

LUCA BANDIRALI AND
ENRICO TERRONE

CONCEPT TV

AN AESTHETICS OF TELEVISION SERIES



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An Aesthetics of Television Series

Luca Bandirali and Enrico Terrone

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Contents

List of Figures	vii
Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	1
1 The Problem: Supersize Narratives	5
2 The Solution: Conceptual Narratives	23
3 The Upshot: Engaging with Conceptual Narratives	57
Bibliography	111
Index	119
About the Authors	123

List of Figures

Figure 2.1	<i>24</i> (Fox, 2001–2010)	32
Figure 2.2	<i>Money Heist</i> (Netflix, 2017–)	42
Figure 2.3	<i>Homeland</i> (Fox, 2015–2020)	50
Figure 2.4	<i>Stranger Things</i> (Netflix, 2016–)	56
Figure 3.1	<i>Black Mirror: Bandersnatch</i> (Netflix, 2018)	68
Figure 3.2	<i>The Good Wife</i> (CBS, 2009–2016)	71
Figure 3.3	<i>Gomorra</i> (Sky Italia, 2014–)	77
Figure 3.4	<i>Game of Thrones</i> (HBO, 2011–2019)	90
Figure 3.5	<i>Mad Men</i> (AMC, 2007–2015)	102
Figure 3.6	<i>BoJack Horseman</i> (Netflix, 2014–2020)	106

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Introduction

The aesthetics of television series that we propose in this book is the result of a long and deep reflection on what we call the argument from supersizeness. This consists of two premises (P1, P2) and a conclusion (C):

(P1) Supersize audiovisual narratives tend to be aesthetically flawed

(P2) TV series are supersize audiovisual narratives

(C) TV series tend to be aesthetically flawed

We dub “pessimists” those who accept (C) and “optimists” those who reject it by arguing that (P1) is false. Pessimists surely have prevailed for a long time in the aesthetic debates on television but the outstanding improvement of TV series quality over the last twenty years has reversed the situation, so that optimists are now the majority. We ourselves were pessimists until we discovered series such as *24* (2001–2010), *The Sopranos* (1999–2007), and *Mad Men* (2007–2015), which turned us into optimists. Yet, after a while we felt disappointed by the fact that most TV series, even the best ones, were showing serious difficulties in developing their stories season after season. This tempted us into going back to pessimism. However, we were able to resist this temptation as we realized that the purported flaws of TV series are not due to their way of telling stories, but rather to a widespread, but fundamentally flawed, conception of those stories as supersize stories. This led us to build up a new conceptual framework for the aesthetics of TV series.

We now are neither optimists nor pessimists. We are conceptualists. We agree with optimists that (C) is to be rejected but we do not think that the best way to do so consists in arguing against (P1). Indeed, we are happy to concede to pessimists that (P1) is true, or at least might be true. Our point is that (P2) is false and that is why (C) does not follow. Even if supersize

audiovisual narratives were flawed, this would not entail that TV series should be flawed. That is because TV series are not supersize audiovisual narratives, but rather conceptual narratives, which are to traditional narratives what conceptual art is to traditional art. Hence the term “conceptualism” to label our stance toward TV series. This book attempts to argue that TV series, which are among the most praised narratives in contemporary culture, are to be understood as conceptual works of art rather than as supersize films.

Chapter 1 will show that a cinematic approach to television series proves to be unsatisfactory. If such works are evaluated as supersize audiovisual narratives, they seem to be characterized by structural and unsolvable problems, going from the difficulty to fill the vast amount of time at their disposal, to their lack of closure. However, television series cannot be blamed for issues that are not part of their nature—it would be like complaining about the absence of exteriors in a theatrical piece.

Chapters 2 and 3 will propose an approach that allows us to redefine the subject matter of our study. A TV series is not an audiovisual structure, but rather a concept expressed through an audiovisual structure. In other words, television series are conceptual narratives. The type that establishes the series as a conceptual narrative is a principle of construction of audiovisual narratives based on a topic, a narrative idea, the distinctive features of the storyworld, and further features concerning discourse and style. The performances instantiating the series type are its tokens—episodes and seasons.

Chapters 2 and 3 also include ten case studies in order to show that the conceptual approach is not just a new way to watch and appreciate series, but also a new way to analyze and critically evaluate them. Television series are not considered extremely long megamovies that postpone closure more or less easily, but conceptual narratives whose type is performed multiple times, as it happens with the score of a symphony. Such an approach may be adopted to evaluate any kind of serial production, regardless of season format, number of episodes, genre, and the fact that the series is still running or not. This does not mean that the genre, the production context, and the specific format of the series are not taken into account. The point is that a work of art needs to be, first and foremost, identified and hence analyzed based on the art form it belongs to. Although a portrait differs from a landscape, they are both, first and foremost, paintings. A symphony is different from a sonata, but they are, first and foremost, works based on a notation system that allows to create a score enabling multiple performances.

In order to show that our conceptual approach can work even with series that show deeply different features from one another, our case studies belong to various genres (spy thriller, science fiction, fantasy, legal drama, crime drama, period drama, animation) and represent diverse geographical areas (US, UK, Italy, Spain), which in turn implies cultural and production

differences. The series analyzed also vary in terms of length of the episode format (from thirty minutes to more than an hour), and number of episodes per season (from traditional more-than-twenty-episode seasons to more recent ten-to-twelve-episode seasons). Concluded series have been selected (*24*, *Homeland*, *Game of Thrones*, *The Good Wife*, *Mad Men*, *BoJack Horseman*), as well as series that are still running (*Stranger Things*, *Money Heist*, *Gomorra*, *Black Mirror*): if the series is a concept, it is appropriate to evaluate it even when the whole audiovisual structure has not been experienced yet. In order to stress the fact that a serial work has to be identified with a concept, the title of every analysis will highlight the core concept of the series under exam.

Chapter 1

The Problem

Supersize Narratives

TELEVISION SERIES AS MEGAMOVIES

One of the distinctive features of television series is the vast amount of narrative time at their disposal. As Jason Mittell points out in his influential book *Complex TV*, “a series is a cumulative narrative that builds over time” and “time is an essential element of all storytelling but is even more crucial for television [. . .] seriality itself is defined by its use of time” (2015: 18, 26–27). In contemporary TV series, time seems to be even more important, as Melissa Ames puts it, “although temporal play has existed on the small screen prior to the twenty-first century [. . .] never before has narrative time played such an important role in mainstream television” (2012: 9).

Both films and TV series deal with temporal sequences of images and sounds, but the vast amount of time that is available to television can give rise to “megamovies,” as Vincent Canby (1999) called them. If films are middle-size audiovisual narratives, TV series are rather supersize audiovisual narratives.

Still, the vast amount of time of TV series seems to conflict with the structural constraints of audiovisual narrative which films are normally expected to abide by. As pointed out by Syd Field (2005), Robert McKee (1997), and David Bordwell (2008), such constraints are based on the Aristotelian perspective according to which a narrative is inherently a knot to be untied. In Aristotle’s words (1907: § XVIII), “Every tragedy falls into two parts, Complication and Unravelling or Denouement. Incidents extraneous to the action are frequently combined with a portion of the action proper, to form the Complication; the rest is the Unravelling.”

According to this conception of an audiovisual narrative, TV series seem to have two options at their disposal, which we will call the *super-knot* and

the *super-knotty rope*. Yet, we will argue, these two options are not sufficient in order to fill the vast amount of time available to a TV series. Further filling strategies are needed. Among them, we will consider the *flash strategy* and the *strand strategy* to be the most suitable for TV series. However, these strategies raise further issues that risk affecting the aesthetic value of TV series. We will thus conclude that the right way to maximize the aesthetic value of TV series consists in giving up the conception of them as megamovies, and rather embracing the conceptual alternative that we will propose in chapters 2 and 3.

THE VAST AMOUNT OF TIME

TV series can use the vast amount of narrative time at their disposal in order to present fictional worlds with an impressive number of characters, places, and events. As Mittell puts it, “A television serial creates a sustained narrative world, populated by a consistent set of characters who experience a chain of events over time” (2015: 15). Such an amount of narrative time is the runtime available to discourse time in order to build story time, and thus it is structurally inaccessible to films, which are forced to deal with a standard duration of roughly two hours.

The cases in which films overcome this standard duration can be described as exceptions that prove the rule. For instance, in *Apocalypse Now* (1979) or in *Heaven’s Gate* (1980), the temporal extension weakens the causal links of the story in order to highlight the visual features of the fictional worlds. In *Boyhood* (2014), temporal extension is aimed at reproducing the flow of life while preserving some narrative structure, whereas in Andy Warhol’s *Sleep* (1963) temporal extension reproduces the flow of life in its simplest form. In all these cases, the increase in the amount of time does not correspond to a relevant increase in the number of characters and events. Narratives, if any, remain focused on a few plots. When the number of characters and events significantly increases, films tend to acquire a serial structure, as shown by cases such as *The Godfather* (1972–1990), *Star Wars* (1977–2015), and *Harry Potter* (2001–2011).

These exceptions apart, film narration is based on the challenge of telling a whole story by means of roughly two hours of narrative time. Interestingly, some filmmakers have occasionally tried to overcome the temporal limits of cinema by means of television. These works have often been produced in two versions, a longer one for television and a shorter one for theaters. For instance, Ingmar Bergman’s *Scenes from a Marriage* (1973) was originally conceived as a 300-minute miniseries constituted by six 50-minute episodes, and later released also as a 167-minute film. Other works of this sort have

been released in theaters in their original duration, as a series of films, each corresponding to an episode. Among these are *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1980), *Dekalog* (1989), and *Heimat* (1984–2013).

The amount of narrative time available to TV series is strictly connected with the economics of TV: as suggested by Rachel Talalay, “The business model for television is first and foremost about volume of material” (2013: 6). Still, from the Fifties to the Eighties, most series have limited themselves to indeterminately repeating the same modules consisting of a few places and a few characters in which the same kinds of plots occur over and over again.

On the other hand, viewers, critics, and scholars agree that the new course of TV series that started in the Nineties has produced works that, from an aesthetic perspective, are at least as valuable as films. In the contemporary cultural system, TV series undeniably constitute what Dominic Lopes calls “an appreciative kind” (2014), which allows to group together, and appraise in a specific way, distinct works of art that share a core of relevant features. As Michael Wayne points out:

For the majority of its history, from Newton Minow’s “vast wasteland,” to the anti-TV activist groups who believed the medium to be a public health concern akin to illegal drug use, television has been labeled a low cultural form. As television entered the post-network era in the late 1990s, this began to change. Today, some critics assert that the cultural significance of televised serial drama has surpassed that of Hollywood films (2014: 49).

The key aesthetic feature allowing televised serial drama to allegedly surpass Hollywood films seems to consist in the capacity to present fictional worlds that have the same consistency and plausibility of those presented by films but are also enriched by exploiting a much bigger amount of time.

TV series have at their disposal an amount of time that films lack, and they use it to explore fictional worlds in a way that films cannot. While the world exploration provided by films resembles a short journey, that provided by TV series rather resembles a long stay. TV series, in this sense, constitute “a range of texts [. . .] which share qualities such as creating detailed, expansive diegetic worlds” (Hills 2005: 190).

By virtue of such increased cinematic features, TV series are often praised for their outstanding achievements. Given the large agreement on this point, there seems to be no special need for further arguments in their defense. Yet, TV series seem to hide a sort of dark side that is worth exploring. Specifically, if we think of series as supersize films or megamovies, the vast amount of time that constitutes a benefit for TV series in terms of narrative complexity might also involve side effects raising aesthetic problems.

The point is that the value of an audiovisual exploration of a fictional world depends not only on the extension of the portion of the world

explored, but also on the relevance of the story told. Fictional worlds are not interesting per se. They are interesting inasmuch as interesting stories occur in them. Proof of this is the fact that no TV series has so far been limited to merely show a world. It is true that *Mad Men* builds a narrative world so detailed that it allows the viewer to travel through the 1960s, but it is equally true that you watch *Mad Men* to follow *the story of its characters in that world*. Fictional worlds differ from the actual world since they have a primary function, which consists in grounding and supporting the development of interesting stories. As Marie-Laure Ryan points out, “narrative must be about a world populated by individuated existents” and “this world must be situated in time and undergo significant transformations” (2006: 8). The vast amount of narrative time of TV series enables a massive exploration of the fictional world. However, if we conceive of TV series as supersize narratives, this can become problematic in terms of the significant transformations of that world. In the following sections, we will try to explain why and how that happens.

THE NORMS OF AUDIOVISUAL NARRATIVE

Our cultural practices of appreciation of audiovisual narratives such as films involve some evaluative standards that allow us to establish whether a narrative is well-formed. The core principles of such narrative normativity can be traced back to Aristotle’s *Poetics*. According to Aristotle, a narrative is constituted by a problem to solve, which he metaphorically describes as “a knot to untie.” Therefore, a narrative is normally shaped by a three-act structure: the knot tying (the introduction of the problem), its resisting (the struggle between the hero and the problem), its untying (the solution of the problem).

The main innovations that contemporary film scholars add to the Aristotelian model do not concern the names or the number of the acts of a play, but rather their functioning. In particular, story analysts specify that the Aristotelian “knot to be untied” can be expressed in terms of conflicts giving rise to three distinct kinds of plots: (1) *pragmatic plots*, associated to external goals; (2) *psychological plots*, associated to underlying needs, flaws and transformation arcs of the characters; (3) *social plots*, associated to relations among characters (Bordwell 2008; Marks 2009).

On the one hand, an audiovisual narrative can consist of several plots of these three kinds. On the other hand, a proper audiovisual narrative should intertwine and unify all these plots, in order to make some “point” or to achieve a communicative goal (Livingston 2001: 275–284). This point or goal typically consists in a reflection about a morally relevant theme, “a value achieved through conflict” (McKee 1997: 34).

Thus, a narrative world differs from reality since it is goal-oriented and value-oriented: the narrative has to make a point and achieve closure. As Marie-Laure Ryan puts it, “Some of the events must be purposeful actions by these agents, motivated by identifiable goals and plans. [. . .] The sequence of events must form a unified causal chain and lead to closure. [. . .] The story must communicate something meaningful to the recipient” (2006: 8).

The three-act structure is normative in the sense that it provides screenwriters with a set of rules that bears upon their work. Yet, normativity involves not only rule-following but also rule-breaking. An explicit account of narrative rule-breaking in films has been suggested by Ken Dancyger and Jeff Rush, who propose the notions of *two-act* and *one-act* structures, which “narrow the screenplay’s focus to just one conflict or goal and tend to confirm what we already know about the character or situation” (1991: 47).

Dancyger and Rush’s point can be rephrased in the following way. Assuming that an audiovisual narrative is constituted by a problem whose solution involves a conflict, that is, the Aristotelian “knot to untie,” one can just tie the knot without finally untying it, thus developing Dancyger and Rush’s two-act structure. Or one can even give up trying to untie it, thus having Dancyger and Rush’s one-act structure. However, in order to build a narrative, at least a tied knot needs to be shown. In this sense, the three-act structure remains *potentially* constitutive of an audiovisual narrative, since the latter requires at least a knot that *could* be untied.

Ultimately, narrative normativity has to do with a distinctive temporal shape of stories. In our language, we have descriptions referring to “countable” *events* and others referring to “uncountable” *processes* (Steward 1997). For instance, “the sun went down” refers to an event (and one can ask how long it takes for it to happen), whereas “it is raining” refers to a process (about which one can only ask how long it lasts). A narrative is a way of describing what happens to one or more characters *as an event rather than as a process*. Noël Carroll makes a similar point by claiming that a narrative aims to closure: it is a report that proceeds by generating questions that then it goes on to answer, and “closure obtains when all of the pronounced questions the movie has elected to put emphatically before us have been answered” (2009: 211). In achieving closure by engendering in the audience “the sense of completeness and coherence,” a narrative shows the happening facts as having the “countable” temporal shape distinctive of an event rather than the “uncountable” aspect distinctive of a process. In this sense, a narrative is a journey and not simply a movement, since it does not just start and finish but *it has a beginning* from which it departs, and *it has an end* toward which it moves. In Carroll’s terms, there is a narrative if there is a temporal shape that starts up from a question, which corresponds to the Aristotelian “knot to untie,” and that finally exhibits closure by answering that question.

From this perspective, narrative rule-breaking in films can finally be seen as an attempt to produce a work whose temporal form is more similar to a process than an event. Art-house films such as *The Great Beauty* (2013) and *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961) nicely exemplify this sort of attempt. Still, the structural constraints keep bearing upon any audiovisual narrative that aims at overcoming these very constraints. The rules of the game still hold also for the players who try to break them.

THE CLASH BETWEEN NORMS AND TIME

Films are well-suited to abide by the norms of audiovisual narrative since their typical duration of roughly two hours allows them to show a knot that unties in a bounded range of time. In fact, what makes stories interesting is not only the knot to be untied, but especially the fact that it is to be untied in due time. Problems become too easy to solve if we have a lot of time to do so. The interest raised by problem-solving activities is normally related to their having deadlines and countdowns. The challenge for a runner is to cross the finish line as soon as possible, not to cross the finish line in whatever time. Likewise, the challenge for the hero of a story is to untie the knot as soon as possible, depending on the specific constraints of that story. For example, in romantic comedies the knot to be untied is typically that of the characters becoming a couple, and yet what matters is not whether they will become a couple sooner or later before they die, but whether they will succeed in a bounded range of time. Although this temporal range in which the knot should be untied is usually only implicitly established by storytelling, it plays a crucial role in turning a story into an interesting story—a role almost as important as that of the knot itself.

Here is the problem that narrative norms raise for TV series as supersize films. The vast amount of time threatens the temporal bounds on which the capacity of a narrative to raise interest essentially depends. In traditional TV series, this problem was solved by restarting the narration in each episode. That is, each episode functions as a self-standing narrative with its own knot to be untied and its own bounds of time. The unity of a series as a whole is just a matter of resemblance between a number of self-standing episodes.

Still, contemporary TV series cannot content themselves with this simple solution. If considered megamovies, they are expected to build up unitary narratives by massively exploiting the vast amount of time at their disposal. They thus face two options: (1) creating a knot whose untying requires a lot of time or (2) turning the knot into a rope full of knots whose entire untying requires a lot of time. Let us call option (1) “the super-knot” and option (2) “the super-knotty rope.”

The Super-Knot

The super-knot occurs when a narrative extends a plot—that is, the tying, resisting, and untying of a certain knot—as much as possible. This involves two risks.

First, if there is too much time at the hero's disposal to untie the knot, the story risks becoming uninteresting for the viewer. For example, in *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019), a super-knot can be found in the plotline focusing on Daenerys Targaryen, whose goal is to build an invincible army in order to reclaim the throne of Westeros. In this case, the problem is that the time available to the heroine risks being excessive, considering that Daenerys has been building her army for six seasons.

Second, if the hero unties the knot in a due time before the series ends, the remaining time is very hard to fill. For example, in the original run of *Twin Peaks* (1990–1991), discovering who killed Laura Palmer actually is a super-knot, but when the knot is untied after one season and a half, the remaining episodes of the second season risk to boil down to a dispensable appendix.

Since the untying of a knot is the main way in which narratives communicate, if the untying is excessively extended, the narration risks becoming pointless, as argued by Di Chio (2016: 218):

The increasing difficulty in solving plots makes it hard for the spectator to gain something in terms of cognition and emotion from contemporary stories. Without the reduction of possibilities to necessity that derives from narrative closure, without a goal and an end, there is no way to make a point. [. . .] In contemporary TV series, the ending is more and more deferred, and when it finally comes it seems to lack its capacity of solving the narrative issue. That is because the stories are extended as much as they have commercial success, and that involves a continuous dilution of the crucial elements.

The Super-Knotty Rope

In the narrative strategy that we dub the super-knotty rope, the knot is untied in a due time, and then a new knot is to be untied so that the story can continue. In this case, the story risks boiling down to a repetitive untying of a sequence of similar knots. In fact, what makes a story interesting is not only the untying of a knot in a bounded time, but the exceptional character of the knot itself, that is, the exceptional character of the experience that the hero lives in facing this problem. If this kind of problem regularly shows up and is solved, the narrative as a whole tends to become uninteresting. We are thus brought back to the functioning of classic TV series in which all the interest

lies in each single episode, while the series as a whole cannot be considered a proper narrative.

If we try to conceive of the narrative as a whole, as contemporary television encourages us to do, a TV series ends up resembling a sort of video game in which the hero relives the same kind of adventure each time the game is played—such a supersize narrative seems a sort of unintended remake of *Groundhog Day* (1993), the well-known film in which Bill Murray plays a journalist destined to indeterminately relive slightly different versions of the same day of his life. Interestingly, the TV series *Russian Doll* (2019–), explicitly draws on this analogy in an aesthetically fruitful way, but most TV series seem to be rather hindered by it.

The main problem of the super-knotty rope is that a narrative is expected to have a point of *maximal* intensity that leads to the definitive untying of the knot and to the clarification of what is communicated by the narration. A point of *maximal* intensity, as such, in principle cannot be repeated. In this sense, story analysts call this point “climax” or *non plus ultra*, that is, a point that you cannot exceed. Robert McKee characterizes the climax as “a final action beyond which the audience cannot imagine another” (1997: 140).

Still, in TV series each season (or even each episode) normally needs a point of maximal intensity, a climax or *non plus ultra*. Therefore, given the climax of a certain season, the next season requires a new climax that should exceed the previous one. Since a climax as such is not to be exceeded, this raises a problem for serial storytelling. The second season of *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013), for example, ends with a scene of high intensity: Walter saves his young friend Jesse from addiction to heroin, and takes him to rehab. This event gives a sort of closure to the relation between Walter and Jesse, which seems hard to exceed. If this was a film, the viewer would be left to imagine a future in which, for instance, Jesse would bring flowers to Walter’s grave. Yet, serial storytelling requires a new beginning, and therefore in the third season of *Breaking Bad*, Jesse is back from rehab and his friendship with Walter is rebooted in view of a new climax.

By turning the unique into the repeatable, the inflation of climaxes may lead a supersize narrative to a lack of plausibility, as Di Chio points out:

Challenges become more and more extreme and characters’ performances more and more blatant [. . .] Correspondingly, however, the fictional worlds become increasingly implausible. The more the sequels of seasons, the less the degree of plausibility [. . .] *House M.D.*’s last seasons go beyond any reasonable idea of medicine. *Lost*’s last seasons become a sort of fairy tale. The mysteries of *Desperate Housewives* become more and more complicated in a way that appears ridiculous. As the seasons of *24* go by, the fury of the terrorists against California and the extraordinary concentration of threats that Jack Bauer has to

face become increasingly absurd. Plastic surgery in *Nip / Tuck* has become pure witchcraft, as well as the use of science and technology in series like *CSI* and *Fringe* (2016: 207).

The super-knotty rope option raises problems also with respect to the development of the character, the so-called arc of transformation, which, if we consider TV series supersize narratives, ends up extending for too long. Each knot should correspond to a significant transformation in the life of the character, a *bildung*, an initiation, the learning of a lesson that will shape his or her entire existence. This kind of experience, as such, represents an exceptional event in the life of a person. Yet, by endorsing the super-knotty rope option, TV series seem forced to ascribe multiple initiatory experiences to characters.

At the end of the second season of *Mad Men*, Don Draper, as a modern Ulysses, is lost in a Homeric California, among the lotus eaters and avatars of Circe and Calypso. And, just like Ulysses, he is also faced with the dead, or at least the memory of dead people. In fact, this is an excellent piece of one of the best contemporary series. At the end of the season, Draper comes back to New York and to his wife Elizabeth just like Ulysses comes back to the island of Ithaca and to his wife Penelope. Nevertheless, in Homer's narrative, Ulysses' return to Ithaca and to Penelope represents the end of the story, the climax, the *non plus ultra*, the meaningful accomplishment of his experience. By contrast, Don Draper will live other Californian odysseys in *Mad Men's* subsequent seasons. If we consider this series a megamovie, such iteration of special initiatory experiences leaves us with the deceiving impression that the character has not learned anything from each of them. Since Don Draper is a very sensitive and intelligent character, we are also left with the impression that the reason why he has not learned anything does not lie in his inability to learn, but rather in a pragmatic constraint external to the narrative.

In the episode *Free Churro* of the series *BoJack Horseman* (2014–2020), the eponymous hero exceptionally reveals, from within a TV series, such dependence of supersize narratives on extra-narrative constraints. BoJack begins with considering an episode of the TV show *Horsin' Around* in which he has played the main character for a long time:

We did this one season finale, where Olivia's birth mother comes to town. And she was a junkie, but she's gotten herself cleaned up, and she wants to be in Olivia's life again. And of course, she's like a perfect grown-up version of Olivia, and they go to the mall together, and get her ears pierced, like she's always wanted [. . .] Anyway, the horse tries to warn her, "Be careful, moms have a way of letting you down." But Olivia just thinks the horse is jealous, and when the mom says she's moving to California, Olivia decides to go with her.

At this point, Bojack reveals what lies behind the functioning of supersize narratives:

And the network really juiced the cliffhanger: “Is Olivia gone for good?” But of course, because it’s a TV show, she was not gone for good. Of course, because it’s a TV show, Olivia’s mother had a relapse and had to go back to rehab, so Olivia had to hitchhike all the way home, getting rides from Mr. T, Alf, and the cast of *Stomp*. Of course that’s what happened. Because, what are you gonna do, just not have Olivia on the show? You can’t have happy endings in sitcoms, not really, because, if everyone’s happy, the show would be over, and above all else, the show . . . has to keep going. There’s always more show. And you can call “Horsin’ Around” dumb, or bad, or unrealistic, but there is nothing more realistic than that. You never get a happy ending, ‘cause there’s always more show.

Supersize narratives are similar to reality in this sense, as BoJack aptly points out, but this prevents them from having the key feature that distinguishes storytelling from reality: having closure, making a point, providing the audience with an ultimate meaning.

FILLING STRATEGIES

Assuming that an audiovisual narrative is a knot to be untied by a hero, in order to have an interesting story, the time at the hero’s disposal should be bounded, and this knot should represent an exceptional event in his or her life. This is how films work. If one assumes that the vast amount of time of TV series as megamovies is massively exploited to untie one “super-knot,” one can often detect that they exceed the bounds of time that are appropriate for that knot, hence the narrative becomes uninteresting. Likewise, if such an amount of time is used to untie a plurality of knots on the same “super-knotty rope,” the exceptional character of the hero’s experience fades and the supersize narrative risks becoming uninteresting also in this case.

The basic reason behind these issues is that TV series seem to have too much time compared to what the norms of audiovisual narrative prescribe. The vast amount of time available to a TV series constitutes a too large temporal sheet for the narrative score to be written. In order to see how this score can be written anyway, let us consider two filling strategies, the “flash strategy” and the “strand strategy.”

The Flash Strategy

Many contemporary TV series systematically make use of flashbacks that contribute to fill the vast amount of time at their disposal. Flashbacks provide

a way to fill time by pausing, so to say, the untying of the knots, and exploring the characters' past. A flashback, as such, does not necessarily make an audiovisual narrative less valuable. Indeed, many films are praised for their use of flashbacks, as for example *8½* (1963), *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), *Wild Strawberries* (1957). Likewise, in instances of the film noir genre such as *Double Indemnity* (1944) or *Criss Cross* (1949), the use of flashbacks is meant to emphasize the fatalism of the story. Yet, the use of flashbacks may make the narrative experience less valuable if they do not exhibit any relevant connection with the narrative itself.

Specifically, the merit of an audiovisual narrative can consist in its capacity to implicitly provide a character with a backstory, which allows the viewer to acknowledge the past experiences of this character without directly seeing them. In this sense, an unmotivated use of flashbacks may seem a symptom of the incapacity to construct a backstory in a subtler way, or a redundancy with respect to an already established backstory. When watching TV series as though they were supersize films, the quantity and frequency of flashbacks can often become overwhelming. For instance, in *Dexter* (2006–2013), many flashbacks focusing on the hero as a child and his relationship with his father seem redundant compared to what the present events have already revealed about Dexter's personality. And when the flashbacks only supply information that does not significantly contribute to better understand the characters and their lives, the viewer is left with the impression that the past of the fictional world is nothing but a reservoir of events that can be arbitrarily drawn out when there is some narrative time to fill.

In series such as *Lost* (2004–2010) or *Orange is the New Black* (2013–2019) the flashbacks focusing on a certain character become a standard piece of each episode, regardless of the relevance of the character featured in the flashback and of the events that the flashback presents. *Scandal* (2012–2018) multiplies the flashbacks of the campaign in which Olivia Pope has met the future president, which quickly appear blatantly redundant. *The Good Wife* (2009–2016) seems to exploit the flashbacks about Peter Florrick's resignation as a filler that can be used whenever it helps, especially in the empty intervals between a knot that has just been untied and a new knot that is going to be tied.

When TV series are seen as supersize narratives, flashbacks often seem to come down to stratagems to fill a superabundance of time. This sense of redundancy can become even stronger when a TV series turns a whole episode into a flashback. For example, in *Lost*, the seventh episode of Season Two (*The Other 48 Days*) is an entire flashback showing what happened to the survivors of the tail section of Oceanic Flight 815 from the moment of the crash right up to the present. According to Stephen King (2007), this flashback strategy could have led in the long term to ruin *Lost*: "don't beat

this sweet cow to death with years of ponderous flashback padding. End it any way you want, but when it's time for closure, provide it. Don't just keep on wagon-training."

A similar filling strategy might consist in using, instead of a classic flashback, a "what if" episode in which the narration explores a counterfactual, that is, an unrealized possibility in the fictional world. We may call this stylistic device "flashbeside," in the sense that it explores a possible world which is *beside* the fictional world. As a stylistic device, the flashbeside is aesthetically neutral, and in principle can lead to outstanding achievements. For instance, in the film *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), the flashbeside allows the hero to see what the world would be like *without* him, thus preventing him from committing suicide. Conversely, in the film *25th Hour* (2002), the flashbeside allows the hero to see what the world would be like *with* him in it, enabling the viewer to finally understand the meaning of the title—the 25th hour only belongs to the reign of possibility.

Still, if we consider TV series megamovies, the use of flashbesides seems to lack such a deep significance, boiling down to a way of filling a superabundance of time. In the third season of *Banshee* (2013–2016), after the death of a woman who was in love with the hero, the narration inserts a "what if" episode. A series of flashbesides, marked by black and white images, allows the hero to see what would have happened if he had not stayed in *Banshee* and had not involved the citizens of *Banshee* in a spiral of violence. Yet, if one sees *Banshee* as a supersize narrative, after two seasons and a half of continuous carnage, this sort of regret sounds out of time, and seems to be motivated only by a need to fill the narrative time.

The Strand Strategy

While the flash strategy fills the narrative time by means of flashes that explore past or possible events somehow connected with a certain plot, the strand strategy pursues the same filling goal by adding new narrative strands to the main plot.

A well-known case of strand strategy can be found in *College*, the fifth episode of *Sopranos'* (1999–2007) first season: leading character Tony Soprano, a mafia mobster, takes his daughter on a trip to visit the college she would like to go to. The events narrated in this episode are neither relevant effects of what happened in the previous episodes nor relevant causes of what will happen in the next ones.

Critics usually appreciate such "lateral" movements that lead to self-standing narrative strands. Another famous case is that of *Breaking Bad's Fly* (season 3, episode 10), entirely devoted to a fly that accidentally entered a laboratory. Yet, if one sees a TV series as a supersize narrative, the fact

that such episodes can be removed without affecting the understanding of the whole narrative raises doubts about their genuine contribution to the value of one's experience. This can lead one to suspect that the main goal of such episodes is not to contribute to the value of the viewer's experience but just to help the producers to fill a vast amount of narrative time.

A proper audiovisual narrative requires a certain degree of unity. Films can host multiple plots, that is, knots to be untied, but all those plots should be intertwined in order to contribute to the same communicative project. Thus, a series whose plots are not properly intertwined risks to be a patchwork of self-standing narratives rather than a unified whole. For instance, in series such as *The Leftovers* (2014–2017) or *Wayward Pines* (2015–2016), whose main plots revolve around adult characters, secondary strands focusing on teenagers may sometimes fail to significantly connect with these plots. Symmetrically, secondary strands about adult characters in teen dramas such as *Gossip Girl* (2007–2012) or *Glee* (2009–2015) may find it hard to significantly connect with the main plots featuring teenagers.

When the number of strands increases, leading to a multi-strand narrative, a TV series might move from a state of *complexity* (Mittell 2015: 17), in which the various strands are components of a unitary communicative project, to a state of mere *complication*, in which viewers strive to keep track of the developments of all the strands, with this effort not being rewarded with any relevant insight into the supersize narrative. Kristin Thompson characterizes the grey zone between complexity and complication in terms of density:

In a single episode of *E.R.* or *Bad Girls*, the individual scenes are mostly very short, providing only a slight bit of progression in a given plotline. By moving quickly among plots, the narrative gives the impression of considerable density and "lifelikeness". This is why so many dramatic serials are set in large institutions such as hospitals, police stations, law firms, and prisons, where many characters' concerns can bounce off each other (2003: 57).

An interesting example of the distinction between complexity and complication comes from the comparison between the first (2014) and the second season (2015) of *True Detective* (2014–2019). In the first season, the strand strategy leads to such a complex structure that the main plot focusing on the two detectives who investigate a serial killer intertwines with a secondary strand in which they are under investigation. Yet, in Season Two, which tells a brand-new story, the number of detectives is increased to three and the villain becomes a full-fledged character. These four characters are not only part of the plot set in the present, but they also have their own strand developed in the past. This results in pure complication, a cumbersome storytelling that has

led the critic Gwilym Mumford to say about *True Detective*'s showrunner: "Nic Pizzolatto is just happy to wallow in the murk" (2015).

In sum, the strand strategy may end up in a swirl of events that fills the vast amount of time without significantly contributing to the development of the supersize narrative, thereby leaving the viewer in a state of puzzlement. As Di Chio points out,

in some episodes of *The West Wing* each scene makes reference to something very important, yet after a number of such references you would like to go back and check the crucial details you maybe have missed. But at the end you remain confused. The question that these scenes raise ultimately is not "How will it end?" but "What is going on?" (2016: 219).

According to the norms of audiovisual narratives, the increase in the number of narrative strands normally involves a corresponding increase in the number of fictional individuals who, as possible protagonists of a strand of their own, count as full-fledged characters. The vast amount of time that characterizes TV series as supersize narratives, however, can force the narration to put those characters in a sort of stand-by condition, as if the story could easily do without them. In *Banshee*, an asthmatic child is periodically hospitalized thereby allowing periodical reunions of his parents, and at a certain point he completely disappears from the story without any explanation. In *Game of Thrones*, the Night Watch's steward Samwell Tarly is often involved in narrative strands that seem to lead nowhere. Even an important character like Brandon Stark in the same series, after finally reaching the magic tree at the end of Season Four, disappears without any explanation for the entire fifth season, and this sounds quite awkward, even though he will reappear in Season Six.

By significantly increasing the number of events and characters, the strand strategy should in principle also increase the number of places in which characters act and events occur. Yet, because of both structural and financial reasons, the spatial range of a TV series usually remains quite restricted, especially in comparison with the temporal range. In fact, an increase in the number of exceptional events without a corresponding extension of the spatial domain can produce odd narrative effects when a TV series is considered a supersize narrative. A violent crime in a quiet small town is an effective narrative trigger, for example in Stephen King's novels, precisely because it represents an exceptional event in such a quiet context. But if in this small town a new kind of violent crime occurs each week, like in classic TV series such as *Murder, She Wrote* (1984–1996), the viewer is left with the impression that the true author of all these crimes is in fact the narrator himself, and that their motive is nothing but filling the vast amount of narrative time.

A similar problem may also affect contemporary TV series. For instance, the small town of Charming, in which *Sons of Anarchy* (2008–2014) is set, accumulates more crimes than the entire metropolitan area of Los Angeles, and more victims than a whole war. Likewise, in *Bron/Broen* (2011–2018), the density of extravagant crimes in the austere cross-national metropolitan area of Copenhagen and Malmoe seems quite exaggerated. If one takes it for granted that series tell stories just like films do, but having more time at their disposal, one seems entitled to conclude that filling time by increasing the number of characters and events can end up being an aesthetic flaw when the space available to the audiovisual narrative is not sufficiently wide.

TWO ALTERNATIVE CONCLUSIONS

The issue of filling time is central in TV series, especially in heavily serialized shows. Such series build very detailed worlds in which very complex narratives can occur. Yet, audiovisual narratives are subject to some basic norms, which the vast amount of time of TV series makes it hard to follow.

We have seen that, according to Aristotle's metaphor, a story is like a knot to be untied. More specifically, a story consists of a first act in which the main goals are individuated, a second act in which some complication arises, and a third act in which the denouement occurs. When considered megamovies, TV series are expected to abide by these constraints in spite of their vast amount of time and their complex structure involving multiple episodes and seasons. Although the vast amount of time of contemporary TV series allows them to better explore the narrative world and investigate the personality of a multitude of characters, it also forces them to fill a narrative score that overflows the standard temporal dimensions of well-formed stories, thereby jeopardizing their aesthetic value.

That being the case, the conclusion that one might be tempted to draw is that TV series tend to be aesthetically flawed audiovisual narratives, since they have too much time to fill with respect to the proper amount of time required by a well-formed audiovisual narrative. If we consider TV series narratives forced to go on, whatever it takes, we can judge them repetitive and redundant. For example, the first season of *You* (2019–) tells, in a very original way, the story of a stalker, Joe Goldberg, who ends up killing Beck, the girl he falls in love with. Throughout the season, we learn that Joe has already done the same thing in the past with his previous girlfriend, Candace, and this is already a first redundancy. In the second season, Joe moves from New York to Los Angeles and meets a new girl, Love, but this bond is complicated by the appearances of Beck's ghost and by the actual return of Candace, who did not actually die. We then learn through flashbacks what happened in

Candace's backstory, while in the present a very similar story is unfolding again. If we think of *You* as a long film, we say that it is spinning on itself in an aesthetically problematic way. We can make a similar judgment on many other TV series. How many times does poor Saul Berenson in *Homeland* (2011–2020) have to be kidnapped? Why in *Suits* (2011–2019) doesn't Ross finally take a bachelor's degree in law? Why doesn't *The Good Wife*'s Alicia Florrick divorce her husband once and for all? Why should we care about the characters' past instead of their present? And why should we be interested in stories of supporting characters whose names we barely remember? And above all, why do these stories never come to an end?

If we continue to answer these questions considering TV series extended films, television seems structurally inferior to film as a narrative art. Still, there is another conclusion that is worth exploring. All the problems we have highlighted in this chapter arise from the assumption that TV series are supesize audiovisual narratives, namely megamovies. But we are not forced to conceive of TV series as narratives that extend from the first episode of the first season to the last one of the final season. We can conceive of them, instead, as conceptual narratives that have episodes and seasons as their instances rather than as their parts. From this perspective, episodes and seasons are not to TV series what chapters are to novels, but rather what performances are to symphonies. The fact that all the chapters of a novel exhibit the same structure might make that novel dull, but it would make no sense to claim that a symphony is dull because all its performances exhibit the same structure—indeed, that is precisely what performances are expected to do. Likewise, if TV series are conceived of as conceptual narratives, it would make no sense to complain that all their seasons exhibit the same narrative structure. For instance, it would make no sense to complain that in each season of *Mad Men* Don Draper is going through the same kinds of adventures and experiences, since this is precisely what each season of *Mad Men* should do as a sort of performance executing the narrative score that constitutes *Mad Men* as a TV series.

From this perspective, the two seasons of *You* can be seen as two performances that execute the same score with different nuances. The score is first of all constituted by a narrative pattern in which Joe Goldberg falls in love with a girl in his peculiar, psychotically romantic way, which leads him to commit a variety of crimes in the name of love. Still, other narrative elements can also be part of the score: the glass cage in which Joe keeps his prisoners; Joe's hacking activities on social networking sites that allow him to control his loved ones and to carry out his crimes; the interference of Joe's previous partners in Joe's new love affair; Joe's friendship with a kid. Moreover, stylistic elements can also be part of the score, in particular the massive use of Joe's inner voice and the peculiar alternation, through a change of tone by

the actor, between that voice and Joe's real voice when he is speaking with other characters.

Each season of *You* instantiates these features in its own way, just like an orchestra executes the score of a symphony in its own way. The very title of the series seems to suggest that it is a matter of instantiating the same abstract structure in different contexts. The word "you" is an indexical, that is, in David Kaplan's (1989) terms, a word whose meaning is an abstract "character" that acquires a specific "content" when uttered in a specific context. The character of "you" is always the addressee of the utterance, but its content changes depending on the person to whom the utterance is addressed in a certain context. For instance, in the first season of *You* the addressee of Joe's utterances is Beck whereas in Season Two it is Love. The way in which the indexical "you" works is also the way in which each season of *You* works, that is, by deploying the same "character," the same bunch of features, to obtain a new "content," a new audiovisual narrative.

A TV series such as *You*, from this perspective, is not a supersize audiovisual narrative in which the second season follows the first season just like the second half of a film follows its first half. Rather, *You* is a narrative score of which each season is meant to provide an execution, and in this sense one can praise the second season for its clever and meaningful variations, for its virtuoso performance of the narrative score, instead of blaming it for telling almost the same story that the first season already told. Even Mozart's *Jupiter Symphony*, indeed, would be quite repetitive and boring a work if one conceived of it as the sequence of its performances rather than a principle of construction of performances that each performance is meant to properly and possibly originally instantiate. In the next chapters, we will argue that conceiving of TV series in this way, as conceptual narratives instantiated by episodes and seasons, allows us to explain the way we usually discuss TV series in evaluative conversations. Moreover, we will argue, conceiving TV series as conceptual narratives enables us to improve our aesthetic experience of them, and to maximize their aesthetic value.

Chapter 2

The Solution

Conceptual Narratives

VIDEO ART, FILM, TELEVISION

In 1975, the Italian artist Fabio Mauri showed his video installation *Intellettuale* at the Galleria Comunale d'Arte Moderna of Bologna, the modern art museum of the city. Mauri projected the film *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo* (1964) onto the body of its director, Pier Paolo Pasolini, whose chest served as a screen for the whole performance. Did the audience watch a film or a video installation? And what is the difference between *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo* seen on a cinema screen and its projection on Pasolini's white shirt in Bologna?

Both a film and a video installation show moving images, although they belong to two different art forms (Balsom 2017; Rush 2007). The difference between *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo* and *Intellettuale* lies in what may be called their "use plan," what the audience is required to do in order to appropriately appreciate the work of art. A film needs to be watched from beginning to end, preferably without any interruptions. A video art installation, on the other hand, can be seen with a freer approach, by selecting samples of the moving images in order to have an idea of the artistic project leading to their projection. This suggests that a film and a video art work are ontologically different. A film is an audiovisual structure, a sequence of images and sounds, with a definite length that determines the length of the audience's experience. A video art work, although being expressed through an audiovisual structure, does not seem to coincide with it, as the work can be appropriately appreciated without experiencing the whole audiovisual structure from beginning to end.

Just as in Mauri's *Intellettuale*, in Nam June Paik's *TV Bra for Living Sculpture* (1969), the images projected onto the screens on a cellist's bra (the

“TV Bra”) while she is performing (the “Living Sculpture”) do not need to be seen from beginning to end to appropriately appreciate the work of art. When seeing a video art work, the audience is not usually expected to sit in front of the screen from the beginning to the end of the projection, nor go through all the screens and entirely watch each one of the projections if the installation includes more than one screen. Rather, the audience is expected to pay just enough attention to the screen, or wander from screen to screen just enough to grasp the idea the artist has developed and shown through the images.

In this sense, video art—or at least some sort of video art—can be traced back to conceptual art. Works of video art make use of perceivable structures (images and sounds), but do not coincide with such structures. Rather, they are to be identified with the concepts that such structures allow to grasp (see Dodd 2018; Schellekens 2019). While films are audiovisual structures, video art works are rather concepts expressed through audiovisual structures.

In 1967, Sol LeWitt asserted this general principle in his *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*: “The idea itself [. . .] is as much of a work of art as any finished product” (1967: 81). In Mauri’s *Intellettuale*, the idea itself is “a reflection on the relationship between a work of art and its author” (Boràgina 2019: 308). In order to understand this concept, it was not necessary to watch the whole film, but it was essential to know that the man on whom the images were being projected was Pasolini. The concept, however, has been resistant even to the death of Pasolini himself: “On December 9th, 1975, at Galleria Toselli in Rome, in fact, Mauri re-staged *Intellettuale*, but in the very absence of Pasolini, because in the meantime (on November 2, 1975) the great Italian director was found dead in circumstances that remain today quite obscure. On that occasion, Mauri projected *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo* on the white shirt Pasolini himself wore when he was killed” (Senaldi 2012: 270).

Film and conceptual video art are at the two extremes of the operating range of the audiovisual structure within which serial television also finds its place. Serial television represents, in turn, an art form whose works involve images and sounds, but have use plans that differ from both those that determine the appreciation of films and those that determine the appreciation of video art works. This chapter aims to identify the use plan for television series that determines their ontological nature. We assume that television series, just like any other work of art, can be traced back to the category of “public artifacts,” which Amie Thomasson (2014: 47) characterizes as follows: “While all artifacts are indeed mind dependent, public artifacts do not depend merely on the individual intentions of their makers; they also depend on public norms.” Following Wybo Houkes and Pieter Vermaas (2010: 7), we conceive of the public norm on which a public artifact depends as the “use plan” that prescribes how to use it. While use plans for technical artifacts are quite often made explicit by user manuals, those for works of art tend to remain implicit

in networks of shared attitudes. The purpose of this chapter is to make the use plan for television series explicit.

In contemporary aesthetics, television series are considered a different art form from film, although they are taken to be closer to film than to video art (see Nannicelli 2016; Shuster 2017). This is confirmed by several attempts aimed at improving the artistic reputation of television by highlighting the reduction of the gap between television and film. What has been described as *quality television* exhibits the typical features of films, such as “cinematic look” (Pearson 2007a: 244, 245; Goode 2007: 127) and “cinematic image” (Nelson 2007: 43), thereby identifying a group of noteworthy products, as in the case of “cinematic TV dramas” (Nelson 2007: 51). Moreover, television screens have become theatrical, with home theater systems providing a home version of the movie theater, as “domestic screens have expanded and offered unprecedented and compelling visual images” (Lotz 2014: 85). Since both the television product and the technology used to reproduce it tend to cinematic quality, film becomes the benchmark to assess the success of television series. The pilot of *Lost*, for example, “looks like a film” (quoted in Pearson 2007a: 245) and the plane crash scenes are described as “just as good if not better than anything seen in the cinema” (quoted in Pearson 2007a: 245).

Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine (2012) have pointed out how the legitimation of a new television targeting niche audiences (the quality television of serialized dramas) goes hand in hand with the preconceived denigration of traditional mass television (from soap operas to multi-camera sitcoms). From this perspective, the legitimation of a certain television production is, first and foremost, the legitimation of the elite that watches it. Some of the studies quoted by Newman and Levine (e.g., Butler 2010; Caldwell 1995) embrace “a film-centered conception of television style” (2012: 164–165) that may be summarized in the adjectives “theatrical” and “cinematic.” The former refers to new technologies that improve the performance of the medium in order for it to achieve cinema-quality levels (from low to high definition), while the latter refers to a television style that is more and more similar to that of film and “connotes artistry mixed with a sense of grandeur” (Jaramillo 2013: 67).

The process of legitimation of the television medium, which has been described as “cinematization,” (Newman and Levine 2012: 4) involves that a television series is considered a very long film, a megamovie. This process has been facilitated by the aggregation of episodes and seasons that material supports such as DVDs, and later streaming services, made possible. The quantitative availability enables the appreciation of the television series as a whole composed of the sum of the seasons.

From this perspective, the main—if not the only—difference between a television series and a film is the fact that the former is divided into episodes

and seasons. This means that a series needs to be watched at different moments, and not in a single sitting as it happens with a film. However, this does not seem to be such a significant difference, since both films and television series are works of art that coincide with audiovisual structures. The difference lies only in the fact that the audiovisual structure of a film is a single unit, while that of a series is divided into episodes and seasons. In the case of video art, on the other hand, the difference in the use plan implies a difference in the structure: a video art work is not so much an audiovisual structure, but rather (at least in the cases considered above) a concept expressed through an audiovisual structure.

This chapter will investigate the—hitherto unexplored—hypothesis that serial television is ontologically closer to video art than to film. According to this “conceptual” hypothesis, a television series is not an audiovisual structure, but a concept expressed through an audiovisual structure. Stanley Cavell somehow foresaw the conceptual hypothesis in his 1982 *The Fact of Television*. Consider this statement: “What is memorable, treasurable, criticizable, is not primarily the individual work, but the program, the format, not this or that day of *I Love Lucy*, but the program as such” (1982: 77). What Cavell here calls “the program, the format” corresponds to what we call the concept. Moreover Cavell, just like us, insists on the relevance of this fact both at the aesthetic and at the ontological level: “To say that the primary object of aesthetic interest in television is not the individual piece, but the format, is to say that the format is its primary individual of aesthetic interest. This ontological recharacterization is meant to bring out that the relation between format and instance should be of essential aesthetic concern” (1982: 79). What Cavell here calls “the relation between format and instance” corresponds to the relation between the concept and its instances in our theory.

Cavell concludes that “the aesthetic medium of television” relies on “an aesthetic procedure in which the basis of a medium is acknowledged primarily by the format rather than primarily by its instantiations” (1982: 86). Fair enough, but when it comes to specify “What are the formats, or serializations, of television?,” Cavell remains at a very general and vague level: “sitcoms, game shows, sports, cultural coverage (concerts, opera, ballet, etc.), talk shows, speeches and lectures, news, weather reports, movies, specials, and so on” (1982: 86). In this chapter, instead, we will investigate in depth the aesthetics of one specific television kind, namely TV series.

ARGUING FOR THE CONCEPTUAL HYPOTHESIS

According to the conceptual hypothesis, the norm governing the appreciation of a TV series does not require to experience the entire projection of the

audiovisual structure, but to select a portion large enough to grasp and appreciate the concept—a term that also lies at the basis of the production practices of the medium. The conceptual hypothesis is supported by the practice of appreciation of television series, which allows to evaluate a work before experiencing its entire audiovisual structure. The practice of appreciation of films, instead, does not consider this approach appropriate. Moviegoers are expected to watch the whole film, and the question about film appreciation is always asked in the past tense—“Was it good?.” On the other hand, television series viewers appreciate what they are still watching, a work that has started but has not ended yet. Therefore, cinema critics are expected to watch the entire film before reviewing it, while television critics are allowed to review a series without having watched it from beginning to end—which is also due to the fact that a series is often reviewed before all its seasons are released.

The theory that a TV series is a concept expressed through an audiovisual structure effectively explains this evaluation practice. If the series is a concept, it seems appropriate to evaluate it even without experiencing the entire audiovisual structure. If, instead, the series coincided with the entire audiovisual structure, it would be difficult to explain how it could be evaluated without such structure being available in its entirety.

Despite this explanatory advantage, the hypothesis that television series are concepts faces further challenges. To begin with, there are two alternative explanations for the practice of evaluating a series before watching it in its entirety.

The first explanation lies in the denial of the existence of such practice, which is reduced to an incorrect choice of words. When one says that *Money Heist* (*Casa de papel*, 2017–) is one’s favorite series, one is only expressing appreciation for the seasons one has already seen—one is just using synecdoche, mentioning the whole for one of its parts.

The second explanation is based on the idea that television series are works that change over time. At a certain moment, a series coincides with the audiovisual structure identified by the entirety of the episodes released up to that moment. When one says that *Money Heist* is one’s favorite series, one is indeed talking about *Money Heist*, and not just one of its parts. Yet, *Money Heist* is a work destined to change over time, hence the judgment made does not concern the overall work, but the work at the moment when judgment is made.

However, both these explanations misrepresent the evaluation of the work. People usually discuss a television series assuming they are talking about the same object, identified by the same features, even if they have not exactly watched the same portion of the series. According to the first and second explanations, if different people saw different portions of the

same series, they would not actually be discussing the same object having the same features, although they would believe the opposite. Following the first explanation, they would be talking about different parts of the work. Following the second explanation, they would be talking about the work at different moments, and hence the work would be identified by different features. By contrast, if the work can be identified with the concept, it can be said that those people are indeed talking about the same object, characterized by the same features, although they have experienced different audiovisual structures.

This characterization is particularly important when considering that audience misalignment has increased over the last few years, due to new distribution strategies. Linear television involved the release of an episode per week, on a given channel and at a specific scheduled time, a practice that aligned the individual experiences of the viewers. Later, video recorders and digital distribution services allowed to personalize the experience, which today makes the alignment of series audiences rare.

Over long periods of time, the problem of the identification of the work of art has arisen also in the field of architecture. From Saint Peter's Basilica in Vatican City to The Guggenheim in New York, any work carried out after the completion of the buildings substantially altered the original design, with visitors appreciating rather different works over the years. However, these buildings had been completed and they were altered only at a later time, while television series are more similar to a building site where construction is always in progress, as in the case of Gaudí's Sagrada Família. According to Marie-Laure Ryan, "Because TV narrative stretches out indefinitely in time, its plot is continually in the process of being written" (2006: 61). And, following Brett Martin, "Almost alone among the narrative arts, these shows are composed with no ending—indeed, with the hope that it will stay that way indefinitely" (2013: 60).

Another feature that series share with architectural works is the possibility of being partially experienced and evaluated. The sentence "I have visited the Colosseum" does not imply the fact that the visitor has seen every area of the building. In order for the sentence to make sense, the visitor needs to have been to the Colosseum and had an overall idea of it. The way in which television series are close to video art is hence similar to that in which architecture is close to conceptual art. An architectural work can be appreciated as a project that is shown through a building, without coinciding with the entirety of the building itself (cf. Goodman 1968; Wollheim 1980). In the same way, a series can be appreciated as a concept expressed through an audiovisual structure, without coinciding with the entirety of the audiovisual structure itself.

TELEVISION SERIES AS CONCEPTUAL NARRATIVES

So far, we have argued that TV series are concepts in the way some video art works are rather than audiovisual structures as films are. However, an important difference between serial television and video art remains. Video art works make the audiovisual structure completely and immediately available, while TV series make it gradually available over time. As for the order in which the images should be seen, video art traditionally leaves substantial freedom to the viewer—or visitor—who can wander from image to image, especially when there are multiple screens. Conversely, television series tend to impose a structured path, typically the one that goes from the pilot to the latest available episode, through an ordered sequence of episodes and seasons.

To clarify the difference, let us compare Julian Rosefeldt's *Manifesto* (2015) and Graeme Manson and John Fawcett's *Orphan Black* (2013–2017). Although both works are based on the performance of a single actress—Cate Blanchett and Tatiana Maslany, respectively—who plays 13 different characters, their use plans are significantly different. *Manifesto* is a work of video art to be projected in a single place where thirteen screens have been installed, and the viewer can move freely from screen to screen. *Orphan Black*, on the other hand, is a TV series consisting of five seasons of ten episodes each, to be watched one after the other. Furthermore, *Manifesto*'s thirteen videos are meant to depict situations inspired by political or artistic manifestos, while *Orphan Black*'s five seasons are meant to tell stories. This allows us to highlight another key difference: TV series are essentially narratives, while video art works are, at most, accidentally so.

Although TV series can be considered concepts, they need to be considered concepts in a very specific sense. TV series are conceptual narratives, principles of construction of stories that can be instantiated by a variety of different audiovisual structures (episodes and seasons), all substantially similar but never identical.

A useful point of reference to investigate the ontology of television series as conceptual narratives is provided by performing arts such as theater and music (cf. Davies 2011; Schellekens 2017; Dodd 2019). Theatrical works are usually considered textual structures identified by scripts and expressed through performances. Similarly, musical works can be cast as sound structures that are identified by scores and expressed through performances.

In the ontology of art, the structure is called “type,” and its performances “tokens” (cf. Kivy 2002; Dodd 2007; Davies 2010). Specifically, in the wake of Peter Strawson (1959), we conceive of the type as a principle of construction of its tokens.

The notion of performance, as we will use it, involves a deliberate, creative activity that can be evaluated from an aesthetic point of view. Therefore, a double evaluation occurs—the evaluation of the type and that of the token. For example, the audience can admire Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* as a type but disapprove of the performance-token they saw, and the same can happen at a performance of Mozart’s *Jupiter Symphony*. In that sense, performances are different from screenings and playbacks, which make the type accessible without the token making any further aesthetically relevant contribution (cf. Carroll 1996). For example, the audiovisual structure of a film or the sound structure of a pop song are made accessible through screenings and playbacks respectively.

The type/token relationship and the notion of performance can be applied to both conceptual art and television series. This allows to highlight the ontological affinities that hold between conceptual video art and TV series, as well as the specific features of the latter as conceptual narratives.

Sol LeWitt, one of the pioneers of conceptual art, used to conceive the idea for a work (a sculpture or wall drawing) and create a set of instructions to follow (shapes, lines, painted backgrounds, colors); then other people executed the work. As he stated, “In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art” (1967: 79). Here are the instructions for his *Wall Drawing #328* (1980): “On a black wall, a white circle within which are white vertical parallel lines, and a white parallelogram within which are white horizontal parallel lines. The vertical lines within the circle do not enter the parallelogram, and the horizontal lines within the parallelogram do not enter the circle” (LeWitt 1980). LeWitt’s works were executed on location by a team of experts who were provided with the artist’s instructions. That is why he compared himself to composers, who plan in detail but do not practically perform their music (cf. Roberts 2012: 193).

From this perspective, a conceptual work of art is a principle of construction of its visual instances, as a musical work represents the principle of construction of its auditory instances. Similarly, we contend that a television series, as a conceptual narrative, is a principle of construction of audiovisual narratives. In other words, the television series is a type T* whose performances are the various audiovisual narratives constituting episodes or seasons which, as moving images, are in turn types T** whose tokens are screenings. The latter notion of type, however, is not relevant to our analysis: T**, unlike T*, do not involve a performance—the projection of a film represents a purely mechanical act, which cannot become the object of aesthetic evaluation.

A television series, as a type, is a principle of construction of audiovisual narratives and, since both seasons and episodes are audiovisual narratives, they both can instantiate the type. Whether one or the other is more suitable to that purpose depends on the kind of narrative specified by the type. In a series like *Black Mirror* (2011–), a single episode works perfectly as a token that makes the type identifiable as a principle of construction of narratives exploring the dystopian consequences of the use of digital technology. On the other hand, in a series like *24*, it is the season that better identifies a principle of construction of narratives that develop within a 24-hour real-time framework.

Case Study: *24* or The Longest Days

Christian Marclay's *The Clock* is a 24-hour long video art work made up of a montage of film clips featuring clocks. The concept governing the work is the construction of a clock constituted of images of clocks: the scenes are ordered and synchronized so that the time displayed in the various films is always the same as that on the viewer's watch. *The Clock* was first shown at White Cube's London gallery in 2010, and later at the 2011 Venice Biennale, with an additional public showing at the Biennale Cinema International Film Festival. The latter showing was held in a square, which leads one to think that some viewers may have seen *The Clock* from beginning to end, something that could not have happened when it was shown at the Venetian Arsenal, as the building was closed at night. *The Clock*, however, is not meant to be seen from beginning to end: it engages the viewer in an appreciation game that does not consist in watching a 24-hour long film from beginning to end, but in appropriately sampling the 24 hours in order to grasp the concept that underlies them. The same can be said about Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho*, a video art work created in 1993 by slowing down the film *Psycho* to two frames per second, in order for it to last 24 hours. The viewer is not expected to experience the projection in its entirety, but to sample it in order to grasp the concept, which concerns the subjective and technical manipulation of time.

The television series *24*, aired on Fox from 2001 to 2010, with a coda in 2014, shows significant similarities with *The Clock* and *24 Hour Psycho*. Each season of *24* corresponds, on a minute-by-minute basis (excluding four five-minute breaks per episode during which story time continues to elapse), to an entire day in Jack Bauer's life. As an agent of the Counter Terrorist Unit (CTU) based in Los Angeles, Bauer lives special days, characterized by a constant wakefulness that allows him to face various national security issues. Each threat to the United States develops and increases by the hour, becoming more complex than expected, as shown by a usual mid-season

plot twist. It could be argued that *24* takes *The Clock* and *24 Hour Psycho* to the extreme. While the latter works always instantiate their concept through the same audiovisual structure (screened in different circumstances), *24* instantiates its own concept varying the audiovisual structure season by season, as though the concept were a score that makes room for different performances.

At a thematic level, the concept governing all of *24*'s seasons is characterized by duality, as it is exemplified by the public/private, law/violence, necessity/freedom relations. Jack Bauer is the hero that burdens himself with such inextricable antinomies and their possible solution. At a stylistic level, a distinctive trait is the use of the split-screen. On the one hand, the split-screen is used as an alternative to shot/reverse shot and, more generally, to analytic editing. On the other hand, the split-screen is a way to connect the multiple segments of a many-sided plotline, as well as the preferred technique to visually show the ever-present phone calls (see figure 2.1).

24's main stylistic feature is the realism of the *mise-en-scène*, in a 360-degree space framework where the action is shot in continuity by different cameras, with continuously moving shots and an aggressive editing that even dares to break the 180-degree rule. Another extremely innovative characteristic is provided by the layered sound. Words, noise and music complement each other in a harmonic text where the sound effects (in terms



Figure 2.1 *24* (Fox, 2001–2010). *Source:* Author screenshot.

of both story—the phone—and discourse—the digital clock), the catchphrase (“Do it now!”) and the musical theme share the same function as leitmotifs.

In *24*, the essential issue is always and only the present. The relentlessly ticking clock with the numbers running on screen, Bauer’s imperative “now,” the light continuously changing from dawn to sunset, from night to day: they all represent an idea of life where the present is so important that it does not allow to waste any time thinking about past, future, or possible events. If the past, the future, and what is possible seem to be relevant, it is only because the present manages to take them into account.

24’s first season instantiates the concept making the time of the season coincide with that of an entire day, starting at midnight. A narrative twist occurs mid-season, resetting the coordinates familiar to the viewer: the ever-present villain that keeps Jack Bauer in check turns out to be just a mercenary, who is hence replaced by the true antagonist.

While in Season One Bauer’s actions are aimed at a private and public defense against a single external enemy, in the second season he has to face an elusive and polymorphous internal threat. This time, the storyline starts at eight in the morning, and the turning point reveals that the investigation into an external terror attack needs to be paralleled by another into an internal enemy, deeply embedded in the political and economic context of the United States.

In the third season, Bauer starts to counterattack, sometimes even meaning revenge. Here, the mid-season plot twist does not only involve the replacement of the antagonist, but also resets the whole previous investigation, which turns out to have been devilishly fabricated.

Whereas the first three seasons perform the concept focusing above all on the relationships between Bauer, his colleagues at the CTU and President Palmer, the fourth season is characterized by the band reunion strategy. The heroes from the previous seasons reunite for a last great mission.

The fifth season seems to start from scratch, with a renegotiation of all the previous alliances. Bauer is no longer the shining star of the CTU, but a loose cannon. If the fourth season was characterized by the comeback of Bauer’s long-standing allies—Tony Almeida, Michelle Dessler, David Palmer—the fifth season is marked by their leaving the scene. Even the CTU evolves: there is no longer *a place for* Bauer there, but he is still *needed*.

The sixth season takes Bauer’s alienation to the extreme. After having been detained and tortured in a Chinese prison for twenty months, he seems to be completely disconnected from his own world, to the point that in the first episodes he looks like somebody in between Robinson Crusoe and Jesus Christ. The typical mid-season turning point here divides the narrative into two rather independent adventures: in the first, the CTU and Bauer need to stop an attack by a group of Islamic terrorists, while in the second,

Bauer needs to prevent Chinese secret services from acquiring a military device.

Before the release of the seventh season, *24*'s concept is instantiated in a peculiar way, through a television film, *24: Redemption* (2008). On the one hand, this token breaks some of the constitutive rules of the conceptual narrative: it is no longer set in Los Angeles, but in Africa, it only lasts an hour and a half, and most of the recurring characters and situations are no longer there. On the other hand, Bauer still is the main character of a spy adventure told with a real-time gimmick. By accomplishing a single mission, he has to seek redemption for all the wrongdoing carried out in the previous six days—as the title suggests.

The “relocation” characterizing *Redemption* is also featured in the other two subsequent seasons, although on a national scale, as they are set in Washington and New York, respectively. In the seventh season, Tony Almeida, a key character in the first four seasons, makes a comeback, as it happens when a concerto is performed long after its creation using one of the instruments originally required by the score. The eighth season is characterized by a sharp contrast between a first part in which Bauer, now a grandfather, seems to be a redeemed man who has made peace with himself, and a second half where his vindictive nature leads him to commit extremely violent acts.

The last performance of the conceptual narrative, *24: Live Another Day*, was released in 2014, four years after the eighth season, which had seemed to be the conclusion of the series. *Live Another Day* is an atypical season, as it lasts only twelve episodes. This reflects the change that occurred in television production over the decade, a shift from long formats featuring about twenty episodes to a new standard of about ten episodes per season. Yet, although being half the usual length, *Live Another Day* keeps the real-time gimmick covering a 24-hour adventure in Jack Bauer's life, thanks to a 12-hour time jump within the finale. Set in London, *Live Another Day* has a cold, grim tone. Bauer is clearly out of place and out of time, although being always determined to fulfill the destiny of serial heroes, whose deeds are characterized by repetition rather than uniqueness.

After the last performance in *24*, the narrative world created by Joel Surnow and Robert Cochran continues to exist in a spin-off called *24: Legacy* (2017). Here, Jack Bauer's legacy is continued by old and new characters, developing a new conceptual narrative. The real-time format is kept, but with twelve episodes instead of the usual twenty-four, as in *Live Another Day* and for the same production reasons. With Jack Bauer out of the picture, the new main character is Eric Carter. An Afro-American ex-Army Ranger, he will push his body to the limit and cross any ethical line in order to save the country from a terrorist attack. The narrative mechanism follows that of *24*: the

first enemy seems to be invincible, but insignificant compared to the second. Tony Almeida's comeback is another element of continuity, referring to *24*'s seventh season. A novelty factor is provided by agent Carter's main political interlocutor, Senator Donovan, who first despises CTU violent methods, but is then forced to rethink his plans after being involved in urban guerrilla. His arc of transformation reminds of that of Boorman's and Milius's heroes in films such as *Deliverance* (1972) and *Big Wednesday* (1978). This is the epic style of American film whose legacy *24* has turned into a conceptual narrative.

ONTOLOGY AND EVALUATION

The cultural practices of evaluation of TV series fit well with the type/token ontology. A review of *Lost*, appeared in *The Guardian* and titled "When good TV goes bad" (Heritage 2017) may help to clarify this point. Written after the series finale, the article states that "While it was on, *Lost*'s characters and extravagantly high concepts captivated people in their millions." The series created by Lindelof and Abrams is based on a mystery that needs to be solved—the survivors of a plane crash wander around a deserted island trying to find a solution to their problem. The solution to the narrative problem, however, does not lie in the development of the action, nor in the characters' future—the answer is the past that brought them on a given plane on a specific day. The series suggests this reversed perspective from the beginning, with each character's story being told in flashbacks, episode after episode.

Although *Lost* was highly acclaimed, a number of fans complained about a decline in quality over time. According to *The Guardian*'s critic, the ninth episode of the third season (the 58th episode of the series, aired in 2007) represented the peak of this trend of decline. "Lost was such a hit that ABC didn't want it to end. [. . .] So, at the financial behest of its network, the showrunners found themselves having to spin their wheels indefinitely. And they did this with flashbacks. Although they began as a way to fill in character blanks, they quickly became a crutch. With no end in sight, the flashbacks became longer and less essential. And then came *Stranger in a Strange Land*. It was the ninth episode of *Lost*'s third series, and it was utterly pointless" (Heritage 2017).

In what sense did they say that the series saw a decline in quality? When does good TV go bad? Our hypothesis is that this happens when a "bad" token of a "good" type is provided. Up to the third season, *Lost*'s narrative score, composed of the mystery of the island and the characters' flashbacks, is "played well." Then, it starts to be performed badly, as it would happen with a Beethoven's sonata played by a not so gifted pianist. Therefore, a series like

Lost may be “good” (as a type) and “bad” (as one of its specific tokens) at the same time. This means that its negative evaluation might not necessarily be definitive. The narrative score can be played properly again, and this is also what *The Guardian*’s critic points out. “[This episode] was so awful it caused something amazing to happen. Realising what a go-nowhere stinker they had on their hands, the showrunners took the episode to the network. ‘Look what you made us do!’ they said. ‘Look what happens if we have to tell this story for ever!’ Seventy-five days later, the network relented. *Lost* finally had its endpoint” (Heritage 2017).

The *Guardian* critic’s behavior shows a pattern of evaluation that may be generalized. To begin with, a first evaluation is expressed while the series is still airing, which is something that both viewers and scholars do. Some essays in *Reading CSI: Crime TV Under the Microscope* (Allen 2007) ascribed aesthetic features to the series as if it was a cinematic whole, even though *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (2000–2015) was still running. For example, Karen Lury writes: “The series’ sensational use of colour, the integration of CGI and other special effects, as well as the development of signature framings—such as the so-called “CSI-shot”—have understandably been the focus of much critical attention” (2007: 107). Likewise, the essays in *Reading Lost* (Pearson 2009) analyzed and evaluated the series, which was still airing, with the final episode being released in 2010. For example, Mittell writes: “*Lost* is a great television programme” (2009: 119), and then “In arguing for *Lost*’s greatness, I will consider four aesthetic norms that the show successfully achieves” (2009: 125). As we will explain later in more detail, what Mittell here calls “aesthetic norms” can be traced back to the conceptual narrative as a principle of construction of episodes and seasons.

At a later stage, an evaluation may be reconsidered if the performance of the series is not appropriate. In the same book, Ivan Askwith (2009: 159–180) points out that the audience’s main concern while *Lost* was still airing was a matter of meaning. Attracted by the initial enigmas (why the survivors ended up on the island, who is “the Monster” that frightens them, there might be other inhabitants on the island), the audience, from a certain point on, starts losing faith in the possibility of getting a definitive and indisputable answer to the central narrative questions, and hence they fear the work has no meaning. As Askwith states, from a certain point on, the series seems “to construct the appearance of meaning where there is none” (2009: 163). This corresponds to the production stage when showrunners start to reassure the audience about what may be called the “closure issue”: if there is a finale, and *Lost* will have one, rest assured that there is meaning. Such meaning, we contend, belongs to *Lost*’s conceptual narrative, to *Lost* as a type. If sometimes meaning seems to be missing, it is only due to some uninspired token-performances.

A similar fate befell the quintessential cult series, *Twin Peaks*. Although the first season had been highly acclaimed, in the second season “its ratings fell and many began to see it as an artistic failure” (Newman and Levine 2012: 27). Yet, the third season, released after a long hiatus, rekindled the enthusiasm, as if the new tokens had finally revealed the still unfulfilled potential of the type.

The critical discussion on series like *Lost* or *Twin Peaks* fits well with the conceptual approach describing TV series as types that may have good and bad tokens (episodes and seasons). However, it could be objected that such critical discussions also focus on the capability of the final episode to contribute to a more balanced evaluation of a series. This seems to reassert the traditional narrative approach that describes a series as a narrative in the same way as a film is, so that the series has to be identified with the entirety of the audiovisual text. In order to face this objection, the parallelism between television series and the performing arts needs to be deepened.

A TV series is similar to a musical work not only because it may have bad tokens (as in the case of a bad performance of a symphony), but also because of the finale issue. When dealing with a type instantiated by tokens neither the enjoyment nor the judgment depends on the last token: it would be as though a specific performance of a Beethoven’s sonata were identified as the final and definitive performance after which the musical score could never be played again. This is clearly absurd.

From this perspective, if the finale of a TV series is illuminating, this does not depend on its capability to definitely close the narrative, excluding the possibility of new performances. Rather, an illuminating finale is to be considered an episode that has the capability to clearly reveal a potential that lies in the series as a conceptual narrative but still has not been actualized. A successful series finale reveals that a given series, as a principle of construction of audiovisual narratives, has the potential for the construction of an episode capable to give a satisfying feeling of closure. As a brilliant performance of a symphony reveals not only the excellence of the performer, but also the aesthetic potential of the symphony as a principle of construction of performances, a successful series finale—like that in *The Leftovers*, where all the questions are answered—reveals not only the brilliance of those who wrote and directed the episode, but also the aesthetic potential of the series as a principle of construction of audiovisual narratives that has made the construction of that episode possible.

The analogy between the performing arts and television series concerns both production and appreciation. On the production side, musicians give their own interpretation of a work conceived by the composer, just as the writers of episodes and seasons give their own interpretation of the conceptual narrative conceived by the showrunner. On the appreciation side, the

audience of a performance of a musical work evaluates—simultaneously but independently—both the work and the performance, and so does the audience of a series. Attending different performances of the same musical work contributes to better appreciation, revealing aspects that might have gone unnoticed after the first performance. And so does experiencing more “performances” (episodes and seasons) of a series.

However, an important difference between the performing arts and serial television remains. A musical work is clearly identified by a notation structure—the musical score—describing in detail how a performance should instantiate the work. The same can be said about theatrical works, identified by a script. Even conceptual art works, such as those by Sol LeWitt, are characterized by the presence of a notation structure, which in that case is a visual score. Television series, however, lack this characteristic. Conceptual narratives are not clearly specified through notation as musical or theatrical works are. Yet, a conceptual narrative is, in turn, a principle of construction of its performances. Only the way in which this principle is specified changes: in music and theater, it is clearly specified through scores and scripts, while in a series it is specified through those examples or prototypes that Peter Strawson (1959), in his theory of types as principles of construction of their tokens, calls “model particulars.” This means that there are no instructions guiding the first performance, which sets the norms identifying the conceptual narrative, to which subsequent performances should conform. Performances that do not abide by those norms count as irregular tokens. In principle, however, some performances may have the capacity to change the type, that is, to function as prototypes despite not being the pilot of the series. Indeed, the type, as a cultural norm, is hard to change but not impossible to change (Terrone 2017; Friedell 2020).

Although conceptual narratives are not explicitly articulated in schema such as scores or scripts, an explicit articulation can be found a posteriori through an analysis of token narratives. An interesting forerunner, in this sense, is Umberto Eco’s 1966 essay, *Narrative Structures in Fleming*. According to Eco, the principle of construction that governs all James Bond novels can be expressed through the following script, which Eco compares to a game of chess:

- A) M moves and gives a task to Bond.
- B) Villain moves and appears to Bond (perhaps in vicarious forms).
- C) Bond moves and gives a first check to Villain or Villain gives first check to Bond.
- D) Woman moves and shows herself to Bond.
- E) Bond takes Woman (possesses her or begins her seduction).
- F) Villain captures Bond (with or without Woman, or at different moments).
- G) Villain tortures Bond (with or without Woman).

- H) Bond beats Villain (kills him, or kills his representative or helps at their killing).
- I) Bond, convalescing, enjoys Woman, whom he then loses.

Still, the conceptual narrative highlighted by Eco is just a theoretical device, which does not bear upon practices of appreciation. The primary focus of appreciation when one reads a James Bond novel remains the novel itself rather than the totality of novels or the narrative pattern that all novels instantiate. Likewise, when one watches a James Bond film, the primary focus of appreciation remains the film itself as an audiovisual narrative rather than the totality of films or the narrative pattern that all films instantiate. In TV series, instead, the conceptual narrative that episodes and seasons instantiate is brought to the fore, thereby becoming the primary focus of appreciation. TV series are like games in this respect: when one states that tennis is a wonderful game one's primary focus of appreciation is tennis as a principle of construction of similar matches, not one particular match.

Eco also notices that in James Bond stories games are represented within the story itself as if they were small-scale models of the narrative. Likewise, in the TV series *The Queen's Gambit* (2020) the relevant analogy is between the game of chess as a type that has particular chess games as tokens, and the series itself as a type that has episodes as tokens. Specifically, *The Queen's Gambit* as a type prescribes that, in each token-episode, the heroine challenges a chess champion with the help of a mentor. Likewise, each season of *Money Heist* is explicitly compared to a particular chess game, as we will show in what follows.

Case Study: *Money Heist* or Revolutionary Checkmates

The heist movie is characterized by a narrative focusing on a robbery. Examples of this genre are films such as *Du rififi chez les hommes* (1955), *Ocean's 11* (1960), *The Sting* (1973), *Bandits* (2001), and *Inside Man* (2006). A special case is the franchise started by the remake of *Ocean's 11* (2001), with its sequels *Ocean's Twelve* (2004) and *Ocean's Thirteen* (2007), and even a spin-off, *Ocean's 8* (2018). Here, the heist movie tends to a more conceptual form, as the great robbery is no longer a unique event in the characters' lives, but it becomes an iterative mechanism. However, as it usually happens in film franchises, also in the *Ocean's* saga the primary object of appreciation remains each single film rather than the higher-level iterative structure that underlies and governs all the films.

Money Heist (original Spanish title: *La casa de papel*) takes the heist movie to television, bringing the iterative mechanism to the fore: the conceptual narrative becomes the primary focus of appreciation. Created by Álex

Pina in 2017, for the Spanish network Antena 3, the series was later acquired by Netflix, which re-cut the 15 original episodes into 22, releasing them in two blocks of 11 episodes each. Netflix produced the second season, released in 2020 and characterized by other two blocks, this time featuring eight episodes each. Such blocks are sometimes described as “seasons,” although this definition is inappropriate, because it is only the union of the two blocks that produces a season at a narrative level, a fully fledged token of the conceptual narrative. In the following paragraphs, we will use the phrase “first season” to describe the union of the first and second blocks, and we will talk about “second season” to mean the union of the third and fourth blocks.

The conceptual narrative instantiated by each of *Money Heist*'s two seasons focuses on a group of robbers who carry out a great heist, striking at the financial heart of the Spanish state. In the first season, they use the Royal Mint machines to print an enormous amount of money, while in the second season they plan to steal all the gold stored in the Bank of Spain. In both cases, the conceptual narrative requires the robbers to lock themselves in the building being the headquarters of the financial institution. There, they take the employees hostage and face police forces, starting reckless negotiations that can be compared to a game of chess, as made explicit in a few scenes. It could be said that *Money Heist*'s conceptual narrative sets the rules of a special game while its two seasons portray two different matches of that game.

The characters' contribution to the conceptual narrative depends on their role in the game. Known as “The Professor,” the mastermind behind the heist is a brilliant chess player that chooses and guides the robbers as though they were his chess pieces. The latter, nicknamed after some famous foreign cities, are characterized by some shared features, such as their red jumpsuits and Salvador Dalí masks. However, unlike chess pieces, they are not mere placeholders, but active subjects who are able to make their own contribution to the game, namely, the conceptual narrative. Each of the robbers has a specific criminal talent, as well as particular psychological issues to deal with. Tokyo and Nairobi, for example, are two brave young women, sometimes unscrupulous to the point of cruelty, but also scarred by trauma and desperately looking for affection. As for male characters, Rio is a polite and skilled hacker who pays the price for his immaturity and inexperience of the criminal world, while Denver, who has grown up in that world and cut his teeth there, needs to learn how to behave like a civilized person.

The conceptual narrative also includes some unpredictable variables that even the omniscient Professor cannot control, as in the case of Berlin in the first season and Palermo in the second. Moreover, it requires to steal some pieces from the opponents, such as Stockholm and Lisbon. In each season, the Professor faces a woman inspector and a member of the Spanish Intelligence: Raquel Murillo and Luis Prieto in the first season, Alicia Sierra

and Luis Tamayo in the second. Whereas the inspectors stand out for their cleverness and ability to deal with the Professor, the officers they cooperate with are rather presumptuous, arrogant, and obtuse. Further antagonists of the Professor are the strong-willed deputy inspector Ángel Rubio in the first season, and the fascist César Gandía, chief of security for the Bank of Spain, in the second one.

Besides the members of the police force, the character that better represents the system of power challenged by the robbers is Arturo Román, the Director of the Royal Mint of Spain. He is the symbol of a cunning, lively, but also objectionable and mean middle class. In the first season, Arturo is taken hostage by the robbers, while in the second season he becomes influential in the media as the Professor's great accuser. Arturo's role as the robbers' antagonist is so essential in the conceptual narrative that he goes back to being a hostage in the subsequent episodes of the second season.

The extremely negative characterization of the capitalist, patriarchal system challenged by the robbers in red jumpsuits gives their criminal acts a revolutionary connotation. Their Salvador Dalí masks remind of Guy Fawkes masks in *V for Vendetta* (2005). Furthermore, the multiple performances of the song *Bella Ciao*, the anthem of the Italian anti-fascist resistance, are explained not only by the fact that the Professor's grandfather fought alongside the partisans in Italy, but above all by the idea that the robbers challenge the current establishment just as the partisans acted against an authoritarian state. However, *Money Heist's* conceptual narrative does not adopt a Manichean approach by which the robbers represent Good and the state Evil, but it rather highlights the ambiguity and inconsistency of both, although openly siding with the robbers. As the title sequence chromatically shows, this is not a simple contrast between black and white, but a more complex duality, within which a third color is introduced, namely, red.

Since the conflict between stability and revolution is narratively expressed through the assault, the role played by editing proves to be essential at the configurational level, as it alternates images of the robbers locked inside a building with images of what happens outside. This spatial dialectic between inside and outside is paralleled by a temporal one involving the present and the past, with images of the robbery alternating to the events that led to its planning. The temporal and spatial alternation is instantiated in each episode, as every particular inside/outside conflict in the present is juxtaposed with the past events that clarify it. Such fragments from the past also allow the characters that died in a heist to be still present in the series.

This happens, for example, in the second-season flashbacks that recall the planning of the heist on the Royal Mint in order to introduce the character of Manila. Those flashbacks also symbolize a sort of Garden of Eden, which does not belong to the past, but to a dimension that seems to be outside of

time. At the beginning of the episode *5 Minutes Earlier* (Spanish: *5 minutos antes*), the Professor is talking to Denver, Moscow, Helsinki, and Oslo, while Nairobi, wearing a red dress, is lying on the grass, enjoying the sun. The end of the next episode, *TKO* (Spanish: *KO técnico*), goes back to this flashback, providing a dreamlike variation where the symbolic and narrative levels merge. After killing Nairobi, Gandía escapes, chased by Denver, who throws a grenade whose explosion occurs at the same time when the electronic music theme crescendo reaches its maximum intensity. This sound peak is first followed by complete silence on a black screen, then by Damien Rice's song *Delicate*, with Nairobi being seen from above, her arms outstretched in a crucified position. The song replaces the narrative sounds and, while Damien Rice sings "in some sacred place," editing links two close-ups of Nairobi. The image of her lying on the ground with glassy eyes is connected with Nairobi's look to the camera when she was happily lying on the grass, holding a daisy in her mouth, her red dress paralleling her red jumpsuit (see figure 2.2). The parallel editing also reveals that Nairobi is pregnant, something that the flashback in *5 Minutes Earlier* did not show. Finally, the viewer sees her turn to look at Oslo, Moscow, and Berlin (who did not appear in the *5 Minutes Earlier* flashback), the three characters who died in the Royal Mint heist. It is as though Nairobi was telling them, "Here I am, ready to join you in the robbers' heaven."

This representation, drenched with subjectivity, fits well with the fact that *Money Heist*'s conceptual narrative is based on Tokyo's narration of the story. Tokyo, as the narrator, has an external perspective on the events, as though she was recalling, or commenting on, them from an unspecified future. In this sense, the (above considered) transformation of the content of a



Figure 2.2 *Money Heist* (Netflix, 2017–). Source: Author screenshot.

flashback into an Edenic dream may be interpreted as Tokyo's way of paying tribute to her friend Nairobi.

The second season as a token is characterized not only by such a peculiar way of instantiating flashbacks, but also by a variation in the instantiation of the robbery. The first season ends with a successful robbery and a showdown between the Professor and the police inspector. The second season, instead, stops at the moment of the showdown, as it happens with a cadence that postpones the finale of a piano concerto. In *Money Heist's* second season, the finale is exceptionally postponed to the next performance.

THE COMPONENTS OF CONCEPTUAL NARRATIVES

So far, we have argued that a series is a type, a conceptual narrative, a principle of construction of audiovisual narratives. It is now time to clarify the components constituting the type. To begin with, theme and narrative idea will be analyzed. First, the theme is what the story is about, the main topic the story deals with, developed following a principle of coherence that connects all the elements of the story and provides it with unity. Second, the narrative idea is a problem the characters need to solve or, from the audience's perspective, the main question that needs to be answered. The series *How to get away with murder* (2014–2020) exemplifies its narrative idea starting from the title. A group of brilliant students at a prestigious law school commit a murder and try to get away with it following their professor's teachings. Hence the question that engages the curiosity of the audience: are they really going to get away with it? Season after season, the series has to develop this idea, creating additional problems of the same type (e.g., new murders to be covered up). As for the theme, the series reflects about crime, suggesting that getting away with a crime is possible, although crime never pays off in the end.

In addition to the theme and narrative idea, a key role in the construction of the concept is played by the storyworld, the framework in which the events that are aimed at fulfilling the narrative idea occur. A storyworld extends in both space and time. It includes individuals, groups, and communities, but also knowledge, values, economic relationships, attitudes, and objectives.

The main difference between a cinematic storyworld and a television storyworld is the fact that the former is a world the viewer usually experiences for about two hours, before leaving it forever. An exception to this are sequels and all the other forms of expansion of a film narrative world which continue to tell the same story, but in a different work, to be evaluated separately. An example of this is provided by *The Godfather*. Its storyworld is shown in a trilogy of films, directed by the same director and featuring the same actors. In cultural practices, the three films are not considered three different parts of

a single, bigger work, but rather three separate works. Even the amalgamation of the first two parts into a home video version, released in 1981 and titled *The Godfather 1902–1959: The Complete Epic*, does not create a new work consisting of two parts. According to Palmer (2010: 70), “no transforming amalgamation, however, has produced a new, and unitary, critical object from the three Godfather films. From the point of view of production, distribution, and exhibition, there is no “whole” as such containing three parts. [. . .] The films are singular, though subordinate to one another.” Although the themes and storyworld of *The Godfather* can be described as a type whose tokens are the single films in the trilogy, this type does not represent a primary focus of appreciation in the same way as the type of a television series does.

Both in film and TV series, the storyworld is not only the framework within which the action takes place but also the source of those narrative conflicts that are essential for the development of the story. In the narrative structure of a film, conflicts need to be solved within a short time: they are set up and paid off, thus serving their purpose. In television series, instead, the main conflicts need to last longer and be reignited.

The distinctive features of the storyworld are part of TV series type, contributing to the building of an object of appreciation the tokens will show on the screen. Whereas a film is an audiovisual narrative that *represents* a storyworld, a series is rather a principle of construction of audiovisual narratives that *includes* the distinctive features of the storyworld. Even in anthology series, where the episodes stand alone and the storyworld seems to change from token to token, there can be some continuity. For instance, in *Black Mirror*, different clues and background details scattered throughout the episodes mark the presence of the same context (cf. McSweeney and Joy 2019: 10). In this sense, the *Black Mirror* type is also constituted by a storyworld that aims at representing how our world could evolve following the further development of the digital revolution. Similarly, in *True Detective*'s third season, a character in the new storyline makes reference to events and characters in the first season, showing a connection that, although weak, leads one to think that the seasons are set in the same storyworld, which can thus be included in the type. In some anthology series, it is the setting that relates the storyworld to the type. In episodic anthology series like *Room 104* (2017–2020), the link is the room mentioned in the title, as it represents the setting where all the episodes take place. In seasonal anthology series like *Fargo* (2014–), all seasons are set in the same geographical area at different times.

The storyworld is inhabited by characters, who are bounded by a number of constraints which also are part of the type. In the historical fiction television series *The Last Kingdom* (2015–), set in eleventh-century England, the main character is Uhtred, a Saxon raised by the Danes. Uhtred contributes to Wessex's military victories and flourishing, although experiencing a

never-ending conflict with power. When he serves the Catholic king, he finds his authority unbearable; when he joins the tribes of the Danes, he cannot tolerate their dynamics of abuse. It is his twofold identity that, as an element of the conceptual narrative, creates the conflicts in episodes and seasons, so that it never comes as a surprise when he betrays a king just to serve another. At the beginning of the third season, for example, Uhtred seems to have found its place at the court of King Alfred the Great but, in just three episodes, he first re-joins his old Danish men, breaking the oath to the Saxons, and then breaks the pact with the Danes to save King Alfred's daughter.

The same mechanism of repetition is shared by the main characters of *24* and *Homeland*, two series that deal with the fight against terrorism focusing on an ethical and political theme: how far can the law go? Jack Bauer in *24* and Carrie Mathison in *Homeland* constantly face this problem. They suffer the consequence of their choices: they usually manage to thwart the threat to society, paying a high price in their private life. It does not matter how high the price is, the main characters always have to give up their private life in order for the story to exemplify the concept. In a film, the hero can decide to leave the storyworld once the order has been restored: this is what typically happens when the hero of Western films leaves the community in the finale. *The Searchers* (1956) and *Pale Rider* (1985) are exemplary in this respect. In series such as *24* or *Homeland*, on the other hand, the hero or heroine cannot leave, and if they do leave, they are then forced to come back. It is the series itself, as a principle of construction of episodes and seasons, that imposes such behavior.

Season after season, special agents Jack Bauer and Carrie Mathison give up their badge because of either a life choice or the consequence of their actions. However, not even this option lets them escape the repetitive mechanism: it just strengthens the role to which they are constrained, restating the concept. As in Greek tragedy, the main characters of a series face a fate they cannot escape.

There is something inherently tragic in TV series. As Roberto De Gaetano points out in his analysis of *Gomorra* (2014–), “the deep mythic structure that animates the series is that of tragedy” (2018: 15). Just like the myth, the serial storytelling is not a matter of uniqueness, but of repetition. The most relevant Greek myth, in this sense, is that of Sisyphus. As he is eternally forced to bring a boulder on the top of a mountain, so serial characters like Bauer and Mathison are forced to eternally face the same challenges. From this perspective, serial characters can be related also to XX century Existentialism, as suggested by Albert Camus' reading of the myth of Sisyphus. These considerations by Stanley Cavell also point in that direction: “the aesthetics of serial episode construction comes to a suggestion that what is under construction is an argument between time as repetition and time as

transience. Without considering that this is a way of characterizing the thinking of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, and following that, of Heidegger's *What Is Called Thinking?*" (Cavell 1982: 94).

While "Sisyphusian" characters like Bauer and Mathison are part of the type of their series, other series formats do not make use of a recurring character. Anthology series like *Black Mirror* or seasonal anthology series like *True Detective* do not include characters recurring in every episode or season. In such series, the characters' story arc develops over an episode or season, then the characters are replaced by new ones. Therefore, these characters are part of the audiovisual narratives of the tokens, rather than components of the conceptual narrative of the type. Thus, one might say that the two police officers in *True Detective*'s first season are better developed than the three officers in the second season, in the same way as the different performances of the same piano concerto can be put in order of preference.

The level of the story to which characters and events belong is supplemented by the level of discourse or configuration. That is, the set of configurational operations whereby the work represents the story: screenplay, direction, acting, photography, editing, sound, graphics, and special effects. For instance, *Fleabag*'s (2016–2019) concept is mainly identified by character and narrative idea—"a sitcom about a tall, painfully middle-class woman struggling with a difficult family and a job that cannot possibly fund her lifestyle" (Heritage 2016). Yet, the concept of this series is also marked by its hilarious tone, its abrupt and mournful flashbacks, and the constant use of the look and speech to the camera.

A crucial configurational aspect of series as types is acting, which proves to be particularly important, since it shows that conceptual narratives also include indexical elements. Beside establishing the construction of tokens in which the character shall behave in a certain way, the type also establishes that the character shall be played by *that* actor or *that* actress, as though in the type there were an arrow (out of metaphor, an indexical) pointing to an individual in the real world and requiring to include him/her in the audiovisual narratives that will instantiate the conceptual narrative.

In series such as *24* and *Homeland* what is crucial to the type is one particular character played by one particular actor, namely Kiefer Sutherland as Jack Bauer in *24* and Claire Danes as Carrie Mathison in *Homeland*. On the other hand in series such as *Money Heist* and *Stranger Things* the type includes a collective played by a group of actors and actresses; while in *Money Heist* the collective is a bunch of thieves, in *Stranger Things* is a group of kids.

Case Study: *Homeland* or a Woman under Attack

Aired for eight seasons on Fox (2015–2020), *Homeland*'s narrative is based on the Israeli series *Hatufim* (2010–2012), created by Gideon Raff. Fox

purchased the rights to *Hatufim* and asked Raff to adapt his series for the American audience, with the help of *24* producers Howard Gordon and Alex Gansa. *Hatufim* features two seasons and tells the story of some Israeli reservists kidnapped 17 years earlier. The type explores the characters' new life, as they adjust to social, family, and psychological change. *Homeland* moves from a similar premise. A Marine captured by al-Qaeda is rescued and returns home, but he is later suspected of preparing an attack on American soil, having been turned by the terrorists. When the premise ends, however, also the similarities between *Hatufim* and *Homeland* do. *Homeland* moves forward developing a narrative focused on the global war on terrorism by a country that constantly feels under threat and needs to be ready to total mobilization.

An important role is played by the CIA, which has to deal with any terrorist threats before they result in irreversible attacks. However, *Homeland* is not a story of good against evil, as the series type is rather based on a constant chase after an enemy that is neither good nor bad. The enemy is just the enemy, a role that can be played by anybody. In this context, a global-war professional's life is made of gathering information, building advantageous relationships, tailing people, and working in the field. There cannot be room for anything else in the main characters' lives. Terrorism threatens the community, which implies a global war that affects all the space and time at the individual's disposal. The main characters devote themselves body and soul to the fight, disregarding their ambitions and desires. They have a single objective—winning the war. Everything is subordinate to this objective and anyone is expendable and all means are legitimate to achieve it. *Homeland* shares with *24* the themes of the fight against terrorism, paranoia, public/private duality, and the power of law, hence the question: to what extent is it licit to fight violence with violence? To what extent is it licit to break the laws of the community to protect the community itself? However, *Homeland* moves the focus of the question from society to the individual: to what extent can individuals sacrifice themselves for the good of the community?

The main character of the series is Carrie Mathison. A former Arabic language student at Princeton University, she is recruited into CIA by veteran officer Saul Berenson, who becomes her handler and mentor. She has been a field operative in Iraq, but at the beginning of the series the viewer learns that she has been reassigned to Langley, Virginia. Carrie devotes herself to work, a dedication that is strengthened, but also hindered, by the bipolar disorder she has been dealing with since she was very young.

Carrie's illness is an element of the series as a type. Although bipolar disorder has often been associated with the hyperbolic creativity of great artists, the series does not depict it as a superpower. By contrast, the series highlights both the illuminating intuitions and blunders stemming from Carrie's manic phases. The disorder traps the damaged heroine and condemns her to depression, although simultaneously forcing her to get back on track, as she needs to be

ready to resume the war. Carrie is continuously under attack, caught between her bipolar disorder and her duty, both of which are permanent conditions. The complexity of the character's state is effectively expressed by Claire Danes's performance, as Negra and Lagerway point out: "For *Homeland's* Mathison, her illness manifests in an obsessive attention to detail, inappropriate sexual relationships, and frequent hysterical outbursts and crying. Danes's performance, which prominently features her ability to crumple her face and quiver her lip in intense distress, foregrounds this emotionalism with extremely wide-open eyes and gestures like raking her hand through messy hair that express frustration with her inability to fully protect the US homeland" (2015: 130).

In each season, the title sequence instantiates the type through a fragmented montage of images and sounds reminding of the broken narrative of an individual suffering from a mental disorder. These memories of unhealed personal and social trauma are always present in Carrie's mind and are musically highlighted by a jazz score by Sean Callery: the trumpet pitch corresponds to the images of the Twin Towers. The title sequence portrays Carrie's disturbed sleep, her restless mind trapped in a maze with no way out. Jazz represents her intuition, her ability to improvise and think outside the box, besides being the character's favorite type of music. The images of such title sequence change season after season, in order to include the woman's most recent and painful memories.

Carrie is, thus, the main element of *Homeland* as a conceptual narrative. "Carrie's mind and body humanize and literalize the war on terror," as Alex Bevan (2015) points out. Interestingly, Bevan's analysis of *Homeland* is based on the first four seasons of the series: half the work, in terms of the totality of the episodes and seasons, but a sufficient number of tokens to grasp the type, according to the conceptual-narrative hypothesis.

Another element that constitutes *Homeland* as a type is the objective to which Carrie devotes her body and soul. The series makes a strong statement on this theme: the global war is neither won nor lost. Only the struggle remains, with such war being fought in every place at every time, with no limits or borders, against any individual who may pose a potential threat. Not only will global-war professionals never achieve the objective, but they will also never receive anything in return. These characters' actions are not rewarded, unlike what happens with heroic deeds in traditional narratives. This is first and foremost due to the fact that the war never ends for *Homeland's* characters, but it is also the result of their being tools in the hands of a greater power that considers them expendable.

Homeland's type thus includes a higher-level power exemplified by the White House, with its presidents, vice presidents, and chiefs of staff. For such power, intelligence officers are disruptive pawns. Conversely, the professionals of the war on terror consider such level of power an obstacle requiring

long and often fruitless negotiations. They thus often work alone, at their own risk, concealing operations from their higher-level officials.

Still, even when working alone, Carrie remains part of a system of relationships. Her relationship with her mentor Saul Berenson, a CIA Division Chief, is a key element of *Homeland* as a type: it is a teacher/student relationship, but also a father/daughter relationship. Carrie already has a father (who dies in the third season) who is the source of her genetic inheritance (including her bipolar disorder). Yet, childless Saul has entrusted Carrie with his professional legacy, transmitting his obsession with intelligence operations to her. Every season instantiates this relation, which is made up of sharing and affection, but also misunderstandings, turnarounds, and betrayals, always motivated by the only thing that really matters: the characters' highest objective.

Throughout the series, Carrie, who has sacrificed her mental health, seen most of her friends die in the field, as well as neglected her daughter, sister, and family, becomes a suspect, is arrested, downgraded, fired, sectioned in a mental institution, and questioned like a criminal by those who represent that law she protects at all costs. In one of the last episodes of the final season, when she is extracted by American helicopters on a hill in Afghanistan and is about to shed light on a new threat to the United States, she is arrested. Carrie can never set her own objectives (raising her daughter, recovering, having a stable romantic relationship, working for the common good without killing anybody, as she tries to do in the fifth and sixth seasons after leaving the CIA) because she has one greater objective to achieve.

In one of the many sequences in which she moves from a country to another, from a battle to a new one, Carrie gets off a truck in Kabul and says goodbye to her Afghan driver, after telling him something that summarizes the core of *Homeland's* conceptual narrative: "Just a couple days ago, there was this moment, and you know what I was thinking? I did it. I won." But that moment is over, and the objective has not been achieved yet, not even this time. Later, Carrie gets off the truck and is about to disappear into the crowd, when she stops for a moment, just to look at a little girl who is playing with her toys. The scene is constituted by three shots. The first shows us Carrie looking forward. The second is a close-up of the little girl which suggests that Carrie is in front of her. Yet, the third shot reveals that the second was not a point-of-view shot by showing that Carrie is behind the little girl (see figure 2.3). This powerful image shows, out of focus in the foreground, a chance that Carrie has thrown away, while in the background, in focus, the only life that has ever been given to her.

Nobody gets a better fate. Saul Berenson's high-profile role at the CIA is constantly questioned, his decisions hardly ever prevail, and he is kidnapped and taken hostage at least once per season. His whole life focuses on the global war on terror. The subplot of Saul's marriage crisis, which instantiates



Figure 2.3 *Homeland* (Fox, 2015–2020). *Source:* Author screenshot.

the “no life out of the job” component of the type, has no reason to be further developed from the second season on. Carrie and Saul’s relationship is mirrored by that between two other main characters in the series, Dar Adal and Peter Quinn. Dar Adal, a high-ranking official at the CIA, can be described as Saul’s devilish counterpart, while Peter Quinn is Dar Adal’s protégé, a killing machine suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Whereas Carrie and Saul’s relationship survives, with its highs and lows, throughout the whole series, Dar and Quinn’s does not. In the sixth season, Dar Adal is accused of treason and ends up in an American prison, which he will never leave. Peter Quinn manages to cope, up to his final sacrifice in the season finale. They are the tormenters, strategists, and sacrificial victims of the war on terror, which takes advantage of them in any way possible.

In general, Carrie starts troubled relationships that are also means to achieve her higher objective. In the first three seasons, her mission is connected with Marine Sergeant Nicholas Brody, a veteran that has been welcomed as a hero but who is actually working with the terrorists. When Carrie gets involved with Brody, it is first of all to expose his criminal intent, persuade him to change side and go back to serving the United States. However, she will end up mourning for him and clearing his name. Brody has devoted his life to the cause, but his efforts are not even symbolized by a star at Langley. That is why, in one of the most painful scenes of the whole series, Carrie draws, with a marker pen, a star in memory of Brody on the CIA memorial wall.

Homeland’s first two seasons are an alternate or simultaneous montage of Carrie’s and Brody’s life experiences, against the political, diplomatic, and military background of Washington, D.C. They establish a double bond that embodies both the political-spy conflict and erotic attraction. Claire Danes’s pained and intense performance and Damian Lewis’s soberer and more enigmatic one make the heroine and traitor’s double bond plausible, without

ever showing which one of the two dimensions is going to prevail. In some scenes, seduction seems to be only a weapon in the spy game, while other times the characters' feelings question specific systems of power and values. In particular, in the first season, spy missions prevail over romance, while the second season begins with an extreme conflict that gradually becomes a passionate melodrama.

In *Homeland's* third season, Carrie and Brody struggle to survive as individuals. Carrie is once more in a psychiatric facility. Brody reappears in the third episode, set in Caracas slums, just to disappear again and resurface in the eighth episode, becoming the main focus of the final part of the season. The contrast between Brody's crucial role in the story and the short amount of time in which he appears makes this season an almost experimental token, less cohesive and rhythmic than the previous two, but featuring unforgettable scenes. Brody seems to be in an embryonic stage, a fetus that develops and comes painfully into the world for the second time, in episode nine. Birth, death, and rebirth are inextricably interconnected in a season that starts with the killing of a child, goes through Brody's metamorphosis and ends up in a childbirth.

The instantiation of the series type changes season after season. The baroque style of the first two seasons becomes soberer in the third and fourth seasons, then minimalist in the fifth and sixth seasons, going back to being lavish in the final season.

The fourth season instantiates the type by showing the effects of Carrie's obsession with military victory at all costs. Having intel on a Taliban leader's location, she orders a drone strike on an Afghan village, but ends up killing 40 civilians, later discovering that her target was not even there. Although the season focuses on the efforts to capture the Taliban leader, it finishes with Carrie learning that the enemy she has repeatedly and unsuccessfully tried to kill has made a deal with Saul Berenson and Dar Adal.

The fifth and sixth seasons share a seeming deviation from the type. Carrie has left the CIA and has another job now. First, she is the head of security for a charitable foundation based in Germany, then she works for an organization that provides legal aid to Muslims living in the United States. The point is that the war on terror never stops, regardless of her life choices: once an agent, always an agent. No matter the side, there will always be a vacant place to fill in the war on terror.

In the fifth season, Carrie raises her daughter in Germany and tries to lead a normal life, although this part of the narrative aims at showing that this is not an option for her. If Carrie leaves the CIA, the CIA will get in contact with her again. In this season, Carrie is targeted by the Russian secret services, which leads her to disappear and fake her death. Contextually, a terrorist threat arises in Berlin, with Carrie, Saul, and Peter risking their lives to thwart it. The season instantiates the conceptual narrative by restating its

main themes. The war is global and it cannot be experienced from the outside. Anybody can be an enemy, even a loved one. For instance, the double agent for the Russians is Saul Berenson's lover, someone he would never be suspicious of. Anything can be sacrificed to achieve the objective, even partners, as it happens when Carrie convinces the doctors to revive Peter from his medically induced coma, worsening his conditions, just to have information about a terrorist cell.

The sixth season is set in the United States, last used as a setting in Season Three. Peter has come out of his coma, but he is in terrible psychological and physical conditions, a lost junkie as Brody was in Season Three. Carrie is living with her daughter, trying, once more, to lead a normal life. In this season, the President of the United States is Elizabeth Keane, who appreciates Carrie and wants her advice to stop the war on terror. The latter option, which is not part of the type, transforms President Keane into a target of the CIA and its high-ranking officers like Dar Adal. Therefore, the President is first discredited and, when this strategy proves to be no longer effective, an operation is planned to assassinate her. Carrie and Peter save her, although he gets killed. After the attack, President Keane seeks revenge by imprisoning hundreds of CIA officers, including an innocent Saul Berenson, who has been a prisoner in several rogue states, but never in his own country.

The seventh season introduces a variation on the war on terror as a civil war. The irreconcilable internal divisions caused by President Keane's revenge lead to an alliance between some politicians and a counterintelligence officer, the one leading the operation to discredit the President. This subtle side of the storyline is set in a frustrated, dissatisfied rural America that prepares for a civil war that is actually directed by external, global forces, involving the traditional Russian enemies. The sides are represented by either single individuals (a politician, a challenging journalist) or groups (the rural American family): *Homeland's* score is here played by a small orchestra. Carrie's attempt at a normal life fails definitively in this season, when she chooses not to be a mother and gives custody of her daughter to her sister. In the season finale, Carrie also loses everything else, as the Russians capture and hold her prisoner, preventing her from taking her medication for bipolar disorder. When she is released in exchange for Russian prisoners three years later, Carrie is a ghost. In *Homeland*, this is the stage leading to the character's final, aggressive attack in the battlefield.

Homeland's eighth season shows a situation that parallels the storyline of the first season. At the beginning of the story, an American soldier, released after being held prisoner for a long time, embraces his Taliban persecutors' cause, then regrets it and helps the CIA to defeat them. Now, the CIA officer who persuaded him to change side is in his same situation: after being held prisoner in Moscow for such a long time, Carrie fears she has helped the Russians, becoming a double agent. The season starts with Carrie once

more struggling to recover, although now she cannot take the time she needs. Saul Berenson takes her back to Afghanistan, as he is about to negotiate a peace deal with the Taliban. When the war on terror seems to have ended, *Homeland's* conceptual narrative reignites it. The U.S. President's helicopter crashes at the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. Carrie has to find the helicopter black box and she is helped, and betrayed, by a Russian friend, the one who held her prisoner in the previous season. To achieve her objective, Carrie repeatedly betrays her colleagues and allies, to the point that she accepts the Russians' unacceptable offer: she has to kill Saul Berenson. When a young colleague of hers asks how she can be willing to do all that, she replies, "Tell me there's another way." The series shows once more that there is no other way. Carrie faces the riskiest operation of her life: siding with the Russians, leaving her country, giving up her role as an intelligence officer and abandoning the family she has never had. In a traditional narrative, this would be an ending. In *Homeland*, the epilogue, which happens two years after these events, points toward a possible further instantiation of the type. Carrie is attending a jazz concert in Moscow, while Saul, in Washington, receives her coded message and smiles at the fact that the student has become the master. And the war continues, as well as the life of a woman who is constantly on the attack, but also under attack, just like her country.

Case Study: *Stranger Things* or The Never-Ending Eighties

Some classics from the Eighties such as *E.T.* (1982) and *The Goonies* (1985) are based on the idea that the transition from childhood to adolescence may be symbolically represented as a journey through a world inhabited by fantastic creatures. *Stranger Things* transforms this idea into a conceptual narrative, a principle of construction of multiple narratives. The series type is not only derived from those classics, but it also includes the age during which those stories were created. Therefore, the Eighties become one of *Stranger Things'* distinctive features, giving it a reminiscent, nostalgic tone that could not have characterized the works that inspired the series itself.

The tribute to the pop culture of the 1980s also influences the discourse elements of *Stranger Things'* conceptual narrative. An example of this is the luminist and chromatic style typical of films in that decade, which *Stranger Things* recreates in post-production. Similarly, *Stranger Things'* soundtrack has been composed using analog instruments, such as Prophet-6 and ARP 2600 synthesizers, as well as excerpts from period music from artists including Tangerine Dream, Vangelis, Moroder, and Carpenter.

As for the storyworld, the conceptual narrative is characterized, first and foremost, by a group of recurring characters, namely Mike, Will, Dustin, and Lucas. These *Dungeons & Dragons* young players end up dealing with a proper alternate dimension, known as "the Upside Down," which is similar

to the setting of their favorite role-playing game. The character who mediates between the ordinary rural town where the four boys live—Hawkins, Indiana—and the exceptional Upside Down, is Eleven, a girl having androgynous features and supernatural abilities. She also plays a key role in the depiction of the four nerds' sexual awakening. The main plotline following these five characters transitioning from childhood to adolescence is paralleled by a storyline focused on adolescence, which revolves around Jonathan and Nancy, Will's older brother and Mike's older sister, respectively. A further storyline focuses on adults, involving Will's mother Joyce and Hawkins' police chief Jim.

Created by the Duffer Brothers and released on Netflix in 2016, the first season features eight episodes. It provides what Strawson (1959, 233), in his theory of the types as principles of construction of their tokens, describes as the "model particular": a prototype, a first example that sets the norm it exemplifies, establishing the conditions for the construction of subsequent examples. In particular, the first season identifies the essential narrative structure of the series. Four kids fight against the creatures from the Upside Down, with the help of more or less skeptical siblings and parents, as well as the hostility of some people of power—politicians, scientists, officers—who want to use the Upside Down to their own advantage.

The nine-episode second season, released in 2017, is a new performance of the score played by the first season. It is still set in the small town of Hawkins, but a year later, with the events taking place from 1983 to 1984. The Upside Down reveals itself again through Will, although in a different way: while in the first season the Upside Down takes control of Will's body, in the second season it takes control of his mind.

Eleven, thanks to her superpowers, continues to play a crucial role in the fight against the Upside Down, but her character also reveals new aspects, according to the origin story typical of superheroes. From this perspective, the seventh episode, *The Lost Sister*, proves to be particularly significant, as it conflicts with two structural norms of *Stranger Things* as a conceptual narrative: ensemble casting and the setting in the town of Hawkins. This episode is entirely focused on Eleven, who finds out she has a sister named Kali, also having superpowers, and goes to Chicago to meet her. Episodes like *The Lost Sister* exemplify how a token may perform the conceptual narrative not only following, but also challenging, its norms. Such challenge, however, can never end up in completely breaking the rules. The token can move away from the norm up to a certain extent, but then the norm itself requires the token to go back to the right path, as it happens with a rubber band that stretched up to a certain point before snapping back. Hence, at the end of *The Lost Sister*, Eleven has a vision of her friends who are in danger and decides to return to Hawkins to save them. Then, in the two subsequent episodes,

the story goes back to following the norms set by the conceptual narrative, thereby directing it to the conclusion required.

Season Two also performs the conceptual narrative by introducing new supporting characters, which may be compared to the addition of new instruments in the performance of a score. The dynamics of the boys' group are thrown off balance by Maxine, the new girl in town who is skilled at playing *Dragon's Lair*. Both Dustin and Lucas are attracted to her, which adds a new love plotline to the main one involving Mike and Eleven. Maxine's older brother, Billy, is a new addition to the group of adolescents in the story, while Bob, a grown-up nerd who has always been in love with Joyce, is introduced in the plotline focusing on adults.

The eight-episode third season, released in 2019, follows the characters a year later, instantiating the conceptual narrative in 1985 and choosing as its favorite setting the newly opened shopping mall in the suburbs of Hawkins. The distinctive characteristic of this new performance is its focus on psychological and relational aspects rather than on the pragmatic plot.

In the first two seasons, the story is governed by the fight against the Upside Down, during which the boys shape their personalities and develop their relationships. Conversely, such personalities and relationships become now a primary focus of interest, while the fantasy plot is reduced to a sort of routine, comparable to a tiring but not particularly difficult school task, completed only out of a sense of duty. An example of this is provided by Will. His main problem is no longer being abducted or manipulated by the monsters from the Upside Down, but rather being ignored by his friends, who are all focused on their adolescent crushes, while he just wants to play as they used to do when they were children. Similarly, Eleven's main focus of attention is not the use of her superpowers to fight against monsters, but rather her complex relationship of friendship and rivalry with Maxine. In the second episode, *The Mall Rats*, the two girls go to the mall, in a brilliant sequence of scenes linked together by Madonna's *Material Girl* that reminds of a music video.

The use of songs as signs of the times proves to be another distinguishing feature of this season, its own way of instantiating the nostalgia for the Eighties as a constituent of the type. Whereas *Material Girl*, released in 1984, is actually a song that Eleven and Maxine could have listened to, the use in the first episode of Cutting Crew's *(I Just) Died In Your Arms Tonight*, which was released in 1986, has to be considered a slight, charming anachronism (like Schubert's *Trio in E Flat* in Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon*, *mutatis mutandis*).

The chronological accuracy of the music returns with the use of Limahl's *The NeverEnding Story*, which stands out as the extreme virtuosity of this third performance of the conceptual narrative. The song is featured in Wolfgang Petersen's film of the same name, released in 1984 and based on



Figure 2.4 *Stranger Things* (Netflix, 2016–). Source: Author screenshot.

Michael Ende's novel of the same name published in 1983. The appearance of this song in the season finale thus is, first and foremost, a homage to the fantasy culture of the Eighties, as the type requires. On the other hand, the way in which the song is introduced in the story confirms the specific nature of this third season as a token, its own particular way of instantiating the conceptual narrative. At the most crucial moment of the fight against evil forces, the main characters, divided into groups but connected via radio, need to know the exact value of Planck's constant. The solution is provided by a new character, Suzie, the girl Dustin describes as his camp girlfriend to his skeptical friends, who suspect she is but a figment of Dustin's imagination. Although mentioned multiple times over the season, indeed, Suzie has never been seen so far. Through a radio tower, Dustin contacts Suzie, who is finally shown in a shot/reverse shot. However, she will tell him the much-needed value of the constant only if he first sings *The NeverEnding Story* with her, to prove his love for her. Saving the world can wait, as what becomes of primary importance in this third performance of the type are the teenagers' feelings. Dustin starts singing over the walkie talkie, without any backing music. In shot/reverse shot, Suzie replies singing the chorus, with the backing track gradually being heard. The performance becomes a duet. The split screen shows Suzie, wearing a nightgown, in her warmly lit bedroom, beside Dustin under the night sky lit up by a full moon (see figure 2.4).

In the season finale, *The NeverEnding Story* will be sung again, this time by Maxine and Lucas, who are mocking Dustin. In addition to paying tribute to the pop culture of the Eighties and establishing the importance of love over adventure in the plotline, the deployment of Limahl's song says something crucial about the nature of *Stranger Things* as a conceptual narrative: this is a story meant to *never end*, always capable to develop new plotlines.

Chapter 3

The Upshot

Engaging with Conceptual Narratives

THE NORMATIVITY OF CONCEPTUAL NARRATIVES

As a principle of construction of audiovisual narratives, a series involves norms governing episodes and seasons. Following Mittell (2015: 167–168), we distinguish between the norms governing every series, namely the “extrinsic norms” (e.g., the fact of being divided into episodes and seasons, or the fact of including a title sequence), and the norms governing a particular series, namely the “intrinsic norms,” which are usually established by the pilot and confirmed by subsequent episodes. As Mittell puts it: “series establish their own intrinsic norms [. . .], teaching viewers how to watch and what to expect from future episodes” (2015: 168).

From our conceptual perspective, extrinsic norms constitute television as a medium while intrinsic norms constitute each series as a type (on the normativity of television series, see also Andrzejewski and Salwa 2018; Vidmar Jovanović 2020). Intrinsic norms can shape a series not only by supplementing extrinsic norms but also by overwriting them. Consider for example the extrinsic norm that associates each series with its title sequence, which includes visual (images and text) and sound elements, and is identical for every episode. In *Watchmen* (2019) an intrinsic norm overwrites that extrinsic norm by prescribing that the title sequence changes episode by episode, although keeping the same graphics for the title (the series logo).

A series may also offer some variations on the intrinsic norms it has set: “*Six Feet Under* begins every episode with a ‘death of the week,’ but by the second season, the creators vary the presentation of these deaths to offer misdirections and elaborations to keep viewers engaged once they understand the program’s intrinsic norms” (Mittell 2015: 45). In a case like this, the episode that violates the norms does not represent a bad performance, but rather a

very creative one, as the cover of a famous song that is difficult to recognize from the first few notes. More generally, the fact that a token violates the norms set by the concept does not mean that it is aesthetically flawed—it may just be more eccentric and, hence, aesthetically interesting. This is the case of some “atypical” episodes like *Pine Barrens* in *The Sopranos* and *Fly* in *Breaking Bad*, which, although violating the intrinsic norms of their series, result in increasing the appreciation of the work. As Alan Sepinwall (2017) has pointed out,

It was through that attempt at minimalism and frugality that we got the *Breaking Bad* equivalent of the “Pine Barrens” episode of *The Sopranos*. Only this one was, heresy though it may be, better. Both “Pine Barrens” and “Fly” were black comedies about crooks out of their element (Paulie and Christopher lost in the woods, Walt and Jesse trying to play exterminator), but much as I love “Pine Barrens,” it stayed in that minor key.

All this shows that there can be an aesthetic evaluation of both the type and its tokens. As in music it is possible to evaluate both a single performance of a symphony and the symphony itself as a principle of construction of its performances, it is possible to evaluate both a television series as a type and the single episode or season as its tokens. What follows investigate the difference between these two forms of evaluation.

THE EVALUATION OF CONCEPTUAL NARRATIVES

In what way does the ontological specificity of the series drive the evaluation process? Let us recall that, unlike film audiences, the viewers of a series are hardly ever aligned: they hardly ever watch the same part of the story at the same time. Most of the times, the fact that viewers of a series are watching it, does not imply they are watching it simultaneously. Hence the typical questions: “What season are you on?” and “What episode are you on?” This difference in experiencing a series is common in contemporary television because the users have seasons and episodes at their disposal, on on-demand platforms. They can choose how to watch the series: the distribution paradigm has shifted from a mass model (broadcasting) to an individual model (personalcasting). However, viewers were not aligned in broadcasted television either. Let us imagine two viewers discussing *Columbo* (1968–2003) in 1978, having two quantitatively different experiences in terms of episodes watched. If the concept is identified clearly, neither of the two viewers will bring up the quantitative aspect, unless the discussion is about a single episode. In that sense, a hypothetical conversation might go as follows: “Do you

like *Columbo*?”—“Yes.” “Me too, but what do you think about last week’s episode?”—“Well, I missed it!” Or, “Do you remember how good the first episode was?”—“I’ve never seen it, I started watching *Columbo* when I got married, in 1973.” These two hypothetical developments of the conversation do not conflict with its beginning, where both viewers share a positive evaluation of the TV show *Columbo*.

Over the years, television has changed its distribution practices, which has also resulted in a change in the opportunities and experiences of use. Before on-demand distribution, viewers had to wait for the weekly release of new episodes, while now they can decide to watch a single episode, several episodes, an entire season and even all the seasons available in one sitting—a phenomenon called *binge-watching*. Today’s viewers can decide to marathon view *House of Cards* (2013–2018), watching a ten-episode season in one sitting, or they can choose to watch an episode per day, or they can even decide to divide a single episode into multiple parts to watch on different days. By contrast, the viewer of the network era was dependent on times and schedules.

Still, despite the differences in terms of time and way of watching, when viewers evaluate a series, the primary object of evaluation remains the type, today like yesterday. Yesterday’s viewer could start watching a series in medias res, without nobody saying, “Don’t start watching *Perry Mason* if you haven’t watched the first 24 episodes.” Furthermore, in the case of soap operas, it is unthinkable that the audience of *Guiding Light*’s first episode, aired in 1952, was the same as the audience of *Guiding Light*’s final episode, aired in 2009, 57 years later. The evaluation of a series does not strictly depend on the number of episodes and seasons the viewer has actually watched. This is different from what happens with films, normally seen from beginning to end, and evaluated only after the end. This behavior is shared not only by ordinary viewers, but also by “professional viewers” such as television critics and scholars.

For example, when reviewing the second season of *Shrill* (2019–) for *Rolling Stone* in 2020, Alan Sepinwall—an authority in the field of U.S. television criticism—stated:

I really enjoyed *Shrill* last year but felt like it was only just getting to what seemed to be the heart of the story: Annie learning to take control of her life and the narrative around it, by any means necessary. So kicking off Season Two with such a bold declaration, followed by an episode where Annie is noticeably more aggressive than before, was profane music to my ears. The premiere, though, turns out to be more an aberration than a harbinger of things to come. Pretty soon, Annie is her genial old self, and *Shrill* is back to being a sweet, pleasant show that’s still taking its time getting wherever it wants to go.

In the evaluation of the “*Shrill*’s Season Two” token, the critic evaluates to what extent the token conforms to the type, which he calls the “heart of the story.” He establishes that, although the first episode of the second season seems to contradict the type (“profane music to my ears”), in the subsequent episodes, the series goes back to playing the score properly.

APPROACHES TO EVALUATION

In the academic field, the debate on evaluation has been intense over the last few years. Scholars such as Jason Mittell (2015) and Ted Nannicelli (2016) have two different approaches, which, however, both aim at considering television series from the perspective of aesthetic appreciation. But what is the proper way of appreciating a television series? If a film needs to be watched from beginning to end, is it the same for a television series? Or is there a quantitative threshold to overcome before being entitled to judge?

An entire chapter of Mittell’s *Complex TV* (2015: 206–232) concerns the issue of evaluation. Mittell argues that scholars cannot just analyze television series and explain how they work, but they should also evaluate them. In order to exemplify this approach, Mittell carries out a comparative evaluation of *Alias* (2001–2006) and *24*. Without going into his judgments, it is interesting to consider what he states before evaluating *24*: “At least judging from the first season (which is the only year I watched in full, along with selected episodes from subsequent years), the program does little to puncture its own self-serious tone” (2015: 208). This suggests that, according to Mittell, it is possible to evaluate a series after watching only one of the nine seasons available (when his book was published).

In the comparative evaluation of *The Wire* (2002–2008) and *Breaking Bad*, two series that Mittell likes, no quantitative parameters are mentioned, but the discussion on *Mad Men* starts with the following statement:

I dislike it. To clarify what I mean by “it,” I watched *Mad Men*’s first season in full, along with assorted episodes of subsequent seasons. While numerous commenters on my blog criticized me for basing my claims on a first season that they acknowledged was weaker than subsequent years, the program’s critical praise and copious awards began in season 1, and my sampling of later seasons did not change my opinions. So my analysis of what I dislike about the series is based on the first season; whether we can fairly judge a serial text on a limited sample is a larger topic for another time, but certainly many viewers do just that all the time—in fact, most viewers judge programs on the basis of single episodes (or even partial episodes), so the idea that we must consume something in full before evaluating it seems both impractical and misguided (2015: 228–229).

Mittell clearly states that a series can be evaluated as a work after watching an adequate number of episodes and seasons, in the same way as a musical work may be evaluated after listening to an adequate number of its performances. Although Mittell implicitly conceives of television series as audiovisual narratives, his practical approach to criticism presupposes an ontology of television series as conceptual narratives.

The collective volume *Quality TV*, edited by Akass and McCabe (2007), anticipates Mittell's *Complex TV* in highlighting a historical change in television production. The contributions to the volume aim at identifying the criteria against which new television series are evaluated. The practice of television criticism, as described and exemplified in this book, is characterized by the fact that television critics are professionally obliged to evaluate a series while it is still airing—no critic would wait for the series finale of *Game of Thrones* to evaluate the show. In many cases, the portion of a series that a given critic examines is specified, as in the following evaluation by David Bianculli: "So what has quality TV evolved to in the US? It's turned into *The West Wing*, the first two seasons of which, with creator Aaron Sorkin's razor-sharp wit and tone, are about as good as television can get" (2007: 37). A television critic's job is to evaluate the parts of a whole, where the viewing of the whole is an exception, not the rule. As Bianculli puts it:

TV critics, to do their job, must multi-task voraciously, taking notes on one show while writing about another. With most TV, that's easy to do, and short-changes neither the TV creator nor the newspaper reader. But when something comes along that's good enough, complex enough, surprising enough, or just different enough, I'll stop multi-tasking and give the show my full attention. That's my equivalent of "I know it when I see it". In my case, I know it when I stop to watch it (2007: 37).

No film critic would ever say that they write about films they have started to watch but never finished, and that only when coming across a masterpiece they would watch it to the closing credits. The parceled nature of television criticism is made clear not only subjectively by the single critics, but also by methodological approaches. Consider the following:

You are also apt to select certain parts of a program to criticize. Thus, in addition to being subjective, criticism is also partial. Because most dramas and comedies on television are episodic, and it is possible to watch an entire season online or with a box set, it is not likely that you would take on an entire season of a series to criticize unless you were writing a doctoral dissertation or a book about a series. The usual selection is a single episode, although you are advised to be aware of the other episodes in a series (O'Donnell 2017: 34).

These descriptions of the critical practice seem to presuppose that a series is not an audiovisual narrative that starts from the first episode of the first season to include the final episode of the final season, but rather a conceptual narrative that is instantiated by the various episodes and seasons and that can be evaluated through an appropriate selection of samples.

The ontological commitments of the evaluation of television series are made explicit in Nannicelli's book *Appreciating the Art of Television* (2016), in particular in the chapter called "Evaluation." Nannicelli states that evaluation requires the individuation of the object of appreciation: "The possibility of appreciating a work of television depends upon our ability to identify and individuate it such that our appreciation is of *the* work and not some other work(s)" (2016: 98). What is the work to be appreciated? According to Nannicelli, there is not a single television artifact, but three: "'episode', 'season', and 'series'—all of which, in my view, name distinct sorts of television artworks" (2016: 115). As a result, a single episode of a series can be evaluated without watching all the others, and so a single season. In order to evaluate a series, instead, it should be watched in its entirety. For Nannicelli, the object on which attention should focus changes from series to series. For example, in *South Park* (1997–) the focus of attention should be on single episodes, while in *True Detective* on the season in full, and in *Breaking Bad* on the totality of seasons.

However, this approach seems to be too stipulative since it falls short of the variety of modes of appreciation. Moreover, it is undeniable that when viewers compare all these series, stating that one is better than another, they are assuming that these are objects of the same kind, which transcends the episode, the season, and the totality of seasons. Therefore, Nannicelli's account of evaluation, albeit sensible, reveals itself to be incomplete. In the practice of appreciation of television series, *four* objects play a key role—the episode, the season, the totality of seasons, and the conceptual narrative. The latter object, which determines and supervises the other three, enables the comparative evaluation of series that are very different from one another, as for example *South Park*, *True Detective*, and *Breaking Bad*.

MODES OF CONCEPTUAL NARRATIVES

As suggested by the comparison between series such as *South Park*, *True Detective*, and *Breaking Bad*, serial television can be conceptual in different modes. In the history of television, there have long been two main formats: series and serials. A series is a kind of story divided into episodes with the same main characters, whose practical objectives (winning a case, saving a patient, catching a criminal) are achieved at the end of a single episode. In a series, Kojak or Columbo will solve a case within the episode, while in a

serial, “questions, problems, mysteries might remain unsettled or their resolutions might provoke still further questions, problems, and complications” (Allen 1992: 107). Indeed, a serial is similarly divided into episodes with the same main characters, although here the situations the characters face are never solved within a single episode, with the achievement of their objectives being postponed to the next episode. The structure of the episode is closed in series such as *Perry Mason* (1957–1966) and *Starsky & Hutch* (1975–1979), while it is open in serials such as *Guiding Light* (1952–2009) and *Dallas* (1978–1991).

In our framework, series and serials have the same conceptual nature: they are both types, that is, principle of construction of their tokens. In both cases the work is not created to be watched “from beginning to end”: neither the serial nor the series is characterized by definitive closure. In this sense, Allrath, Gymnich, and Surkamp (2005: 3) talk about “ongoing narratives.”

An exception to the model of ongoing narratives is represented by miniseries, closed narratives that have been particularly common in some production areas since the 1950s. The television literary adaptations by the BBC in the UK (*Pride and Prejudice*, 1952, *Jane Eyre*, 1956) and RAI in Italy (where they were called *sceneggiati*) usually featured six episodes and, following the structure of the original literary work, did not include any other season. Yet, we contend, miniseries are closer to conceptual narratives than to long films, since the cultural practice of appreciation makes room for sampling. In order to make an appropriate judgment on a miniseries, it is not necessary to watch it in full: a sample of episodes can serve the purpose, something that proves not to be true when evaluating a film. TV critics are entitled to write reviews of miniseries when just some episodes have been released, whereas no respectable film critic would review a film after watching just some sequences of it. This suggests that also the miniseries is a type, whose distinctiveness lies in the fact of being shown in a limited number of tokens, as it happens in the art of print-making with some limited-edition prints (see Davies 2015).

Such modes of conceptual narratives can be identified also in today’s television. A specific mode is represented by anthology series like *Black Mirror*, *Philip K. Dick’s Electric Dreams* (2017–2018), and *Love, Death & Robots* (2019–), which show a closed story in each episode, with different characters and settings. The type is mainly thematic. In the animated series *Love, Death & Robots*, the episodes were even produced by different studios.

In *Black Mirror*, the main concept relates to a vision of the future of humanity: what is going to happen when technology becomes so pervasive that it might structurally change the individual? The concept is constantly restated, although in a variety of narrative situations that present a more and more dehumanized future, where individuals lose control of their freedom

and identity, which may only be regained through rebellion. Although *Black Mirror*'s episodes tend to restate the concept, one is not forced to watch them all to understand it. The pleasure of watching *Black Mirror*, and its success, is based on the identification and appreciation of the best narrative performances of its type, in the same way as the pleasure of listening to a sonata is based on the identification and appreciation of the best musical performances of its type.

The Romanoffs (2018) is another anthology series where the appreciation of the type is essential for the evaluation of the work. This is an eight-episode series dealing with a narrative variation on the theme of family descendants, which tells the stories of characters who are, or claim to be, descendants of the Romanoffs. The type makes reference to a genre, the melodrama, in its widest sense, a "form that seeks dramatic revelation of moral and emotional truths through a dialectic of pathos and action" (Williams 1998: 42). The opening credits show a fictionalized version of the Romanoffs' death in 1918, followed by the escape of a female character that ends up in a contemporary urban scenario. In the meanwhile, a sequence of two really different tracks can be heard, a classical music piece followed by a rock song by Tom Petty. This identifies an element of continuity in the episodes, which show a continuous oscillation between the past and the present. The concept of this series is also characterized by the exceptional format of the episode, whose length is, on average, close to that of the feature film.

A variant of the episodic anthology series is the seasonal anthology series, where the story unfolds over a season, at the end of which a new story starts, with new characters. The connection between the episodes of a single season is both thematic and narrative, while the connection between the seasons is only thematic. As examples of the seasonal anthology series one can mention *True Detective*, *American Horror Story* (2011–) and *The Terror* (2018–).

An interesting hybrid is represented by *Narcos* (2015–2017). The first two seasons of the series are set in Colombia and chronicle the life of drug lord Pablo Escobar from the late 1970s to the 1990s, covering his rise and fall. After two seasons, the series seems to have achieved its closure: in the last episode, Escobar dies, as it happened in real life, therefore there is nothing else to tell about him. Furthermore, in *Narcos*, Escobar's antagonist is an American detective (who also is the narrator for the first two seasons) who, according to historical facts, went back to the United States after the drug lord died. There seemed to be no premise for a third season of *Narcos*, which, however, was produced, without Escobar and without the detective: the supporting characters in the first two seasons became the new protagonists, restoring the conflict between Colombian drug trafficking gangs and law enforcement agencies. The theme, the setting and the rise-and-fall narrative structure are kept, proving to be the constitutive elements of the type

of this series. *Narcos*' Season Three, as a token, is thus a proper instance of the type, despite lacking those that seemed to be, but were not, structural elements. Interestingly, the title suggested from the beginning that the story of Escobar was just an instance of a concept concerning Columbian narcotraffic in general.

The putative fourth season of *Narcos*, however, is not a further instance of the type, but rather the starting point for the creation of a new type. This approach is, once again, made clear by the title of the work, which becomes "Narcos: Mexico". While *Narcos* ends up being a series featuring three seasons and a spin-off, *Narcos: Mexico* (2018–) is a new series that develops, in a new form, the subject matter of an already existing work. As Allrath, Gymnich, and Surkamp point out, "Popular TV series sometimes give rise to another series which focuses on a particular segment of the original series, on some of its characters, or at least on the same fictional universe" (2005: 36). The new series, which is usually called a "spin-off," identifies a second type, partially drawn from the first, original type. Just as, *Narcos: Mexico*, as a spin-off, offers a new perspective on the same docu-fictional universe of *Narcos*, *Better Call Saul* (2015–) develops a supporting character from the series *Breaking Bad*, and *The Good Fight* (2017–) deals with some of the characters of *The Good Wife*.

Case Study: *Black Mirror* or *Chronicles of The Digital World*

In anthology series, the unity of the work is not provided by a shared storyline, but by a common theme that is usually summarized by the title. In *Black Mirror*, this is the obscure reflection of the digital world we live in, with its disquieting connection between technology and show business. Produced by Endemol, the first two seasons featured three episodes each and were broadcast by the British Channel 4 between 2011 and 2013. The series was later purchased by Netflix, which released the subsequent three seasons from 2016 to 2019. The shift from Channel 4 to Netflix opened up new horizons for the series, as its creator Charlie Brooker also stated: "Netflix connects us with a global audience so that we can create bigger, stranger, more international and diverse stories than before, whilst maintaining that *Black Mirror* feel" (Plunkett 2015). The increase in quantity, with a double number of episodes in the fourth and fifth seasons, was followed by that in quality, with significant investments in terms of cast, special effects, and copyright of music tracks (which Brooker skillfully connects with the plots, as it happens with Radiohead's *Exit Music* in *Shut Up and Dance*'s finale). However, the idea to preserve the "*Black Mirror* feel" is always kept—an unscrupulous, disenchanting attitude toward information technology. In sum, the shift from Channel 4 first two seasons to the subsequent Netflix ones does not imply a

change in the narrative score, but rather in its performances. These become more ambitious and magniloquent, as it happens when a score originally intended for an ensemble is performed by an orchestra.

Black Mirror's conceptual narrative focuses on the society of digital show business. The latter does not become the object of moral condemnation, heartfelt complaint or radical antagonisms, but it is analyzed using a detached, doubtful, cautiously pessimistic, sometimes satirical, attitude. This ideological understatement translates into expressive parsimony at a stylistic level. The narrative progresses at a slow pace, marked by digressions, fragmentation, elapsed time, sudden turning points, and obscure passages that prevent unambiguous interpretations. The story is usually set in featureless, provincial places, as opposed to the typical science-fiction depiction of the overcrowded, high-tech metropolis. In *Black Mirror*, the effect of digital technology is rather that of making the urban distinction between the center and the suburbs irrelevant. The acting tends to prevent the development of empathy between characters and viewers, encouraging the audience's critical sensibility. Even when the narrative focuses on the main character, this is never perceived as having distinctive qualities or a particular fate. The protagonist is rather described as one of many ordinary individuals who could experience a similar situation to his or hers. In other words, *Black Mirror* tells about social reality as a whole, more than single individuals.

At the heart of *Black Mirror's* conceptual narrative is the exploration of science-fiction possibilities that remain implicit in current society and technology, and can be made explicit by focusing on near-future plausible scenarios. Some episodes perform such conceptual narrative in a rather sober way, without introducing new revolutionary technologies, but rather exploring extreme uses of those already available. An example is provided by both the first season premiere and the second season finale, which tell about an unscrupulous use of communication technologies leading to the humiliation and degeneration of politics. In the first season premiere, *The National Anthem*, the prime minister is forced to have sexual intercourse with a pig on live television. In the second season finale, *The Waldo Moment*, a digital puppet enters the by-elections, keeping two human candidates in check. Episodes showing a similar sober approach to technology are also present in subsequent seasons. *Nosediva* and *Shut Up And Dance* in the third season, as well as *Smithereens* in the fifth season, are a reflection on the devastating impact that communication technologies might have on the privacy of individuals, their reputation, dignity, and safety.

Other episodes develop the potential of *Black Mirror's* conceptual narrative more deeply, speculating on what society might become as a result of a technological improvement. Here, the core element is provided by perception and memory technologies. The first season finale, *The Entire History of You*,

hypothesizes the existence of a subcutaneous device that records everything an individual perceives over a lifetime. *Be Right Back*, which opens the second season, focuses on the creation of an artificial lover based on a real partner who died in an accident. The second episode of Season Two, *White Bear*, concerns a technological manipulation of human memory involving people in a never-ending deceptive simulation.

In a similar vein, the fourth season deals with mechanisms capable to give access to other individuals' experiences. *Arkangel* tells about a device that allows a mother to share and monitor her daughter's perceptions, while *Crocodile* introduces a gadget that helps to visualize memories of other people. The final *Black Museum*—an episode of episodes, a sort of miniature *Black Mirror*, as the two similar titles suggest—tells about a variety of technologies to share and transfer consciousness.

The technological manipulation of individual experience is taken to its extreme with augmented reality, virtual reality, holograms, and artificial consciousness. This seems to be a latent trend in the first two seasons, with the only exception of *15 Millions of Merits* in Season One. This episode tells about a society focused on entertainment where public life comes down to a series of television shows in which citizens-viewers participate through their avatars. The theme of digital simulation becomes crucial in *Black Mirror's* conceptual narrative starting from the special episode *White Christmas* (2014), which is a sort of bridge between the second season and the subsequent ones. In the third season, *Playtest* focuses on virtual reality, *Men Against Fire* on augmented reality, while *San Junipero* goes as far as introducing a virtual space people can inhabit through digital consciousness, even after their death. This takes *Be Right Back's* idea of a digital afterlife to its extreme: as in the title of Belinda Carlisle's song included in *San Junipero's* soundtrack, "Heaven is a Place on Earth."

The fourth and fifth seasons further focus on the themes of virtual reality, artificial intelligence, and digital consciousness. In the fourth season, *USS Callister* and *Hang the DJ* tell about a software able to produce experiences and thoughts within a simulated environment, while *Metalhead*, exceptionally filmed in black and white, deals with the more traditional topic of robots turning against their creators. In the fifth season, *Striking Vipers* celebrates the recreational use of virtual reality, while *Rachel, Jack and Ashley Too* exemplifies the idea of artificial consciousness, satirizing the music industry.

The standalone episode *Bandersnatch* (2018), released in between *Black Mirror's* fourth and fifth seasons, deserves a special analysis. From an aesthetic perspective, it is not one of the best performances of the *Black Mirror* type: the storyline lists a number of clichés about computer geeks, while the recreation of the 1980s as a pre-digital era is trivial, being far from the outstanding nostalgic simulations in *San Junipero* and *USS Callister*.

Bandersnatch's main point is rather to be found in the development of the interactive narrative on three levels: the video game the main character has to program, the book on which the game is based, and the episode itself, which tells about the creation of the game. *Bandersnatch*'s viewers are exceptionally asked to choose from pairs of alternatives, thus influencing the main character's storyline. This interactive mechanism makes *Bandersnatch* not only an episode of a series, but above all a reflection on the narrative form of TV series per se, which lies in between the linear storytelling of film and the iterative nature of video games. The number of possibilities television series present is extremely lower than that of video games, and yet TV series tend to move away from the narrative linearity of films. *Bandersnatch* shows this through the glyph symbol, an upside-down Y identifying a narrative bifurcation (see figure 3.1). While in a film, a "glyph" means an irreversible choice, TV series can explore both the alternative options in different episodes or seasons.

On the one hand, film narratives are linear and disjunctive. On the other hand, serial narratives tend to iteration and conjunction. However, TV series usually hide the iteration of the same conceptual structure and the connection of the possible alternatives behind a mask of linearity and disjunction. By means of its peculiar interactivity, *Bandersnatch* tears off this mask, thereby revealing the conceptual nature of serial storytelling.

Case Study: *The Good Wife* or Alicia in Wonderland

A seven-season legal drama, *The Good Wife* aired on CBS from 2009 to 2016 and spawned a spin-off titled *The Good Fight*. The story is set in Chicago and includes all the traditional elements of the legal genre: an important law firm hires some associates who fight their way to the top. More than in other series belonging to the same genre, here the plotline focused on how the characters'

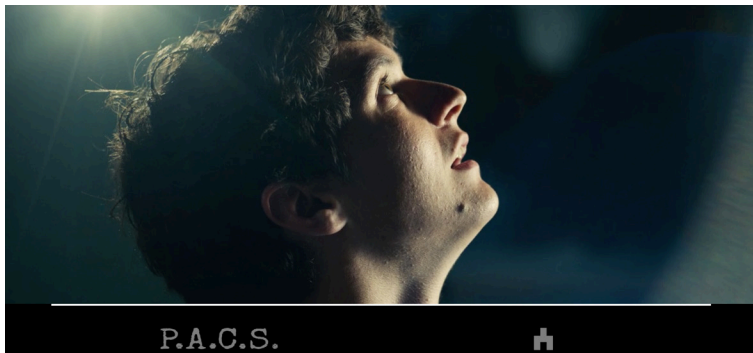


Figure 3.1 *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (Netflix, 2018). Source: Author screenshot.

private life dialectically interacts with that dealing with the public context. The “wife” of the title is Alicia Florrick, whose private issues are relevant to her public role, since she is an associate at a law firm and is married to Cook County State’s Attorney. Therefore, in *The Good Wife* the line between the public and the private is blurred.

After spending thirteen years as a stay-at-home mother, Alicia suddenly finds herself competing against younger, fresh-out-of-law-school professionals yearning for success. Her arc of transformation is a journey that starts from a new beginning and involves a shift from a passive to a more active role, as Paola Brembilla and Lucia Tralli (2015, 149) have pointed out. “[*The Good Wife*] managed to become, season after season, a compelling tale of a woman’s resilient struggle to achieve her goals. [. . .] Alicia Florrick’s work-related and personal journey [. . .] is the main selling point of the show.”

The first episode of *The Good Wife* introduces several elements of what Brembilla and Tralli call the “selling point” and we have characterized as the type. Alicia’s past is summarized in the premise, which tells about the traumatic event she has recently experienced—a press conference in which her husband resigns from the State’s Attorney’s office following allegations of corruption. Alicia, astonished and submissive, stands beside him, who has just used her while holding her hand. She will redeem herself from this condition, as the last shot in the scene suggests, when her husband asks her, “Are you alright?” and she responds by slapping him across the face. The series will focus on this transformation, here in its initial stage.

In the next scene, six months after the press conference, Alicia is already a different person, first and foremost in terms of appearance: she has changed her hairstyle and usual outfits, going from the stereotypical mother to a law professional.

The firm is the main arena in the series, and Alicia needs to understand how it works, adjust to a new routine and become part of the group. In this sense, the tracking shots following her while she walks quickly along the corridors do not just represent a characteristic element of the legal genre. They help the viewer to share the experience of an adult outsider who needs to keep up with the chaos and competition of a world previously denied to her.

One of the name partners at the firm, Will Gardner, is an old law school friend of Alicia’s. He pursued that career she would now have if she had not focused on her husband and family. But Alicia also had feelings for Will, who still has the qualities she used to find attractive. Thus, changes in both Alicia’s public and private life lie in her past relation to Will.

The title sequence emblematically summarizes the features of *The Good Wife* as a type. It consists of four fixed grainy black and white images, accompanied in the soundtrack by a progression of three simple chords. These images first show the detail of the husband’s and wife’s hands (a reference to

episode 1), then Alicia in profile, and finally two frames of the woman, from the closest to the most distant one, with an axial cut. Different sides (profile, detail, close-up) of her personality will be analyzed, starting from her role as a wife. The core element of the type is here visually introduced, a conflict between “the good wife” and “the good lawyer.”

Each episode of *The Good Wife* tells about a case that ends up in court, which allows the series to introduce a number of peculiar judges, defendants, and lawyers representing the opposing party. Besides lightening the courtroom drama atmosphere and injecting some humor into the series, such characters also contribute to the unpredictability of strategies and verdicts, moving away from the mechanical rationality of the narratives belonging to this genre. This peculiar way of deploying supporting roles is part of *The Good Wife*'s type and is instantiated by characters introduced at different stages. For example, from the second season on, a determined antagonistic lawyer, brilliant as well as crafty and immoral, does not hesitate to use his tardive dyskinesia in order to win the sympathy of the court. He is played by Michael J. Fox, who has been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease and has to face problems similar to those of his character. This helps to convey a further feeling of reality and highlights how the series tends to characterize supporting characters. Facing peculiar characters like this, Alicia keeps a composed attitude, sometimes revealing either amusement or annoyance, but always with a touch of understatement that realigns and balances expressive effects.

Alicia also has to deal with two role models that are the symbol of female independence. The first is Diane Lockhart, the main element of continuity in the storyworld, as she is present in all the seasons and becomes a fellow protagonist in the spin-off *The Good Fight*. A senior partner at the law firm, Diane sets an example in terms of legal career, institutional recognition, and political skills. The second role model is the private investigator Kalinda Sharma, a symbol of pragmatic determination, moral arrogance, and sexual freedom. These women do not have the burden of a family and throw themselves headlong into their projects, establishing relationships of either alliance or conflict with Alicia.

Another distinctive feature of the conceptual narrative is the introduction of the political drama around Alicia's husband, Peter Florrick. Supported by a relentless ambition, he campaigns for elections season after season, both succeeding and failing, in a serial system of alternating fortune. His storyline, linked to Alicia's, constantly turns the private into the public, making the couple a network of multiple relationships and preventing Alicia from gaining her complete independence. This intertwining of careers makes Alicia play, in her own way, the role of the wife mentioned in the title.

The various seasons perform the type showing the character's attempt to free herself from her old identity, which becomes particularly evident in the

cliffhangers, which usually revolve around Alicia's future. What is at stake is not a fate unknown to her, but rather a destiny that she is building. Here the conceptual narrative reveals itself to be an iteration strategy that systematically postpones closure. The conflict between Alicia as a good wife and Alicia as a good lawyer is never resolved, opposites do not reconcile, extramarital affairs are always about to turn her into an ex-wife, but a regressive option is introduced every time, with different variations. Since the type requires a constant conflict between Alicia as a wife and Alicia as a career woman, its tokens express such conflict by reshaping it continuously, instead of definitively solving it.

For example, the third-season finale hints at some sort of remarriage along the lines of the kind of comedy analyzed by Cavell (1981). Alicia makes a surprise visit to her ex-husband and children, who invite her to stay for pizza. She does not accept, but while she is leaving a house that is no longer hers, she hesitates. In three subjective close-ups, the viewer first sees her feet on the doormat, with the word "welcome" written upside-down, then, from a window, her husband and happy children who are setting the table for dinner (see figure 3.2), and finally, her parked car. The season ends with a close-up of Alicia, whose choice is unknown to the audience.

The conceptual narrative also makes room for exceptions. Assuming the firm is the essential arena of *The Good Wife*, the fourth-season finale is striking: Alicia decides to leave the partners who welcomed her years before, giving her the opportunity to build a career. In Season Five, Alicia opens a new firm with some young faithful associates. This token, however, does not fully contradict the type since Alicia's role has not changed. Rather, this token expands



Figure 3.2 *The Good Wife* (CBS, 2009–2016). Source: Author screenshot.

the type by providing the new firm with the features of the concept such as ambition, redemption, independence. Then, in the sixth season, a “boomerang move” (so frequent in serialized dramas) brings Alicia back to her old firm.

In the seventh and last season, Alicia faces a further investigation into her ex-husband, but she also has to deal with the ghost of Will Gardner, the love of her life, whose statement “It was romantic because it didn’t happen” summarizes their relationship. In the last scene of the series, Alicia is standing beside her husband again, in a press conference in which he resigns from office once more, but this time she does not let him hold her hand as it happened in the prologue seven years earlier. Maybe she will pursue a political career and ask for a divorce, or maybe not, coherently with the conflict between stability and change that has characterized all the seasons.

The spin-off, *The Good Fight* (2017–present), takes place a year after *The Good Wife*’s finale, but it cannot be considered its eighth season. It is a new work, featuring three seasons so far. Although set in *The Good Wife*’s story-world, it lacks the distinctive element of the previous work: the wife Alicia Florrick. Rather, it introduces a new main character, Maia Rindell, who exhibits deeply different aspects in comparison with Alicia. Whereas *The Good Wife* tells the story of an adult woman and her new beginning, as well as her struggle to find a new place in society, *The Good Fight* is the story of a young woman who is trying to shape her identity. *The Good Fight* focuses on a young lawyer and her mentor, Diane Lockhart, the successful middle-aged woman who was a senior partner at Alicia Florrick’s law firm. The young lawyer’s confidence is shattered by a financial scandal involving her father, which puts her in a new, difficult situation. The elements of continuity are clearly evident. The title of the new series only replaces “wife” with “fight,” while the graphics of the logo show “good” written in red. Some thematic elements are also kept, such as the inextricable conflict between politics and law. However, *The Good Fight* aims to be more radical, as is already clear in the title sequence. Here, the images show a sort of semantics of the legal genre: a judge’s gavel, a set of Code volumes, but also a laptop and other items graphically identifying the genre. Such objects explode synchronously to the strongest accents of the minimalist music theme building an audiovisual crescendo. *The Good Fight* has been described as “bolder than its predecessor” (Bastián 2020): its conceptual narrative takes the social and political issues of the legal profession to the extreme.

CONCEPTUAL METANARRATIVES

What governs the relationship between a series and its spin-off? It could be said that the link between the two series is represented by a higher-order

abstract object. In the case of *The Good Wife* and *The Good Fight* the higher-order abstract object is characterized by the word “Good” in the title of the work, by the continuity of the storyworld and by the narrative structure of the heroine’s journey and the theme of the conflict between politics and law. Likewise, the relationship between *Narcos* and *Narcos: Mexico* is characterized by the word “Narcos” in the title of the work, historiographic realism (involving also archival footage), a theme (fighting deep-rooted crime such as drug trafficking requires immersing yourself in it), the structure of the conflict (detective/drug lord). The storyworld, also, is a common feature: although the characters of *Narcos* and *Narcos: Mexico* do not meet or know each other, they are all part of the same narrative world, which is quite close to the actual world. It could be argued that such higher-order abstract object is, in turn, a type: a conceptual metanarrative, a principle of construction of conceptual narratives whose tokens are *Narcos* and *Narcos: Mexico*.

The same could be said about the relationship between other series and their spin-offs, for example *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul*, or *Merli* (2015–2018) and *Merli: Sapere aude* (2019–), which shares with *Narcos* the identification of the spin-off through an addition to the original title. However, such higher-order objects are not primary focuses of appreciation in cultural practices. Television critics discuss *Breaking Bad* or *Better Call Saul*, but nobody surely evaluates a putative unitary work, of which *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul* would be parts or instances. The conceptual metanarrative that links *Breaking Bad* to *Better Call Saul* is a useful grouping method for practical or historiographic purposes, but it does not prove to be relevant as an object of aesthetic appreciation: it is not a work.

The same is true for television formats, whose use has characterized broadcast programming since the 1950s. According to Moran, a format is a “set of invariable elements in a program out of which the variable elements of an individual episode are produced” (1998: 13). Similarly, following Rak and Ingrassia (2011), a television format is a production project provided with all the instructions necessary to its realization and characterized by a set of fixed and repeatable elements.

A format seems to be a type in the same sense a series is. Yet, a new format series is the remake of a preexisting series, whose authors earn in copyright fees. For example, *BeTipul* (2005–2008) is a TV series in which each episode tells about a patient’s session with a psychotherapist, whose relations develop in a certain way. This series has had five licensed remakes (titled *In Treatment*), in countries different from that of origin (Israel). Thus, the Israeli series provides a “recipe” based on the stories of patients in therapy, but the “spices” in the stories are local. In the Italian edition, titled *In Treatment* (2013–2017) just like the American one (2008–2010), specific elements of the national culture have been introduced, although complying with the

format requirements as much as possible. The essential norms are respected, from the length of the episodes to narrative progression and entire dialogues, but the characters are developed within the sociocultural context of the target country. An example of this is provided by the fighter pilot in the original Israeli series who, in the Italian version, becomes an undercover member of the Carabinieri corps involved in a dangerous anti-mafia operation. Although the rules are still followed, if the context changes, a new narrative world is created, and hence a new type and a new work, with different conflicting values and different mindsets. Both in the American and in the Italian *In Treatment*, *BeTipul*'s cultural pillar—*jewishness*—is lost. The visual recipe also has its local options. Whereas the Israeli series has an intense and varied chromatic aspect and prefers low contrast light, both the American and Italian versions tend to select colors and are characterized by hard shadows, thus creating a particular style that emphasizes the tone of the story to tell.

At an ontological level, it can be said that *BeTipul*'s format is a type, a conceptual metanarrative, whose tokens are *BeTipul* itself and its other five remakes. These tokens, as conceptual narratives, are, in turn, types—viz. “nested types,” as Nemesio García-Carril Puy (2019) calls them—and they have episodes and seasons as their tokens. The main difference is that the conceptual narrative of a series is a primary focus of appreciation in our cultural practices, while the same cannot be said about the conceptual metanarrative of a format. Critics evaluate *BeTipul*, or the United States or the Italian *In Treatment*, but they surely do not evaluate some sort of format-work that would encompass all those series.

Another example of format series is *House of Cards*, which is based on a literary saga by Michael Dobbs, a trilogy that tells about the rise and fall of the Machiavellian politician Francis Urquart and ends with the death of the main character, murdered for the good of both the nation and his legacy. As Chalaby points out in his book *The Format Age*, “in 2013 [. . .] Netflix commissioned its own version of *House of Cards*, originally a BBC One political thriller” (2016: 172). The BBC series features three seasons of four episodes each that reproduce the narrative arc of Dobbs' novels, hence Urquart's parabolic journey ends with his death. In the U.S. version, the arc develops in a 13-episode season at the end of which the main character, Francis Underwood, does not die: his career will continue for four more seasons. The first season expands the narrative world of the format at the level of supporting characters and details (cf. Boutet 2015: 83), while, from the second season on, *House of Cards* moves forward freely, independently of the format. Frank Underwood's parabolic journey ends with the fifth season, when, as a consequence of the legal issue involving Kevin Spacey (the actor who plays Frank Underwood), the character is killed off-screen. The sixth and final season develops without its main character.

When discussing *House of Cards* in terms of aesthetic appreciation, the first thing to do is clarify which of the two versions needs to be considered. In a conversation about *House of Cards*, if two interlocutors found out that one of them watched the three-season British version while the other saw the six-season American adaptation, they would conclude that they watched two different shows. On the other hand, if both watched the American version, although one stopped watching it at the end of the fifth season, they would agree they watched the same thing. Viewers who also watched the final season could say that *House of Cards* does not work without Frank Underwood, casting this season as a bad token. Or they could say the opposite, stating that this token breaks the rule of the type in a creative, successful way. This is what actually happened in the critical debate. On the one hand, according to the *Hollywood Reporter's* critic (Fienberg 2018), "The shift in focus from Frank to Claire Underwood finds the series somewhat reinvigorated through its first five new episodes. It's a change that comes far too late for the show to escape many of its worst narrative instincts, or a surplus of flat recurring characters, but for the first time in years, 'House of Cards' has something new and frequently interesting to say." On the other hand, according to *The Guardian's* critic (Seale 2018), "Nobody's relishing the transgression in the way Frank would. Season 6 is a web with no spider at the center." The *Esquire's* critic (Coates 2018), instead, blames *House of Cards'* decline in quality on a cause different from the killing off of the main character: "The overall quality of the show dipped dramatically when Willimon [the showrunner] left after Season Four; by now, the show feels limp."

Despite their disagreement on this particular issue, all the critics seem to evaluate the same object, that is, *House of Cards* in its American version: for some critics the new tokens are worse, for others better, than the previous ones. These critics are certainly not making any reference to the *House of Cards* format, although this format determines some of the important features that the American *House of Cards* shares with the English version, not only in the story but also in the discourse; for example, in both series the main character often directly addresses the audience, looking into the camera. All this shows that formats are structures that are individuated by features and can have multiple instances, and in this sense they are ontologically similar to conceptual narratives. Yet, only the latter are primary objects of appreciation in our cultural practices.

Formats can be compared to other cultural devices such as genres and brands which also function as principles of collection of similar works, without individuating a primary focus of aesthetic appreciation. Cavell highlights the difference between serial works of television and genres in the following terms: "The units of a serial are familiarly called its episodes; I will call the units of a genre its members. A thesis it seems to me worth exploring is that

television, for some reason, works aesthetically according to a serial-episode principle rather than according to a genre-member principle” (1982: 79).

The genre-member principle is such that the genre collects members which have similar features, but “the primary object of aesthetic interest” (Cavell 1982: 79) is the member, not the genre. For example, *The O.C.* (2003–2007) is an instance of the genre teen drama, but when one watches *The O.C.*, the primary focus of appreciation is the series itself, not teen drama as a genre. The serial-episode principle, on the other hand, is such that “the primary object of aesthetic interest” is *The O.C.* as a serial, whose instances are its episodes (and seasons).

While a genre collects works that have similar features, a brand collects works that can be traced back to the same origin, regardless of their specific features. For example, the films *Gomorra* (*Gomorra*, 2008) and *The Immortal* (*L'immortale*, 2019), and the TV series *Gomorra* (*Gomorra: la serie*, 2014–) belong to the same brand since they all can be traced back to Roberto Saviano’s 2006 novel *Gomorra*, which instituted the brand; the book *Il brand Gomorra* (Benvenuti 2017) investigates this line of descent. All this shows that the brand is a helpful tool to investigate the production and distribution of works like these, and yet, when it comes to aesthetic appreciation, the primary object is not the brand but rather the single work that can be traced back to the brand.

Case Study: *Gomorra* or Kill the Ones Who Gave You Life

Gomorra is the most popular Italian crime drama worldwide. Created by Roberto Saviano and based on his book of the same name, the series was released in 2014 and has run for four seasons so far. It tells the story of a Camorra clan that controls drug trafficking and dealing in Secondigliano, in the suburbs of Naples. Camorra is an Italian Mafia-type criminal organization based in the Campania region. In the series, the Savastano Camorra clan is headed by Don Pietro, a prominent member of the old guard. His son Genny is an immature young man, while Ciro is Don Pietro’s loyal and promising affiliate. *Gomorra* is Genny’s *bildungsroman*, as he becomes more aware and rises to power, in a constant attempt to transform the vicious, dreaded old Camorra clan into a respected new business.

The conceptual narrative is characterized, first and foremost, by the setting, namely, the sprawling housing estate in the outskirts of Secondigliano and Scampia (see figure 3.3). As Saviano has stated, shooting in Scampia was crucial: Scampia is an actor, not just a background for actors; its apartment blocks, its stairways, its sky are the main characters (see Fumarola 2014). In this sense, Saviano concludes that Scampia is part of the series DNA. This metaphor can be traced back to the type that episodes and seasons instantiate. The setting is essential to the type because it encloses the characters in



Figure 3.3 *Gomorrah* (Sky Italia, 2014–). Source: Author screenshot.

a world they cannot escape from. Camorra is a territorial entity, it imposes its control on an area through ubiquitous presence and constant monitoring.

The continuity between character and context is ensured by shots that never exclude the surroundings. The vast exterior spaces, however, are shown in contrast with the stereotypical depiction of southern Italy. As Chiara Checcaglini (2018, 46) points out:

the preferred choice for daytime scenes is to remove sun glare or desaturate it, so that every shot highlights the lack of reference to Naples' sunny disposition. [. . .] while days are marked by low skies and dark lights, nights are paradoxically more chromatically different. The dull green and blue of the neon lights badly illuminating tunnels and corridors in the apartment blocks are paralleled by light sources standing out against the dark of the night, acting as a lure into another existing and unreachable world.

This setting tells about family, past, roots, belonging, and property: the members of the clan live in houses with shabby exteriors that hide lavishly furnished interiors full of precious items. This deeply local dimension becomes also evident in the language, a combination of Neapolitan dialect and Camorra slang, which requires subtitles even for the Italian viewer. Moreover, the setting determines the music in the scenes, featuring rap and neo-melodic songs in the Neapolitan dialect. The soundtrack, on the other hand, has a post-rock style. This is provided by Mokadelic's drone-based compositions, focusing on tones and atmospheres rather than themes and melodies, thanks to a few basic elements, such as sustained sounds and simple chords, with a variable duration. Before the ending of each episode, one of these abstract, evocative compositions, *Doomed to live*, informs the viewers

that the images they are going to see are meant to give meaning to the whole episode. The closing credits feature a rap song in the Neapolitan dialect, *Nuje vulimm na speranza (We want hope)* by NTO and Lucariello. Besides reminding of the local characterization, this song restates the main theme of the series, the unattainable dream of a different life from that imposed by the environment, as stated by the chorus: “Noi vogliamo una speranza per campare domani” (“We want hope for surviving tomorrow”).

The strong local characterization emphasizes the pervasiveness of the Camorra system and the impossibility to challenge it. This theme produces a chain of events in the storyline: *Gomorrah*'s main narrative arcs are attempts to move away from the starting point that end up in just going back to it. The symbolically dense and visually recognizable setting is governed by Camorra clans with rules and codes of conduct to be respected as though they were proper laws. Therefore, the conceptual narrative is also characterized by the absence of the State and its forces of law and order. No main or supporting characters represent them, and they can only be described as components of an external world which is meant to remain off-stage. All the conflicts occur within the closed system of the Camorra, at least up to when the approach of its old guard prevails over the new desire for expansion, in terms of space and methods. Magistrates and entrepreneurs are introduced only in the fourth season, when Genny tries to enter the civilized world that exists outside of the Camorra.

The conceptual narrative also includes local and territorial family structures that give rise to chains of conflicting events. The Savastanos govern the outskirts of Naples, the Levantes the rural hinterland, the youth known as “The Taliban” the Forcella neighborhood. Camorra clans are groups of individuals linked by blood ties, with actual power or reputation being handed down from generation to generation. For example, the young Forcella clan is headed by Enzo, a man known as “Sanguèblù,” literally meaning “blue-blooded,” because, although his family is now in disgrace, he remains the grandson of an important deceased Camorrista.

A clan can also be joined by affiliation, as subordinates and loyal soldiers. In every season, besides the long-established clan members, teenagers aiming at becoming Camorristi are introduced. Their parabolic journey unfolds over one or two episodes. An example is the story of Danielino, whom Ciro turns into a killer in Season One, and then sacrifices to a rival clan. This aspect of the type is instantiated by various other characters, such as the two teenagers that join the Secondigliano clan in Season Four, and are then executed for disobeying an order.

Clan affiliation does not have gender limits either. Each season introduces the rise to power of a woman who does not hesitate to give orders, shoot and kill: Donna Imma in Season One, Scianel in Season Two, Patrizia in Seasons

Three and Four. As Donna Imma tells Ciro, “You divide the world into two categories: those who kill and those who don’t. You think that because I am a woman I belong to the latter. You’re wrong.”

The characters’ fate, regardless of their age and gender, is ruled by another element of the conceptual narrative: a system of loyalty and treachery that creates most of the conflicts in the stories. Loyal relatives and affiliates keep the structures of power intact, which makes them worthy of survival. On the other hand, treachery breaks such structures, and traitors are punished with death. In this sense, *Gomorra* often portrays treachery as a means to speed up the rise to power.

Treachery triggers a recurring chain of events in the series, including two typical scenes: epiphany and vendetta. In epiphany, some evidence or an informant helps the deceived character learn about a friend’s betrayal. The *mise-en-scène* of such a narrative situation is solemn: the deceived character shows a superficial calm that masks the fire of revenge. In Season One, when Genny finds out about Ciro’s betrayal, he is alone and his expression is imperturbable and inscrutable, no matter how close the camera gets to his face. Patrizia shares the same attitude when, in Season Four, she realizes she has been betrayed by the dearest person to her heart—her husband. These epiphany scenes highlight another characteristic of the type: the dialogs between Camorristi are characterized by those that Neapolitan people call “leaden words,” heavy and affected words, meaningful phrases to intimidate or express agreement, repeated to the point they become catchphrases, such as the popular “Guagliò, sta’ senza pensier” (*Keep your cool, mate*).

After the epiphany of treachery, the characters start planning their revenge, which requires a new and tighter circle of loyal friends that will deal with the traitor’s punishment. Violence is thus a key element of the conceptual narrative: shootings, executions, torture, bashing are the basic criminal acts in the series.

Given the setting and the family structure of the clan, *Gomorra*’s basic conflict is a clash of generations, with Don Pietro embodying the old-school Camorra spirit and Genny representing the new guard. This kind of conflict can be found in traditional myths, which have explored the positive and negative poles of the relationship between father and son. The son needs his father and looks for him, following the archetype of Telemachus and Ulysses. The son shows gratitude, affection, and respect for his father, as in the case of Aeneas and Anchises. However, the son is also motivated by the drive to replace his father, as it happens with Oedipus and Laius. Such drive derives from the threat that the father poses to his son, as in the archetype of Zeus and Cronos. *Gomorra* reshapes these myths in terms of a conceptual narrative that develops the epic and the tragic in a serial form. Even after Don Pietro’s death in the second season finale, the conflict is destined to continue, as it is

Camorra itself to represent the fatherly figure through a variety of characters. The Oracle tells Oedipus that he is going to kill “the one who gave you life,” a figure which in *Gomorra* becomes a key element of the type whose tokens are the different seasons.

Each season, as a token, has a peculiar temporal structure. Starting from the second season, each first episode begins from when the previous season ends, while the second episode features a time jump of a year. The structure is the following: S1E1>>S2E1-(one year later)-S2E2>>S3E1-(one year later)-S3E2>>S4E1-(one year later)-S4E2 . . . (to be continued). This structure bridges the gap between a season and the next one, while introducing a break within the season itself, so that each first episode is an ending, while each second episode features a new beginning.

The first season instantiates the type by giving a picture of the consolidated Camorra business, its cruel and local dimensions. Don Pietro Savastano rules the outskirts of Naples, while his right-hand man, Ciro, is building a reputation by getting rid of the rivals of the clan. However, the Savastanos need their son Genny to grow up, as he still is too immature and a coward, to the point that his juvenile excesses lead to the boss’s arrest. The treachery as an element of the type is instantiated when Ciro realizes that he plays a minor role in the clan, which leads him to kill Donna Imma. In the season finale, Ciro and Genny shoot each other, with the latter ending up in hospital, nearly dead. The Savastanos’ rule seems to be over, but Don Pietro manages to break out of prison.

The second season is characterized by a new scenario in which Don Pietro fights against everybody, including his son, and ends up dead. On the other hand, a more aware and clear-headed Genny starts a family elsewhere, before ordering the murder of his own father.

In the first two seasons, Genny Savastano’s *bildungsroman* focuses on his transition from son to man. In Season One, the transformation occurs through a radical use of off-screen action. When he leaves for Honduras in order to take care of a shipment of drugs, he is an immature, spoiled young man. There, he is taken hostage by local drug trafficking gangs, and his initiation takes place. When he comes back to Naples, Genny is a warrior. In the second season, the conflict between Genny and his father becomes more and more explicit. Even the Honduran environment, the off-screen setting of Genny’s initiation in the first season, becomes part of the visuals at the beginning of episode 2.

These two seasons share Don Pietro’s particular location in the narrative space. In the first season, he is in prison; in the second, he lives in hiding in an apartment. In both cases, the father is in an isolated place, far from the center of power where he used to be, as though this foreshadowed his downfall and his son’s rise. However, Don Pietro refuses to accept his downfall and, even

from his peripheral position, continues to carry out plans to keep his power. Even when his downfall seems inevitable, the father finds the strength to rise from his ashes, as it happens in the emblematic final sequence of the first season.

The oedipal conflict between Genny and Don Pietro is increased by a third character, *Ciro Di Marzio*. Whereas Genny is Don Pietro's biological son, *Ciro* is rather a symbolic son, his favorite soldier, the person that reminds the boss of himself. However, also in this case, the father does not want to give up his reign. The conflicts in *Gomorra*'s first two seasons develop through two plotlines: first, the fight between Genny and *Ciro* to succeed to their father; second, and more important, their common attempts to oust him.

In Season Three, Genny faces, once more, the old guard. Now, the main conflict revolves around his wife *Azzura*'s father, *Avitabile*, another clan leader who does not want to be deposed. In this season, the conflict extends also in terms of space. The powerful families based in the historic center of Naples enter the scene, together with the young newcomers from *Forcella*, known as "The Talibans" because of their hipster beards. Meanwhile, the role of Genny and *Azzurra* strengthens, as they are going to become the couple that will redesign the future of organized crime. In the first half of the season, *Ciro* instantiates, in multiple forms, the generational conflict embedded in *Gomorra*'s type. The third episode, set in Bulgaria, introduces his relationship with an old boss who, although being his mentor and symbolic father, has a biological son who is going to inherit his criminal empire. This allows *Ciro* to re-experience his initiatory journey, coming to the same conclusion: the killing of his adoptive father. *Ciro* then comes back to Naples to become an adoptive father himself, starting to be the mentor of *Enzo*, a young orphan who is trying to redeem himself (like *Ciro*), but also the descendant of a powerful clan (like Genny). *Ciro* will replace *Enzo*'s dead father, in the same way as Don Pietro did for *Ciro* himself.

Throughout the season, the (both biological and symbolic) relationship between parents and children develops in further plotlines. The theme is explored from a female perspective with *Patrizia Santoro*, the orphaned young girl who, after being Don Pietro's assistant and lover, becomes the protégée of the boss *Annalisa Magliocca*, known as "Scianel." *Patrizia* reveals herself to be *Ciro*'s female counterpart. The symmetry between the two characters is manifestly expressed in the final scene of the eleventh episode. The camera follows *Ciro* walking and captures a wide shot featuring, in the middle, Genny, his wife *Azzurra*, and their son *Pietro*, and, on the other side, *Patrizia*, as though *Patrizia* and *Ciro* were two angels protecting the Holy Family. In the next episode, the third season finale, *Patrizia* shoots her adoptive mother *Scianel* to death, in the same way as her male counterpart *Ciro* gets rid of his adoptive father Don Pietro in the second season finale. The daughter's

rebellion theme is iterated by Azzurra, Genny's wife, who rebels against her father, the boss Giuseppe Avitabile, ending up having a key role in his killing.

The fourth season follows Genny's new attempt to become a kind of criminal-entrepreneur, while having to face the traditional, patriarchal dimension of crime that tries to hold him back. This expansion of the social sphere explains the introduction of characters not belonging to the criminal world. In particular, a key role is played by the magistrate who investigates Genny and sends Patrizia to prison. If criminals leave the area controlled by the clan, they have to face the State. The law is no longer a marginal element in the series, as it is now embodied by an actual character.

This season also shows a so-far-unexplored criminal area, the archaic rural hinterland, with its old bosses that are even more anachronistic than those whom the previous seasons have portrayed. In the first episode, Genny tries to make peace with the bosses in Naples and, in order to get the most from the negotiations, he asks for the support of the Levantes, a rural clan. Having obtained what he wished for, Genny entrusts Patrizia with the local management of his drug trafficking.

The season continues to develop two parallel plotlines that will gradually converge. On the one hand, Genny commits to a legal, extremely profitable project, as he wants to build an airport serving the area around Naples. His ambitions for change make him come into contact with an international financial environment leading him to London. However, even there, he gets involved in the same mechanisms of betrayal, deception, and revenge that he experienced in Secondigliano. On the other hand, Patrizia falls in love with the most open-minded member of the Levante rural clan, Michelangelo, a potential "new man" who has an education and would like to change the old rules. Their relationship seems to mirror Genny and Azzurra's, but Michelangelo is not strong enough to oppose his family's archaic power. His incompetence becomes evident when the police seizes a shipment of drugs. This relaunches the loyalty/treachery mechanism that runs in *Gomorra*'s narrative DNA. Genny has to go back to Secondigliano, thus instantiating another essential element of the conceptual narrative: the son's inability to get rid of his father, as well as the reiteration of the father's killing, clearly exemplified when Genny shoots the head of the Levantes. A symbolic instance of such impossibility of becoming a new man is provided in episode 9, when Genny would like to have the scar on his cheek removed, as it reminds him of his upsetting Honduran experience, but then he changes his mind. In the season finale, on a terrace overlooking the lit-up Gulf of Naples, Genny explains to his wife the mechanism whereby he moves forward and backward on the line of change:

Genny: I tried to be the man you deserved, the father you wanted for Pietro.
Azzurra: And you succeeded.

Genny: I don't know, but I tried. I tried very hard. I did it for you two and for my brother *Ciro*, who died to leave us with his dream. But in this new life I felt a battle inside me. And what I was before began pounding, wanting to get out again.

Mirroring *Genny* and *Azzurra*, *Patrizia* and *Michelangelo* also should represent the new face of crime. Yet, they try to change their status taking the radical path of cooperation with the authorities. *Genny*, thus, kills them both, which forces him to become a fugitive hiding in a bunker, just like his father in *Season Two*. In the conceptual narrative of *Gomorra*, *Genny*'s attempt to become a new man is doomed to a never-ending struggle against the traits that make him similar to his father.

The relevance of the *bildungsroman* puts *Gomorra* in line with a series such as *Game of Thrones*, which focuses on an epochal war of succession. The conflict between fathers and children, either biological or symbolic, is an important element of the conceptual narrative of other contemporary series such as *Alias*, *24*, *Homeland*, *Mad Men*, and *Breaking Bad*. Still, *Gomorra* treats such a theme with an unprecedented strength, developing it in multiple forms and pushing it to the extreme. A number of children fight against their fathers, but also against their mothers, brothers, and sisters, as if all those people were instances of paternal power.

Each of *Gomorra*'s seasons ends with a—literal, not just symbolic—killing of an emblematic figure. In the first season, *Donna Imma*, the Mother, is killed; in the second, *Don Pietro*, the Father; in the third, *Ciro*, the Brother; in the fourth, *Patrizia*, the Sister. The series producer, *Riccardo Tozzi* has declared that the authors have found a “special angle for season five” (*Wiseman* 2020), that is, arguably, a sharply different way of instantiating *Gomorra*'s conceptual narrative. And he added: “We feel like this is the last season. You never know. But at the moment, we think of it as the last season.” Arguably, the latter will draw also on the content of the film *The Immortal* (2019), another instance of the brand *Gomorra* released while the fourth season was running, which reveals that *Ciro* survived his alleged killing and is ready to be back in action.

SERIALIZED SERIES

Let us reconsider one last time the analogy between conceptual art and TV series. A work of conceptual art can have multiple instances. An exemplary case is *Michelangelo Pistoletto*'s *Venus of the Rags*, a plaster cast of a classical nude, *Thorvaldsen*'s *Venus*, positioned with its back to the viewer, next to a large pile of used, discarded clothes. Created in 1967, the work is based

on an idea that has been variously interpreted. This idea, which Pistoletto articulates as the ability of art to give new life to materials degraded by contemporary society, has been instantiated multiple times:

Pistoletto has made several versions of *Venus of the Rags*. In the first, shown in 1967, he used a concrete or cement Venus, which he had purchased from a garden centre and covered with a layer of mica to create a glittering surface. He made three further versions in the same year using plaster casts of this original Venus statue. [. . .] In 1970, Pistoletto produced two versions using a larger plaster Venus measuring 160cm in height. In 1972 he made a version with a gold-covered Venus entitled *Venere degli stracci dorata* (Golden Venus of the Rags). T12200 is a unique version produced in 1974, for which the Venus was made by stone masons in Tuscany using a special Greek marble containing mica. In 1980, a version of *Venus of the Rags* was enacted in a performance held in San Francisco, with a live model replacing the statue (Sanger 2009).

From an ontological point of view, it can be said that the *Venus of the Rags* is a type that has been instantiated in several tokens over time. The history of this work presents elements that change locally: the Venuses are different, the rugs are different, but it is always the same idea that determines the work. To evaluate *Venus of the Rags* as a conceptual art work it is not necessary to see all the various installations, although seeing more than one would help to fully grasp the expressive potential in the concept that identifies the work. Anthology series like *Black Mirror* work in the same way: it is not important which and how many episodes have been watched, but it is sufficient to have had at least some opportunities to experience the work.

However, most of the contemporary television series are not anthology series, but rather a combination of series and serial, as they are divided into episodes but tell long stories. When the series prevails over the serials, there are both short storylines that finish when the episode ends, and longer storylines featured in more seasons, as in the case of *X-Files* (1993–2002, 2016–2018), with its “monster of the week” plotline (the mystery to solve in each episode) and the storyline about alien abduction (which spans all the seasons of the series). The same happens with those legal and crime drama series that feature a case to solve in each episode, while offering longer narrative arcs on the relationships between the characters—the doctors in *Grey’s Anatomy* (2005–), the lawyers in *Suits*. The repetition of the episode scheme makes these series similar to anthology series. For example, the conceptual narrative of *Suits* is clear from the beginning: a brilliant young lawyer who has never attended law school, Mike Ross works for the most important law firm in the city, but he constantly needs to prevent the other characters—except his mentor—from discovering his secret. The structure of this series

is determined by this situation: over time, some characters will discover he is a fraud and they will help him, while others will learn his secret and try to make him pay, to the point that he will go to prison. Yet, the problem will remain substantially unchanged, because it is part of the type. In the eighth season, the actor who plays Mike Ross left the cast. The conceptual functions of his character are thus exceptionally fulfilled by other characters, who find themselves in situations that Mike would usually experience. In the ninth and final season, however, Mike comes back as a recurring character.

That said, the works that characterize contemporary television production, those that are repeatedly quoted when talking about quality, complexity, cult, legitimation, and appreciation of television, are *serialized series* such as *The Sopranos*, *Breaking Bad*, *Mad Men*, *Game of Thrones*. In these series, the episode does not focus on a short storyline that concludes at the end of it. The episode is only a segment of a longer narrative arc (and so is the season). This arc, however, is not as long and undefined as that of pure serials such as soap operas: the former, unlike the latter, has been conceived to reach a conclusion. If we cast a series as a type including a theme, narrative idea, storyworld, and configurational elements, whose tokens are episodes and seasons, how can we accommodate those serialized series that have a finished narrative arc, telling a story from beginning to end? Are they rather similar to a longer-than-average film, a megamovie? How is it possible to apply the conceptual narrative paradigm to such series?

In anthology series, the concept can be instantiated by a single episode (as in *Black Mirror*) or, at most, by a single season (as in *True Detective*). In serialized series, on the other hand, every episode, up to the final one, seems to add more meaning to the work. In this sense, Martin Shuster, in his book *New Television: The Aesthetics and Politics of a Genre* (2017), insists on the importance of conceiving of serialized series as totalities of seasons, which he calls “mythologies” and analyzes by applying the theoretical framework that Cavell (1971) devised for films.

Still, we contend, there is a crucial difference between series and films, even when the former are serialized. Does *Mad Men* tell a story of perdition or redemption? If it were a supersize film, everything would be clarified in the last episode of the final season, as only there the meaning would be definitive. This is what happens in a film, where the theme is confirmed at the end: viewers cannot say what the meaning of *Pretty Woman* (1990) is if they leave the cinema before Richard Gere gets to Julia Roberts’ house and asks her to marry him.

At this point, one might object that characterizing the cinematic narrative in this way leaves aside that many films do not clarify anything at all in their endings. This worry, however, can be addressed by stressing that even films that do not clarify anything at all in their endings make a final point about

indeterminacy or opaqueness of reality, thereby achieving a sort of closure. For example, some Michelangelo Antonioni's films do not answer all the relevant questions at the story level in order to make a further point: *Blowup* (1966) "ends when the filmmaker has finished to communicate us what he meant: not a murder mystery, but the complex relationship between reality and appearance" (Donati 2017: 134); likewise, *The Adventure* (1959) does not tell us what happened to the girl who has vanished, and *Eclipse* (1962) does not tell us whether the two lovers will meet again, but both these films make a point about the loneliness of human beings and the irrelevance of their fates. As George M. Wilson (1986: 41) points out: "The requirement of explanatory coherence should be framed to say either that an answer will be supplied and marked as such, or the absence of an answer will be rationalized by other constituents of the narrative." In short, even the lack of an ultimate answer in a film is a sort of answer, and thus even the apparent lack of closure is a sort of closure. TV series, instead, do not function in this way and rather limit themselves to ignoring the issue of closure.

If *Mad Men* were a megamovie, only after watching the 92nd episode, the finale of the seventh and final season, viewers could say to have understood its meaning and decide if they have liked the series, or not. But it is not so. Although serialized series seem to tell stories similar to those of a film, just longer, a crucial difference remains. On closer inspection, also serialized series prove to be conceptual narratives instantiated by episodes and seasons. They differ from anthology series only in degree. Serialized series involve long narrative arcs that unfold season after season, and yet tokens cannot move too far from the type. Characters do not develop much and tend to repeat the same narrative schemes, albeit in different forms. Even in a long film such as Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978), the main character proves to have learned something from the war and will certainly not join the army again. Yet, serialized series do not achieve that sort of closure. As Brett Martin states, "After all, the goal of a TV show, unlike that of a movie or novel, no matter how ambiguous, is to *never end*" (2013: 105). The linear development of serialized series is only an appearance. There is a deeper immutable structure, the concept, which imposes repetition. In what follows, we will show how this structure imposes repetition in the case of a paradigmatic serialized series, namely *Game of Thrones*.

Case Study: *Game of Thrones* or Houses on Fire

Based on George R. R. Martin's literary saga *A Song of Ice and Fire*, *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019) is an eight-season serialized series that has been considered a work to be watched from beginning to end, as though it were a long film. Set in the fantasy Middle Ages, *Game of Thrones* can be seen as

the *bildungsroman* of young nobles living in an era in which humanity fears the end of the world. The claim that *Game of Thrones* is one vast audiovisual narrative is supported by the fact that the characters in the series change over time, in terms of both physical appearance (as some of them are young men and women who become adults) and psychological profile (as the characters gradually shape their own identity and worldview). Such a development of the characters' personality also results in a change in the viewer's judgment on them. As Matthew Cormier (2019: 8) puts it, "*Game of Thrones* has, over its seasons, introduced several character arcs that deal with redemption that, coupled with the programme's notoriety for killing off characters, have had viewers worrying about these characters' fates after initially wishing for their demise—and vice versa."

We argue that, although *Game of Thrones* includes such transformation arcs and remarkable changes from beginning to end, it lacks the typical features of film narratives, and thus it is better cast as a conceptual narrative based on a vast map that features four continents. One of these, Westeros, is divided into Seven Kingdoms and is the core of the destiny of the world. Each Kingdom is ruled by a House. The conceptual narrative focuses on a specific historical period when the Houses fight each other in a bloody civil war. As the seasonal cycle in this world is longer than that in our world, the events take place while going from a long summer to an incipient winter, hence the claim "winter is coming."

The *Game of Thrones* type prescribes a constant tension between the Seven Kingdoms, with a continuous, stormy renegotiation of the balance of power. The heart of the conflict is the capital of the confederation, King's Landing, where the Iron Throne is located. The ruler who sits on the Iron Throne represents the Kingdom that guides all the others.

The tension within Westeros is paralleled by a number of external conflicts. The most important factors causing such external conflicts are located in two places: the first beyond the Kingdom of the North and the second in the south-east, an area that may be roughly compared to a contemporary Middle East, the edge of the vast continent of Essos.

The threat from the north comes from The Free Folk, who live beyond the Wall dividing civilization from savagery. These "barbarians" move to the south because an army of reanimated corpses, the Army of the Dead, is in turn moving from the north—as the viewers learn from the first scene of the series pilot. The Dead threaten the whole humanity, hence this is the highest level of conflict in the storyworld.

The threat from the south-east comes, instead, from the exiled House Targaryen. The last heir of this House, Daenerys Targaryen, gathers an army to invade the capital and reclaim the Iron Throne that once belonged to her family. Such attack has both a spatial and temporal connotation: it is a threat that comes

from a violent past of fights and conspiracies leading to the Targaryens being ousted from their power on Westeros. The Targaryens also deal with nonhuman creatures, the dragons, hence Daenerys Targaryen's nickname "Mother of Dragons." The threat coming from the dragons, just as that coming from the Dead, is characterized by a tension between the human and the nonhuman.

The geopolitical structure, that is crucial to the *Game of Thrones* type, is illustrated by the title sequence, a digital animation where the camera swoops across a map to explore the narrative locations, which emerge from the map itself when the camera focuses on them. Multiple versions of the title sequence have been created, depending on the token locations that are relevant at a specific narrative stage. However, some invariable components can be identified. For example, a basic module pinpoints, through a camera movement, a certain location on the bidimensional map, and then describes it three-dimensionally, through a sequence of close-ups. The path on the map consists of a sequence of such modules and is characterized by three main phases. The first phase opens with a zoom-in on King's Landing, and ends with the camera moving toward the north of the map. The epicenter of the second phase is Winterfell, from which the camera moves toward northern lands covered in snow and hostile to human presence where the Wall is located. The third phase involves a complex rotating movement toward south-east, which leads to explore Essos' middle east.

This map of power is the concept of *Game of Thrones*. In Kate Marshall's terms, "This is not a map particularly concerned with human scale or occupation—the fortresses and cities drawing the (also inhuman) eye have a relentlessly reflexive, self-moving quality. They emerge powered by themselves or the force of their sigils and symbols, rather than through the labour of persons" (2015: 62). The map defines a space characterized by political and administrative borders that are the result of negotiations, conquests, and defeats. In this space, the Houses confront each other publicly and privately, openly on the battlefield and in secrecy, in peace and war.

Each House is more than a set of individuals sharing blood ties. It is a collective subject owning money, real estate properties, servants, and guards. It is rooted in a legendary past that is always ready to repeat itself: the Starks were, and will always be, impetuous, brave, and loyal, the Lannisters rich and ruthless, the Targaryens insane and untamable. Each House has codes that govern the behavior of those belonging to it, with such codes being part of a system of values, symbolically represented by a coat of arms. It is a subject that owns and exerts power, creating alliances and causing conflicts with other Houses. It plays a narrative role comparable to that of the characters, included a protagonist/antagonist mechanism such that, for instance, the Kingdom of the North ruled by the Starks fights against the Lannisters' Westerlands. An important consequence of the violent conflicts between the

Houses is the high mortality of the characters. Whereas in most television series main characters are protected by their role of protagonists, in *Game of Thrones* only the Houses are protected, while the individuals—although main characters—undergo the transience of life.

The dynamics of power, which lies at the core of *Game of Thrones* type, is illustrated in the seventh episode of the first season, *You Win or You Die*. At the Lannister camp, a long conversation takes place, a nearly five-minute scene in which Jaime Lannister discusses with his father Tywin. The dynamics of power between the two men are perfectly represented by their behavior during the conversation. Jaime stands at the tent entrance, wearing his armor and holding his sword with an aristocratic attitude. By contrast, Tywin is skinning an animal, which makes him more similar to a butcher working in his shop than the richest and more powerful man in the Seven Kingdoms he actually is. It is such difference in the action that explains why, in the conversation, the father imposes his will on the son: a practical, pragmatic, instinctive man, he really knows how the world works, and does not just pretend to. Tywin Lannister teaches his son Jaime a life lesson starting from posture and gestures, before translating it into words:

If another house can seize one of our own, and hold him captive with impunity, it means we're no longer a house to be feared! Your mother's dead, before long I'll be dead, and you... and your brother and your sister and all of her children. All of us dead, all of us rotting in the ground. It's the family name that lives on. It's all that lives on. Not your honor, not your personal glory, family.

Game of Thrones focuses exactly on that: human beings are so insignificant and ephemeral that it is not worth dealing with every single individual and their palpable souls. When individuals act and interact as a group, however, then they can make history. The construction of the shot highlights the dynamics of power between father and son, through a harsh figure-to-ground contrast (see figure 3.4). In the foreground, his hardworking hands covered in blood sculpted by light, is Tywin, the father, the man who has realized that individuals can give value to their existence only if they act to serve their community. In the background, in semidarkness, is Jaime, the son, who thinks he can only rely on his own talent and individuality.

In addition to stating the primacy of the Houses over their members, the conceptual narrative establishes the structure of the seasons. The first episode of each season focuses on description and exploration. The subsequent episodes involve an increasingly gripping plotline leading to the penultimate episode, which usually features a single storyline that leads the narrative to its climax. The last episode portrays a new beginning which makes room for further developments.



Figure 3.4 *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011–2019). *Source:* Author screenshot.

The first season tells the stories of the fathers, Ned Stark and Robert Baratheon. They will pay the price for challenging the powerful House Targaryen and House Lannister. The young Starks are thus scattered over the Seven Kingdoms, with the illegitimate son Jon Snow going to the north to serve in the Night’s Watch. The Lannisters kill Robert Baratheon, the king sitting on the Iron Throne, and have their seat at King’s Landing. The penultimate episode is the most intense of the season: the Starks lose their king, beheaded by the Lannisters, and the young Joffrey comes to power. The season finale shows a new beginning, marked by deaths and births, weddings, departures, and arrivals. In particular, at the end of the first season, Daenerys Targaryen’s first husband dies and the three dragons are born.

The first part of the second season redefines the dynamics of power. The Baratheons consider themselves the legitimate heirs to the Iron Throne, and Robb Stark creates alliances and fights to win independence for the North. Jon Snow goes beyond the Wall to explore the unknown lands from which the threat of the White Walkers is coming. Daenerys Targaryen establishes herself as the leader of a nomadic tribe, setting off on a long journey. In the ninth and penultimate episode, a bloody battle takes place at King’s Landing: the Lannisters manage to defeat the Baratheons and keep their power, thanks to the Lannisters’ father’s troops—the old generation still has a say in the matter. The season finale instantiates the type by indicating a new beginning. A marriage is arranged to join House Lannister and House Tyrell, while Robb Stark, King of the North, marries the woman he loves, refusing to accept an arranged marriage.

The first eight episodes of Season Three redesign the map of the empire traced by the two opening seasons, exploring lands far and wide. As in the previous seasons, the balance breaks in the ninth episode: King Robb Stark

and his mother die in the ambush known as the “Red Wedding.” In the season finale, the new beginning asks for Jaime to reunite with the Lannisters after a long journey, while Jon Snow rejoins the Night’s Watch after his adventure beyond the Wall.

The fourth season performs—again—the score of the Wall/Kingdoms/Dragons alternation, with an increase in quantity, as in a new orchestration where new instruments are added to the same musical piece. Further north, more and more White Walkers are ready to trespass. In King’s Landing, the plots at court are becoming more intricate and complex after the poisoning of King Joffrey. In the south-east, Daenerys Targaryen has gathered a faithful army. The ninth episode is entirely focused on a great battle along the Wall, between the Free Folk and the Night’s Watch. In the season finale, Tyrion Lannister, sentenced to death for the murder of King Joffrey, escapes King’s Landing after killing his father, thus marking a new generational shift in the Houses.

In the fifth season, the Lannisters gradually succumb to a religious sect that interprets the discontent of the population of King’s Landing. The members of this sect do not belong to any House, just like the Free Folk defeated at the Wall in the fourth season. In the north, the members of the Night’s Watch are more and more divided, while in the south-east, Daenerys struggles to keep order in the city she has conquered. The penultimate episode of this season, although not a single-subject one, features a crucial event. The young Targaryen is going to suffer a deadly attack in one of the cities she has conquered, but she is saved by the strongest of her dragons, and re-establishes her power. In the season finale the major Houses suffer a blow. Cersei Lannister is humiliated before her people, Daenerys Targaryen is captured by the Dothraki, Jon Snow is killed in a mean ambush—here the series places the most striking of its notable deaths.

The sixth season is marked by Jon Snow’s resurrection—the only exception to the notable-death rule. The system of power, which seemed about to be defeated in the previous season finale, is back in action with the usual mechanism of alliances and movements. The peak is, as usual, in the penultimate episode, which focuses on the battle of the Bastards for the control of Winterfell. Jon Snow defeats his enemies, and the Stark banners can fly again. The season finale concerns the capital and the south-east regions: Cersei Lannister obtains revenge and restores her power in King’s Landing, while Daenerys Targaryen’s army and her dragons move toward Westeros.

Game of Thrones’ seventh season differs from the six previous ones, as it instantiates the type at an atypical pace. This season features only seven episodes, instead of the usual ten, although the last two episodes exceptionally last more than an hour, being seventy and eighty minutes long, respectively. This novelty implies a significant aesthetic cost: it is as though, for the performance

of the same symphony, somebody decided to speed up the metronome. While in the previous seasons the journeys in the vast narrative space were accurately described, now a cut is enough to make the characters move from one end of the continent to the other. This risks compromising the stylistic coherence of the series as a whole, as many have pointed out. An article appeared in *New Musical Express* and humorously titled *Winter Came Too Quickly*, rephrasing the series claim “Winter is coming,” states that: “*Game Of Thrones* is a series that once had near-perfect timing. Its incredibly involved plot was paced with peaks, troughs and plateaus that played the viewer like a fiddle. Seasons typically had two crescendo episodes [. . .]. Now, with all still to play for Throne-wise, we’re in a scrap to the end. Plots that have lovingly unfurled over years are being tied up in unsatisfactorily swift and sloppy fashion” (Stubbs 2019).

This season is marked not only by its atypical pace, but also by the fact that the main plotlines, involving Jon Snow, Daenerys, and Cersei, finally converge. However, the basic structure of the season that the type prescribes is preserved. The penultimate episode involves an extremely dangerous task, namely the capture of a White Walker, and the season finale offers a new beginning, as Jon Snow and Daenerys negotiate with Cersei in King’s Landing. The ending of this season clearly shows that the Houses are exercising a power that is always reignited and of which individuals are mere embodiments, as stressed by the fact that the negotiations take place in an ancient amphitheater built by previous generations.

In the eighth season, shorter than average just as the seventh, a great battle exceptionally occurs already in the third episode, when the Kingdoms and their allies face the White Walkers. Once the nonhuman threat has been thwarted, the storyline goes back to King’s Landing for the battle of the Kingdoms, which culminates in the penultimate episode, focused on the siege of King’s Landing. The season finale instantiates one last time the new beginning specified by the type: Jon Snow kills Daenerys after she expresses her desire for absolute power during the battle at King’s Landing. Ultimately, Daenerys has succumbed to the madness that affects her House. The Targaryens are thus prevented, once again, from sitting on the Iron Throne while the Starks disperse, once again, just after reuniting themselves. Bran is crowned King, Sansa rules the North, Arya sets sail to explore unknown lands, and Jon Snow leaves the Seven Kingdoms, going beyond the Wall to start, once again, a new life.

SERIALIZED CHARACTERS

While in a serialized series such as *Game of Thrones* the conceptual narrative concern collective entities rather than individual characters, other important

serialized series of the past few decades show ambivalent and complex characters on whom the serial works essentially depend. Thus, one may argue that such series may be cast as megamovies that portray the development of those characters. However, on closer inspection, those characters do not really evolve, but rather keep constantly fight their demons, without ever winning or losing the war. As Brett Martin (2013: 103) puts it, “If man’s battle with his inner demons defined *The Sopranos*, *Six Feet Under*, and their descendants, they also drew a crucial dose of their realism from the tenacity of that battle—the way their characters stubbornly refused to change in any substantive way, despite constantly resolving to do so.” This substantial stability of the serial character may be interpreted as a flaw if one adopts a cinematic approach. By contrast, it proves to be a value when considering the character a relevant element of a series type, so as that the character’s contribution to the story essentially consists in remaining true to himself or herself. In Martin’s terms, “Recidivism and failure stalked these shows: Tony Soprano searches for something to fill the gnawing void he feels; he fails to find it. [. . .] The specter of Don Draper’s past infidelities comes to him in a fever dream, in the person of an old conquest. And though he literally chokes the Beast to death, we, and he, know she will be back” (2013: 104). Thus, for Martin, serialized characters keep making “the same mistakes season after season” and there is “an endless series of variations in which people repeatedly play out the same patterns of behavior” (2013: 105).

Such serialized characters have been often described as antiheroes. The debate in Television Studies has identified the antihero as one of the elements that break with traditional television series (cf. Mittell 2015; Vaage 2016). In traditional series, the main characters embodied positive values for the community, while antagonists were absolutely negative characters. Over the past two decades, however, a number of protagonists of series have started to fall somewhere in between the positive hero and the villain.

For example, Emily VanDerWerff (2017) describes the main character of *Patriot* (2015–2018) as “a messy, bloated antihero drama” influenced by “the decade’s defining antihero drama,” namely *Breaking Bad*. The antihero is not a simple villain, but rather an antagonist having desires, intentions, and plans that conflict with those of the main character. More importantly, such duality is not represented by two different characters, but by a single one, the antihero, who is constantly torn between two competing alternatives. The antihero thus unifies the hero and the antagonist in one character.

If the antihero were a character of a film, the end would surely clarify if the character chose Good or Evil. In television series, instead, the antihero can do nothing but keep venturing down both paths. Margrethe Bruun Vaage (2016) characterizes the antihero as a morally flawed protagonist that viewers are encouraged to appreciate, because of the antihero’s intelligence and

initiative, or even sensitivity and vulnerability. Viewers suspend any moral judgment because, after all, the antihero is not the worst character of the story. In *Breaking Bad*, for example, the main character, Walter White, is implicitly compared to worse criminals, like Tuco Salamanca and Gus Fring.

In fact, television series feature not only antiheroes but also pure antagonists, who have their own particular characteristics and differ from traditional film villains: in the narrative development, the serial antagonist can be replaced. In *24* there are usually two villains per season, an evil one and a super evil one, but Bauer defeats them both. Likewise, in *Breaking Bad*, Tuco Salamanca leaves the scene to make room for Gus Fring. By contrast, the antihero goes through the whole series, from beginning to end, coinciding with the protagonist's dark side. Jack Bauer, as an antihero, is the antagonist of his own, and so is Walter White.

The antihero's debut on television screens is usually said to coincide with that of Tony Soprano (January 10, 1999) in *The Sopranos*. He is a lovely father, an Italian-American mobster, a ruthless criminal. For some reason, the audience grew fond of this negative character who paved the way for a number of antiheroes, from the vigilante serial killer Dexter to the beyond-suspicion drug dealer Walter White. As pointed out by Milly Buonanno (2017), the antihero era has been followed by that of antiheroines, whom *The Guardian's* critic characterizes as follows, "*Jessica Jones, Top of the Lake, Orange is the New Black, Happy Valley, UnREAL*—all these series go out of their way to reject the idea that their leads have to be likable" (Nicholson 2018).

The antihero phenomenon may be explained from multiple perspectives. Following an audience-oriented explanation, the audience for traditional television was made up of families who gathered in front of the screen, with networks following the "least objectionable programming" paradigm (see Lotz 2014: 24), according to which the program shown was not the most appreciated, but the least divisive. Conversely, in contemporary communication, a successful product is characterized by its ability to create strong conflicts. The measure of success seems to be changed: it is no longer important how many people gather in front of the screen to watch a series, but how many are discussing it. In that sense, it is easier to divide the audience on characters like the antihero of *The Young Pope* (2016) than a brave magistrate. The sign of the times is that even networks are adapting to the cable style. This explains why RAI, the Italian national public broadcasting company, produces series like *Rocco Schiavone* (2016–), whose morally flawed main character is not the traditional paternalist police commissioner, but a man who befriends criminals and smokes marijuana. Contemporary serial products aim at being shameless and arrogant, thinking outside the box at every level. The antihero proves to be an instrument of this production strategy.

In addition to these mainly sociological explanations, philosophers have stated that the antihero drama audience oscillates between acceptance and dissociation: the series challenges the viewers in order to understand to what extent they do sympathize with evil (see Carroll 2004, Eaton 2012). As Vaage has pointed out, “the moral complexity of the antihero series entails that the spectator is intended to like the antihero—but through a challenging narrative also come to dislike him. The antihero series typically encourages sympathy for the antihero initially, but increasingly also questions this positive orientation” (2016: XVI).

Frank Underwood, *House of Cards*' main character, challenges the viewers to appreciate him for the whole first season, despite his Machiavellian wrongdoing, or because of it. However, when he kills a girl with his own hands, the threshold has been crossed and thus Frank Underwood leaves the antihero gray area, and steps into the well-defined area of the rough hero, the absolute villain (see Bernardelli 2016). Yet, some characters can remain antiheroes in spite of trespassing that threshold. This suggests that antiheroes are not characterized by their wrongdoing, but rather by the possibility of doing a good deed, which is never excluded, together with possible redemption. *Ciro Di Marzio* in *Gomorra* and *Joe Goldberg* in *You*, just as *Tony Soprano*, seem to remain antiheroes even after committing terrible crimes.

According to Vaage (2016), the antihero does not bear any television-specific characteristics. Assuming that narrative systems are a-modal, it could not even be said that the antihero is specific to visual narratives. Literature also might feature antiheroes. Yet, the television antihero shows a distinctive feature: remaining linked to the moral flaw, being unable to evolve or regress. *Mike Vronksy*, the hero played by *Robert De Niro* in *The Deer Hunter*, finds out that he has changed, when he decides not to shoot a deer. If *The Deer Hunter* were a series, however, the main character could go back to killing the deer, resorting—again—to the violence the story needs to move forward.

In sum, the main characteristic of the television antihero is the possibility of going from being good to bad to good and bad again, while the cinematic antihero can oscillate between the two states, but finally has to choose one. Here is where the conceptual nature of TV series comes into the picture.

Narrative structures, in general, are determined by *causality* and *teleology* (cf. Carroll 2007; Velleman 2003; Currie 2010; Feagin 2007; Barwell 2009). Causality creates a chain of events where every event leads to another, while teleology ensures that all the events, as a whole, lead to a certain objective. Teleology provides narratives with what *Francis Kermode* (1966: 45) calls “the sense of an ending,” that is, “an organization that humanizes time by giving it form.” As pointed out by *Richard Eldridge* (2007: 146–148), narratives give us “the sense that every life is a parable of each, with meaning to

be found [. . .] a sense of life in a human reality that is, if marked by brute contingency, not everywhere dominated by it.” Still, serialized series, as conceptual narratives, involve causality but deal with teleology in a peculiar way. The multiple closures and new beginnings of a series postpone (potentially forever) the series’ ending. Brute contingency thus seems to prevail over the sense of life in a human reality.

The ending is essential in determining the true nature of characters. Since conceptual narratives lack a true ending, the television antihero’s distinctive quality is the ability to suggest potential transformations that will never really occur. Dexter might stop killing, but he cannot do that now: the symbolic and narrative mandate of the series obliges him to continue doing what he usually does. Yet, Dexter cannot become a proper serial killer either, freeing himself from any residual moral conscience. A television antihero is forever.

Such constant oscillation between conflicting values occurs because serial characters, as components of a conceptual narrative, tend to repeat their actions. The characters, belonging to the type, never change, even though the situations and events they experience, being part of the tokens, do change. As Roberta Pearson has pointed out, “Characters are suited to their particular fictional forms. Protagonists of one-off novels, plays, or films may complete teleological trajectories to life-changing epiphanies. The central protagonists of television dramas must perforce exhibit relative stability in keeping with the repetitive nature of the series/serial format” (2007b: 50). Even when the series ends, the long and narratively vain alternation of Good and Evil prevents the teleological closure. When Walter White dies, the alternation seems to be simply interrupted, as it also happens when the screen cuts to black and Tony Soprano abruptly disappears in *The Sopranos*’ finale. The oscillation between contrasting values has lasted too long to be considered concluded definitively. The series has ended, but it has reached no objective: nothing clarifies whether the bright or the dark side of the antihero has won the exhausting conflict. Series such as *Mad Men* and *BoJack Horseman* are exemplary in this respect.

Case Study: *Mad Men* or Play It Again, Don

Series like *Ally McBeal* (1997–2002) and *The Practice* (1997–2004) have transformed the legal profession into a conceptual narrative, while works like *Grey’s Anatomy* and *House* (2004–2012) have led to the same result as for the medical profession. And so does *Mad Men* (2007–2015) as for advertising. The series is set in the United States of the Sixties; New York is the core of the events. As Aviva Dove-Viebahn (2013) and David Pierson (2014) have pointed out, *Mad Men*’s stance toward that historical period combines a

critical attitude and nostalgia, creating a continuous conflict between a longing for the past and the refusal of its dominant values.

The microcosm through which *Mad Men*'s conceptual narrative represents 1960s America is Sterling Cooper advertising agency, which includes among its professionals the creative director Donald Draper and the account executive Pete Campbell. Draper, who "is posited as analogous to other television antiheroes" (Mittell 2015: 231), is a sort of American Ulysses characterized by his nostalgia for a lost and unattainable hometown, as he states in the first season finale when discussing the advertising campaign for Kodak's new slide projector. Campbell, instead, is a sort of Telemachus who looks up to his symbolic father and would like to fight at his side, although simultaneously dealing with the oedipal drive to replace him. The relationship between the two characters is reflected in the difference between John Hamm's sober performance as Draper, based on authoritative looks and half smiles, and Vincent Kartheiser's more frenzied Campbell.

Draper and Campbell's relationship is made more complex by Peggy Olson, the secretary who emulates Draper, challenging a sexist society. In Elisabeth Moss's performance, Peggy turns out to be a strong-willed, determined character who has to deal with her feelings. Pete-Telemachus thus ends up competing against a symbolic sister in emulating their "father," while being romantically involved in some sort of symbolically incestuous relationship with her. Such love affair is reiterated season after season, leading nowhere.

The conceptual narrative revolves around these characters. On the one hand, each episode features a different company issue to be solved, finding the right idea to meet the clients' needs; for instance, the pilot focuses on the Lucky Strike advertising campaign, in a period when tobacco corporations can no longer lie about the effects of smoking cigarettes and use doctors as their spokespeople. On the other hand, the plotline following Sterling Cooper's struggle for survival in the capitalist jungle unfolds over a season, developing a year-long narrative arc. The same happens with the storyline that focuses on Draper's and Campbell's family relationships. They are both married to perfect wives and have advertising-proof families, and yet they are attracted to more unconventional, difficult women. The psychological plotlines also unfold over a season, with Draper dealing with trauma and ghosts from the past, in his attempts to shape a more stable identity.

Through its different plotlines, *Mad Men* accurately describes the dynamics of power, with a hierarchy going from shareholders down to directors, account executives, and, within a sexist and racist social framework, secretaries and unskilled Afro-American workers, such as cleaners and lift boys. The mindset and mores of the time are depicted not only through items, such as hats and cigarettes, but also through the depiction of a conservative society

that has to deal with multiple factors of change, from Elvis' rock and roll to the alternative culture in Greenwich Village.

The episodes consist of long scenes, mainly set in interior spaces, with digressions and uneventful moments. This structure, which may seem theatrical, combines with the multiple movements of the camera and a rhythmic editing, which enhance the recreation of the times through scenery and costumes, while leading the viewers to focus on the actions and reactions of a number of characters. All this makes *Mad Men* an ensemble-cast series. The viewers do not just admire a detailed recreation of setting, items, and costumes, but also observe the society of the time, in its routine life.

With such rich and dense visual features, the background music is usually rarefied, although being dramatically introduced in some crucial moments, in order to transform the meaning of the images. This happens, for example, when the piano and strings underline an intense exchange of looks between Pete and Peggy in the fourth episode of Season Four.

At a thematic level, *Mad Men* is a reflection on the ambivalence of the American dream. With no family, no story, a false identity, and an obscure past, Draper manages to transform himself into a successful, respected professional who has a wonderful family. Such an achievement, however, costs him his psychological stability. In *Mad Men's* perspective, Draper's case, unique as it may seem, exemplifies the role of the individual in society. Individuals are alienated from their social identity, in some way they resist it, although without completely denying their past or changing their name as Draper does. This explains the title of the series, a pun that makes use of the abbreviation of Madison Avenue (the street in New York City where a number of advertising agencies are located) to hint at that touch of madness that characterizes, more or less explicitly, the protagonists' existence. Draper's tragic connotation also extends to the other main characters: his wife Betty, his symbolic children Pete Campbell and Peggy Olson, but also his senior partner Roger Sterling and the latter's secretary Joan Harris, who are involved in a sentimental and professional relationship that mirrors Don and Betty's, as well as Pete and Peggy's, although with more ironic tones.

The age issue is essential in *Mad Men's* conceptual narrative, which is based on a historical background and depicts layers of generations. The oldest generation is represented by the founder of the agency, Bertram Cooper, born in the 1800s and now only a whimsical, eccentric guru. The next generation is represented by Roger Sterling, a World War II veteran who has inherited his role as partner from his father, Roger Sterling senior. Draper's generation comes next, as he was born in the second half of the 1920s and fought in the Korean War. Finally, Pete and Peggy represent the generation of those born in the 1930s. All these different generations share the same value system questioned by the cultural revolution of the 1960s. All of *Mad Men's* heroes,

even the youngest, belong to “the world of yesterday.” Elvis and Marilyn, the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, Malcom X and Cassius Clay, Timothy Leary and Bob Dylan occasionally show up in their life, through the radio or television, but never become part of it. By continuously working on the paradigm of desire and consumption, Cooper, Sterling, Draper, Campbell, and Olson play a key role in the transition from the old to the new era. Quite ironically, *Mad Men*’s heroes end up being marginalized or excluded from a world that they themselves have contributed to create. Each season of the series describes, in its own way, the characters’ struggle to survive the fall of their world, renegotiating their existence and happiness in the new rising era.

The events in the first season take place between March and November 1960, paralleling the presidential campaign that resulted in Kennedy’s victory over Nixon. The narrative arc is marked by Peggy’s pregnancy and professional ascent, with a first episode in which she finds a job as a secretary, ending up sleeping with Pete and becoming pregnant. In the season finale, Draper promotes her to junior copywriter, challenging the taboos of a sexist society. Peggy gives birth to a baby at the end of the same day. Besides focusing on the professional sphere, the season follows Draper’s extramarital relationships and the problems in his marriage to Betty. An important role is also played by his attempts to deal with an obscure past, shown first in flashbacks and later through the dramatic appearance of a brother whom Draper seems to have erased from his life, together with everything else.

The second season begins on Valentine’s Day, 1962, and finishes in the October of the same year, with the Cuban Missile Crisis. This time, the professional conflict revolves around Sterling Cooper facing the risk of becoming part of a larger corporation, while at a family level, Betty finds out about her husband’s infidelity. The flashbacks explore the relationship between Don and his old friend Anna, the widow of the man whose identity he stole. In the second half of the season, a business trip to California gives Draper the opportunity to see Anna again, a meeting that will heal the hero, giving him the strength to face his final battle in New York. In the season finale, while Kennedy prevents the missile crisis from happening, Draper thwarts the threats against his agency and his family. The imperfect emulation by his symbolic children, Pete and Peggy, serves as the perfect counterpoint for the hero’s victory. The final scene describes Don-Ulysses’ return to his Betty-Penelope, who tells him she is pregnant. This is preceded by a shot/reverse shot in the scene in which Pete professes his love for Peggy, who confesses that he got her pregnant but she put their child up for adoption. While one couple, Don and Betty, manages to get back together, another, Pete and Peggy, is doomed to fail.

The events described in the third season take place in 1963, which ends up in Kennedy’s assassination. A new attack on both Draper’s marriage and his

agency unfolds over the new season. Draper has an affair with his daughter's teacher, and Betty reacts by starting an extramarital relationship herself. In the meanwhile, Sterling Cooper has become part of a larger English company whose representative, Lane Pryce, ensures the American branch a certain level of operational independence. However, the perfect relationship with the new owners is jeopardized by an awkward incident, following which a plan to sell the company is devised. Mirroring the second season, a national crisis corresponds to a period of difficulty in Draper's professional and family life. In the penultimate episode, Kennedy's assassination is shown on TV, while the scheme devised to dismantle the company is about to happen, and Betty tells Don that she has no longer feelings for him. Once more, the season finale follows Draper in a crucial war on two fronts. The agency rises from its own ashes, becoming the Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce, with a handful of loyal employees, including Peggy and Pete. Conversely, on the family front, the failure is complete. Draper goes back to being what he has actually always been—a hopelessly lonely man.

The fourth season takes place between Thanksgiving 1964 and October 1965. Draper has to rebuild his love life and career: now living in a simple apartment, he is facing alcoholism and seems to have lost his professional talent. Like in the previous seasons, the crisis is resolved thanks to both a journey through memories (with a sequence of flashbacks that go back to his first meeting with Sterling and his first day at Sterling Cooper) and a new trip from gray New York to golden California.

Season Five, going from May 1966 to March 1967, is marked by a positive and productive atmosphere. The agency is back on track and Draper experiences a never-ending honeymoon with his new wife, Megan, in his new Manhattan penthouse. The series keeps up with this shade of optimism through a freer *mise-en-scène* that gives space to the characters' everyday life and the actors' improvisation. Examples of this are the long sequence depicting Draper's birthday party in episode 1, and the dinner party at the Campbells in episode 5, which seem to be taken from a Cassavetes film. This season proves to be an eccentric performance of the conceptual narrative, without any historical events intruding nor any great professional and emotional turmoil in the characters' lives. Yet, *Mad Men's* characters have never seemed so miserable. Instead of enjoying their success, they start creating new problems. Draper would like wealthier, more eminent clients. Pete, finally a father, is still dissatisfied and looks for happiness in extramarital relationships that turn out to be more and more painful. Peggy is not happy with her role within the agency and decides to start working for Draper's long-time rival. This apparently atypical performance of the narrative score clarifies that the core of *Mad Men's* conceptual narrative is a misery that

does not come from contingent factors, such as a marital or professional crisis, but it is rather rooted in both the characters' soul and the structure of society.

The sixth season takes place in 1968 and shows, in the background, Martin Luther King's and Robert Kennedy's assassinations, Nixon's victory in the presidential elections, the success of *Planet of the Apes* and *Rosemary's Baby* on the silver screen. In the foreground are, as usual, the professional, private, and psychological struggles of Draper and his coworkers. While Sterling Cooper is facing a complex merger with the agency where Peggy is now working, Draper starts a shady love affair with his neighbor. Pete tries to emulate Draper as usual, but this time he ends up being kicked out of his home. Draper's professional and private struggles are paralleled by a reflection on his past, which goes back to his childhood in a brothel and results in a shocking confession to his colleagues and relatives. This costs him his place at Sterling Cooper and his marriage to Megan: in *Mad Men's* conceptual narrative, the end of lying and pretending means the loss of your place in society.

The seventh and final season features fourteen episodes, instead of the usual thirteen in the previous seasons, and it is divided into two relatively independent parts of seven episodes each. The first part, titled *The Beginning*, takes place in 1969 and ends with the moon landing. The conceptual narrative is performed in a crescendo similar to that of Season Four, with a lost hero who needs to start over. Draper gradually gets his career back on track at Sterling Cooper, which has a new corporate structure following its founder Bert Cooper's death. Less attention is paid to Draper's affairs, as he focuses on his relationship with his teenage daughter Sally. The second half of the season, titled *The End of an Era*, takes place in 1970 and embarks on a journey of decline. In the first episodes, Draper seems to be his old brilliant self, in terms of both career and love life. Some negative and sorrowful factors, however, gradually lead him to an apparently irreparable existential crisis. Historical events are out of the picture, flashbacks have no *raison d'être* anymore, social relationships weaken, and individuals deviate from their path. *Mad Men's* heroes become the ghosts of a fallen age, denizens of a time out of joint, disconnected from both the past and the present. Even in this extreme situation, however, the conceptual narrative reasserts its logic, perfectly summarized by the title sequence, in which a man falls from a skyscraper and lands in his office armchair, which ultimately reveals itself to be Don's armchair (see figure 3.5). In the finale, what seemed an irresolvable crisis turns out to be a new historical perspective, opened by the iconic commercial "I'd Like to Buy the World a Coke." The new era will be, once again, under the aegis of Don Draper.

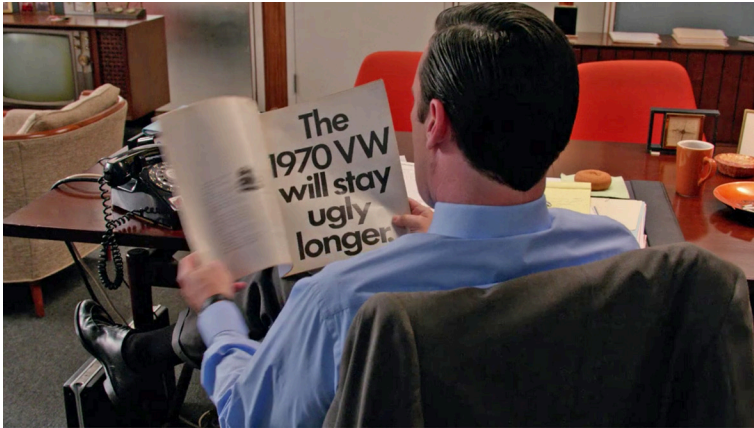


Figure 3.5 *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007–2015). Source: Author screenshot.

Case Study: *BoJack Horseman* or *The Arrows of Time*

What would the world be like if all the animal species had evolved as the human one, in terms of average body size, upright posture, and language? The animated series *BoJack Horseman* (2014–2020) explores this hypothesis, combining it with a Hollywood setting. The hero is a 50-year-old horse who became popular thanks to a 1990s sitcom, *Horsin' Around*, and is now trying to regain focus after a period of confusion and depression. The other main characters are four friends of his: the unemployed Todd, the writer Diane, Mr. Peanutbutter, a dog and an actor, and the agent Princess Carolyn, a cat.

BoJack is the typical antihero the audience tends to sympathize with, despite his unbearable immortality. His four friends mediate between his negativity and the viewers' perspective, providing controversial points of view on the main character that mirror the audience's difficulty in understanding and judging him.

Far from implying the absence of social relations comparable to human ones, the animal nature of the characters support and reshape such relations. For example, Mr. Peanutbutter, a dog with a typical name for a dog, has the language and social skills of a human, although his social relationships are governed by dog instincts, which produces a limitless number of jokes. BoJack himself, despite his human way of life, still remains a horse, as becomes evident when he nostalgically looks at a herd of racehorses galloping in the desert in Season Three's finale.

BoJack Horseman's conceptual narrative requires each season to be characterized by a main showbusiness-related, practical problem the characters need to solve. This is paralleled by the development of the plotlines following BoJack's relationships with his four friends, but also other relationships

marking the life of the five characters. An important role is played by psychological plotlines based on flashbacks through which BoJack and—at a lower but still significant level—his friends need to deal with their past. In the construction of the flashbacks, animation proves to be crucial, as it allows to solve a typical aesthetic problem connected with the representation of the past in traditional films: the difficulty in reconciling the need for the characters' appearance to change with the invariable looks of the actors.

The figure-ground relationship is one of the strengths in *BoJack Horseman's* aesthetics, with a continuous interplay between the objects in the background and the events happening in the foreground. The dialectics between different image levels goes beyond a visual joke when the spatial relationship between figure and ground corresponds to a temporal relationship between past and present. In this sense, a TV screen or a photo on a wall create a similar effect to that of a flashback, but in a single shot. An example of this are the scenes of *Horsin' Around* that can be seen on BoJack's TV starting from the first episode of the series.

The first season revolves around BoJack's memoir. This simultaneously provides a pragmatic objective leading the story toward the future and the opportunity to introduce flashbacks exploring BoJack's past, in particular the relationships with his two families: his real Horseman-Sugarman family and the fictional one depicted in *Horsin' Around*. The key episodes, in this respect, are the third, *Prickly-Muffin*, and the eighth, *The Telescope*. The former introduces Sarah Lynn, once a child prodigy starring in the sitcom and now a troubled woman in her thirties, while in the latter BoJack tries to reconnect with Herb Kazzaz, the creator of "Horsin' Around." Similarly focused on the past is the fifth episode, *Live Fast, Diane Nguyen*, with Diane going back to Boston for her father's funeral.

In *BoJack Horseman's* conceptual narrative, the flashbacks' movement toward the past is paralleled by a narrative movement toward the future. Both movements are resolved in the last two episodes of each season. In particular, a dramatic and emotional peak is present in the penultimate episode, while the finale develops a new beginning. Following Joseph Campbell's (1949) and Christopher Vogler's (1998) narrative model of the hero's journey, it could be said that the penultimate episode is that of the "death and resurrection," while the final one revolves around the "return with the elixir." In the first season, BoJack's death and resurrection occur in the episode *Downer Ending*, when he desperately tries to write his memoir without the help of Diane, ending up taking drugs and hallucinating the happy life he would like to have but has never been able to live. The final episode, *Later*, takes place a few months later, when the memoir has been published, sparking an unexpected success.

The pragmatic objective of Season Two is the production of *Secretariat*, a biopic in which BoJack plays the role of his childhood hero, which allows to

introduce new flashbacks. Likewise, in the third episode, *Still Broken*, Herb Kazzaz's funeral provides the opportunity for a *Horsin' Around* reunion, hence a new sequence of flashbacks that compare the relationships between the cast members and those—idealized—between the members of the fictional family. At Herb's funeral, BoJack reconnects with the doe Charlotte. Following this encounter, in the penultimate episode, *Escape from L.A.*, he goes to New Mexico to start a new life with her, but it is too late for that and he is doomed to fail. The escape *from* L.A. ends up being an escape *to* L.A., followed by an “elixir” in the finale, *Out to Sea*: the *Secretariat* biopic has been finished despite BoJack's absence from the set, as he was replaced by an avatar.

The future-oriented plot of the third season is based on *Secretariat* running for the Oscar. On the other hand, the going back to the past is nicely instantiated in the second episode, *The BoJack Horseman Show*, an ensemble-cast flashback set in 2007, ten years earlier. After BoJack's Oscar nomination fails to materialize, toward the end of the season, the narrative feature of “death and resurrection” moves from being metaphorical to literal, when Sarah Lynn overdoses in the penultimate episode, *That's Too Much, Man!* Although this death, which is literal, cannot be followed by a resurrection, in the closing sequence of the season finale, *That Went Well*, BoJack obtains his “elixir” anyway. A herd of horse athletes appears and, with their determined and constant commitment, exemplified by a thoroughbred on the foreground that wipes the sweat from his forehead, they distract BoJack from his suicidal thoughts.

The fourth season does not feature a main narrative problem involving BoJack and leaves more room for the other characters. It especially focuses on Mr. Peanutbutter's campaign for governor of California, the main pragmatic objective of the season. The flashback sequence explores the story of BoJack's mother, Beatrice Sugarman, starting from the depiction of her childhood during World War II in the second episode, *The Old Sugarman Place*. Beatrice's life continues to be detailed in the penultimate episode, *Time's Arrow*. The latter proves to be an emblematic title in *BoJack Horseman's* conceptual narrative, based on the contrast between the relentless movement of the arrow of time toward the future and the tendency of the mind to throw this arrow back to the past, or toward what is possible. *Time's Arrow* also is a “death and resurrection” episode in which Beatrice relives the most tragic moments of her life and finds out long-hidden truths about herself. However, the one who drinks the elixir in the finale, *What Time Is It Right Now*, is BoJack, who finds out the true story of his family, and in the meanwhile signs a contract for a new TV show.

The relaunch of BoJack's career, once more, determines the main plot of Season Five, which follows the making of the TV series *Philbert*. In the

meanwhile, the time's arrow points backward multiple times: in *The Dog Days Are Over*, Diane's past is explored, while *The Amelia Earhart Story* recalls Princess Carolyn's childhood; *Free Churro* goes back to BoJack's childhood again, as a premise to the eulogy at his mother's funeral; *Mr. Peanutbutter's Boos* builds new flashbacks paralleling four Halloween parties held in different years (1993, 2004, 2009, 2018) but in the same place (BoJack's house) and with the same ending (a love crisis involving Mr. Peanutbutter). The production of *Philbert* derails in the penultimate episode, *The Showstopper*, which is based on a hallucinogenic trip similar to those in the first and third seasons. This time, BoJack's delusion is caused by painkillers, leading him to hallucinate the exploration of the space of his mind. When the hallucination becomes more intense, BoJack tries to strangle, in the real world, the actress Gina Cazador, his co-star in *Philbert*. The season finale, *The Stopped Show*, offers, once more, a new beginning: Gina is still alive, while BoJack goes to rehab.

Unlike the previous seasons, *BoJack Horseman's* final season does not feature twelve episodes, but it is divided into two parts of eight episodes each. Released in two blocks, such parts function as two independent seasons. The first part focuses on BoJack's rehab: this time he has to get his health back on track, not his career. BoJack's therapy requires him to recall his past, thereby instantiating the backward movement prescribed by the conceptual narrative. BoJack seems to achieve the goal of healing in the penultimate episode of this first part, *The Face of Depression*. Yet, everything is questioned in the next episode, *A Quick One, While He's Away*, a peculiar token that does not feature any of the main characters of the series.

The second half of the season depicts the conflict between the optimistic perspective toward the future that characterized *The Face of Depression* and the impossibility to get rid of the past described in *A Quick One, While He's Away*. An initial positive phase in which BoJack reinvents himself as a drama professor is followed by a negative phase during which his wrongdoing comes to light, taking him back, one more time, to depression, drinking, and drug abuse. In the penultimate episode, *The View from Halfway Down*, the "death and resurrection" figure is instantiated nearly literally, making the prophecy in the title sequence come true, when BoJack drowns in his swimming pool. The finale, *Nice While It Lasted*, introduces a new beginning, conforming to the conceptual narrative: BoJack has lost everything he had been fighting for, but he is still alive. Or, perhaps, he is just dreaming of his resurrection just before dying, as suggested by the opening scene which anticipates his final dialog with Diane, while superimposing the almost flat electroencephalogram of BoJack (see figure 3.6). In the last part of the episode, the four dialogues with Mr. Peanutbutter, Todd, Princess Carolyn, and Diane have a dreamlike gloomy mood that also encourages the interpretation



Figure 3.6 *BoJack Horseman* (Netflix, 2014–2020). Source: Author screenshot.

of the episode as the continuation of the goodbye to life started in *The View from Halfway Down*. In particular, at the end of the dialogue between BoJack and Todd, the dark shape of the sea on the shore recalls the black stains that, in the previous episode, symbolized death. When the dark sea seems to be about to swallow him, BoJack says “it was nice while it lasted,” echoing the title of the episode. The thing that was nice while it lasted, perhaps, is just life.

CONCLUSION: RETHINKING TELEVISION SERIES

Among the objects that can be evaluated when watching a television series, there are episodes and seasons, but also the totality of episodes and seasons after which a series seems to reach a conclusion, becoming what in chapter 1 has been called a supersize narrative. In chapters 2 and 3, however, we have stated that the primary focus of appreciation is not the supersize narrative, but the conceptual narrative. While the former narrative consists in an audio-visual structure spanning from the first to the last episode, the latter is a type characterized by distinctive features that constitute the principle of construction of its tokens, namely, episodes and seasons. For example, the idea that a mobster is a man who fights against his vulnerability is part of the *Sopranos* type, and the idea that an ordinary man can become a criminal is part of the *Breaking Bad* type. Besides the elements of the story, the type also includes the rules of the game: in *24*, the events follow a real-time storytelling framework, while *Lost* is based on the exploration of the characters’ backstories; hence *24* banishes flashbacks, which are essential in *Lost*.

Viewers do not need to watch the totality of the episodes before evaluating a series as a type, but they can surely watch them all in order to judge single performances, as a music lover would listen to the different performances of a symphony not only to evaluate the symphony per se, but also to evaluate those performances. As Nannicelli (2016) has pointed out, also episodes and seasons are objects of evaluation. However, we have argued, in the practices governing the appreciation of what Nannicelli calls “the art of television,” the series as a type—as a conceptual narrative—is the primary focus of appreciation.

Among the aspects of conceptual narrative that are relevant to its evaluation, there is also the ability to allow the various performances to be gripping and interesting, each one in its own way. In that sense, the larger the number of tokens considered, the more the potential of the type is grasped. A comparison between the types of *X-Files* and *Prison Break* might be insightful in this respect.

The *X-Files* type may be summarized as follows: two FBI agents (a man and a woman) investigate unusual, unsolved, unexplainable cases, and part of their investigations revolves around the presence of extraterrestrial life on Earth and the government’s attempt to keep it a secret. The narrative structure develops in two ways: serial cycle for the episodes featuring a story that reaches a conclusion within the episode itself (with a fantastic plot), serial linearity for the episodes that are closely related one to the other (featuring the science fiction plot about aliens). In its serial cycle mode, *X-Files* provides the perfect example of a fantastic story according to Todorov’s (1975) definition of the fantastic: a mysterious, bizarre, horrifying event occurs in a realistic context; such event is given two different interpretations, a rational and a supernatural one; the plot oscillates between two lines of interpretation, without ever opting—not even in the finale—for one of the two. Such repetitive scheme makes use of two complementary characters, one more open to a possible irrational line of interpretation (the male character, agent Mulder), the other more skeptic (the female character, agent Scully); it is their dialectic that makes the storyline oscillate. Although immediately understandable, the *X-Files* type shows great potential for the development of a number of gripping performances, focusing on aspects such as the in-depth analysis of the characters and their relationship, the development of the case of the week, the procrastination of the linear plot.

On the other hand, *Prison Break* shows a type with more limited potential, perfect for the development of a certain number of performances, but not suitable for the proliferation of further tokens. The series was created in 2003 as a prison television drama unfolding within the wider context of a political plot. Focused on an extensively planned, spectacular prison break, it seemed to be intended for a miniseries format. Still, the project evolved into a proper

series, produced by Fox in 2005 and running for four seasons, until 2009. The story revolves around Lincoln Burrows' death sentence. A man with a troubled past, he has been framed by a Masonic group for the murder of the U.S. Vice President's brother. Determined to save Lincoln, his younger brother Michael commits a crime in order to be sent to the same prison where Lincoln is being held.

The structure of *Prison Break*'s first season was influenced by production issues. It is divided into a homogeneous first part (episodes 1–13), characterized by an increasingly gripping plotline that gets interrupted when the first breakout fails, and a more irregular, impure second part (episodes 14–22), with an uncertain beginning, some obscure passages and a season finale ending on a cliffhanger. The “prison break” narrative idea that structures the type has been instantiated twice over the season, in episode blocks. The subsequent seasons are characterized by a scheme that includes the prison break, some adventures on the outside of the prison walls, the arrest, and the devising of a new escape plan. However, the potential of the type is limited. Prison breaks are not events that can be iterated in the way investigations on mysterious happenings can be iterated. Hence *Prison Break* finds it hard to create further thrilling tokens after the first season. In sum, a television work is a type whose tokens, although being continuously different, always have to confirm the type itself. The potential of the type, in that sense, consists in allowing a significant variety of performances while keeping its own features. *X-Files* succeeds in doing so whereas *Prison Break* seems to fail.

The relationship between a series as type and its episodes and seasons as tokens can be expressed in terms of form and content. Following Richard Eldridge, by the content of a narrative we mean “things in the world” (1985: 310) and by form a “particular way of manipulating the materials [. . .] of its medium” (1985: 313). In the case of television series, the things in the world that constitute the content appear in the tokens while the manipulation of the medium, which is a conceptual medium, takes place primarily at the type level.

The medium constraints the formal manipulation in a way that bears upon the content. Specifically, the essentially iterative nature of the series (as a type) fits well with repeatable actions in the world portrayed by episodes and seasons (as tokens). Thus, *X-Files* succeeds because the investigation on mysterious events is a kind of action that is apt to be repeated while *Prison Break* fails because escaping from a prison is rather an exceptional event in the life of a character. More generally, the form of the series seems to be more apt to portray repeatable professional behaviors such as those of doctors, lawyers, detectives whereas the form of film is more apt to depict exceptional or even unique events such as falling in love or facing death. In short, the serial form

calls for repeatable content while the cinematic form rather calls for nonrepeatable content.

From this perspective, most of the putative flaws of television series as narratives that have been described in chapter 1 derive not from the series themselves, but from an inappropriate way of considering them. The flaw was in the eye of the beholder. The sense of a flaw derived from noncompliance with the standards used to evaluate audiovisual narratives. Yet, television series, as we have argued in chapters 2 and 3, are not supersize audiovisual narratives but rather conceptual narratives, which need to be evaluated using a different approach.

The philosophical debate on the nature of narratives converges on the fact that a narrative is a representation of events that has its own distinctiveness. According to Carroll (2001), such distinctiveness is the causal connection between the events depicted. Other philosophers (Velleman 2003; Barwell 2009; Currie 2010; Goldie 2012) have argued that narratives do not just connect events, but also make events tend to an end that is also a purpose, a closure that gives events meaning. Carroll (2007) also has stated that narrative closure proves to be an essential aspect for the appreciation and evaluation of narratives. Television series, however, seem to challenge the traditional concept of narrative closure, as Cavell points out:

If classical narrative can be pictured as the progress from the establishing of one stable situation, through an event of difference, to the reestablishing of a stable situation related to the original one, serial procedure can be thought of as the establishing of a stable condition punctuated by repeated crises or events that are not developments of the situation requiring a single resolution, but intrusions or emergencies—of humor, or adventure, or talent, or misery—each of which runs a natural course and thereupon rejoins the realm of the uneventful; which is perhaps to say, serial procedure is undialectical (1982: 89).

On the one hand, classical narrative is dialectical in the sense that it presents a stable situation, denies it through a conflict, and finally reaffirms it by solving the conflict; serial narrative, on the other hand, is undialectical since the conflict is indefinitely rehearsed.

All this helps us to explain why spectators and critics usually evaluate and discuss series *as narratives* before experiencing their conclusion, which would be unacceptable for a film or novel. Our proposal is that the lack of closure of television series due to their being undialectical is a problem only if they are cast as traditional narratives. If, instead, they are cast as conceptual narratives, that is, principles of construction of episodes and seasons, then the lack of closure proves to be an expressive resource that can contribute to the aesthetic value of a series.

Ultimately, television series provide a contemporary variation on the classical Kantian idea of aesthetic value as “purposiveness without purpose.” Despite lacking the achievement of the purpose that would be warranted by narrative closure, a conceptual narrative still tends toward something that is established by the type and should be pursued by its tokens. Here is the purposiveness without purpose of TV series.

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Index

- 8 ½, 15
24, 1, 3, 31–35, 45–47, 60, 83, 94, 106
24: Legacy, 34–35
24: Live Another Day, 34
24: Redemption, 34
25th Hour, 16
- Abrams, J. J., 35
The Adventure, 86
Akass, Kim, 61
Alias, 60, 83
Allrath, Gaby, 63, 65
American Horror Story, 64
Ames, Melissa, 5
Antonioni, Michelangelo, 86
Apocalypse Now, 6
Aristotle, 5, 8, 19
Askwith, Ivan, 36
- Bad Girls*, 17
Bandersnatch, 67–68
Bandits, 39
Banshee, 16, 18
Barry Lyndon, 55
Beethoven, Ludwig van, 35, 37
Bergman, Ingmar, 6
Berlin Alexanderplatz, 7
BeTipul, 73–74
Better Call Saul, 65, 73
Bevan, Alex, 48
- Bianculli, David, 61
Big Wednesday, 35
Black Mirror, 3, 31, 44, 46, 63–68, 84–85
Blanchett, Cate, 29
BoJack Horseman, 3, 13, 96, 102–6
Bordwell, David, 5
Boyhood, 6
Breaking Bad, 12, 16, 58, 60, 62, 65, 73, 83, 85, 93–94, 106
Brembilla, Paola, 69
Bron/Broen, 19
Brooker, Charlie, 65
Buonanno, Milly, 94
- Callery, Sean, 48
Campbell, Joseph, 103
Camus, Albert, 45
Canby, Vincent, 5
Carlisle, Belinda, 67
Carroll, Noël, 9, 109
Cavell, Stanley, 1, 26, 45–46, 71, 75–76, 85, 109
Chalaby, Jean K., 74
Checcaglini, Chiara, 77
Cimino, Michael, 86
Columbo, 58–59, 62
Cormier, Matthew, 87
Criss Cross, 15
CSI, 13, 36

- Dallas*, 63
 Dancyger, Ken, 9
 Danes, Claire, 46
The Deer Hunter, 86, 95
 De Gaetano, Roberto, 45
Dekalog, 7
Deliverance, 35
 De Niro, Robert, 95
Desperate Housewives, 12
Dexter, 15, 94, 96
 Di Chio, Federico, 11–12, 18
 Dobbs, Michael, 74
Double Indemnity, 15
 Dove-Viebahn, Aviva, 96
 Duffer, Brothers, 54
Du rififi chez les hommes, 39

Eclipse, 86
 Eco, Umberto, 38–39
 Eldridge, Richard, 95, 108
 Ende, Michael, 56
E.R., 17
E.T., 53

Fargo, 44
 Fawcett, John, 29
 Field, Syd, 5
Fleabag, 46
 Fox, Michael J., 70
Fringe, 13

Game of Thrones, 3, 11, 18, 61, 83, 85–92
 Gansa, Alex, 47
 García Carril Puy, Nemesio, 74
 Gere, Richard, 85
Glee, 17
The Godfather, 6, 43–44
Gomorra (*Gomorra*, film), 76
Gomorra (*Gomorra: la serie*, TV series), 3, 45, 76–83, 95
The Good Fight, 65, 68, 70, 72–73
The Good Wife, 3, 15, 65, 68–73
The Goonies, 53
 Gordon, Douglas, 31

 Gordon, Howard, 47
Gossip Girl, 17
The Great Beauty, 10
Grey's Anatomy, 84, 96
Groundhog Day, 12
Guiding Light, 59, 63
 Gymnich, Marion, 63, 65

Happy Valley, 94
Harry Potter, 6
Hatufim, 46–47
Heaven's Gate, 6
 Heidegger, Martin, 46
Heimat, 7
Hiroshima Mon Amour, 15
Homeland, 3, 20, 45–53, 83
 Houkes, Wybo, 24
House M.D., 12
House of Cards, 59, 74–75, 95
How to get away with murder, 43

I Love Lucy, 26
Il Vangelo secondo Matteo, 23–24
The Immortal (L'immortale), 76, 83
 Ingrassia, Walter, 73
Inside Man, 39
In Treatment, 73–74
It's a Wonderful Life, 16

Jane Eyre, 63
Jessica Jones, 94

 Kaplan, David, 21
 Kermode, Francis, 95
 King, Stephen, 15, 18
 Kubrick, Stanley, 55

The Last Kingdom, 44
Last Year at Marienbad, 10
The Leftovers, 17, 37
 Levine, Elana, 25
 LeWitt, Sol, 24, 30, 38
 Lindelof, Damon, 35
 Lopes, Dominic, 7
Lost, 15, 25, 35–37, 106

- Love, Death & Robots*, 63
 Lury, Karen, 36
- Mad Men*, 1, 3, 8, 13, 20, 60, 83, 85–86,
 96–102
Manifesto, 29
 Manson, Graeme, 29
 Marclay, Christian, 31
 Marshall, Kate, 88
 Martin, Brett, 28, 86, 93
 Maslany, Tatiana, 29
 Mauri, Fabio, 23–24
 McCabe, Janet, 61
 McKee, Robert, 5, 12
Merli, 73
Merli: Sapere aude, 73
 Mittell, Jason, 5–6, 36, 57, 60–61
Money Heist (Casa de papel), 3, 27,
 39–43, 46
 Moran, Albert, 73
 Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus, 21, 30
 Mumford, Gwilym, 18
Murder, She Wrote, 18
- Nannicelli, Ted, 60, 62, 107
Narcos, 64–65, 73
Narcos: Mexico, 65, 73
 Negra, Diane, 48
The NeverEnding Story, 55–56
 Newman, Michael Z., 25
 Nietzsche, Friedrich, 46
Nip/Tuck, 13
- The O.C.*, 76
Ocean's 8, 39
Ocean's 11, 39
Ocean's Thirteen, 39
Ocean's Twelve, 39
Orange is the New Black, 15, 94
Orphan Black, 29
- Paik, Nam June, 23
Pale Rider, 45
 Pasolini, Pier Paolo, 23–24
Patriot, 93
- Pearson, Roberta, 96
Perry Mason, 59, 63
 Petersen, Wolfgang, 55
 Petty, Tom, 64
 Philip K. Dick's *Electric Dreams*, 63
 Pierson, David, 96
 Pina, Álex, 39–40
 Pistoletto, Michelangelo, 83–84
 Pizzolatto, Nic, 18
Pretty Woman, 85
Pride and Prejudice, 63
Prison Break, 107–8
Psycho, 31
- The Queen's Gambit*, 39
- Raff, Gideon, 46–47
 Rak, Michele, 73
 Rice, Damien, 42
 Roberts, Julia, 85
Rocco Schiavone, 94
The Romanoffs, 64
Room 104, 44
 Rosefeldt, Julian, 29
 Rush, Jeff, 9
Russian Doll, 12
 Ryan, Marie-Laure, 8–9, 28
- Saviano, Roberto, 76
Scandal, 15
Scenes from a Marriage, 6
 Schubert, Franz, 55
The Searchers, 45
 Sepinwall, Alan, 58–59
 Shakespeare, William, 30
Shrill, 59–60
 Shuster, Martin, 85
Six Feet Under, 57, 93
Sleep, 6
Sons of Anarchy, 19
The Sopranos, 1, 16, 58, 85, 93–96,
 106
South Park, 62
Starsky & Hutch, 63
Star Wars, 6

- The Sting*, 39
Stranger Things, 3, 46, 53–56
Strawson, Peter, 29, 38, 54
Suits, 20, 84
Surkamp, Carola, 63, 65
Sutherland, Kiefer, 46
- Talalay, Rachel, 7
The Terror, 64
Thomasson, Amie, 24
Todorov, Tzvetan, 107
Top of the Lake, 94
Tozzi, Riccardo, 83
Tralli, Lucia, 69
True Detective, 17–18, 44, 46, 62, 64, 85
Twin Peaks, 11, 37
- UnREAL*, 94
- Vaage, Margrethe Bruun, 93, 95
VanDerWerff, Emily, 93
Vermaas, Pieter, 24
V for Vendetta, 41
Vogler, Christopher, 103
- Warhol, Andy, 6
Watchmen, 57
Wayne, Michael, 7
Wayward Pines, 17
The West Wing, 18, 61
Wild Strawberries, 15
Wilson, George M., 86
The Wire, 60
- X-Files*, 84, 107–8
- You*, 19–21, 95
The Young Pope, 94

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