration or reliable extradiegetic narrator. In the final scene however, Nora only tells it, and her story is not confirmed by any visualization other than the images that may appear before our mind's eye. Carrie Coon's performance, the generic expectations and the viewer's investment in the romance story make it still believable for many viewers. To others, the mystery box is opened, but its content is not shown to be completely reliable (cfr. *infra*). The violation of "show, don't tell" hinders these viewer's expectation of a visualisation or recounting enactment<sup>6</sup> at a crucial moment when they desire clear answers. It draws attention to the formal structures of audiovisual storytelling, i.e., the conventional and intratextual use of flashbacks, while at the same time answering the big mystery arc of the TV show, and this creates an ambiguity that keeps the excitement for the mystery alive.

### **Mirroring monologues**

On top of that, a crafty way of narrative and visual plotting deepens the ambiguity and narrative special effect by inviting us to compare Nora's story with two other stories told in the third episode of the third season, 'Crazy Whitefella Thinking'. That episode, five

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<sup>6</sup> Drawing on Seymour Chatman's *Story and Discourse*, David Bordwell defines recounting enactment as the convention of a character telling about past events, and the syuzhet (or plot, discourse) subsequently presenting the events in a flashback, in direct presentation, "as if they were occurring at the moment". (Bordwell 78)

weeks earlier than the finale in the original broadcast, is dominated by two long monologues like Nora's: one by Kevin Sr. (Scott Glenn), the protagonist's father, and one by a new character called Grace (Lindsay Duncan). The comparison of these three monologues prompts the viewer to see Nora's story in a different light.<sup>7</sup>

The episode revolves around Senior trying to prevent the world from the Deluge that according to him will start on the seventh anniversary of the Departure. He collects ritual chants from First Nations of Australia tribal people, for which he is arrested. After being released, he goes in search of the leader Christopher Sunday, the only man who knows the last chant Kevin Sr. needs to prevent the coming apocalypse. He illegally manages to find Sunday's whereabouts and tells him how he got convinced of this impending flood in a seven-and-a-half-minute monologue. His story is an absurdist sequence of coincidental events in which the psychotic Kevin Sr. recognises deeper meanings, and which lead him across the continent to Sunday. Apart from the characterisation of Senior as a derailed mind and the subsequent foreshadowing of Junior's mental derangement in the following episodes, this monologue points to the unbridled creativity and humour that the makers brought to the show, especially in the third season, and people's tendency to seek meaning in contingency.

Yet, it is the concluding scene of this episode that resonates most intensely upon viewing the series finale. When Senior fails his mission, he ends up in the middle of the Australian desert, where he gets bitten by a snake and is found by Grace in a lamentable state. When he wakes up some weeks later, Grace confesses to Senior the heart-breaking story of how she, a true Christian and believer of the Evangelist concept of the Rapture, whole-heartedly was convinced that when she came home after an errand in town, her husband and five children had all been called to God on the day of The Sudden

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<sup>7</sup> There are more notable monologues in the third season, but these two stand out for all the reasons that will be discussed below.



Departure. She felt utterly blessed, until sometime later she found out that her children had wandered off in the desert looking for help when only their father had 'departed'. Grace never went to look for them, being convinced they were God's chosen ones. Subsequently, she understands she's responsible for her children's death and loses her faith, only to regain it seven years later when stumbling upon the delirious Kevin Sr. lying at the foot of the memorial cross in the desert where her children died, with a handwritten page clutched in his hand. The language on the page looks like Scripture, since it is part of the holy book Matt is writing about the series' protagonist Kevin Jr. Lying with his arms open wide like a crucified Jesus, Grace believes Senior must be an angel sent by God, and she instantly regains her lost faith. The scriptural page talks about a police officer Kevin who died and travelled to the world of the departed and came back to the living. So, while Senior is recovering from his snakebite, Grace kidnaps a local cop called Kevin, convinced he is the biblical Kevin who can talk to her deceased children, only to find out he's not the One. She drowns him. By then Grace realizes that her need to belief has deflected her from reality once again, now accepting the fact that Senior is no angel, and that God doesn't care about her. "It's all just a story I told myself," she sobs, "it's just a stupid silly story." To which Senior replies that she is not wrong: she has just drowned the wrong Kevin. Of course, by then the viewer knows Senior is not the most mentally stable and reliable person, and this will be confirmed in the penultimate episode when the predictions of the Flood and of Kevin's role as saviour turn out to be false.

Grace tells her amazing story over a cup of tea at the end of the episode in a monologue of six full minutes to a man called Kevin, Kevin Sr. They are sitting at a table in a bay window and the entire scene is filmed with almost the exact same framing, lighting, camera angles, performance style, amount of reaction shots and editing pace as the final

scene of Nora talking to Kevin.<sup>8</sup> When watching *The Leftovers* finale, we are struck by the reiteration of the confession theme, the setting, the mis-en-scene, the identical visual style and editing of Grace's monologue early in the season, thus realizing that her character is a kind of doppelgänger of Nora. By then Grace's beliefs (together with Kevin Senior's predictions) are definitively refuted, and this provides the context or interpretive grid through which we can or should comprehend Nora's final story. The title of the final episode, 'The Book of Nora', not only indicates that the last instalment will focus on Nora – just like the two former seasons ended with her last words – but that her story needs to be evaluated in relation to the central theme of religion and belief systems, as announced in the prologue of 'The Book of Kevin'. On top of the emotional gratification of Kevin and Nora recoupling, the viewer gets a cognitive form of resolution, a subtle hint from the creators to observant viewers about how this ending might be understood differently: Nora is just telling a stupid silly story, to make sense of the world and to cope with her loss and grieve, like Grace did.

### Visual storytelling

Despite Lindelof's deeply rooted artistic notion of keeping the excitement and the mystery alive, during the writing and production he could not help but formulate for himself and his crew an answer to *The Leftovers'* mystery and its pending question of where the departed went. For example, he suggested filming the first scene of the pilot from the perspective of the disappearing baby, just in case they might need it later in the show, but there was no time left to film it. (Kachka, 'How to End a TV Show') In other words,

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<sup>8</sup> The similarities are apparent at a glance in a supercut by Jonas Fontaine on Youtube (Fontaine). Fontaine adjusted the playback speed of some shots to make the sequences more similar, but even without these manipulations, the similarities are striking.

the nuclei of Nora's final story germinated very early in the production process, but it would emerge in a different way than Lindelof had initially imagined.

Lindelof was still struggling with the question of whether to reveal the mystery when he started plotting the third and final season. During the collaborative writing process, however, Lindelof was protected from himself and his compulsion to give more than a glimpse of the answer to the Sudden Departure. While he suggested to show where the 2% disappeared to, to avoid the same criticism as the *Lost* finale, Tom Perrotta vetoed against the idea. Then, writer-producer Patrick Somerville came up with a subtle compromise: what if Nora only tells the story of her visit to the Other Place to someone in the finale, sometime in the future, over a cup of tea? "But", Lindelof countered, "if she tells it, then we won't know if it's true!" And in the middle of that sentence, he realized that it was "the perfect way" to end the series: giving an answer, but not telling whether it's true. As soon as this was agreed on, they wrote "Nora makes tea" on the writers' room whiteboard and started plotting the entire final season towards that scene. (Kachka, 'How to End a TV Show')

The similarity between the monologues and the characters is striking and that's not only due to the script writing. Executive producer and director Mimi Leder directed the third and last episode of the final season of *The Leftovers*. She was Lindelof's partner in crime throughout the series and shifted the tone from the end of the first season, (Travers) and she knowingly created this thematic and visual echoing, as she asserted on different locations. (Gennis; Lindelof et al.; Whitney) Leder wanted to replicate these scenes: "What I really tried to do was mirror those images of all those monologues. It was very important to me that they felt similar, that there was a, you know, a visual theme to them, so that when you saw them it felt familiar." (Lindelof et al.) The editing pace even more reinforces this parallelism, and since Lindelof did the final editing of the series, he is responsible for this. (Kachka, 'How to End a TV Show') Additionally, it is significant that Lindelof named

Nora's doppelganger Grace, since he used that word repeatedly at the time to describe successful endings (D'Addario; Ausiello; New York Magazine): he wants his characters to "achieve some level of grace" after all their suffering, he declared, like in the ending of his all-time favourite M\*A\*S\*H\*. (New York Magazine).

The visual storytelling amplifies the analogy of the monologues in the script, and the viewer can find the common ground to make interpretative connections between them, or not. By the eighth and final episode, so much genre and plot twists have accumulated that the visible connections between the finale and the other monologues may have faded for the viewer. Nora tries to track down the swindlers, while Kevin is once again taunted by hallucinations and Matt, in a desperate attempt to get Kevin back, gets stuck on an orgiastic party boat, and Laurie does get as far as Kevin to say goodbye to him, after which he drowns and, in his subconscious, must solve an off-the-wall spy plot. Viewers who due to this overload of information hadn't noticed the resemblances on first viewing, were shocked when confronted with the possibility Nora was only telling a story.<sup>9</sup> In the end, *The Leftovers* is tying in with one of the key technique of ending many serial narratives: "the inward turn toward metafiction." (Mittell, *Complex TV* 324). The narrative plotting and visual storytelling combining these monologues suggest that the characters are telling (silly, stupid) stories and that the TV show is about belief system as storytelling machines. In short, *The Leftovers* is a story about storytelling.

## Conclusion

Nora's explanation to the core mystery of the series, her answer to the question where her husband, two children and the rest of the 2% departed went to, addresses the problem of the mystery box: it gives a satisfying answer for anyone who wants or needs

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<sup>9</sup> See the reactions on Youtube below the supercut made by Fontaine. Viewers find it "mind-blowing", "awesome", "amazing", "incredible", etc. One viewer expresses his embarrassment for not noticing the analogy before.

to believe it. The emotional gratification is immense – thanks to Coon and Theroux's performance – and the generic expectations are completely satisfied: the story ends with closure. But for those who spot the analogy of the two monologues, the mystery isn't resolved and Nora most likely is not telling what really happened.

In an interview in *New York Magazine* Lindelof said that the writers had “a unanimous feeling” as to which one of the realities was real, but that they would never say. (Kachka, ‘Goodbyes Are Hard’) Still, Tom Perrotta, Mimi Leder, Justin Theroux and others have suggested that Kevin is a pragmatic who needs to believe Nora in order to reconcile.<sup>10</sup> And even Lindelof hinted at the unlikelihood of Nora's story, expressing his surprise that some viewers took the “fishy” story for granted. (Sepinwall, ‘Damon Lindelof Explains’). Elsewhere he accepts that his artistic ambitions may not be matched and that most viewers will not notice the ambiguity and will simply believe Nora. (Kachka, ‘How to End a TV Show’)

Even though not all viewers were happy with the finale of *The Leftovers*,<sup>11</sup> the critics were unanimously positive and there was little or no dissonance on social media. Part of the answer to this unanimity lies in the way the series' creators solved the convoluted problem of ending serial television drama. The five challenges Vaage observed, are being addressed in *The Leftovers* finale. (1) The ensemble plot is fittingly dismantled by focusing on Kevin and Nora at the same time as (2) the romance genre is moved forward and satisfactorily concluded, together with the overarching mystery. (3) The makers disentangle complex serial drama's intermediate position between art and industry and the corresponding audiences by overtly presenting a closed ending (Nora's truth) that's

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<sup>10</sup> Elsewhere Lindelof did exclaim his surprise about viewers taking Nora's story for granted: “At the very least, I thought her story would smell fishy and then people would decide whether or not to believe it. The fact that they just take it completely and totally at face value that it's the truth has been surprising to me.” (Sepinwall, ‘Damon Lindelof Explains’)

<sup>11</sup> Though, the majority liked it according to *TVLine's* poll: 46,31% of the respondees thought it was ‘awesome’, 21,58% called it ‘very good’, 17,06% said it was ‘OK’, 9,27% coined it a ‘fail’ and 5,78% judged it ‘subpar’. (Mason)

opened by adding an authorial comment, using mirrored scenes, suggesting the closure is not what it seems. The mystery box is open and closed at the same time, the viewer can have it both ways. (4) And so, all the audiences can bid a satisfying farewell to the main characters they have spent so much time with, as well as to the makers who have invested in creating an intriguing, underlying layer of meaning. (5) Although Kevin and Nora are not as morally reprehensible as Walter White and the like, their fascinating but self-destructive behaviour comes to an end when Kevin chooses to believe Nora and she, in turn, chooses life.

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