

# INTRODUCTION: DIALOGUES WITH TECHNOLOGY

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LUCA BARRA  
OSWALDO GARCÍA CRESPO

Across their history, film and television have constantly been influenced by technological evolutions, both in their impact on audiovisual production and distribution and in their long-lasting relevance in narratives and representations. The entire development of Hollywood studios can also be read as an endless engagement with technical instruments and their many consequences. And even in Europe, during the period of the Weimar Republic, German studios invested large sums of money in researching and developing new technologies applied to cinema, in an attempt to challenge Hollywood's dominance and to establish a film industry with a unique identity – such effort is reflected in several studies linking that era of technological boom to the form and content of its audiovisual discourse (Langford 2008). Although technological developments have accompanied photography, cinema

and television since their inception, only in periods of major changes have they become central in academic research.

In recent years, however, digital technologies have impacted so much on cultural, social and political paradigms, and have been integrated into the processes of creating and distributing cultural objects. This has established a dialogue between the computer and culture (Manovich 2001), changed the media (Bolter and Grusin 1998), and became part of the reconfiguration of digitextuality (Everett and Caldwell 2003). This context impacts the production, distribution, and promotion of television series, which then engage at a textual level with the technological challenges facing the medium. Changing audiovisual production processes and their influence on fictional narratives, distribution strategies and automated data collection and management provide a perfect

scenario for academic researchers and professionals to analyse the dialogues between technology and serial narratives. At present, then, it is extremely pertinent to address, through a multidisciplinary approach, how technology has impacted fictional serial narratives across cinema, television and digital media, as well as research into these narratives.

TV series are at the forefront of the challenges faced by an industry with high technological specificity. This can be seen in seemingly prosaic but nevertheless pressing issues: one example could be found in the difficulties of correctly streaming the *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) episode “The Long Night” (8.03), with battles represented in great display, with changing contrast ratios and under-exposure, but also some backlash related to the streaming platform data standards; another can be symbolized by the non-linear, interactive narrative designs of the *Black Mirror* (2011-2019) episode “Bandersnatch”, and of similar experiments by Netflix in comedy and factual programming. In general, the aesthetic, narrative and productive implications of visual effects, trans-media strategies, previewing systems and future scenarios of visual production (Rubin 2019) emerge as a crucial topic to be considered. Furthermore, the viewer’s screens and pervasive software services lead to profound social and cultural changes that call into question creators, producers and critics’ ideas of the way in which we metabolize audiovisual discourses (Nikdel 2015). It is appropriate then to take a trans-disciplinary and systemic glance to producers and creators, narratives and audiences, since television, as cinema, “needs to be considered holistically as technology, space, experience and form” (Llinares and Arnold 2015: 6).

## CHANGING THE RULES OF THE GAME

The delinearization of audiovisual production, caused by the digitization of production processes for more than twenty years, has turned filmed material (in physical sets, with real characters) into just one more layer of the digital image, which is often created, with increasing technical and human resources, in the post-production stage. Thus, the so-called visible and invisible visual effects are present in any production and have expanded authors’ creative boundaries, as suggested by screenwriter Angela Obón (personal communication, July 1, 2020). *The Mandalorian* (2019-), created by Jon Favreau, uses film sets in which light, locations, characters and camera movements enable an unprecedented level of handling and control. This poses both a challenge and an opportunity for

creators, as they are faced with a blank page. Digital technology is somehow bringing filmmakers, directors of photography and screenwriters closer to the process of creation of animated films. Real-time, digital set creation in *The Lion King* (2019), directed by Jon Favreau as well, is a first step towards a new way of producing stories, where the filmmakers able to metabolize the new workflows resulting from this highly technological environment can be ahead of the game, as implied in a brief comment by director Carlos Theron (personal communication, July 26, 2020). Furthermore, this image processed in real time separates filmmakers and directors of photography from the classic production process and from the contact with natural settings by which to be inspired, as stated by the cinematographer Pol Turrents (personal communication, July 2, 2020).

This is perhaps why Netflix has landed as a content producer at its European headquarters emphasizing the need for highly specialized post-production professionals (Molina 2020). And the Secuoya Group, which has technically supported Netflix’s arrival in Spain and the creation of its production centre, does not hesitate to point out how post-production is the differential between the platform’s original content and any other production regarding a series’ final look, even though this differentiation now tends to disappear, in the opinion of technical coordinator Hugo Tejados (personal communication, June 5, 2020). The democratisation of the quality standards linked to the digitization of production processes are reducing the classic disparities in the productions made by different industries and countries. On the one hand, digital platforms are responsible for creating protocols, on workflows and on technical requirements, which their contents must comply with across different countries, and this is leading to a uniformity not only of the results but also in writing, production and distribution processes. On the other hand, standard filming and lighting equipment can be afforded now by any type of production, and there is hardly any difference between the technical filming equipment for a television comedy and the equipment used in HBO or Netflix franchise series (Tejados, cited communication). According to Turrents (cited communication), these differences are fading away, even between different genres and formats, leading to the formal homogenization of the audiovisual discourse. Spots, series, video clips and documentaries often present the same features, and this is a consequence both of the technological developments and also of the lack of risk-taking in the search for innovative visual proposals.

The very dynamics of the industry are encouraging a trend that may be determining the type of narrative approaches to serial fiction. On the one hand, the struggle between a television viewing based on weekly premieres of high impact series, connected to linear scheduling, and the model intended to increase average daily consumption, favouring the implementation of a user experience that integrates solutions aimed at binge-watching (Barra 2015; Jenner 2018; Neira 2020) also implies a different conception of serial narratives from the first steps of development. More than a revolution, this shift appears to be an oscillation, with some series, and players, choosing one or the other distribution model, and therefore stimulating a step-by-step, hype-generating fruition or a day-and-date sudden interest. It should be also recalled that Netflix offered in some systems the possibility of speeding up playback to twice as fast as normal, according to the company always respecting the artistic act, since dialogues can still be heard naturally. And on the other hand, this distribution scenario leads logically to an increased importance of knowing the audience, favoured by an individualized consumption where user data are key to the main distribution platforms' business strategies. And this is not only referring to their web interfaces or to how they organize their content. The relevance of "Bandersnatch" lies, rather than in the doubtful interactivity of its storyline, in its ability to generate qualitative data on viewers. In the same way as series thumbnails are tailored to the user profile, it is pertinent to imagine a scenario in which all these collected data have also a growing influence on the production policies.

## DIGITAL IDENTITIES

The communicating vessels that connect the audiovisual creation with a social reality influenced by automation processes and ubiquitous screens also invite the fictional narrative discourse to establish a dialogue with those visual codes associated with the culture of software. Thus, the fragmentation of the discourse, the graphical user interface, or the translation of the interactive nature or video games and social networks into the audiovisual narration coexist within a context where the contemporary exponential growth of serialized fiction audiences (even increased by the Covid-19 pandemic and by the consequences of lockdowns and social distancing) will necessarily slow down, sooner or later.

Long ago freed from a tradition in which the potential of the digital medium and distribution was only measured in

relation to its ability to emulate the analogue format and to improve profit margins, the impact of the technological paradigm shift can be evaluated in terms of the influence of the definition of its aesthetic and narrative identity, hybrid if you will, but taken on as its own. However, its existence requires taking risks. The search for that digital identity was bold at the beginning of the 21st century, at a peak of the digital boom. Thus, the use of digital storage devices that eliminated the need for changing reels during long shots impacted on the set design, as intellectualized by the Dogma movement and by Mike Figgis in *Timecode* (2000). Reduced production costs represented a liberation from the rigid business structures of that time, which initially allowed taking formal risks in InDigEnt productions, and even a director as Eric Rohmer, with *L'anglaise et le duc* (2001), experimented with digital image compositing in post-production. These radical proposals seem to have watered down over time, or maybe they have shifted to creative settings where the business risks associated with significant above-the-line production, promotion or distribution costs are much lower.

The revolution has become the norm, the experiments have been included in the industrial processes and in promotional and marketing campaigns, but the slow institutionalization of digital technologies must not lead us to normalize, or underestimate, its permanent aesthetic and narrative effects. Moreover, another element that has influenced the slowdown in this search for a digital visual identity is that the Internet – long promised as a space for democracy and freedom – has now turned into a large commercial area where digital marketing strategies could be used to automate a production run by the increasingly omnipresent digital distribution platforms. In the contemporary audiovisual environment, more than ever, film and TV discourse, production processes, and corporate promotion and distribution of television serials are strongly connected, and need to be considered altogether.

## SOME RESEARCH TRAJECTORIES

After highlighting some key technological aspects of contemporary serial narratives, affecting aesthetics and production, distribution and audience engagement, both looking at present trends (in a sort of still image) and at some future steps (in a potential virtual scenario), the relevance of the dialogues between serial audiovisual narratives and technology, as well as the many multifaceted approaches to them, are effectively

proved by the articles published in this special issues. Putting together different examples and varied theoretical and methodological perspectives, these contributions are able to provide at least a glimpse of the current research on the topic, as well as to open paths for further investigation.

The first essay shows how technology, throughout history, has played a far-reaching role as a mediating element, and how these aspects are underlying our representations and memories of the past. Building on semiotics and narratological instruments, Francesca Di Tonno investigates the recent phenomenon of *Ostalgie* in the German landscape, with several film and television titles also travelling abroad, and focuses on the specific case of *Deutschland83* (2015) to show how this series seeks to establish emotional connections with the local history through a thematic and aesthetic commitment to the role played by technology in the cultural and social field represented by the series. On the one hand, the research shows how the narrative construction of many episodes deals with technological objects; on the other, it reflects on the way these objects can assume different meanings and functions for the viewers. Di Tonno therefore includes technology as an inextricable part of a material and, above all, immaterial heritage.

A second article deals with “Bandersnatch”, the special episode of *Black Mirror* (2011-2019), addressing the episode’s proposed narrative with a critical approach. Adriano D’Aloia downplays the impact of videogames on its fictional plot. D’Aloia instead suggests how the show could be more aptly interpreted in terms of its interactivity, or rather its absence, inside the field of experimental interactive cinema, and suggests its role as part of a scenario of hybrid narratives with great potential. This work engages with both the journalistic and scholarly debate to position the media product inside a series of fruitful poles: interactive and interpretative cooperation, actuality and virtuality, self-awareness and self-citation, free choice and control, co-authorship and authority, and decision-making and randomness. All these contradictions make this episode exemplary of many trends of a digital audiovisual strongly affected by technologies. D’Aloia appeals both to the need to avoid any determinism and to the digital media’s ability to inspire new aesthetic and narrative territories, with anthropological implications.

After looking at the dialogues with technology as a past representation with new meanings, and as a current condition that affects both the aesthetic and narrative development and the experience of the viewer, in the third article technologies become an increasingly relevant instrument of analysis,

able to open the serial texts to a better, and deeper, understanding. Software, while intervening in the functioning of our economies, societies and personal relationships, has also integrated research by automating data collection and management, enabling the development of new methodologies. Carmen Gregori Signes uses software to automate pattern searching in the dialogues of the first two seasons of *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991). With this technique, it is confirmed and spotlighted the frequency of references to victims in the conversations across the episodes, and as a consequence the relationships between characters are better understood, defining a genre and helping the viewer to navigate complex plots.

Finally, technology becomes a mediating element for serial narratives, encouraging their foreign distribution, global circulation and even a contemporary boom, in the so-called “peak television”, encouraged by mainstream networks, pay operators, digital platforms and social media. The last article thus observes the influence that improved audiovisual content distribution technologies have had on programming and scheduling techniques. Focusing on the pan-Arab region and especially on the Kuwaiti television system, Ahmad Hayat shows how technological changes have strongly impacted both the acquisition of foreign ready-made TV series and the production of local original ones. The focus on the commissioning process and on the serial design helps in understanding how industrial and technical developments have determined the choice of specific narratives inside serial contents and have helped to correctly meet the many different cultural sensitivities of Muslim audiences.

The articles included in this special issue constitute only a small step in the wider task of investigating the many entanglements between digital technologies and writing, production, distribution and fruition of television (and audiovisual) serial narratives. However, we hope that this small step can be helpful in understanding how relevant this element is in the contemporary media landscape, both at a national and a global level, and in fostering the interest towards aesthetic and narrative aspects, production tools and routines, distribution strategies and platforms, promotional tools and discourse, transmedia strategies, audience engagement. In all these directions, there is abundant space for further research.

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