ANALYSING SEMI-SERIALIZED TELEVISION FICTIONS: THE ETHICAL STAKES OF NARRATIVE STRUCTURES

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ABSTRACT

The power of episodic television shows such as *Columbo* (NBC, 1968-1978; ABC, 1989-2003), in which each episode tells a full story, has been highlighted by Jean-Pierre Esquenazi (2017: 107-28), who compares them to cubist works, whose universes become denser over time. Yet, surveys evidence that audiences generally prefer watching serial television shows whose narrative arcs develop over numerous episodes (Glevarec 2012, Combes 2015). Series such as *ER* (NBC, 1994-2009), *Angel* (The WB, 1999-2004), *Lost* (ABC, 2004-2010), *Person of Interest* (CBS, 2011-2016) and *Awake* (NBC, 2012), which are the focus of this essay, negotiate a "balance between episodic and serial demands"

(Mittell 2015: 20), as they include episodes that both stand on their own and advance various long-term narrative arcs. These semi-serial shows display a writing which, season after season, feeds on the very tension between their episodic and serial aspects, between short-term and long-term features. This tension raises ethical stakes, particularly an ethics of care, which this essay will attempt to bring to the fore, drawing from the work of Sandra Laugier (2014: 261). Laugier's work invites us to understand how television shows, through their durations and the various kinds of attachment they elicit, may educate viewers morally and make them attentive to what seems to be unremarkable within ordinary life. Her recent work on TV series (2019) focuses on their representational contents – situations, dialogues, gestures, dilemmas, identity politics and (political or moral) choices made by (groups of) characters – but it does not take into account the way specific narrative structures may encourage spectators to adopt a particular ethical view. The purpose of this essay is precisely to focus on the ethics of care invoked through serial narrative structures. By analyzing several examples, we will show that semi-serial shows thematize their own narrative negotiations within the story world and, even if they construct strong serial arcs, maintain the importance of the episodic form as a metaphor of human beings in their very individualities and specificities.

The power of formula television shows such as *Columbo* (NBC, 1968-1978; ABC, 1988-2003), in which each episode has a certain form of autonomy, has been highlighted by Jean-Pierre Esquenazi (2017: 107-28), who compares them to cubist works, whose universes become denser over time. Yet, surveys evidence that audiences generally prefer watching serialized television shows whose narrative arcs develop over numerous episodes (Glevarec 2012, Combes 2015). TV series such as *ER* (NBC, 1994-2009), *Angel* (The WB, 1999-2004), *Lost* (ABC, 2004-2010), *Person of Interest* (CBS, 2011-2016) and *Awake* (NBC, 2012), which are the case studies chosen for this essay, are semi-serialized shows since they all negotiate a "balance between episodic and serial demands" (Mittell 2015: 20) and include episodes that both stand on their own and advance various long-term narrative arcs. On a narrative level, *Lost* may look, at first sight, like a pure serial show but the episodes generally follow a structure centred on a character and his/her past or future, making them *at the same time* units with some closed plots. This formal repetition was especially needed because, during the first three seasons, no ending had been negotiated with the producers, so that writers had to make the show last as long as possible. Conversely, a series like *ER* may look like a pure medical procedural drama with autonomous stories each week, but in fact its episodes reveal how the medical cases have lasting consequences on the recurring staff of doctors and nurses over seasons and even the entire series.

This essay relies on a specific terminology in French serial narratology developed over the years (Cornillon 2018, Favard 2018, Lifschutz 2018, Hatchuel and Thiellement 2019) and on previous articles written on the relationship between ideology and serial narrative structures in different TV series – for example, on *Angel* (Cornillon 2017), on *Awake* (Hatchuel 2014), or on *Lost* (Hatchuel and Cornillon 2016). This essay represents an attempt to draw a synthesis and a theoretical frame from these previous works in order to elaborate a new methodology to study television series, especially semi-serialized shows, and to share our first results with the international community working on serial narration and aesthetics.

The terminology used here makes a distinction between formula shows (such as *Columbo* or *CSI*), serialized shows (such as *Stranger Things* or *The Handmaid's Tale*) and semi-serialized shows (such as *ER* or *Lost*, as we have just seen). The latter category is the one we are going to explore to understand precisely how its structural hybridity is a frame for its ideological and ethical content. Among those semi-serialized shows, and the examples chosen in this essay, we find two

main sub-categories (Cornillon 2018), leading to a more nuanced understanding of television seriality:

1. *Formula* semi-serialized shows (such as *Angel, Person of interest* or *ER*) : in this sub-category, different story arcs are developed throughout the entire season or series (regarding plot elements, the relationships between characters or the evolution of these characters) but every episode is structured around the same formula. It is based, for instance, on the case of the week, the patient of the week or the monster of the week.

2. *Episodic* semi-serialized shows (such as *Lost*): in this sub-category, each episode serves a long-term narrative plot but also features a certain form of autonomy based on a particular theme or linked to a character's specific viewpoint. However, contrary to what happens with the formula semi-serialized show, *episodes do not follow the same narrative pattern each time*.

Therefore, a very serialized show such as *Stranger Things* (Netflix, 2016-) does not operate in the same way as *Lost* since its episodes have no thematic or formal specificities – they could be considered as parts of a very long film. On the continuum that exists between episodic and serialized television, *Stranger Things* tends to be more serialized while *Lost* has a more balanced structure between the two poles (Cornillon 2019).

The variety of structures that can be found in TV series has thus to be acknowledged in a more complex way than just a binary opposition. One has to think in terms of tension, negotiation, hybridity and continuum instead of strict opposition. Semi-serialized shows (whether formulaic or episodic) display a writing which, season after season, feeds on the very tension between their episodic and serialized aspects, between short-term and long-term features. This tension raises ethical stakes, particularly an ethics of care, which this essay will attempt to bring to the fore.

Sandra Laugier's work (2014: 261) has invited us to understand how television shows, through their durations and the various kinds of attachment they elicit, may educate viewers morally and make them attentive to what seems to be unremarkable within ordinary life. Her recent work on TV series (2019) focuses on their representational contents – situations, dialogues, gestures, dilemmas, identity politics and (political or moral) choices made by (groups of) characters – but it does not take into account the way specific narrative structures may encourage spectators to adopt a particular ethical view. Other volumes (Skorin-Kapov 2019, Watson and Arp 2011) engage with ethical issues *through* film or televi-

sion, but fail to address the very ethics *of* film or television. The purpose of this essay is precisely to focus on the ethics of care *implied by the shows' narrative structures*. Through four case studies (the number of which is necessarily limited by the scope of an academic essay), we will test a new methodology to analyse semi-serialized fictions, revealing how these shows thematize their own narrative negotiations within the story world. Even if semi-serialized shows construct strong serial arcs, they seem to maintain the importance of the episode as a metaphor of human beings in their very individualities and specificities. Our four examples are taken from network television, a source of serial narratives which has generally been discarded or underestimated in terms of innovation and complexity. For instance, Dunleavy's 2018 volume on complex seriality focuses on cable and multiplatform television only. Yet it is crucial to underline that subtle and complex narrative structures can also be found on network TV.

Each type of audiovisual serial narrations opens up a specific space for ideological and ethical negotiation, especially in terms of the status of the characters. In formula semi-serialized shows (Cornillon 2017), many characters appear each week just for one episode. What part do they play? How do they function within the narration alongside the returning characters? A television series such as *ER* fundamentally deals with this issue: the emergency room appears as a mise-en-abyme of the semi-serialized formulaic template, in the sense that it is a hosting space for strangers, whom the main characters will have to take care of. The doctors, just like the viewers, learn to know them within this brief temporality, but they also have to let them go at the end of the day and of the episode. The doctors stay, but patients are just passing through, a fact which is acknowledged countless times by the characters themselves during the fifteen seasons. The patient of the week is consequently a true guest star, structuring the space of the episode which is devoted to him or her. Revealingly, the most memorable moments in the show are not necessarily the heavily serialized episodes (with some exceptions, such as Mark Greene's and Lucy's deaths). All along the fifteen seasons, most of the dear memories we keep from *ER* are memories of patients: the pregnant lady who dies after an awful night and whom Mark Greene fails to save; the businessman who has a heart defect and has just one more night to live. The show is in fact about opening a narrative space capable of welcoming each time another human being in his or her specificity, individuality and life story.

This is the reason why *ER*, like so many formula semi-serialized shows, is particularly suited for the appearance of famous

actors, that is to say, guest stars. The narration leaves room for these characters to be the centre of one episode. For instance, James Woods appears in season 12, in which he plays a professor who is completely paralyzed; Forest Whitaker appears in season 13, as a patient whose state deteriorates rapidly during his stay in the emergency room and who will sue Luka Kovac for malpractice. Serialized narrative arcs progress for their part, but doctors always have to readapt their points of view to be more sensitive to their patients' own perspectives. Several episodes actually adopt a patient's point of view in order to thematize an ethical issue both for doctors and viewers. It is notably the case of an episode in season 11, which is focused on a mother, played by Cynthia Nixon, one of the main actresses from *Sex and The City* (HBO, 1998-2004). She has a stroke that leaves her paralyzed. During most of the episode, the camera adopts her point of view while the viewer can hear her thinking in voice-over. The use of the subjective camera lets us discover what the patient sees and especially the doctors working around her. She does not fully realize that she is paralyzed in the first place; she first thinks that she is speaking before understanding that the words are just her thoughts and that she is unable to communicate, trapped as she is in her own body. Through this technique, the viewers are invited, during these scenes, to move their attention away from doctors and to build an empathetic link with the patient. They experience her situation, making this episode a very hard one to watch.

The hybridity of the semi-serialized formulaic form makes it a site where heterogeneous elements constantly interact with and echo one another. *ER* thus creates a shift in points of view as it works at maintaining, at least in its first seasons, a balance between the different types of characters, between the main and supporting casts. Moreover, even if some doctors end up leaving the show, nurses are presented as the real pillars of the emergency service. They are always present, and they keep the place running, whoever the doctors or the patients are. It is precisely through the place given to everyday life at the ER, and not only to the major story arcs, that these kinds of characters can find a space to thrive within the diegesis. Consequently, the series' discourse can be found in the specific narrative space it constructs, which acts like a rhetorical frame (Soulez, 2013). The very fact that the series creates a balance between serialized storylines and formulaic ones asserts an ideological position regarding alterity and empathy. In the space of the episode, what we already know (about the doctors or the nurses) and what we do not know (about the new patients) are articulated: we are encouraged

to care for "others" in order to evolve. In a medical show, whose point is precisely to take *care* of patients, in the usual but also philosophical sense of the word, this aspect becomes even more crucial.

Political and ethical questions are thus not limited to issues of representation such as those studied by Sandra Laugier (for instance the representation of sexual or racial minorities): they are also embedded in narrative and aesthetic structures that host and shape these representations. Showrunner Joss Whedon understood that very well, as he turned all his shows into spaces of ideological negotiation, putting at their core a series of ethical questions about power, choice and responsibility. *Angel*, another formula semi-serialized show and a spin-off of *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* which was created by Joss Whedon and David Greenwalt and broadcast on The WB network from 1999 to 2004, is a series in which these questions are addressed very explicitly. As in *Buffy*, the characters in *Angel* have to face evil and fight to survive in a context which has been predetermined for them. Buffy is the chosen One, although she did not want to be; Angel has been cursed, turned into a vampire and is eventually the object of a prophecy claiming that he will go back to his human form if he performs enough good deeds to redeem himself. Buffy and Angel are both, at first, the subjects of stories that have been told about them and for them without their consent. Yet both their journeys are ones of community-building, and of collective emancipation from structures of power that want to confine them within a path of destiny.

Angel begins as a very formulaic series, whose episodes work similarly with story arcs that are closed at the end. Each episode focuses on an investigation regarding a supernatural phenomenon and then the fight to destroy it. But these storylines are quickly put into perspective because they come from the "Powers That Be", eternal powers who have enrolled Angel as their Champion. He accepts the missions they give him with the aim of becoming better and redeeming himself. The formulaic aspect is thus embedded into a larger scheme which is serialized. The serial aspect, in this show, can be found in the long-term narrative structure of destiny and of prophecies, which introduces a causal link between every event in the characters' lives. The characters act under the gaze of a power above them, from which they cannot escape. They cling to these narratives and prophecies because they give meaning to their lives and they try to build a future upon these foundations. But these narratives are deceptive. Season 3 and 4, the most serialized seasons in the series, are also the most apocalyptic, because these framing narratives

are manipulated by forces of evil who want nothing else than death and destruction. Wesley is led to believe that Angel is going to kill his son, Connor, and, because of this belief, he chooses to help Angel's worst enemy kidnap Connor. In season 4, Jasmine seems to be the converging point of all the storylines that took place before, but she is at the origin of a world of false happiness where there is no free will. As a matter of fact, the characters have attempted in vain to create a utopian world without evil – an idea linked to the equally utopian wish for Angel's final redemption, upon which the entire series is built. But as soon as season 2 starts, this project and this teleological view of the story are revealed as impossible. In episode 15, Angel has to find the origin of evil, the Home Office of Wolfram and Hart lawyers' corporation, but the elevator leads him to his starting point – our world. Evil is nowhere and everywhere at once, from all times, and in every one of us. It is not possible to annihilate it, but it is possible to fight against it, and that is the point of the whole show.

In this context, the end of the series redefines the narrative and ethical configuration for the benefit of the formulaic (Cornillon 2017). Because evil can never be completely defeated and because there is no final destiny, Angel eventually chooses, in a daring bet, to oppose these forces of evil, knowing that he and his friends will certainly die in this battle. He therefore waives the prophecy of a promised happy life as a human and frees himself from his destiny. He does so to underline what seems more important to him – the ethical choice which has to be made again every second and every minute of our lives. As soon as in "Epiphany" (2.16), Angel asserts: "If nothing we do matters, then all that matters is what we do. Cause that's all there is. What we do. Today". After the serialized disasters of season 3 and 4, the series becomes formulaic again in its fifth season; but, instead of trying to help individuals and save lives, as the characters used to do with their small detective agency, they now enter a system at the core of power, the Los Angeles branch of Wolfram and Hart. This branch, via the senior partners, represents the long-running plots: it is the place from which larger narratives emerge. So the main characters are again caught away from the questions they should deal with. They are trapped in a pattern in which they take the risk of becoming mere puppets and which they will have to reject at all costs.

The series ends with a radical break as it reintroduces an attention to the present, to an always renewed moment in which one makes a choice – the moment where true heroism can be revealed. In a sense, what Angel tries to demonstrate in the story world is that the champion's real action lies within the formu-

laic aspect, embodied by the agency's client of the week, who needs to be defended and protected. Yet, precisely, this ending will not be an end, because the series has been continued in the form of comic books, in which some of the original characters reappear. Everyone has changed but the world has not: it is still a battleground between good and evil. *Angel* may thus be read as defining a space of negotiation in terms of narration and ideology which ends in an ethical coup. Fred, in "Offspring" (3.07), encapsulates this idea when she cries out "Screw destiny". The show is about understanding formal constructs (in life and in fiction) that confine us so that we can resist them. That is why the particularly constraining form of semi-serialized shows happens to be an ideal frame to showcase questions of free will, determinism and relations to institutions.

Another formula semi-serialized show, *Person of Interest* – created by Jonathan Nolan – also starts as very formulaic, and progressively injects many serial arcs into the narrative. Inside the diegesis, the mysterious billionaire, Harold Finch (Michael Emerson) has created a mass surveillance system for the US government in order to avoid 9/11-type terrorist attacks. His hyper-connected Machine can predict terrorist acts thanks to the recordings of surveillance cameras, phone calls, social networks, etc. The Machine also spots crimes that may be committed by ordinary citizens. Since the government prefers not to take those into account since they are considered too numerous and minor, it is Finch who receives each day, from the Machine, the social security numbers of those "persons of interest". The show's formula does not change for a while: with the help of his team of mercenaries, Finch tries to find these persons and discover rapidly if they are victims or perpetrators, in the hope of preventing crimes from happening.

During the first season, so that the Machine's data can't be stored and misused, Finch wipes out the Machine's memory at the end of each day at midnight. The Machine is thus halted in its development – which reflects the initial narrative format in which each episode is devoted to a given "person of interest" and the plot seems to stand still on a macroscopic level. But Finch soon discovers that the Machine has found a way to keep its memories by printing daily data on actual paper. The Machine's efforts to become self-reliant and autonomous echo the series' developing storyline, which becomes more and more complex and serialized. It includes narrative arcs focusing on the Machine's original creation, the way it progressively acquires self-awareness and is then endangered by Samaritan, a new hyper-connected surveillance mega-system, that is much more aggressive, interventionalist and imperialistic than the Machine itself.

The more the series advances, the more it challenges what is generally considered "minor" (the formulaic aspects) and "major" (the serialized aspects), at the same time by the characters within the story world and by the audience outside the fiction. Samaritan only sees the key stakes of global terrorism: it develops a specific logic in which the end justifies the means and the big picture makes possible the killing and sacrificing of thousands of people. On the contrary, the Machine never forgets individual stakes and always attempts to minimize human loss, even when "ordinary" citizens are involved. The fight between the two super-computers can be said to reflect the tension between the two major dynamics at work in serial writing – that which favours the macro/serial arc with its recurring, evolving heroes and that which concentrates on the micro/formulaic arc hosting many non-recurring characters, for instance in the form of guest stars. In this case, the "persons of interest" come to represent and anchor the viewers themselves within the story world. In this process, the expression "person of interest" is invested in a new meaning: beyond the usual meaning of "person being looked for" or "potential suspect", it can signify, in the context of the series, "important person", "person that we care about", "person that we cannot give up on".

While the series unfolds serial arcs that build a true mythology for the series (Favard 2018: 272), *Person of Interest* also goes against the viewers' preferences by preserving and even emphasizing its most formulaic aspects. In its last season, at a point when the heroes would like to fight exclusively against Samaritan, the Machine keeps sending them the social security numbers of unknown individuals whose lives may be in danger. When Sameen Shaw (Sarah Shahi) cries out that she is fed up with the "numbers", she expresses out loud what viewers may be feeling. Our desire to experience a pure serial narrative, freed from the usual "case of the week", is constantly frustrated. But the strength of the series is also to inspire in us a commitment and attachment to the formulaic format, because if we reject the numbers, if we disparage the week's "person of interest", we become exactly like Samaritan, endorsing a dehumanizing ideology in which some individuals count less than others. *Person of Interest* thus creates a tension between our wish to see the Machine evolve (and the narrative become more complex) and the necessary awareness that each life (each episode) is invaluable. The show appears, therefore, as an ethical justification of formulaic repetition versus the powerful forces of evolving seriality.

Created by Kyle Killen and Howard Gordon, the television series *Awake* even goes so far as to thematize the narrative

tension between standstill and progression through a point of view informed by both love and grief. The series includes 13 episodes – a single season due to its cancellation by NBC in May 2012. The show's pilot lays the groundwork for the serial narration. Detective Michael Britten (Jason Isaacs) describes to his therapists the incredible situation he is experiencing. A few weeks beforehand, he was driving at night with his wife Hannah (Laura Allen) and their teen-aged son Rex (Dylan Minnette) when their car fell off a cliff. Since then, when he wakes up in the morning, he finds himself in a reality where his wife has survived but his son is dead; when he falls asleep at night, he immediately wakes up in another reality that seems as real as the first, in which his wife died and his son is alive. Each dimension works as the other's dream, creating a mental Möbius strip where echoes and coincidences arise between the two "universes".

Even though the fictional dimensions are double (even triple), their frames are never sealed: in what stands as constant metalepsis, the story needs to oscillate between worlds to progress. As a semi-serialized series, *Awake* shares common points with the classical, self-contained, procedural drama with Michael investigating cases as a detective in Los Angeles, the only difference being that there is no longer one but *two* cases per episode. Clues echo from one dimension to the next: Michael has crucial intuitions to solve each case, which are, in fact, generated by the other reality in which he also lives. In a pattern that repeats itself from one episode to the next, Michael needs to come up with credible explanations to justify his astounding inspiration to the other police officers. However, as a semi-serialized narrative, *Awake* creates suspense with two issues at stake. The first, "Was the car accident really an accident?"—a question which amounts to wondering whether Michael was the victim of a conspiracy – underlies the narrative arc that runs through the whole first season. The second, "What is the nature of each dimension?", was designed to maintain the suspense over the course of the whole series, if it had not been cancelled.

The diegetic swaying from one reality to the other takes part in a narration that itself oscillates, from the pilot onwards, between the notion of progression/evolution and that of repetition/cyclicity. The first questions that therapist Dr. Lee asks Michael reflect this tension:

> *Dr. Lee:* And then, what?
> *Michael:* Then I go home
> *Dr. Lee:* And then, what?
> *Michael:* I wake up.

If the therapist's questions call for linear progression, reflecting the spectators' desire to know what happens next, Michael's answers take us back to a monotonous daily routine that seems to negate any kind of suspense, only to eventually introduce doubt, ambiguity and originality within routine itself.

While we may expect from a pilot that it focuses on the themes of opening, change and evolution, the emphasis is, in fact, on the hero's absence of movement. From the first episode, we learn that Michael's wife would like to cope with her son's death by changing everything – painting the house, quitting her job, moving out, having another child. On the contrary, Michael does not want to stop being a detective or to move house. He fears that any kind of change might make one of the "survivors" disappear from his life. As he tells Dr. Lee at the end of the pilot:

> The thing is, Doctor, yes, I still see my wife *and* my son. But I've also watched both of them lowered into the ground. And when you see a loved one buried, your one thought over and over and over again, is that you'll do anything, *anything*, to get them back. So if you're telling me that the price for seeing them, feeling them, of having them in my life, is my sanity, it's a price I'll happily pay. Now I'll come and see you and talk to you as long as they make me, but trust me, when it comes to letting one of them go, I have no desire to ever make progress.

Reflecting this "one thought" that repeats itself "over and over and over again", the series promises to deliver a fiction closed on itself. Paradoxically, there will be some evolution but only between two dimensions clearly identified from the start. Alternation is combined with stability; the formulaic form merges with seriality, notably in an attempt to keep audience ratings stable since the semi-serialized structure allows spectators to continue following a story even when they have missed one episode. Yet this creates a challenge: the lack of progress(ion) promised by Michael may hinder narrative events, thus weakening our interest in the series. Contrary to Michael, who is obliged by his hierarchy to consult a therapist regularly, spectators do not constitute a captive audience. They need to be won over every week.

From the very first episode, we are given leads as to how the story could end. Michael rephrases what Dr. Lee has tried to make him understand: "You're saying that as soon as I decide which one is dead, then they'll stop showing up in my dreams?". The series should, therefore, stop when one of the

dimensions is revealed to be a dream or when Michael's mind no longer copes with the situation. Dr. Lee claims in the first episode: "While your brain should be resting, recharging, your subconscious is using it to hold up a detailed and complicated alternate reality. If we don't deal with that, this situation will ultimately become unsustainable". The situation that is deemed "unsustainable" sends us back reflexively to the idea that the series' viability might be threatened by the repetition of similar episodes and might disappear prematurely.

However, *Awake*'s originality lies in the fact that the show's propensity to serial narrative is rejected and fought from the start by its main character – because, in this case, what could be perceived as narrative *progress* (i.e. the revelation of where the "true" dimension lies) would in fact mean an awful emotional *regression* both for Michael, who would then lose either his wife or his son, and for the spectators, who would lose one of the protagonists they have grown to care for. Because the series never had the opportunity to provide a final word, it has preserved the bewildering mystery of its images: throughout the whole series, what we think is a dream could be real and what we think is real could be a dream. *Awake* finally denies the possibility of ever reaching a reality that would discredit what the viewers (through Michael) have experienced. But the series even goes further: it invites the viewers to think about their desire for narrative advance when progression and epiphanic revelation would necessarily result in the death of a loved one. Here, the formulaic storyline and the narrative standstill thus become the only means to preserve and cherish life.

In *Lost*, an episodic semi-serialized show in which the elaboration by showrunners Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse of a long-running mythology (around the island, its history and its successive inhabitants) is prime, the status and autonomy of the episode still remain strong. The plots are generally centred around one of the main characters and, in each episode, the present regularly echoes the past, the future, or another dimension. This resistance of the episodic form is thematized in season 2 through Desmond (Henry Ian Cusick)'s specific action, which has to be repeated every 108 minutes. Desmond's mission is to enter a series of precise figures in a computer and press "Enter" in order to reset a countdown timer inside the Swan Station, in the hope of preventing a major electromagnetic incident which could destroy the island and maybe the whole world. Through the resetting of the timer, the series' narrative mode is revealed in a *literal* way: the series avoids linearity, playing as it does on rewriting, repetition in variation, revival in instability – a process that reaches its

climax in the seasons' opening sequences (which mirror each other) and in the flashsideways sequences in the last season (which repeat the whole story with differences) (Hatchuel 2013). Just like the characters who wonder whether pushing the button every 108 minutes is crucial or not, each spectator of *Lost* is invited to ponder if pressing "Play" every 42 minutes to start a new episode is eventually worth it.

When John Locke (Terry O'Quinn) tries to convince the other survivors that they need to stop believing in the countdown system, he urges them to refuse being "slaves": for him, they can't be free as long as they choose to push the button. Locke can then be read as the one who opposes the persistence of the episodic form and who wishes the story to move on quickly, freed from the limited, confined space of the Swan Station: he thus represents a viewer who resents the narrative being linked to the repetition of a single gesture. However, after having the audience believe that Desmond's repetitive gesture was at best useless and at worst some sort of psychological experiment, the series ends up legitimating and endorsing the decision to continue pushing the button. This action turns out, in fact, to be *essential*. As soon as the characters stop believing in its crucial necessity, they pave the way to the implosion of the Swan Station at the end of season 2. The energy of the serial plot is then partly released but the human price to pay will be dire. *Lost*'s episodic features can be likened to the fail-safe key that Desmond himself represents throughout the whole series.

This essay's agenda is not to assign a specific ideology to a specific form but rather to think about serial narration as a space of negotiation and articulation between different narrative structures. To understand the ethical scope of these series, it is necessary to think about the way representations appear within their narrative frame. Semi-serialized television shows, through the way they bring value to each episode, embed an ethical vision within their own narrative structures. In our four examples, the formulaic and episodic aspects seem to invite viewers to consider repetitions as fruitful instead of static, as empathetic instead of emotionally dry. In *ER*, *Angel* and *Person of Interest*, the formulaic/procedural aspects encourage us to see individual lives as precious and worth fighting for, whether they be the lives of anonymous people or loved ones. In *Lost*, the episodic aspects remind spectators, through Desmond's repetitive but determined actions, that we may all need a home port, a loved one and a mission to accomplish. Every semi-serialized show actually draws its own specific space that engenders meaning in terms of ideology and ethics; actions represented in these narratives and charac-

ters evolving in them interact constantly with the series' specific narrative rules. The showrunners might be aware of these ethical negotiations or they might not; what, in fact, matters is to understand that semi-serialized shows imply, through their very hybrid narrative structures, such ideological tensions. This essay, as a work in progress in need of development through further case studies, has exemplified a new approach to understand and analyse semi-serialized tv shows, merging ideological and formal studies. Very little research has yet been conducted on this perspective and we wish to continue this reflection, exploring narratological patterns through the lens of ethical issues. We wish to analyse the way different narrative configurations may ideologically converge or diverge within hybrid semi-serialized form, in a viewership and media context that still tend to create hierarchies among broadcasting channels, serial formats, types of stories and characters. The analysis of other examples in the future may perhaps lead us to more nuanced conclusions: in some other semi-serialized shows, the interpretation of narrative structures may be different (the serialized aspects may be those inspiring empathy and ethical awareness, although this remains to be seen) but the methodology leading to these interpretations will be the same. This methodology may also be used to engage with other types of fictions (whether on television or even in the cinema): other formats will certainly raise different ethical issues and tensions. In any case, the question of what we must look at and care for in a show remains a crucial issue in itself.

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Sex and the City (1998-2004)
Stranger Things (2016-)
The Handmaid's Tale (2017-)