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Smolev Daniil D.

PhD (in Philosophy), Senior Researcher, Western Contemporary Art
Department, State Institute for Art Studies, 5 Kozitsky Lane, Moscow, 125375,
Russia
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-4944-8792
ResearcherID: ABA-5523-2020
danilasmolev@mail.ru

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Smolev Daniil D.

Series and Pauses: To the Problem of Cutting



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Смолев Даниил Дмитриевич

Кандидат философских наук, старший научный сотрудник, сектор
современного искусства Запада, Государственный институт
искусствознания, 125375, Россия, Москва, Козицкий пер., 5
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-4944-8792
ResearcherID: ABA-5523-2020
danilasmolev@mail.ru

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Смолев Даниил Дмитриевич

Сериалы и паузы: к проблеме монтажного шва

Abstract. Unlike a classic film, which requires the audience's attention from the first to the last frame, every series is forced to deal with pauses, which constitute the aesthetic specificity of this artistic format. Breaks between seasons, episodes, and sometimes blocks within a separate episode (transitions to advertising) are often carefully thought out by the creators and supported by specific tools that are designed to maintain the viewer's interest in the work: a cliffhanger, retroactive continuity, the module "in previous episodes," etc.

Using film, television and literary series as a researcher material, the author analyzes the process of the audience's encounter with a work — both during its direct perception and in anticipation of the next part. High discreteness of the serial rhythm leads the extralong form to a succession of drama crises, forcing it not only to develop the action forward but also to correct its own past, resolve logical inconsistencies, and reinterpret the events that have already happened. The article argues that a series deliberately abandons the fabula (plot) as an eventual given, introduces new unspoken conventions that its devoted viewers must accept, and receives the audience's feedback, entering an interactive narrative mode.

Аннотация. В отличие от классического кинофильма, требующего от аудитории внимания от первого до последнего кадра, всякий сериал вынужден работать с паузами, составляющими эстетическую специфику этого художественного формата. Разрывы между сезонами, эпизодами, а иногда и блоками внутри отдельной серии (переходы к рекламе) нередко тщательно продумываются создателями и поддерживаются специфическим инструментарием, который призван удержать интерес зрителя к производству: клиффхэнгер, ретроактивный континуитет, модуль «в предыдущих сериях» и др.

На материале кино-, теле- и литературных сериалов автор анализирует процесс встречи реципиента и произведения — как в период непосредственного восприятия, так и в ситуации ожидания следующей части. Высокая дискретность сериального ритма приводит сверхдлинную форму к череде драматургических кризисов, вынуждая не только развивать действие вперед, но и корректировать собственное прошлое, устранять логические несогласования и по-новому интерпретировать уже случившиеся события. В статье утверждается, что сериал намеренно отказывается от фабулы как от событийной данности, вводит новые негласные условности, которые должен принимать его преданный зритель, а также налаживает «обратную связь» с аудиторией, входя в интерактивный повествовательный модус.

The mystery of cutting

An important factor in experiencing a series as a special aesthetic phenomenon is the problem of anticipation. At first sight, the act of watching, reading or listening to an episode of a series is little or no different from watching a feature length film, reading a completed novel or listening to an opera – except for the fact that the amount of accumulated information which the audience have to refer to while processing new input data in a series is excessive compared to that in the works of a loop structure having their immediate beginning and end. The difference becomes visible in between episodes and seasons, when the viewer has finished one, but has not yet started another. So, where do we find ourselves when anticipating the next episode? Do we continue to ‘watch’ a series not physically watching it?

Today, the filming of almost any non-serial temporal and spatio-temporal work can be put on hold. The conscientious audience may conceivably keep thinking about the characters they take interest in, plot twists and motifs that froze in time to continue moving later. During a break, the audience is free to study the creator’s biography, clarify vocabulary, search for parallels in art history, etc. However, such ‘extra-textual’ activities are optional and are seen as nothing but artifacts of seriality that may or may not enter the audience’s consciousness.

When it comes to series, it is absolutely impossible not to notice notches of discontinuity. Another part or episode may take weeks, months, or even years to be released; it may also happen so that an interrupted series is never continued. As a self-observing system (“self-observing systems always produce theories about their own motions – they do so in order to keep moving” [23]), a series conceptualizes its development as well as its pauses. According to film expert Ilka Brasch, even in between episodes we persist in the serial “now” [15, p. 94] which appears to be currently located in the inter-frame uncertainty – in the elastic cut that stretches beyond spatio-temporal bounds.

The mystery of the inter-frame space has repeatedly been in the limelight of theoreticians and practitioners of cinema (even long before its invention). For physicists and physiologists Joseph Plateau, Michael Faraday, Félix Savart, Jules Marey, Eadweard Muybridge and others, it was not film that was of interest but the retina, not the lens but the pupil,

not the camera but the human brain. Seeking to resolve the mystery of vision, all of them, like Luis Buñuel in the surreal film *Un Chien Andalou* (*An Andalusian Dog*, 1929), ‘scalped’ a certain composite eye, revealing substantial discrepancies between what was presented and what was seen: flowing water, a galloping horse, a shotgun pellet hitting a soap bubble. Here is how Viktor Shklovsky, echoing Henry Bergson, defined this property: “The continuous world is a world of vision. The discontinuous world is a world of recognition. The cinema is a child of the discontinuous world” [12].

Subsequently, for obvious reasons, the potential of cutting engaged the attention of the pioneers of film editing. It was scrutinized within the context of linguistics and Juri Lotman’s semiotic school: “If we compare the movement of events in life and on the screen, then, besides the obvious and striking resemblances, the attentive observer will also note some differences: events in life come as a continuous stream, but the action on screen, even in the absence of montage, forms certain clots between which there are voids filled with linking actions” [6, p. 14]. In the late 1980s, the genetically determined discontinuity of moving images laid the basis for the original theory of video director Boris Yukhananov, who contrasted the discreteness of cinema with the a priori non-discreteness of video [13].

The first person to perform a truly artistic transformation of a cut was Georges Méliès, who came up with his original tricks of substitution and transformation by accident when his camera jammed in the middle of a take: “It took a minute to disengage the film and to start the camera up again. In the meantime, the passersby, horse trolleys, and other vehicles had, of course, changed positions. When I projected the strip of film, which I had stuck back together at the point of the break, I suddenly saw a Madeleine-Bastille horse trolley change into a hearse and men become women” [8, p. 211]. Just a year after the invention of cinema, the great French illusionist started considering film break not as a technical defect but as an artistic achievement, presenting to the audience more and more metamorphoses built on transformations of space and time hidden from their view.

The early production primitives of Georges Méliès are not at all films without (or almost without) editing, as they were expected to be perceived

by contemporaries, but a series of implicit jump-cuts⁽¹⁾ in which *the hidden* (the ‘dark matter’ of cinema) was virtually of greater significance than *the revealed*. Reflecting on the phenomenon of cutting in films, culturologist E.V. Salnikova writes: “In a circus one can try to guess where the rabbit from the magician’s hat or the illusionist’s assistant locked in a black box have disappeared to. But it is impossible to make any assumptions about where everything that is happening now in the screen world actually is, everything that we see in the frame or that suddenly escapes the frame, because all of this is nowhere. But at the same time – in front of the audience. And yet nowhere” [9, p. 78].

It is unlikely that the mystery of cutting remained unnoticed, that the cinema audience took that disruption for granted and did not demand answers: where the well-dressed lady disappear to, how a skeleton appeared in her seat and where it disappeared later when due to the sweeping passes of Méliès the lady returned from the off-screen nowhere (*The Vanishing Lady* (Escamotage d’une Dame chez Theatre Robert Houdin), 1896). M.B. Yampolsky, relying on Siegfried Kracauer’s well-known observation on the audience’s memory in the work *The Mass Ornament*, stated that “uncontrolled feelings always create an illusion of relevance, since for the reader or viewer there is nothing more relevant than their own emotional response” [14, p. 321]. Similarly, the space and time cut out in between frames does not disappear without leaving a trace; on the contrary, this is precisely what occupies the audience’s mind. The diegetic (what belongs to the on-screen world) becomes the key to studying the non-diegetic (what is beyond the on-screen world), and a cut is no longer just an editing method but a space in which the agitated human consciousness can reside.

French film semiotician and structuralist Christian Metz analogized the film audience with a suitcase with film equipment: “When I say that ‘I see’ the film, I mean thereby a unique mixture of two contrary currents; the film is what I receive, and it is also what I release, since it does not pre-exist my entering the auditorium and I only need to close my eyes to suppress it. Releasing it, I am the projector, receiving it, I am the screen;

in both these figures together, I am the camera, which points and yet which records” [7, p. 81]. Regarding what has been said above, we consider this multi-stage metaphor reduced. The mystery of cutting can excite the audience at the instant of perception of a film as well as in the ‘closed eyes’ phase – when the viewer is neither “receiving” nor “releasing” the film. The described affect is largely transcendental and unreal; it is beyond the boundaries of institutional rules, for which reason the early cinema ignored it for a long time, content with the spectacular effect of ‘before and after’.

One Thousand and One Nights

In serial forms there is a completely different attitude to cuts, because such forms originate precisely in the ‘break of the film’, regardless of a specific medium where they are found. Supposedly, the best illustration of this thesis is the proto-series *One Thousand and One Nights* – a medieval monument of Arabic literature encompassing the tales of several nations. In light of the issues under consideration, the frame story entitled *The Story of King Shahriyar and His Brother* is of interest. It introduces into the narrative the main female character – Shahrazad, the daughter of the vizier, the cunning concubine of the murderous king. It is worth reminding that the central conflict of the collection of tales is as follows: hoping to escape execution – the fate awaiting any virgin who spends the night with Shahriyar – the resourceful Shahrazad undertakes to entertain the king with fairy tales every night: “And the King said, ‘By Allah, I will not kill her until I hear the remainder of her story!’” [5, p. 36].

The mere presence of regular characters imparts to scattered stories the features of a single linear narration, which in composition resembles a hybrid series. For an explanation of this term, let us turn to British culturologist Raymond Williams: he understood a vertical series as “an episodic narrative of repetitive variation” and a horizontal series as “a narrative that works with progressing story arcs” [27, pp. 56–57]. In other words, each episode of a vertical series represents an enclosed novella – a story with its beginning, central part, and end, whereas a horizontal series has a novel structure, and the narration continues from chapter to chapter. The most common type of series on Western television in the 2000s–2010s is a hybrid series: each episode presents a complete story, but the characters remain throughout the entire narrative connecting separate

(1) If traditional editing methods are expected to smooth out the progress of screen time, jump cuts disclose the manufactured nature of cinema leaving the audience with an impression of a spatio-temporal segment being cut out in editing. An illustrative example of this technique can be found in Jean-Luc Godard’s film *Breathless* (1960).

stories into a whole (e.g. *House, M.D* (2004–2012), *The Office* (2005–2013), *The Big Bang Theory*, (2007–2019), etc.). Such recurring characters in *One Thousand and One Nights* are Shahriyar and Shahrazad. Not only do they present tales (enclosed novellas), but they also progress themselves as characters: over one thousand and one nights they manage to have three sons and get married⁽²⁾.

In this proto-series, the cuts in the ‘blind area’ between morning and night are clearly visible: every time the dawn interrupts Shahrazad in mid-sentence forcing the king to postpone her execution again and again. Here is how Fedwa Malti-Douglas, researcher of Muslim literature and feminist, interprets this dramaturgical feature: Shahrazad’s ruse “could be argued to be the ultimate in female trickery, representing a continual game of attraction (the storytelling) followed by denial of satisfaction (the end of the story, which must await yet another night). Rather than directly taking on the king’s fractured pattern of physical love-making, Shahrazad shifts the problem of desire from the area of sex, the realm of Shahriyar’s trauma, to the superficially more distant and malleable world of the text. Her storytelling teaches a new type of desire, one that continues from night to night” [25, p. 40].

To carry out the shift, it was not enough for the unknown authors of the medieval masterpiece to endow Shahrazad with the talent of cliff-hanging in narration – that is to separate the flow of the ‘fiction’ and ‘real’ time of the series – and they introduced another character (speaking rather than acting) – Dunyazad, the main female character’s younger sister. “Shahrazad said, ‘O King, I have a younger sister, and I wish to take leave of her’. So, the King sent to her; and she came to her sister, and embraced her, and sat near the foot of the bed. Then the King arose and did away with his bride’s maidenhead, and they talked. And the younger sister said to Shahrazad, ‘By Allah! O, my sister, relate to us a story to beguile the waking hour of our night’” [5, pp. 21–22].

Dunyazad’s part in the storyline is interesting, and not only because she is silently present during her sister’s copulation with the king. Her role consists in moving from one night to another, from one cut to another,

craving for development and kindling Shahriyar’s interest. She tirelessly repeats, “Finish for us your story” [5, p. 89]. In other cases, Dunyazad demands a new tale or, as we would say today, a new episode, “O my own sister, by Allah in very sooth this is a right pleasant tale and a delectable; never was heard the like of it, but prithee tell me now another story to while away what yet remaineth of the waking hours of this our night.” She replied, “With love and gladness if the King give me leave;” and he said, “Tell thy tale and tell it quickly” [5, p. 177]. Finally, she seems to be voicing the questions of the taciturn tyrant: Shahriyar’s thoughts are Dunyazad’s words. Thus, having told *The Hunchback’s Tale*, Shahrazad throws a new hook for the serial-fan king: “This tale is by no means more wonderful than that of the two Wazirs and Anis al-Jalis.” However, the one who replies to her is Dunyazad: “And what may that be?” – asks she [5, p. 332].

Interfering neither with the course of the large horizontal story nor with the smaller vertical ones, possessing no distinctive characteristics except for curiosity, this strange female character, Dunyazad, performs a purely functional, linking role (but only in the beginning – in the second volume the reader almost forgets about the shadowy third person in the royal chambers). Therefore, Dunyazad is virtually the first character in the history of serial forms that personifies a cliffhanger.

Cliffhanger: winding up before a series break

If we refer to Scott Higgins’s benchmark definition of a cliffhanger as a gap between “in the nick of time” and “too late” [19, p. 64], Dunyazad appears to be the device intended to bridge the gap between the story, the cut, and the return to the fairy tale. She embodies anticipation, a break in artistic continuity, and the intention of a series to develop indefinitely, postponing death, in the truest sense of the word.

The need to personify a technical device, to endow it with bodily properties cannot be justified by the immaturity of the medieval serial form. Similar cliffhanger instances can be found in silent film series where the transition from the diegetic to the non-diegetic serial space is often accompanied by intertitles: “Were Juve and Fandor killed in the explosion of the villa of lady Beltham?” – asks the director, Louis Feuillade, at the finale of the episode *Juve vs. Fantômas* (*Juve contre Fantômas*, 1913) as the fourth wall of the villa is falling down. In sound series, intertitles are

(2) There exist two versions of the finale of *One Thousand and One Nights*, the short and the long ones. The long one describes Shahriyar and Shahrazad’s wedding, while the short one does not; nevertheless, both present the fact of them having three sons.

replaced by the off-screen voice, which became a signature feature of the Columbia studio in the 1940s: “How can Brenda survive this terrific crash? How can Chuck help her with two murderous gunman closing in on her? And what will happen even if she comes out of the wreckage alive?” (*Brenda Starr, Reporter*, 1945, Episode 2, The Blazing Trap). In some series of the era of ‘sophisticated television’, similarly to *One Thousand and One Nights*, a cliffhanger is personified by half-characters or the author themselves. This can be seen in *The Kingdom (Riget)* (1994–2002) by Lars von Trier: “Each episode ends with a lyrical and philosophical note by von Trier, who appears in front of the camera wearing Carl Th. Dreyer’s tuxedo and discusses the events that have just taken place, alluding to their dramaturgical outcomes” [10, p. 22].

In the examples given above, not only does the serial form exploit a cliffhanger in order to hold the audience’s attention for as long as possible, but it also brings it (a cliffhanger) into artistic reality, creating a centaur (through intertitles, off-screen voice, and someone else’s appearance in the frame): it is not yet a fully legitimate agent of the fictional world, capable of acting alongside with other characters, but no longer a celestial creator, sacred to the public and fundamentally invisible. Even though personification or mimetization of the device is not a prerequisite for development (series fans can recall many successful series that managed without any shifts and cliffhangers), the emphasis on it indicates a collapse, an extraordinary situation in which a “self-observing system” goes to the limit to survive discreteness.

What is the final cliffhanger of a series from the point of view of the drama? Obviously, it is an artificial, forced solution to a crisis. The gap between “in the nick of time” and “too late” is reduced to a minimum; it is equivalent to the strongest suspense. A character finds themselves at a critical juncture, the one they have never encountered, at least in a certain episode (up until dawn, Shakhriyar perceives a tale by inertia, but what if, distracted in the inter-frame space, he does not want to hear a new one?). The series is temporarily out of control – the authors have started a provocation, allowing the audience to take on the role of a demiurge. Therefore, the inevitable resolution of a cliffhanger situation, a return to the story, will be marred by hidden rivalry: who will solve the puzzle better and more convincingly and will find the most logical way to break the stalemate? At this point, the narrator’s dictation is softened, and the

series enters a dangerous interactive mode: it risks losing its audience if they find it unconvincing.

The situation described above is characteristic of most horizontal and hybrid series, but occasionally it may also be applicable to the vertical novelistic type of prolonged stories which tend to reset the accumulated information to zero with every new episode. Sometimes creators of vertical series appeal to cliffhangers in film, television and Internet formats, anticipating commercial breaks with an emotional wind-up. However, since in such a case a break is not long and lasts just several minutes, the degree of tension is far from extreme: a character may just be asked a tough question, get into trouble, or face the unknown – possibly even without any immediate threat. Each time, such quasi-cliffhangers are marked by a slightly intensified action but not by a total collapse of the entire structure forcing the creators to trap their characters or turn to the audience for help (the interactivity of a serial break). Building up in seasons, vertical series reveal characters with formed habits and behavioural strategies in new plot twists, which, in our opinion, can come to resemble the cubist principle of film creation. The multi-perspective nature of a vertical series inevitably results in episodes becoming uniform and characters becoming simplified, coarsened, and ‘geometrized’, in a way. Its intrigue is not due to the desire to learn *what will happen next*; it consists in *what it can be like alternatively*, and therefore, there is no need for additional stimulation of interest.

The life of the audience in a serial pause

Nevertheless, interrupting storytelling is risky for most series. What comes with a break is not a period of stasis but that of an active ‘inter-frame life’ during which the audience should not lose track of the narrative – they should act as if replacing the temporarily frozen characters. Even when a series is paused, the audience keep interacting with it. Following Lothar Mikos, German researcher of the media, “... the pleasures people take in media entertainment do not strongly depend on specific experiences that they enjoy and perceive as pleasant. Of greater importance is what they transform this experience into when they tell others how much fun they had, or how exciting/touching/terrible/nerve-racking, etc. it was” [26, p. 139].

Modern online cinemas have all the necessary tools to release the entire seasons of television series, but, interestingly, they do not stick to this distribution principle. Some streaming services (e.g. Netflix, Amazon) prefer to release all episodes of a season at once, thus allowing the audience to binge-watch, whereas others (e.g. HBO Max, Warner Media) follow the traditional television pattern, presenting their subscribers with weekly portions. Western sociologists prove that a portioned presentation of a series is not an atavism: it allows fighting piracy more effectively, holding the audience, reducing the possibility of stumbling across spoilers, and creating a sense of unity, as a release of each season appears to be a major event collectively anticipated and experienced by the audience [20].

Another manifestation of an active inter-frame life is the establishment of fandom (fan culture) which uncontrollably disseminates a serial narrative in other media. Its typical form is fan art based on a particular universe, which includes dressing up as fictional characters (cosplay), participation in theme festivals (e.g. Comic Con), and creation of works of interpretation (fan fiction). Despite the clear dependence of local fan communities on the mass culture boom of the 20th century, it should not go unnoticed that this phenomenon has a truly ancient history. According to a number of literary scholars, fan fiction originated with fairy tales, folk beliefs and myth stories [17, p. 62]. Furthermore, American writer Michael Chabon flatly states that “all literature, highbrow or low, from the *Aeneid* onward, is fan fiction” [16, p. 56].

Based on this statement, it can easily be concluded that fandom and general intertextual processes in world culture are inextricably connected. Regardless of specific practices of transferring an enclosed narrative into a narrative cluster (a film into a film series or franchise, a series into several related series, a computer game into a full-scale transmedia project, etc.), the potential of the intertextual owes to a cut – the hub from which a work branches out on a journey through various media.

Meanwhile, anticipating a release of a new serial ‘chapter’ cannot be called a smooth process. The behaviour of the audience in anticipation is determined by individual features of the psyche, which can radically change their attitude towards a series. In some cases, the degree of interest generated with a cliffhanger appears to be insufficient, and the interest in the story starts to wane: details escape memory, events become confused, and the narrative falls into pieces. In other cases, on the contrary, the thirst

for another episode increases, bringing the viewer into an exalted state. A description of such a deviation can be found in the preface to Stephen King’s novel *The Green Mile* in which the author quotes a popular story dating back to 1840: “Dickens’s serialized novels were immensely popular; so popular, in fact, that one of them precipitated a tragedy in Baltimore. A large group of Dickens fans crowded onto a waterfront dock, anticipating the arrival of an English ship with copies of the final instalment of *The Old Curiosity Shop* on board. According to the story, several would-be readers were jostled into the water and drowned” [4, p. 6]. Apparently, what worried the agitated fans of the literary series was one single question – “Is Nell Trent alive?”; the question of their own survival held no interest for those who died in the inter-frame space⁽³⁾.

Retroactive continuity and participatory culture

In 1893, in the story *The Final Problem*, Arthur Conan Doyle attempted to kill his detective off by throwing him and Professor Moriarty off a cliff at the Reichenbach Falls. However, numerous readers, Queen Victoria included, were so indignant at the death of their favourite character (in terms of a serial poetics – at turning a cliffhanger into the point of narration) that they bombarded Sir Arthur with letters demanding to resurrect Holmes. And then ten years later, in the story *The Adventure of the Empty House* (1903), the bereaved Watson had the most incredible encounter in his life: “I moved my head to look at the cabinet behind me. When I turned again Sherlock Holmes was standing smiling at me across my study table. I rose to my feet, stared at him for some seconds in utter amazement, and then it appears that I must have fainted for the first and the last time in my life” [3, p. 342]. To explain his miraculous rescue, Sherlock immediately returned to the nuances of that fatal battle, reminded of the pieces of evidence his partner had found (an alpenstock, a cigarette case, and a farewell note) and reassembled the story, introducing some previously

(3) For Stephen King, a cliffhanger is not only a common narrative device but also a marker of a characters’ mental deviations. For example, in the novel *Misery* (as well as in Rob Reiner’s 1990 eponymous film), we see a devoted reader force writer Paul Sheldon to rewrite the final installment of his novel. Her favorite female character should not die, and in order to save her literary future, she is ready to take extreme measures, causing the writer grievous bodily harm.

unknown details: “...torn and bleeding, upon the path, I took to my heels, did ten miles over the mountains in the darkness, and a week later I found myself in Florence with the certainty that no one in the world knew what had become of me” [3, p. 345].

Such a sophisticated and obviously fraudulent solution is typical for serial culture and accompanies many inter-frame pauses. For instance, in the film series *A Woman in Grey* (1920), the main female character is doomed to death, shoved in front of an oncoming train. But then another episode starts, in which the train inexplicably travels across time and space, and the character performed by Arlene Pretty unaccountably lands in a hopper transporting grain.

The trick of adding new camera angles and playing with temporality is characteristic of many silent film series. Technically, it traces back to the early cinematic performances of Georges Méliès but serves a different artistic purpose – it is an extraordinary attempt by screenwriters to escape the equally extraordinary cliffhanger trap, which both the characters and the screenwriters themselves have fallen into. While the tricks of Méliès seem organic to the audience and are in line with the director’s conventions in terms of plot and genre, jump cuts in series – regardless of how skilfully they are made – expose a foul play and shout about the violation of the unspoken agreement between the authors and the audience.

Such drama clashes are even more pronounced in cases when series creators do not simply join the points “in the nick of time” and “too late” but, like Doyle, cross the red line. For example, in the series *The Exploits of Elaine* (1914), at the end of an episode the protagonist performed by Pearl White dies, doctors determine the time of her death (Episode 10, *The Life Current*), but at the beginning of the next episode, scientist and detective Craig Kennedy gives her electroresuscitation and brings her back to life (Episode 11, *The Hour of Three*). Twenty years later, the singing cowboy Gene Autry made a similar journey in *The Phantom Empire* (1936), dying (Episode 6, *Disaster from the Skies*) and deftly returning to the narrative just a week later (Episode 7, *From Death to Life*).

It is no less self-exposing for the serial form when characters disappear in the notorious inter-frame space. In professional slang, taking characters out of a long narrative is known as ‘putting them on a bus’. If certain actors cannot continue filming but do not rule out the possibility of appearing in the film again, screenwriters do not deal with their characters shortly but

gently take them out of the plot due to a lethargic sleep or coma (there is even a slang term ‘convenient coma’), a prison sentence, a long journey, etc. The presence of such characters in the action becomes nominal: they stop developing but can become some sort of a MacGuffin⁽⁴⁾, springing to mind of the remaining characters in the form of flashbacks or making their presence felt, indirectly influencing the action – they can send letters, make calls, contact other characters on social networks, etc. Various scenario tricks of this type can be found in medical procedural drama series such as *House, M.D.* (2004–2012) and *Grey’s Anatomy* (2005–present).

Such jams in the serial action may not be directly read by the audience, but they definitely arouse the feeling of quackery. But what do they mean? Are they accidental or rooted in the serial genome?

At first sight, intervention in the narrative is conditioned by a purely practical need: the task for Conan Doyle was to do what it takes to bring the protagonist back; what is required in the cliffhanger deadlock is no longer logic but a miracle, which with the realistic progress of time in mind can only be performed in cutting; or an actor who has left the cast may return to filming. Additionally, the longer a series lasts, the more non-normative interventions in the narrative are to be found – such is the phenomenon that Knut Hickethier, German researcher of the media, associated with the problem of double formal structure [18, pp. 397–403].

According to this hypothesis, any serial form deals with two types of narratives – minor and major. Minor narratives contain storyline twists that take place in each episode and are typically resolved by its end. Minor narratives contribute to major ones, which in turn represent the totality of information about the series the viewer receives while it is on. To put it simply, if Dunyazad is already in the chambers of Shahryar, an ideal series cannot but take this fact into account in the cause-and-effect relations of events. Then, if Sherlock Holmes once dies, the series requires a detailed and logical justification of his resurrection. Regardless of who is working on development, one author or the entire team, massive amount of accumulated information inevitably results in contradictions, inconsistencies, or even

(4) The term ‘MacGuffin’ usually refers to an object that the characters of a film or series pursue. The object itself may not even appear on the screen, serving just as the trigger for the plot.

glaring screenwriting errors, which a series as a self-observing recursive format attempts to rectify after the fact.

It should be mentioned that alongside with what is said or done, accumulated information includes more subtle things: a certain style of filming and editing, specific elements of the context, a given level of irony or a tragic element, the characters' favourite clothes, their manners and behaviour, etc. Frank Kelleter, German researcher of the media, focuses on other details that result in additional complications: "New elements or unexpected developments – often intruding from such presumably extranarrative realms as production economics (an actor leaving after failed contract negotiations) or the world of geopolitics (terrorist incursions that reverberate within narratives of realism) – have to be realigned again and again with previously told events" [24, p. 17].

Thus, a series, which from an aesthetic point of view has neither a starting nor an ending point, is forced to develop not only into the future but also back into the past, eliminating inconsistencies and overcoming its ever-increasing entropy. In an attempt to continue indefinitely, the format is confronted with a force that from within undermines its integrity, organic nature, and vitality, ultimately foredooming the narrative either to regular zeroing out (according to this principle of unconsciousness, as we mentioned earlier, vertical cubist series are built: in each new episode, the characters act as if nothing happened to them before) or to a slow decay – forceful ending, rupture, and transformation into a transmedia project. Meanwhile, from our perspective, individual inconsistencies are destined to become elements of serial life which the viewer is forced to reckon with and accept as a new convention. Taking notice of a train travelling across time and space, a character suddenly disappearing from the narration, or Sherlock Holmes's awkward excuses (which, by the way, are completely uncharacteristic of him), the audience wilfully remain blind to the clots of untruth. Interested persons and accomplices in a longer narrative, they are ready to put up with and justify individual fluctuations, since a series is a succession of planned and unplanned accidents.

In the lexicon of screenwriting, narrative devices designed to address plot holes and change errors to conventions are known as retroactive continuity, or retcon. Using a wide range of techniques, from the unreliable narrator technique to floating timeline, retcon edits the serial past while simultaneously reestablishing broken drama connections and leaving traces

behind (like postoperative scars). However, the attempts of aging long-running series to seem fresh are unable to deal with the key problem of expanding chaos. Apparently, even an unsophisticated audience is capable of reading retcons and unconsciously adds them into the cumulative narrative along with other information. A patchwork of logical errors and bloopers, such a series is akin to Frankenstein's monster, which results in a decrease in audience interest and, eventually, leads the project to decay.

This narrative-disrupting force is most visible in long-running series. Thus, the American soap opera *The Guiding Light* (1937–2009), which is considered the longest-running series in history, ran for 15 years on radio and 57 years on television. Watch the remaining video material would take a desperate viewer almost a year and a half, while its total running time can hardly be calculated as such. Moreover, the very idea of considering *The Guiding Light* as an integral work is questionable: during its running, over a dozen different families appeared in the story; its intonation, style, and opening sequence transformed beyond recognition in line with the changing canons of the media; ultimately, it engaged several generations of the audience who did not have the remotest chance of following the narrative and its cause-and-effect relations from start to finish.

The generations of screenwriters who made unintentional errors when developing its monstrous plot did not have that chance either. If in the late 30s the title of the series referred to the lamp in Reverend Ruthledge's study that symbolized the willingness to help all those in need, then gradually, when the character left the narrative and was forgotten, the new symbol of *The Guiding Light* was introduced – the lighthouse in the fictional city of Springfield. Some interesting errors in the series include four characters discussing the dreadful events of 25 years ago, 'forgetting' that one of them was not then in the plot and that the discussed events were not shown in the series, or a character named Phillip Spaulding becoming a victim of the soap opera rapid aging syndrome (SORAS), growing from 12 to 17 years old in just a few months.

These and other bloopers originating in extremely long narratives clearly demonstrate the dement nature of serial storytelling, which, whether it wants it or not, alienates even the most devoted fans. When demanding that the serial past be reset, forgotten, or made conditional, considering it a compliant material for the production of new episodes, long-running series are dismissive of their fandom. Thus, not only do the

devices of retcon rewrite serial history in an attempt to handle extended cumulative narratives, but they also reject a particular storyline: anything that happens in the narrative is not final and irrevocable; any completed event can be revised, rearranged, or cancelled. According to the academic definition of B.V. Tomashevsky, “the fabula (storyline) is the totality of mutually related events reported in the work... The fabula is opposed to the syuzhet (plot): both include the same events, but in the syuzhet the events are arranged and connected according to the orderly sequence in which they were presented in the work” [11, p. 137]. Therefore, a series handles the plot as direct storytelling, but its fabula (the totality of information) is unknown, and so is its total concept – at any point of time either the author themselves or their successors may intrude, reincarnating frozen characters in a sequel and expanding the work into a transmedia universe or franchise.

Only in the 1990s, the distinguished cultural scientist and theorist of the media Henry Jenkins investigated this phenomenon and introduced the concept of participatory culture [21, pp. 227–287], which has become standard. “The term, participatory culture, contrasts with older notions of passive media spectatorship. Rather than talking about media producers and consumers as occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands” [22, p. 3]. The key emphasis in Jenkins’s theory is put on modern technologies, which have allowed users to feel, if not full co-creators of news, content, and ideas but citizens of a shared interactive space and residents of McLuhan’s global village. Yet, what best embodies these ideas, regardless of the presence of digital tools, is the nature of serial culture.

What resurrected Sherlock Holmes if not the thirst for the story to continue? What, if not feedback and requests from the audience, do series have at heart when resourcing to a cliffhanger, retcon or opening sequence? The fragility of the storyline that we have mentioned and its technical absence is due to the continuous audience feedback the series collects. Depending on the feedback (letters of criticism, box office performance, online reviews, etc.), long-running series are continuously adjusted to respond to incoming requests. Practice shows that the opinion of the majority can influence development, making filmmakers put an unwanted character ‘on a bus’, focus more on the audience’s favourite, shift the focus

of narration to a trending topic or even change the genre, add dynamism to what is happening or, on the contrary, continue in minor key. Additionally, there have been cases when the ideas of the audience were not just taken into account by screenwriters, helping to find unexpected solutions to intricate stories, but were even brought to screen.

The request of the audience is also taken into account by mass culture as such, which by means of repetition and variation crystallizes the most successful artistic images and plots in archetypes, canons, and clichés – in other words, serializes and memorizes itself. The same goal is pursued in test screenings of films, which rooted in Hollywood with the helping hand of comedian Harold Lloyd (1928). The status of a focus group in test screenings is by no means identical to that of ordinary viewers. Specially for a focus group, an enclosed film is forcedly interrupted, unlocking the non-diegetic montage space, which allows for final changes to the film. The aesthetic paradox is that just for one screening, a draft film turns into a series and sets solid after its official release.

Conclusion

In this regard, a series is seen as the most free, approachable, and democratic form of interaction with the audience, which allows comprehending its development from episode to episode, from season to season. Its synthetic nature can combine the element of pure entertainment and the intent of great art, adapt to various channels but obey the laws of dissemination in the media, which historically consider news not as a fact of a plot (it is well known that fake news operates this way) but as a chain of events that continue each other.

Unlike a classic film, which is locked within the first and last frame and has established running time and chronology, the beginning and end of a series is flickering, its duration is knowingly undefinable. Having filmed a pilot episode, the authors of a series at any point of time are free to change the vector of its development: move tens or hundreds of years forward (flashforward), move back (flashback), move sideward (focus on secondary characters in spin-offs), or sometimes balance the course of the diegetic and non-diegetic time, creating an illusion of constant relevance on the screen. This complex rhizomatic structure, commonly known as ‘the universe of a series’, is outstandingly discrete, free from

stylistic uniformity and duration, and is a step away from vanishing in transmedia.

As has been mentioned above, we have to deal with an extremely discontinuous mechanism of narration, within which the capacity for fragmentation and duration are equally inexhaustible, and therefore an ideal series seeks to continue indefinitely. The end of a traditional work automatically sends it to the realm of cultural heritage and withdraws it from the present; however, when it comes to a series, its innate resistance to come to an end justifies not only its traditional lightness and even entertainment ingrained in the audience's consciousness but also wrestling with death based on its repeated postponement – from episode to episode, from chapter to chapter. Placing an emphasis on being here and now – in the field of the immediate sensual – a series also advocates its presentationism and a special temporality without which it is unthinkable.

This allows mapping out the 'Goldilocks zone', universal for all serial forms with no exception. It lies across a wide range between the statics of a single object and endless transmedia that transforms a work into a meta-collage of popular images or a 'universe' of texts; between closed discreteness (complete storylines and character arcs) and open discreteness (a series is abandoned by its creators); and between the beginning of a plot and its end, which an ideal series does not want to know.

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