

## ART & MEDIA FILES **Seriality, Repetition and Innovation in Breaking Bad's Recaps and Teasers**

### *Introduction*

I will explore recaps and cold opens in *Breaking Bad* as serial and cross-medial forms, focusing on the socio-cultural and semiotic mechanism of reinterpretation through narrative *condensation* or narrative *expansion*. Condensation means using each episode's initial recap not only to summarise important actions and dialogues from previous episodes, but also to reopen narrative fragments from previous seasons in order to understand the current episode.

In a more expanded medial ecosystem, the 'internal' recaps of the series interface with other forms of 'external' metanarrative redundancy, such as the synopsis, the encyclopedias and the wikis that can be found online. They also deal with other *additive* comprehension logics of narrative expansion, such as the official *Breaking Bad* web episodes, short chapters released online and used to keep the viewers' expectations high in the time between two seasons.

I will analyse how recaps change over the course of the seasons, and how teasers can be aimed at tricking the viewer into false narrative tracks, but also at expanding the narrative storyworld through unexpected short prequels.

Audiovisual recaps are paratexts<sup>1</sup> given as initial thresholds and intertextual products that interact with the past and present narrative of a series and are designed to build narrative maps for the viewers. Teasers often take the shape of alienating prologues, which obtain to sidetrack the viewer or to anticipate what will happen in the episode<sup>2</sup>.

In this article we basically investigate two serial products as Mittel<sup>3</sup> defines them: the "retelling" strategy, which includes redundancy and repetition, and the "suspense" strategy, which creates cliffhangers and narrative expectations. Therefore recaps and teasers in *Breaking Bad* are also a pretext to study the serial logics of repetition and innovation as ways of either "centripetal" storytelling, to deepen the narrative knowledge, or "centrifugal" storytelling, to expand it.

### *Interstitial Nanotexts, Entryways Paratexts*

Scolari applies the Groupe  $\mu^4$  classification of rhetorical operations based on rules of addition, omission, transposition and permutation to analyse cross-media narrative strategies in Tv series, especially in the *Lost* media system. It works as a taxonomy of "transmedia expansion and compression narrative strategies"<sup>5</sup>, combining narratology and semiotics:

Since classical rhetoric, the four fundamental rhetorical operations have been addition (*adiecto*), omission (*delectio*), transposition (*transmutatio*), and permutation (*immutatio*). [...] *Addition* is based on the expansion of elements, *omission* on the subtraction of them, *transposition*, or transferring, changes the normal order or arrangement of the elements and, finally, *permutation* is based on the substitution of elements."<sup>6</sup>

While "addition" concerns alternative endings and "permutation" takes the form of new media products like re-cut trailers and mashups by prosumers and fans, "transposition" (of the timeline) concerns flashbacks and flashforwards produced by the Tv series<sup>7</sup>. Recapitulations (or recaps) are defined by Scolari as "compressed texts": they use the rhetorical operations of "omission" both when they are paratextual elements (as in *Previously on Lost*) and when they become transmedia practices through prosumers' web videos as in *Lost Recap – All You Need to Know About Lost in 4 (min.): 24 (sec.)*.

Scolari, talking about the three dimensions for analysing the convergence process proposed by Barra,

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Penati and Scaglioni<sup>8</sup> (i.e. “extension, access, and branding”), discusses the first of them: extension. In transmedia storytelling theory, the opening of a narrative world through different media and platforms is also called ‘expansion’, states Scolari, who wonders: “Are all transmedia experiences *expansive*? Are there any experiences of *narrative compression*? Many audiovisual contents, rather than expanding the story, reduce it to a minimum expression, like in trailers and recapitulations”<sup>9</sup>.

Scolari defines these products of narrative compression *paratextual nanotexts*: they are used (and abused) in contemporary web “snack culture”, becoming a basic component of the transmedia universe while providing “new interpretation frames” or allowing the consumer “to enter the narrative world”<sup>10</sup>. Thus, states Scolari, transmedia narratives should be considered with “a more flexible definition of transmedia storytelling”, that includes “compressed contents”.

According to Scolari, recaps and trailers are also *interstitial nanotexts*, a formula that defines “time-based transmedia strategies [that] act on the temporal dimension of the narrative, filling in the blanks, telling stories before or after the diegetic time of the main text or compressing the contents into a few minutes”<sup>11</sup>.

An answer to Scolari’s questions comes from the theoretical proposal of a chronological evolution of narrative serial contents through different steps, starting from the first wave (in the mid ‘80s) of serial multilinear narratives up to the age of media convergence, with the dominant logic of transmedia storytelling that is the target of Scolari’s critiques.

Innocenti and Pescatore<sup>12</sup> state that after the first wave comes a more “cross-medial” phase, concerning the development of a complex project that starts from a narrative matrix and spreads since the very beginning across several media and deliveries. According to Innocenti and Pescatore, this second phase does no longer entail simple logics of “derivation” (i.e. secondary processes following the products) but instead a pre-determined cross-media design that requires great consistency and coherence among the different products and media, like in *The Matrix*’s cross-media strategy and obviously in Jenkins’ theory of “transmedia storytelling”<sup>13</sup>.

There would be also a third step in this evolution: the design of a “serial ecosystem” in which the initial model evolves in ways and shapes undefined in advance<sup>14</sup>. Thinking about an “expanded medial ecosystem”<sup>15</sup>, the internal recaps of the series interact with other forms of external metanarrative redundancy, such as the synopsis, the encyclopedias and the wikis that can be found online. Following this argument, trailers, teasers (or cold opens) and recaps that can be found both in *Lost* and *Breaking Bad* interact with other additive comprehension logics of narrative expansion<sup>16</sup>, such as the official *Breaking Bad*’s web episodes (*webisodes*), short chapters released online and used to raise viewers’ expectations between the seasons.

As mentioned above, trailers, webisodes and recaps are not just textual objects for the Tv productions; they also represent a rich source material for the ‘unofficial’ fictional world of fan remix and mashup paratexts. As Scolari<sup>17</sup> shows in his analysis, “the borderline between user-generated contents and the culture industry’s production is very porous”, even if they often require “to apply an advanced set of narrative, textual, and technological skills”<sup>18</sup>.

Scolari closes his long article on *Lostology* stating that official and unofficial recaps “always propose new doors into the fictional world that allow new spectators to join the show”<sup>19</sup>. Let me now explore this idea of “doors” into the fictional world.

Nowadays we deal with a “complex Tv”<sup>20</sup>, as to say several complex storyworlds, expanded in time and space, produced by the new seriality of contemporary North American Tv series, with serial texts opening up seemingly “endlessly deferred hyperdiegesis”<sup>21</sup>. Therefore we perceive these “expanded medial ecosystems” as some abnormal objects that “overflow both in time and in space [with the] ability to branch through different media, producing narratives and related content from the web to merchandising.”<sup>22</sup> That is why, according to Gray, “we might expect both the frustrations of wanting to

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know what will happen, and the experience of a text as comprising much more than just the show, to increase markedly.<sup>23</sup>

Hence, the necessity of those “in medias res paratext” that are the video recaps, i.e. every small text preceding a television series such as “last week on”, or “previously on”:

Such segments usually consist of a carefully edited fifteen-to-thirty-second sequence of images and plot-points from previous episodes, designed to give audiences the necessary backstory. For new viewers, these segments clearly serve as entryway paratexts, but they also act as reminders for returning viewers, designed to focus attention on specific actions, themes, or issues<sup>24</sup>.

According to Innocenti and Pescatore<sup>25</sup> these “entryway paratexts” are “predefined information packets” that can guide the viewers, giving them “functional knowledge” that is very useful in an expanding universe. These information packages provide contextual and local instructions, avoiding a global mapping that is given elsewhere, for example in the online wikis of the series. Actually, this could happen not just with the recaps, but “with every element of the expanded Tv seriality”:

The textual objects of the series (episodes, recaps, mobisodes, webisodes, minisodes) allow the viewer to be oriented inside of a complex informational architecture, by acting as interfaces. These textual objects modulate the relationship with the user of serial universes, by acting as design tools of the narrative experience<sup>26</sup>.

### **Recaps in Breaking Bad**

Even if many remixed recaps of *Breaking Bad*'s five seasons (AMC, 2008-2013) can be found on YouTube, official recaps are quite difficult to find: they do *not* appear as part of the episodes in *Breaking Bad*'s official DVDs (also in the Italian DVD boxes), but are sometimes present as ‘extras’, for example in a DVD box in which AMC network offers an official recap for the second season (actually, it is rather a trailer of the first season). By checking online, we can easily find the five seasons on streaming without any recaps. Checking the five seasons on air on AMC, *Breaking Bad*'s recaps seemingly start from the third season and run until the fifth and last one. When recaps eventually appear on air, they have probably become ‘necessary’ to recall previous narratives of two seasons, at least according to our quick survey. I would argue that this is a choice of the producers of the series on air and then on DVD box. Nonetheless, not having recaps could simply be an aesthetic choice. *No recaps* at all, as it happens in DVD boxes, means a stronger shock for the viewers who have to face straight away the unexpected and sometimes even horror-style cold opens. We should always remember that the extremely original use of these teasers or cold opens is a main issue when talking about *Breaking Bad*. Considering this, the absence of recaps allows the series to emphasise the alienating effect caused by entering the fiction.

Anyhow, on air AMC recaps open with a male narrative voice over introducing: “Previously on *Breaking Bad*”, then they sample some fictional dialogues and situations. As I will explain later, we can call them “modular recaps”<sup>27</sup>.

The recap in 3x02 (*Caballo Sin Nombre*) is actually about the second season and the previous episodes, as if AMC network needed to organize not only the “screening time” (the scheduled time to air the episodes) but also the inner narrative and “discourse time” of the series<sup>28</sup>.

The recap presents a quick overview of selected images, seemingly edited in a non-narrative order, with no fading and using clear cuts among them.

The extra-narrative music, an obsessive drums pattern, works as the glue for the whole recap sequence.

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We watch eight very short scenes, with narrative dialogues, which show a given narrative situation in a few seconds. Generally, all the *Breaking Bad* recaps are designed in this way and they are never longer than 30-35 seconds (towards the end of the fifth season they become even shorter.)

In 3x02 (*Caballo Sin Nombre*), the recap opens with a drawing of drug lord Heisenberg (Walter White, the protagonist), whom we saw in the previous episode, becoming an “ex-voto” placed by the twins Salamanca, two killers of the Mexican cartel, next to the statues of the popular Mexican cult of *La Santa Muerte*. The recap then moves on to a scene from the second season (ep. 2x11, *Mandala*), in which Skyler, Walter White’s wife, discovers the rigged financial statements of the company that she has recently gone back to work for. After that, we watch Hank Schrader, Walter White’s drug busting DEA brother-in-law, inquiring the old boss Salamanca (now mute and on a wheelchair), about the business that his nephew Tuco has in place with Jesse’s partner (Heisenberg). Jesse witnesses the police questioning, in a scene that belongs to the second season (ep. 2x03, *Bit by a Dead Bee*). Then comes another scene from the second season in which Jesse, on the ground after a scuffle, picks up a rock and hits Tuco Salamanca, who wanted to kill him (ep. 2x02, *Grilled*). Then Skyler returns, in a scene from the previous episode (3x01, *No Mas*) in which she asks Walter if he’s a drug dealer: Walter denies it, but she tells him that only if he accepts to divorce she will not speak with Hank about it. Then comes another short scene from the second season (episode 2x04, *Down*): sitting in front of a judge and his parents, Jesse is told he will have to leave the house where he lives, since his mom has found out about his drug lab. Immediately after, the recap goes back to the key scene of the previous episode (3x01, *No Mas*): just when Walter White has quit cooking methamphetamines, drug lord Gustavo Fring offers him three millions dollars to go and work for him for three months. The recap ends with an explosion in the sky over Albuquerque seen through the eyes of Walter White, a spectacular scene from the previous season’s last episode (ep. 2x13, *ABQ*).

Just before being told the story of the next episode, we have been taken through sequences from the previous and scenes of the previous season. According to Mittel,<sup>29</sup> recaps indeed serve several expository roles to activate the viewer’s working memory, highlighting both “specific narrative information for the upcoming episode” and “long-term plotlines”. In fact, the recap for episode 3x02 focuses on the dangers hanging over Walter – the two killers and the risk of losing his family, and on the new opportunity for revenge that is offered to him by Gustavo Fring.

Being already halfway through the entire series, the plotlines have become increasingly complicated, following the evolution of each main character. This is why we follow the implications of Skyler working for a man who will become her lover; we see Hank’s investigations coming close to discovering the real identity of Heisenberg, aka Walter White; and we are shown the role of Jesse in the killing of drug dealer Tuco Salamanca, the first true antagonist of Walter and Jesse.

After the recap, episode 3x02 (*Caballo Sin Nombre*) opens with a very traditional narrative teaser, in which we see Walter being fined because of a broken windshield, reacting angrily with the traffic agent and eventually getting arrested. Walter’s loss of self-confidence and *hybris*, as well as his failure as a husband and father, are highlighted by a scene in which he ends up handcuffed and pepper-sprayed, passive and humiliated.

As said before, recaps are *compressed texts* that use the rhetorical operations of “omission”. The recap that opens the first episode of the fourth season (4x01, *Box Cutter*) serves to guide the viewer through the main plotlines of the previous season. After the ritual male voice over (a voice of the network) saying: “Previously on *Breaking Bad*”, we watch a key scene of the first episode of the previous season (3x01, *No Mas*). Skyler is discussing with her husband, Walter, who is finally admitting the truth about his double life: “I’m a manufacturer, not a drug dealer”. Then the recap collects two scenes from episode six of the third season (3x06, *Sunset*): Walter admiring the brand new hi-tech lab that he obtained after accepting Gustavo Fring’s offer, and Walter meeting with his new assistant Gale. Immediately after it, we watch Walt dismissing Gale and asking Jesse to return to work with him (3x07, *One Minute*). Here

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comes one of the key scenes of the third season: the Salamanca's twins seek to kill Hank, but they are shot and injured by him (3x07, *One Minute*). From the last episode of the previous season (3x13, *Full Measures*) we watch a perfidious dialogue in which Gus Fring asks Gale when he will be ready to fully replace Walter White (so that he may finally kill him). Then, in the last scene of the previous season, we see Jesse who, trying to defend Walt by Mike (who wants to kill him on behalf of Gus), coldly shoots Gale (3x13, *Full Measures*).

By selecting only a few pertinent narrative lines, the recap enables the viewer to smoothly enter the fourth season. Walt's revelation to his wife, an important moment of truth after two seasons of lies, is just hinted at. Similarly, the shootout between Hank and the Salamancas is just enough to let us know that they are gone and that Hank is still alive (even if out of the game for a while). What seems to be more important in this season's recap is the development of the relationship between the dominant drug lord (Gus Fring) and the "cook" Heisenberg/Walter White, who aims to take its place.

The two recaps that I have described are quite similar in terms of morphology, but also different for the selection of narrative possibilities and for their communication aims.

While the recap that opens the first episode of the fourth season (4x01, *Box Cutter*) is a typical early-season recap, fishing solely from the previous season, the 'poly-perspective' narrative of the recap of episode 3x02 (*Caballo Sin Nombre*) mixes two strategies: the early season recap with the retelling of the key scenes of the previous episode. This not only lets the viewer into the overall narrative, it also improves a strong consistency with the first episode of the new season.

In the fifth season, instead, the last episodes's recaps are very short flashes recalling only the key scenes of the immediately preceding episode.

These quick examples allow us to sketch some hypotheses on the recap's product strategy throughout a long term seriality.

### ***Some tentative typologies***

Bisoni<sup>30</sup> works mostly on recaps in *Lost* and *24*, exploring the idea of "interfaces" and entrypoints between the medial objects and the viewers' experience. In this perspective, recaps become useful products that help the users to enter a complex system of narrative contents:<sup>31</sup> running plot (cross-episodes 'horizontal' storylines) and anthology plot ('vertical' storylines of a single episode), plot of the single episode, events and main characters and the space-time of their mutual transformations. In his analysis, Bisoni considers two types of official recaps: the traditional ones, or *voice over recaps*, that have a "summary function"; and the so called *modular recaps*, without voice over, that work just as a "local and partial guide" to the narrative materials. The latter are products of condensation, because they are aimed at giving back not the global movement, but just some portions of the narrative universe. Bisoni<sup>32</sup> states that recaps constitute a sort of "recycled Tv", which uses the rhetoric of the "quotation" in a "found footage way". According to Bisoni<sup>33</sup>, "modular" recaps suggest the articulation of general narrative lines (framework situations or scripts) but in relative terms, because recaps may have a local range compared to the complex narrative universe of the series.

By selecting just a few narrative levels, every recap summarizes the relevant narrative articulations (i.e. the actantial logic of heroes and anti-heroes and the explanation of the purposes of the actions)<sup>34</sup>, but at the same time manages to show the complexity of the plotlines through short flashes. This means, for example, opening the discourse organization through the characters' points of view, and through spatial and temporal dimensions. It also means selecting both a pragmatic and an expressive way to communicate, presenting gaze's strategies and considering stylistic elements of the series (for example, the use of the split screen for the series *24*).

Every recap thus becomes an internal threshold of the episode, but also an outside threshold that opens a dialogue with the communication context and builds a strong pragmatic deal with the audience. In this



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way the viewers enjoy an intertextual knowledge, which provides access to the new episode with a local narrative mapping, useful at any level of their medial experience of the series.

In other words, several factors intervene in making the selection and production of the recaps a non-neutral process: first of all, the relevance given to some scenes rather than others; secondly, the choices made in presenting, editing and post-producing the material (voice over or not, close narrative editing or parallel editing to create links between characters and situations, etc.); finally, the choice of 'objective' or 'subjective' points of view, the choice of a guided or non-guided narration and all other textual strategies used to create specific meanings or 'perceptive' and 'affective' effects<sup>35</sup>.

I propose to think about recaps in a narrative semiotic way, first of all differentiating those that simply summarise the previous episode, or *short term inter-episodes recaps*, from those that tell more about the whole season, or *long term inter-episodes recaps*; and finally from those that are about previous seasons' scenes and storylines, or *inter-seasons recaps*.

Moreover, using the notion of "aspectualisation"<sup>36</sup> of textual semiotic, I propose to identify the narrative time strategy of recaps as a way to classify them. In the strategies of production of recaps we can find narrative time condensation, with the displacement of turning points or the possible 're-orders' of a narrative linearity (that gets systematically lost in many contemporary series). It also seems useful to verify where the recaps appear in a long seriality with more seasons, as to say if they come at the beginning, during the central part, or at the end of a season. Depending on where they appear, they may design a different rhythm of the viewer's experience: a rhythm of the serial narrative "tension",<sup>37</sup> which produces different semiotic and pragmatic effects.

Actually, in serial Tv narratives we could observe two different 'textual zones', in which recapitulations work in specific and peculiar ways: the beginning and the end of the season.

Let's consider *Breaking Bad's* third season recaps: the *end-of-season recaps* are very quick reworks of the key scenes and turning points of the previous episode, or of the previous two or three episodes, whenever they are useful to link and resume a particular storyline. They are *short term inter-episodes recaps* that create an urge to follow the running plot, because the narrative time is about to end, so it would be hard to open memory breaks or *excursus* in the viewer's mental archive. These recaps are a 'run forward', aimed at closing the gaps of the narration and reaching 'the end' of the season.

Conversely, the *start-of-season recaps* are placed at the opening of the first episodes of a season. These recaps, for example the first two or three episodes of the third season of *Breaking Bad*, present more wide cognitive and framing maps ("situation maps" according to Eugeni)<sup>38</sup>, which explore multiple storylines so to refresh the memory of the viewer or build it *ad hoc*. In these *long term inter-episodes recaps* we do not find the urge to 'run' (in a cognitive way), but instead an effect of delay or of a more relaxed opening. The viewer's competence takes a step back in order to better understand the complexity of the storylines and appreciate the new season.

Inside the serial narrative, as to say in the continuity of the central episodes, we could talk of *mid-season recaps*<sup>39</sup>: their function is oriented to maintain the basic competences on the main storyline and the main turning points of previous episodes. These recaps allow the viewers to follow the episode without having to remember 'everything': they select for them some useful 'red threads' that will lead them inside the open threshold of the story<sup>40</sup>. Actually, in semiotic terms, we could identify also the re-use of similar scenes in a series of recaps (*inter-episodes* or even *inter-seasons* ones) usually consecutives. These parts are merely 'redundant' because of the repetition of the same scenes in the recaps: they induce the viewer's attention through key scenes, whether about one character or the development of a conflict between characters. We would call them *redundant recaps*.

Nonetheless, these different kinds of textual objects - *start-of-season*, *end-of-season*, *mid-season* and *redundant recaps* - are flexible and adaptable to each specific series. We have seen before how the recap of episode *Caballo Sin Nombre* (3x02) merges the typical *start-of-season recap* and the *short term inter-episodes recap* (that retells scenes of the previous episode). When talking about the last

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episodes of *Breaking Bad*'s third season, for example, the recap for episode 3x11 (*Abiquiu*) does not increase the narrative rhythm to 'run' to the end: instead it searches the previous season to recall the death of Jesse's beloved girlfriend Jane by overdose. In fact, the teaser in the same episode shows a flashback in which Jane and Jesse visit the museum of painter Georgia O'Keeffe: it is a scene that we have never seen before and that expands the time of the past to serve the nostalgic present of Jesse, who in the beginning of the episode will find a cigarette smoked by Jane in his car. In this way, the viewers can go deeper inside Jesse's emotions and better appreciate his narrative transformations.

To discuss my tentative typology I will quote an article by Mittel<sup>41</sup> about the "Previously on" and the "mechanics of memory" inside Tv series. Mittel states that recaps help to face the "challenge for the mechanics of memory" of the viewers of "a series that is told over a period of months and years" and that produces an expansive narrative universe<sup>42</sup>.

Mittel proposes many kinds of textual mechanisms, from the "diegetic retelling" via dialogues, to "visual cues" that can "activate long-term memories"; from the "voiceover narration" to the common technique of flashbacks, mostly as a first-person subjective flashback that incorporates previous events into one episode.

Talking about recaps, Mittel claims that they are part of "a number of strategies outside of the core storytelling text to help manage memories"<sup>43</sup>, and that most contemporary serials produce and air "a one-to-two-minute recap before each episode to summarize key events 'previously on' the series"<sup>44</sup>.

Recaps are "designed for the weekly original airings", states Mittel, but nowadays many series on DVDs offer the option to view each episode with or without recaps: notably, according to Mittel: "the presence or absence of recaps can drastically change the way episodes are consumed and comprehended"<sup>45</sup>.

We could try to compare some of Mittel's proposals to our typology. Talking about the recap in *Silence of the Lambs* (*Veronica Mars* episode), Mittel suggests that recaps highlight specific narrative information for the upcoming episode and, furthermore, "the show triggers which long-term plotlines need to be activated into working memory to comprehend this episode's developments"<sup>46</sup>.

This kind of recap is like the one in *Breaking Bad*'s third season, which recalls the viewer's memory of Jane's death. According to Mittel, recaps "can serve more expository roles, especially early in a series run": "The second episode of *Dexter* features a two-minute recap, culled exclusively from the 52-minute pilot. This recap functions as a true summary of the pilot, providing glimpses of each main character, highlighting the core narrative scenario, and establishing the ongoing [narrative arcs]<sup>47</sup>".

We can easily define these kinds of recaps "early in a series run" as *start-of-season recaps*, which, as we said above, relocate the cognitive and 'situation' maps<sup>48</sup> for the viewer. Moreover, Mittel offers also a good example of our *end-of-season recaps* that filter the vast amount of story information and activate "the most crucial bits of narrative into working memory":

The recap from *Dexter*'s first season finale is much more in keeping with the memory-refreshing role typically found later in a season. The 1:45 recap contains clips from many of the previous 11 episodes, and presents them in such quick succession that they would be incomprehensible to a new viewer. For ongoing viewers, however, the flashes of clues remind us of how far Dexter had gotten in his pursuit of the Ice Truck Killer, and the final shots of his sister in peril refreshes the cliffhanger from the previous episode. The recap also focuses on the stabbing of police officer Angel from episode 10, which becomes a major plot point in the finale<sup>49</sup>.

However, Mittel clearly identifies other meanings created by recaps: they can activate long dormant memories, which are lost in the viewer's archive, to create surprise<sup>50</sup> or activate curiosity towards a character that will return to be seen (even just as hallucination)<sup>51</sup>.

We could add that recaps may also give some new information, telling us something more or showing

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something from a different point of view. Modular recaps of *House of Cards* use (at least in the first and second seasons) this way to reopen the previous episode, usually giving us a shred of brand new or previously unheard dialogue in a situation that we have already watched.

### *Teasers as minisodes*

What seems more interesting in *Breaking Bad*'s episodes is finding out how the fixed, stable, and reassuring Tv format of the recaps comes into conflict with the uncertain, stylish, and cinematic format of *Breaking Bad*'s teasers or cold opens.

In a detailed analysis Rossend Sánchez-Baró<sup>52</sup> explains that *Breaking Bad*'s teasers are the "most imaginative" among all AMC series. Some critic calls them *minisodes*<sup>53</sup> and many fan-made videos are devoted to editing all these textual objects in one sequence<sup>54</sup>.

*Breaking Bad*'s teasers are often used for narrative and aesthetics experimentation, as an authorial choice to immediately capture the audience's attention: "the series *Breaking Bad* uses disorientation as a narrative asset to create uncertainty and promoting viewer's curiosity toward the story [...]. The creator Vince Gilligan [...] manages to generate a permanent sensation of unpredictability<sup>55</sup>".

Sánchez-Baró claims that *Breaking Bad*'s cold opens are an exclusive place in the series for time shifts that use flashbacks and flashforwards<sup>56</sup>.

In the first season, the teaser to the episode *Crazy Handful of Nothin'* (1x06) shows Walt and Jesse back in their RV laboratory, arguing while cooking methamphetamines. After their experiences with two drug dealers that they have killed (Emilio and Krazy-8), Walt wants to stay in the background so Jesse can deal with customers. Walt insists that there will be "no more violence". During his speech we watch a flashforward to the end of the episode where a shaven-headed, badass-looking Walt carries a bloody bag out of a blasted building. According to Guffey and Koontz: "it looks like Walt's no violence rule won't last long. The cold open sets up the disparity between what Walt imagines the drug business to be and what it actually is<sup>57</sup>".

One strange and intermedial way to anticipate information is the teaser of *Negro y Azul* (2x07), in which we are told how much fame and how many enemies the cook Heisenberg has through the joyful performance of three Mexicans 'mariachi': three guitar players and singers of the real band *Los Cuates de Sinaloa*.

Conversely, an example of powerful flashback is the teaser of *Box Cutter*, the first episode of the fourth season (4x01). As we learn that Gale, the assistant metamphetamine cook, had strongly wanted Walter White in the new laboratory that Gus Fring was building, we feel strange, because we know that the previous season has just ended with Gale being murdered by Jesse.

Other widely studied examples are the second season's teasers, in which the images of the eye floating in the swimming pool are in black and white, with a fuchsia of the roasted teddy bear being the only color in them. It is a false narrative path, which opens some negative assumptions about the destiny of Walter White and his family, whereas the teddy bear is only the residue of an airplane crash in the sky of their city. Actually, we will understand this, and the whole sequence of the airplane disaster, only at the end of the season<sup>58</sup>.

In all *Breaking Bad*'s seasons, cold opens are disruptive and destabilising for the viewers because of their ambiguity: they start the story without any advice or contextualisation, often using extreme close-ups from unexpected points of view. These choices create confusion and "increase the audience's interest in what they are seeing, so they look for immediate answers", states Sánchez-Baró<sup>59</sup>, but in the case of the pink teddy bear's cold opens "expectations and uncertainty escalates", because the first three episodes end "without offering any guide [...] to those strange images":



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The use of the close-up shot encourages a conscious strategy of concealment. Instead of showing the general scenario of waste and damage caused by the crash, the series pays attention to the slightest detail creating a vast and unreachable off scene. This *mise-en-scène* presumes, eventually, a space fragmentation. The previous teasers offer a succession of images juxtaposed, between which there is not a connecting thread. This strategy of juxtaposition and fragmentation is a common occurrence throughout the entire series<sup>60</sup>.

Barrette and Picard consider the same sequence of cold opens like an “enigmatic prologue”, which “forcefully demonstrate the work of enunciation and contribute to identifying the series with second-degree style”: “The eye floating on the water’s surface at the beginning of the sequence, separated from the body of the teddy bear, and the broken-up, overcharged vision it produces thus take on the task of reminding us reflexively of the constructed and subjective nature of the world we are being shown<sup>61</sup>”. Accordingly, Checcaglini<sup>62</sup> summarises some functions of *Breaking Bad*’s teasers: whether or not they have a role of “displacement”, they always create the right mood for the viewers of the episode, and in this case they work together with the recaps. Besides, cold opens “provide clues” about the plotlines that will be carried out in the episode, and they sometime serve the narration by compacting many different plotlines. Finally, we remember that they force the viewers to think about the textual mechanisms of seriality and about fiction itself.

### **Conclusions**

In this article we observe recaps in two different textual zones of serial Tv narratives: the beginning and the end of a season. In both cases recaps contribute to the general viewing rhythm, either by reopening and going deeper inside the plotlines or by running to the end of the season to create the effect of a ‘closing time’.

Referring to some examples from the series *Breaking Bad*, we could say that in semiotics terms the recaps as recognizable and redundant paratextual objects are the opposite of the experimental, innovative cold opens or teasers.

First of all, the conflict is both pragmatic and semantic, because recaps are *paratextual* elements while cold opens are a sort of misleading *textual prologues*, and because recaps are a sort of a *targeted condensation* while teasers produce semantic expansion<sup>63</sup>. Secondly, recaps serve the narration in a ‘local’ way (to enter the episode), in a ‘summarising’ way (to follow the ongoing season), and like a wider ‘memory mechanism’ of the series (among many seasons). Teasers, instead, expand the narration by opening new storylines, focusing on microscopic and sometimes unnecessary details, or going back to the past through flashbacks. Thirdly, at least in *Breaking Bad*, we face a conflict between two different communication strategies: while recaps are reassuring as they guide the viewer inside the complex narrative maps of new Tv seriality, teasers are instead disorienting, since they create curiosity and suspense for the viewer.

What happens in the above mentioned *Breaking Bad* medial products can be considered as a micro-example of the conflict between two main logics. The first one comes from the production, distribution and industrial pole, which demands attention to the audiences, their habits and their thirst for exhaustive knowledge. This pole wants to direct, explain, give instructions and narrative maps, reassuring and supporting its customers. The second one comes from the creative pole and expresses itself in authorial logics and complex textual constructions that privilege innovative choices and stylistic consistency over the intelligibility of each episode.

We could argue that recaps and teasers reviewed in this article appear as the products of a constant struggle between producers and creatives (authors), between conservatives and innovators, but also

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between the series textual products and the audience. The teasers, for example, are working against the viewers, to mislead them, ask them questions and challenge their interpretations. On the other hand, recaps answer the viewers' questions and provide instructions to guide their interpretations in selected and coherent plotlines. In semiotic terms, teasers activate an affective ('pathemic') suspension that the episode will be in charge to develop, while recaps reactivate narrative memory and emotions that the viewer has already experienced.

American new series are composed with temporal pivots that allow a mechanism of compression or expansion in their consumption. Thanks to the alliance (or to the conflict) between teasers and recaps, everybody can *binge watch* more episodes in one night without losing the waiting dimension and the narrative desire to always know more. As to say, teasers and recaps are thresholds between the inside and the outside of the episode (the other episodes and the other seasons, the series ecosystem, etc.), and serve as orientation tools that enable textual games of repetition and suspense, while encouraging fans (extratextual) practices<sup>64</sup>.

Nicola Dusi

### Notes

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5. Carlos A. Scolari, *op. cit.*, p. 45.
6. *Ivi*, p. 60.
7. See "Table 2", *Ivi*, p. 61.
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10. Nancy Miller, "Manifesto for a New Age", *Wired*, n. 15/3 (March 2007), pp. 16-28.
11. Carlos A. Scolari, *op. cit.*, p. 58.
12. Veronica Innocenti, Guglielmo Pescatore, "Architetture dell'informazione nella serialità televisiva", *IMAGO*, n. 3 (2011), pp. 142-143.
13. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York University Press, New York 2006.
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15. Claudio Bisoni, Veronica Innocenti, Guglielmo Pescatore, "Il concetto di ecosistema e i media studies: un'introduzione", in Claudio Bisoni, Veronica Innocenti (eds), *Media Mutations. Gli ecosistemi narrativi nello scenario mediale contemporaneo. Spazi, modelli, usi sociali*, Mucchi Editore, Modena 2013, pp. 11-26.
16. Henry Jenkins, *op. cit.*
17. *Ivi*, pp. 55-62.
18. "From a cultural perspective, the excellent quality of many recaps and synchros shows us that the borders between the culture industry and fan culture are very blurry." (Carlos A. Scolari, *op. cit.*, p. 64).

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19. *Ivi*, p. 62.
20. Jason Mittel, *op. cit.*.
21. Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures*, Routledge, London-New York 2002, p. 142.
22. Veronica Innocenti, Guglielmo Pescatore, *op. cit.*, p. 135.
23. Jonathan Gray, *Show sold separately: promos, spoilers, and other media paratexts*, New York University Press, New York-London 2010, pp. 42-43.
24. *Ibid.*
25. Veronica Innocenti, Guglielmo Pescatore, *op. cit.*, pp. 140-141.
26. *Ivi*, p. 140.
27. Claudio Bioni, "Il funzionamento dei recap: dal riassunto all'interfaccia", in Claudio Bioni, Veronica Innocenti (eds), *op. cit.*, pp. 141-151. (Engl. Transl. "The TV Recap: Knowledge, Memory and Complex Narrative Orientation", in Sara Pesce, Paolo Noto (eds), *The Politics of Ephemeral Digital Media. Permanence and Obsolescence in Paratexts*, Routledge, New York 2016).
28. About "screen time" and "discourse time" see Jason Mittel, *op. cit.*, pp. 263-265.
29. Jason Mittel, "Previously On: Prime Time Serials and the Mechanics of Memory", in Marina Grishakova, Marie-Laure Ryan (eds), *Intermediality and Storytelling*, De Gruyter, New York 2010, p. 84. Now re-edited and enlarged in Jason Mittel, *op. cit.*, cap. 8: "Orienting Paratexts").
30. Claudio Bioni, *op. cit.*.
31. According to Bioni, recaps work "as an interface that permits the user to interact with a complex medial system from a defined access point" (*Ivi*, p. 150). See also: Veronica Innocenti, Guglielmo Pescatore, Luca Rosati, "Converging universes and media niches in serial narratives. An approach through information architecture", in Artur Lugmayr, Cinzia Dal Zotto (eds), *Media Convergence Handbook. Firms and User Perspectives*, vol. 2, Springer-Verlag GmbH, Heidelberg 2015, pp. 1-18).
32. Claudio Bioni, *op. cit.*, p. 144.
33. *Ivi*, p. 144-145.
34. Algirdas J. Greimas, Joseph Courtés (eds), *Sémiotique. Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage II*, Hachette, Paris 1986.
35. See Eugeni's proposition of a semiotic of medial experience (Ruggero Eugeni, *Semiotica dei media. Le forme dell'esperienza*, Carocci, Roma 2010).
36. A narrative semiotic dictionary (Algirdas J. Greimas, Joseph Courtés, *op. cit.*, pp. 19-20) defines "Aspectualisation" as a point of view inside the textual processes given by time and space instructions (or "deictic marks").
37. "Tension" in textual semiotics means at least two things: in seriality, the viewer's degree of engagement in 'waiting for' something known, or unknown; the degree of intensity of the textual construction of affects and 'passions' (emotions), seen as a textual (and medial) strategy.
38. Talking about a semiotics of the medial experience, Ruggero Eugeni (*op. cit.*, pp. 101-102) claims that a *situation map* is a kind of cognitive scheme, with a rich array of information in synthetic form, constantly updated and realized by a viewer as he/she follows the episode.
39. The "*durativité*" in French textual semiotics means the expanded time of the narrative process shown during its development (Algirdas J. Greimas, Joseph Courtés, *op. cit.*).
40. In textual semiotics we call these main "red threads" narrative and discourse "isotopies" (see Nicola Dusi, "Don Quixote, Intermediality and Remix: Translational Shifts in the Semiotics of Culture", *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, n. 18/1 (2015), pp. 119-134).
41. Jason Mittel, "Previously On", *cit.*, pp. 78-98.
42. *Ivi*, pp. 79-81.
43. *Ivi*, p. 84.
44. *Ibid*

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45. *Ibid*
46. *Ibid*
47. *Ivi*, p. 85.
48. See Ruggero Eugeni, *op. cit.*, pp. 101-102.
49. Jason Mittel, "Previously On", *cit.*, p. 85.
50. Mittel (*Ibid.*) recalls the example of the recap of the fourth season *Battlestar Galactica*'s episode: "Escape Velocity".
51. Moreover, the so-called "recap spoilers" risk to say too much and therefore to ruin the surprise (*Ibid.*).
52. Rossend Sánchez-Baró, "Uncertain beginnings: *Breaking Bad*'s episodic openings", in David P. Pierson (ed.), *Breaking bad: critical essays on the contexts, politics, style, and reception of the television series*, Lexington Books, Plymouth (GB) 2014, pp. 139-154.
53. David Lavery, "Bad Quality: *Breaking Bad* as Basic Cable Quality TV", *Critical Studies in Television* (2009), <http://www.criticalstudiesintelevision.com/index.php> (accessed on 31 January 2016).
54. For example, the Press Play blog, which collects in one sequence in continuity all the cold opens of *Breaking Bad*'s seasons one and two, and does the same for seasons three and four. See: <http://blogs.indiewire.com/pressplay/sheila-omalley-breaking-bad> (accessed on 10 September 2015).
55. Rossend Sánchez-Baró, *op. cit.*, p. 151.
56. See also Chiara Checcaglini, *Breaking Bad*, Mimesis, Milano-Udine 2014, pp. 103-104.
57. Ensley F. Guffey, K. Dale Koontz, *Wanna Cook? The Complete, Unofficial Companion to Breaking Bad*, ECW Press, Toronto 2014, p. 29.
58. The titles of the episodes of the second season linked to the pink teddy bear represent a paratextual clue forming the phrase: *737 (Boeing) down over Albuquerque (ABQ)*.
59. Rossend Sánchez-Baró, *op. cit.*, pp. 146-147.
60. *Ivi*, p. 144.
61. Pierre Barrette, Yves Picard, "Breaking the waves", in David P. Pierson (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 125. See also David R. Koepsell, Robert Arp, "Introduction. A Fine Meth We've Gotten Into", in David R. Koepsell, Robert Arp (eds), *Breaking Bad and Philosophy: Badder Living through Chemistry*, Carus Publishing Company, Chicago 2012.
62. Chiara Checcaglini, *op. cit.*, p. 104.
63. Juri Lotman, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*, I.B. Tauris, London 2001 [1990].
64. For these final remarks I would like to thank the 'blinded reviewers' of my article, as well as Giorgio Grignaffini and Federico Montanari. Thanks also to my English proof-reader Cosimo Bizzarri.