

SYNCHRONIC SERIALITY: THE DISSOLVING OF DIEGETIC BORDERS THROUGH METALEPSIS

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ABSTRACT

In dialogue with Gérard Genette's literary concept of *metalepsis* to television, this paper considers instances of meta-textual actor/character portrayals in serial narratives to show that meta-narrative intrusion fosters a greater empathetic link between the spectator and character, whilst simultaneously inviting the viewer to appreciate the technique as an artifice-aware gesture. The fluidity of diegetic borders brought on by the conflation of performer/performance replicates Baudrillard's simulacra, creating a synchronic form of seriality and transcending rigid genre classifications.

Fiction is the lie through which we tell the truth.
 Albert Camus

Reality and fiction are often thought of as a distinctly binary opposition, the real and true in opposition to the invented. For a film or television audience, the universe created within a narrative often depends on a spectator's willing suspension of disbelief, in spite of, or perhaps because of recognizing certain actors and actresses who inhabit a role. Viewers are invited to accept a televisual portrayal of life as a possible world, independent of reality but reflecting it. What, then, is the spectator to make of obvious intrusions of the real world in the fictional one? Gérard Genette's concept of *metalepsis* as a narratological device holds that a transgression of the boundaries of fictional and real world representations occurs through "any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.) or the inverse" (1980: 234–35). Thus, the real enters the fictional world that is created, or the fictional world addresses the author, reader or spectator. Any disruption of the reality/fiction binary creates several simultaneous degrees of viewing consciousness, yet paradoxically, reminders of the real world within the fictional one do not inherently threaten the story-world that has been created. In fact, these moments serve a dual function within the narrative: they foster a greater empathetic link between the spectator and the characters, while simultaneously (and somewhat paradoxically) inviting the spectator to appreciate these techniques as an artifice-aware gesture by the creator.

The fundamental tension between realism and authorial intervention acknowledges a vast diegesis that extends beyond the story-world and largely beyond distinctions of genre, in a synchronic form of seriality; an enhanced seriality is engendered in an extradiegetic engagement with temporality through metaleptic intrusions. Translating Genette's literary concept of *metalepsis* to the television serial narrative, I will track the reflexivity in television shows created by obvious intrusions of the real world into the fictional one, examining a corpus of television series with instances of non-diegetic spill-over that confuse character and actor distinctions in a refraction of temporalities (past, present, and potential). Through the transparency of the cinematic and televisual conventions that support—yet also challenge—the impression of reality, the emphasis becomes not just about a character/viewer relationship, but about a creator/viewer relationship that presupposes a sophisticated, intertextually-aware spectator.

METALEPSIS AND TEMPORAL REFERENTIALITY

Michael Dunne, in his *Metapop: Self-Referentiality in American Popular Culture*, writes that "the increasing immersion of Americans in all forms of mediation" has shifted the rhetorical intention of self-referentiality in pop culture objects, creating "a contemporary...community based on a mutual recognition of mediated experience on the parts of senders and receivers of cultural messages" (1992: 11). Indeed, many contemporary series rely on participatory models of serial engagement in which spectators negotiate meaning through their interactions with the text. For the purposes of this study, two such categories of metaleptic intervention will be considered as case studies of the phenomenon: the incorporation of actor photos within a narrative, and/or the inclusion of a performer's public persona into the storyworld. In both cases, the insertion of reality into the fictional world creates a temporal link between the past and the present: the moment of iteration (use in the series), and the moment of creation (that is to say, the taking of the photograph [a one-time event], or the development of a persona and/or career [a far more time-intensive project]). Faced with these metaleptic intrusions in the storyworld, a spectator must necessarily engage with the extradiegetic past to decipher the deployment of these strategies, and in so doing, contribute to the richness of the storyworld on a macro level.

For the first category of *metalepsis*, the incorporation of actor photos within a narrative, examples will be drawn from Ingmar Bergman's 1973 Swedish arthouse miniseries *Scenes from a Marriage*,¹ as well as Alan Ball's 2001 HBO family drama *Six Feet Under*. For the second group, metaleptic intervention is examined in instances where actors star as a fictional version of themselves, engaging the spectators' previous knowledge of their lives and work. This category includes actors appear in recurring roles and celebrity cameo appearances (in which celebrities and popular figures appear in portrayals ranging from realistic to highly exaggerated versions of themselves), with specific examples drawn from the complex web of fiction and reality used in Louis CK's eponymous FX network comedy *Louie*, as well as premium cable series *Episodes*, produced for the Showtime network. Though the circumstances of creation and genre vary widely between these four series, examples were chosen for their relation-

1 I refer here to the original television mini-series, rather than the edited film version of 1974.

ship to the use of metalepsis in the narratives, and selected from different registers of the “television ecosystem” for the broader interplay of their respective genres. *Scenes from a Marriage*, with its meticulous design, nuanced cinematography, and poetic ruminations on love and loss, is cinematic, high art television from Bergman, widely hailed as one of the most influential auteurs in cinema. *Six Feet Under*, by contrast, is considered an example of contemporary “Quality TV,” a discursive category and designation of an alleged aesthetic superiority of certain television shows, making it closer to arthouse than soap opera (aspirationally, at least). These two works are contrasted with series *Louie* and *Episodes* in terms of genre, as the latter are comedies rather than dramas, but also in that the two comedies capitalize on the well-worn reflexivity of serial sitcoms, beginning even in their premise (following fictionalized versions of real, well-known individuals, such as stand-up comedians and actors, in the vein of *Seinfeld*, *Titus*, *Martin* and more. This concept harkens back to the earliest days of popular television, to shows like *The Jack Benny Program*², with its show-within-the-show format and a stage persona that set comedian Benny up as the comedic foil). What links the four examples selected for this study, however, is the use of metalepsis as a potential strategy to map self-reflexive textual play across genres, and an interactive audience mode that blurs truth and fiction, past and present.

ACTOR PHOTOGRAPHS AS METALEPTIC INTERVENTION

Ingmar Bergman’s 1974 drama/mini-series, *Scenes from a Marriage*, is an exercise in serial form, tracing a thread of quiet moments across a disintegrating marriage. Marianne, as one half of the titular marriage, is a woman who mourns squashed dreams that never came to fruition, with unfulfilled desires of her youth and the unknown of what “might have been” in a parallel life. In the fourth installment of six episodes, “The Vale of Tears” (1.4), Johann and Marianne have been separated for over a year, but meet privately to discuss, reminisce over, and generally question the status of their relationship. Marianne has had to reconstruct her identity when she is abandoned, and she offers to read her journal to Johann in order to give him a sense of her progress in the post-separation search for self. Marianne reads her journal aloud, recounting

stories of a strict upbringing during childhood, her formative teenage years and secretive sexual awakening, and the struggle to find an authentic identity both in the past and present as a woman, wife, mother and individual. As Marianne reads from her journal, the camera pushes in on an extreme close-up of the face of actress Liv Ullmann, and the monologue switches to a voice-over, while actual photographs of actress during her youth appear on the screen. These photos of the actress show the progression of her life from schoolgirl to marriage, one after the other in a long sequence of almost two minutes. It is as if a slideshow of family photos is being presented to the spectator from within the character Marianne’s mind; we are positioned to hear her monologue as if she is speaking to the spectator directly, rather than to her estranged and uninterested husband (who has fallen asleep). The spectator is virtually alone with Marianne, seeing the images that illustrate her memories from inside her head. Furthermore, this scene is a powerful reminder of the background of the performer behind the character, with the images compelling the spectator to step outside of the narrative to consider the context of the images, invited to do so by the unwavering stare of Marianne/Ullmann. The photos almost exclusively feature Marianne/Ullmann staring at the originary camera, and thus project the character past the secondary filmic camera, past the narrative, and into the eyes and minds of the audience.

By the time *Scenes from a Marriage* was filmed, Ullmann was truly defined by her connection to director Bergman, as actress and muse,³ former lover, and co-parent to a daughter. The actress herself admitted in a 1974 interview that she personally related to Marianne’s fictional journal revelations, specifically the confession that she had only ever lived for others. Ullmann said, “I have spent most of my life and still spend most of it living for other people, doing what is expected of me... I’ve wasted oceans of time doing what other people didn’t care about my doing for them, while they were doing the same thing for me” (Haskell, 2006: 74). That this real-life statement by the actress sounds like it could in fact be a passage replicating the text in Marianne’s fictional journal, speaks to the fact that the audience is invited to transpose what they know of the personal life of Ullmann onto her character’s fictional one, and to interpret the dialogue within the context of a complicated relationship between the actual author, Bergman, and the actress, highlighted by these personal photographs from her past. The “what might have been” invoked by the character, is replicated in the minds of

2 *The Jack Benny Program* (television series) ran from 1950 to 1965, as a seamless continuation of Benny’s weekly radio show, which was broadcasted from 1932-1955.

3 Ullmann had appeared in 5 Bergman films prior to *Scenes from a Marriage*.

the spectators, who confront the invisible specter of bygone possibilities when faced with the images of a hopeful, young Marianne/Ullmann, both of whom have yet to live the life in store for them.

In *Scenes from a Marriage*, diegetic levels converge in a temporal intervention that invites the spectator to consider supplemental meaning to the event, giving the episode both an individual and an over-arching meaning. The same might be said of *Six Feet Under*, particularly in an episode entitled “The Invisible Woman” (the fifth episode of the second series), which deploys metalepsis in the incorporation of actor photographs into the narrative, triggering a simultaneous adherence to/expulsion from the story-world. In *Six Feet Under*, Los Angeles matriarch Ruth Fisher (Frances Conroy) desperately tries to create intimacy within her family after the death of her husband upsets the family dynamic and undermines the future of their funeral parlor business. As part of the serial structure of the show, each episode of *Six Feet Under* begins with the death of a stranger, who will become the newest “case” at Fisher & Sons funeral home, each triggering a type of reflection on the family’s current relationships. In “The Invisible Woman” episode, a mysterious, lonely woman dies with no one to witness or mourn her passing. Ruth draws a parallel between her own solitary life and that of the unknown woman’s death, and reaches out to her three grown children, Nate, David, and Claire to reconnect. Ruth’s goal to enrich her family life is undone when her children unequivocally reject her advances at intimacy; unable to recapture the closeness and affection she so desperately craves, she weeps in front of a table filled with framed photographs of her three children. In a tracking shot from Ruth’s point of view, the spectator sees the series of family photographs, showing actual childhood photographs (or incredibly convincing digital reproductions) of the actors playing her children, Claire (Lauren Ambrose), David (Michael C. Hall), and Nate (Peter Krause), at various stages of their respective childhoods. Ruth’s hand longingly brushes over each of the picture frames, and the camera pans past the set of photos, featuring undeniably recognizable versions of Claire/Lauren as a pigtailed toddler, David/Michael in school pictures, and a smiling Nate/Peter with a boyish haircut and a turtleneck sweater. Ruth drops to her knees, and the camera cuts back to a closer shot of the photo frames, with the actors’ faces even more identifiable at such close range.

The grief, loneliness, and inability to recapture the lost past are neatly summed up by this series of photos, with the past haunting the present. Certainly, within the context of the plot, the spectator is to be moved by the character of Ruth’s

emotion, acknowledging that she is a disconnected mother who longs for a simpler, long-gone past with her family. However, this scene evokes an even stronger identification with the character through the spillover of non-diegetic images into the diegetic universe. The photographs of the real actors as children are ostensibly real, indexical moments from actual lives that have been lived, the earlier years of actors Lauren, Michael, and Peter. As such, the spectator is invited to read the scene within the fictional world as a nostalgic reminder of the passage of time, while being made aware of a historic and tangible past when the child versions of Claire/Lauren, David/Michael, and Nate/Peter were young. This contrapuntal reading of the images imbues the scene with a sense of nostalgia that anchors us to the character of Ruth within the diegesis. The nature of a photograph and all that it conveys—the missing of a moment in order to capture it on film, the inability to regain lost time, and the ephemeral nature of images and of life itself (a recurring theme of the *Six Feet Under* franchise as a whole)—heightens the emotional weight of Ruth’s grief.

In both series, *Scenes from a Marriage* and *Six Feet Under*, the use of child photographs creates a self-conscious historicization of the fictional world that captures the moment of the present while showing another, different captured moment of the past. This interplay of past, present, and present-destined-to-become-past affirms itself as its very own indexical moment, timeless yet impermanent, preserved in perpetuity, and undeniably fleeting. When character and performer divisions are blended, reality is appropriated by the narrative and then recreated as truth passed through a prism of fiction, allowing the spectator to identify within and above the diegesis. Through a transparency of the cinematic conventions which support yet also challenge the impression of reality, the emphasis is not just on the character/viewer relationship, but on the filmmaker/viewer relationship as well, linking to the auteurism at the center of art cinema of the 1950s. Jacques Rancière, in his book *La Fable cinématographique/Film Fables*, discusses Jean-Luc Godard’s 1998 *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, an eight-part film made from images and sound spliced together from other filmmakers’ works. Rancière says that this audio-visual collage, which prioritizes the image over a narrative, reinvents the images as autonomous by removing them from their original context (2001: 219). While it is apparent that the project of Godard’s masterwork and these serial television examples are vastly different forms of art in terms of intention and execution, *Histoire(s) du cinéma* is also, as Adrian Martin suggests, a personal kind of history, wherein

“huge portions of cinema history, yesterday and particularly today, are missing. Rather, it is one man’s history, [Godard’s] secret cinema of formative viewing experiences, personal illuminations and epiphanies...This is why so many of its filmic references gravitate around the gods and fetishes that he discovered while hanging out and writing for Cahiers du cinéma magazine in the 1950s...(discoveries like Bergman, Hitchcock, Renoir, Mizoguchi...)” (Martin, 2012). The simultaneous removal of an originary context and embedding of personal history into the reformulated images creates a new, invisible branch of the narrative for a spectator, fusing real and invented, past and present. In the same manner, the inclusion of the actors’ childhood photos creates a framework in which the spectator is at once aware of the technical construction of the scene and the inclusion of the photos as a meta-commentary on the unseen.

ACTOR PERSONA AS METALEPTIC STRATEGY

The use of actors’ childhood photos is not exclusive to *Six Feet Under* and *Scenes from a Marriage*. Many television series use this technique to build the story-world before the show even begins. Series revolving around family dynamics like 80’s American sitcom *Family Ties* (on air from 1982-89), long-running British sitcom *Outnumbered* (2007-14), or the multi-narrative drama *Parenthood* on American network NBC (running from 2010-15, and remarkably also starring Peter Krause), use “through the years” credit sequences that show the actors at varying ages. This creates a visual family tree that implies a shared history between the characters even before the pilot episode opens. As viewers, we may retroactively assign even more meaning to these images once we identify the characters within the hierarchy of the larger fictional family as the season progresses. And, in the case of a long-running series, we are given evidence of the actual physical changes in the actors since the time that the show has been on the air⁴. The story-world becomes what film theoretician Gilles Deleuze calls *l’image virtuel*, a “virtual image” bridge between the perception of reality and the representation of it (Deleuze,

1985 : 93-94); it is a world that reflects reality as it is, but also as what it could have been. The fictional context of the character’s childhood remains unseen, inviting us to “fill in the gaps” of their backstory since the context of the actor’s childhood remains largely unknown,⁵ giving the spectator an artistic liberty to add to and engage with the narrative world.

Similarly, the boundaries of the show’s fictional story-world are transgressed by points of intersection in the actor/character lives when actors appear as a fictionalized version of themselves; like childhood photographs, incorporation of a performer’s persona is linked to a specific temporality in which the spectator relates the moment of articulation in the present (within the series) to a construction or reconstruction of a performer’s life in the past. Richard Dyer discusses a translation of star persona to character (what he deems as the “constructed representations of persons,” [Dyer, 2009: 89]) saying that the “phenomenon of audience/star identification may yet be the crucial aspect of the placing of the audience in relation to a character. The ‘truth’ about a character’s personality and the feelings which it evokes may be determined by what the reader takes to be the truth about the person of the star playing the part” (Dyer, 2009: 125). There is an enmeshing of the character and actor, and the audience is invited to transpose what they know of the personal life of an actor onto the character’s fictional one, and therefore to interpret their actions and dialogue with a view to reality. The fictional characters are subject to spectator scrutiny due to the non-diegetic spillover that is acquired through magazines, interviews, biographies, and external knowledge of the context of an individual’s real life, in intentional references or even accidental connections made by the audience who map the star persona onto the character.

A prime example of such a fluid diegetic border is the creation of *Louie* and comedian Louis C.K., a somewhat curmudgeonly stand-up comic in real-life, who, on and off-stage, riffs about the hardships of being a single dad in his forties. As writer/director/actor/producer of *Louie*, C.K. has fashioned a character who is...*also* a somewhat curmudgeonly stand-up who, on and off-stage, riffs about the hardships of being a single dad in his forties. Self-deprecating and angst-ridden in the absurdity of the everyday experience, the television version of Louis in *Louie* navigates hilarious bad dates, bad jokes, and bad sex, while doling out earnest commentaries on race, class, sexual preference, illness, relationships, war, and parenting. There are

4 In the specific case of Peter Krause, for example, there is a *double* time capsule effect: the title images of a young Peter Krause next to his forty-something self as character “Adam Braverman” on *Parenthood* in 2014 recalls the *other* childhood images of baby Peter Krause as a thirty-something “Nate Fisher” on *Six Feet Under*, giving the spectator a sense of the over-arching trajectory of Krause’s career and a virtual aging that reminds the spectator of the passage of time/real time.

5 An exception, perhaps, might exist in the case of child actors who maintain a career into their adulthood.

rapid-fire tonal shifts from comedy to drama and back again and a flaunting of conventional narrative; for example, Louie's childhood is often represented in flashback, and he is played by different children—the very opposite of the indexical photograph moments of *Six Feet Under* and *Scenes from a Marriage*. In Emily Nussbaum's profile of Louis C.K., she notes unexpected differences between the show's star and main character: "The fictional Louie has a serious Charlie Brown streak. He's awkward with women; he stares gloomily down at his jiggling belly. In person, however, the nonfiction Louis C.K. is an attractive man in his early forties, built square, with pale brown eyes and a neatly trimmed goatee. He carries himself with physical confidence...He is not warm, but he is smart and direct. He answers questions in a lucid flood but doesn't ask much back. Every once in a while, he grins, and when he does, his face softens and lights up, his eyes twinkling" (Nussbaum, 2011). Nevertheless, since the star and his creation share the same career (comedy), city (New York), friends (working stand-up comics who regularly appear in the show), and the same personal backstory (divorced father of two, trying to make it all work), the fictional Louie is perceived as a not-so-thinly veiled version of his creator.

In the spectator projection of the creator-as-character, there is a sort of bounce-back that renders the actual, real life version more sympathetic (or sometimes less, depending on the context of the narrative), because of the character. In a sense, Louis-the-creator becomes Louie-the-character, who in turn becomes his *own* entity that reflects back on Louis-the-creator, not unlike Baudrillard's process of simulacra. In "Simulacra and Simulation," Baudrillard explains that in the simulation of reality, the difference between real and representation is blurred, and the hyperreal simulation replaces reality itself (1998: 635). Louis C.K., by creating a representation of himself, is, in essence, replaced by his fictional version when we assign him the characteristics of Louie-the-character. Thus the character and star become indiscernible to the audience in the conflation of real and imaginary in a Deleuzian "coalescence" between the actual and the virtual, (Deleuze, 1985: 68).

The structure of *Louie* not only engages with this type of coalescence, but it gleefully exploits opportunities to breach the "fourth wall." For instance, in the third season episode "Miami" (3.3) the comedian travels to Florida and has a magical evening with a stranger, a male lifeguard. There are elements of the episode that parallel C.K.'s own life, including the character's heritage: Louie tells his new friend that he lived in his father's native Mexico until the age of seven when the family moved to Boston, just as the actual Louis did. In a recent *Rolling Stone* article, C.K. calls himself "an accidental

white person" based on the disparity between his looks and his cultural identity: "I was a little kid, so all I had to do was completely reject my Spanish and my Mexican past, which is a whole lot easier because I'm white with red hair. I had the help of a whole nation of people just accepting that I'm white" (Richardson, 2013). C.K. perhaps furthers this commentary of complicated and "assumed" race by casting a black actress to play the mother of his two white, blonde children in the show, in another unexplained reality/fiction blend that fuses his real life divorce with social commentary. Yet just as the script becomes biographical, the "Miami" episode ends with *Louie's* signature blend of anxiety and misunderstanding: the budding friendship is stopped in its tracks because the lifeguard thinks Louie is making a romantic pass at him, thereby returning the character to the realm of representation. Then, in the tag at the end of the episode, we see a version of this scene being *filmed*, the cameraman bobbing in the waves as actual-Louis acts and directs the shots. The inclusion of such a clip highlights the explicit creator/spectator relationship, recalling David Bordwell's concept of art cinema auteur: "art cinema foregrounds the *author* as a structure in the film's system...the author becomes a formal component, the overriding intelligence organizing the film for our comprehension" (2009: 719, emphasis original). *Louie* showcases the construction of the episode, as if to re-anchor the character in fiction and as an artistic, self-aware creation, that combines arthouse narrative structure with comedic reflexivity.

The confusion of reality/fiction can be exploited, as with *Louie*, or unintentional, particularly in the case of inadvertent similarities between star and character traits. As a case study, consider the UK/US co-production *Episodes*, starring Matt LeBlanc, arguably best known for playing the character of Joey Tribbiani on 1990's sitcom *Friends*. In *Episodes*, LeBlanc plays a fictional version of himself, and the series references the star's life, his persona from *Friends*, as well as the subsequent failed *Friends* spin-off *Joey* that was both critically and publicly panned. In *Episodes*, characters joke about LeBlanc's career and poke fun at his real-life struggle with weight gain (a publically-private battle, due to cruel tabloid cataloging of LeBlanc's weight after *Friends* went off the air). All of these meta-issues are mocked by the writers of *Episodes* and by the actor himself, who, in an interview with the *New York Times*, reveals that he is not particularly sensitive about the jabs at his previous success—and lack thereof. LeBlanc explains, "David [Crane] and Jeffrey [Klarik, the series creators,] told me, 'We're not doing a documentary – anything you're not comfortable with, we won't do,'...Then it became fun. In the beginning I

was the brunt of the joke, but I've said it before and I'll say it again, I don't mind being the brunt of the joke if it's a really good joke" (Itzkoff, 2011). In addition to using real details of LeBlanc's actual life and career, the writers exaggerated his backstory, creating imagined tension with former *Friends* cast-mates and exaggerating LeBlanc's similarities to the dim-witted Joey character. Yet there is also accidental spillover in the doubtlessly unwelcome connection between Matt LeBlanc the star and Matt LeBlanc the character (and indeed to Joey the "ladies' man" character, as well) with the widely circulated reports (again, tabloid rumors) of infidelity, divorce from his wife, and a reputation as a recalcitrant womanizer. There is an association of star persona-to-character and a conflation of truth/fiction that is unsubstantiated yet persistent, based on what the audience knows, or quite simply interprets about the celebrity based on the character, or previous characters, when they are so embedded in an intertextual representation.

This accidental carryover can also occur when a well-known celebrity appears on a series, but as a wholly fictionalized *character* rather than an exaggerated version of themselves. If we return to *Louie*, there is an interesting blend of guest appearances that range from uncomfortably earnest (the seemingly-raw confrontation between Louie and Dane Cook over a real life and formerly acrimonious feud about stolen jokes [*Louie*, "Oh, Louie/Tickets" (2.7)]), to uproariously embroidered characterizations (Joan Rivers, who chastises, then sleeps with Louie after an Atlantic City show [*Louie*, "Joan" (2.4)]), to completely invented characters who just happen to be played by a celebrity, like longtime C.K. friend and actress Amy Poehler, who pops up in the third series finale as one of Louie's previously unmentioned/non-existent sisters (*Louie*, "New Year's Eve" [3.13]). Because the story-world is so rich with celebrity cameos, it takes the spectator a beat to recognize whether the character on screen is supposed to be Amy Poehler as herself, as an exaggerated Poehler-esque character, or simply as a new and wholly fictional character who just happens to be played by Poehler. In these cases, the star persona attached to the actor almost renders them a cameo version of themselves, regardless of who—or what—they represent on screen. A prime illustration of this "unintentional cameo" comes in the form of a three-episode arc at the end of *Louie's* third season, when Louie is trained to become host of *The Late Show* under the tutelage of "Jack Dall," played by famed film director David Lynch. In a thematically united triptych of episodes, Louis C.K. creates a poignant commentary on the career options for an aging comic (and actually elevates Louie-the-character to a potential level of fame that Louis-the-director actually has

achieved through this very series), while Lynch plays a bizarre television producer/prophet, sent to whip Louie into shape (in "The Late Show part 1" [3.10], "The Late Show part 2" [3.11], and "The Late Show part 3" [3.12]). Whenever the famously strange Lynch appears on screen, the show becomes decidedly "Lynchian" in tone and form: the dialogue is stilted, the actress playing the receptionist changes into a different woman in the span of time from a long shot to a close up, and an unexplained gun sits in the producer's desk (and, unlike Chekov's famous gun, this one will *never* be mentioned again). Though Louis C.K. riffs on the strange idiosyncrasies and rhythms of a David Lynch production, there is also a built-in expectation on the part of the audience, who look for these references and connections to Lynch, even where they may not legitimately exist as an intentional creation. The spectator, in fact, may read into the "Lynchian" quality of the episode and project it onto certain details: canned laughter sounds inexplicably creepy, the colors in a perfectly ordinary office seem washed out, and the décor dated, simply because it is exactly the aesthetic that one might expect in a David Lynch feature. This recalls Kenneth Burke's notion of "a 'repetitive form' as the means of securing coherence within rounded characterization—that is to say that a formal pattern is discernible, and endlessly repeated, beneath the apparent changes in a character's behavior" (Dyer, 2009: 96). A certain level of consistency exists each time a celebrity embodies a new character: Matt LeBlanc will always be marked by the attributes of Joey, from the role that made him famous; David Lynch, appearing in *Louie* cannot help but to retain a certain odd Lynch-ness, in spite of playing Jack Dall, a fictional creation.⁶ In this underlying repetitive portrayal, the serial is moved beyond the space of the screen by the character and actor fusion, which in turn becomes temporally and aesthetically synchronic between the filmic world and the real world.

IMPLICATIONS OF SYNCHRONIC METALEPSIS IN THE NARRATIVE

The examples discussed above are masterful meta-fiction, self-referential, tongue-in-cheek, and playing with the con-

6 The same could be said of Lynch's filmmaking style—immediately, sometimes disturbingly, familiar. In the 1995 documentary *Lumière & Company* (F. Servan-Schreiber et al, NY: Fox Lorber), well-known directors were challenged to create a 52 second short film using the Lumière brothers' original *cinématographe* camera. Despite stringent "rules" of the game, Lynch's film manages to encapsulate his unique aesthetic in under one minute.

struction of the fictional world in dizzyingly complex and meticulously crafted levels of reality. This is not a new strategy, as there is an entire history of reflexivity in postmodern television that plays with audience knowledge and awareness of genre and form. Joanne Morreale chronicles a long-standing tradition of self-referential stylistic devices in series endings, for example, using metalepsis as “a final nod to viewers before the series leaves the air,” with “...moments [that] highlight the relationship between text and viewer by enabling the viewer to read multiple levels of meaning” (2000: 110). Finales of shows like *Mary Tyler Moore* and *Cheers* reference the closing of fictional workplaces that become true for out-of-work actors and crew; final episodes of *Newhart* and *Roseanne* rewrote the series’ narratives as a complicated dream or a fictional story, respectively; and finales of shows like *Murphy Brown* and *Seinfeld* created complex “recursive loops” allowing the spectators to revisit the premise and tropes of the show alongside characters (Morreale, 2000:110-11). The emphasis of these reflexive endings is on a retroactive assignment of meaning, with spectators revisiting form and content of the narrative world as a whole, marking an endpoint to the series.

By contrast, the examples of metaleptic intervention through photos or star persona focus on a more immediate engagement on the part of the spectator, meted out in small doses, and not just upon the series’ end. Jason Mittell writes about narrative complexity as a distinct narrative mode in contemporary American television, elaborating on its discursiveness of form/genre, its “operational aesthetic” and its modes of viewer engagement that suggest a “reconceptualization of the boundary between episodic and serial forms, a heightened degree of self-consciousness in storytelling mechanics, and demands for intensified viewer engagement focused on both diegetic pleasures and formal awareness” (Mittell, 2009: 35, 38-39). In moments of multilayered shifts between real and created, it is as if these complicated intertextual references are a kind of code, a secret language constructed between the show creator and the “plugged-in” spectator. Instead of a teleological “payoff” as with *The Wire* or *Lost* (which demand a long-term engagement by the spectator for a long game, multi-season plot arc), the extreme self-referentiality of the metaleptic intrusion is an instant-gratification payoff, for a spectator in-the-know and in-the-now. It is this immediate payoff that links seemingly unconnected serials in a wide range of genres—prototypical European arthouse series (*Scenes from a Marriage*), premium cable drama (*Six Feet Under*), auteurist comedy (*Louie*), and cable sitcom (*Episodes*)—the television aesthetics and level of discourse may vary, but

the metaleptic use of actors appearing as themselves (in photos or by persona) propels an engagement with viewers in a synchronic form of seriality.

The current “golden age” of television programming that sees internet-television companies like Netflix and Amazon and premium, pay-cable channels like HBO dominating awards nominations and critics’ annual best-of lists, is fashioning an ever-increasingly crowded field for network programming. Similar use of metaleptic techniques across distinct and varied genres in different registers showcases a kind of trickle-down effect of creative strategies used to imitate the success of the ubiquitous quality TV movement (itself already in imitation of arthouse film and television). This creates a kind of dual-timeline of causality and engagement, in which examples of metalepsis play on a spectator’s engagement with past representations of actors *and*, in fact, of the serial form itself. Like Deleuze’s aforementioned virtual image, the transposition of real into fiction (and vice versa) “exists outside of consciousness, in time” (1985: 80). These moments of metalepsis invite a reflection on reality, blurring the boundaries between truth and fiction, past and present, and creating a viewing experience that transcends all categories.

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