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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.¹

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*

¹ 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?"²

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

² 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

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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