CINERGIE 11
il cinema e le altre arti

SOTTO ANALISI **Super Size Stories. Narrative Strategies in Contemporary TV Series**

This paper starts by claiming that the amount of narrative time is one of the distinctive features by virtue of which TV series are treated as a self-standing appreciative kind in contemporary culture. As suggested by Jason Mittell, time is constitutive of TV seriality: "a series is a cumulative narrative that builds over time" and also "time is an essential element of all storytelling but is even more crucial for television" or "seriality itself is defined by its use of time"[1]. There are so many contemporary series considered experimental in time structure that, as Melissa Ames puts it, "although temporal play has existed on the small screen prior to the twenty-first century […] never before has narrative time played such an important role in mainstream television"[2].

We will argue that this vast amount of time can conflict with the structural constraints of formulaic narrative, especially from an Aristotelian perspective according to which a narrative is inherently a knot to be untied. More specifically, according to Aristotle, "Every tragedy is in part Complication and in part Denouement; the incidents before the opening scene, and often certain also of those within the play, forming the Complication; and the rest the Denouement". We will show that, with respect to this issue, contemporary TV series primarily face two options, which we will call the *super-knot* and the *super-knotty rope*. We will argue that these two options are not sufficient in order to fill the TV series' amount of time. Further filling strategies are needed. We will present what we consider the two main filling strategies in contemporary TV series, namely the *flash strategy*[3] and the *strand strategy*[4]. Finally, we will argue that these strategies can raise issues that risk to make the narrative experience of contemporary TV series less valuable. We will do so with particular reference to heavily serialized shows both in US and in Europe.

1. TV series' vast amount of time

Since the Nineties, TV series have changed their storytelling strategies. "Over the past two decades, a new model of storytelling has emerged as an alternative to the conventional episodic and serial forms that have typified most American television since its inception"[5.] "The development of new technologies and the emergence of a new aesthetics are interdependent processes, which jointly have turned the 1990s into a period of major transformations of serialized TV narratives"[6].

Contemporary TV series started exploiting the amount of narrative time at their disposal to present fictional worlds with a great quantity of characters, places and events: "A television serial creates a sustained narrative world, populated by a consistent set of characters who experience a chain of events over time"[7]. Such an amount of narrative time employed (i.e. runtime available to discourse time in order to build story time) is structurally inaccessible to films, which are instead forced to deal with a standard duration of roughly two hours[8].

The cases in which films overcome this standard duration appear as exceptions which render the rule valuable. For instance, in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) or in Bela Tarr's *Satantango* (1994) the temporal extension weakens the causal links of the story, in order to explore the visual features of the fictional worlds. In Richard Linklater's *Boyhood* (2014) temporal extension is aimed at reproducing the flow of life while preserving some narrative structure, whereas in Andy Warhol's *Sleep* (1963) temporal extension reproduces the flow of life in its simplest form. In all these cases the increase in time employed does not correspond to a relevant increase in the quantity of characters, places and events. The narration remains focused on a few plot points. When the number of characters, places and events significantly increases, films tend to employ a serial structure, as showed by cases such as *The Godfather* (1972-1990), *Star Wars* (1977-2015), *Harry Potter* (2001-2011). These exceptions apart, film

narration is mostly based on the challenge that telling a whole story by means of roughly two hours of narrative time represents.

It is worth noting that some filmmakers (or, to say better, *auteurs*) have occasionally tried to overcome the temporal limits of cinema by means of television. Often these works have been produced in two versions, a longer one for television and a shorter one for cinema. For instance, *Scener ur ett äktenskap* (Ingmar Bergman, 1973) was originally conceived as a 300 minutes mini-series constituted by six 50 minutes episodes, then released also as a 167 minutes film. Other works of this sort have been released in theaters in their original duration, as a series of film corresponding to an episode each. Some xamples are *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1980), *Dekalog* (Krzysztof Kieślowski, 1989), *Heimat* (Edgar Reitz, 1984-2013).

In this sense, we can say that the amount of narrative time employed is the main structural feature which separates TV series from films. This is strictly connected to the so-called new economics of TV. As suggested by Rachel Talalay, "The business model for television is first and foremost about volume of material"[9]. Nevertheless, most series before the Nineties did not effectively exploit this feature. From the Fifties to the Eighties, most series limited themselves to repeat the same modules consisting of a few places and a few characters with the same kinds of plot points occurring over and over again. Attempts to exploit differently the amount of narrative time were made in soap-operas, where key is the limitless text-duration and "absolute resistance to final closure"[10]. Yet, in soap-operas, the short-term exploitation of narrative time is usually much more important that the long-term narrative strategies. The goal of each episode, from this perspective, is nothing but the construction of a cliffhanger that triggers the next episode, without a real interest for the narrative as a whole.

The new set of TV series that started in the Nineties succeeded where its predecessors have failed[11]. Most spectators, critics and scholars agree that the new TV series are works that, from an aesthetic perspective, are at least as valuable as films[12]. In the contemporary cultural system, TV series undeniably constitute what Dominic Lopes calls "an appreciative kind"[13], which allows one to group together, and appraise in a specific way, distinct works of art that share a core of relevant features.

In the case of contemporary series, such a core consists in the ability to present fictional worlds that have the same consistency and plausibility of those presented by films, but they are also enriched by the expansion of the time feature that is distinctive of TV series. The fictional worlds of contemporary TV series are bigger than their predecessors. They are worlds that spectators can treat as their own world, just as the worlds presented by the best films. This narrative structure defines the new TV series as "a range of texts […] which share qualities such as creating detailed, expansive diegetic worlds"[14]. In fact, TV series can use an amount of time that film are not able to use, and they exploit it in order to explore fictional worlds to an extent that films cannot. While the world exploration provided by films resembles that of a short journey, that provided by TV series rather resembles of a long stay.

As Barra and Scaglioni put it, "the possible worlds of TV series become *more and more wide*, rich, and even chaotic. Spaces and times are filled with new objects, environments, characters, events. The number of plots increases just as the number of characters and their backstories"[15]. In this sense, the exploitation of a vast amount of time provides the spectator with the impression that the world of contemporary TV series is *wider* than those of films or those of old TV series.

By virtue of such feature, TV series are by now treated as a self-standing appreciative kind and are often praised for their outstanding achievements. Given the agreement on this point, there seems to be no special need for further arguments in their defense[16]. By contrast, we think that some achievements of contemporary TV series hide a sort of dark side that is worth exploring. More specifically, we argue that the vast amount of time that seems to constitute a benefit for TV series in terms of narrative complexity can also involve side effects which are raising problems.

Indeed, the value of an audiovisual exploration of a fictional world depends not only on the extension of the portion of the world that is explored, but also on the relevance of the story that is told. Fictional worlds

are not necessarily interesting in themselves. They are interesting for us so far as interesting stories occur in them. The evidence of this lies in the fact that no TV series have so far been limited to a mere display of a world. It is true that *Mad Men* builds a narrative world so detailed to allow the spectator a journey in the 60's era; but it is equally true that you watch *Mad Men* to follow *the story of its characters in that world*. Fictional worlds differ from the actual world since they have a primary function, which consists in grounding and supporting the development of interesting stories. We can consider fictional worlds complying to the narrow conditions of what Marie-Laure Ryan calls "storiness". In fact, it seems that "narrative must be about a world populated by individuated existents" and "this world must be situated in time and undergo significant transformations"[17].

To explain why and how the vast amount of narrative time of TV series, which involves a massive exploration of the fictional world, can turn from a resource to a problem, is the main goal of what follows.

2. Narrative normativity

Since a fictional world is a condition for "storiness", in order to assess the fictional worlds of TV series we begin by considering what stories are and what storytelling is. We argue that narration is a normative notion in the sense that our cultural practices of appreciation involve some evaluative standards that allows us to establish whether a narration produces a well-formed narrative or not.

The core principles of narrative normativity can be traced back to Aristotle's *Poetics*. According to Aristotle, a narrative is constituted by a problem to solve, which he metaphorically represents as "a knot to untie". Therefore, a narrative is normally shaped by a three-act structure: the knot tying (meaning: the introduction of the problem), its resisting (meaning: the struggle between the hero and the problem), its untying (meaning: the solution of the problem).

The real innovations that contemporary scholars add to the Aristotelian model do not regard the names or the number of the acts of a play, but rather their functioning. In particular, story analysts specify that the Aristotelian "knot to be untied" can be expressed in terms of conflicts, which give raise to three distinct kinds of plots: 1) *pragmatic plots*, associated to external goals; 2) *psychological plots*, associated to underlying needs, flaws and transformation arcs of the characters; 3) *social plots*, associated to relations among characters[18].

On the one hand, a narrative can consist in several plots of these three kinds. On the other hand, a proper narration should intertwine and unify all these plots, in order to convey some "point" or to achieve a communicative goal[19]. This point or goal typically consists in a reflection about a morally relevant theme – in McKee words, "a value achieved through conflict"[20]. In fact, narration differs from reality since the former is goal-oriented and value-oriented: narration has to make a point and achieve a closure. As Marie-Laure Ryan puts it, analyzing the dimensions of a story-world: "Some of the events must be purposeful actions by these agents, motivated by identifiable goals and plans. […] The sequence of events must form a unified causal chain and lead to closure. […] The story must communicate something meaningful to the recipient"[21].

To sum up, the three-act structure is normative in the sense that it provides the storyteller with a set of rules that bears upon her work. Yet normativity is related not only to the rule-following process, but also to the rule-breaking one. An explicit account of narrative rule-breaking has been proposed by Dancyger and Rush[22]. They criticize the three-act structure and propose the notions of *two-act* and *one-act* structures, which "narrow the screenplay's focus to just one conflict or goal and tend to confirm what we already know about the character or situation"[23].

Dancyger and Rush's criticism can be rephrased in the following way. Given that a narrative is constituted by a problem and the solution involves a conflict, which is the Aristotelian "knot to untie" – then one can just tie the knot without finally untying it, and we therefore find Dancyger and Rush's two-act structure. Or one can even give up trying to untie it, and we have Dancyger and Rush's one-act structure. But, if

one wants to build a narrative, one has at least to show a tied knot. In this sense, the three-act structure remains *potentially* constitutive of narration, since, in order to have a narration, there must however be a knot that *could* be untied.

Ultimately, narrative normativity has to do with a distinctive temporal shape of stories. In our language, we have descriptions referring to "countable" *events* and others referring to "uncountable" *processes*[24]. For instance, "the sun went down" refers to an event (about it, you can ask how long does it take), whereas "it is raining" refers to a process (regarding it, you can only ask how long does it last).

Narration is a way of describing what happens to one or more characters *as an event rather than as a process*. Noël Carroll makes a similar point by claiming that the narration is a matter of closure: it is a report that proceeds by generating questions that then goes on to answer, and "closure obtains when all of the pronounced questions the movie has elected to put emphatically before us have been answered"[25]. In achieving closure by engendering in the audience "the sense of completeness and coherence"[26], the narration shows the happening facts as having the "countable" temporal shape distinctive of an event rather than the "uncountable" one distinctive of a process. In this sense, narration is a journey and not simply a movement, since it does not simply start and finish but *it has a beginning* from which it departs, and *it has an end* towards which it moves. Likewise, at the basic structural level, there is a narration if there is a temporal shape that starts up from a question, which corresponds to the Aristotelian "knot to untie", and that finally exhibits closure.

From this perspective, narrative rule-breaking can finally be seen as blatant attempt to produce an "open work"[27], whose temporal form looks like a process rather than an event. Art-house films such as *Few of Us* (Šarūnas Bartas, 1996) and *The Turin Horse* (Béla Tarr, 2011) nicely exemplify this sort of rule breaking. Still, the structural constraints of narration keep bearing upon any storytelling that aims at overcoming these very constraints. On a closer look, even the alleged "open films" of Italian New Realism and French Nouvelle Vague still exhibit some knots that untie or at least should be untied. In our cultural practices concerning fiction, there is no escape from narrative normativity.

3. The conflict between narrative normativity and TV series' vast amount of time

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

Here is the problem of TV series with respect to narrative normativity. The vast amount of time implied by serial formats threatens the temporal bounds on which the capacity of a narration to raise interest essentially depends. In previous fiction formats this problem was solved by restarting the narration at each episode. That is, each episode functions as self-standing narrative with its own knot to be untied and its own bounds of time. The unity of the serial work as a whole is just a matter of resemblance between a number of self-standing episodes. As Umberto Eco puts it, "the emphasis must be placed on the inseparable scheme-variation knot, where the variation is no longer more appreciable than the scheme"[28].

Still, contemporary TV series do not limit themselves to this simple solution. They aim at building up unitary narratives by massively exploiting the vast amount of time at their disposal. We argue that by so doing a TV series faces two options: (1) creating a knot whose untying requires a lot of time or (2) turning the knot into a rope full of knots whose entire untying requires a lot of time. Let us call option (1) 'the super-knot' and option (2) 'the super-knotty rope'.

3.1 The super-knot

In the option that we call the super-knot, the narration extends a plot – i.e., the tying, resisting and untying of a certain knot – as much as possible. Consequently, the risk is two-fold. On the one hand, if the time at disposal of the hero to untie the knot is too much, the story risks to become uninteresting for the spectator. On the other hand, if the hero unties the knot in due time before the series is ended, the remaining time is very hard to be filled.

Consider the case of *Prison Break* (2005-2009). The escape from a maximum security prison is a good example of a super-knot, a knot that requires a lot of time and efforts to be untied. In fact, *Prison Break* was initially conceived of as a series of 14 episodes that should end with the escape from the prison. Yet, the production subsequently received funding up to 22 episodes, and this is why the escape in the fourteenth episode, which succeeded in the first draft of the script, unexpectedly fails so that the plot can be extended. But also a super-knot should be untied in a specific amount of time. In the case of *Prison Break*, the untying finally occurs at the end of season 1, and the consequence is that season 2 appears irremediably idle: there is no longer a prison break to accomplish, the narration limits itself to follow the fugitives, and the knots to be untied look like mini-knots in comparison to the super-knot of the first season.

A similar problem afflicts one of the most important precursor of contemporary TV series, namely *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991). Discovering who killed Laura Palmer actually is a super-knot, but when the knot is untied after one season and a half, the remaining episodes seem to boil down to a dispensable appendix. Likewise, in *Game of Thrones*, a super-knot can be found in the plot of Daenerys Targaryen, whose goal is to construct an invincible army in order to reconquer the throne of Westeros. Also in this case the time that the narration concedes to the heroine risks to be excessive, if we consider that Daenerys has been constructing her army for six seasons.

Since the untying of a knot is the main way in which a narration communicates, if such an untying is excessively extended the narration risks to become pointless. As Di Chio puts it,

> The increasing difficulty in solving plots makes it hard for the spectator to gain something in terms of cognition and emotion from contemporary stories. Without the reduction of possibilities to necessity that derives from narrative closure, without a goal and an end, there is no way to make a point. […] In contemporary TV series, the ending is more and more deferred, and when it finally comes it seems to lack its capacity of solving the narrative issue. That is because the stories are extended as much as they have commercial success, and that involves a continuous dilution of the crucial elements[29].

3.2 The super-knotty rope

In the option that we call the super-knotty rope, the knot is untied in due time by the hero or the heroine, and then a new knot is to be untied by him or her so that the story can continue; yet in this case the story risks to boil down to a repetitive untying of a sequence of similar knots. Indeed, what makes a story interesting is not only the untying of a knot in a bounded time, but the exceptional character of the knot itself, that is, the exceptional character of the experience that the hero lives in facing this problem. If this

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If we try to conceive such a narrative as a whole – as contemporary TV series encourage us to do – the story risks to look like a sort of unintended remake of *Groundhog Day* (1993), the well-known film in which Bill Murray plays a journalist destined to indeterminately relive slightly different versions of the same day of his life. In other words, the story ends up resembling a sort of video game in which the hero relives the same kind of adventure each time that the game is played.

In fact, storytelling involves a point of *maximal* intensity that leads to the definitive untying of the knot and to the clarification of what is communicated by the narration. A point of *maximal* intensity, as such, in principle cannot be repeated. In this sense, story analysts call this point "climax" or *non plus ultra*, that is, a point that you cannot exceed. Robert McKee characterizes the climax as "a final action beyond which the audience cannot imagine another"[30].

Still, in TV series each season normally needs a point of maximal intensity, a climax or *non plus ultra*. Therefore, given the climax of a certain season, the next season requires a new climax that should exceed the previous one. Since a climax as such is not to be exceeded, this raises a problem for serial storytelling. The second season (2009) of *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013), for example, ends with a scene of high intensity: Walter saves his young friend Jesse from addiction to heroin, and takes him to rehab. This event gives to the relation between Walter and Jesse a sort of closure that seems hard to be exceeded. If this was a movie, the spectator would be left to imagine a future in which, for instance, Jess bring flowers on the grave of Walter. Yet serial storytelling requires a new beginning, and therefore in the third season (2010) of *Breaking Bad*, Jesse is back from rehab and his friendship with Walter is rebooted in view of a new climax.

By turning the exception into the rule, the inflation of climaxes may lead a serial narration to a lack of plausibility, which Di Chio points out in the following terms:

> Challenges become more and more extreme and characters' performances more and more blatant. [...] Correspondingly, however, the fictional worlds become increasingly implausible. The more the sequels of seasons, the less the degree of plausibility [...]. *House M.D.*'s last seasons go beyond any reasonable idea of medicine. *Lost*'s last seasons become a sort of fairy tale. The mysteries of *Desperate Housewives* become more and more complicated in a way that appears ridiculous. As the seasons of *24* go by, the fury of the terrorists against California and the extraordinary concentration of threats that Jack Bauer has to face become increasingly absurd. Plastic surgery in *Nip / Tuck* has become pure witchcraft, as well as the use of science and technology in series like *CSI* and *Fringe*[31].

The super-knotty rope option raises problems also with respect to the development of the character, the so-called arc of transformation. In principle, each knot corresponds to a significant transformation in the life of the character, a *bildung*, an initiation, the learning of a lesson that will shape his or her entire life. Still, this kind of experience, as such, represents an exceptional event in the life of a person. Instead, by endorsing the super-knotty rope option, TV series are forced to ascribe a multiplicity of initiatory experiences to characters.

Consider the case of *Mad Men*. At the end of season 2 (2008), Don Draper, as a modern Ulysses, is lost in a Homeric California, among the lotus eaters and avatars of Circe and Calypso. And, just as Ulysses, he is also faced with the dead, or at least the memory of dead people. In fact, this is an excellent piece of one of the best contemporary series. At the end of the season, Draper comes back to New York and to his wife Elizabeth just as Ulysses comes back to the island of Ithaca and to his wife Penelope. Nevertheless, in Homer's narrative, the return of Ulysses to Ithaca and to Penelope represents the

end of the story, the climax, the *non plus ultra*, the meaningful accomplishment of his experience. By contrast, Don Draper will live several odysseys in California in the following seasons of *Mad Men*. Such iteration of special initiatory experiences lefts us with the deceiving impression that the character has not learned anything from each of them. Since Don Draper is a very sensitive and intelligent character, we are also left with the impression that the reason why he has not learned anything does not lie in his inability to learn, but rather in a necessity that lies outside the story.

4. Filling strategies

To sum up, a narrative basically is a knot to be untied by a hero. In order to have an interesting narrative, the time at the hero's disposal should be bounded, and this knot should represent an exceptional event in his or her life. If the vast amount of time of TV series is massively exploited to untie one "super-knot", the risk is to exceed the bounds of time that are appropriate for that knot so that the narrative loses its interest. Yet if such an amount of time is used to untie a plurality of knots on the same "super-knotty rope", the exceptional character of the hero's experience fades and the narrative risks losing its interest also in this case.

The basic reason of these difficulties is that TV series have too much time with respect to the requirements established by narrative normativity. The time employed by TV series constitutes a too large temporal sheet for the narrative score to be written. However, the sheet must be filled. In order to address this issue, contemporary TV series have developed two further filling strategies that are worth to be considered. In fact, as we have argued above, the super-knot option and the super-knotty rope option are ways of filling the temporal sheet that risk making the story uninteresting, and therefore cannot be exploited above a certain threshold. That is why, we contend, further filling strategies are required. In the following paragraphs, we will analyze what we consider the two main filling strategies pursued by contemporary TV series – namely, the 'flash strategy' and the 'strand strategy' – and we will highlight the main issues they raise.

4.1 The flash strategy

Many contemporary TV series systematically exploit flashbacks in order to fill the amount of time at their disposal. Flashbacks provide the narration with a way to fill time by pausing, so to say, the untying of the knots, and exploring the past of the characters, thereby allowing the audience to know their existence in more depth. A flashback, as such, does not necessarily make a cinematic narration less valuable. Indeed, many films are praised for their use of flashbacks, as for example *8 ½* (Federico Fellini, 1963), *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (Alain Resnais, 1959), *Wild Strawberries* (Ingmar Bergman, 1957). Yet, the exploitation of flashbacks may make the narrative experience less valuable if they do not exhibit any relevant connection with the specific narration that exploits it.

In fact, the merit of a narration often consists in its capacity of implicitly providing a character with a backstory, which allows the spectator to acknowledge the past experiences of this character without directly seeing them. In this sense, an unmotivated use of a flashback may appear as a symptom of an incapacity to construct a backstory in subtler ways, or as a redundancy with respect to an already established backstory.

For instance, in *Dexter* (2006-2013) many flashbacks concerning the hero as a child and his relation to his father are redundant with respect to what the present events already has revealed about Dexter's personality. And when the flashbacks only supply information that does not significantly contribute to better understand the characters and their lives, the audience is left with the impression that the past of the fictional world is nothing but a reservoir of events that can be arbitrarily drawn out when there is some narrative time to be filled. In series such as *Lost* (2004-2010) or *Orange is the New Black* (2013-present)

the flashback concerning a certain character becomes a standard piece of each episode, regardless of the relevance of the character concerned by the flashback and of the events that the flashback presents. *Scandal* (2012-present) multiplies the flashbacks of the campaign in which Olivia Pope has met the future president with an unmotivated zeal, which quickly makes them appear blatantly redundant. *The Good Wife* exploits the flashbacks concerning the resignation of Peter Florrick as a filler that can be used wherever it helps, especially in the empty intervals between a knot that has just being untied and a new knot that is going to be tied.

In many contemporary TV series flashbacks seem to come not from narrative reasons but rather from an external reason, namely, to fill a superabundance of time. This sense of redundancy can become even stronger when a TV series turns a whole episode into a flashback. For example, in *Lost*, season 2 (2005-2006), episode 7 (*The Other 48 Days*) is entirely constituted by a flashback showing what happened to the survivors of the tail section of Oceanic Flight 815 from the moment of the crash right up to the present. According to Stephen King, this flashback strategy could have lead in the long run to ruin the story of *Lost*: "don't beat this sweet cow to death with years of ponderous flashback padding. End it any way you want, but when it's time for closure, provide it. Don't just keep on wagon-training" (http://www.ew.com/article/2007/02/01/stephen-king-issues-challenge-lost-execs).

A similar filling strategy consists in using, instead of a classical flashback, a "what if episode"[32] in which the narration explores a counterfactual, that is, an unrealized possibility in the fictional world. We may call this stylistic device "flashbeside", in the sense that it explores a possible world which is *beside* the fictional world. Also the flashbeside, as a stylistic device, is aesthetically neutral, and in principle can lead to outstanding achievements. For instance, in *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) the flashbeside allows the hero to see what would be the world *without* him and to give up his intention to commit suicide. Conversely, in *25th Hour* (2002) the flashbeside allows the hero to see what would be the world *with* him and allows the spectator to finally understand the meaning of the title – the 25th hour only belongs to the reign of possibility.

Still, in several contemporary TV series the use of flashbesides lacks such a deep significance, and simply appears as a way of filling a superabundance of time. Consider the third season of *Banshee* (2015). After the death of a woman who was in love with the hero, the narration inserts a "what if" episode in which a series of flashbesides – pointed out by the black and white – allows the hero to see what would have happened if he had not stayed in Banshee and had not involved the citizens of Banshee in a spiral of violence. Yet, after two seasons and a half of continuous carnage, this sort of regret sounds out of time, and seems to be motivated only by an exigence of filling the narrative time on the part of the production.

4.2 The strand strategy

While the flash strategy fills the narrative time by means of flashes that explore past or possible events somehow connected to a certain plot, the strand strategy pursues the same filling goal by adding new narrative strands to the main plot. An interesting case of the strand strategy can be found in *College*, the fifth episode of *Sopranos* (1999-2007) first season. The events narrated in this episode are neither relevant effects of what happened in the previous episodes nor relevant causes of what will happen in the next ones:

> "College" precisely fits Egan's sense of *The Sopranos*' commitment to "lateral" movement, since the psychiatric environment and particular mafia-related conflicts of the show's first four episodes are absent. Chase deemed it the show's "most successful episode […] a film noir in and of itself"; critically, "it has nothing to do with anything that happened beforehand, and it has nothing to do with anything that happened later […]. To me, that was the ultimate Sopranos episode."[33]

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Critics are usually prone to appreciate such "lateral" movements that lead to self-standing narrative strands. Another famous case is that of *Fly* the tenth episode of *Breaking Bad* season 3, entirely devoted to a fly accidentally entered in Walter White's laboratory. Yet, the fact that one can remove such episodes without affecting the understanding of the whole narrative raises doubts about their genuine contribution to value of the narrative experience. It may be that such episodes are appreciated as exceptions, but when the number of such exceptions increases, one may legitimately raise the doubt that their main goal is not to contribute to the value of the narrative experience but rather just to contribute to fill a vast amount of narrative time.

Indeed, it is worth recalling that a proper narrative requires a certain degree of unity. Narratives can host a multiplicity of plots, that is, of knots to be untied, but all those plots should be intertwined so to contribute to the same communicative project. A series whose plots are not properly intertwined risks to appear as a patchwork of self-standing narratives instead of as a whole narrative. For instance, in series whose main plots concerns adult characters (e.g. *The Leftovers* [2014-present], *Wayward Pines* [2015]), secondary strands concerning teenagers may fail to significantly connect to these plots. Symmetrically, secondary strands about adult characters in teen dramas such as *Gossip Girl* (2007-2012) or *Glee* (2009-2015) may find it hard to significantly connect to the plots concerning teenagers.

When the number of strands increases, leading to the so-called multi-strand narrative, a narration risks to move from a state of *complexity*[34], in which the various strands appear as a components of a unitary communicative project, to a state of mere *complication*, in which the audience strive to keep track of developments of all the strands but this effort is not rewarded by some relevant insight into the narrative. Kristin Thompson characterizes what one might call the gray zone between complexity and complication in terms of density:

> In a single episode of *E.R.* or *Bad Girls*, the individual scenes are mostly very short, providing only a slight bit of progression in a given plotline. By moving quickly among plots, the narrative gives the impression of considerable density and 'lifelikeness'. This is why so many dramatic serials are set in large institutions such as hospitals, police stations, law firms, and prisons, where many characters' concerns can bounce off each other. The impression of density and realism has also been a factor in the claim by some critics that the introduction of such series has marked a step up in quality from other types of programs[35].

A striking example of the distinction between complexity and complication comes from the comparison between the first (2014) and the second season (2015) of *True Detective* (2014-present). In the first season the strand strategy leads to a complex structure such that the main plot in which the two detectives investigate on a serial killer intertwines with a secondary strand in which they are under investigation. Yet, in the season 2, within a new fictional world, the number of detectives is increased to three, the villain becomes a full-fledged character, and these four characters not only take part in the plot that occurs at the present time but also have their own strand that is developed in the past. The result is a pure complication, a cumbersome storytelling which a critic has effectively summarized in this way; as Gwilym Mumford writes, "Nic Pizzolatto is just happy to wallow in the murk" (<http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2015/jun/22/true-detective-season-two-episode-one-recap-the-western-book-of-the-dead>).

The complication arising from multi-strand narratives is often emphasized by fast cutting. The result is a swirl of events that fills the narrative time without significantly contributing to the development of the story. The audience is left with the impression that something is going on, but this is just an impression: in fact, nothing relevant has happened. As Di Chio points out,

in some episodes of *The West Wing* each scene makes reference to something very important, yet after a number of such references you would like to go back and check the crucial details you maybe have missed. But at the end you remain confused. The question that these scenes raise ultimately is not 'How it will end?' but 'What is going on?'[36].

The increase in the number of narrative strands normally involves a corresponding increase in the number of fictional individuals who, as possible protagonists of a strand of their own, count as full-fledged characters. Yet many of such characters often are devoid of interesting things to do, thereby forcing the narration to put them in a sort of stand-by condition. Consider, for example, in *Game of Thrones,* the endless and pointless narrative strand involving the Night Watch's steward Samwell Tarly. Another example of this sort is the asthmatic child in *Banshee*. He's periodically hospitalized thereby allowing periodical reunions of his parents. At a certain point, without any explanation, this child completely disappears from the story. Did he die because of a lethal asthma attack? The narration lefts us without any answer. In fact, if a character boils down to a mere filler, since its filling role has been completely exploited he or she risks to be forgotten and disappear. Even a quite important character such as Brandon Stark in *Game of Thrones*, after finally reaching the magic tree at the end of season 4, disappears without any explanation for the entire duration of season 5, and this sounds quite awkward, even though he will reappear in season 6.

By significantly increasing the number of events and characters, the strand strategy should in principle also increase the number of places in which characters act and events occur. Yet, because of both structural and financial reasons, the spatial range of a TV series normally remains quite restricted, especially in comparison with the temporal range. Nevertheless, an increase in the number of exceptional events without a corresponding extension of the spatial domain can produce odd narrative effects. A violent crime in a quiet small town is an effective narrative trigger, for example in Stephen King's novels, precisely because it represents an exceptional event in such a quiet context. But if in this small town each week a new kind of violent crime occurs – like in old-fashioned TV series such as *Murder, She Wrote* (1984-1996) starring Angela Lansbury – the audience is left with the impression that the true author of all these crime is in fact the narrator himself, and that his motive is nothing but filling the narrative time. A similar problem may also afflict contemporary TV series. For instance the small town of Charming, in which is set *Sons of Anarchy* (2008-2014), accumulates more crimes than the entire metropolitan area of Los Angeles, and more victims than a whole war. The strategy of filling time by increasing the number of characters and events risks to fail if the space that the narration allocates for all these characters and events is not enough. In this sense, along the first three seasons of *Bron / Broen* (2011-2015), the density of extravagant crimes in the austere cross-national metropolitan area of Copenhagen and Malmo appears quite exaggerated.

5. Conclusion

In this paper we have argued that the issue of filling time is central in contemporary TV series, especially in heavily serialised shows, both in US and in Europe. Such series construct very detailed worlds in which very complex narratives can occur. Yet, we have argued, narratives should obey to some basic narrative norms, which go beyond historically determined conventions and seem to be naturally constitutive of the very notion of narration. We have showed that the vast amount of time that characterizes TV series makes it more complicate to comply with these norms.

According to Aristotle's metaphor, a story is like a knot to be untied. More specifically, a story consists of a first act in which the main goals are individuated, a second act in which some complication arises, and a third act in which the denouement occurs. TV series should face the issue of abiding by these

normative constraints in spite of their amount of time and their complex structure involving a multiplicity of episodes and seasons.

On the one hand, the amount of time employed by contemporary TV series allows them to better explore the narrative world and investigate the personality of a multitude of characters. On the other hand, such an amount of time force contemporary TV series to fill a narrative score that seems to overflow the standard temporal dimensions of well-formed stories. In this paper we have focused on the main ways in which contemporary TV series try to carry out the latter task and we have highlighted the main narrative challenges that they face. Contemporary TV series surely elicit valuable narrative experiences from their audience, but the value of those experience significantly depends on their capacity to face these challenges.

<div align="right">Luca Bandirali, Enrico Terrone*</div>

Notes

* The article was conceived and planned together by the two authors. Sections 1, 2 and 3 were written by Enrico Terrone; sections 4 and 5 by Luca Bandirali.

1. Jason Mittell, *Complex TV. The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, New York-London, New York University Press, 2015, p. 18, pp. 26-27.
2. Melissa Ames (ed.), *Time in Television Narrative. Exploring Temporality in Twenty-First Century Programming*, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2012.
3. "Departures from chronology", as indicated by Gaby Allrath, Marion Gymnich, Carola Surkamp, "Introduction: Towards a Narratology of TV Series" in Gaby Allrath, Marion Gymnich (eds.), *Narrative Strategies in Television Series*, New York, Palgrave McMillan, 2005, p. 33.
4. "A coherent story not as a single sequence of events but as a multiform plot". Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck,* Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1997, p. 185.
5. J. Mittell, *op. cit.*, p. 17.
6. G. Allrath, M. Gymnich, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
7. J. Mittell, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
8. TV series' vast amount of time also differs from the potentially unlimited amount of pages at the disposal of a writer, since the number of pages of a novel does not determine the amount of fictional time that is presented to the audience whereas the duration of a film or of a TV series does.
9. Rachel Talalay, "Will Television Sound the Death Knell for Directors?", *Cinephile*, vol. 9 no. 1, Spring 2013, p. 6.
10. Robert Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas*, Chapell Hill-London, The University of North Carolina Press, 1985, p. 75.
11. "While many past television shows have adhered to the procedural format, which favors stand-alone, or case of the week episodes over character development and multi- episode/season story arcs, modern television dramas such as *Mad Men* (2007-), *Game of Thrones* (2011-), *Justified* (2010-) and *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) find common ground through their complex characters, intricate plotlines, puzzling narrative devices, and oftentimes controversial themes and content". Andrea Brooks, Oliver Kroener, "Editor's Note", *Cinephile*, vol. 9, no. 1, Spring 2013, p. 2.
12. "For the majority of its history, from Newton Minow's "vast wasteland," to the anti-TV activist groups who believed the medium to be a public health concern akin to illegal drug use, television has been labeled a low cultural form. As television entered the post-network era in the late 1990s, this began to change. Today, some critics assert that the cultural significance of televised serial drama has surpassed that of Hollywood films (see Epstein, O'Hehir, Polone, Wolcott)". Michael L. Wayne, *Moral Ambiguity, Colourblind Ideology, and the Racist*

Other in Prime Time Cable Drama, *Cinephile*, vol. 9, no. 1, Spring 2013, p. 15.

13. Dominic Lopes, *Beyond Art*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014.

14. Matt Hills, "Cult TV, Quality and the Role of the Episode/Programme Guide", in Michael Hammond, Lucy Mazdon (eds.), *The Contemporary Television Series*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2005, p. 190.

15. Luca Barra, Massimo Scaglioni, "Mondi al limite" in Aldo Grasso, Massimo Scaglioni (eds.), *Arredo di serie. I mondi possibili della serialità televisiva americana*, Milano, Vita&Pensiero, 2009, pp. 17-20 (our translation).

16. See the positions on tv series increasingly incurred by influential film critics as Andrew O'Herir, according to whom this is "an age when cable TV drama has arguably become the leading narrative form" (http://www.salon.com/2014/12/29/andrew_ohehirs_top_10_movies_of_2014/). At the same time, scholars discuss the need for an aesthetic evaluation of contemporary TV series, in consideration of their quality. See Jason Mittell, "Lost in a great story: Evaluation in narrative television (and television studies)", in Roberta Pearson (ed.), *Reading* Lost: *Perspectives on a Hit Television Show*, London, IB Tauris, 2009, pp.119-38.

17. Marie-Laure Ryan, *Avatars of Story*, Minneapolis-London, University of Minnesota Press, 2006, p. 8.

18. See Dara Marks, *Inside Story: The Power of the Transformational Arc*, London, A&C Black, 2009; see also David Bordwell, "Three Dimensions of Film Narrative", in Id. (ed.), *Poetics of Cinema*, New York, Routledge, 2008, pp. 85-133.

19. Paisley Livingston, "Narrative", in Berys Gaut, Dominic Lopes (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, New York, Routledge, 2001, pp. 275-284.

20. Robert McKee, *Story: Substance, Structure, Syle and the Principles of Screenwriting*, New York, Harper-Collins, 1997, p. 34.

21. M.-L. Ryan, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

22. Ken Dancyger, Jeff Rush, *Alternative Scriptwriting: Writing Beyond the Rules*, Boston-Oxford, Focal Press, 1991.

23. *Ivi*, p. 47.

24. Helen Steward, *The Ontology of Mind. Events, Processes and States*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997.

25. Noël Carroll, "Narrative Closure", in Paisley Livingston, Carl Plantinga (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film*, London, Routledge, 2009, pp. 207-216.

26. *Ibid.*

27. Umberto Eco, *Opera aperta*, Milano, Bompiani, 1962.

28. Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*, Bloomington-Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, pp. 97-98.

29. Federico Di Chio, *L'illusione difficile. Cinema e serie tv nell'età della disillusione*, Milano, Bompiani, 2011, p. 218 (our translation).

30. R. McKee, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

31. F. di Chio, *op. cit.*, p. 207 (our translation).

32. According to Jason Mittell, "What If" is an approach to storytelling which "poses hypothetical possibilities rather than canonical certainties, inviting viewers to imagine alternative stories", out of the "potential canon". J. Mittell, *op. cit.*, pp. 315-316.

33. Ethan Thompson, Jason Mittell (eds.), *How to Watch Television*, New York and London, New York University Press, 2013.

34. "A new model of storytelling has emerged as an alternative to the conventional episodic and serial forms that have typified most American television since its inception, a mode that I call *narrative complexity*". J. Mittell, *op. cit.*, p. 17. See also Warren Buckland's definition of *puzzle plot*: "A puzzle

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plot is intricate in the sense that the arrangement of events is not just complex, but complicated and perplexing; the events are not simply interwoven, but entangled" Warren Buckland (ed.), *Puzzle Films. Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, Chichester, Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, p. 3.

35. Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in Film and Television*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 57.

36. F. di Chio, *op. cit.*, p. 219 (our translation).