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TELEVISION DRAMA SERIES' INCORPORATION OF FILM NARRATIVE INNOVATION: THE CASE OF 24

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1. The Golden Age

Joyard (2003) refers to the past decade as the Golden Age of the American series, mostly in connection with their narrative features and their capacity to arouse emotions. *24* (2001) by Joel Surnow and Robert Cochran illustrates perfectly these innovative capacities in dramatic series. The series concept is everything, making *24* an instant cult object. It is presented as the nearest to real time that any artistic work can achieve. The continuous flow of events from *24* enters our homes through our TV sets permitting us to follow an apparent reality, projected week by week at the same hour, but making us feel a contemporaneous experience from a use of a space/time that struggles against illusion.

Creative liberty has permitted the development of new narrative trends (Thompson, 2003), just as unusual aesthetic forms new to television (Nelson, 2001) have striven to deliver greater degrees of realism. Narrative complexity is increasing, becoming more intricate not only at the plot level but also at the level of character development, which might lead us to believe that television series are positioning themselves in the vanguard of visual media narrative. Surnow in interview (Cohen and Joyard, 2003) refers to this television as a new land of opportunity for creative and original artworks, based upon a freedom promoted by cable television (and here we should mention the impressive achievement of the pay cable channel Home Box Office in backing ground-breaking new TV series) which allows artists to transcend the constraints of Hollywood dictated by economic globalization. In this sense, television series have been transformed in recent years into an attractive alternative option for Hollywood figures: writers (Alan Ball, *Six Feet Under* (2001)); directors (Mike Nichols, *Angels in America* (2003)), producers (Jerry Bruckheimer, *CSI* (2000)) and actors Kiefer Sutherland (*24* (2001)).

At the same time, creativity doesn't reside alone in the series' content but also in their form and style, as Marker (2003, c.f. Joyard, 2003) argues about "the amazing American series [...] there, we have knowledge, a sense of discourse, of linkage, of ellipse, one science of framing and editing, one dramaturgy and a game of actors, which have no equivalent anywhere else". On the audience side, Johnson (2005) says that, "American TV series have increased the cognitive work they demand from their audience, exercising the mind in ways that would have been unheard of thirty years ago", insisting on the increase in narrative complexity levels in television.

We therefore present our argument in defence of the above view by offering an account of the evolution taking place in terms of content, narrative and visual form and describing the most salient elements used by TV series to captivate their audiences in the ways that they do.

2. The Concept behind the New TV Drama

New television series are not born from any truly innovative vision of narrative or form or any need to build artefacts with wholly novel characteristics, but instead are new formal fusions of older styles. In terms of narrative structure, new series borrow most of their techniques from soap operas. In terms of visual style they mostly borrow from contemporaneous Hollywood film. So we have an object that makes use of the narrative core of popular television grammar, but adding to it from the main techniques of Hollywood-style visual storytelling. This new form made of the union between television and film has created a new dramatic language, we would argue, able to rise above not only television itself but also film language.

Soap opera is a storytelling and episodic format that began in US radio in the twenties and arrived in television in the late forties. Above all, the open plot structure is what best defines soap opera narratives, and as a consequence what has generated the skills to manage plot complexities and plausible continuity through years of scheduling. On the other hand, Hollywood also has powerful storytelling formats but in more visually style-oriented ways. In soap operas, the "telling" is everything whereas in Hollywood, on the contrary, the "showing" is everything. So, in the latter instance, we have above all visual continuity through acting and editing and a powerful cinematography almost able to tell the story on its own.

This new TV drama format, able to join the best of both worlds, was pioneered by Steve Bochco with the series *Hill Street Blues* in 1981. This is

a show about a police precinct, a working community with all its daily professional and personal problems. Marc and Thompson (1992) describes *Hill Street Blues* as "... multiple centers of audience identification; complicated personal lives; overlapping dialogue; hand-held camera shots; busy, crowded mise-en-scènes." In terms of dramatic stagings, Bochco transferred the common domestic social relations between families of soap operas to a professional environment such as a police precinct. The narratives were then enlarged in scope, being able not only to talk about intra and inter-personal relations but also about intra and inter-group relations thus extending the communication "systemics" (Bateson, 1979) and so creating a wider network for drama conflicts. Characters in *Hill Street Blues* were multi-racial and not especially attractive, in order to attain a kind of realism that soap operas were never able or willing to offer. Visually it was innovative and realistic for TV, in contrast to, say, Hollywood cop films, with a noisy and cluttered cinematography and an elaborate use of different angles and editing to tell the stories.

This format developed by Steven Bochco in 1981 was successful but not sufficiently so at the time to become a dominant new paradigm. It took a couple of decades, and other series by Bochco which reworked the paradigm with variations, to be adopted by almost every new series: *The West Wing* (1999), *The Sopranos* (1999), *24* (2001), *Six Feet Under* (2001), *Lost* (2004), *Desperate Housewives* (2004).

2.1 Complex narrative structure

Storytelling in soap operas can be extended over years or decades. CBS's *The Guiding Light* (1952) is credited by the *Guinness Book of Records* as being the longest soap opera ever told. Started as a radio drama in 1937, it was transferred to television in 1952. It's easy to understand that the narrative basis that supports the show is by now not only enormous but also very complex for anyone that has never seen the show. In content terms, nothing is for granted in soap operas; characters can die on-screen or off-screen and come back a few months or years later, through some hidden plot artifice. Everything that seems white today in soaps can easily become black the next day. Soap's drama goals are the developing of a fantasyland where events run almost like in real life but where dreams and wishes generally prevail in life's struggles.

Hollywood has an unwritten rule that forbids writers and directors to extend their movies beyond 2 hours and 15 minutes. Reasons for this are commercial (longer movies generate less viewings, and so less tickets per day in theatres) but also because of the possible complexification of the

story plot, something that Hollywood producers also dislike because it implies a challenge for the audience's mental range. In content, classical Hollywood favours a realism based upon a cause and effect plot, realistic continuity perceived as plausible and natural by the audience. This realism is reinforced by characters enacted in an emotional realist form, with actors performing within an accepted scale of styles running from classical theatrical to modern psychoanalytically-influenced modes like "the method" (Stanislavski, 1938).

Drama series run over months and years. Series are normally developed in seasons that are aired during one year or a semester and their audiences are then quantified and analysed in order to decide if a new season is to be produced or not. Content follows the Hollywood-realist approach, with characters developed through plot actions, and the evolving personality traits revealed through realistic (usually emotional) codes of representation. This implies a narrative structure strongly based on the soap opera format, making use of realistic Hollywood drama content. The main structure is therefore built around three main techniques - multi-plots (a), multi-characters (b) and seriality (c) – which we will now look at in more detail.

(a) In each episode, various plots are developed simultaneously (see figure 1) through the interwovenness of information and characters across the different plots, unlike in Hollywood, where each movie has one dominant plot and possibly a secondary, more character-related plot. The multi-plot technique started with fewer, non-hierarchised and non-simultaneous plots with *Hill Street*, but in today's TV series we can have in a single episode around ten different plots running concurrently and competing for the audience's attention and taxing its memory. As Johnson (2005) argues, this higher and interwoven information flow means an increase in complexity and so a higher cognitive workflow in audiences. In some way, we can say the audiences of today, having cut their teeth on *Bohco*, are better prepared cognitively to watch such complex types of drama than audiences from thirty years ago.

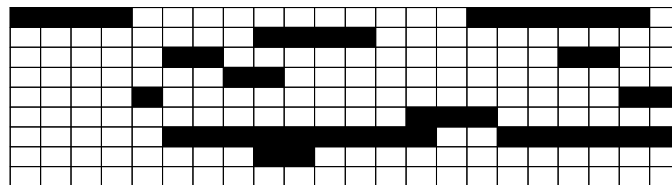


Figure 1 - Part of a "The Sopranos" episode (Johnson, 2005)

Audiences today are not only better prepared but they require more information at a faster pace. Series with multi-plots have in recent years become more successful than traditionally focussed shows. Looking at *CSI* first season (2000), in narrative terms, we can easily see that beyond the sub-plots predicated on the recurring characters, we have in all the episodes not one but two crimes to solve in simultaneity, and this corresponds at some level to the viewers' hunger for more and more information to decipher within the show's run-time.

(b) Multiple characterisation is one of the great techniques used by new TV series because it functions as a big wheel of conflicts and affinities for the writers to choose from. Having not one hero, but a group of characters with similar weight creates large dramatic possibilities to expand the series not only in time but also in social relations and so dramatically. In each episode the writer uses the characters wheel (see figure 2) to mix the characters with plots to generate tension and surprise and to achieve dramatically satisfying outcomes; each character having more or less the same prominence it's easier to maintain the effect of novelty and to avoid baggage or redundancy building up around one single character. At the same time, each character can have their own plot-lines that are developed through series time, each of the characters revealing more of themselves at the same time that they are evolving relationships with other series characters. In terms of audience reception, multi-characters helps feed the cognitive needs of viewers; by augmenting and complicating social relations, the viewer is compelled to invest more labour in getting to understand each character than if it were just one protagonist (as in the case of classic TV detectives like Columbo), and also to understand their emotional inter-relatedness with others. The web of relations functions then as a knowledge basis to understand the ongoing events in the series.

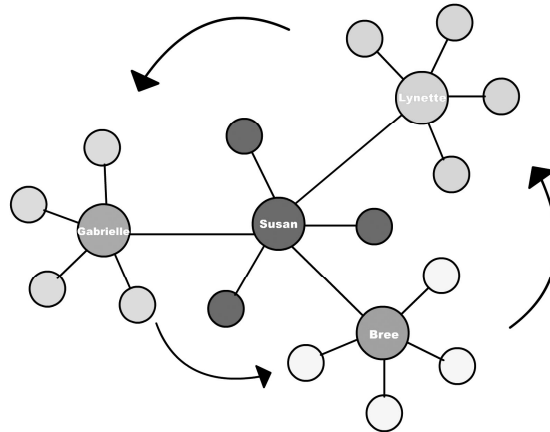


Figure 2 – “Desperate Housewives” (2004) - characters wheel

(c) The techniques of multi-plotting and multi-character have developed another technique that we might call seriality. Plots and character evolution run through episodes and even seasons. In contrast to those series with closed plots for each episode, the new TV series uses the multi-plotting technique to advance enough information that can satisfy the viewer during one episode, to avoid the necessity for closure and to leave open clues for plots of the next episodes:

what we are trying to do is create a long-term impact. One which requires its viewership to defer gratification for a while, to control that impulse in anticipation of a more complex and fully satisfying closure down the road. It's the same commitment you make when you open up to the first page of a novel. (Bohco, 1995 c.f. Johnson, 2005, 221)

Closure in movies and older series has an implicit reward function, the viewer knows that at the end of the episode he or she will be surprised or enlightened as to what was happening, creating a sort of relief and also a psychological reward. In the new TV series with around ten plots ongoing at the same time, we have lots of information but it is mostly fragmented. The reward comes then as information-hunger approaches satisfaction, the viewer's mind being completely occupied processing and patterning the fragmented information and so understanding the plots' networking, feeling rewarded by the task of network information solving. However, the seriality technique doesn't completely avoid closure in most of new TV series. There are usually some efforts made to take at least one plot strand

to some resolution in the middle of all the others. This resolution is not as absolute as in single plot series, where plot information raises tension to a climax and a palpable relief at the end, but in some way it retains this older need for some sort of closure within its narrative frame-work.

2.2 Complex style form

According to Bordwell, “*Stylistics* deals with the materials and patterning of the film medium as components of the constructive process” (Bordwell, 1989). In the case of most of the series here under review, we’re concerned mostly with the editing and cinematography processes.

Soap operas are rapidly and serially produced with relatively few resources. Episodes are shot almost always in studios, with pre-mounted cameras in fixed places and the production rhythm needs to be very high in order to fulfil the programme scheduling of one episode per day. Understanding these constraints, it is easy to see that visual flair is not a key issue and that it is routinely subordinated to narrative construction. So in soaps, narrative is the driving force and concerns about style are not at the explicit level but only as matter of easing narrative comprehension.

Switching to Hollywood’s value-system, style is put at the same level as narrative and sometimes even above it. Emotional expressivity is carried through style most of the time, a subsuming in film conventions accepted by the audience that colludes in the construction of a type of heightened realism. The shooting of a movie can take many, many months which gives time for the construction of sets and close attention to other visual details able to convey the authenticity and substantiality of the narrative environment. Post-production is then used to add elements impossible to achieve through shooting or cut out unwanted or redundant elements in the cinematography. Post-production is used to match up with the preconceived audiovisual inferences (Prince, 1996) audiences draw in respect of the degree of realism or generic fidelity (in stylistic terms) the stories require. Hollywood style is more “expressionistic” than realistic; the concern is always to use bold stylistic tropes to produce immersive spectacle which it is largely impossible for audiences to resist. As Murch (1995) argues, Hollywood movies are made of 51% emotion and only 21% story.

Taking into account these two different styles of audiovisual storytelling, new TV drama makes use of both styles but what seems most conspicuous is its adopting of Hollywood techniques and modes of production. Unlike soap operas, the production rhythm is only concerned with one episode per week having much more time to prepare each episode.

Also as to resources, TV series are aired mostly at night in prime-time which earns greater returns in terms of publicity, and they are also sold in DVD series packages creating new revenues streams that soap operas could never obtain. These two factors, money and time, help to differentiate the new artwork types at the level of style. Clearly they are predicated on the economics of production.

The complex style can then be defined as the elaborated and careful construction of the story in an immersive visual environment, taking into account all the little details about plotting and character development. Having a cinematography able to mimic realistic but also to indulge in expressionistic lighting, shooting in real places and taking time to find the best framing for each action are its trump cards. Skilful editing also makes a huge contribution to the management of emotional responses, as it is used to shape visual information and to move between general framing and the greater intensity of close-up.

4. Case Study: 24

24 is a series created by Joel Surnow and Robert Cochran from the beginning on the challenging principle of a “real-time format”. The “real-time format” searches for a mode of dramatic action that will exactly equate to screen presentation time. In this manner, one season covers the events of one day in the life of Jack Bauer, and every episode covers the events of one hour in that day. So real-time itself is fore-grounded and gives its name to the series, that is, 24 episodes for 24 hours.

24 has been praised by critics and public alike and extensively cited as a symbol of the new golden age of TV series (Joyard, 2003; Johnson, 2005). Central to all this approval is not the real-time concept in itself but **all** the techniques emphasised earlier in this paper: the multi-plot, multi-characters and seriality. We will only offer here an analysis in depth of the first season, which was aired in 2001/2002 and which launched the real-time concept.

The first season starts at 12:00am with one major plot that revolves around an assassination attempt on Senator David Palmer and it will take 24 hours (24 episodes) to foil this attempt, during which time three more major plots will erupt and thus we will be following the lives of around twenty characters each developed in detail, each with their own motivations, goals and eventually sub-plots.

4.1 Multi-Plot and seriality

24 is made of four major plots that run through the entire first season scheduling. The construction of the plots is in line with the Hollywood storytelling system, with a structure divided into four major parts: setup, complication, development and climax/epilogue (Thompson, 1999). 24 functions internally as a 24 hour long Hollywood movie instead of the regular two hours. A structure normally used by the central plot of one movie is then transformed into an interwoven structure of four major plots (A) prevent the assassination of a presidential candidate; (B) save kidnapped wife and daughter; (C) find the traitor within the organization; (D) unveil the presidential candidate's son as a murderer (see figure 3).

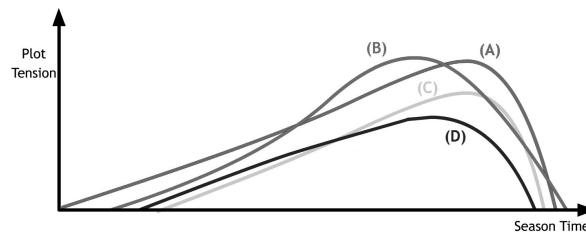


Figure 3 - Multi-plot and seriality story arcs

This interwoven structure can't run straight for 24 hours as it does in a movie of two hours and so it needs to have a seriality structure able to support and maintain interest through the many weeks of hiatus in the presentation of the series. Seriality is heavily based on script cliff-hangers that in 24 are always dependent on new revelations and the creation of new sub-plots to resolve in the next episode. Redundancy (or reinforcement, depending on your point of view) is also used by 24; some reviewers have accused the series of being too repetitive in its situations (Chambers, 2005; Thorsen, 2005), but this is a normal and necessary feature of seriality, in order to help viewers understand new information from week to week. The strong pace of the series and the number of sub-plots and story-lines presented each week to maintain viewers' interest couldn't be easily borne by the audience if the series didn't reiterate and recycle some information. The two most evident of these structures are thus, at the beginning of each episode, a summary of the events that happened in the previous episode is offered and then a second one takes place, whenever breaks occur, with a multi-screen recapitulating the ongoing actions.

4.2 Characters' web

24 is made of four circles or families – Bauer, Palmer, CTU and Drazen, each family having between 3 and 6 major characters. Throughout the entire season each one of these characters will be introduced psychologically to the viewers and suffer transformations. Jack Bauer functions as the central hub of the social network, sharing the main role with all the other characters but serving direct connections between all the other characters. This permits hundreds of plot connections, and an almost infinite amount of information cues to flow.

Characters' relations support the interest in major plots lasting for weeks; it is often their own sub-plots that viewers will need to explore to understand the major plots. Also, the cognitive workflow generated by this web of complexities and the understanding of character motivations functions as a source of local small gratifications for the viewer.

When Surnow (2003) talks about the creative liberty promoted by cable television, he is talking about content as much as about format. In *24*, we can see some of these liberties in a number of plot events realised, such as: Bauer's wife being raped by kidnappers; Palmer divorcing his wife on Election Day or even Bauer's wife dying at the end. The possibility of using strong, markedly "unpopular" content raises the bar in terms of television character density and uncertainty, leaving the viewer unanchored in terms of predictability of the characters' fates and wary of too ready identification. Easy predictability has always been one of the weaknesses of television series drama.

4.3 Dramatic Artifices

Besides multi-plot, multi-characters and seriality *24* is also very efficient in making use of specific dramatic artifices – clocks, cell phones and multi-screens - that greatly contribute to the success of the series. Albeit not entirely original, the artifices developed by *24*'s creators are at least so skilfully introduced that it may be regarded as more successful than the original artworks which invented them (Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948) being the ground-breaking film in this area).

Indeed the clock is a typical *hitchcockian* element that serves to emphasise the sense of suspense, ticking on-screen from time to time. *24* uses it at a regular rate of 10 displays per episode, which in itself indicates the intense and highly emotional urgency of the series. The clock is

presented almost always as a superimposition. For the viewer it works as a shifting device between the diegetic and non-diegetic planes, increasing the sense of viewer participation in the rapidly unfolding events. The clock works as an essential feature by insisting upon the “real-time format”, always reminding the audience of its difference from other suspense formats. *24* reinvents the cop drama as something as time-focussed as a space mission countdown

Cell phones are used very often, a mean average of 20 calls are made per episode. Using dialogues in visual storytelling to advance the story is a common artifice but normally it has very weak visual impact. The cell phone works as a sort of saving grace in this respect. We can say that it functions as a strong narrative tool used to transform the story’s progression time into “verbal” space, to connect characters in continuous and distant movement with one another without redundant journeying time. Besides story progression, cell phone dialogues in *24* carry most of the information needed to understand the pressure of real time and are responsible for maintaining the information flow for the 24 hours, complementing visual simultaneity with verbal inter-action.

Our last artifice, the multi-screens, is a sort of mixer of both previous artifices. It makes use of the clock and the cell phone to impose its necessity in the representation, taking up the “verbal space” developed by the cell phone and creating a new visual space non-existent without the multi-screens. Almost all calls are made through multi-screen representation, putting the two characters in fixed shots in two smaller inserts and talking and using a third moving point-of-view to keep up the action/pace of the series, changing the perspective of the moving camera in the position of the dominant character at the moment of conversation.

5. Synchronism as Reality Simulation - moment for moment

24 gives a new edge to temporal engagement. The “real-time” concept was born in the computer science field, serving to define the processing of information which returns results so quickly that the interaction appears to be instantaneous. However *24* is not an open system, it can’t suffer any kind of interaction from the viewer and then answer back. So *24* is more of a synchronic format, able to establish time synchronisation with the viewer during the viewing experience.

Albeit not able to produce a real-time system, the synchronism developed by *24* is able to go beyond passive viewing and put the viewer in a situation of quasi-participation of the action. Each watching moment of

the viewer corresponds to each 'protagonist moment', establishing common touching points between viewer and agent through the ticking of time. Day, month or year of the events presented can be different and so asynchronous in relation to the viewer's date of watching, however from the moment he or she starts watching the representation he or she suffers a time synchronisation with the series. The viewer understands and experiences physically the same amount of time in terms of minutes and seconds as the series characters. When Jack Bauer is told that he has 45 minutes to save his daughter and wife, the viewer knows that 45 minutes of his or her own life will be engaged up to that deadline. The synchronism occurs and there is no way to short-cut this time. The appearance of the superimposed clock makes the connection between fiction and reality. It works like glue securing belief in the representation to experience of the representation. Anchored in real time, the viewer is induced into a continuous shifting between passive and active roles.

The experience of *24* can assume very different perspectives, from regular weekly scheduling and DVD consumption to omnibus broadcast screenings with the series being aired complete and straight for its 24-hour duration¹. In the episodes aired weekly, we enter the episode and the synchronisation can occur for its defined duration; for some, the end of the episode will come too soon for total engagement. On the other hand, using the DVD box set, the shared experience of time is more striking; even offering the capacity to stop, pause and rewind. This reinvention of suspense is really so powerful as to discourage use of the remote. Finally, from the omnibus screening perspective, it functions in a similar way to the DVD experience, but with one important difference. If we wish to break off viewing it, we have to make predictions as to when crucially to rejoin the flow. Leaving the series in the middle and coming back after some time will give the illusion of a pervasive 24-hour world, evolving by itself, obliging the viewer to use more cognitive processing to recover lost plot developments. This is in contrast to how soap opera is theorised, where viewing patterns are as 'intermittent but continuous' as the narrative itself – that is to say, viewers expect to miss episodes or see only part of them and yet still feel little anxiety about picking their way back into the multiple story-lines.

The DVD and the omnibus broadcast perspectives perhaps better reflect the way the series should be experienced as opposed to traditional weekly airings, certainly they are very much part of the marketing of the new-type

¹ The whole second season was aired unbroken on the 23rd September 2005 in a nation-wide broadcast on Portuguese channel RTP2, thus all but monopolising an entire week-end.

series. Synchronization is stronger, and therefore so is engagement and interest. It delivers the impression of a reality simulation occurring in front of viewers' eyes. *24* has taken audience engagement to another level. The viewer knows the events are not true, are fiction, but time is passing for real in his or her life during viewing. In some way they are suffering the same time effects as the characters and so reality seems to supplant fiction for these moments.

6. Conclusions

We have seen that complexity at the narrative level and at the level of style have increased in recent years. We have suggested that new series are finding innovative formats and styles to surpass not only familiar television genres but also film products as well. The best evidence for this is the homage paid to *24* by writer Larry Cohen and director Joel Schumacher's film *Phone Booth* (2002). Picking up on the benefits of 81 minutes of extreme spatial compression, the eponymous phone booth is thus able to achieve the emotional intensity of the confessional. If you add to that the pivotal role of telephone conversation itself and the vocal (and briefly the physical) presence of Kiefer Sutherland (in the role of the preternaturally knowing villain), it is clear that film is learning from television. TV drama series are increasing not only the cognitive demands they place upon the viewer but also the emotional pace at which events unfurl, seeking as it were visceral effects which can take series to new heights of excitement.

Besides all these demands, complexities and consequences, new drama series are diversifying and stealing more and more audiences from film, perhaps having the effect of redressing of the imbalance which television, as its younger, poorer and more timid relation, has traditionally had with the movie industry.

Acknowledgment

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