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## Old Wine in New Bottles. Narrative complexity in the dawn of Netflix Originals (2013–2017)

**Abstract**

This article explores how the first five years of Netflix Originals dramatic storytelling fit the “Complex TV” label that Mittell defined, with its innovative season-drop delivery strategy. We focus on one narratological device: the delimited flashback, the predominant type of analepsis in the 33 pilot episodes that made up our sample. Although the delimited flashbacks analyzed are semantically diverse, the discussion combines quantitative data with a qualitative analysis focusing on three key elements: the objects and places that trigger the characters’ memories, the contradictory or parallel relationship between timeframes, and the violation of boundaries between narrative layers.

**Keywords**

**Flashback, Netflix, narrative, narratology, television studies.**

### 1. Introduction: When Netflix Changed the Game

The successful establishment of streaming services has been one of the highlights of the television landscape over the last ten years. Several facts attest to this achievement –the global phenomenon of such series as *Money Heist*, *The Squid Game* or *Stranger Things*, the millions of worldwide subscribers to such services as Amazon Prime or Disney+, the cultural relevance of the growing Apple TV services with such shows as *Ted Lasso* or *Severance*. Data from the last Emmy Awards (2022) support this statement. Streaming services got 297 nominations (won 61), while traditional television (premium, basic cable, over-the-air networks) got 334 nominations (won 62). However, HBO/HBO Max, a dual brand consisting of a premium cable network and a subscription video-on-demand streaming service, is over-represented in the second statistic.

During this institutional upheaval, Netflix led the streaming services’ breakthrough. One of the Los Gatos company’s most relevant strategies was commissioning original products to broadcast exclusively on its platform. The Machiavellian political drama *House of Cards* –whose first 13 episodes Netflix released on February 1, 2013– was the first TV series that a studio produced for Netflix (*Lilyhammer*’s first season premiered on NRK1, the main channel of Norway, and subsequently moved to Netflix). After introducing the Underwoods, Netflix increased its potential, becoming “a dominant challenger to linear television, viewing practices, nationalised media systems and established concepts of what television is” (Jenner, 2018, p. 3). Since then, many online TV trends have spread and even grown incrementally.

In fact, since the release of *House of Cards*, Netflix appears to have generalized a new way of delivering television shows, namely, the season-drop<sup>1</sup>. Amazon Prime Video followed suit, and amid the launching of many new streaming services, the strategy was booming, to the point where the famous TV critic Matt Zoller Seitz wondered in April 2019 if the audience was facing the end of an era: “Is *Game of Thrones* the Last Show We’ll Watch Together?” In this sense, Catherine Johnson’s synthesis of how streaming services work seems a proper fit for Netflix:

Online TV integrates the linear logics of television (continuous flow, scheduling, ‘temporal standardization,’ and ‘immediacy’) with the non-linear logics of the World Wide Web (fragmented data/files, databases, and ‘lack of temporal constraints’ extended to unlimited access) (Johnson, 2019, pp. 127–8, qtd. in Zündel, 2019, p. 202).

Streaming services are so relevant that Netflix having become a trending academic topic is no surprise. Limited to the areas of Social Sciences and Arts and Humanities, a search in Scopus displays 217 academic items (both chapters in books and journal articles) in 2022, ranging from the use of big data (van Es, 2022) to the features of quality Israeli TV series (Lavie, 2022). If we change the focus from Netflix to HBO, the results drastically decrease to only 59 items. In addition, Adrià and Fernández-Ramírez conducted a bibliometric analysis using the Web of Science and concluded that the Netflix papers “most cited are related to computational subjects” (2022, p. 141). They continue: “Scientific literature is more interested in Netflix’s culture and business strategies than in its series because their analysis is specific and timely. [...] While attention is paid to the Netflix revolution in other fields, narrative studies neglect this issue” (2022, p. 142).

This article aspires to taking a modest step toward fixing such inattention. Establishing a dialogue with Mittell’s widespread concept of narrative complexity, we explore how the first five years of Netflix Original Dramas dealt with specific narrative structures and devices. We want to shed light on the following question: “How has the success of streaming services altered the predominant features of TV drama storytelling, or, on the contrary, how does Netflix significantly change serial narrative complexity?” To answer this question, the article begins by underlining Netflix’s most significant difference from traditional television, its all-in-one delivery format. Next, it explores how Netflix Originals fit under the “Complex TV” banner. Then, we explain our sample selection and the quantitative methodology we adopted to analyze the narrative structure of 33 pilot episodes, a number broad and diverse enough to identify patterns and groups of exceptions. The article delves into “flashback theory,” outlining the different flashback categories and paying particular attention to the type that centers this study: the delimited flashback, the more intensely specific narrative device that Netflix Originals uses. Thereafter, we deployed a close reading, focusing on three elements pertaining to the delimited flashback in our sample: the objects and places that trigger the characters’ memories; the contradictory or parallel relationship between past and present; and, finally, how metalepses in several shows disrupt and blur the boundaries between narrative layers. They are the most immersive dive into the past that this study analyzed.

## **2. Netflix and Complex TV**

Jason Mittell’s notion of “Complex TV” has been fruitful in analyzing contemporary television series from a narrative point of view. As he claims in his 2015 landmark book, “[O]ver the past two decades, a new model of storytelling has emerged as an alternative to the conventional episodic and serial forms that have typified most American television since its inception, a mode that I call *narrative complexity*” (2015, p. 17). While he brings Netflix into his argument

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<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, Disney+, Apple TV, and HBO Max stick to the traditional serial format and, in 2023, weekly programming seems to be as valuable a delivery strategy as releasing the entire season in one go. Even Amazon Prime has reassessed its strategy, and some of its hit shows, such as *The Rings of Power*, are broadcast weekly.

(2015, p. 41), he published the book before the streaming service was as dominant as it became a few years later. Contextualizing the notion of complexity, Mittell explains how the new paradigm of television storytelling did not avoid disorienting the audience, rather encouraging it to actively engage in storytelling innovations and creative narratological strategies. “Complex TV,” he continues, redefines “the boundary between episodic and serial forms, with a heightened degree of self-consciousness in storytelling mechanics.” Moreover, it demands “intensified viewer engagement focused both on diegetic pleasures and formal awareness” (2015, p. 53).

Against this theoretical background, we chose Netflix Originals as our sample for several reasons. First, in 2013, its delivery format was quite innovative compared to any other TV channel, offering a “bingeable narrative” (Kozak & Zeller-Jacques, 2021) as an essential and differentiating feature of its broadcasting strategy. In the same vein, we focused on Netflix Originals during the first years of its existence because our analysis departs from a similar assumption, namely, that it generalized a new approach to new releases. When Netflix began to produce original TV series, binge-watching television already included various options, such as DVD boxsets, TiVo, TV reruns, or even streaming platforms offering whole seasons previously broadcast on other channels. Netflix Originals’ big novelty stems from superseding that last alternative, namely, by releasing a batch of fresh episodes, new stories watchable for the first time. As Jenner summarizes, “The practice of binge-watching implies not only viewers’ desire for autonomy in scheduling [...] but also a wish for ‘pure’ text that is distinctively not part of the television flow” (2016, p. 66).

As Tyron argued in 2015, when only a few original TV series were trying to establish the model, “Netflix has worked to define itself as rewriting the very rules of TV storytelling, often in language that echoes the discourses of quality and exclusivity that were used to describe HBO, with subtle differences for the convergence era” (2015, n.p.). However, the academic research on Netflix’s innovative storytelling is not conclusive. Some authors have discussed whether the platform’s original series offer an idiosyncratic narratological and artistic achievement due to the season-drop instead of the weekly-episode format. Kozak and Jacques, for example, analyze the *Stranger Things* narrative, concluding that the show “clothes itself in cinematic and novelistic discourses,” only to end up exhibiting “clear formal alignments with its [traditional] television predecessors” (2021, p. 220). Hemingway affirms the opposite in a close reading of *Arrested Development*’s fourth year: “The season encouraged, and even required, binge-watching through its jigsaw-puzzle approach, where the whole story was presented out of order and incomplete, only forming a full picture once the viewer had watched all fifteen episodes” (2021, p. 229). While Warhol explained how Netflix’s new original shows introduced innovations and departed from traditional serial patterns (2014, pp. 145-157), A. N. Smith paired Netflix’s narrative novelties with those that the premium cable channels, such as HBO, undertook: “A key aim guiding HBO and Netflix’s commissioning of original drama series has been to generate narratives clearly distinct from network output” (2018, p. 95). This variability reinforces what the authors of the section on binge-watching narratives in Jenner’s volume (*Binge-Watching and Contemporary Television Studies*) assert: “While there is not one set formula or template that Netflix uses for its bingeable narratives, these chapters demonstrate that its business model of full-drop release has led to certain significant shifts and trends in narrative form, storytelling and temporality” (Kozak *et al.*, 2021, p. 276).

As Buonnano puts it, “the practice of bingeing is not merely the child of technological innovation but is informed by cultural principles of our time [...] and reverberates on the hermeneutic processes of meaning-making” (2019, p. 194). Thus, researching narratological strategies allows us to assess (paraphrasing television scholar Tom Hemingway) whether Netflix Originals tends to “create a more intricate narrative” that depends on watching “multiple episodes of the show consecutively to establish a sense of narrative cohesion” (2021,

p. 227). Therefore, we aim to test Netflix's artistic success in this sense, focusing our article on an essential aspect of storytelling, the delimited flashback. Furthermore, we implicitly pit Netflix Originals against the rest of traditional TV narratives from those years.

The last reason for choosing Netflix Originals from 2013 to 2017 is timing. At that time, Netflix's delivery format was unique; soon after, other streaming platforms, such as Amazon Prime and Movistar, followed suit. By inquiring about the first years of this new way of programming, our article aspires to estimating whether, due to its season-drop bingeable format, Netflix Originals was more prone to offer more narratologically convoluted stories; or, on the contrary, whether Netflix Originals jumped on a wagon where, following Mittell, "narrative complexity has suffused television" to such a degree that several "temporally fractured narrative technique[s] can go unnoticed" (2015, p. 11).

### 3. Methodology

As we have explained elsewhere (Planes, García & Pérez-Morán, 2022), a specific set of criteria determined the selection of the sample for this study. The TV series had to bear the "Netflix Originals" label, to have been released during the first five years of Netflix as a first-window content exhibitor (2013–2017), and to be an ongoing serial drama. Our sample focuses on 13 television pilot episodes containing delimited flashbacks, out of 33 that met those criteria.

This article is one of the first steps in a broader project<sup>2</sup>; therefore, our quantitative and qualitative analysis here is limited to pilots. Otherwise, the sample would have been excessively vast. Thus, the most significant limitation of this research lies in its failure to consider the serial continuity of the narratives we analyzed. The obvious problem with this approach is that a story that continues over multiple episodes and seasons can develop a narrative complexity that would not be apparent in the pilot. The narratologically jam-packed German series *Dark* could be the most evident example in this regard. Its first episode contains only one temporal disruption, an oneiric flashback. However, we analyzed the pilot episode for each television series in the sample in depth, as pilots generally contain the essential features that will ultimately characterize the series.

Moreover, as Mittell explains, a television pilot always serves a dual function. On the one hand, it serves to establish the diegetic universe of the series, offering the spectator a set of specific thematic and dramatic coordinates that effectively introduce the story. On the other hand, it constitutes a kind of instruction manual for decoding the story that it introduces (2015, p. 56). Thus, based on this dual role of television serial storytelling that Mittell identified, the pilot episode presumably contained the seeds of the rest of the series narrative structure. Thus, the basic arsenal of narrative strategies, including the use (or absence) of time-shifts, would generally appear in that first episode, so the audience can "learn" to read them in each series they begin watching.

### 4. The delimited flashback in context

The academic field of narratology arose in the 1970s. One of the field's most prominent figures is the French scholar Gérard Genette. In 1972, he published his seminal analysis of Proust's novel *In Search of Lost Time*, a study that laid the foundations for narratology not only in literature but also in film and television. Such authors as Chatman (1978), Bordwell (1992), Branigan (1992), and Gaudreault and Jost (2017) built on Genette's work, further developing his ideas and applying them to audiovisual media. Of the various key concepts that Genette

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<sup>2</sup> Further studies could benefit from exploring the utilization of flashbacks in other television programs. This may involve a comparison between different channels, for instance, examining whether HBO shows are more inventive in their use of time than those on Netflix. Another possible approach is to incorporate our analysis with existing scholarly research that explores the use of flashbacks in certain subgenres such as vampire TV (Jowett, 2016), or in specific TV shows like *Breaking Bad* (Logan, 2016), *Lost*, and *How I Met Your Mother* (Booth, 2011), among others.

introduced (e.g., focalization, delegated narration, frequency), this article focuses on analepsis, a concept that functions as the literary equivalent of the cinematic flashback.

In her study of the concept, Turim defines the flashback as “an image or a filmic segment that is understood as representing temporal occurrences anterior to those in the images that preceded it” (1989, p. 1). In the most recent academic volume devoted to this narrative device, Gordejuela suggests that “[t]he history of the flashback is one of multidirectional influences of various kinds, and as a result, the device has many and diverse formal manifestations” (2021, p. 21) There have been various attempts to explore and classify this diversity of practices, taking into account, for example, the gap between “story time” and “narration time,” the positioning of the flashback within the *syuzhet* (i.e., chronological structure) externally or internally, whether it is internal to the diegesis (homodiegetic vs. heterodiegetic), which character is experiencing the recollection (intradiegetic vs. extradiegetic). Based on Gaudreault and Jost’s (2017) definition, a “flashback” is an *a posteriori* evocation of a past event in the present. This definition is also in line with those of Bordwell *et al.* (2017, p. 514) and Königsberg (1987, p. 129). To cover the diversity of the device theoretically, Planes (2018) developed the taxonomy that this study uses. It is particularly useful because it adds a qualitative, plot-focused dimension to the analysis.

We identified five types of flashbacks on the basis of the circumstances that cause them.

- **Delimited:** A flashback triggered by a particular stimulus, such as a specific object, noise, situation, or setting, subsequently identified (although with variations) in the retrospective sequence –that is, the thing that triggers the flashback is also present, albeit in a different form, in the flashback itself.
- **Expository:** The depiction of a memory that a narrator begins to recount, either to another character or to the spectator, which may involve using a voice-over or off-screen narration as the sequence progresses.
- **Undefined:** A past event evoked by a character with no connection to any of that character’s current circumstances.
- **Independent:** A flashback that emerges autonomously in the story, not associated with a character but instigated by the “meganarrator” or “grand imaginer.”
- **Oneiric:** A past event that is relived during a dream.

We must point out that these categories are not mutually exclusive; a given flashback can share features of two varieties. To illustrate how a flashback can accommodate two types from the taxonomy, take a famous one from *The Godfather II*. Forty minutes into the movie, Michael Corleone expresses an emotional goodbye to his son after suffering an assassination attempt. A close-up of Michael watching Anthony in the 1958 timeline dissolves into another close-up of Vito guarding baby Santino back in 1917. This flashback functions as both delimited and independent. In any case, despite a hybridization of taxonomies, notably, we have yet to find any mixture in our Netflix Originals sample. This lack of interbreeding indicates the absence of a very intricate formal complexity regarding time-jumps. As we examine later, the most multifarious are those adjoining a metalepsis to the delimited flashback.

**Table 1.** Number of flashbacks in each series pilot, classified according to typology.

TV Series	Delimited	Expository	Undefined	Independent	Oneiric	Total
<i>3%</i> (2016)	4	0	0	0	0	4
<i>13 Reasons Why</i> (2017)	4	8	0	0	0	12
<i>Between</i> (2015)	0	0	0	1	0	1
<i>Bloodline</i> (2015)	0	0	2	0	0	3
<i>Daredevil</i> (2015)	0	0	0	0	1	1
<i>Dark</i> (2017)	0	0	0	0	1	1
<i>El Chapo</i> (2017)	0	0	0	5	0	5
<i>Estocolmo</i> (2016)	0	0	0	1	0	1
<i>Good Morning Call</i> (2016)	4	0	1	0	0	5
<i>Gypsy</i> (2017)	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Hemlock Grove</i> (2013)	0	0	0	4	0	4
<i>Hibana Spark</i> (2016)	0	1	1	0	0	2
<i>House of Cards</i> (2013)	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Ingobernable</i> (2017)	0	0	0	1	0	1
<i>Iron Fist</i> (2017)	2	0	1	0	3	6
<i>Jessica Jones</i> (2015)	1	0	0	0	0	1
<i>Las chicas del cable</i> (2017)	1	0	0	0	0	1
<i>Luke Cage</i> (2016)	2	0	0	0	0	2
<i>Marco Polo</i> (2014)	0	0	0	1	0	1
<i>Marseille</i> (2016)	1	0	0	0	0	1
<i>Mindhunter</i> (2017)	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Narcos</i> (2015)	0	1	0	1	0	2
<i>Orange Is the New Black</i> (2013)	4	0	0	4	0	8
<i>Ozark</i> (2017)	1	0	0	0	0	1
<i>Paranoid</i> (2015)	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Sense8</i> (2015)	1	2	1	0	1	5
<i>Stranger Things</i> (2016)	1	0	0	0	0	1
<i>Suburra</i> (2017)	0	0	0	1	0	1
<i>The Crown</i> (2016)	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>The Get Down</i> (2016)	0	1	0	0	0	1
<i>The OA</i> (2016)	0	3	0	0	0	3
<i>The Punisher</i> (2017)	3	0	7	0	1	11
<i>Travelers</i> (2016)	0	3	0	0	0	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>87</b>

Source: Own elaboration based on the qualitative and quantitative analysis of Netflix Originals (2013-2017).

Of these five categories, this study focuses on the delimited flashback because it is the most frequently used in our sample and the most productive from an aesthetic and dramatic point of view. The oneiric flashback can also offer a rich *mise-en-scène* and emotional heft, but it is also the most marginal of the five types, appearing in only five TV series in our sample. Therefore, in the interests of uniformity, this study focuses exclusively on the delimited flashback.

The key feature of the delimited flashback is the explicit existence of a specific onscreen inducement that triggers the retrospection. This element usually appears in the past as well, with equal (or at least similar) *mise-en-scène* features, establishing a bond between present and past that makes for a time-jump that is gentler than it is in the other types of flashbacks, where there is no diegetic relationship between the two timeframes. The delimited flashback encourages the viewer to identify dramatic parallels and divergences between the two temporal levels or to discern visual allusions or compositional connections between past and present images.

The link between *mises-en-scène* that the triggering element evokes can substantially reinforce analogies or disparities. Ultimately, these associations convey a kind of ironic perplexity concerning the passage of time and the unfathomable or relentless condition of a character's journey. Similarly, the delimited flashback evokes a paradox residing in the contradictory emotions it often elicits. By comparing a current and a past situation, we expect the character to fetishize the memory while casting a shadow over the present, as several episodes in our sample illustrate. These dramatic and emotional parallels and contradictions are a key focus of our close analysis.

The examples in the flashbacks sample stand out for their brief duration and spontaneity –most show only single isolated events. Only six flashbacks out of the 29 identified comprise more than one scene<sup>3</sup>: the first one in *Orange Is the New Black*, which is a four-scene montage sequence; two in *3%*, each one comprising three scenes; and two in *Good Morning Call* and one in *Jessica Jones*, with two scenes each. Generally, the trigger that evokes the memories in mental processes is not a deliberate decision by the character. Once they appear, the character does nothing to stop them or get on with events in the present. Consequently, most flashbacks are products of a memory describable as *passive*, understood as an emotional reaction rather than a voluntary mnemonic activity in which the character takes a critical and emotional distance from something to understand it better.

The rest of the article presents an in-depth analysis of the functions of delimited flashbacks, focusing on three features: the triggering element that links past and present; the semantic complexity (both stylistic and emotional) between narrative layers; and, finally, the disruptive linearity between diegetic and metadiegetic levels.

## 5. Triggering element: objects and places of memory

When a specific place or thing triggers a reminiscence, we can observe how the past lives on and materializes in symbolic objects with great sentimental value for the characters. Usually, these elements relate to dead or absent characters who were once significant to the protagonists and, more importantly, figures, central to past events, who have become idealized over time. Simultaneously, these memory scenes allow the subjects to dodge a present crisis or weakness by taking shelter in the past. Thus, flashbacks undoubtedly imply an evasion of reality, but they also conjure up absent figures.

For example, in *Thirteen Reasons Why*, Evergreen's theater and Clay's helmet helped forge the close relationship between the two main characters. Clay and his longed-for Hannah worked together and befriended one another in the theater. The helmet was the object of a heartfelt compliment Hannah once gave him, which made a solid impression on Clay –"Helmet" was even the nickname Hannah gave to Clay. This shows how particular objects whose meaning is so bound to the past can function as material relics in the present. Consequently, seeing the theater or the helmet triggers Clay's memories. In *Orange Is the New Black*, Piper's tattoo, identified in a medical examination upon her admission to prison, activates an analeptic scene that informs us of her relationship with Alex –a relationship so

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<sup>3</sup> This study adopts the Bordwell *et al.* widely accepted notion of scene: "A segment in a narrative film that takes place in one time and space or that uses crosscutting to show two or more simultaneous actions" (2017, p. 504).

passionate that Piper commits a crime for her. Similarly, in *Luke Cage*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* triggers the protagonist's recollections of Reva, the psychologist who treats Cage in jail, warning him of the hazards of loneliness. We understand that the meeting between them was one of many and that she inspired Luke's reading habit at that time. Noticeably, none of these three leading characters (Clay, Piper, Luke) can overcome the influence that these key figures from the past still exert over them. Thus, the flashbacks show how certain characters can be so important to others (Hannah to Clay, Piper to Alex, Reva to Luke) that they do not even question their influence. These obsessive relationships, embodied in the triggering elements of helmet, tattoo, and book, prevent the protagonists from evolving or seeking new points of reference.

This type of flashback exhibits a recurrent *mise-en-scène* strategy: spaces associated with the past that the characters revisit in the present. In keeping with the features mentioned above, these "homecomings," such as Clay's return to the theater in *Thirteen Reasons Why*, reinforce the sense of change and loss while simultaneously exposing the transformation of the emotions that the location hosted in the past.

Another example of this occurs in the single flashback in the pilot for the French TV series *Marseille*, depicting the power struggle between the city's mayor, Robert Taro, and his former protégé and deputy mayor, Lucas Barres. The flashback hints at the antagonist's remorse, reveals his vulnerability, and even humanizes him. Standing in the empty chamber of Marseille's city council, Barres recalls a plenary session years ago, when Taro appointed him deputy mayor, and remembers how those attending praised and applauded him. On the narrative level of the present, this memory is revelatory because Barres intends to betray Taro and remove him from the city council. Now, we learn that although he is unscrupulously determined to carry out his ruthless mission, Barres knows very well the crucial role that Taro played in his political ascent. The flashback plays out exactly where Barres is now, but except for him, the council chamber is empty. He has come of his own volition, allowing the past to draw him back, and he wrestles with mixed emotions over his goal to bring down his former mentor. When the flashback ends, the camera shows Barres with a pensive, morose expression, then moves in a semicircular tracking shot that ends at his back, evoking the character's sense of shame.

This example highlights the expressive potential of the delimited flashback, through memories in which the characters fully immerse themselves. Using the same setting in the two timeframes underscores the disparity between present and past. The contrast between the two constitutes a tragic inference about the character's evolution. Yesteryear's friendship and solidarity have morphed into solitude and betrayal today, and the applause has turned into silence. However, the clash between present and past is not always as powerful and complex as it was in *Marseille*. The degree of semanticity can vary widely, as the next section explores.

## **6. Semantic relationship between narrative layers**

Of all the flashback categories, the delimited flashback has the most remarkable capacity to build bridges between the story's temporal levels. It uses a shared element that adopts a different meaning or context in each timeframe. However, not every delimited flashback in the sample takes full advantage of its formal and semantic possibilities: 38% of the Netflix Originals studied qualify as low in semanticity, implying that their delimited flashbacks perform a single, straightforward function, i.e., advancing the plot. Conversely, 62% of the sample shows higher semanticity, using the semantic and aesthetic potential of this type of flashback. On the one hand, these instances highlight the emotional disparities between present and past (38%) and, on the other hand, they draw parallels between narrative layers of the remembering subject's mood (24%).

**Table 2.** Semantic relation between past and present in delimited flashbacks.

TV Series	Low Semanticity	Emotional disparity	Emotional parallelism
<i>3%</i> (2016)	4	0	0
<i>13 Reasons Why</i> (2017)	0	3	1
<i>Good Morning Call</i> (2016)	4	0	0
<i>Iron Fist</i> (2017)	0	0	2
<i>Jessica Jones</i> (2015)	0	0	1
<i>Las chicas del cable</i> (2017)	0	0	1
<i>Luke Cage</i> (2016)	0	1	1
<i>Marseille</i> (2016)	0	1	0
<i>Orange Is the New Black</i> (2013)	2	2	0
<i>Ozark</i> (2017)	0	1	0
<i>Sense8</i> (2015)	0	0	1
<i>Stranger Things</i> (2016)	1	0	0
<i>The Punisher</i> (2017)	0	3	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>7</b>

Source: Own elaboration based on the qualitative and quantitative analysis of Netflix Originals (2013-2017).

### 6.1. *Low semanticity: expanding the narrative*

The 38% of the sample dubbed “low in semanticity” comprises 11 featured flashbacks, including in *Good Morning Call* (4), *3%* (4), *Orange Is the New Black* (2), and *Stranger Things* (1). These time-jumps hinge on triggers that turn out to be either too weak or too trivial to expose significant equivalencies and contrasts between spatiotemporal frames. Thus, choosing this type of flashback has to do with its ability to expand the narrative structure, fluidly providing new information. However, these simple analepses reinforce the cause-effect relationship throughout the action, despite disrupting the chronology. Any anachronisms can be explained from a strictly diegetic perspective, the result of how the plot unfolds. These low-semantic analepses help place the audience inside the fictional universe but hardly exploit the delimited flashback’s expressive potential.

For instance, in the Japanese series *Good Morning Call*, a romance about two teenagers who fall in love while sharing an apartment, three of the four delimited flashbacks in the pilot show the protagonist, Nao, learning about her roommate Uehara’s backstory. For example, when she breaks a picture frame containing a photo of Uehara’s parents, we cut to a flashback of their death. Similarly, the only delimited flashback in the popular series *Stranger Things* provides some backstory on the abducted Will Byers. Will’s backyard fort is the setting that past and present share. When Joyce, Will’s mother, visits the fort in search of the missing teenager in the present, the narrative cuts to a scene in the past where she finds him reading there. This flashback provides information chiefly about the setting itself and, in passing, about the dynamics of the mother-son relationship.

A similar approach appears in *3%*, a Brazilian series presenting a grimy dystopia in the near future where young adults compete for a spot in an idyllic land called the Offshore. As the title suggests, only a very tiny minority will get there. The pilot episode uses four delimited

flashbacks to reveal that during the selection process for the Offshore, Michele was a mole working for a revolutionary group. Unveiling this information at a crucial moment in the episode drastically alters our perception of Michele and her motivations. Thus, rather than establishing an emotional dialectic between spatiotemporal planes, these flashbacks fulfill a purely narrative purpose, to uncover concealed aspects of this character's identity. The two simple semantic analepses in *Orange Is the New Black* follow a similarly strict narrative pattern.

However, the other 18 delimited flashbacks are more interesting to explore because they offer a richer and more comprehensive array of expressive qualities. This complexity encourages viewers to identify associations between narrative layers and characters' emotions that their memories prompt, which we analyze in the following two subsections.

## 6.2. Emotional disparities between present and past

The glorification of the past at the expense of the present is a feature of 11 delimited flashbacks among *Thirteen Reasons Why* (3), *The Punisher* (3), *Orange Is the New Black* (2), *Marseille* (1), *Ozark* (1), and *Luke Cage* (1). Five of these regressions originate in analogous situations between present and past, three relate to places, two to objects, and one to characters. The bitter, upsetting nature of the experience of remembering characterizes all these flashbacks. In other words, these memories never arise in a state of stability or satisfaction but, rather, quite the opposite. In this regard, following Niemeyer & Wentz, these flashbacks can be understood as the paramount narrative device to represent nostalgia, a "painful longing for a romanticised, stable and more innocent past" (2014, p. 131).

*Ozark* eloquently expressed this nostalgic juxtaposition. About halfway into the pilot episode, Del, the main antagonist in season one, goes on a killing spree. After accusing some Chicago-based financial advisers of stealing cartel money, this ruthless lieutenant for the Navarro drug cartel shoots four people point-blank. The last man standing is Marty Byrde, a brilliant accountant who has been getting deeper into the money-laundering business. His fate seems sealed in joining the dead bodies strewn around him, and he tries negotiating with his executioner in a frantic bid to find a way out. Del seems unpersuaded by Marty's pitch and orders him to kneel. The killer cocks his gun and points it at his terrified victim.

Marty closes his eyes, and we cut to a slow-motion scene showing a happy moment from his past. In this scene, Marty's eyes are closed just as they are in the present moment, and he is positioned below the rest of the characters. He is lying in his backyard under a trampoline on which his two kids are gleefully jumping. His now-estranged wife, Wendy, appears in this reminiscence, smiling and sprinkling water over them. The joy of the recollection contrasts wildly with the fatal moment framing it. As we have witnessed in the episode up to this point, Marty's family is falling apart, and he has been getting involved with some dangerous people. Moreover, now that he is facing death, he recalls a joyful postcard moment with his family. Marty's spontaneous closing his eyes carries him back to a past moment when he performed the same act. The contrast between the two scenes is palpable: on the brink of the abyss –the character facing certain death– an involuntary memory arises, turning doom into a jubilant celebration of life. Naturally, the comparison of the two disparate events enhances the paradoxical effect. The past and the present have very different *mises-en-scène*, but certain cohesive elements connect their contrasting meanings (Marty's closed eyes and his positioning below the action).

Two brief but significant flashbacks shortly after the beginning of *The Punisher* take a similar approach, reflecting a robust emotional rift. Happiness and mutual understanding characterize Frank and his daughter's past music rehearsals. However, in the present, Frank repeatedly expresses his loneliness, rage, and despair at his wife and daughter's murder –the details become clear later. Frank's music rehearsal in the present prompts violent outbursts that he is quite unable to control. His guitar is an object whose emotional value he once associated with his family. Now, its only connotations are bleakly traumatic: on the one hand,

reminding him of the absence of a loved one; on the other, revealing the paradox of its new meaning. Neither the rehearsal nor the guitar is a source of joy anymore; instead, they have become symbols of sadness and desperation, representing a dramatic transformation of their connotative power. In addition, the use of a blur filter and warm colors for the scenes of the past contrasts with the cold visuals of the present, evoking two opposing emotional responses and leading us to interpret the analeptic scenes as a mental idealization. Frank's response to these memories throughout the episode is peculiar. They seem to serve only as a form of self-punishment, yet despite the suffering they cause, the character obsessively returns to his past.

A short, delimited flashback in *Luke Cage* underscores the passage of time, the unpredictable nature of events, and the characters' evolution. The protagonist appears unsatisfied, due to his fugitive condition and low living standards. He must work overtime as a dishwasher at Harlem's Paradise, a restaurant where he has trouble getting paid. Luke's behavior changes when he sees Shades, a criminal he met in prison. Their chance meeting takes place in the kitchen at the restaurant, where Shades is working as the right-hand man to Cottonmouth, a Harlem drug lord who owns Harlem's Paradise. When Shades enters wearing a stylish outfit and sunglasses, Luke recognizes him immediately; Cottonmouth carries on without noticing him. The flashback conveys an image of Shades and Luke together, both in prison uniforms suggesting a relationship of equals. However, returning to the present, the contrast between Shades' status in jail and his privileged position of power now becomes clear, as we see his prosperity through Luke's eyes.

Nevertheless, perceiving the contrast between Shades' evolution and Luke's material circumstances, worse now than when he was in prison, exacerbates Luke's annoyance. Frustration is one of the protagonist's primary character traits in this first installment of *Luke Cage*. The contrasting image in his memory underscores his current difficult personal and economic situation. He is a fugitive living a miserable existence. Shortly after Shades departs, Luke's taking his apron off and resigning from his precarious blue-collar job is no coincidence. Unlike the flashbacks in *Ozark* and *The Punisher*, the memory in *Luke Cage* does not romanticize the past but, instead, highlights the protagonist's progressive decline, mainly through its emphasis on Shades' improved conditions. This brief time-shift creates a jarring effect between the splendor one timeframe depicts and the deprivation the other portrays.

We have examined the frequent use of the delimited flashback's formal and semantic mechanisms to depict dramatic situations. However, the contradiction that emerges by juxtaposing two different temporal levels can also generate comic effects. An example occurs in the opening analepsis of *Orange Is the New Black*, featuring a series of memories that convey the pleasurable and comfortable connotations that water has had for Piper throughout her life. Four scenes highlight its particular value for her: Piper being bathed by her mother as a child; enjoying herself alone in a bath at a young age; kissing a girlfriend in the shower; and, finally, with Larry, her fiancé. The protagonist's voice-over describes her love for baths and cleanliness. However, when the flashback ends, a direct cut marked by a buzzer sound-effect brings the story abruptly into the present, with a situation that significantly contradicts the glamorized images we have just seen. The protagonist awkwardly tries to take a shower in the tiny and repugnant space of a prison bathroom. This time-jolt makes the *mise-en-scène* feel exaggeratedly grotesque; aided by Piper's bizarre flip-flops made out of maxi-pads, the scene acquires comical overtones. Nevertheless, although this sequence in *Orange Is the New Black* produces expressive effects entirely different from those explored above, we again find two features essential to the delimited flashback: the drastic resignification of an activity portrayed in the past, then repeated in the present, and the paradox between two similar situations occurring at different times and experienced differently.

### 6.3. *Equidistance and parallelism*

The previous section explored 11 complex delimited flashbacks that establish a semantic contrast between narrative levels, idealizing the past in the context of a present whose prospects are uncertain. Conversely, the other seven complex delimited flashbacks in the sample establish an equidistant relationship between the timeframes and the subject's emotional attitude. These flashbacks reinforce the affinity between the two narrative threads, drawing parallels between the emotions associated with past and present experiences. Usually, a state of affliction or bitterness connects the two temporal dimensions, related to some mental block when characters compare past and present. The result is bleak overtones in the flashbacks in *Sense8*, *Cable Girls*, *Thirteen Reasons Why*, *Luke Cage*, *Jessica Jones*, and *Iron Fist*.

Two complex parallel flashbacks occur in *Iron Fist*, a series tracing the adventures of Danny Rand, a martial arts expert who can summon a mystical power. Both flashbacks convey equivalent emotional experiences arising from similar situations. In the first, Danny faces an imminent car crash in the present and recalls a similar accident that he and his parents suffered decades ago. A parallel emerges between the two life-threatening situations and the stress they provoke. In other words, the accident in the present exposes an emotional wound still open: every time Danny faces a problem analogous to his parents' tragedy, an emotional crisis ensues.

Because the personal circumstances of the characters experiencing these memories tend to be desperate or unstable in both timeframes, we can sometimes discern an inner conflict, a trauma whose origins will shed light on the character's current state. For example, the delimited flashbacks in *Sense8* and *Cable Girls* both evoke traumatic childhood experiences linked to their protagonist's reprehensible way of life in the present (the characters experiencing the flashback –Alba in *Cable Girls* and Wolfgang in *Sense8*– are thieves).

On the other hand, *Thirteen Reasons Why* presents a parallel flashback comparing Clay's present and past moods, both set in the cafeteria at Evergreen High School. Following an argument between Clay and his friend Tony regarding Hannah's tapes, Clay remains seated, alone, frustrated, and pensive. Then, suddenly, Hannah appears and asks, "Hey, Helmet. Can I eat with you?" The audience can recognize the flashback because the color scheme is warmer, a frequently used technique, and Clay's Band-Aids are missing from his forehead. The parallel also lies in the way the past and present scenes develop. As in the present scene with Tony, Clay and Hannah argue, and Clay ends up sitting alone in the cafeteria, disappointed and reflective.

Hannah's presence in this scene comes without a break in the continuity, producing an invisible time-jump that maintains the setting and Clay's attitude and position –sitting at a table, deep in thought. Hannah's appearance is an example of a metaleptic delimited flashback –a rhetorical figure that the following section explores in more detail.

## 7. When are we? Blurring the boundaries through the metaleptic flashback

As in the example from *Thirteen Reasons Why*, some cases in the sample offer a much more complex interplay between continuity and *mise-en-scène*. In particular, the flashbacks in *Jessica Jones*, *Luke Cage*, and *Iron Fist* all contain metalepses that blur the boundaries between timeframes and, thus, between diegetic and metadiegetic levels. These metaleptic flashbacks offer a more penetrating immersion in the past than in previous example analyses.

**Table 3.** Number of delimited flashbacks and metalepses within them.

TV Series	Delimited flashbacks	Temporal metalepses
<b>3%</b> (2016)	4	0
<b>13 Reasons Why</b> (2017)	4	2
<b>Good Morning Call</b> (2016)	4	0
<b>Iron Fist</b> (2017)	2	0
<b>Jessica Jones</b> (2015)	1	1
<b>Las chicas del cable</b> (2017)	1	0
<b>Luke Cage</b> (2016)	2	1
<b>Marseille</b> (2016)	1	0
<b>Orange Is the New Black</b> (2013)	4	0
<b>Ozark</b> (2017)	1	0
<b>Sense8</b> (2015)	1	0
<b>Stranger Things</b> (2016)	1	0
<b>The Punisher</b> (2017)	3	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>5</b>

Source: Own elaboration based on the qualitative and quantitative analysis of Netflix Originals (2013-2017).

In his classic *Narrative Discourse*, Genette defines metalepsis as a transgression: “Any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.) or the inverse” (1980, pp. 234-235). Thus, metalepsis occurs when any action, character, or element on one narrative level invades another level where they do not belong (crossing “the sacred frontier between two worlds,” according to Genette). Therefore, following Cohn and Gleich, metalepsis can happen at either the discourse level or the story level (2012, p. 105). Also, it can be exterior, meaning that it occurs “between the narrator’s universe and that of his or her story,” or interior, referring to a transgression “between a primary and secondary story, or between a secondary and tertiary story” (2012, p. 106). However, as this article concerns the relationship between the present and the past from an aesthetic and dramatic point of view, we classify metaleptic flashbacks according to their degree of severity.

At one end of the spectrum is the illusory continuity effect<sup>4</sup>, which, strictly speaking, is not a metalepsis. Although it produces an interplay between temporal frames of the narrative, no transgression of the frontier between them occurs. This type of metalepsis functions as an editing device that establishes a false connection between two shots which, despite belonging to different temporal levels, maintain a relationship of forced continuity through similar (if not identical) looks, gestures, or positions. We describe this device as illusory because the audience finds out only in retrospect that despite appearances to the contrary, the continuity link between the images is not actual. This effect makes it possible to connect two narrative threads, reflecting the blend of diegesis and metadiegesis from the character’s point of view. This device catches spectators off-guard, as only afterward will they realize the leap between past and present. Alongside the previous example, *Thirteen Reasons Why* offers another

<sup>4</sup> Burch explores the different options of temporal and spatial continuity or discontinuity that could appear between two shots. One of these is where “something in shot B or some other subsequent shot might retrospectively reveal that the transition [from shot A] actually belongs in an altogether different temporal or spatial category, or perhaps even both” (1981, p. 12).

illustrative example of the *illusory continuity effect* and the pivotal role that *mise-en-scène* and setting play. First, in the present, Clay observes his friend Hannah's empty desk, a powerful image that conveys how painful her death is for him. An almost identical scene follows but with a crucial difference: Hannah is now sitting at the desk. Clay then remembers how he complimented her haircut. The flattering comment is evidence of his attraction to her, and his recollection reveals that Hannah's memory continues to haunt him. This flashback occurring after Mrs. Bradley's speech to the students, urging them not to dwell on Hannah's disappearance, is revelatory. Ignoring her advice, Clay recollects this little moment from the past. While he is gazing at Hannah's empty desk, Mrs. Bradley passes in front of him, shortly blocking his view, and when she is gone, he suddenly sees Hannah sitting there, as if by magic. This immediacy in the leap between present and past reveals both the trauma Clay feels over the loss and the persistence of the memory, which he cannot simply erase after seeing her every day for such a long time.

At the other end of the spectrum of metaleptic flashbacks is the dissolution of the fourth wall: a break from the cinematographic illusion when the characters look at the camera or question the audience to comment on the flashback. This device is so rare in drama, generally speaking, that there is not a single example of it in the Netflix Originals in this study<sup>5</sup>. Between these two extremes is temporal dissolution, the most common metaleptic flashback, involving a blurring of the boundary between narrative levels so that when there is a shift from one level to another, it is impossible to distinguish the exact point separating them. This, in turn, creates a continuity effect in the *mise-en-scène* between the temporal planes in the narrative, discussed below by focusing on three Marvel adaptations.

Contrary to the illusory effect created in the two examples above from *Thirteen Reasons Why*, the three metalepses identified in *Jessica Jones*, *Luke Cage*, and *Iron Fist* feature no illusion of continuity but a violation. In these cases, the memory is more intense, establishing a strong association between the juxtaposed situations. *Jessica Jones* is a Marvel adaptation for the small screen that tells the story of an efficient but ill-tempered private investigator suffering from PTSD. Although the past event that haunts her appears only in a very brief scene, when she learns that the villain who caused her past suffering has returned, the spectator realizes how nerve-racking such a memory is for Jessica. This metaleptic flashback occurs when the superhero is in a restaurant inquiring about the whereabouts of Hope Shlottman, a missing young girl whose parents have hired Jessica to find her. The protagonist has been to this restaurant before, but its name is different now. Based on the headwaiter's information, she concludes that Kilgrave, a criminal who seduced Jessica years ago and turned her into his sex slave, has abducted Hope.

Having made the connection, she walks over to the same table where she used to meet Kilgrave. The empty place turns blue and fills up with customers, indicating the transgression of the temporal level and a shift into the past. Present-day Jessica walks on *inside* the flashback and reaches the table where she sees herself in the past. She is dressed elegantly and sitting with someone whose back is turned to us. From what we can hear, he is giving her a pair of earrings for their anniversary. But this past event stops suddenly, and back in the present, Jessica stares at the empty table, bewildered. This flashback design undoubtedly conveys an intense inner conflict that the protagonist believes she has already overcome. There is a significant opposition between the attitude and appearance of Jessica then and Jessica now, as if they were two distinct characters. The present-day Jessica is cold, harsh, and hardly disposed toward romanticism. The past Jessica gazes lovingly at her partner. This retrospective interval reveals a startling affinity between Jessica's past experience and the case she is

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<sup>5</sup> It is worth mentioning how *House of Cards*, a Netflix Originals *pièce de résistance*, made breaking the fourth wall one of its stylistic marks. However, Frank Underwood speaking directly to the audience is an example of metalepsis but involving no flashback, the narrative device upon which this article focuses.

now investigating. Her worried face conveys the horror of reliving a devastating experience –and discovering that the person responsible for it has resurfaced.

A similar example of the metaleptic delimited flashback occurs in a sequence in *Iron Fist* when Danny returns to his family home after having been presumed missing or dead for a long time. He walks downstairs and steps out onto the terrace. With no transition between timeframes, he steps straight into a scene of his childhood. We see the child Danny with Joy and Ward Meachum, two friends who were close to him due to the relationship between their families. This memory reveals that Danny’s conflict with Ward has a long history, stemming from a relationship that has been problematic from the beginning. His present-day struggles with Ward, who refuses to accept Danny’s identity, are thus a consistent extension of their childhood discord. The conflict worsened after their fathers co-founded Rand Enterprises, and Ward began to view Danny as his rival and tried to bully and intimidate him. This smooth shift into Danny’s past –with minimal changes to the *mise-en-scène* but a vivid memory of Ward’s mockery and manipulation– better contextualizes their relationship. The metaleptic flashback sheds light on a central character’s conflict, which, although it began in his childhood, is still extremely intense, as if no time had passed. The way that past and present are rhetorically interwoven through temporal dissolution, forming a connection analogous to the character’s emotional response to the issue on each narrative plane, supports this interpretation.

Finally, a similar parallel also forms in the flashback in *Luke Cage*, which exhibits a rhetorical blend of timeframes, again using the same type of metalepsis. This procedure helps to highlight one defining feature of the protagonist’s personality, common to both the present and the past, which the passage of time seems to have left entirely unaffected: loneliness. In the present, Luke is in his room. Books are scattered across the bed, including Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. A hand enters the shot where the protagonist is, and the location starts to transform after a tracking shot. Now we see Reva with the former prisoner in Seagate Penitentiary, where Luke had regular sessions with her. Again, the two *mises-en-scène* have a spatiotemporal convergence, but one that is somewhat more unexpected than the flashback in *Iron Fist*. We identify a primary space from the same setting (Luke’s room) and an artificial one (the prison library). Reva, the prison psychologist, warns Luke in this scene that loneliness “never goes away, especially in places like Seagate.” She also adds, “If you don’t make attempts to befriend someone, loneliness is guaranteed to eat you alive.” This draws a connection between Luke’s prison time (past) and his efforts to rebuild his life in the Harlem neighborhood, despite his fugitive condition (present). The recurrent motif in the two periods is Luke’s habit of isolation and individualism; hence, Reva’s words return, fixed in his memory. This formal strategy reveals a mental block that continues to afflict the character, despite his efforts to overcome it in the past. There is no sign of healing from this inner conflict, assuring the similarity between present and past. This is the source of the temporal dissolution: we are located in two spaces and times, i.e., in both Luke’s room and the library at Seagate. There is no evolution or overcoming in Luke’s struggle with loneliness, only stagnation. We find him in a spatiotemporal limbo in psychological terms.

## **8. Conclusion: how original are Netflix Originals?**

This article aimed to explore whether the Netflix Original series –characterized since 2013 by a new mode of delivery, the season-drop–offered specific and distinctive narrative features. Following a quantitative and qualitative analysis, we have focused on narratology, an essential element for TV fiction, as Mittell explains: “Understanding narrative time is vital to serial storytelling because seriality itself is defined by its use of time” (2015, p. 27). Thus, this article has examined the intersection between memory, narrative complexity, and *mise-en-scène* in Netflix Originals series from 2013 to 2017. We have focused on narratology, looking for aesthetic and dramatic patterns across the 33 TV series in the sample.

Unsurprisingly, we have found that flashbacks are the predominant temporal disruption device in Netflix Originals, clearly prevailing over flashforwards and mental images. Moreover, the “delimited flashback” is the most common of the five categories this study defines. The dialectical nature of the delimited flashback may explain this preponderance, as it can elicit semantic interplays between different temporal levels, due to its repetition of certain *mise-en-scène* features. This attribute becomes a powerful semantic tool, offering creators innovative and nuanced expressive options to tell their stories. However, semantic asymmetry among the delimited flashbacks characterizes the sample. This unevenness is understandable, given the stylistic and geographical diversity of Netflix Original dramas. Of the 29 delimited flashbacks analyzed, 11 (in *Good Morning Call*, 3%, *Orange Is the New Black*, and *Stranger Things*) are low in semanticity, serving mainly as a narrative device applied rationally or logically to jump from one temporal level to another, in the interests of broadening the plot.

Conversely, the other 18 delimited flashbacks establish a complex relationship between temporal levels, making aesthetic and dramatic use of the delimited flashback’s dialectical nature. Eleven of these 18 complex delimited flashbacks (in *Thirteen Reasons Why*, *The Punisher*, *Orange Is the New Black*, *Marseille*, *Ozark*, and *Luke Cage*) depict the past as an escape from an unbearable present. In moments of crisis or weakness, the character plunges into an idealized past, underscoring the conflicts and problems in the contemporary timeline. In these cases, the characters give free rein to their memories, embracing them as an emotional release. The fact that the present and past share certain *mise-en-scène* elements allows the delimited flashback to enhance the aesthetic qualities of those elements, now redefined semantically. These objects, places, and situations are linked to certain emotions in the past, which contrast antagonistically with the present. The elements can take on dramatic and unexpected levels of added meaning to encapsulate a character’s psychology. In this sense, the delimited flashback can draw out expressive paradoxes because it emphasizes the passage of time and highlights the unfathomable changes it can bring, by contrasting past and present emotions. This paradox is primarily dramatic and only occasionally comical.

Instead of contrasting past and present, the remaining 7 of the 18 complex delimited flashbacks (in *Sense8*, *The Cable Girls*, *Thirteen Reasons Why*, *Luke Cage*, *Jessica Jones*, and *Iron Fist*) reveal parallels between them. In this group, the juxtaposition of past and present conveys a sense of frozen time. Characters are trapped emotionally or psychologically in age-old conflicts, yet to be overcome. Therefore, the delimited flashback is ideal for exposing paradoxes in troubled characters and their backstories, exhibiting expressive parallels to suggest dramatic stability in the character’s inner world.

The metaleptic flashback foregrounds the experience of recalling a past moment, the intensity of memories, and the overlapping of physical and mental levels. Through the so-called illusory continuity effect or the blurring of the boundaries between past and present, such series as *Luke Cage*, *Iron Fist*, *Jessica Jones*, and *Thirteen Reasons Why* enhance the formal and dramatic complexity of their retroversions. These flashbacks are elaborate ways of capturing and expressing the present experience that the character faces.

Nonetheless, although metaleptic flashbacks could be the paramount narrative complexity in this study, the data obtained in the quantitative study do not suffice to affirm that Netflix Originals conveys a new paradigm of television storytelling. Mittell’s account of “Complex TV” can accommodate even the most audacious of Netflix Originals, a label broad enough to include such convoluted narrations as *Sense 8* or *Orange Is the New Black*, along with linear stories, such as *House of Cards* or *Mindhunter*. Upon reviewing the available content on the streaming platform, it is predictably evident that most of it caters to commercial and general audiences. This indicates a dearth of pioneering creativity in storytelling and an emphasis on conventional narrative techniques. Despite using an innovative season-drop delivery system, Netflix Originals failed to bring fresh storytelling techniques to the table in its first five years. Instead, they simply put the old narratological wine in new distribution bottles.

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**Annex**

The series reference list is available in the Figshare data repository with the following doi:  
<https://www.doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.24573130>