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# More, More, More: Contemporary American TV Series and the Attractions and Challenges of Serialization As Ongoing Narrative

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## Mise au point

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Sérialité : densités et singularités

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Contemporary American TV Series and the Attractions and Challenges of Serialization As Ongoing Narrative

Monica Michlin

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- 1 Over the past ten years, the revival and revolutionizing of the ongoing serialized narrative on television has translated into a record number of major series that have won viewer and critical attention alike, spawning an entirely new interest in TV fiction. Surprisingly, the revival that originated on premium cable, and particularly, on HBO, has spread across all of American television, to non- premium cable TV and to the major broadcasting networks (in particular, ABC), despite the financial risk involved. Precisely because the core of the serial narrative, once it is launched, is that much has happened before, and that there is more to come, how does the storytelling reflect this mode of constant suspension and taking up where it had left off? Do series highlight or play down markers of serialization in their text and paratext? In a double-bind, how does contemporary TV fiction avoid the pitfalls of *too-obvious* seriality – how does it disrupt linear progression, avoid repetition, renew its esthetics of surprise? Finally, if serialization is based on the desire for *more, more, more*, does it not preclude, rather than include, in its contract, that even the best stories must end? How can viewers be brought to think that *it's time*, and to accept that all is over?

## Reviving serialization

### Financial risk and the role of cable networks

- 2 As numerous critics have foregrounded, “TV series” has served as an umbrella term for vastly different narratives: those based on a paradigm of recurrence, often called “episodic series”, and those that are conceived and can only be received as a single ongoing narrative.<sup>1</sup> The first type, which includes procedural dramas like *CSI*, does not require assiduous viewing; individual episodes function autonomously. A cast of recurring characters, a strict “bible”<sup>2</sup> codifying clothes and hairdos, mannerisms and taglines, sets and props, make these series a comfortable parallel universe one can return

to off and on;<sup>3</sup> serialization is simply created through incremental addition and continued viewing, since each episode presents a new challenge or mystery, which will be resolved before its close. Until the late 1990s, and the emergence of premium cable TV (HBO in particular) – and until the explosion of VCR ownership, the advent of the DVD box set, followed, in the last few years, by such technological revolutions as streaming and other “outside-the-box” modes of viewing (on computers, mobile phones, etc) – this broadcasting strategy was seen as safest by the networks that relied primarily on advertising revenues.

- 3 A truly serialized, ongoing narrative seemed financially risky : Olivier Joyard and Loïc Prigent’s documentary *Hollywood, le règne des séries* (Agat Films, 2005) highlights that out of 300 series pitched, only 10 will result in a pilot episode reaching test screening, and only 3 will ever reach viewers. Joyard and Prigent highlight how HBO played a major role<sup>4</sup> in redefining the TV series landscape with such narrative series as *Sex & The City* (1998-2004), *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005), *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) or *The Wire* (2002-2008), forcing other cable broadcasters such as Showtime or FX, and the networks themselves, to follow its lead : FX’s *Nip/Tuck* (2003-2010), Fox’s *24* (2001-2010), Showtime’s *Queer As Folk* (2000-2005), *The L Word* (2004-2009), and ABC’s *Desperate Housewives* (2004-) or *Lost* (2004-2010) were all prompted by HBO’s groundbreaking revival of the serial. The far-reaching result is, as Horace Newcomb points out, that the vast majority of series today are continuous, and that “Even those ‘series’ that deny, or defy, seriality, the *Laws & Order*s, the CSIs, are defined by their rejection of seriality.” (Newcomb, 2008 : 31).

## Narrative sophistication, queering, hybridity: from old Soap to New Soap

- 4 There are obvious attractions to a story *to be continued*. Serialized narratives have always existed, from *The Tales of the Arabian Nights* – in which Scheherazade stakes her life on the power of the suspended narrative – to nineteenth century masterpieces, many of which were published by installments before becoming “classics” studied in the classroom.<sup>5</sup> All genres have been serialized : from historical sagas to comic strips. The fundamental desire serialization seems to address is that for unlimited storytelling – by delaying, protracting, digressing, diverging, incorporating *mise en abyme* and inset storytelling, and playing on suspension and thus suspense, all truly serialized storytelling reflects our desire to postpone closure in the desire for more. But because the main TV genre to have unequivocally opted for continuous serial narration since the 50s was the *soap opera*, much of the last decade’s revolutionizing of the serial narrative has unsurprisingly been about either the *queering* of *soap* in a post-modern, post-patriarchal, gender-bending fashion – which might describe series from *Six Feet Under* to *Desperate Housewives*, to *True Blood* (HBO, 2008-) – and/or of the hybridization of soap opera with the “male” genre of the thriller : from the *war on terror* series *24*<sup>6</sup> to the gender-bending-camp- *noir* *Nip/Tuck*, *soap* has been redefined to appeal to male viewers. Soap is, in fact, the only form of serial narrative that producers are not averse to, if one is to believe Marc Cherry’s quip that he could not get anyone to buy *Desperate Housewives* until he quit pitching it as a satire, and relabeled it *soap*.<sup>7</sup> *Lost* similarly had to be pitched as a cross between reality show (a take on *Survivor*) and character drama, minimizing its supernatural or sci-fi elements.<sup>8</sup> The difference between “old-fashioned” *soap* and today’s serialized narrative series featuring *ensemble* casts and the proliferation of subplots within an overarching and master

storyline, is that today's characters are not only more diverse, but complex, and exhibit a degree of self-awareness prohibiting stereotype. These adult serial narratives on contemporary television develop what a two-hour film can only allude to, or compress, leaving much in the subtext.<sup>9</sup> An existential narrative like *Six Feet Under* takes on a deeper meaning precisely because it allows viewers to age alongside the characters, while constantly questioning the meaning of life and of relationships. This sustained form of reflexive functioning, the series' intense and often disturbing dialogue, and the exquisite cinematic aesthetic of the series made it more like *auteur cinema* than any TV serial drama until then.<sup>10</sup> Given the parallel drift of Hollywood movies towards the special effects blockbuster over the last decade, serial narrative can be argued to have found within its very seriality a depth that such commercial cinema now finds itself hard pressed to imitate (the sudden revival of 3D cinema may, in fact, be a "spatial" answer to a "temporal" issue).<sup>11</sup>

- 5 All series portraying groups of friends (*Sex and the City* ; *Queer as Folk* ; *The L Word*) need to develop over time to depict not only life-changing events, the throes of love and heartbreak, but also day-to-day trivia, the "metadiscursive processing" of changing relationships, which viewers' discussion of these series echoes in turn. Other series narrating a quest through time and space, like *Battlestar Galactica* (2004-2009), *Carnivalè* (HBO, 2003-2005), or *Lost*, also require time to unfold their mythology, and to create the complexity that will compel adult viewers to suspend disbelief.

### To be continued... cliffhangers and beyond

- 6 Meanwhile, series' *to be continued* quality makes the cliffhanger a central element of their composition: each episode must end on a shock or surprise of some kind; seasons must end on a cliffhanger in order to lure viewers back. Although an increasing proportion of viewers watch recorded or streamed contents, skipping commercials altogether, screenwriters for all series not shown on premium cable *must* include dramatic twists just before the breaks for advertising, to ensure that viewers will not channel-surf. Series like *24*, *Lost*, *Desperate Housewives*, or *Grey's Anatomy* have perfected this into an art. Jack Bauer's in- real-time adventures play on the pun on "plots" (a script which includes many subplots about plotting), on the "web" of the split-screen (which reminds viewers of the different narrative threads they are following as well as of the central "surveillance" theme), and on the in-built structure of breaks for advertising, transforming an economic constraint into an aesthetic force and actually clocking out the time for ads and using it as a form of narrative ellipsis for dull moments (Jack driving his SUV from A to B if no car-chase is involved). Even if each season of *24* is essentially self-contained, it generally ends on a cliffhanger (an assassination attempt on President Palmer at the end of Season 2 ; Jack on the brink of death as Season 7 winds down...). Although Seasons of *24* are called *Days* to emphasize the 24-hour real-time effect, the entire series is infinitely more engrossing if one has followed Jack's adventures – as spy thriller, workplace drama and *soap* – from the very beginning.
- 7 Because practically all series combining thriller elements (from *Desperate Housewives* to *Lost* to *Alias* to *Nip/Tuck*) or drama (from *Grey's Anatomy* to *Weeds*) tailor their narratives so that even individual episodes end on *hooks* if not cliffhangers,<sup>12</sup> it now seems glaringly obvious in retrospect when a series does *not*. Season 1 of *The West Wing*, for instance, is based on rapid-fire dialogue, and the *walk and talk* technique, but deliberately ignores

anything like a cliffhanger until the assassination attempt in the finale. In an involuntary parodic effect,<sup>13</sup> however, the cheerful musical score that returns with each episode's closing credits undermines the cliffhanger itself, and reminds us of how quickly such scoring conventions have become outdated. At the opposite end of the spectrum, *Lost*'s systematic use of the cliffhanger followed by eerie closing sound effects (reminiscent of *The Twilight Zone*) alongside the smash cut to the black-and-white "LOST" title card, is the very embodiment of suspenseful sound effects in keeping with the story. Among the handful of series that deny their audience the drama of cliffhangers, *The Wire* forgoes them in reversing most of the conventions of the standard cop show, as Brian G. Rose (2009) convincingly demonstrates: in deliberately anticlimactic fashion, major characters are sometimes killed in the middle of an episode, without much retelling, and with no replaying of the event, in stark *realist* opposition to the aesthetics of dramatization prevalent in fiction. In keeping with this breaking of conventional dramatic rhythm, the last shot of an episode generally pans out on some scene of desolation or despair, and fades to black to the score song "The Fall", the very beat of which seems to underline the continuing failure of the police investigations to capture the major criminals or alter the dysfunctional institutions of Baltimore (taken as an allegory of US cities in general), as well as the falling narrative arc of the episode itself.

## Unlimited serialization and limited viewer memory: the challenges of serial viewing

### Recaps

- 8 All ongoing complex narratives, in which new subplots and characters constantly emerge, resurface or disappear, share one characteristic: they pose a formidable challenge to viewers' memories. As Jason Mittell argues in "'Previously On': Prime-Time Serials and the Mechanics of Memory", there are a number of diegetic forms of memory prompting: *diegetic retelling* (in which a character reminds another of something viewed in an earlier season or episode), *visual cues*, *replays*, and *diegetic flashbacks* being some of the most prominent techniques he discusses. The prevalent extradiegetic form is, of course, the *recap*, which is typically put together by producers of the show to ensure that viewers feel enough continuity as they enter a new episode. As Mittell points out, recaps, because they are tooled specifically for the episode about to unfold, run the risk of turning into *spoilers* since they single out the narrative arcs that are to be developed, or even herald the return of a long gone character.<sup>14</sup> (This "collateral" effect of the recap acts somewhat like the fast-cut teasers that introduce each episode of *Battlestar Galactica*: it reveals too much of what is to come.) On the other hand, the absence of recaps on *The Wire*, for instance, perhaps pushes the demands on most viewers too far.
- 9 In the absence of recaps, title credits become fundamental memory prompters – or so *The Wire* seems to show, in its particularly long, elaborate, and evolving title sequences, from season to season. As Ariane Hudelet (2009) has pointed out, title sequences, which are often series' opening credits, have increasingly become short feature films in their own right, functioning as a hallmark of the series, immersing us, through their visuals, their musical score and their pacing, into the world we are returning to, rather than pointing to which actor plays which part (*The West Wing* upholds this older convention); they allegorically illustrate the title. *Dexter*'s opening credits, for instance, produce a feeling of

anxiety and discomfort because of the way Dexter's innocuous morning routine is filmed in extreme close-ups (and amplified sound effects) and saturated with blood and the color red. The stains in the title card on his name, I would add, remind us of the implicit play on words: beyond the idea of dexterity, which indeed applies to the character, *dexter* inevitably calls to mind its Latin opposite, *sinister*, which is of course the subtext of the title sequence and the series itself. As for the shot in which Dexter looks us in the eye, it announces the voice-over technique, as a form of disturbing intimacy with the serial killer, much like the extreme close-ups themselves.

## Metamorphic title sequences

- 10 In the case of *The Wire*, the title sequence is not an opening sequence: there is always a *cold open* (much as in *Lost*) and only after a first scene that functions as a miniature allegory of the series' ambience do the title credits unfold, in a montage of fast-cut shots. While this sequence contains much of what is going to occur – in Season 1, all of these shots are extracts from episodes of that season – none of them shows us the major characters' faces, and none of the *soap* elements of the narrative are present. A few shots illustrate the concept of wiretapping and surveillance (an authorization to wiretap, the monitoring equipment, a camera fitted with a powerful zoom), and others show “the wire” itself, in a shot of an electrical or phone wire winding across the screen, or a blue LED visualization of speech as caught on monitoring equipment – an image often used as the image of the series itself.<sup>15</sup> While the jumble of images suggests a puzzle of interconnected plots, it also suggests the series will resist viewing – the title sequence ends with a surveillance camera being shattered and the picture turning fuzzy, in a reverse image of the HBO logo.<sup>16</sup> Just as the wire emerges and disappears in the fast cutting of title shots, so does it sometimes seem absent from the actual plot for weeks on end, as Brian G. Rose has pointed out (Rose, 2009 : 87). Indeed, the title sequence plays on reflexivity and metafilmic metaphor, as we watch and listen *between the lines* of this “visual novel”,<sup>17</sup> as creator David Simon has called it. This gives its real meaning to marketing tagline – *Listen* – and to the composition of the title sequence that suggests that everything is connected within a “bigger picture”.
- 11 At the opposite end of the spectrum, some series have opted for a title sequence so short as to be almost non-existent – this is the case for *Lost* and for *24* – which makes them just as significant. Indeed, *24*'s fizzling digital clock neatly encapsulates the series' core idea of time running out, of an accelerated countdown, and of an imminent explosion, while suggesting that in this macho action “real-time” narrative there is no time to spare. Similarly,
- Lost*
- 's choice of title credits emerging in white lettering on black and pivoting to the eerie sound of a plane falling through space, as we zoom between the letters O and S, perfectly reflects the themes of the crash, of disorientation, of time-travel and “warped” perspectives, as well as the “black-and-white” symbolism of the fight between good and evil which is part of its mythology. Indeed, the title sequence appearing some 8 minutes after a cold opening into the episode is part of *Lost*'s reflexive *modus operandi*; and when each episode (at least starting Season 3) ends with a cliffhanger, the choice of a systematic smash cut to the title card LOST reminds us that we are, in a way, as lost in the mysteries of the island as when we started, despite the 42 minutes of story that have just elapsed.

- 12 This technique presents the additional advantage of avoiding viewer boredom. Indeed, only hardcore fans will sing along to the title credits episode after episode (especially if seeing them on DVD), while most will fast-forward their way through them. *Weeds*, Showtime's satirical series about a young widow starting to sell weed (a pun on the "widow's weeds") to maintain her bourgeois lifestyle, initially broadcast an opening title sequence mocking the conformity of bourgeois suburbs through digitally cloned identical and faceless characters (coming out of the shopping mall, driving their SUVs, etc.) to the sound of Malvina Reynold's 1962 song "Little Boxes".<sup>18</sup> Although the very predictability of the intro was obviously ironic, each episode in Seasons 2 and 3 staged a different version of the song (by artists from Engelbert Humperdinck to Joan Baez) to prevent viewer weariness. In Season 4, the characters having left the suburbs, the creator of the series, Jenji Kohan, boldly changed aesthetics: doing away with intro and theme song, she had the opening shots subtly embed the title card for the series and for her own name diegetically, in the setting or on a prop (on a roadway sign, a pinball machine, a swimsuit, a bar of soap), staging an object morphing into a cannabis leaf (*weed*) as a reflexive wink to viewers (a compilation of these intros can be seen on YouTube).<sup>19</sup> In their very inventiveness, these introductions embody a performance of seriality as literally *iconoclastic* change. Similarly, by parodying its title sequence – a disheveled, puffy-eyed Dexter goes slow-motion through the motions of his morning routine, to a comically distorted musical score – the opening of *Dexter* Season 4 suggests that paternity has turned Dexter from maniacally pristine killer into pathetic victim of fatherhood.<sup>20</sup>

### Seriality versus linearity: jumbled chronologies and mind-fraks<sup>21</sup>

- 13 If seriality poses challenges to the *paratext* of series, it of course poses them tenfold to the screenwriters, who are caught in the double bind of viewers wanting more of a story, and yet wanting it to progress. Linear progression is the easiest route to follow, but also the most predictable: hence, from its very pilot, a series like *Desperate Housewives* plays on the disruption of linearity, since we *belatedly* understand that Mary-Alice's voice-over is being told by a ghost or "angelic" presence that hovers all-knowingly above Wisteria Lane. Because this voice-over structures the entire series, giving it its dark humor of moral allegory with a satirical twist, and because it is our threshold both into and out of each episode, almost every possible technique is to prevent us from becoming *blasé*. Most often, the intros involve flashbacks into the characters' lives, while the conclusion draws the ambiguous allegorical lesson from the elapsed episode. *Desperate Housewives'* deliberately plays on "impossible" repetitions of thematic motifs and goes for the camp or the excessive, but always with a satirical twist. Major narrative upheavals occur; Season 4 Episode 9, "Something's Coming", in which a tornado hits Wisteria Lane (conveniently killing a main character), could be quoted as the perfect metatextual example of disruptive seriality: viewers must be caught off-guard *despite* being warned. The last minute of the season finale went further, showing glimpses of the characters' lives five years later, thus suggesting that Season 5 would leapfrog over those years (which it did), and, by not showing any images of heartthrob Mike Delfino, creating fears that he had died in the interval...
- 14 More daring series like *Damages* have attempted to transgress seriality by playing on repetition as change, and on reviewing as re-interpretation. The series begins *in medias res*, and, one-upping *Grey's Anatomy's* use of the elevator as dramatic space, opens on the



elevator door we zoom into in a series of jump cuts, to the jangling sound of the elevator ring, only to see a haggard blood-stained young woman fleeing from it. That a second passes before the elevator door opens points to its reflexive use as “opening” to the series (an equivalent of the theatrical curtain rising), but also to the “what you see/what you don’t” *modus operandi* of this thriller. In a process comparable only to *auteur cinema* like Christopher Nolan’s *Memento* (2000), we are made to literally review scenes we have already seen, quickly learning that re-contextualization brings shifts in meaning, and that much of what we are shown manipulates us into false interpretations.<sup>22</sup> While this circumvents the predictability of linear progression, it requires that viewers accept, and even relish the overlap between replayed sequences, thus flying in the face of conventional serial viewing.

### Flashbacks, flash-forwards, flash-sideways

- 15 In a slightly different move, *Lost*, which had from its very first season played on flashbacks, both to allow viewers to escape from excessive feelings of entrapment on the island, and to give the characters a past and psychological depth, began, in its Season 3, to stage flash-forwards. In Season 3 Episode 8, “Flashes Before Your Eyes”, it became obvious that Desmond was time traveling, either to the past or future, playing on the uncanny and metatextual<sup>23</sup> effects of *déjà-vu*. In a major break in the use of time in the narrative, the Season 3 finale, “Through the Looking-Glass”, propelled viewers not into flashbacks, but into flash-forwards, showing that the type of resolution many viewers were hoping for (Kate and Jack leaving the island, living together happily ever after) would turn out to be the opposite : a nightmare. A wrecked Jack actually cries out in agony : “we have to go back” as the “wuumph” sound of a plane taking off signals the smash cut to the end of the episode and season. Season 4 featured flashbacks and flash-forwards, but season 6 took time-travel to a new level by playing with the notion of “flash- sideways” or an alternate reality unfolding in a parallel timeline. Indeed, in an apparent bending of the axiom of time-travel according to which the past cannot be changed (“what happened, happened” was the tag-line reiterated by various characters), two separate time-lines seemed to open up : one in which the Oceanic 815 plane *had* crashed in 2004 ; and one in which it had *not*, and all the passengers landed safely in Los Angeles, and went their separate ways. Season 6’s alternate time-line could *especially* appeal to those who watched *Lost* as a story of love, friendship and redemption, even if they did not wholly understand the underlying time-travel theories, because of the poignant situations and heart-wrenching paradoxes created by the alternative text. The numerous biblical allusions – Jack’s being named “Shepherd” and leading the Losties, Desmond’s tagline “see you in another life, brother”, the constant metadiscourse on faith and trust, on second chances and redemption, made it obvious from the start that *Lost* was a mystical narrative and an allegory for our own condition : as viewers in a labyrinthine narrative, and as virtual “brothers” for the characters on the island.

### Viewer reception and frustrated expectations: *Lost* as case study

- 16 Roberta Pearson (2009: 143) quotes Damon Lindelof and especially Carlton Cuse on the “characters first, island second” rationale behind the show, Cuse stressing that the broader audience cared less about the “mythology” of the island than the “niche” audience of sci-fi fans. But the latter were the viewers who logged onto *Lostpedia*,<sup>24</sup> blogs,

forums, and internet-based discussions focused on the narrative as hermeneutics-driven, to the point, as they pored over the clues and enigmatic dialogues and tested hypotheses, of creating a *spoiler* subculture of enthusiasts who did not seek to undermine the show but rather to deeply engage with it.<sup>25</sup> These fans expressed a number of critiques as to the coherence of the serial narrative. Ivan Askwith lists what exasperated fans obsessed by the mysteries of the island: “too many questions, too few answers”; “redundant flashbacks and the endless middle”; “convenient inconsistencies”; “meaningless signifiers” (p. 161-163).

- 17 While anyone watching *Lost* primarily as soap would, of course, scoff at the very concept of “redundant flashbacks”,<sup>26</sup> and would put down the black smoke monster to the *grand-guignol* aesthetics of much of horror sci-fi, and “meaningless signifiers” to the writers’ sense of humor and of the reflexive nature of story-telling, those viewers anchored in what Jason Mittell refers to as “forensic fandom” demanded a “master plan”. Not only does *television not work that way*, as Askwith underlines (174) – feedback and questions from fans prompted responses from the screenwriters in turn, because seriality implies the possibility for improvisation, and must indeed include such extra-narrative paradigms as a screenwriters’ strike,<sup>27</sup> an actor wishing to leave the series, the network wishing to prolong or to pull it – but this very “demand” for a “master” plan eerily cast the writers in the roles of a metafilmic Jack or Locke, Jacob and the Man In Black – “leaders”, even “god” figures, asked by certain “followers” of the series to resolve issues of the predetermination/ free arbiter/ chance/ fate questions posed within the narrative itself. But this is what cult series *do*: make the metatext the real issue – and as Stacey Abbott convincingly argues, *Lost*’s tremendous success can be ascribed to its having managed to be both cult and blockbuster (Abbott, 2009).

### The viewer as “unifier” of the serialized text?

- 18 Because it seems from most of the immediate reactions to *Lost*’s final season and to its finale, in particular, that most viewers felt the series had fulfilled its promise, I would argue, in a qualification of Jason Mittell’s defense of *Lost* as a “unified text” (Mittell, 2009: 125) that Season 6 was felt by many viewers not to be unified at all. There were the on-island, epic *fight to the end* scenes, and the extraordinarily poignant alternate lives in the flash-sideways; or, put otherwise, the Man-in-Black-based episodes versus the Desmond-based – but ultimately, each of us is free to “unify” the text we cared for. Indeed, precisely because *Lost*’s strength is indeed what Mittell calls its “operational aesthetics” (*i.e.*, its reflexivity, and metafilmic, metatextual, and metatelevisual<sup>28</sup> images and discourse), it construes its unity through its very symmetries – and this is what gives it its artistic value. This was true from *Lost*’s opening shots: the much-commented pilot scene is spectacular not so much for its recreation of the plane crash, or the gory special effects of the anonymous passenger being sucked into the reactor (although they made it one of the most expensive pilot sequences ever), but for its brilliant metafilmic beginning: Jack’s eye, as it opens in extreme close-up, does not simply signify disorientation – it mirrors our gaze, as we are plunged into the world of the island. It is a perfect reflexive image for the series, and the creators necessarily end the series on this same eye as it shuts. This, and viewer feelings of catharsis, rather than the supposed or proclaimed intentions of the creators, is what makes it impossible to deny that the text has unity, no matter how many loose strands have been left dangling over the course of six seasons.<sup>29</sup>

## Reflexivity, *mise en abyme*, remediation

- 19 Reflexivity is a factor of narrative coherence in any serial narrative and generally points to a more sophisticated level of storytelling; besides, self-conscious storytelling dispels some of the self-consciousness at watching a popular art form (for academic viewers, in any case). When writers or artists are featured within the story, one generally finds a *mise en abyme* of writing, filming, drawing, and artistic creation: in *Sex & The City*, Carrie's adventures are voiced-over by the questions she types into her computer as she writes her eponymous column – reminding the viewers that the series is also a self-conscious take on witty conversations about sex in the tradition of the literary *salon* or of Oscar Wilde, rather than of contemporary women's magazines.<sup>30</sup> In Season 2 of *Queer As Folk*, when Justin and Michael work on creating the gay comic hero *Rage*, their first comic strips re-enact events we have witnessed, such as Brian's rescuing Justin from a near-fatal gay-bashing; in the finale, the party to launch the comic book begins with a live theatrical reenactment of the same events. These inset forms of *remediation* point to the series not merely as a “window” onto gay life but as a work of art, constantly adapting and readapting, paying homage to other forms of art, and inscribing itself in an artistic tradition as well as proclaiming its novelty.<sup>31</sup>
- 20 A series like *Heroes* goes much further still in playing on remediation and multiple forms of “seriality”. Within the diegesis, it uses comic strip typography, has a character (the aptly named Hiro) recognize himself in a comic strip narrating his actions as the series has just depicted them, in a *mise en abyme* of scripting (1.2); shows the artist as a “pre-cog” who, in Season Episode 20 (1.20) materializes in a *string installation* (reminiscent of police investigation boards) all of the characters' lives, complete with identifying photographs and excerpts from newspaper articles. One character comments “it's a living map of every choice” in another metatextual reference to the threads as so many literal “storylines”, in a teasing glimpse of what is yet to unfold. This “teasing” technique, in which a reflexive image captures the entire series in one emblematic image is a recurring metatextual device: in *The L Word*, Alice's “Chart” of the relationships between all the characters is a condensing image of the series itself; in *Flash Forward*, Mark Benford's posting board for the “Mosaic” Investigation becomes the story assembling itself under our very eyes – reminding us of the work it takes for a mere mapping out of connected elements to become a series; in *Prison Break* Season 1, the tattoo on Scofield's back that one enters through *tunnel vision* is the blueprint for the entire season.

## Reflexivity and remediation: extension of the fictional universe, or entropy?

- 21 *Heroes* (like *Lost*) extends remediation *beyond* the diegesis, in a multi- platform extension of the series, as Will Brooker points out:
- The dedicated website for [...] *Heroes* (Tailwind Productions, 2006-) includes an online graphic novel that expands on the events of last week's show and a blog by one of its key characters, Hiro Nakamura, encouraging visitors' participation in the fiction. [...] At a further remove, the character Claire Bennet (like Martha Jones from the 2007 season of *Doctor Who*) has a MySpace profile where visitors respond to

her as a real friend and contact, again entering into the fiction and casting themselves as secondary characters. (Brooker, 2009 : 66).

- 22 As opposed to this extension of the fictional serial universe, its turning inward in a *mise en abyme* often seems the sign that a series has lost its initial centrifugal serial drive: revealingly, Seasons 5 of *The L Word* and of *Nip/Tuck* staged a film-in-the-series or a reality show/series-in-the-series, as an attempt to bring in new characters, and to highlight the vitality of the series as opposed to its deadening, censoring or its being turned voyeuristic in the inset form of entertainment. But the result was the opposite – the fictional universe seemed to be dying of entropy. To avoid such a risk, perhaps, a creator like Alan Ball had announced early that *Six Feet Under* would have a lifespan of only 5 seasons ; but few creators have the freedom of deciding when to end their serial narrative.<sup>32</sup>

## Coming to an end...

### Spin-offs and cross-overs

- 23 When Christopher Anderson wrote his 2005 essay on TV serial drama, he commented that despite the phenomenal success of both *Lost* and *Desperate Housewives*, which had just been launched by ABC, viewers should bear in mind that networks needed to attract some twenty million viewers per episode and to entice the casual viewers too, so that engaging complex narratives were more likely to continue on cable rather than on network television. Five years later, *Desperate Housewives* is still scheduled to run through 2011 ; but ABC has failed to launch a new ongoing series. The short-lived *Flash Forward*, with cross-over actors from *Lost* such as Dominic Monaghan (Charlie) and Sonya Walger (Penny) in some of the lead roles, was obviously meant as a clone or spin-off to *Lost*, and an *Oceanic Airlines* billboard visible in the pilot episode was an obvious wink to the fictional world *Lost* had created. *Flash Forward*'s narrative aesthetics, however, involving a great deal of replaying and of diegetic retelling, were a throwback to narrative conventions that *Lost* had antiquated. The series was pulled after just a season – proof, once again, that networks may spend millions of dollars on a spectacular pilot episode – *Flash Forward*'s was on a par with disaster movie scenes such as *2012*, with a distinctly post-9/11 twist – and yet pull the series altogether, leaving furious viewers dangling on a cliffhanger. Networks' disrespect for viewers is total, as shown in the extreme case of *Cashmere Mafia* (2008), a rejuvenated clone to *Sex & The City*,<sup>33</sup> which was pulled by ABC after a mere 7 episodes. Interrupted narratives are only tolerable because they are *to be continued* ; renegeing on that contract is a violation of the viewing process itself. Even HBO's *Carnivalè*, which can stand on its own as a diptych, was so obviously meant to continue into the next generation's fight that it feels "truncated".

### Never can say goodbye: playing on (impossible) closure in the finale

- 24 All continuous serial narratives face the problematic issue of *the end*: why conclude them at all, commercial issues set aside? And *how* ? Some, like *Six Feet Under*, *Queer as Folk*, or *The Wire*, even if they necessarily frustrate the desire for continued immersion in the "second life" the series has become, stage a mourning process or a rite of passage that explicitly mirrors the viewer having to "let go" while becoming a depository and passer-on for the series. *Queer as Folk*'s perfect loop, from its pilot to its finale, is effected with

Michael's line "this is where it all began" as he and Brian stand in the bombed-out décor of Babylon, the gay nightclub that is one of the main gathering-places and recurring sets of the series. When Brian counters: "Didn't you say it's all a cheap illusion? That outside life goes on but in here, nothing never changes?", in what could be taken as a double reference to the night-club and to the series itself, Mikey answers: "Yes, I did. But that was before I realized some things aren't meant to change". Michael asks Brian to dance with him to their song, although the sound system has been destroyed – and as the beat of the song "Proud" magically fills the air, Babylon comes alive again, dancing crowd, happy couples, laser beams and all. Mikey's voice-over concludes, in a loop back to his initial voice-over, on a testament to gay life continuing forever, so as to allow the viewers to let go of the series itself: "So the *thumpa-thumpa* continues. It always will – no matter what happens, no matter who's president. As our divine lady of disco Ms Gloria Gaynor has always sung to us, we *will* survive."

### Letting go or starting over?

- 25 *Six Feet Under's* finale seems to choose the opposite: the literal "laying to rest" (Akass & McCabe, 2009, 80) of the series, in a flash-ahead to the deaths of all of the major characters. *The Wire's* finale similarly attempts to offer glimpses into each of the characters' lives to come – and stages two "mock-wakes" for the policemen who have kept the wiretap going and who are now forced to retire (within the story, from the police force, and extra-diegetically, from the roles they had played for 5 years). But the ending is, paradoxically, not as powerful as those staged in the finales of Seasons 1, 2, and 3, in which we see the wiretapping unit forced to dismantle their equipment, the actors effectively stripping down their own set and exiting, the way they might leave a theatrical stage, in an ending that plays on the "dismantling" of our own watching, much the same way the stripping of the *Battlestar Galactica*, at the end of Season 5, was a decommissioning of the series itself, a visual pun on "*Battlestar Galactica* stops here"... but with a twist: the suspended ending 150,000 years later, on what is obviously our Earth, when the character known as (Cylon) *Number 6* asks the pointed question at the heart of all ending serial narratives: "all of this has happened before... the question is, *will it happen again?*" As I write, I have only seen the pilot of the *Battlestar* spin-off and prequel, *Caprica*, and have found it fascinating. But more fascinating still is that it is the prequel to a series that is itself a remake (of the 1978 *Battlestar*). The process is potentially endless, but for NBC's Syfy network, *Caprica's* future depends exclusively on the buzz and viewership it generates<sup>34</sup>, reminding us that one can never put aside the commercial realities of serial creation on television.

### What lies ahead...

- 26 As all TV studies scholars emphasize, the recent evolution of streaming, downloading and boxed DVD sales has meant a revolution in how we watch serial narratives – how networks and cable will respond is still an open question. One of the problems posed by serialization, for all viewers alike, is that when networks interrupt broadcasting for a few weeks, frustration builds up uncontrollably (Brooker, 2009, 58-60). Hence discussions on "binge viewing" of uploaded episodes over a period of time rather than the piecemeal broadcasting imposed by the networks;<sup>35</sup> hence too the huge number of worldwide fans who watched the last season of *Lost* on streaming because it was not going to be available

legally for another year or so in their own countries, even if the quality of the image was sometimes problematic. Seriality itself may be changing nature, in the contrast between viewing the narrative in “serialized flow”, or as a complete opus on DVD. Jason Mittell brilliantly encapsulates that, while the emergence of the DVD box set and of the entire paratext it includes, has allowed serial narratives to present themselves as aesthetic objects, formally, textually, lending themselves to both analysis and “serial pedagogy” (as objects of study in academia), this also alters the relationship between the text and the viewer. In the case of a series like *Lost*, Mittell (2010) argues :

the truly ephemeral aspect of the series was not the initial textual broadcast but the experience of serialized spectatorship. When the next generation of media historians look at *Lost*, all that will remain from the original airing is the program and the archived paratexts—the aesthetic experience of collectively decoding a complex narrative will be lost. [...] It seems that if we have the ability to watch on demand, we will sacrifice the positive experiences of communal engagement for the realities of personal schedules or the urge to binge. The structure of broadcast flow may be replaced by the control of boxed publishing, but there is a palpable experiential loss that cannot be artificially retained.

- 27 Indeed, and this will be my conclusion, the word “text”, in its etymological meaning of “interwoven” implies connection between elements, just as the verb “to relate” means both to “recount, narrate events” and to “create/enter into relationships”. Serial narrative implies both. At its most orthodox, it implies a community of viewers, relating to each other even as they relate to the work, its story and aesthetics. But because of the freedom offered by DVDs and VOD, there will increasingly be subjective, potentially de-serializing, modes of viewing serial narrative. Viewers’ selective replay of episodes obviously constitutes one such mode of “de-serialization”, whether it is lived as form of “emotional highlights”, forensic fandom, aesthetic appreciation of visual effects or of the musical score, and whether this form of replay is lived as a form of “reviewing”, “reliving”, or “dissecting” a favorite series.<sup>36</sup> Some series are being marketed for “de-serialization” post-broadcast : viewers can purchase the DVD boxes pertaining only to one character they enjoy, ignoring the rest of the cast.<sup>37</sup> I believe, however, that because series are so often about groups of friends, families, or other communities, they incite us to watch them in mirror-fashion ; and that whether we meet by the watercooler or on internet forums, in hallways or in classrooms, on the subway or at the dinner table, the urge to discuss and comment serial narrative, whether seen live or belatedly, will always be there. For the core of serial viewing is a celebration of connection, and a search for meaning. If ongoing serial narrative is, at its most realist, a mirror that reflects the very flow of our lives, and at its most fantastic, the looking-glass that invites us into another dimension, seriality itself embodies our human condition – in enabling us to accept the transience of its flow, and in telling us over and over again that, as the song goes, *it ain’t over till it’s over*.

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## Filmography

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## NOTES

1. See Christopher Anderson, 2008: p. 78-79.
2. This “bible” is part of the series “branding” process of the series, as Jonathan Bignell points out. (Bignell, 2007: p. 160).
3. As Peter Dunne puts it “Aaron Spelling, the most prolific TV producer in the history of the industry [...] called his series such as *Mod Island*, *Charlie’s Angels*, *Starksy and Hutch*, *Love Boat*, *Dynasty*, *Fantasy Island* and so many others, ‘mind candy’” (Dunne, 2007: p. 104). Dunne himself compares them to “visual fast food”. (*Ibid.*).
4. Gary R. Edgerton (Edgerton & Jones, 2009: p. 1-20) documents this shift as a key part of HBO’s marketing strategy (“It’s Not TV, It’s HBO”) and of its effort to impose its creations as “breakout programming” and “watercooler series” (to be discussed at work the next day), and gives a detailed analysis of the economic aspects of this strategy, which Christopher Anderson (2008: p. 82-83) also discusses in depth.
5. As Jason Mittell points out, these works, too, only took on the aura of the “masterpiece” once they were “reconstructed” as a published whole – serial publishing being the mark of “popular” literature, to which *one* can substitute the word “vulgar” in many critics’ view, even today. “The serial publishing of Dickens and Tolstoy certainly garnered these authors both popularity and acclaim, but had they not been bundled and compiled into published novels, *War and Peace* and *Bleak House* would probably be regarded less as timeless masterpieces and more as ephemerally tied to their historical moment, if remembered at all.” (Mittell, 2010, “Serial Boxes”).
6. See Tara McPherson’s article “Techno-Soap: 24, Masculinity and Hybrid Form” (2007).
7. See Marc Cherry’s 2005 Golden Globes acceptance speech.
8. For a complete analysis of *Lost*’s intertextual connection to previous works, literary, filmic and televisual, see all of Angela Ndaliansis’s “*Lost* in Genre”, especially p. 182-187.
9. A number of highly successful series were initially pitched as films – David Chase’s *The Sopranos* for instance – then expanded into a series. David Simon’s 6-part mini-series *The Corner* (2000) was “expanded” into the five-season *The Wire* after it garnered Emmys for “outstanding miniseries” and “outstanding writing and directing of a miniseries”, among other prizes, but Simon had always thought of it as a “visual novel” (see all of Brian Rose’s article “The Wire”).
10. For an analysis of Alan Ball’s *Six Feet Under* debt to European and American “art cinema” in its filming techniques see Feuer, 2007 : p. 150-154; for its *queer* perspective on heterosexual relationships see McCabe and Akass, 2008: p. 71-81. The series was created in 2001, after Alan Ball’s screenwriting for Sam Mendes’s *American Beauty* (1999) had brought him critical acclaim.
11. There are, of course, filmic series that bear no relationship whatsoever to the blockbuster, in contemporary indie cinema: ten years after *Happiness* (1998), Todd Solondz directed a companion piece, *Happiness 2* (2008). The issue the term “series” raises in film is that it can define works that are not actually sequels, but more broadly “interrelated” works, which someone else than their creator can present as a coherent whole. Film anthologies create more or less arbitrary filmic “series” based on artistic genre, author or director, or on the presence of a major actor – the term “star” regaining its gravitational meaning to promote a “constellation” of works – simply by numbering the works in a box set of DVDs, or by presenting them in chronological order, or by organizing their broadcasting over a period of time on television or during a film festival. In this loose meaning – one that does not stem from an inherent sequence between works, but from

other aspects of interrelatedness – chronology often remains a main organizing principle. If a cultural TV network such as Arte were to broadcast “the world’s most celebrated vampire films”, it would probably start with Murnau’s *Nosferatu* (1922) and work its way up to the *Twilight* (2008-2010) trilogy, because the emphasis would be on thinking within the frame of the history of cinema, and of the “seriality” of creation. The subtext might even be made explicit: that each director is confronted to questions of tradition and originality, intertextuality and variation, and that creation around a theme or figure within a specific genre involves inherently “serial” concerns that can be discussed in terms of sequelization or homage, re-adaptation or remake, rejuvenation or parody, pastiche or revision, and that the same figures take on different, albeit recurring, meanings within changing social contexts. A more commercial network, however, would opt for a more sensational paradigm to bring various works together, for instance “the sexiest vampires ever” and segue from *Interview With A Vampire* (1994) to *Twilight*, while completely omitting Count Orlok as played by Max Schreck or by Gary Oldman (in Coppola’s 1992 *Dracula*). Each of these “series” could be considered as valid as the other, according to its self-proclaimed and self-justifying paradigm – and both would indeed be received as a series, whether viewed serially through broadcasting over a period of weeks, or bought in a DVD box set – and yet retain the arbitrary quality of a collection, an anthology or a selection, since each of the films in any of these “compilations” of films stands on its own, and can in no way be considered “incomplete” without the others. To illustrate how a leading actress can “create” a serial effect by simultaneously or sequentially playing roles that appear connected to the moviegoer, one need only think of Julianne Moore’s dual performance of unhappiness in suburbia in Todd Haynes’ *Far From Heaven* and Stephen Daldry’s *The Hours*, both released in 2002. While this might be a result of Moore’s having been typecast, to see her in both roles creates the illusion of a variation on women’s unhappiness in 1950s and 1960s American suburbia.

12. <sup>12</sup> Some cliffhangers are particularly memorable: the penultimate episode of *Nip/Tuck* Season 3, which revolved around the Carver, has been analyzed by Eddy Chevalier as an example of “jumping the shark”, in baroque and camp excess. See “*Nip/Tuck* : soap opera baroque ? Viol, secret et viol du secret dans la saga du Carver” In “Les pièges des nouvelles séries télévisées américaines: mécanismes narratifs et idéologiques”, *GRAAT* online # 6, December 2009 : p. 161-180. <http://www.graat.fr/backissuepiegesseriestv.htm>

13. *Deliberate* ironies in the choice of the musical score for the end sequence can, of course, be an excellent aesthetic and ideological choice. Each episode of the first seasons of *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007- ) ends on an American standard associated with romance; but given the oppressive sexual politics played out in the series, the narrative re-contextualization turns this musical nostalgia on its head and sours the “sweetness” of the closing song, in keeping with the fact that episodes tend to end on a note of disillusionment or loss.

14. “The strategies of recall prompted by recaps can run counter to one of the core narrative pleasures of most genres of storytelling: surprise. Within many complex long-term narratives, the deep mythology of the storyworld can be confusing and hard-to-follow without recaps to active working memories and remind us of deep-seated backstory. However, seeing a character or event in a recap can effectively ‘spoil’ a surprise appearance or twist, undercutting the narrative effects that creators might have been hoping to produce.” (Mittell, “Previously On”, 2009).

15. For instance on Wikipedia: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:The\\_Wire.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:The_Wire.jpg) (last consulted October 25, 2010).

16. An image of static on a TV screen; the letters HBO appearing; and then coming into clear definition, just as the sound of static resolves itself into a clear note.

17. See Simon’s 2002 interview with *Salon* magazine: <http://dir.salon.com/ent/tv/int/2002/06/29/simon/index.html>

18. “Little boxes on the hillside/ Little boxes made of ticky-tacky/ Little boxes on the hillside/ Little boxes all the same/... <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i8StRAJCork> (posted July 30, 2009; last consulted October 25, 2010).
19. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EjtNMr0TrGg> (posted September 16, 2009; (last consulted October 25, 2010).
20. To see the two versions and enjoy the contrast: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ej8Rqo-VT4> And <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-k6WfdU85XE>
21. Those unfamiliar with the term “frak” need only watch a few episodes of *Battlestar Galactica*.
22. See Barbara Villez, “Damages: ‘Trust No One’, Believe Only What You See”.<http://www.graat.fr/backissuepiegesseriestv.htm>
23. In this episode, a character tells him he cannot stray from the original script: “You don’t buy the ring, Desmond.”
24. For a brilliant analysis of Lostpedia see Mittell, “Sites of participation: Wiki fandom and the case of Lostpedia” (2009).
25. See Gray and Mittell, 2009 (also analysed by Pearson, 2009). For an analysis of the specific marketing strategies this enabled, and of *Lost*’s ambitious use of *other media* in an extension of its universe, see Brooker, 2009, and Johnson, 2009.
26. While this issue is not raised by Gray and Mittell, there is probably an overrepresentation of male viewers on these platforms; women bloggers writing for the *Washington Post*, while extremely versed in the island mythology, clearly expressed their preference as viewers for the Desmond-based narrative rather than to the war being waged on the island, throughout Season 6. See: [http://voices.washingtonpost.com/celebritology/2010/05/lost\\_dueling\\_analysis\\_the\\_end.html](http://voices.washingtonpost.com/celebritology/2010/05/lost_dueling_analysis_the_end.html) (posted June 24, 2010; last consulted October 25, 2010). Also see Mittell’s own reassessment of what *Lost* turned out to be about in his post on Just TV after the finale: “*Lost*’s Lingering Questions”, 10 May 2010.
27. The 100-day strike from November 2007 to February 2008 impacted most series. For an analysis of its causes, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2007%E2%80%93932008\\_Writers\\_Guild\\_of\\_America\\_strike](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2007%E2%80%93932008_Writers_Guild_of_America_strike) (last consulted October 25, 2010).
28. The distinction I would make between “metafilmic” and “metatelevisual” is that the latter refers to any instance in which TV is specifically referred to, for instance when characters speak of favorite TV programs, exhibit their own TV culture (for instance, quipping from cult series like *Star Trek*), or are shown watching television, with all of the possible ironies of the medium having changed so much over time (for instance, our watching the characters in *Mad Men* create and/or review TV ads of the early 1960s takes on the character of entering a time machine if seen from an advertising perspective, but carries specific ironies from the point of view of intermediality, since the TV series itself has some of the qualities of art cinema (narratively and aesthetically) and depicts TV in its infancy... and crass commercialism.
29. Most blogs and reviews on the *finale* hinge on their authors having experienced this catharsis... or not: for an interesting overview of responses, from the uplifted to the let down: <http://features.metacritic.com/features/2010/lost-finale-review-season-6-episode-1718/> (posted May 24, 2010; last consulted October 25, 2010).
30. This does not preclude the flaunting of consumerism, constant product placement (etc).
31. See Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation* (2000), MIT Press, and Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, Routledge, 2006 on these issues of remediation and adaptation from one medium to another.
32. Askwith quotes *Lost* creator Lindenhof saying “The reality is that Carlton, myself, J.J [Abrams], the creative brains behind the *Lost* universe, we could all band together and say ‘We’re ending the show after three seasons because that’s the arc. They get off the island, and we reveal all the things we want to reveal.’ And the network would say, ‘No, you won’t.’ They will hire somebody and do *Lost*, with or without [us].” (Askwith, 2009 : p. 167).

33. With variations such as a mixed-ethnicity cast including Lucy Liu (following *Grey's Anatomy*, *Heroes* and *Lost*'s lead on casting Asian, Latino and Black actors and actresses), a more aggressive tone concerning men-women relationships, and a lesbian love affair (this was between the end of *The L Word* and *Grey's Anatomy* Season 5 portraying Dr. Callie Torres falling for women).
34. See "Syfy's Innovative *Caprica* Marketing Generates 1.5 Million Pre-Premier Audience" <http://tvbythenumbers.com/2010/01/19/syfys-innovative-caprica-marketing-generates-1-5million-pre-premieraudience/39280> (posted January 19, 2010; Last consulted October 25, 2010).
35. Networks have nothing to worry about when a series is successful. See this link on the \$900,000 cost of a 30 second ad during the finale of *Lost*; on announcers' savvy advertising (tying into the storyline of the series) and on the benefits of this strategy for them: "Advertisers' Budget Splurge On "Lost" Finale Well Worth Their Money - And Yours" <http://blog.searchenginewatch.com/100602-152946> (posted June 2, 2010; last consulted October 25, 2010).
36. As Ellen Seiter and Mary Jeanne Wilson point out, in "Soap Opera Survival Tactics", the replaying of specific episodes can be seen in a psychoanalytical light (2008 : p. 145).
37. The psychoanalytical series *In Treatment* (HBO, 2008-), in which the psychiatrist deals with different patients on set days of the week, can apparently be purchased in Israel in serial, but "non-ensemble" form.

## ABSTRACTS

This article examines both the advantages and challenges of the ongoing serial narrative in contemporary American TV series. How did such series manage to spread beyond premium cable TV like HBO and Showtime to mainstream networks like ABC, despite the economic risks involved? How do such narratives hook their audiences, and play with every convention from opening credits to the cliffhanger, from ensemble casts to subplots, in their reinvention of formulaic soap opera into sophisticated *new soap*? How do they avoid the pitfalls of too-obvious serial progression, disrupting their timeline, and renewing their aesthetics of surprise? How, in an attempt to satisfy very different viewer expectations, do they play on identification, reflexivity, metatextuality, and remediation to guarantee different levels of "engagement" with the series? Finally, if serialization is based on the desire for *more, more, more*, who determines when the story must end, and can there ever be a successful *finale*?

Cet article étudie les défis posés par la structure en « feuilleton » des séries télévisées américaines contemporaines. Comment ce modèle de sérialité a-t-il pu s'étendre au-delà des chaînes câblées vers les chaînes généralistes comme ABC, malgré le risque économique qu'il représente ? Comment, pour fidéliser le public, les scénaristes jouent-ils sur les accroches, depuis le générique jusqu'aux interruptions brutales du récit, et comment renouvellent-ils les conventions du soap opera, évitant les pièges d'un déroulement trop linéaire, bouleversant la chronologie pour maintenir une esthétique de la surprise et de la révélation ? Comment ces séries jouent-elles sur l'identification, la réflexivité, la métatextualité, et l'intermédialité pour garantir différents types de réception et différents niveaux de lecture ? Enfin, si la série repose sur le désir que l'histoire se poursuive encore et encore, qui donc décide d'y mettre un terme ? Une série télévisée peut-elle ne jamais se conclure de manière satisfaisante ?

## INDEX

**Keywords:** contemporary TV series, serialization, new soap, episode, season

**Mots-clés:** séries télévisées contemporaines, sérialité, feuilleton, épisode, saison

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