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Seriality at the periphery of television fiction, or intermediality as a critique of the “all narrative” serial

Saute-Requin

Translation : Laura Haydon

- 1 The study of television series is thriving, as evidenced by the many and varied perspectives now available to allow us to approach them, be they sociological, economic, narratological, genetic, *gender*, or philosophical. Nonetheless, on closer inspection, it seems that this often-stimulating research frequently hinges on showcasing the function of the fictions they depict, the characters who inhabit them, their themes, their structure, or their writing processes. If the question of *mise en scène* is sometimes invoked, conferring a strong audio-visual identity on some productions, this more full-frontal aesthetic approach remains strongly characterised by the heritage of codes of representation and analysis forged in the field of cinema. In other words, if television series are sometimes – but not always – analysed as aesthetic forms, this analysis is made possible mainly by tools originating in another discipline and another media field.
- 2 This text originates in a collective effort by a group of lecturer-researchers and students from a number of subject areas at the University of Rennes 2 (Language and Literature, Film Studies, Information and Communication Sciences), and emerged in the wake of an acknowledgement of the prevalence of narratological models in university studies of television series. Or at least, a consideration of these objects which highlights their narrative dimension to the detriment of other possible prisms of study.
- 3 Indeed, beyond the audio-visual components of television series, what about seriality itself, the inventions it makes possible but also the concepts at its root? Why couldn't television seriality be analysed (plastically, structurally, rhythmically, etc) through prisms other than the directing or the narration? The question is particularly relevant

because numerous works from other artistic fields (photography, painting, music, poetry, dance, sculpture, etc) have been studied via the prism of their serial nature, without supposing or presupposing a story. By focussing on the very idea of intermedia seriality, and on the discourses that promote it in different contexts and eras, this acknowledgement is all the more striking and leads us to ask why television seems to screen off concepts of seriality which do not rest exclusively on what we could call a narrative-centred paradigm.

- 4 Thus, this article has a triple goal: first of all, to try to understand the reasons why television seriality is so strongly associated with the narrative model. Then, to open up our perspectives by investigating the origins of the term “series” in the media field, to show that if our contemporary understanding of it is largely conditioned by the television series model, this perspective is far from being the only one possible, and that the notion opens up aesthetic horizons which can be distant from narrativity. In conclusion, by looking to the past, we can offer a few clues about other possible approaches to television seriality, by asking what an analysis fed by interpretative frameworks borrowed from other serial media might yield.
- 5 To look at these questions head-on is to open a Pandora’s box. That’s the reason this text must be taken for what it is: a work in progress, a cluster of questions and propositions, which do not claim to be exhaustive or definitive or to deliver a “truth” which has remained hidden until now. Our ambition is more modest – to draw attention to a few points of research methodology and to suggest some trains of thought which seem to us to be unfairly undervalued, but potentially fertile. This explains the particular form that we have given this text: written by fourteen hands, opening up perspectives which are sometimes very different, it is to be taken as an incomplete inventory and as a jumping off point for the collective creation of a questioning which increasingly seems to generate the cultural intermediality to which contemporary series belong.

Why narrative?

- 6 Although the television series of the last thirty or forty years have learned to polish their audio-visual aesthetics, they are nevertheless still understood first and foremost on the basis of their narrative content, i.e., the stories they tell. For if the formal ambition of the series has helped attract new audiences, it is indeed through the often vertiginous nature of their narratives, through a complexity bound up with the serial form itself, that they have been able to stand out from cinema and attract the public and critical success they enjoy today. In the 1990s, the idea of “Quality TV²” emerged, expanded and theorised by Jason Mittell, who talked about “Complex TV³”. Yet this complexity is first and foremost narrative. It blurs and mixes the logic of the soap opera and the serial, as in a sitcom like *Friends* (NBC, 1994-2004), which alternates seemingly gratuitous comedy sketches with long-running romantic soap opera storylines. Here, the story architecture is sophisticated, moving more and more towards human temporality. This complex temporality of story, based on the arrangement of narrative arcs which draw a rich fictional universe, was always going to be of interest to narratology, and theories of fiction more broadly.
- 7 The TV serial story which emerged in the early 1950s sprang from “the appearance of new narrative arts made possible by technical progress⁴”, namely cinema and animated

cartoons, which emerged at the end of the 19th century. If Thierry Groensteen qualifies them from the outset as "narratives"⁵, it is because they concentrated more or less on the principle of fictional narration, a function of art which the traditional arts were questioning in response to the emergence of the avant garde at that time. Like their predecessors, television series were born (and developed) from the cross-fertilisation and mutual construction of fictional genres of popular culture and the industrialisation of cultural products, a process which started with the explosion of the press in the mid-19th century, and that television reinforced, and which is still current today in many cultural practices (video games, role plays, *fan fiction*, etc.).

- 8 And yet, for these modes of expression, "narration very quickly imposed itself as their natural slope, their objective vocation"⁶, seriality imposed itself as the best way to go down this slope and to fulfil this vocation, that is to say, in the context of the prevailing capitalist model, to satisfy a demand. The phenomenon can doubtless be imputed to the context of industrialisation in which it emerged: mass production, the new panacea to satisfy all human needs, from the moment it is also applied to objects suitable for cultural consumption, was to end up having an impact on the very content of these objects. The serial nature of material production (serialised novel, movie, book, a list than can doubtless be extended to include cultural consumer objects less directly linked to fiction) affects the fiction of which it is the bearer, in its form and content: the narrative itself as well as the fictional universe it deploys are transformed by the paradigm of seriality, which ultimately modifies the consumer's relationship to these cultural objects, to their particular medium, to their modes of address as well as to the fiction which transcends them and sometimes even obscures them⁷. Because they are at the heart of these ideological, economic, anthropological and epistemological issues, television series appear to us as the paragon of this cultural landscape that combines fictional narration and seriality for commercial purposes. As fiction becomes serialised, that is to say, subjects its narrations to a serial ordering, something that in most of these arts stems from an industrial rationale, it is easier to understand that the most widespread concepts of seriality today, particularly on television, first embraced narratological approaches, which were supported by theories of fiction.
- 9 These approaches have also been necessary in the process of legitimising television series. Once the approach to television as an essentially social phenomenon (its relation to dominant discourses, its alleged effects on the viewer) had been overcome, it was essential to note the aesthetic quality of a large number of these "plural fictions"⁸ stemming from the cultural industries so much decried in intellectual circles, from Sainte-Beuve to the Frankfurt School⁹. However, this recognition did not come from researchers in audio-visual studies¹⁰, but from Americanists, cultural sociologists and information and communication researchers, who were already studying media products and deploying a range of tools from various disciplines. Thus, the narratological approach to these audio-visual objects was favoured precisely because those who took an interest in them were not audio-visual studies specialists, or because they had previously adopted a narratological perspective on cinema¹¹. This approach can be enriched by questions related to fiction, or by more sociological questions inherited from cultural studies¹². This extended narratology, combining a thematic and modal approach, analyses fiction as constructed communication, and falls within a semiotic competence widely shared in the field of human sciences, which explains why a certain number of disciplines are beginning to study television series (their narrative

content at least), as audio-visual objects certainly, but above all fictional ones, based on *representations*.

- 10 Indeed, if the reception and analysis of television series remain very largely subordinate to their narrative dimension, it is because they do not seem to do anything other than tell stories, an art which they frequently celebrate, for example by depicting “bedtime story” scenes (*Doctor Who*, *Master of None*, *Shameless* (UK), *The Office* (US), *Community*¹³, etc.). We are also reminded of this idea by the warning at the beginning of the *Fargo* series (FX, 2014-): “This is a (true) story”. That is why, from this perspective, television series can, in addition to being an audio-visual spectacle, be viewed as an *art of (fictional¹⁴) relationship*: the main objective being to captivate the viewer, we offer him an audio-visual object which *tells him a story* and thus creates a *bond* with him. This bond is established over time and with a certain regularity, thereby reinforcing the idea of a relationship. It is established through the story being told, the fictional world and its development, but also through the specifically audio-visual manner of telling this story. Thus, as Jean-Pierre Esquenazi put it, “every narrative weaves, as it progresses, the image of a world in which it takes place¹⁵.” What is this image, and how does the story weave it? This two-fold question, which calls for the combined use of a thematic and modal narratology, should encourage the analyst to consider its audio-visual staging as much as the content and ordering of the story, as the former first helps to build the relationship between the viewer and the fiction.
- 11 In our opinion, there is therefore a two-fold issue at stake in such a framework for television series. First of all, in order to understand the narrative complexity of contemporary serial creations of the televisual media, it is necessary to “take account of new paradigms developed in the field of story theory¹⁶.” Nevertheless, if narratology has focussed this much attention on this type of object, it is also because it makes it possible to take a fresh look at the story itself, to “rethink” it in return¹⁷, in order to grasp new narrative specificities.
- 12 The second issue is more specifically concerned with theories of fiction. Indeed, within what is sometimes referred to as the era of generalised fiction, in which we are today immersed, “linking the collective understanding of fictional objects to the territory of gaming and infinite possibilities¹⁸”, we believe that “evolving” television series - in other words, serials - occupy a critical place. They make it possible to configure real “possible worlds” due to the vast extent of their continuum. It is thus the work itself which, as such, becomes a world in which “the creators [...] go so far as to invest their plots with direct reflections of the ontological questioning and possible reflections raised by the theorists, exploiting from all angles the metaphor of the text-universe¹⁹”. If we consider here the new transmedia practices that have increasingly emerged over the last two decades, according to which a fictional universe is deployed and then developed on different platforms - producing, as Matthieu Letourneux notes, a “serial effect²⁰” - , it seems that the propensity of these diegetic universes to be available transmedially²¹ is increased “when the objects were already serial beforehand²²”. Transmedia experiences like those in *Lost* (ABC, 2004-2010), in as much as they aim among other things at completing and suturing the gaping fictional holes inherent in the fragmented story, thus fully structure themselves around the original television series.
- 13 However, even if the prism of narrativity would be the most “natural” or logical way to approach these television objects, hasn’t this synergy between narrativity and seriality

gradually contributed to obscuring certain fundamental dimensions of serial creation? Hasn't it made us forget what is also, and moreover, a *serial* creation?

For an archaeology of the series

- 14 Indeed, seriality is not an exclusively narrative phenomenon (or process). The return to etymology can turn out be illuminating, as the work of Matthieu Letourneux testifies. In his opinion, the Latin *series* “referring simultaneously to the idea of an uninterrupted sequence, an arrangement of things which hold onto each other, and of interlacing, threads or lines – demonstrates the span of the term, between a finite and indefinite whole, a model of the warp and the weft, juxtaposition and organisation²³”. It’s from the verb *serere* (to plait) that the noun is formed, supporting the metaphors of plaiting²⁴ and weaving²⁵ in its narratological approaches. In its concrete uses, the Latin *series* corresponds less to the idea of succession and more to a spatial network of more or less discontinuous elements. Quintus Curtius Rufus employs it in the sense of “entanglement²⁶” in the description of a mountain range: the proximity and intersections of the ranges make up a whole with its own coherence (“*cohaerentia*”). The same is true of the description of a tangle of knots on the yoke of Gordius’s chariot²⁷ giving rise to the expression “Gordian knot”. Elsewhere, *series* is understood as a network - of blood vessels in Pliny the Elder²⁸, of roads in Statius²⁹.
- 15 It is more in its abstract meanings that *series* is covered by a narrative logic and refers to sets marked by logical or chronological succession. First of all, in the order of rhetorical or philosophical discourse, it takes on the sense of ordering or argumentative structure. Thus Quintilian regrets that the new orators use prototypical rhetorical structures, which hinder their speeches in arguments that form an “intractable series³⁰”. In its abstract meaning, seriality is logically based on cognition and a causal sequence. Finally, it is only when this causal sequence concerns a temporality, a chronological story, that it takes on a narrative dimension: the term appears when Cicero defines destiny (*fatum*) as a causal sequence of events, where *series* means an ordered, chronological succession³¹. In other words, seriality is narrative when it concerns a sequence of events perceived as being caused by each other, and when the narrative junction between these events takes precedence over more concrete modes of interconnection.
- 16 Moreover, other terms such as 'season' or 'episode', which can nowadays denote sets of narratives, have recently acquired this narrative dimension on the basis of the development of television forms³² and a specialised vocabulary, which has now become part of everyday language. This inclination towards narrativity can be explained by other factors, notably the popularisation of cultural practices and the development of serial practices aimed at building consumer loyalty according to a capitalist rationale, where fragmentation and trans-textual logic take precedence over the uniqueness of the work. This gives rise to semantic shifts that account for the tension between units that are broadcast independently, and compensatory narrative continuity. Thus, the word “feuilleton” (“serialised story” or “soap opera”) derives from the publishing format, and it is only later that it comes to designate a mode of narrative continuity, which counterbalances editorial fragmentation. Conversely, “episode”, originally integrated into a single narrative as “a complete part of the tragedy that lies between

the completed chants of the chorus³³", becomes autonomous by becoming an editorial and narrative unit, while at the same time being integrated into a series.

- 17 As far as the term 'series' is concerned, our understanding of it as essentially narrative to the detriment of the richness of other possible meanings, is due to two types of contamination. On the one hand, the entry of "série" ("series") into the French language via mathematical vocabulary (between the end of the 17th and the beginning of the 18th centuries) is based on an almost identical meaning to that of the term "suite" ("sequel", "continuation")³⁴. Indeed, Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encyclopaedia* groups them together in the same entry³⁵. This could explain the long-standing confusion between the two words and semantic exchanges, whereby common usages of "suite" ("sequel", "continuation") become meanings of "série" ("series"). "Série" ("series") entered the artistic lexical field late in the 19th century in France. At that time, the terms "roman-fleuve" ("river-novel") and "feuilleton" ("serialised story") dominated the literary field to describe serial novels with a narrative continuity³⁶. The second reason for this semantic contamination is the effect of the English term "serial", formed from the noun "series". It was used as early as 1841 as an adjective ("serial publication") and in 1846 as a noun to describe literary serials, while the same year "serialist" was used to describe writers of serialised stories³⁷. Even if the formation of the English word is based on the mode of publication, the semantic shift from "series" to narrativity in the artistic sphere could be explained in part because it refers to "feuilleton" ("serialised story") in French. This narrativization of the term obscures the fact that the development of seriality in the artistic sphere corresponds above all to the development of practices linked to the industrialisation of the artistic and cultural field.
- 18 In this respect, one cannot but notice the systematic use of the term "series" during the 19th century, in a meaning obviously different from that which tends to shape our contemporary imagination. The term designates, then, a mode of production and - by extension - a mode of consumption of artistic forms, based less on the uniqueness of the work than on its reproducibility. In a sense still distinct from that which can be found in mathematical usage, or in the context of music (based on the construction of a successive logic, the memory of the notes played conditioning the performance of the following notes with a view to creating a rhythmic and melodic harmony³⁸), the notion of series quickly came to denote the mechanical reproduction of works (mass production is "production en série" in French), allowing their large-scale diffusion, very much along the lines of the production of coins in antiquity, or the development of printing in the 15th century. Hence its rather obvious connection to the press and photography in particular, but also to the slide. However, if the series in this context refers only to a mode of *production*³⁹, the latter clearly had an impact on the artistic imagination of the time. In fact, beyond the reproducibility of works, we find a kind of logic in the act reproduction, based either on the "identity" of the objects produced, or on their proximity, invoking the principle of variation on a theme, for example, and determining collection practices. Here again, the examples are numerous, ranging from philately⁴⁰ to photographs, via painting with series of canvases such as those by Claude Monet, for example, variations on selected motifs painted at different times of the day (Water Lilies, Cathedrals, etc.⁴¹), or series of portraits, a pictorial concept which certainly did not appear with modernity, but which would never actually be named as such until the 19th century. In addition, the mass retailing of certain objects (books, reproductions of images, press, etc.) opens up an economic dimension that is part of

the continuity of so-called "modern" capitalism associated with the industrial revolution, encouraging public loyalty in order to ensure long-term profits.

- 19 In fact, at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, a similar conception of the term emerged in the field of animated pictures, namely, the cinema. Beyond the principle of "serialisation" of photographs, which is exactly how film functions, or even of the first coherent programmes made up of series of images⁴², it is notable that this idea of coherence is quickly followed by another principle, linked to the development of public loyalty via recurring actors/characters. To take just one example, the magazine *Ciné-Journal* explains that as early as 1908, "the French Société des Films Éclair, out of respect for the public's tastes, has launched the series of Nick Carter's extraordinary adventures⁴³". The article goes even further, stating that "the success of the first part [...] shows that cinematography [...] can be as popular as the novel, the serialised story and the theatre⁴⁴". Such an assertion only confirms the impact of an imaginary world generated by these artistic forms on the contemporary vision of seriality.
- 20 These early examples of a desire to build audience loyalty were later reflected in a large number of *serials*, from Louis Feuillade's *Fantômas* in France (1913-1914) to Louis Gasnier's *Exploits of Elaine* in the United States (1914-1915). It is interesting to note that it is on the basis of these particular productions that a whole vocabulary associated with narrative seriality appears, as can be seen, for example, in the American reception of Louis Feuillade's *Vampires: The Motion Picture News* thus evokes the "third episode" of what it calls a "photo-novel⁴⁵" (again the influence of the novel), but also "plot twists" or "surprises in quick succession" in what it called at the time a "series⁴⁶". But as we can see, this view of seriality is indeed inherited from a single approach linked to forms that are above all narrative (serialised story, theatre, novel), which we link to the idea of succession - but it is in no way linked to the notion of series itself, which, as we have understood it, could very well designate other forms of production, not limited to narration (painting, photography, music, etc.), and which at the time even aspired to destroy narration. It would therefore be appropriate to explore further the twists and turns of this contamination of serial forms by the narrative imagination as it emerged over the course of the 20th century, and not just where this concerned television. We also need to consider the ways seriality persists or survives outside the narrative paradigm.

Open seriality

- 21 The public and critical fortune of television series has thus not only consecrated a dominant, almost hegemonic model - that of narrativity - to the detriment of other possible models: it has also installed a received view of seriality which, taking precedence over others, obliterates the historicity of the notion, and in so doing, perhaps prevents it being used in new ways. In this sense, it can be said that the consecration of television series has set in motion a tautological movement, which is in all likelihood the harbinger of future entropy and exhaustion. Thus, to say that the series takes up the torch of cinema (and before it, of the novel) as the great art of storytelling is to accept from the outset the - questionable - idea that cinema is *first and foremost and always* an art of storytelling.

- 22 Opening the analysis of television series to other approaches therefore means departing, at least partially or temporarily, from a narrato-centric logic. Such a programme, of which only the broad outlines will be sketched here, could consist first of all of calling upon conceptions of seriality that precede or compete with the narrative model, which basically amounts to a broader challenge to the idea that narrativity is inherent in the condition of moving images. It would thus be a question of proposing, importing or reactivating models of analysis in which narration can certainly play a role, but no more important, and above all, no more structural than other dimensions which also permeate television objects, and which are paradoxically neglected today.
- 23 First of all, let us recall that in cinema, there absolutely are, even if they are a minority, non-narrative forms, and even serial non-narrative forms, i.e., series of films, explicitly conceived as such, in which narration is neither a prerequisite for filmmakers nor a horizon for analysts. They are essentially encountered in the field of what is usually called "experimental" cinema. These are, among many others, the Rose Lowder *Bouquets* series (1994-2009), Stan Brakhage's *Persian Series* (1999), Oskar Fischinger's *Studie* (1929-1932), and so on. The design of these filmic ensembles depends on a twofold principle: on the one hand, they are sometimes based on structural and compositional models borrowed from pre-existing arts, mainly painting and music. On the other hand, they are based on an in-depth knowledge of the properties of the medium, which the filmmakers explore reflexively, particularly the technical reproducibility of the cinematographic image and the fundamentally repetitive nature of the film strip, arranged in successive and equidistant photograms.
- 24 Insofar as television series are so often presented as forms that re-appropriate or extend questions asked in the field of cinema, it is surprising that there are - to our knowledge - no similar attempts in the history of television serial forms, where narrativity reigns almost unchallenged. Does this mean that television series would be condemned to the narrative-representative form? That the narrative would be so deeply entwined with the body of television seriality that the medium would, at bottom, be incapable of taking charge of and amplifying the echoes of what has nevertheless so profoundly shaken the sphere of the plastic arts, or that of music, during the 19th century and throughout the following one? However, if we look at it from the broader perspective of a history of forms, it seems to us that seriality is both distinct from the narrative model - which it can, however, intersect with - and, at times, linked more directly to an ambition to disregard this model. This is what the variations at work in the history of engraving bear witness to in a variety of ways, with the 250 or so paintings that make up Claude Monet's *Waterlilies*, or Andy Warhol's serigraphs; but also the atonal compositions of serial music by Schönberg or Webern, Raymond Queneau's *Hundred Thousand Billion Poems* or his *Exercices de style*, or the principle of *sampling* in contemporary popular music. These are very different examples, but they share an open conception of seriality, where narrativity is at best a collateral effect. It seems to us that the exclusively narrative approach to seriality thus blocks off the potentially fruitful dialogues that television series could maintain not only with other spheres of artistic creation, but also with the compositional or structural models from which they derive, and from which they blithely feed. To take just one example, the collective, even choral, dimension of a series such as *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010-), is not solely due to narrative imperatives. The way in which it

organises the spatial relationships of its protagonists in a form of permanent page-skimming, certainly indicates a desire to problematise the figure of the leader, and to successively deepen the painting of the personalities of the community of characters; but it also thematises collective writing strategies, those of the "writer's room", to which it refers in a reflexive way. It organises its elements according to a polyphonic principle. It invents models of interaction that can arouse interest beyond any consideration of the future of this community in a world in ruins. It builds relational architecture that also affects its aesthetics, through the values of the frame, the interpolations of the editing, the treatment of the relationships between figure and background, or between surface and depth.

- 25 In an article published in 2008, Olivier Aïm put forward the hypothesis of a "tabular writing"⁴⁷ at work in television seriality, making it possible to get out of the narrative rut. The idea of a tabular reading, as opposed to a linear reading, was also one of research topics of the μ (Mu) Group in their attempt to conceptualise poetic rhetoric at the end of the 1970s⁴⁸. Both closer and further away from us, the notion of tabularity was also put forward by Georges Didi-Huberman or Philippe-Alain Michaud in their work devoted to the art historian Aby Warburg. The *Mnēmosyne* Atlas, which he had worked to build up during the 1920s, was a tool used by many researchers to reflect on the future of images, their modes of "survival" and circulation, the heuristic virtues of anachronism, displacement and montage. The tabularity of the atlas, made up of hiatuses and bifurcations, thus offers an alternative to the linearity of the *istoria* model, as put forward by Erwin Panofsky, even though he was one of Warburg's disciples⁴⁹. Of course, a "tabular" consideration of the images does not imply the abandonment of any link with narrativity. But it does suggest an emphasis on both the role of the plasticity of the forms and the effects of structure which, without making the narrative disappear, disperse it sufficiently to leave the eye free to survey the images according to other rationales. Putting narrativity "in a minor key" (to continue the musical metaphor) into serial forms would therefore also allow different epistemic models to emerge in their analysis. To unfold or flesh out the forms, as well as the experience we make of them, and the way we account for them.
- 26 Considering other models for the analysis of television seriality thus implies being attentive to the historicity of serial practices, and to the diversity of the forms they take in the contemporary context. In the absence of a true typology, we would like to flag up at least two possible main paths which would help us design modes of analysis of television serial productions presenting an alternative - or a complement - to the narrative paradigm. The first aims to consider what is created in the series, at the structural level, by substituting a more syntactic model for the dominant semantic model, even if it means abandoning the analysis of the piece and adopting large-scale quantitative interpretation frameworks, which highlight the accumulation of data rather than linear organisation models. Conversely, the second way consists - without contradicting the structural model - of evaluating the contribution of a more resolutely formalistic approach to television series, which have been little observed in terms of the plasticity they display. From this perspective, it is mostly a question of flagging up the virtues of an analysis which, instead of taking television as a frame of reference, looks at the medium - film, analogue or digital video - and the expressive powers it contains.

27 Thus, a first line of thought would be to look at the structural dimension of television series based on other artistic forms, taking care not to subordinate structure to narration. It seems to us that a distinction between two types of television series can be envisaged at the very least. On the one hand, certain series (*Breaking Bad*⁵⁰, *Lost*, *The Wire*⁵¹, *The Walking Dead*, *Game of Thrones*⁵², etc.), currently widely recognised for their great narrative complexity, deploy a spatial approach based on an *expansive* model. These series revolve around the imaginary world of the frontier, with each season aiming to go beyond it and discover new spaces, on a model that in many ways is reminiscent of the western - but also of certain cartographic models developed in the context of video games. On the other hand, fixed-frame series such as the *sitcom* or *soap opera* are part of a different, *intensive* spatial approach, which aims at the exhaustive use of a unique and often closed space (flat, building, company offices, school, etc.). They function on the basis of unvarying sets, which further constrain an exploration of spatial potentialities that function by superimposition and accumulation. The study of this modality of serial spatiality, relatively rarely undertaken so far, would make it possible to consider how production constraints generate innovative forms which are less reminiscent of the aspirations of the soap opera than those, for example, of the Oulipo. Founded in the early 1960s around Raymond Queneau and the mathematician François Le Lionnais, the OUVROIR de Littérature POTentielle is a research group working to produce new literary structures and forms from constraining procedures that are carefully researched, refined and accepted. Convinced that constraints are a powerful lever for investigating literary potential, its members create their work from mathematical, musical or gaming structures. The television series may not have its own *ouvroir* (yet), but production constraints, when used as potential creative tools with no intent to use narration to hide them from the viewer, provide fine examples of approaches linked to the issue of inhabiting a space. Exhausting the possibilities offered by a place, but also by a medium, constitutes an innovative creative challenge, evoking the *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien* or *La vie mode d'emploi* by Georges Perec⁵³. Such a perspective could benefit, for example, from quantitative analysis models such as those used by Franco Moretti for literature, who in *Graphs, Maps, Trees*⁵⁴, focuses on a quantitative history of the fiction genre and its sub-genres around the world. This type of approach on a very large scale could be transposed to the analysis of these constellations of sequences, episodes, narrative arcs and seasons, leaving aside their linear construction to envisage structures based on the essential elements of accumulation and reiteration.

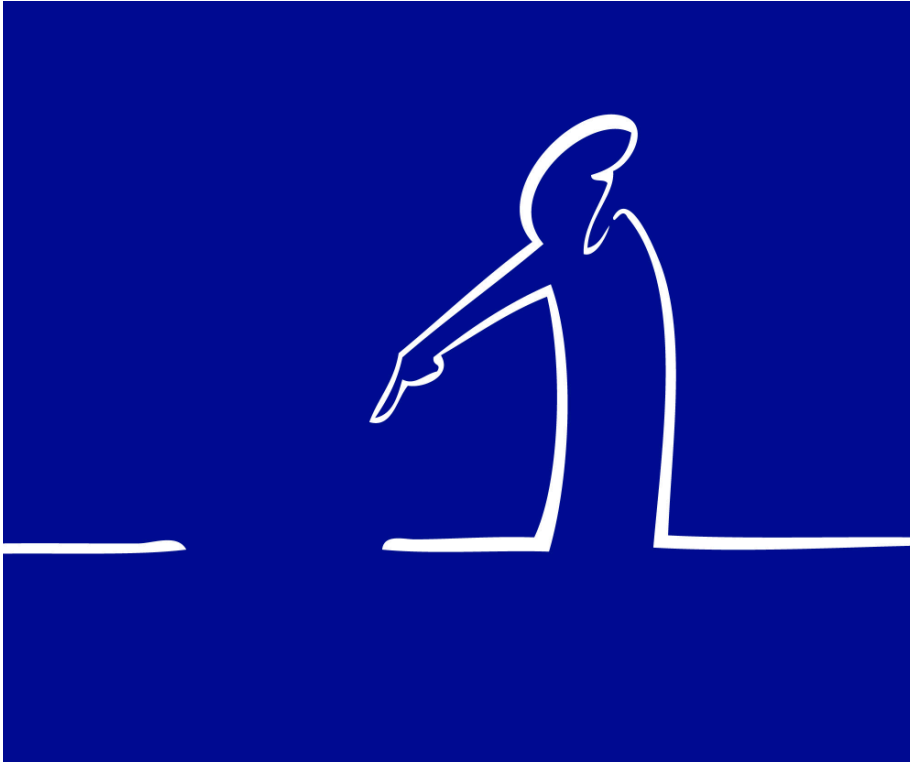
Figure 1: Guillaume Duchenne de Boulogne, *Mechanism of the human physiognomy or electro-physiological analysis of the expression of passions*, 1862, Plate 7.



- 28 What can a serial space do? What can a body do when caught up in such a space? Working on these issues requires a careful look at the dimension of repetition and variation in the structural motifs of television series. The repetitions of grimaces, mimicry, yelling, retorts, gestures by Sheldon Cooper in *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS, 2007-2019), to take just one example, are burlesque variations around a motif, variations that are barely subject to temporal linearity in the same way as Guillaume Duchenne de Boulogne's photographic plates in the middle of the 19th century. He documented his experiments in clinical treatment with electricity, using forms of serial editing that compared his patients' facial expressions with the forms of pathos developed by Greek statuary (Fig. 1). Following the example of the novel *Marelle* by the Argentinian writer Julio Cortazar⁵⁵, several modes of viewing television series are also possible. While the viewer may obviously enjoy following the narrative order laid down by the creators of a series, he or she may just as well watch episodes in another order, which they either choose (elective "editing") or which are imposed on them⁵⁶. Variation can also result from economic strategies to adapt a successful series from one country to another. For example, the scriptwriters and directors of the Franco-Belgian adaptation of the Norwegian teen series *Skam* (NRK, 2015-2017) were contractually obliged, in the early episodes, to follow the storylines and directing of the original series (dialogue, shot-scaling, costumes, etc.). Beyond the traditional issues of remake and adaptation, the fact that it is possible to refresh a moving image using different actors and spaces leads us to wonder what makes a presence, or an image, unique, each shot being attractive to viewers familiar with the Norwegian version, causing them to focus intently or look on in astonishment, sparking curiosity not so much about the narration but about variations around a referent, a model. To investigate these games of echoes, repetitions, and variations, it is worth exploring approaches outside

narratology as they have particularly fertile potential for analysis. These approaches investigate serial forms of viewing practices and production imperatives, thereby inviting new questions and modes of analysis, etc. But to do so, we are obliged to call on fields of creation or knowledge in which narrativity is not, or no longer, a primary issue.

Figure 2 : *La Linea*, episode 9, 1978 (RAI)



- 29 At the other end of the analytical spectrum, the growing number of reflections on the plasticity of images and the specificity of the media could also offer suggestions for the study of television seriality. It is surprising, for example, that Dominique Avron's stimulating work *Le scintillant*⁵⁷ has not been more widely emulated in the analysis of television forms. However, television series can consciously play with (and trick) the technical and aesthetic parameters that allow the creation of a television image, whether cathodic or digital. The 90 episodes of the Italian animated series *La Linea*, broadcast on RAI and then all over the world from 1971, tell no more than the twists and turns, the convolutions and sweeps of a line, which also refers to the television frame, the loom on which the cathodic forms were made (Fig. 2). Closer to us, in "The Signal" (S04E24), an episode in the cartoon series *The Amazing World of Gumball* (Cartoon Network, 2011-), a character's face can suddenly be broken down into a succession of pixels, the sound becoming jerky. The viewer may then assume that his television set has a temporary fault, but this glitch, this visual error which is also a form in itself, is actually a planned part of the broadcast, sowing confusion about the cause of this incident, and referencing the series' self-reflective dimension (Fig. 3-5).

Figure 3: *The Amazing World of Gumball*, S04E24, "The Signal".



Figure 4: *The Amazing World of Gumball*, S04E24, "The Signal"



Figure 5: *The Amazing World of Gumball*, S04E24, "The Signal"



- 30 Some series go even further, such as the cartoon *Adventure Time* (Cartoon Network, 2010-2018), one episode of which, entitled "A Glitch is a Glitch" (S05E15), is entirely built around a disruption of the digital flow that not only affects the conditions of the cartoon's reception, but also contaminates - as much as it structures - the narrative itself (Fig. 6-9). That these examples are taken from the field of animation should come as no surprise, as the liberties taken with the very principle of representation are greater there than in live-action series. But in the latter, once again, is narrativity a foregone conclusion?

Figure 6: *Adventure Time*, S05E15, "A Glitch is a Glitch".



Figure 7: *Adventure Time*, S05E15, "A Glitch is a Glitch"



Figure 8: *Adventure Time*, S05E15, "A Glitch is a Glitch"Figure 9: *Adventure Time*, S05E15, "A Glitch is a Glitch"

- 31 The appearance of these double-bottomed images, which question the very condition of series in the digital age, thus produces not only representations, but also questions of a new kind, investigating "the interdependence of technical development and its social and cultural integration"⁵⁸. "These image practices do not only refer to what are sometimes called "meta" series, which embed their own kind of audio-visual narratives⁵⁹. Series makers are familiar with the technical issues around a digital image, its production and transmission, and it is therefore curious that this dimension has not been given more attention by commentators, perhaps for lack of appropriate tools to grasp these issues.
- 32 In conclusion, it seems to us that television studies would benefit from a more systematic challenge to the postulate that a television series is first and always a narrative, index-linked to effects that make it resemble the world that produces it.

- 33 What can an image do? By failing to ask this question directly - a question which has long preoccupied cinema and all the visual arts - television studies have not accomplished all they could. As we have said, it is not a question of evaluating series on the basis of a criterion such as *mise en scène*, and even less of suggesting that everything is still to be done, or that nothing has been done, far from it. Rather, it is to argue for a concept of seriality that is less unilaterally semantic, i.e. both more specific - evaluating television forms on the basis of their own plasticity - and more open - remaining attentive to other concepts of serial creation, which have informed other areas of artistic activity, in other eras, and continue to do so.
- 34 This text was not intended to provide answers to such a problem, but to simply point out its existence. It must therefore be taken for what it is, in all modesty: a work in progress, made up of observations and proposals, a piece of work yet to be done, an emerging work, and an invitation to researchers to trust forms, which are always freer, more inventive, more stimulating than what the industry would like to reduce them to (stories). Looking elsewhere than where we are told to look means we are already looking with fresh eyes.

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NOTES

1. The text was written by Sophie Barel, Quentin Fischer, Jean Gueguen, Damien Keller, Yannick Kernec'h, Jean-Baptiste Massuet and Éric Thouvenel.

2. Robert J. Thompson, *Television's Second Golden Age*, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 1997.

3. Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, New York, NYU Press, 2015.

4. Thierry Groensteen, « Fictions sans frontières », dans André Gaudreault et Thierry Groensteen, *La Transécriture. Pour une théorie de l'adaptation*, Québec, Nota Bene, 1998, p. 14.

5. Jean-Pierre Esquenazi also speaks of « l'art (narratif) des séries télévisées ». Jean-Pierre Esquenazi, *Les Séries télévisées - L'avenir du cinéma ?*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2014.

6. Thierry Groensteen, « Fictions sans frontières », *art. cit.*, p. 15.

7. "It is in the nature of any narrative to focus the public's attention on its fictional unfolding and to obscure, to a certain extent, the artist's work on the signs through which the narrative manifests itself. [...] this relative transparency of form is by no means an effect specific to literature; it can be observed (with nuances) in all narrative arts. It is the result of the intrinsic imperialism of the narrative form, which always recovers for its own benefit all the elements that make up the work. As Christian Metz says: "In a narrative film, everything becomes narrative, even the grain of the film or the timbre of the voices". In short, a film, a novel or a comic book are essentially, for an audience eager for stories and spurred on by curiosity, the concrete manifestation of a scenario, its phenomenological body." Groensteen, pp. 17-18.

8. Stéphane Benassi, *Séries et feuilletons TV - Pour une typologie des fictions télévisuelles*, Liège, CÉFAL, coll. « Grand Écran Petit Écran », 2000.

9. This process of legitimisation in the face of a culture of prejudice is very similar to that which the novel and the cinema have successively undergone. See François Jost, *Comprendre la télévision et ses programmes*, Paris, Armand Colin, coll. "Focus Cinéma", (2005) 2017, p. 17-18.

10. See Jean-Pierre Esquenazi, *Éléments pour l'analyse des séries*, Paris, L'Harmattan, coll. « Champs visuels », 2017, p. 7.

11. François Jost and André Gaudreault, for example, published in 2017 a third, revised and expanded edition of *Le Récit cinématographique*, which updates the original corpus to include analyses of television series. In it, the authors defend the idea that "film narrative" can refer to both films and series', but admit that "audiovisual narrative" is more modern. André Gaudreault and François Jost, *Le Récit cinématographique*, Paris, Armand Colin, (1990) 2017, p. 12-13.

12. H  l  ne Breda, « Le "tissage narratif" et ses enjeux socioculturels dans les s  ries t  l  vis  es am  ricaines contemporaines », doctoral thesis in cinematographic and audio-visual studies, under the direction of Guillaume Soulez, Paris, Universit   Sorbonne-Nouvelle Paris 3, 2015.
13. Respectively: BBC One, 1963-1989 and 2005-- ; Netflix, 2016-2017 ; Channel 4, 2004-2013 ; NBC, 2005-2013 ; NBC, 2009-2014 and Yahoo Screens, 2015.
14. We indicate "fictional" insofar as this relationship is above all the product of the viewer's imagination, and does not rise to a real exchange. However, the many questions that this idea raises, particularly in a contemporary artistic context which values the dynamic exchange between creation and reception (which television has in a sense anticipated and supported), lead us to mark it in brackets to sure the idea of relationship prevails.
15. Jean-Pierre Esquenazi, « Pouvoirs des s  ries t  l  vis  es », *  l  ments pour l'analyse des s  ries*, op. cit., p. 90.
16. Rapha  l Baroni and Fran  ois Jost, « Repenser le r  cit avec les s  ries », in Rapha  l Baroni and Fran  ois Jost (dir.), *T  l  vision*, n   7, 2016, p. 10.
17. Baroni, Jost, 2016.
18. Anne Besson, *Constellations. Des mondes fictionnels dans l'imaginaire contemporain*, Paris, CNRS, 2015, p. 12.
19. Besson, p. 21
20. Matthieu Letourneux, *Fictions    la cha  ne - Litt  ratures s  rielles et culture m  diatique*, Paris, Seuil, coll. « Po  tique », 2017, p. 339.
21. What Philippe Marion calls « transm  diag  nie ». Cf. Philippe Marion, « Narratologie m  diatique et m  diag  nie des r  cits », *Recherches en communication*, n   7, 1997, p. 61-88.
22. According to Matthieu Letourneux, this is due in particular to the producers' interest in declining a previously serial universe, or even to the stability of the encyclopaedic character of its architecture. See Matthieu Letourneux, *Fictions    la cha  ne*, p. 343.
23. Matthieu Letourneux, *Fictions    la cha  ne*, p. 28.
24. Cf. Fran  ois Jost, *Introduction    l'analyse de la t  l  vision*, Paris, Ellipses, coll. « Infocom », 1999, p. 117.
25. Cf. H  l  ne Breda, op.cit.
26. Quinte-Curce, *Histoires*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, coll. « CUF », (1948) 1965, Tome 2, p. 239.
27. *Ibid.*, Tome 1, p. 4.
28. Pliny the Elder, *Histoire naturelle*, livre XI, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, « CUF », 1947, p. 86.
29. Statius, *Silves*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, « CUF », 1944, Tome 1, p. 116.
30. Quintilian, *Institution oratoire*, Paris, Librairie Garnier Fr  res, coll. « Classiques Garnier », 1933, Tome 2, p. 276-277.
31. Cicero, *De la divination*, Paris, Librairie Garnier Fr  res, coll. « Classiques Garnier », 1937, p. 110-111.
32. For the historic evolution of French terms, we have used Alain Rey (dir.), *Dictionnaire historique de la langue fran  aise*, Paris, Dictionnaires Le Robert, (1993) 2010.
33. Aristotle, *Po  tique*, translated into French by Barbara Gernez, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, coll. « Classiques en poche », (2001) 2008, p. 44-45.
34. The mathematical sequence is a sequence of numbers following a known, theoretical and potentially infinite law; the series is a portion of this sequence, a sequence of numbers following the same law but finite, a tool that makes it possible to examine and practically model the evolution of sequences.
35. Anonymous, « S  rie ou Suite : en Alg  bre », dans Diderot, D'Alembert, *L'Encyclop  die*, Volume 15, 1765, p. 93b-96a : <http://enccre.academie-sciences.fr/encyclopedie/article/v15-174-0/>, consulted on 19 February 2018.
36. Cf. Constant Gu  roult, « Du roman-feuilleton », *La Presse dramatique*, n   19, 28 December e 1851, p. 1: "One does not suspect the delights that the daily reading of the serial novel brings to

our regions; one does not know with what impatience this sequel is awaited; the Parisian [...] postpones the reading to a time of leisure that never happens."

37. Anonymous, "Serial", *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, (1933) 1961, Volume 9, p. 497.

38. An example is L. Cherubini's *Marches d'harmonie pratiquée dans la composition*, published in 1847, in which simple harmonies are described as "built on series" by "forming a succession of perfect chords" (p. 103).

39. There are many examples of this, from the lithography invented by Aloys Senefelder in 1796, to photography, to the production of devices intended for marketing such as magic lanterns.

40. Cf. Anonymous, « Observations philatéliques », *Revue philatélique française*, n° 85, décembre 1897, p. 149 : "This very interesting series contains some very curious varieties", a formulation showing the coherence of a whole, beyond the idea of mass production.

41. The term "series" was used at the time to denote his paintings: Cf. Camille Mauclair, *L'Impressionnisme, son histoire, son esthétique, ses maîtres*, Paris, Librairie de l'Art ancien et moderne, 1904, p. 73.

42. Cf. for example Thierry Lecoite, « Les premières années du spectacle cinématographique à Nîmes – 1895-1913 », 1895, n° 43, summer 2004, p. 57.

43. Anonymous, « Éclair – Nick Carter, Roi des détectives », *Ciné-Journal*, n° 5, 15 septembre 1908, p. 4 (our underlining).

44. *Ibid.*

45. Anonymous, "Lone Thief Appears and Opposes "The Vampires" in Third Episode", *Motion Picture News*, Volume 14, n° 22, 2 December 1916, p. 3490.

46. Anonymous, "Give Them What They Don't Expect" – Feuillade, *Motion Picture News*, vol. 14, n° 20, 18 November 1916, p. 3163.

47. Olivier Aïm, « La série télévisée comme machine à voir », *Entrelacs*, Hors-série « Séries télé in/out », 2008, put online 1 August 2012, consulted 15 February 2018 : <http://entrelacs.revues.org/260>.

48. Groupe µ, *Rhétorique de la poésie – Lecture linéaire, lecture tabulaire*, Bruxelles, Éditions Complexe, 1977.

49. Cf. Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'image survivante – Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg*, Paris, Minuit, coll. « Paradoxes », 2002 ; Philippe-Alain Michaud, *Aby Warburg et l'image en mouvement*, Paris, Macula, (1998) 2012 ; Erwin Panofsky, *Essais d'icologie – Thèmes humanistes dans l'art de la Renaissance*, Paris, Gallimard, (1939) 1967.

50. AMC, 2008-2013.

51. HBO, 2002-2008.

52. HBO, 2011-2019.

53. Georges Perec, *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien*, Paris, UGE, 1975 ; *La vie mode d'emploi. Romans*, Paris, Hachette, 1978.

54. Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History*, London, New York, Verso, 2005.

55. Published in 1963, *Marelle* is a novel that can be read according to two types of trajectories: in a linear way, page by page and from chapter 1 to chapter 56; or in a tabular way starting from chapter 73 and following a non-consecutive order indicated at the beginning of the novel, in the manner of the "books where you are the hero", and favouring excursions, digressions, shifts from the novel form to other literary forms.

56. As is regularly the case when TF1, for example, broadcasts episodes of a series in the wrong order. Laziness on the part of the programmer, or genius on the part of the editor?

57. Dominique Avron, *Le scintillant – Essai sur le phénomène télévisuel*, Strasbourg, Presses universitaires de Strasbourg, 1994.

58. Thierry Lancien, « Un objet improbable », *MédiaMorphoses*, n° 6, « La télévision : média de la parole ? », November 2002, p. 21.

59. One of the most famous examples is the series *Community* (NBC and then Yahoo Screens, 2009-2015), in which one of the main characters, Abed, is the only one who is aware that he is in a TV series. It is also significant that this character is viewed as suffering from a form of pronounced autism, or even psychosis, as if this reflexive knowledge were necessarily pathological. We always come back, deep down, to the idea that to bring down the wall between the viewer and the show is a forbidden and dangerous act...

ABSTRACTS

Narrative studies tend to detract television shows from their rich aesthetic value and inherent complexity, which is not limited to their narrative dimension. The success of narrative approaches, whose relevance is not in question here, can be explained historically by the way they were introduced in the academic field and by the discourses surrounding television shows and other forms of serials. Methods developed in other academic fields can however be called for to better explain and understand the aesthetic value and fame of television shows. In this article, we aim at laying the groundwork of this reflection and opening the way we look at and understand these objects.

Les approches narratologiques des séries télévisées tendent à occulter les richesses et les innovations formelles dont font preuve ces objets audiovisuels, dont la complexité dépasse le cadre strictement narratif. Le succès des approches narratologiques, dont la pertinence n'est nullement mise en cause, loin s'en faut, s'explique historiquement par les voies de son intégration dans le champ universitaire et les discours qui en déterminent la réception. Des méthodes développées dans d'autres champs disciplinaires, concernant d'autres arts ou objets culturels, peuvent cependant être sollicitées pour expliquer et rendre compte de la richesse et du succès des séries télévisées. Nous chercherons ici à poser les bases de cette réflexion, conçue comme un exercice d'ouverture du regard.

INDEX

Mots-clés: narratologie, sérialité, arts, littérature, cinéma, peinture

Keywords: narratology, seriality, arts, literature, cinema, painting

AUTHORS

SAUTE-REQUIN

Saute-Requin (Jump-the-shark) is a collective composed of students and scholars from diverse backgrounds, all interested in serial cultural productions, whether erudite or popular. Its main purpose is to promote research and cultural activities about serial cultures. This article is the result of a collaborative work of seven of them, equipped with the tools and perspectives from

their various disciplinary fields: Sophie Barel in communication studies, Quentin Fischer and Jean Gueguen in comparative literature; Damien Keller, Yannick Kernec'h, Jean-Baptiste Massuet and Éric Thouvenel in film studies.

Saute-Requin est une association de chercheur·se·s et étudiant·e·s de divers horizons, toutes et tous passionné·e·s de formes sérielles, savantes ou populaires. Son objectif est de promouvoir la recherche et les activités culturelles autour des cultures sérielles. Cet article est le fruit du travail collaboratif de sept d'entre eux, armé·e·s des connaissances et méthodes de leurs champs disciplinaires respectifs : Sophie Barel, en sciences de l'information et de la communication ; Quentin Fischer et Jean Gueguen en littérature comparée ; Damien Keller, Yannick Kernec'h, Jean-Baptiste Massuet et Éric Thouvenel en études cinématographiques.