INFINITE WOUNDS: REDEFINING NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND SERIAL DYNAMICS IN TELEVISION SERIES

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It is relatively easy to write about television series from a single perspective, developing a discourse on an isolated moment. It requires much more time and effort, however, to do so from the perspective of seriality, comparing repetitions and differences between various points. Our method of analysing series reveals whether we are capable—if we take on the task—of studying them *serially* or not (Logan, 2015). As Fassbinder pointed out when referring to his two screenplays for the novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (series and film), telling a story in three hours is not the same as telling it in fifteen (2002: 45). The German filmmaker's argument for the need to use different actors to play the protagonist in the (short-form) film version and the (long-form) television version demonstrates the fact that the serial format affects much more than just the duration, conditioning all narrative aspects, and that it therefore determines or should determine any methodology adopted to study it. From this perspective, the gestures

of the performers constitute a dimension just as serial as the plot, or even more so, and not only because the actor's palette changes from one episode to another, but also because the connections between character and viewer create a structure of cyclical affinities that are specifically serial and long-form (García, 2016: 63). Tony's repeated gesture in picking at something in the refrigerator in *The Sopranos* (David Chase, HBO: 1999-2007) goes from playful to nostalgic and finally to tragic because it *is* seriality.

Performance is only one of many variables of series that are hardly ever analysed structurally. As obvious as it may seem, the objective of dealing with serial formats should always be to compare various parts (scenes, gestures, dialogues) at the same time, exploring any aspect that interests us but always in connection with others. This is something which, as Veronica Innocenti and Guglielmo Pescatore (2008: 8-22) suggest, entails the quantification of different types of repetitions and

variations, not only the innovations or dramatic developments that are easiest to identify (plots, character arcs, twists), but also the structures of straightforward repetition which, as Todorov pointed out in his day, underpin the progression of any story, however complex it might be: "All comments about narrative 'technique' are based on a simple observation: in every work there is a tendency towards repetition, whether related to the action, the characters or the descriptive details" (1996: 65). In other words, the seriality of *Breaking Bad* (Vince Gilligan, AMC: 2008-2013) consists not only in the Shakespearean transformation of Heisenberg, but also, in an even more serial manner, in the little quixotic routines between Walter and Jesse (one of the greatest Faustian comic couples of all time). The most redundant loops should be analysed with the same attention as the major twists, as it is in the combination of the two that seriality arises: "It is crucial to realize that much of what has been criticized about TV—its continual repetition and formulaic nature—is actually an intrinsic part of its distinctive aesthetic" (Gregory, 2000: 6).

Even so, much of what is published about television series—especially in mainstream media—ignores or dismisses its serial nature, concentrating on thematic aspects (the *what*) inherited from film criticism, instead of engaging in a genuine structural analysis (the *how* through the *who*) that would always take into account different parts of the whole in order to relate them to and against each other: "It cannot be a science of the content of works […] but a science of the conditions of content, that is to say of forms: it will concern itself with the variations of the meanings engendered and, so to speak, *engenderable* by works […] We shall not classify the whole set of possible meanings as belonging to an immutable order of things but rather as being the traces of an immense operative tendency" (Barthes, 1987: 29). This engenderability and operability shape all production aspects of a series from the pilot through

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to the various season finales. Thus, just as physicians honour the Hippocratic Oath, those of us who write about TV fiction should undertake to respect its serial nature as much as possible, comparing the maximum number of vertebrae when analysing the spinal column of any series. There will be some that are perfectly interchangeable, like the episodes of *The Simpsons* (Matt Groening, FOX: 1989-), and others that are asymmetrical and impossible to arrange out of order, like those of *The Wire* (David Simon, HBO, 2002-2008), but the fact that they are series instead of single pieces, long—rather than short—form, must be the starting point for any methodology aiming to study them as they are: forms of serial narration.

With this in mind, this article is intended as an invitation to reassess the specific weight we give to the serial structure in our way of analysing television fiction series, stressing their status as *series* as well as stories. I will begin by arguing for the need to engage in comparative analysis of seriality in different media forms, as opposed to methodological approaches that advocate the isolation—or at least the containment—of the televisual within the televisual. I will then propose a specific application of the concept of narrative structure to the television series, drawing on certain terms from structuralism and post-structuralism (dynamic, force, différance) that underscore the unique mutability of its production processes. The ultimate aim of this article is to enrich the semiotic and narratological models of other authors by positing a range of methodological alternatives for reconsidering the two major dynamics of serial narratives: the self-contained (*series*) and the

serialised (*serial*), always understanding these as hybrid forces which, fortunately, defy any attempt at dissection.

COMPARATIVE SERIALITY, FROM THE *WHAT* TO THE *HOW*

In the past decade, studies of television series have tended to focus on the specificity of "the televisual" as a kind of protection against the omnipresent hierarchies of cinema (Jaramillo, 2016: 35). It is a reaction similar to that of the first generation of analysts in the field of game studies, who protectively delimited the analysis of "the playable", distancing it from other media forms, languages and narratives. Academics like Brett Mills (2013: 64) and Concepción Cascajosa (2015: 32) have argued for the unique virtues of "the smart box" as a space for narrative experimentation and aesthetic complexity, reinforcing a particular tradition that deliberately views the televisual from a strictly televisual perspective. In a way it could be argued that in the television/series binary it is the televisual dimension that has prevailed over the serial, the thematic and historiographic over the comparative, understanding TV fiction as inextricable from the medium that gave birth to it and, therefore, deeming it much more worthwhile to study its forms from a specifically televisual perspective than to get bogged down in comparisons with other media and languages: "Although certainly cinema influences many aspects of television, especially concerning visual style, I am reluctant to map a model of storytelling tied to self-contained feature films onto the ongoing long-form narrative structure of series television, where ongoing continuity and seriality are core features, and thus I believe we can more productively develop a vocabulary for television narrative on its own medium terms. Likewise, contemporary complex serials are often praised as being "novelistic" in scope and form, but I believe such cross-media comparisons obscure rather than reveal the specificities of television's

storytelling form. Television's narrative complexity is predicated on specific facets of storytelling that seem uniquely suited to the television series structure apart from film and literature and that distinguish it from conventional modes of episodic and serial forms." (Mittell, 2015: 18).

However, the problem with Mittell's—admittedly reasonable—isolation of television is that it undervalues the fact that literary and cinematic seriality also exist beyond cinema and literature; i.e., that while certain films and certain novels are self-contained, short-form products, many others share with television the progressive richness of the serial format. For example, as a serial narrative, *Rick and Morty* (Justin Roiland, Dan Harmon, Adult Swim: 2013-) has more in common with the cases of Holmes and Watson or the films of Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis than with many other television series. In fact, the key aspects of television's supposedly unique narrative complexity (Mittel, 2015: 19-31) can be found in other, much earlier serial contexts such as the Arthurian narratives or the *manga* serials. The combination of a dense serialised mythology with episodic "monster-of-the-week" type adventures and the conditional nature of certain inconclusive plots was already present in *The Story of the Grail* and its continuations (Pérez and Garin, 2013), not to mention the epic tales of Osamu Tezuka or Naoki Urasawa, so cleverly serialised without ceasing to be episodic. Comparing the different media forms while respecting their specificity seems to me a rather more productive approach than retreating into the bastion of the televisual. We all like the comfort of a good sofa to watch TV, but ultimately, *Beavis and Butthead* (Mike Judge, MTV: 1993-2011) is not really so very different from *Bouvard et Pécuchet*.

When Umberto Eco compares the James Bond narrative structure to a football match, and immediately thereafter suggests that in fact it more closely resembles the virtuoso displays of the Harlem Globetrotters playing against a second-rate team (1965: 104), he is not merely indulg-

ing in a *boutade*; on the contrary, his analytical pirouette facilitates a much better understanding of the kind of redundant and mechanically playful seriality characteristic of Fleming's novels. Although he is analysing a literary series (with the occasional nod to the films) and his approach is mostly linguistic, his combination of literature, film and sport, in its bold leap from the page to the playing field, turns his indispensable analysis of James Bond into an extremely powerful example of comparative seriality. Why analyse the structure of *House M.D.* (David Shore, FOX: 20014-2012) by comparing it only to *ER* (Michael Crichton, NBC: 1994-2009), when it is equally or even more fruitful to relate it to *Black Jack*? Why stop at *Nikita* (Joel Surnow, USA Network: 1997-2001) in our discussions of *Alias* (J. J. Abrams, ABC: 2001-2006), when we could turn to Sophocles and to *Elektra: Assassin*?[1]

IF WE KEEP THE TELEVISION SERIES LOCKED UP IN ITS OWN BOX, WE RUN THE RISK OF FALLING INTO THE FALSE SPECIFICITY CRITICISED BY ROLAND BARTHES IN HIS DEFENCE OF COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Now that television studies, thanks to approaches like Mittell's, enjoys good health and excellent analytical prospects, it might be worth recovering the comparative spirit of engagement with different media forms and serial languages that characterised the earliest studies in the field back in the 1960s: to return to the Harlem Globetrotters, like *Futurama* (Matt Groening, FOX: 1993-2013) does. Otherwise, if we keep the television series locked up in its own box, we run the risk of falling into the false specificity criticised by Roland Barthes in his defence of comparative analysis against the purism of Raymond Picard (I have substituted the word "literature" with "tele-

vision" in the quote): "Set up like a small weapon of war against new criticism, which is accused of being indifferent 'to what is televisual in television' and of destroying 'television as a primary reality', endlessly repeated but never explained, this proposition has obviously the unassailable virtue of a tautology: *television is television*" (1987: 13). In opposition to such narrow-mindedness, reflected in Mittell's view quoted above, Barthes argues for comparative literature, as I argue here for comparative seriality: "The specificity of television can only be postulated within a general theory of signs: in order to have the right to defend an immanent reading of the work, one must know about logic, history, psychoanalysis; in sum, to return the work to television one must go outside it and draw on anthropological knowledge" (1987: 14).[2]

Any reader of *Corto Maltese* or any viewer of *Cowboy Bebop* (Shinichiro Watanabe, TV Tokyo: 1998-1999) knows that the self-contained can be rather more complex than the interlinked, however much the contrary may be claimed. Precisely because of the consolidation of television studies (one need only note the healthy plethora of publications in the field), my goal here is to contribute to the debate on the narrative structure of series by proposing a new definition of structure that draws on the affinities between media, in an anthropological study of seriality *around* and not only within the televisual. Ideally, this oppositional approach will help, on the one hand, to keep languages and media of other eras alive through television (if as series analysts we do not include *feuilletons*, romances or comics in our course content, who will?), and on the other, to test out methodological tools which, thanks to their ability to identify structures common to written, graphic and audiovisual narratives, respond to the challenges posed by transmedia storytelling today. Given that audiovisual convergence today marks a progressive shift from the *what* to the *how*, from the stories to the characters and their worlds, what better form of training in storytell-

ing across different media could there be than learning to identify structures and patterns by comparing them?

"As an experienced screenwriter told me: 'When I first started you would pitch a story because without a good story, you didn't have a film. Later, once sequels started to take off, you pitched a character because a good character could support multiple stories, and now, you pitch a world because a world can support multiple characters and multiple stories across multiple media'" (Jenkins, 2006: 114). This ontological shift, noted in her day by Marie-Laure Ryan (1991) and systematically deconstructed by Mark J. P. Wolf in his monumental analysis of world-building (2012), demands a structural comparison of media that will help us to make sense of the expansive *how* of narratives whose characters and spaces tend to be more important than their stories. In contrast with the traditional feature film, nearly always focusing on the *what* of the plot (the greatest story ever told), comics, television series and novel sequences share the same tendency toward biographical and geographical expansion (Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin, 2009). What need is there to impose barriers when considering them alongside one another—or even mixed together—is so much more enriching? Why not go back to *The Little Rascals* to analyse *South Park* (Trey Parker, Matt Stone, FOX: 1997-), to Laurence Sterne to analyse *Louie* (Louis C. K., FX Networks: 2010)? If instead of analysing *what* is televisual in the series we analyse *how* it is televisual, the comparative will become specific and the specific will become comparative.

However, while the current transmedia panorama may render it indispensable today, comparative seriality is far from new (Ryan, 2004): research from some time ago applying a comparative analysis to television series includes classic studies like that of Jennyfer Hayward, who traces the tension between the episodic and the serial typical of the soap opera back to *Our Mutual Friend*

and Milton Caniff (1997: 50), or Xavier Pérez and Jordi Balló's myth analysis of universal plots in television fiction (2005). It is no coincidence that comparing narrative forms across different media was an objective already identified by Roland Barthes in the historic issue of the journal *Communications 8*, published in 1966 and dedicated to narrative structure, in which he advocates comparative analysis as a means of methodological enrichment: "The translatability of narrative is a result of the structure of its language, so that it would be possible, proceeding in reverse, to determine this structure by identifying and classifying the (varyingly) translatable and untranslatable elements of a narrative. The existence (now) of different and concurrent semiotics (literature, cinema, comics, radio-television) would greatly facilitate this kind of analysis" (2004: 87-88). This was a desire expressed fifty years before two basic and premium cable series, *The Walking Dead* (Frank Darabont, AMC, 2010-) and *Game of Thrones* (David Benioff, D. B. Weiss, HBO, 2011-) would reformulate their graphic and literary antecedents, taking the *(un)translatability* referred to by Barthes to symptomatic extremes.

LIFE (AND DEATH) OF STRUCTURES

Although it is hardly ever done, it is worth clarifying what we mean when we speak of structure, a term that has given rise to more bickering and misunderstandings between methodological schools in the second half of the twentieth century than almost any other.[3] The fact that most serial narratives, from *The Pickwick Papers* to *The West Wing* (Aaron Sorkin, NBC, 1999-2006), are subject to very specific production requirements and are created, not only without knowing how they will end, but also navigating all kinds of difficulties, format changes, and author crises, means that the narrative structure of a series always needs to be understood as a malleable and dynamic concept. The episodic segmentation, audi-

ence feedback, and intermittent periodisation (if not between episodes, at least between seasons) make any structural postulate, in the strict sense, pale in comparison with the formal dynamism of the series. It is therefore essential to apply flexible tools to conceive of its structure, as Allrath and Gymnich noted in their narratological review of TV fiction: "The study of TV series stands to benefit enormously from the application of the narratological toolkit to the audiovisual medium of TV and from the current trend in narratology to move beyond its structuralist beginnings towards a contextualization" (2005: 3).

However, while Allrath and Gymnich or even Mittell (2015: 74, 106, 164) sustain their approaches on a televisual reworking of the postulates of theorists like Seymour Chatman (1990) or David Bordwell (1996), what I propose here is a Copernican twist: to go back to the "original scene" of structuralism and New Criticism with a view to recovering *another* definition of structure, more open to symbolic figuration and less strictly narratological. TV series are made up of sounds and moving images (bodies, landscapes, frequencies), not just stories. To speak of seriality is to speak of chance and imbalance, of process, as pointed out by George Constanza in his memorable "nothing pitch" in *Seinfeld* (Larry David, Jerry Seinfeld, NBC: 1989-1998). That the sixth season of a series is manifestly worse than the third, and that this could be due to matters as volatile as the mood of an actor or a fight between writers, should not be viewed as a problem but as a distinctive feature, another example of the transformative richness of TV fiction, which delights us and teaches us in its mutability. This is why I am arguing here for a concept of structure that encompasses the unique immanence of the *ongoing*, the fact that forms change over the course of time and breathe like living organisms—just as Gilbert Durand proposes in his ironic review of structuralism titled "Les chats, les rats et les structuralistes", where he expands and redefines

the concept of structure: "Structure, that is to say, the manner of constructing, is force plus material plus form [...]. When we say force we mean renewal and potentialisation [...]. Structure is defined as a dynamic relationship that can serve as a model for construction (or for comprehension, i.e., for reconstruction, for mental 'interpretation') of an object [...]. It represents it adequately, that is, not by analogy but by homology, in the best cases (so as not to confuse the homologous and the homogeneous) by differential homology [...]. The core model of every structure, that is, of every "pattern" in which the forms result from and express forces and materials (and therefore at least one pair of antagonistic forces) [...]. The structural model that I give of a phenomenon is its operative figure [...] Being a re-presentation, whether we like it or not, every structure is floating as soon as it is disengaged from the uniqueness of the example studied, generalising it, assimilating it, decoding it, transforming it into thought" (Durand, 1996: 96-98).

Dynamism, renewal, operability, transformation Apart from settling accounts with Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss, Durand underscores the pre-linguistic nature of symbolic structures (in this case, literary and pictorial), the *becoming* above the *being* of forms. It is not surprising that he should complain of the rigidity of the French language, which, like English, compels us to choose between *forme* and *structure* instead of segmenting a process of gradual formalisation, as does German: "between the abstract analytical form (*Die Form*) and the concrete constructive model (*Der Aufbau*) is the all-purpose ambiguity of *Gestalt*" (1996: 97). This *structural dynamism* connects powerfully with TV fiction, because the more or less predetermined form that a series seeks to present before its première (*form*) is subject to periodic conditioning factors during the production process, to the adaptations of the screenplay to casting and audience reactions (*gestalt*), hindering the establishment of a concrete constructive model (*auf-

bau) applicable to the work as a whole. We need only consider a section of the document prepared by the creators of *Lost* (J.J. Abrams, Jeffrey Lieber, Damon Lindelof, ABC: 2004-2010) for their writers' room after shooting the pilot to show how the form they intended to give the series was radically altered over the course of time: "The Big Question: Is it self-contained or serialized? Self-contained. Seriously. We promise. Yes: the mysteries surrounding the island may serve an ongoing (and easy to follow) mythology, but every episode has a beginning, middle and end. More importantly, the beginning of the next episode presents an entirely new dilemma to be resolved that requires NO knowledge of the episode(s) that preceded it (except for the rare two-parter). Yes: character arcs (romances, alliances, grudges) carry over the scope of a season, but the plots will not. Viewers will be able to drop it at any time and be able to follow exactly what's going on in a story context. This is not lip service, we are absolutely committed to this conceit. LOST can and will be just as accessible on a weekly basis as a traditionally 'procedural' drama" (Abrams and Lindelof, 2004: 2).

Thank God (or thank Dharma), the promises of Abrams and Lindelof were spectacularly broken over the course of the six seasons of the series. But what interests me here is not an appraisal of the legitimacy of a secret document, intended to convince executives at the ABC (Lussier: 2013) and whose influence on the creation of the series is potentially disputable; rather, my intention is to point out that at one point in the production process of *Lost* its creators sketched out the kind of structural progression that Durand referred to, valuing different serial forms that are more or less abstract (*form*) such as *self-contained, serialized, two-parter* or *procedural,* which would later mutate progressively (*gestalt*) into the labyrinthine constructive model for the series (*aufbau*). Apart from the similarities with Durand's terminology, the document is valuable because it proves that the challenges and problems of formalising a nar-

rative, its structural patterns, are not theoretical abstractions but everyday terms, words of the trade that permeate the conception and scriptwriting process of any series.

The Durand quote above, referring to Gothic architecture, conceals fertile parallels with the *floating* structure of the television series, and not only in the case of *Lost*: the distinction between *material* (the words and gestures of a group of actors—or animated characters—as well as the places, sets or music that identify them) and *form* (the coloured storyboards that hang on the wall of any writers' room) is completed with the notion of *force* or *dynamic relationship*. This third concept is key to my methodological approach and encompasses countless variants. On one side is the broadcasting frequency of the different parts of the series, which were not always the same in the *feuilletons* of the nineteenth century (in the same year *Illusiones perdues* was serialised in a magazine, published in volume form and included in an edition of the complete works of Balzac), and are not always the same now thanks to the different consumption rates of broadcast and streamed series. On the other, the fluidity (or lack of fluidity) of the relationships between material and form, wherein arise all kinds of more or less random variables such as an actor getting tired and leaving the series, as occurred in *The Good Wife* (Michelle King, Robert King, CBS: 2009-2016), the captain abandoning ship, as Sorkin did in *The West Wing*, the need to condense the storyline of six seasons into one, as in the case of *Càrnivale* (Daniel Knauf, HBO: 2003-2005), or, the most common, that for various reasons everything that worked perfectly before simply stops working, as happened in the final seasons of *Alias*.

In any case, beyond the consumption rates or mismatches between material and form, the most specifically serial *dynamic relationship* is without doubt the audience response and the subsequent ability of the creators to react. Far from being a *complex* innovation of television, this is a feature

common to the whole history of seriality: from Cistercian monks anonymously serialising the stories of the Arthurian knights in the Vulgate Cycle, reorienting them in accordance with the Church dogma of the era, to the delightful irony of Cervantes' allusions to Avellaneda in the second part of *Don Quixote* (essentially, unauthorised sequels like Avellaneda's are simply a kind of trolling *avant la lettre*). Better-known cases include Sam Weller's rise to a co-protagonist's role in *The Pickwick Papers*, in response to Dickens' readers, or Sherlock Holmes' fortuitous return from the dead following the deluge of letters received by Doyle and his editor. This capacity of the audience to detect the *how* of the series and to influence its development, which authors like Ndalianis (2005) or Mittell (2015: 43) consider specific to television, goes much further back. Indeed, Damon Lindelof's famous tweet after the series finale of *Breaking Bad*, asking fans for forgiveness for the way *Lost* ended (Lindelof, 2013), is no less than the culmination of a centuries-old relationship between narrators and audiences, the very essence of seriality.[4]

DIFFERENCES: FORCE OVER FORM

Jacques Derrida, another of the authors who in the 1960s criticised and enriched the structuralist methodology, proposed the substitution of the word *form* with the word *force* in order to underline the contingent and anomalous aspects of structure: "Since we take nourishment from the fecundity of structuralism, it is too soon to dispel our dream. We must muse upon what it *might* signify from within it. In the future it will be interpreted, perhaps, as a relaxation, if not a lapse, of the attention given to *force*, which is the attention of force itself. Form fascinates when one no longer has the force to understand force from within itself" (1978: 4-5). Force—understood as dynamic—is exactly the same term that Durand uses, however much the two authors might roll

over in their respective graves over this coincidence. In any case, Derrida's great contribution is to compel us to think of structure, in our case, the structure of the television series, not (only) as a set of deliberate decisions by its authors but (also) as a set of anomalies, mutations, chance events and imbalances: différance. It is a structure that is, above all, event and process, not an infallible system that can only delight us (what a great series), but a whimsical living form, happily unstable, whose tendency to disappoint us is yet another example of its richness (the fact that this series is no longer so great is wonderful for making us appreciate how good it was). How fruitful was the frustration that *Lost* made us feel; how absolutely revolutionary!

But beyond the weakness of the adjective *good* in the Nietzschean sense, what I am asserting here is that a series can become strong in its discrepancies, periodically, going from *the best* to *the worst possible* like Lancelot did in the tournaments in obedience to Queen Guinevere. Would *The Leftovers* (Damon Lindelof, Tom Perrotta, HBO: 2014-) be such an interesting series from a structural point of view if it did not veer off in so many directions? Is not part of the unique nature of *The Newsroom* (Aaron Sorkin, HBO: 2012-2014) its knack for getting back on top again in the face of imminent cancellation by HBO? What does the word *filler* refer to among anime fans if not to a structural diagnosis? The idea that the right to evaluate a work—to say that it is better or worse than itself—has to be methodologically asserted, as is now happening with series in the field of television studies in the English-speaking world, is not just a truism, but a tautology: unlike other forms of storytelling, seriality is characterised by its capacity to rearm itself over the course of time, elastically, so that identifying more or less successful or anomalous moments should be something completely natural (without succumbing to dogmatisms) and not an academic trend. We can use any adjectives we like, beyond good and

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THE WOUND RUNS FROM PAST TO FUTURE, FROM PIANISSIMO TO FORTISSIMO; IT IS BOTH TIME AND SPACE. IT IS NOT JUST A WAY OF GUIDING CHARACTER ARCS, BUT ALSO, AND ABOVE ALL, A WAY OF CONDENSING NARRATIVE TIME

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bad; but locating what works and what does not work is the first step taken in a writers' room, and should be part of what those of us who analyse series do as well.

Advocating an evaluative analysis does not mean that evaluation is all that an analysis should do; on the contrary, dimensions of sociology, production, gender, race and class are more effectively explored by *differentiating* between parts of a series rather than generalising. We need only consider the substantial *improvement* of *Orange Is the New Black* (Jenji Kohan, Netflix: 2013-) when Piper loses her central role and the storyline becomes increasingly collective, further proof of what Judith Butler means when she speaks of gender as a *doing* (1990: 34). It is these types of rectifications that make seriality unique, a living material subject to opposing forces in the sense defined by Durand and Derrida. It should thus come as no surprise that other thinkers like Barthes or Deleuze should also assert the importance of *difference* (with or without the deconstructivist "a") to get a sense and idea of structures: "It must be repeated yet again that, structurally, meaning is not born by repetition but by difference, so that a rare term, as soon as it is caught in a system of exclusions and relations, means just as much as a frequent term" (Barthes, 1987: 33); "resemblance, identity, analogy and opposition can no longer be considered anything but effects, the products of a primary difference or a primary system of differences. According to this other formula, difference must immediately relate the differing terms

to one another" (Deleuze, 1994: 143). The fact that Abrams and Lindelof made *Lost* possible by lying, selling it to ABC as a series distinct from what they had in mind to do, is a structural *différance* that recalls the ambivalence of the great serial narratives, from the picaresque to *Pierre Menard*. And precisely for this reason, the fact that millions of viewers around the world can be astounded by the discovery that the flashbacks sometimes conceal flash-forwards is a miracle of seriality, a master class in how to turn difference into repetition and repetition into difference.

THE (IN)FINITE WOUND

"[...] which I was not to understand until long afterwards, when it was given me afresh and more painfully, as will be seen in the later volumes of this work" (Proust, 2003: 73).

Just as Durand did when he located the differential homology of structures in "a pair of antagonistic forces", the leaked *Lost* document introduced a tension to the future form of the series in terms of two major dynamics: the episodic and the serialised. This shows that, rather than being *a priori* structures, the self-contained and the serialised are forces, energies that are updated over the course of the episodes and seasons. In this sense, what is revealing is not that *Lost* was never the self-contained series it could have been, but that the episodic dynamic (its analepses) and the serialised dynamic (its enigmas) coexisted and intermingled in six years of stunning serial inventiveness. Similarly, understanding the teleological and self-contained solely as forces in tension, the most dramatically serialised episode of *The Wire*, which culminates with the cliff-hanger of Kima's possible death, can also be identified as one of the most episodic, opening and closing with the same scene of Bubbles waiting for himself in a park.

In the 1990s, various authors such as Ellis (1992), Kozloff (1992), Butler (1994) and Hayward (1997) suggested that the future of television se-

riality would involve a combination of these two major forces, a hybrid tendency between series and serials that takes shape in the concept of *flexi-narratives* (Nelson, 1997: 39) and that has marked the discourse on the structure of storytelling in television up to the present day (Mittell, 2015: 236). But it is worth remembering that the *serializzazione della serie* (Inocenti and Pescatore, 2008: 19) and the reflection of the episodic in the serial (Garin, 2013) are not phenomena exclusive to television, but have underpinned the narrative patterns of seriality since its beginnings (Pérez López, 2011). The coexistence of these two energies was identified by Omar Calabrese when he referred to the rhythm of repetition (1999: 52), and further developed by Angela Ndalianis into five series and serial prototypes (2005: 83), not to mention Umberto Eco´s geometric analogies when he differentiated between the maximum self-containment of the *loop* and the gradual accumulation of the *spiral* (1988: 134).

The narrative structure of the series oscillates between the fractal and the vector. On the one hand there is always a "special rule of self-containment" (Boom, 1998) in the style of a rondo; on the other, it is open to the inter-episodic development of plots and character arcs, to the *telos*, a dramatic vector that Eugenio Trías associates with the sonata form: "All drama effectively entails an orientation or direction towards an end. A teleology, a trajectory" (1993: 32). But the episodic and the serialised are much more fertile when they are mixed together: a ritually repetitive script structure like the cold open can turn into a focal point of experimental difference, as it was in *Breaking Bad* (Sánchez, 2014), while conversely, the extreme vectorisation of scenes, acts and episodes in *24* (Joel Surnow, Robert Cochran, FOX: 2001-2010) ends up resembling a loop (Jiménez, 2007: 100). Although repetition tends to be associated with an episodic structure and difference with a serialised structure, the most interconnected elements can easily be repetitions (the infidelities

in *True Blood* [Alan Ball, HBO: 2008-2014] or the gags in *Arrested Development* [Mitchell Hurwitz, FOX-Netflix, 2003-2013]), and the most self-contained can be differences (the memories in *Louie*, the deaths in *Six Feet Under* [Alan Ball, HBO: 2001-2005]). Because, as Elisabeth Bronfen (2016) suggests, the most oft-repeated image of a series sometimes hides the secret of its finiteness; do we not see the same man in a black suit fall ninety-three times in the highly teleological opening sequence of *Mad Men* (Matthew Weiner, AMC, 2007-2015)?

The musical meaning of the word *dynamic,* which I have used repeatedly throughout this article, could be quite useful for capturing these nuances of television seriality. Beyond the kinetic sense found in the dictionary ("something belonging to or related to force when it produces movement"), for a musician, dynamics are something quite different. In addition to evoking mobility and movement, they define a progression in intensity, a nuance ranging from *pianissimo* to *fortissimo*. In music, the dynamics are qualitative rather than quantitative transformations, volumetric movements which, in the regulators of *crescendo* (<) and *diminuendo* (>), take a gradual structure: unlike the mathematical sign less-than/more-than, the musical regulator may be lengthened or extended organically, nuancing phrases or whole passages in a unique combination of temporal (accelerating) and spatial (swelling or hollowing) variables. The polysemic nature of the word "dynamic" enriches the temporal development patterns of the narrative (the order, as Genette would say), also giving a progression to their intensity, which in television series ranges from the microstructure of gestures, scenes and episodes to the macrostructure of plots and arcs. As David Simon would suggest when he spoke of the contrapuntal use of music (Garin, 2016), we can learn a lot from the narrative structure of a series by opening up to its musicality.

To conclude, the best approach would be to link this musical dynamism of difference and

repetition with the specifically televisual methodologies of other authors. In this sense, the concept of *cyclical re-allegiance* formulated by Alberto Nahum García in his analysis of the antihero as a generator of cyclic affinities proves especially useful: "The nature of the series gives the viewer access to the most intimate qualities of the character, forming a naturalistic, all-encompassing story that aims to capture the wounds of time in the life of the characters [...]. We can recover our sympathy cyclically, precisely because of the specific form, duration and dramatic needs of television narrative" (2016: 66). His defence of the ability of the series to readjust our emotional connection with the protagonists links up with what Jennifer Hayward called *radical transformation*, referring to the (im)possibility of redemption of the character of the rapist in soap operas (1997: 174). From different perspectives, both authors highlight dynamism and the ability to modulate affinities that characterise the serial narrative, while mentioning one of its most fertile motifs: the wound.[5]

The (in)finite reopening and regeneration of wounds is a key mechanism in seriality, a form/force of the absolute first order. From Lancelot to Sydney Bristow, from Corto Maltese to Dr House, the characters of the great serial narratives hide scars, limps, patches and other physical or psychological damages which, in addition to alluding to an earlier trauma, are periodically renewed over the course of the series. The wound runs from past to future, from *pianissimo* to *fortissimo*; it is both time and space. It is not just a way of guiding character arcs, as Locke did in *Lost*, but also, and above all, a way of condensing narrative time, as demonstrated by the therapy sessions in *The Sopranos* or *In Treatment* (Hagai Levi, Rodrigo García, HBO: 2008-2010). As González-Requena (1989: 43) suggests, there is a whole scale of greys between the insubstantial exacerbation of the present that typifies most soap operas, where a lot seems to happen without anything ever really happening (because the wounds are false), and

the tragic, biographical and powerfully elliptic exhaustion of the *feuilleton*, where the characters grow, reproduce and die whether we want them to or not, and the wounds are remembered.

The wound is microstructure and macrostructure; it can leave a scar that lasts a single episode or fester throughout a whole series. Just as the Arthurian narratives combined the self-contained and festive blood-spilling of the tournaments (the "ketchup") with the deep wounds of the family past (the blood), TV series express the infinite dynamic of the self-contained and the finite dynamic of the serialised in the bodies of their protagonists, whose wounds are at once episodic and teleological. This is why, in the pilot for *The X Files* (Chris Carter, FOX: 1993-2016), Mulder discovers the same mark they are investigating during the episode on Scully's half-naked body. The superficial wounds heal from one episode to the next and barely leave a mark, but the deep ones are fated to be opened again and, more importantly, to reflect one another: here we find the sex and tooth pulling in *The Americans* (Joe Weisberg, FX: 2013-), rolling the episodic into the serialised; here we find the self-contained gravestones of *Six Feet Under*, constantly bringing us back to the past death of the father and presaging the future death of the son; here we have the actress changes in *Louie*, reminding us that nothing matches itself (Garin, 2015: 66).

Wounds and sickness, addiction and pain have always been structures of serial storytelling that go beyond mere characterisation. Another question is whether the characters are able to externalise them, whether they are background elements (in the style of James Bond) or punishments (in the style of Jack Bauer). Precisely for this reason, the fact that the first chapter of *The Story of the Grail* and the pilot to *Alias* present identical serial dynamics, with centuries between them, only confirms that beyond the historical specificity of the medium in which a story is told, wounds always bring us back to ourselves, like those char-

acters who dream of being film stars but wake up every morning in a TV series (Blouin, 2003). Only if we compare one set of wounds with others, the fractal through the vector and the vector through the fractal, will we be able to explore new methodologies that do justice to the formal specificity of the series. Considering the wound not as an epic drama but as an everyday loop, considering the repetition as the key to the difference, seeing Sisyphus as blessed. ∎

NOTES

1　Creators themselves tend to be the first to appreciate these thematic and structural affinities between media forms, as John Steinbeck detailed in a letter to Eugène Vinaver when he was preparing his Arthurian adventure series: "And it can be shown and will be shown that the myth of King Arthur continues even into the present day and is an inherent part of the so-called 'Western' with which television is filled at the present time—same characters, same methods, same stories, only slightly different weapons and certainly a different topography. But if you change Indians or outlaws for Saxons and Picts and Danes, you have exactly the same story. You have the cult of the horse, the cult of the knight. The application with the present is very close, and also the present day with its uncertainties very closely parallels the uncertainties of the fifteenth century. It is actually a kind of nostalgic return to the good old days. I think Malory did it, and I think our writers for television are doing it—exactly the same thing and, oddly enough, finding exactly the same symbols and methods" (Steinbeck, 2008: 338-339).

2　That such a key author for the historiography of serial storytelling as Umberto Eco does not even appear cited in *Complex TV* confirms the methodological isolation of certain sectors of the academic world. To appreciate seriality—or any other phenomenon—in comparative terms, jumping from one medium and language to others, it is necessary to *understand them* beyond *clichés*: to be a humanist and not only an aca-

demic; to be a reader, cinephile and player as well as a TV viewer, free of vagueness or labels.

3　"Which structuralism are we talking about? How can we find the structure without the help of a methodological model?" (Barthes, 1987: 5).

4　If you will forgive the digression, it is incomprehensible—and a sign of the times—that anyone capable of putting together a piece of work as fascinating and revolutionary as *Lost* (even in its imperfections) should have to beg his fans for "forgiveness" and kneel at the altar of the Holy Church of Twitter. As Unamuno declared: "You will win, but you will not convince!"

5　Hayward speaks of "the symbolic scar" (1997: 176) and García of "the wounds of time" (2016: 66).

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INFINITE WOUNDS: REDEFINING NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND SERIAL DYNAMICS IN TELEVISION SERIES

HERIDAS INFINITAS: ESTRUCTURA NARRATIVA Y DINÁMICAS SERIALES EN LA FICCIÓN TELEVISIVA

Abstract

This article compares different television series with the aim of reassessing the importance we normally ascribe to the serial structure in our research on television fiction. I begin by arguing for the need to engage in comparative analysis of seriality in different media forms, as opposed to methodological approaches that advocate the isolation of the televisual within the televisual. I then go on to propose a specific application of the concept of narrative structure to the television series, drawing on terms from structuralism and post-structuralism (dynamic, force, différance) that underscore the unique mutability of its production processes. The ultimate aim of the article is to enrich the semiotic and narratological models of other authors by positing a range of methodological alternatives for reconsidering the two major dynamics of serial narratives: the self-contained (*series*) and the serialised (*serial*).

Key words

Television; Series; Structure; Narrative; Fiction; Storytelling; Media.

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Resumen

El presente artículo compara diversas series con el objetivo de repensar el peso específico que otorgamos a la estructura serial en nuestra manera de analizar ficciones televisivas. En la primera parte se defiende la conveniencia de plantear análisis comparados de la serialidad entre diversos medios, frente a otras tendencias metodológicas que propugnan el aislamiento de lo televisivo en lo televisivo. A continuación se propone una aplicación concreta del concepto de estructura narrativa en las series de televisión, rescatando algunos términos del debate estructuralista y post-estructuralista (dinámica, fuerza, diferencia) que recalcan la particular mutabilidad de sus procesos de producción. Todo ello a fin de enriquecer los modelos semióticos y narratológicos de otros autores en la parte final del texto, planteando un horizonte de alternativas metodológicas para repensar las dos grandes dinámicas de la narrativa serial, la auto-concluyente (*series*) y la serializada (*serial*).

Palabras clave

Serie; televisión; estructura; narrativa; ficción; relato; audiovisual.

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