The Netflix Effect: Impacts of the Streaming Model on Television Storytelling

by

Romil Sharma
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Television is a relationship. It asks for our time, commitment, and trust and, in return, provides certain pleasures and payoffs through its storytelling. In many ways, this relationship is one-sided. The control largely remains in the hands of the viewer, and the show alone carries the burden of satisfaction. The affair begins, as many do, with a courtship. Perhaps, we meet online or through a friend’s recommendation. As the show makes its case for why it merits our attention, we flirt with the idea of settling down. A high-maintenance series may require more attention on the part of the viewer, asking that we tune in each week to remain involved. Others might take a more laid-back approach, allowing us to occasionally drop in at our leisure. We expect a show to know what it wants out of this relationship and to follow through on those intentions. After setting up certain expectations, the show risks disappointing us if they are left unmet. Some missteps may be forgiven in light of the greater benefits, but others could be deal-breakers.

Enter: Netflix. The streaming service releases entire seasons of its shows all at once, a strategy that arguably encourages creators to reconsider or reallocate emphasis within this viewing relationship. If a show fails to woo us on episode one, the next episode is a mere 15 seconds away from starting. Why not give it the benefit of the doubt? Without a week in between each installment, the Netflix model potentially extends the courtship period. With each episode right at our fingertips, a relationship with a series that
requires consistent viewing no longer seems so high-maintenance. At the same time, the level of access that comes with the streaming catalog suggests that if this series disappoints us, moving on could prove to be simpler than it once was.

These relationships hardly exist in a vacuum. Rather, they are subject to external forces that guide the mass medium. Technological and industrial shifts have continually modified the ways in which series are produced and delivered since the birth of television. In turn, these changes have impacted how creators tell stories and how viewers receive them. Recently, the rise of streaming has been a prominent development in the television landscape. Streaming technology has been around for some time, but the inciting force that disrupted the status quo arose through industry rather than technology. A key player came to the fore and realigned the way that people think about television.

On February 1, 2013, Netflix premiered the political drama *House of Cards* (Willimon, 2013-present) as its first exclusive original series, signaling a watershed moment in the growth of streaming television. By no stretch was Netflix the first service to stream original content. Instead, with *House of Cards*, it ruptured the barrier between web television and traditional television. Within the context of this project, the term “traditional television” refers to linear platforms and particularly their scripted programming. Broadcast networks, basic cable channels, and premium cable networks are all linear platforms, meaning that their shows are distributed, often weekly, through
time slots on a live schedule. *House of Cards*, through its high production values and a narrative format that resembles a traditional drama series, paved the way for Netflix to earn a seat at the television table. At the 2013 Primetime Emmy Awards, Netflix became the first web television service to be nominated in a major category, garnering 14 nominations and three wins. After the nominations were announced, Netflix’s chief content officer Ted Sarandos acknowledged this mark of legitimacy from the industry, praising Emmy voters for “eliminating the line between Internet and television and saying that television is about what’s on the screen, not what size the screen is or how the content got there.”¹ This emphatic step into original programming by Netflix established its role as the preeminent streaming platform.

Well before the release of *House of Cards*, Netflix has kept an eye on the horizon of content distribution. It was founded in 1997 as an online DVD rental service, at a time when DVDs were still a new format. In 1999, the company adopted a subscription model, allowing viewers to pay a single monthly rate for unlimited rentals. Netflix began streaming licensed content in 2007, a move that the *New York Times* called “a radically different approach to Internet movies.”² In a premature step to devote attention to its streaming business, Netflix CEO Reed Hastings announced in 2011 that its DVD-by-mail service would be spun off into a separate company called Qwikster.

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Following an outcry from subscribers and a 60% drop in the company’s stock price, Hastings reversed his decision. This rare but serious misstep reflected the company’s desire early on to reorient around streaming for its core business.

In recent years, the streaming service has drifted away from studio output deals and non-exclusive content, placing emphasis instead on originals and exclusive titles. In 2011, Netflix bought the exclusive North America distribution rights for the Norwegian series *Lilyhammer* (Bjørnstad and Skodvin, 2012-2014). The series’ release in February 2012 predates that of *House of Cards*, but this project does not study it as a Netflix original series because it was commissioned in partnership with another broadcaster. Since then, the company has added a staggering 111 original titles, including scripted series, children’s programming, documentaries, stand-up specials, and original films. This represents an average growth rate in original programming of 185.41% per year since 2012. Meanwhile, the size of Netflix’s overall catalog has shrunk by 31.7% since January 2014. The main reason that the service is carrying fewer titles stems from its desire for exclusive content. In the face of rising licensing costs and growing competition, the company has shifted its spending away from non-exclusive

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5 Ibid.

licensing deals, whereby other distributors might carry the same content. It has opted instead to pay more money in exchange for exclusivity, both through original programming and global licensing. *Variety* reported, “Netflix recently reorganized its content-acquisition group to be fully global, rather than having teams focused on individual territories…In negotiations with studios, Netflix is asking for global rights ‘or we’re not interested at all.’” This emphasis on global exclusivity and original programming suggests that the service is positioning itself to compete within the ever-expanding ecosystem of online streaming.

There are currently over 100 online video services based in the United States alone. At least 40% of these streaming services have launched in the past two years. As with what happened during the boom of basic cable, the growing pool of players has begun to fracture into various niche options. For instance, CuriosityStream is a subscription-based service that streams science and history documentaries, while another service Dramafever specializes in Korean films and series. As the choices proliferate, each service feels the need to define itself amidst the cornucopia of streaming. Given its 75 million global subscribers and unparalleled pace of original content output, Netflix remains far and away the leading streaming service. Rather than target a specific niche demographic, the company has aimed to create a mass-market service to assert its hegemony. Hastings announced in

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January 2016 that the service would be instantaneously launching in 130 new countries, bringing its overall reach to 190 countries. In 2016, Netflix intends to release 600 hours of original programming, compared to 450 hours in 2015.\textsuperscript{9} Due to its immense capacity to spend on and commit to programming, Netflix is able to compete with traditional television networks in a way that other streaming services cannot. By closely examining Netflix and its role within the television medium, we can gain valuable insight into the relationship between streaming and storytelling.

This thesis studies the impacts of the Netflix streaming model on creative decision-making. The Netflix model refers to the unique manner in which the streaming service commissions and distributes original programming—particularly, its scripted comedy and drama series. In order to contextualize the discussion, we begin by locating the platform within the historical trajectory of the medium. After demonstrating Netflix’s relationship to television as we know it, we deconstruct the aesthetic toolbox that it offers to creators, laying out the storytelling tools that the platform encourages or enables. Finally, a case-study analysis of the Netflix original series \textit{Sense8} (The Wachowskis and Straczynski, 2015-present) illuminates some of the formal decisions facilitated by the model. Due to its willingness to experiment with televisual narrative form and style, \textit{Sense8} offers an excellent example of the unconventional storytelling choices that the Netflix model emboldens creators to make. I argue that the shift from a weekly release schedule to an

all-at-once release encourages creators to reassess the traditional notions of what a season is, what an episode is, and what it means to tell a story televisually.

Even before Netflix was a platform for original series, it was already changing the ways that viewers access, control, and watch television. Once just a distributor of television, it has now itself become television, offering creators a new playground upon which to experiment. In conducting these experiments, creators both reaffirm and redefine televisuality and the viewing relationship. Netflix has not fundamentally altered the face of television, but it has certainly expanded its definition, and its series have elaborated on the aesthetics of the medium. The service has simultaneously embraced television and posed itself as an alternative. By releasing its series all at once, Netflix drew a distinction from the weekly model, which had hitherto defined the viewing experience. Ushering in a new world order of television delivery, it announced the release of House of Cards with two simple words: Now streaming.
CHAPTER 1

THE TRAJECTORY OF TELEVISION

Over the course of American television history, shifts in technology and the media market structure have resulted in corresponding changes in the ways that people view and create scripted series. Just in the past thirty years, the industry has undergone several shifts, whose effects have manifested onscreen. From the rise of basic cable in the 1980s to the increased prominence of premium cable in the 1990s to the popularization of the digital video recorder (DVR) in the 2000s, changes to the platform have routinely translated into adaptive shifts in scripted television storytelling. This chapter incorporates these and other historical patterns into a discussion of Netflix’s impact on the television landscape in order to contextualize its role within the broader trends facing audiences, creators, and networks today.

VIEWER CHOICE

The degree to which viewers are able to access programs and control the manner in which they watch them has evolved over the years, especially in response to recent technological shifts. However, viewers had been exercising control over their TV viewing long before the advent of digital platforms. For instance, the prevalence of remote controls in the American television marketplace grew from 9.5 percent in 1976 to 90 percent in 1990, a shift that carried with it significant implications for the televisual experience.  

Even before the technology developed for them to rewind, pause, and fast-forward, remote controls made it simpler for viewers to switch between channels. Program listings in newspapers and TV Guide, which had already previously been in circulation, became increasingly useful. These resources informed viewers’ decision-making, making them aware of the programming options available to them. Perhaps most notably, the remote control facilitated viewers’ ability to avoid commercials. In the 1950s, an early version of the remote called “Blab-Off” touted that a viewer could “select the advertising he wants to hear, and he can get away from the commercials he dislikes.”

Similar to the industry sentiment surrounding streaming today, broadcasters were ambivalent toward remotes, as they represented an uncertain future for the medium. In actuality, this device signaled an early shift in the balance of control from the networks to the viewer.

By the early 1980s, the videocassette recorder (VCR) became a common fixture in the American household. The machine offered viewers the opportunity to record and play back episodes on videocassettes. Not only did this new technology allow viewers to fast-forward through commercials, but it also emancipated them from the rigid schedule of time slots and weekly viewing. In a way, the advent of the VCR represents one of the first steps toward the type of schedule-free viewing later popularized by Netflix and other streaming services. Lotz explains, “Viewers first gained the convenience of defying networks’ schedules with the VCR, which established a modest

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beginning that since has been expanded by DVRs and digital devices that integrate Internet and television to vastly expand consumer control.”

The arrival of the DVR in 1999 represented a continuation of the viewing practices established by the VCR before it, allowing viewers to record and store episodes with unprecedented ease. While viewers often would use VCRs to record a few select programs, the added convenience of digital technology encouraged them to make time-shifting their default mode of watching television, essentially promoting a “non-linear programming experience.” The sudden rise of DVR usage, largely led by TiVo, prompted companies to revise their tactics for advertising and ratings measurement, seeing as the device altered how and when viewers would watch television. Additionally, the popularization of DVR viewing has had ramifications for the ways in which creators make television series. By allowing a large portion of viewers to keep up with a series without having to watch each episode live and to control their manner of viewing, this advance in technology has permitted greater degrees of narrative complexity. Granted, DVRs did not affect all viewers equally. While some avid viewers took full advantage of the device’s capabilities to rewatch episodes and parse out details, others settled into time-shifted routines, consistently watching episodes just as they would on live television but at a more convenient time. Other viewers simply could not afford a DVR or felt no desire to purchase one. Essentially, the growth in

13 Ibid., 58.
time-shifting technology partially untethered the viewing experience from the programming schedule and expanded the methods of viewing that each show had to consider.

Alongside this steady evolution in viewer control, other technological advances have simultaneously generated an increase in viewer access. In the 2000s, as DVDs overtook VHS in popularity, viewers became increasingly inclined to purchase and own DVD sets of television seasons and series. While home video releases for television series had already previously been done through VHS and even Laserdisc before it, the DVD format encouraged new heights of collection. Lotz explains:

DVDs conveniently aggregate multiple episodes—unlike VCR tapes that can include only two or three episodes—and are commonly sold in complete seasons that require limited shelf space, making them attractive to fans who want to create libraries, to new viewers who seek to catch up on previous episodes, and to anyone who wishes to avoid television conventions such as commercials and one-week gaps between episodes.¹⁴

Mittell argues that this growth in TV-on-DVD shifted television consumption away from the broadcasting model and closer to a publishing model, as it encouraged continuous viewing and promoted narrative values of unity and complexity across seasons and series.¹⁵ Furthermore, he contends that DVD sets helped raise the cultural value of television, presenting programs as tangible objects with staying power rather than fleeting broadcasts.¹⁶ Lotz adds that they emboldened viewers to seek out programs rather than to rely

¹⁴ Ibid., 128-129.
¹⁶ Ibid.
on scheduled airings, fostering a more active viewing public.\(^{17}\) The rise of DVD sets enabled more viewers to watch a series from the beginning, allowing for more complex narratives and seriality.

The trend toward higher levels of viewer access and control continued with the proliferation of video-on-demand (VOD) services. Even before Netflix and other such streaming services gained prominence, networks would make their programs available to stream on-demand through television providers after they aired. Beginning around the mid-2000s, they would also offer episodes for purchase (i.e. transactional VOD) through online services such as the Apple iTunes Store. The growth of VOD accelerated the ongoing progression of viewer access. Offering similar effects on viewing practices, VOD built on the impacts of DVR and DVD, providing more immediate access to content while operating distinctly from the linear programming stream.

Chamberlain reflects on this progressive accumulation of access and control:

> As the distribution of television is increasingly governed by digital delivery and playback, television interfaces have become gateways to the content we desire, enabling individualized viewing patterns and subtly reformatting our televisual experiences along vectors of customization and control.\(^{18}\)

Fittingly, Netflix was a DVD delivery and subscription VOD (SVOD) service before it led the surge of streamed original content. Beginning in 2007, it offered its subscribers a digital library of licensed content from which they could select series and films to watch at their discretion. Even before that,

\(^{17}\) Lotz, *Television Will be Revolutionized*, 59.

Amazon Instant Video launched in 2006, providing both free and purchasable content to its paying subscribers. Along similar lines, Hulu, a joint venture between networks NBC, Fox, and ABC, initially offered streaming VOD for free starting in 2008 before shifting to a primarily subscription-based model in 2010. Given its network affiliation, Hulu maintained the practice of including commercial breaks, essentially providing greater access than DVR but less viewer control. The rise of these stand-alone SVOD services, which house content from a variety of networks without necessitating a cable subscription, represents a step away from the scheduled flow of linear television, prioritizing viewer choice over appointment viewing. In fact, the emergence of the term “appointment viewing” in our lexicon is itself proof of this shift.

This tension between traditional viewing and SVOD laid the foundation for streamed original content. Netflix, the largest of the SVOD services, faced the greatest amount of pressure from the existing television system. While Hulu was network-owned and Amazon had a more diversified business model, Netflix became increasingly vulnerable to rising licensing costs from studios, who were experiencing falling ratings and began to see the streaming service as a threat. In the face of these mounting pressures, Netflix invested heavily in original programming to curb its reliance on content licensed from traditional networks and channels. Still, other factors, including competitive differentiation and the finite amount of licensable content, drove SVOD services to begin commissioning original series.
Between 2011 and 2013, Hulu, Amazon, and Netflix, to varying degrees, began to make substantial investments in original scripted content. Hulu, whose owners’ core business relied heavily on linear television, maintained the weekly release schedule for its original series. Interestingly, the SVOD service, whose primary appeal is viewer access, retained some of the limitations of linear programming, allowing viewers access to past episodes but restricting access to future ones. On the other hand, Netflix, beginning in 2013, released seasons of its original series all at once, granting unprecedented access and control for newly released content. Amazon, meanwhile, has experimented with a variety of release strategies, including both the full season release and the weekly model.

From 2009 to 2015, the number of online original scripted series grew from two to 44 (i.e. 1% to 11% of total programming), indicating a dramatic shift in the ways television is created and consumed.\(^\text{19}\) In recent years, steep drops in viewership for broadcast and cable have been accompanied by substantial rises in SVOD subscriptions. While a causal relationship has not been established, linear television networks have come under pressure to increase their online offerings. According to Variety, “The motivation behind all of the upheaval in TV content distribution boils down to the industry adjusting to the new world order of viewer choice.”\(^\text{20}\) In 2014, CBS launched the broadband-only service CBS All Access, its aptly named answer to


streaming competitors. In 2015, HBO and Showtime released their own stand-alone over-the-top (OTT) services. In 2016, NBC unveiled a streaming comedy channel called Seeso with five original series immediately available at launch. Notably, episodes of Seeso originals will be released on a weekly basis, in keeping with the vested interests of NBC.

These recent moves by traditional networks reflect a desire to adapt to the trend toward greater viewer choice without cannibalizing their existing decades-long business. That is not to say that appointment viewing no longer holds any value. Broadcast television still commands the highest ratings per episode among all outlets. However, the television experience has steadily gravitated toward increasing levels of viewer control over the course of its existence. Earlier innovations, such as the remote control and the VCR, gradually took hold over the viewing public. Later shifts, such as DVR and VOD, aided by the ease of digital delivery, took comparatively less time. Correspondingly, established networks, faced with the stickiness of industry and a dependence on aging business models, have taken longer to adapt to shifts in the viewing paradigm. Meanwhile, Netflix and other SVOD services have been able to expeditiously take advantage of this growing demand for access and control.

**DISTRIBUTION**

Several factors figure into the way a series is released and the manner in which it is received. From color to widescreen to commercial-free television, industrial and technological forces have guided the steady
transformation of television distribution ever since the birth of the medium. From its inception, television has undergone a variety of shifts that have repeatedly redefined the medium. In recent years, these changes have resulted in a broadening of this definition, multiplying the amount of distribution types that fall under the umbrella of television. That is, while earlier advancements in television distribution generally followed a linear progression of the new replacing the old, later developments have been more additive in nature, augmenting the number of opportunities for viewing and creation.

By the 1960s, color television became commonplace in American households. The networks engaged in a ratings war, competing to broadcast color programming and capitalize on the new innovation. By the 1966-1967 season, the primetime schedules for all three networks were being broadcast in color. The sudden shift in the distribution format had considerable consequences for the production of shows. As networks pushed for color programming in order to remain competitive, creators encountered a host of new creative possibilities but also faced their share of challenges. For instance, some shows had previously exploited the black-and-white mode of distribution to artfully conceal special effects; with the advent of color, creators had to revise their methods. Still, given that filmmakers had already experimented with color in cinema, television creators were not working from scratch, so to speak. Such is the pattern for many of the technological advances in television distribution over the years. With the arrival of
widescreen, high-fidelity sound, and high-definition picture, broadcasters and creators adapted accordingly, and the medium moved forward in a slightly modified form. These improvements to picture and sound quality allowed television to gain more legitimacy and followed a progression of approaching a more theatrical home viewing experience.

However, in the case of some other industrial and technological shifts, the effects have not been apportioned so evenly. Since the rise of cable channels and digital delivery, changes to content delivery have had more localized impacts. For instance, premium cable gained momentum in the 1990s as an alternative outlet for narrative televisual storytelling. Due to their unique subscription-based business model, these channels were able to broadcast series devoid of advertisements. Without the inclusion of commercial breaks, creators became free to vary pacing over the course of an episode, as opposed to timing act breaks around commercials. The creator of the HBO series Oz Tom Fontana contends, “When you don’t have to bring people back from a commercial, you don’t have to manufacture an ‘out.’ You can make your episode at a length and with a rhythm that’s true to the story you want to tell.”

Moreover, the lack of commercials allowed for unconventional approaches to beat construction. In network television, there exists a commercial imperative for each episode to keep the narrative moving forward in order to maintain a hold over the audience’s attention. In other words, the narrative is often designed in such a way as to encourage viewers

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21 Lotz, Television Will be Revolutionized, 194.
to keep watching across the commercial break. Premium cable series were able to include more drawn-out beats, unencumbered by a commitment to forward progress. Inevitably, there are exceptions on either side, but the distribution schemes for broadcast and premium both encourage certain narrative choices over others. This loosening of narrative structure is one of many alternative storytelling opportunities that premium cable offered, others of which will be discussed in later sections. Netflix and other subscription-based streaming services later embraced the ad-free distribution model established during this period.

In the mid-2000s, Internet distribution became increasingly viable as a streamlined, cost-effective approach to releasing televisual narrative content. The emergence of this type of release strategy also brought into question what it means to be called television in a “post-network era.” In 2005, MTV and Comedy Central unveiled Overdrive and Motherload, respectively, which were broadband video channels that streamed short-form content. During this time, several other online networks were created to take advantage of this new form of distribution. Freed from the constraints of linear programming and time slots, web series distributed on these outlets were able to deviate from the traditional thirty- or sixty-minute program run times and weekly release schedules. However, many of these web services still contained advertising, whether in video form or embedded within the webpage.

According to Lotz, “Outlets that possessed an existing television branding like

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MTV and CNN were the first to dominate the Internet distribution of video.\textsuperscript{23} Though Internet distribution involved far fewer barriers to entry than traditionally televised fare, these established brands had the luxury of name recognition and built-in viewing audiences. Still, there was some anxiety among broadcasters at this time that online companies, such as Google, Yahoo!, and AOL, would usurp the dominant positions once held by CBS, NBC, and ABC, a fear not unlike the industry’s current attitude toward streaming services, such as Netflix and Amazon.

While Internet distribution gained some traction during the 2000s, web series were hardly mentioned in the same breath as traditionally televised programs, lacking the cultural legitimacy to be taken seriously as a form of televisual storytelling. Nonetheless, the experimentation with distribution and release strategy during this period set the stage for the streaming services of today. While present-day streaming platforms utilize a range of distribution methods, Netflix popularized the all-at-once release, which represents a clear departure from the weekly programming found on traditional television outlets.

As mentioned in the previous section, Netflix’s approach to distribution is consistent with the steady evolution across the medium toward greater viewer access and control. Traditional channels and networks, along with the network-owned Hulu, have largely retained the weekly distribution schedule for scripted programming, owing to their reliance on the old business model.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 133.
Even so, perhaps due to Netflix’s influence on viewing practices and preferences, some cable companies and streaming services have since experimented with the all-at-once release model. After Netflix released the full first seasons of *House of Cards* and *Orange Is the New Black* (Kohan, 2013-present), Amazon began releasing some of its series’ seasons all at once, beginning with *Transparent* (Soloway, 2014-present). Around the time of *Transparent’s* release in 2014, Amazon Studios executive Roy Prince said, “There is definitely a lot of enthusiasm for the whole binge-release idea. We’re going to do whatever people respond to,” acknowledging that the studio was following rather than setting a distribution trend.24 Even some traditional networks and channels have attempted to incorporate the all-at-once release into a linear programming model. In 2015, NBC released the full first season of *Aquarius* (McNamara, 2015-present) via various video-on-demand platforms immediately after airing the series premiere. The remaining episodes continued to air weekly, though they were already available online. By making deals with select advertisers and airing the same commercials in linear and VOD, NBC was able to execute this unusual distribution tactic, which was essentially guaranteed to cannibalize linear viewership. Soon after, Starz implemented a similar distribution strategy for the third season of *Da Vinci’s Demons* (Goyer, 2013-2015) and for the miniseries *Flesh and Bone* (Walley-Beckett, 2015), but, being a premium channel, it did not include commercials in either the linear or the VOD release.

In 2016, TBS debuted its series *Angie Tribeca* (Carell and Carell, 2016-present) with a commercial-free marathon. The show’s release, dubbed a “binge-a-thon,” featured its ten-episode season being broadcast continuously for 25 hours on linear television. An online all-at-once release accompanied this linear marathon broadcast. Since TBS is partially dependent on advertising revenue, the otherwise commercial-free marathon incorporated ad-sponsored video vignettes between episodes. These sponsored vignettes represented a deliberate attempt by the basic cable channel “to appeal to viewers who might dig into a video favorite via Netflix or Amazon” while still satisfying its revenue model. The distribution strategy for *Angie Tribeca* reflects the growing popularity of the all-at-once release among viewers and the increased desire by networks to take advantage of this viewing behavior. These unconventional hybrid tactics also point to the transitional nature of the television industry at this time. Furthermore, as the number of binge-released programs grows, producers increasingly recognize the creative potential that the new distribution style has to offer. The showrunner of *Angie Tribeca*, Ira Ungerleider, when speaking on the release strategy, commented, “We were all surprised and had never heard of such a thing before. We tossed it around and thought it was a cool way to introduce a show…Certainly, the way we view TV today is binging…The show really

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lends itself to that kind of watching." These recent moves by Amazon, NBC, Starz, and TBS exemplify the influence of the all-at-once release across all sectors of the current television landscape. While Netflix was the first to pioneer this distribution method, it is indicative of a greater trend in viewership that has since manifested itself further and will likely continue to do so.

As traditional television has started to look more like Netflix, the reverse has also been happening. With the rise of streaming services, new forms of distribution have emerged and adapted to bring Internet-based television into the family room. A host of devices, including smart TVs, game consoles, and set-top boxes such as Apple TV and Roku, now let viewers watch streamed programming on their television sets, effectively integrating the interface of streaming with the traditional TV-watching experience. By allowing streaming distribution to transcend computers and mobile devices, these technologies contribute to the broader acceptance and greater legitimacy of services like Netflix within the world of television.

**AUDIENCE FRAGMENTATION**

For decades, the Big Three broadcast networks (i.e. ABC, CBS, and NBC) dominated American television due to prohibitive entry costs and FCC support. As barriers to entry eroded and programming options proliferated, the household reach of each individual network declined, resulting in an increasingly fragmented viewing audience. This steady transformation of how television audiences are allocated has translated into shifts in how scripted

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series are created, distributed, and received. Accordingly, the way that Netflix commissions and delivers its scripted series falls squarely in line with this ongoing trend.

The fragmenting of audiences has not been a consistent trend over the course of television history. Rather, due to tight regulations from the Federal Communications Commission effectively barring new entrants, television was essentially synonymous with the Big Three until the 1980s. Even in 1980, over 90% of Americans' prime-time viewing was broadcast by either NBC, ABC, or CBS. During these first few decades, television was truly a mass medium, as most programs aimed to appeal broadly to the entire television viewing audience. However, in the 1970s, some early cracks in the oligarchy began to show. A string of court decisions dismantled the FCC’s restrictions on pay television and cable and satellite distribution, paving the way for alternative programming channels.

As basic cable and premium cable channels gained traction alongside new technologies such as the VCR, the typical television viewer faced more choices than ever before. Cable and satellite options required some form of additional payment, but any television-owning household could still access the broadcast networks virtually free of charge. That is to say, pay television supplemented rather than supplanted the existing broadcast model. Still, in the 25 years following 1980, the prime-time shares of the Big Three declined year after year, while the viewing audience for cable television steadily grew.

By 2005, 80% of homes had access to more than just broadcast, whether through cable, satellite, or alternative systems.\(^{28}\)

Several implications have stemmed from this rapid rise in cable viewership. Along with audience fragmentation came a degree of polarization, whereby cable networks began catering to select segments of the television viewing population, creating more specialized programming for “small-but-loyal” audiences.\(^{29}\) In the 1990s, HBO used the slogan, “It’s not TV. It’s HBO,” to position itself as providing a high-quality alternative to network content. Later, basic cable channels such as AMC similarly sought to stand out by offering the type of slow-burn narratives and complex storytelling that made HBO famous. Other channels, such as MTV and BET, targeted specific demographic groups and commissioned narrative series specifically for those niche audiences. Advertisers for basic cable channels would accordingly deploy specialized commercials based on these target demographics, prioritizing quality of viewer over quantity. In a sea of choices, cable channels have felt the need to differentiate themselves to attract viewers and advertisers.

As touched on earlier, at the same time as audiences are becoming fragmented along various divergent preferences and interests, fragmentation has also been occurring across time and space. Time-shifting and on-demand technology have further exacerbated the phenomenon of fragmentation,


\(^{29}\) Ibid., 371.
splintering television viewership in more ways than one. The way that Netflix commissions and distributes its shows incorporates both forms of audience fragmentation. The company deliberately targets specific niche audiences through its programming. Netflix's head of original content Cindy Holland stated, “I don’t think any genres are off-limits to us. We have a large subscriber base that consumes a wide variety of content…We hope to reach the entire subscriber base with at least one original series.”

Cable channels tend to craft a unique brand identity around their programming, and broadcast networks largely aim for broad appeal to the general viewing public. Meanwhile, Netflix strives to design a mass-market service by compiling multiple niche programs with distinct target demographics. Ted Sarandos insisted, “I'm not looking to find a single show to define Netflix. That's almost the opposite of what we're trying to do. Our brand is all about personalization.”

In a sense, Netflix's brand identity is characterized by having no brand at all. Without reliance on advertising or a linear schedule, it feels no need to restrict its target audience or content volume. Furthermore, on-demand control over the program library allows for each subscriber to have his or her own unique Netflix viewing relationship. This viewer control also creates an audience that is watching various programs at countless different times simultaneously. Netflix not only contributes to the fragmentation that has been steadily occurring across the different channels

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and networks, but it also essentially fosters a fragmented audience within the confines of its own service.

**CREATIVE FREEDOM**

Creators of television programs have always encountered certain restrictions or guidelines for what they are able to present on screen. As the number of avenues for programming has grown, creators have become faced with several distribution options offering various degrees of creative freedom and autonomy. These variations can be attributed to industrial, organizational, and commercial factors. By studying the historical progression of creative freedom in television, we can get a sense of the influences and motivations behind the creative environment that Netflix provides the creators of its scripted series.

Censorship and content restrictions have a substantial impact on creative freedom. The FCC has long regulated broadcast television, censoring what it determines to be obscene, indecent, and profane content. However, beyond these concerns, the government has little involvement in restricting television content. This is partly because in the 1950s, as television became popular in American households, political pressure drove the industry to create its own regulatory code, akin to the circumstances that brought about the Motion Picture Production Code in 1930. Known as the Television Code of the National Association of Broadcasters, this set of regulations was enacted in order to avoid government censorship. The code prohibited profanity, drunkenness, irreverent portrayal of God and religion, and indecent
movements, among many other things, asserting that broadcasters had a responsibility to serve the public interest. In 1983, legal pressures over concerns such as advertising limits led to the code’s dissolution. Nonetheless, many of the ideals of the code continued to persist within the networks’ individual standards and practices departments, limiting to this day what can and cannot be shown on broadcast television.

In 1996, government pressures resulted in the establishment of a content rating system, which grouped programs into categories that ranged from TV-Y (appropriate for all children) to TV-MA (mature audiences only). This rating system continues today and applies to practically all television channels, including both broadcast and cable. Fearing backlash from advertisers and still facing regulation from the FCC, broadcasters avoid assigning TV-MA ratings, meaning that network series often cannot include graphic violence, explicit sexual content, or excessively crude language. However, as of late, networks have faced greater competition from less tightly regulated cable channels, motivating them to stretch the limits of these self-determined ratings categories. Since the FCC typically imposes sanctions only for indecency and profanity, networks have recently allowed their series to include more intense and frequent acts of violence, while also testing the boundaries on sexuality and swearing, in an effort to compete with cable. Even so, while standards have evolved over the years, broadcast television...
still presents the greatest degree of content regulation and restriction to creators.

Meanwhile, basic cable, which does not face regulation from the FCC but does rely on advertisers, toes the line on content restrictions, allowing more instances of nudity and profanity than network television but stopping short of what is allowed on premium cable. Premium cable, devoid of commercials and regulation, allows and even encourages nudity, profanity, and violence, often using these attributes as a way of differentiating itself from broadcast and basic cable. In a sense, though premium cable channels impose little to no upper bound on explicit content, creators are often implicitly expected to take advantage of the license they are given. One component of these channels’ branding is their tendency to push boundaries in ways that other networks cannot, and the vast majority of their programming is rated TV-MA.

In 2013, Netflix’s Ted Sarandos famously declared, “The goal is to become HBO faster than HBO can become us.” Netflix positioned itself early on as being the Internet’s answer to premium cable, similarly permitting explicit content in its series. However, recent programming choices, such as the TV-14-rated Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt (Fey and Carlock, 2015-present) and the TV-G-rated Fuller House (Franklin, 2016-present), suggest that Netflix is not as closely wedded to the TV-MA rating as its premium cable counterparts. In fact, one could argue that premium cable somewhat limits

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creative freedom by almost necessitating that shows cater to mature audiences. This issue is one that comes down to brand discipline and quality control. Netflix’s approach to quality programming is to give virtually free reign to capable creators. In the case of broadcast, networks generally seek out content that appeals to a mass audience and does so within its commercially imposed restrictions. Meanwhile, premium channels tend to attract series that represent a marked departure from ad-driven television. Across broadcast, cable, and streaming, each network approaches the production of a series in a way that is unique to the preferences and priorities of that individual service. These methods and practices can have varying implications on the creative freedoms of their respective programs.

Broadcast television is in the unique position of being a profit-driven business that provides a public good. Rather than receive revenue directly from viewers, networks earn money by selling advertisements. Networks care about viewer preferences because higher viewership translates to more ad dollars, so, in actuality, advertisers’ preferences tend to play a more dominant role in programming decisions, though the two are certainly connected. This influence often comes in the form of network notes, whereby the network gives producers input on scripts, casting, and other facets of the creative process, forming a relationship that can range from collaborative to adversarial in nature. On the topic of network notes, television writer Alan Ball argued:

The reason why network executives always tell you to make the story softer, to iron out the edge, is that network TV exists as a vehicle for
marketing…After a while, you realize that all network notes can be reduced to: one, make everybody nicer, remove all the conflict; and, two, articulate the subtext, have somebody state what’s going on.  

Ball’s perspective reflects the type of combative relationship that can sometimes arise between highly involved broadcasters and creative individuals. In some rare instances, a showrunner’s reputation and political clout can afford him or her the opportunity to refuse network notes. Such is the case for Shonda Rimes, who began ignoring notes from ABC after the first season of Scandal (Rhimes, 2012-present). Still, broadcast networks have a financial imperative to produce series with wide appeal that can hopefully produce high ratings and attract advertisers. Therefore, while the creator’s vision plays an important role, networks often employ a heavy hand in guiding the creative process.

Though cable channels tend to be less involved in the creation of a series than broadcasters, many cable series still frequently receive notes and guidance. While broadcast networks often attempt to differentiate themselves through branding, this act of specialization is even more noticeable and deliberate in cable, where channels feel the need to stand out amidst an abundance of programming. Many basic cable channels take this concept of brand identity into account when developing and overseeing projects.

Furthermore, these channels make money partly through advertising and also from operators who pay carriage fees for the right to include them in their cable packages. With less reliance on advertising, some channels can take a

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more hands-off approach to the creative process. For instance, Louis C.K. has not received any network notes for FX’s Louie (C.K., 2010-present) but had to take a pay cut in order to achieve this level of autonomy. Other channels still reserve and exercise their right to influence the creative process. The realm of basic cable is much more varied than broadcast when it comes to creative guidance and restrictions, as each channel has its own specific policies and often varies them based on the program.

Premium cable channels and Netflix both follow a subscription-based business model; however, they take somewhat different approaches to the creative process. Broadly speaking, premium cable offers itself as an alternative to commercial television, with each channel loosely defining its respective brand around a reputation for narrative experimentation, provocative content, and general risk-taking. The former president of NBC West Coast, Scott Sassa, stated, “A pay-cable network like HBO is trying to fill a need for people who feel underserved by network television.”35 Because premium cable channels are deliberately counter-programming against other networks and striving for a certain benchmark of “quality,” they often do not hand over complete creative autonomy, opting rather to guide and contribute to the process. Casting director Gayle Keller argued, “HBO is a little bit more involved, just like any other network I’ve worked for—ABC, CBS, NBC—and everyone’s just more involved in the scripts and casting.”36 Certainly, the

35 Ibid., 32.

degree of network involvement varies from series to series, but premium cable channels generally play a role in the creative process, encouraging shows to take risks, break conventions, and also to exude “quality.”

Ironically, this modus operandi, initially established by HBO, has bled into basic cable and even broadcast. What was originally meant to be an alternative to television now helps comprise the general definition of “quality television.” Netflix similarly follows in the footsteps of premium cable, often hearing pitches from the same projects as HBO and Showtime. However, the streaming service differs in that it chooses to largely cede creative control to the program’s producers. Sarandos claimed, “We try to guide with a light touch. We’re not looking to impose our view,” adding that if Netflix and the producer disagree over a creative decision, the producer’s view prevails.\(^37\) In light of this approach, Netflix also requires that programs come to them “better developed” than if they were pitched to another network.\(^38\) Conversely, HBO is notorious for being a “development-rich network,” maintaining over 100 projects in its pipeline with very few actually moving on to production.\(^39\)

Because Netflix hopes to maximize output, it has streamlined the process from pitch to series, eliminating pilots and a lengthy development process.


Meanwhile, a traditionally televised network must be more selective about the projects it airs because there are limited time slots in a programming schedule. Furthermore, if a Netflix series fails to attract a large enough audience, there is no need to cancel it mid-season and pull it off the air. Netflix can simply choose not to order another season, and the first season can remain accessible to those who did enjoy it. Finally, because Netflix is not tied to a brand identity, it faces less pressure to guide or tailor the creative process for any particular show.

**SURVEILLANCE AND ANALYTICS**

While the aforementioned points certainly contribute to Netflix’s commitment to risk-taking and creative freedom, another factor figures into its decision-making: big data. One characteristic that separates Netflix and other streaming services from traditional television outlets is that their series are delivered exclusively over the Internet. This attribute gives streaming networks access to vast amounts of data on viewing behaviors and trends that can be used to inform programming decisions. Because other networks rely on third-party platforms, including cable, satellite, digital terrestrial signals, and telecommunications, for mass distribution, they do not encounter the same level of easy access to data collection. While the degree and depth of data gathering by streaming services is unprecedented, data collection has long been a factor in the television industry, often informing programming, advertising, and business decisions.
Since 1950, The Nielsen Company, a marketing research firm, has been measuring television audiences and tracking progressions in viewership over time. Programmers and advertisers have been using Nielsen ratings for decades to evaluate their successes and failures, as well as to observe important trends and phenomena. Often, traditional television networks will use ratings in order to decide whether to cancel, renew, or change the time slot for a program. Perhaps most importantly, ratings control advertising costs, which helps explain why they influence decision-making on broadcast and basic cable to a higher degree than on premium cable.

As new technologies have emerged and viewing behavior has evolved, Nielsen has adapted its measurement strategies accordingly, incorporating time-shifted and mobile viewing. As TiVo gained in popularity, it started selling aggregate viewing data to advertisers and worked in conjunction with Nielsen along with other market-research firms to develop more sophisticated metrics on viewership. In response to the changes in viewing patterns, networks such as HBO and FX have recently stopped delivering over-night ratings for their shows, choosing instead to release figures that incorporate time-shifted viewing. HBO justified this decision by arguing, “HBO subscribers have available to them an array of entry points to watch our programming – HBO linear feeds, DVR, HBO On Demand and HBO GO – and a single airing is no longer representative of an HBO show’s true audience size.”

In the current

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television landscape, these types of decisions are emblematic of an ongoing shift in television distribution and access.

Netflix has notoriously abstained from releasing the viewing numbers for its series. Because the streaming service does not include advertising, it has no business obligation to reveal this information. Ted Sarandos claimed that premium cable companies were wrong to set a precedent for themselves by releasing ratings for their series, saying, “It has been a mistake for [pay-TV] companies to talk about ratings; it creates performance pressure around these shows which is very unnecessary.”41 While the reporting of ratings does run counter to Netflix’s niche programming strategy, it is also important to note that this practice of non-disclosure increases its bargaining power in licensing and budget negotiations. This refusal has frustrated competing networks as well as the press. NBC even went so far as to conduct an independent study through a third-party research firm in order to collect broadband data on Netflix viewing activity. The network’s president of research and development reported the lukewarm results of this study, insisting, “The notion that the broadcast model is broken or dying—it really

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isn’t.” Sarandos later countered that NBC’s data was “remarkably inaccurate” but that Netflix would continue to keep its ratings secret.

While Netflix does not publicize its viewing data, it certainly collects it. Leading up to the 2013 release of House of Cards, Netflix famously rationalized its $100 million upfront investment by claiming its data analytics indicated that the series would find a sizeable audience. The service collects detailed information on viewing behavior, tracking when a viewer pauses or rewinds content and organizing content into thousands of micro-genres. This approach to programming has attracted some criticism, as many have argued that choosing the right series comes down to more than data interpretation. FX president John Landgraf maintained, “Data can only tell you what people have liked before, not what they don’t know they are going to like in the future. A good high-end programmer’s job is to find the white spaces in our collective psyche that aren’t filled by an existing television show.” In his counter-argument, Ted Sarandos claimed, “Big data is a very important resource to allow us to see how much to invest in a project but we don’t try to

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reverse-engineer,” adding that 30% of the decision-making process comes from human judgment.\textsuperscript{45}

Ultimately, discerning how large a role data plays in Netflix’s programming is a difficult task. Given that the company does not release ratings, its confidence in big data serves as an assurance to stockholders and competitors that it is making informed decisions. Meanwhile, Amazon has turned over the pilot process to the people. Periodically, the streaming service releases a group of series pilots for its subscribers to watch, rate, and critique before using that information to determine which shows to pick up for a full season. By having the viewer play executive, Amazon is similarly hedging its bets by greenlighting shows that are virtually pre-approved by their intended audience. Amazon and Netflix wield their status as Internet-based companies to expand on the types of information gathering utilized by traditional television networks before them. These methods augment the volume of the audience’s voice in making programming decisions, placing greater emphasis on the audience’s habits, tastes, and opinions after having wider access to them. Therefore, while creators of Netflix shows certainly possess a great deal of freedom, the choice to give them that freedom originates from the viewing audience.

\textbf{GLOBAL REACH}

Since the 1960s, international distribution has had a role in US television syndication (i.e. reselling shows), and in the late 1980s, with the

dismantling of global broadcasting regulations and rising domestic production costs, international sales ballooned. It has now become commonplace for studios to sell programs that were initially broadcast domestically to international “distribution windows.” Lotz asserts, “As the economics of the industry change, the potential viability of a show in international sales has come to be an important consideration in whether it is produced for the U.S. market in the first place.”\textsuperscript{46} While many studios do keep international markets in mind when producing their series, this does not necessarily mean that they take into account the preferences of global viewers. Ultimately, assumptions regarding a series’ viability in international markets are “based on seller’s perceptions of buyers’ preferences, and buyers’ perceptions of their target audiences.”\textsuperscript{47}

With so many degrees of separation between domestic sellers and international viewers, misconceptions regarding international appeal can be quite common. For instance, there has long been a general perception that shows featuring African-American casts have less syndication value abroad. In 2014, Fox screened \textit{Empire} (Daniels and Strong, 2015-present) for international buyers, but most passed on the project. However, once the show premiered to blockbuster ratings in the U.S., buyers revisited their positions, and Empire ultimately sold out in practically every major global market. Other African-American-centered shows, including \textit{Black-ish} (Barris, 2014-present)

\textsuperscript{46} Lotz, \textit{Television Will be Revolutionized}, 96.
and *Power* (Agboh, 2014-present) have encountered similar stance reversals in the international market. These dramatic shifts in perception illustrate that shows bred for international syndication do not necessarily reflect the preferences of the audiences they are targeting.

Traditional television networks primarily serve the domestic market, which is often where they initially release their programs before sometimes recouping production costs through international sales. On the other hand, Netflix is a global Internet television company. Though approximately 60% of its subscribers are based in the United States, its scripted series are simultaneously released across all territories, and it has been aggressively expanding overseas. At the beginning of 2016, CEO Reed Hastings announced that the service had added 130 new countries, bringing its overall reach to 190 countries. However, Netflix has faced some challenges with licensing content for its global subscriber base. Ted Sarandos explained, “All of the studios and networks have situated themselves to be regional sellers…Now we are global buyers, and buying global rights to shows and movies, and there is some resistance to it.”

Due in part to these licensing hurdles, Netflix has accelerated its efforts to create original scripted content for specific international markets. Sarandos continued, “We are working with great local talent, local producers, local casts

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and in local languages. I hope that we will have an original-language production in all of our markets in the next year or so.”  

This approach to international distribution foregrounds viewer preferences much more than that of traditional television networks, which are commercially tied to domestic audiences. Some networks, such as HBO, have region-specific channels in several countries that operate as discrete entities. HBO’s international channels, such as HBO Asia, HBO Europe, and HBO Brazil, blend HBO original programming, locally produced original series, and licensed content. Due to global licensing restrictions, HBO must license its third-party content on a territory-by-territory basis. In a sense, this type of international presence shares many overlapping qualities with Netflix’s global network. As with Netflix, licensing restrictions inhibit uniformity across regions, but original programming (save for censorship issues) remains consistently offered.

However, while a network like HBO aims to unite its international audience under the umbrella of its brand, Netflix strives to build a “global community” of viewership that leverages data from around the world to unite viewers with niche preferences and tastes. In a statement announcing its global recommendation system, Netflix explained that viewers may be more alike than they expect:

Rather than looking at audiences through the lens of a single country and catalog…tapping into global insights makes our personalized recommendations even better because now our members benefit from like-minded viewers no matter where they are in the world. While this is

50 Ibid.

especially helpful if a member is in a new or smaller market, we’re also able to better serve members in larger, more established markets who have highly specific or niche tastes.  

This approach to recommendations sheds some light on how Netflix views its audience and, in turn, its series. While creating region-specific content is certainly important to the service, it is also keen on serving overlapping interests that transcend borders. While announcing an upcoming Anime series Perfect Bones, Erik Barmack, the vice-president of international originals, added, “In an era where the Internet knows no bounds, we are proud to deliver high quality original Anime to fans all over the world, at the exact same time, no matter where they live whether it be Japan, France, Mexico, the US, and beyond,” underscoring Netflix’s commitment to this global mentality.

**FINAL THOUGHTS**

When dealing with the advent of a new media phenomenon that seems to disrupt the status quo, the public discourse has a tendency to veer toward hyperbole, seemingly disregarding important contextual elements. Certainly, some of Netflix’s contributions and practices can be heralded as “unprecedented” or “revolutionary,” but a decent amount of its actions are grounded in prior precedent or represent the culmination of decades-long trends. Many of its developments in viewer control, distribution, audience fragmentation, creative freedom, data analytics, and international

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52 Ibid.
programming can claim some spine of influence within the history of the medium. Through thorough examination of the relevant past progressions and events, we deepen our understanding of Netflix's impact on the television industry. A recognition of the platform's role within the medium puts us on a much better footing to investigate its influence over creative decision-making and television storytelling.
CHAPTER 2
THE AESTHETIC TOOLBOX OF NETFLIX

In the creation of any television program, producers are met with a set of tools by which to tell their stories. These tools represent the aesthetic possibilities offered by the medium and the premise. A given series’ aesthetic toolbox can be defined and limited through any number of forces, and oftentimes, a producer may be unaware that certain possibilities even exist until a precedent has been set. Furthermore, the degree to which certain tools are optimally suited for particular series, platforms, or audiences can be a point of contention. For instance, many argue that the approach to character development in AMC’s *Breaking Bad* (Gilligan, 2008-2013) necessitates that viewers watch the series from the very beginning. Given protagonist Walter White’s gradual transformation from boring school teacher to drug kingpin over the span of the show, the reasoning is that viewers who enter partway through the series are not optimally engaging with the character, having not been familiar with the man he once was. Accordingly, one could argue that this type of multi-season character transformation is not ideally suited for traditional television, where new viewers can tune in at any point during the series’ run. Creator Vince Gilligan may be (at least partially) in agreement, as he once admitted, “I think Netflix kept us on the air.”

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This chapter explores some of the ways in which the Netflix model modifies or elaborates on the tools offered to producers of traditional television. In order to delineate the formal implications specific to Netflix, one must first understand the normative aesthetics that characterize the traditional television space. Among the observed literature, Jason Mittell’s book *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* provides the most comprehensive discussion on the formal qualities of contemporary television programs. A key offering by this source is its focus on what Mittell calls “poetics,” or the ways in which texts create meaning, as opposed to broader anthropological or cultural issues surrounding television.\(^5^5\) The study of television poetics provides valuable insight into the creative decision-making that manifests on-screen.

In his book, Mittell deliberates on the formal aspects of complex television, which he defines as television storytelling that “redefines episodic forms under the influence of serial narration.”\(^5^6\) Complex television programs, in contrast to conventional narrative form, balance episodic and serial forms in order to sustain a narrative that builds over time. According to this definition, most, if not all, Netflix original scripted series demonstrate qualities characteristic of complex television. In fact, Mittell incorporates some early Netflix series, such as *Orange Is the New Black*, into his discussion on narrative complexity. However, given the relative novelty of streamed original programming, the book’s predominant focus is traditional television.

\(^5^5\) Mittell, *Complex TV*, 4-5.

\(^5^6\) Ibid., 18.
Still, the fact that Netflix series figure into the larger conversation on complex television is an indication that the move to a streaming model does not represent a clean break from traditional television. Rather, it implies that there actually exists significant overlap. In the 1990s and 2000s, shifts in technology (DVDs, DVRs, the Internet, etc.) may not have directly brought about the rise of complex television, but they did act as enabling conditions that facilitated the increased prevalence of these types of series. Certain aesthetic possibilities that may have once been considered ill-suited for the medium became more attractive in the face of rapid changes transforming the viewer relationship. Mittell argues, “Expectations for how viewers watch television, how producers create stories, and how series are distributed have all shifted.”

Similarly, Netflix original series do not reject the norms of traditional television storytelling. Instead, the platform's offerings seem to fall in line with broader ongoing shifts toward increasing narrative complexity. The Netflix model elaborates on these shifts, adapting and reshaping existing notions of televisual narrative complexity in accordance with the unique nature of the platform. This chapter highlights the specific aesthetic possibilities encouraged by the Netflix streaming model, as compared to traditionally distributed complex television. Evidence drawn from existing Netflix shows helps illuminate specific aesthetic tools that the platform offers producers. This is not to say that every Netflix series does or should take advantage of

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37 Ibid., 3.
these possibilities, or that traditional television must necessarily rule them out. This so-called toolbox continues to expand and mutate, as more producers create for the new platform and experiment with its limits and capabilities.

**Episode One**

In traditional television, the pilot episode holds an integral role in series creation, distribution, and reception. This inaugural episode of the series, produced independently of the rest of the season, functions to sell both networks and viewers on the program. Networks watch pilots to determine the commercial viability of a potential series, and viewers watch them to decide if they want to return next week for more. For traditional networks, which operate within the live broadcast schedule, these episodes help determine which projects are worth fitting into a time slot and which must be abandoned at the pilot stage (usually quite a few).

In the case of some traditionally distributed programs, networks occasionally decide to forego the pilot stage and commit to an entire season. These “straight-to-series” pick-ups are usually reserved for high-profile projects, which typically have top-level talent already attached and are generally considered safer bets. Even in the case of these straight-to-series orders, traditional programs are tied to the weekly broadcast schedule, which keeps the onus on episode one to hook viewers into watching the show. Therefore, even though producers of straight-to-series shows likely feel less pressure to sell the network on the first episode, its relationship to viewers remains similar to that of the pilot. Perhaps in part because of this, Mittell
broadly refers to all traditional series openers as pilots (as many tend to do). He claims that the primary role of the pilot is to “teach us how to watch the series and, in doing so, make us want to keep watching.”

Netflix, which operates outside of the programming schedules of traditional television, is by far the most prominent example of a “network” that consistently forgoes the pilot process. Even its fellow streaming service Amazon Instant Video has doubled down on pilots. Amazon places pilot orders for multiple potential projects and releases them to its subscribers. Ostensibly subbing out network executives for subscribers, Amazon Studios uses viewer feedback on these episodes to decide which ones to order to series. Though many of these shows are ultimately released in the same all-at-once manner as Netflix series, the preservation of the pilot process (albeit, in a modified form) still promotes the traditional role of the first episode as being representative of the rest of the series.

Meanwhile, Netflix tends to deemphasize the role of the introductory episode, as it is traditionally defined. This point is supported by the way it commissions shows (i.e. no pilots, only straight-to-series) and informs the way it distributes them. In a press release, chief content officer Ted Sarandos explained:

Given the precious nature of primetime slots on traditional TV, a series pilot is arguably the most important point in the life of the show. However, in our research…we found that no one was ever hooked on

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58 Ibid., 56.
the pilot. This gives us confidence that giving our members all episodes at once is more aligned with how fans are made.”

Though Sarandos undoubtedly stands to benefit from subscribers embracing the all-at-once release model, indicating a considerable bias, his comments help to explain the transformed role of the first episode in Netflix original series.

In order to explore the ways in which Netflix series may treat their opening episodes differently from traditional programs, I will first outline Mittell’s analysis of the goals and norms of pilot episodes, contrasting it with moments from Netflix shows, before performing a more thorough case study analysis of the first episode of the Netflix series Narcos (Brancato, Bernard, and Miro, 2015-present), entitled “Descenso.” Because the concept of the pilot has long played a crucial role in television storytelling, not every introductory episode of a Netflix series deviates significantly from the norms set by traditional television. Not all producers faced with a novel platform decide to utilize every unique tool it offers. The decision to study the inaugural episode of Narcos stems from the observation that it represents a noteworthy departure from the tools typically used to introduce series and seasons of traditional television.

A key facet of Mittell’s analysis of the pilot episode in complex television is the expectation that it must teach the viewer how to watch the series, presenting its narrative strategies in order to create a template for the

rest of the season’s storytelling. He writes, “For a television series, a pilot is
the primary site for establishing intrinsic norms for the ongoing series and
making clear connections to the relevant extrinsic norms of genre, narrative
mode, and style.” Even in cases of shows employing unconventional
strategies, Mittell argues that programs should announce the series’ tone,
style, and structure as a “promissory note for what is to come.” The first
episode is typically designed as the primary argument for a series’ viability
(for networks) and appeal (for viewers).

Netflix encourages its original series to reevaluate this basic
assumption. The first episode of Orange Is the New Black, “I Wasn’t Ready,”
introduces Piper Chapman and tells the story virtually entirely through her
perspective. Its primary goals are to use Piper as a means of entering the
prison world, as well as to explain her back-story and how she came to be in
this position. The episode devotes comparatively less time to exploring the
prison space and developing the supporting cast of inmates, elements that
end up becoming a primary focus of the season. A review by the A.V. Club
acknowledged this decision, stating, “It’s this task that takes a back seat here:
we meet various other inmates, get a quick glimpse of the guards…but we
don’t really get to know them because Piper doesn’t have time to interact with
them.” This episode effectively throws the viewer into the world alongside
Piper, aligning us with her personal struggle while providing a cursory glimpse

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60 Mittell, Complex TV, 74.
61 Ibid., 67.
at the wide expanse of narrative possibilities that will later be explored. The episode opens *in medias res*, showing Piper struggle to navigate the prison showers, before rewinding back to her life of privilege leading up to incarceration and following her arrival to prison. This narrative structure serves Piper’s choices, goals, and experiences over much else, aligning us with a character that helps ground us in this unfamiliar environment. Ultimately, the season favors the ensemble over the individual, highlighting personal stories through character-centric storylines and flashbacks, while still lending an eye to the broader system at play. Piper’s storyline still remains relatively more visible than the rest, but it rarely commands a perspective as narrow as this episode exhibits. Creator Jenji Kohan articulated her intention: “In a lot of ways Piper was my Trojan Horse...[I]f you take this white girl, this sort of fish out of water, and you follow her in, you can then expand your world to tell all of those other stories.”63 According to Mittell, the pilot traditionally establishes a series’ approach to balancing multiple characters and storylines, but this episode defies that role.64

The first episode of season four of *Arrested Development* (Hurwitz, 2003-06, 2013-present) provides further insight into introductory episodes on Netflix. Though this episode, titled “Flight of the Phoenix,” is technically a season opener and not the first episode of the series, this was the program’s first episode in seven years and the first to be released on Netflix. Mittell

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64 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 82.
describes season openers as “microbeginnings to reorient old viewers and welcome in new ones.”\textsuperscript{65} This point is particularly true for “Flight of the Phoenix,” which represents a continuation in story but a departure in narrative style from previous seasons. Each episode of season four focuses on a different character and covers interlocking stories that occur over the same span of time. The first episode, which focuses on the character of Michael, does very little to establish this new storytelling form. Aside from a slight nod in the opening credits (“It’s Michael’s Arrested Development”), the episode does not acknowledge or prepare the viewer for the new style of narrative. A Grantland review of “Flight of the Phoenix” points to the effect of this withheld explanation on viewers: “You know you’re missing something but it’s not clear what.”\textsuperscript{66} Mittell explains that one of the goals of the pilot is to provide an “encapsulation of what a series might be like on an ongoing basis.”\textsuperscript{67} The opening episode of Netflix’s Arrested Development reevaluates this notion and expects viewers to piece together the puzzle, as the series progresses beyond episode one. This creative decision points to a potential flaw in the storytelling, leading to unmet or misdirected viewer expectations. After the release of the season, creator Mitch Hurwitz confessed, “I felt in many ways, I did not prepare the audience for this...That first episode became much more like chapter one of a novel than episode one of a series. And I didn’t prep you

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 55.
\textsuperscript{67} Mittell, Complex TV, 56.
guys—I’m really sorry about that." For a show that is reintroducing itself to viewers through this new season and platform, the episode does little to establish its new narrative direction. In other words, viewers who are accustomed to watching this series in a traditional format are not cued to recalibrate their expectations for this more experimental approach.

“Descenso,” the introductory episode of Narcos, exemplifies some of the unique qualities in the aesthetic toolbox offered to producers of Netflix shows, as it relates to the first episode of a program. Rather than display narrative strategies indicative of the rest of the season, this episode differs markedly in its storytelling form. Furthermore, its goals and scope are noticeably different from other episodes. Voice-over narration guides the viewer through a fast-paced documentary-style rundown of historical events, pertinent characters, and institutional forces that contextualizes and sets the stage for the central conflicts of the season. The episode provides occasional glimpses at the sort of character-based drama that gains more prominence in future episodes, but the overall anthropology of the world is the dominant focus, affording the viewer a degree of critical distancing that prioritizes comprehension over emotion.

The narrator of Narcos, DEA Agent Murphy, is also a character within the story world. However, his voice-over is delivered from the point of view of an older present-day Murphy whose narration seems almost omniscient in

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scope. “Descenso” concludes with the character Murphy arriving in Bogotá with his wife, and the rest of the season picks up from there. It is easy to imagine a more traditional version of this episode that leads with this inciting moment, seeing as this is where the central narrative, as we come to know it, truly begins. Instead, the bulk of the episode is led by Murphy the narrator, who expeditiously guides the viewer through various points in time and space in order to provide a bird’s-eye view of the moving parts involved in the story.

Occasionally, the episode deliberately silences the narration and slows the pacing to yield the floor to key character moments, such as our introduction to Pablo Escobar. The first time we see Escobar, he is pulled over by a group of police officers. Over the course of the scene, he reverses the power dynamic as it was initially defined, demonstrating his extensive knowledge about the officers’ families. While Murphy’s voice-over controls the pacing for the majority of the episode, Escobar takes command here, as long-take handheld tracking shots follow him from one officer to the next. Soon after this scene, the narrative snaps back into its previously established rhythm. Such moments represent brief teasers for the rest of the season, when emotional engagement becomes a more significant goal within the narrative. For now, these characters mainly serve as essential components to a grander apparatus.

Rather than placing its central focus on character-centered exposition, this episode functions similarly to a stylistically embellished piece of journalism. Throughout the episode, dramatized sequences are laced with
real archival footage, as they both support the narration in explaining the events that lead up to Pablo Escobar’s drug empire. Murphy’s voice-over covers a wide expanse of material, explaining the political forces that brought cocaine to Colombia, the logistics behind Escobar’s operation, and the implications of the drug trade on American society and policy. His narration often articulates facts and linkages that facilitate our understanding of the complex web laid before us. Murphy narrates, “From ’79 to ’84, there were 3,245 murders in Miami,” over real archival footage of dead bodies being collected. As the story jumps from 1989 Colombia to 1973 Chile to 1979 Miami, title cards help orient the viewer but also call attention to the episode’s construction. Camera movement repeatedly functions to highlight, document, and observe various processes and actions. In a scene where Cockroach leads Pablo and Gustavo through their first visit to a cocaine-processing lab, a handheld camera continually wanders away from the characters to observe the various steps of the process. Moments like these reflect the episode’s documentary-esque focus on how the sausage gets made, so to speak. These devices encourage comprehension and allow the viewer to absorb a great deal of expository information. By keeping the viewer at a distance, the episode aims to elicit engagement from a fascination with following the process and making sense of the world.

While the expository goals of this episode favor the wider scope of its narration, the relationship between story action and voice-over is more evenly balanced in future episodes. Though Murphy’s voice-over and the journalistic
framework continue to play a role in viewer engagement, the rest of the season prioritizes character and emotion to a much greater degree. “Descenso” tells its story from a bird’s-eye vantage point, occasionally swooping down to focus on character. Inversely, subsequent episodes spend most their time on the character level and periodically zoom outward to contextualize the drama within the broader network. As a result, the primary source of viewer engagement during the rest of the season stems from the emotions and actions of the characters. Given the paucity of character drama in “Descenso,” the episode aims to captivate the viewer through its engaging delivery of background information. In the voice-over narration, Murphy’s manner of speech is characterized by stylized quips and personability that inject humor and sarcasm into the expositional rundown. The episode establishes this narrative voice from the very beginning when Murphy discusses present-day government surveillance: “Trust me; they know who you’re fuckin’.” The tone of the narration remains relatively consistent throughout the season. However, later episodes utilize voice-over to facilitate the progression of specific plotlines within the story. In other words, the rest of the season uses voice-over to guide the storytelling rather than to assume that role for itself.

To a certain extent, Narcos’ approach to exposition in its first episode is less comparable to television as it is to cinema and documentary film. In fact, the series was originally conceived as a movie project, according to
executive producer Eric Newman.\textsuperscript{69} Moreover, an executive producer of the series and director of “Descenso” is José Padilha, who is best known for his work in documentary and narrative feature films. Padilha’s handling of the exposition for \textit{Narcos} was also influenced by cinema, as he admittedly drew from \textit{Goodfellas} (Scorsese, 1990):

“There’s no reason for me to shy away from it. [In \textit{Goodfellas}], Henry takes the audience into the world of the mafia and tells the audience the complexities of that world. We have two characters that are DEA agents, taking the audience into the world of cocaine and into the world of Columbia. It actually suits the \textit{Goodfellas} model perfectly.”\textsuperscript{70}

A mark of Netflix’s impact, the comparisons he makes to cinema indicate that the creators approach \textit{Narcos} as a season-long story rather than as a string of episodes.

“Descenso” serves to set the tone of the series’ narration as well as to provide a great deal of narrative exposition to help orient viewers. Mittell names both of these functions as being traditional goals for the pilot episode.\textsuperscript{71} However, the episode does not establish narrative strategies and norms intrinsic to the rest of the series. Rather, it functions more as a foreword that supplies viewers with the necessary tools to watch the program. One review by the \textit{A.V. Club} reacted to the voice-over in a way that supports this interpretation of \textit{Narcos’} first episode: “In the season premiere especially,


\textsuperscript{71} Mittell, \textit{Complex TV}, 56.
[the voice-over] is intrusive, messy, and irritating. As the season rolls on, the voice-over not only becomes less prominent, but also serves as one of the more compelling ways the show adds depth and complexity to the narrative." Subjective critique aside, this reviewer points to an observable break between “Descenso” and the rest of season one with regard to the same narrative device. The episode functions in a distinct way, utilizing the tools offered by the platform to introduce the season in a way that is not necessarily representative of it.

**SEASON STRUCTURE**

The fact that Netflix only makes straight-to-series orders and releases its seasons all at once also has an effect on the aesthetic possibilities for season structure. As discussed earlier, no other major television channel exclusively makes full season orders, usually opting instead to order a specific number of episodes. This practice implies that the basic default unit of television storytelling is the episode. Mittell writes:

> The typical model of television consumption, divided into weekly episodes and annual seasons, constrains producers interested in telling stories that transcend individual installments, as any viewer’s memory of previous episodes is quite variable, with a significant number of viewers having missed numerous episodes altogether.

Netflix’s release model compresses the gaps between installments, allowing for producers to reevaluate traditional poetics to tell longer-form stories.

Therefore, the way that Netflix orders shows and the way it releases them

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73 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 180.
both contribute to changes in how producers craft seasons, as well as how viewers receive them.

For traditional television networks, the straight-to-series model of commissioning series is generally seen as being more risky than the pilot model because an entire season demands a much larger monetary bet than a single pilot. For this reason, the season order remains the exception rather than the rule. Netflix, on the other hand, models its series development and distribution around the season. In some cases, it has doubled down on this model, occasionally committing beyond the first season. These advance commitments put more time and power in the hands of creators, allowing for them to plan and structure a program’s storytelling over a longer span of time. By looking at examples of particularly ambitious commitments, the type of which are virtually absent from traditional television, we can study the aesthetic implications of advance commitment on season storytelling.

Netflix’s lengthiest series plan involves its five-series deal with Marvel Television. Reminiscent of the Marvel Avengers film franchise, the plan includes four character-centric series (Daredevil, Jessica Jones, Luke Cage, and Iron Fist) along with a fifth crossover series The Defenders that will unite the characters. The scope of this commitment places an emphasis on the role of the season, rather than the episode, as the basic unit of a series. Each season not only represents an installment within an individual series but also serves a narrative purpose within the overall franchise. The first two releases of the franchise, Daredevil (Goddard, 2015-present) and Jessica Jones
(Rosenberg, 2015-present), are currently streaming. Two seasons of *Daredevil* have been released, and Netflix has commissioned a second season for *Jessica Jones*. The first seasons of these two series function as standalone hero’s journeys that shy away from self-contained, episodic plots in favor of long-term storylines and conflicts that span the season.

In the case of *Daredevil*, season one is an origin story that culminates in the hero finally donning his red suit before defeating his season-long adversary. A *Forbes* review of season one read, “In *Daredevil*, Marvel delivers one of the greatest live-action superhero origin stories ever made. It is in the same top-tier category of true superhero origin films along with *Batman Begins*, *Iron Man*, and *Superman: The Movie*.”

By comparing this season to feature films, the critic’s commentary illuminates the non-traditional poetics that govern the season. According to Mittell, cinematic narratives differ from televisual narratives in that they manage viewer comprehension within the “controlled unfolding” of a film, while series must balance short-term memories of episodic events and serialized recall across the season. By compressing the serial gaps between episodes and releasing the season as a unit, Netflix allows for a more controlled, continuous viewing experience across the season. *Daredevil* takes this opportunity to tell an origin story that follows Matt Murdock, as he grapples with his sense of right and wrong, develops his strengths, and faces a powerful villain who tests his

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75 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 180.
preconceptions about morality. These events build across the season to eventually transform him into Daredevil, the superhero. Not until the final moments of the final episode does he even put on the costume or receive the eponymous alias. The season ends with a shot of Daredevil looking out over Hell’s Kitchen in search of his next mission, signaling that the season’s work is done.

By adapting a feature film narrative strategy to a season of television, Daredevil commits to a relatively lengthy span of time over which to tell its story. While each episode of television similarly faces an obligation to fill its runtime, a season-long story poses an even greater challenge. Though its filmic narrative allows for greater comprehension and cohesion over the first season, Daredevil encounters a length issue that potentially threatens its engagement with the viewer. Superhero origin films typically place plot at the forefront of the narrative and engineer character development through the action. Meanwhile, a more conventional television series featuring an action hero can maintain an emphasis on plot by repeating exposition and telling discrete episodic stories. By stretching its narrative over 13 episodes, Daredevil must space out its action and fill the gaps with dramatic dialogue-heavy scenes. For this reason, the show is just as much a character-based crime drama as it is a superhero action series. Though the first season of Daredevil was generally well-received, a common source of critique (and praise) was its methodical pace, which may reflect the public’s delayed
adjustment to the type of long-form storytelling encouraged by the Netflix model. A *New York Times* review read:

To a greater degree than in previous Netflix series, Mr. Goddard and Mr. DeKnight have taken account of binge viewing in structuring their narrative...Where traditional television comic-book adaptations feel the need to account for their hero's powers and introduce his central adversary quickly, "Marvel's Daredevil" takes its time...This willingness to delay our narrative gratification is a pleasant change from the norm, but it reflects a pace that could be charitably described as leisurely.\(^{76}\)

The reviewer lumps Netflix viewing behavior together under the banner of binge viewership, essentially making the assumption that people who watch *Daredevil* will watch all episodes in quick succession. While Netflix certainly encourages binge-viewing patterns by allowing subscribers to watch at their own chosen pace, an all-at-once release does not equate to immediate consumption. In acquiring the near-guarantee that viewers watch a season from the beginning, Netflix series surrender their ability to have any say in the pace at which they watch. This trade-off leads to certain platform-specific challenges faced by creators. The creators of some Netflix series, such as *Daredevil* and *Jessica Jones*, aim to take advantage of our comprehensive viewership by extending their stories over a full season. In doing so, they implicitly accept the possibility that some viewers will watch them too slowly and lose comprehension or patience.

*Jessica Jones*, even moreso than *Daredevil*, closely follows its single central conflict over the course of season one. The eponymous protagonist

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has a dark, traumatic history with the season’s villain, Kilgrave, and the unfolding of the conflict parallels Jessica’s own personal recovery and reclamation. A review in *Variety* notes that the show “takes its time revealing just how canny and malevolent the detective’s main opponent is...[H]e takes up a lot of space in the drama’s narrative and inside Jessica’s head.”

Though Jessica is a private eye, the series rejects episodic case-of-the-week plots in favor of a slow-burn story that simultaneously provides insight into the character and tracks her journey to defeat the man who broke her.

The Netflix model allows the program to rely heavily on long-term recall, treating the season as a cohesive whole. Episode one first finds Jessica arguing with a man, obscured behind the glass of her office door. The camera slowly tracks in before she throws the man out through the glass. A jazzy saxophone score plays beneath her noir-tinged voice-over, in which she explains that she keeps to herself because “people do bad shit.” In the first episode, she unwittingly faces the resurfaced threat of Kilgrave, who we later learn had mind-controlled her and raped her at a time when she was trying to be a superhero. Across the season, the fight against Kilgrave forces Jessica to reclaim the hero position and face her past traumas. In the final scene after defeating Kilgrave, Jessica sits in her office deleting voicemails from citizens asking for her help. The camera tracks outward into the hallway, framing her through the newly re-smashed window of the door. Over a similar saxophone score, Jessica wonders through voice-over if she can fool herself into being a

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hero. Through narration, music, camera movement, and composition, the bookends of the season evoke a sense of symmetry that cues viewers to consider what, if anything, has changed. This example of narrative construction points to the broader season-level storytelling that governs *Jessica Jones*. The choice to audiovisually bracket the season through various stylistic devices indicates an expectation that a decent amount of viewers will watch at a quick enough pace that episode one remains in their memory when they watch the final episode. For a traditional series, this decision would make less sense creatively, as several weeks would unquestionably pass between the airings of the first and last episodes. Besides, traditional television does not typically allow for the degree of advance commitment that would permit creators to make such a decision in the first place.

In another example of advance commitment, Netflix invested $100 million in two seasons of *House of Cards*, its first original scripted series, without seeing a single frame in advance. This degree of commitment is virtually absent from traditional television and has significant implications for the aesthetic possibilities offered to producers. Creator Beau Willimon stated, “Because we had a two-season order, I thought of seasons one and two as a combined entity—a 26-hour movie.”78 Though the film medium undoubtedly encourages different poetics from streamed television, this comparison

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implies an approach to narrative form that emphasizes serialized storytelling across a set period of time. Seasons one and two of *House of Cards* feature a methodical progression tracking protagonist Frank Underwood’s ascendency to power. Willimon insisted, “We always knew Francis should be president by the end of season two, and we knew that Zoe would meet her demise at the end of episode one in season two before we even started watching *[sic]* season one.” According to producer Modi Wiczyk, “There’s not a cliffhanger at the end of every episode. The episodes really build in a very different way.” The program plans and structures these seasons in such a way that each episode and plot point functions as part of the broader narrative, which culminates in Frank becoming president.

Perhaps for this reason, season three of *House of Cards* received mixed reviews from critics and audiences. One review for the *Hollywood Reporter* attributed the season’s problems to “story fatigue.” Willimon acknowledged the break and called it a “narrative departure,” stating, “The first two seasons were about an ascent; now they’re at the top of the mountain. There’s no mountain left to climb. That’s gonna change things.”

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seasons one and two, an upward trajectory takes Frank to increasingly higher echelons of power, ending with the presidency. The conflicts that arise along the way represent obstacles on this central path. Once the ultimate goal has finally been reached, the narrative in season three must then set up a new story with a different set of expectations.

At its core, the break in the storytelling between seasons two and three is a manifestation of the uncertainty that clouds the creative process. In traditional television, when a series receives an episode order, creators operate under a certain set of assumptions. Realizing that the network may pull the show off the air if it underperforms, creators will encapsulate in each episode its primary argument to the viewers, especially when producing for a broadcast network. Also, in preparation for possibly getting picked up for more episodes, the series will often leave the story open-ended. In the case of a full season order, creators may write an ending that doubles as a series finale so that viewers are satisfied if the network decides to cancel the show. *House of Cards* faces a similar set of constraints from uncertainty but on a larger scale. Netflix’s $100 million commitment to *House of Cards* practically represents the utmost level of confidence in a show’s quality. Even in this most extreme case, uncertainty still affects the creative process. By committing to two seasons before a single scene has been shot, Netflix guaranteed the creators a vast expanse of story time, but they could not sign off on another season before at least gauging the show’s reception upon its release. Even if the first two seasons were well received, other factors such
as contract negotiations or budgetary concerns, could raise question marks.

In the face of this uncertainty, the creators of the show faced an important trade-off. They could either take advantage of the two-season commitment and carefully plan out a self-contained story over the allotted time, or they could keep the story open ended and risk leaving it unfinished. Ultimately, they chose the former, opting for unity across its first two seasons and essentially setting the series up for a divergent third season.

According to Mittell, traditional series that aspire to this type of serialized storytelling tend to rely on “diegetic retelling,” often utilizing dialogue and visual cues to activate viewers’ long-term recall within individual episodes. Similarly, these series oftentimes include recaps at the start of each episode in order to remind viewers of the events “previously on” the program. Mittell claims, “Industry lore has long asserted that fans only watch one-third of new episodes, suggesting that creators must write for a spectrum of potential viewers.” Narrative redundancies serve to facilitate the existence of heavily serialized storytelling on platforms that, in many ways, inhibit it through weekly release schedules. The creator of Netflix series *BoJack Horseman* (Bob-Waksberg, 2014-present) contended that the streaming model provides an alternative:

> The coolest thing about [Netflix’s] model to me, moreso even than the idea of people watching all the episodes together, is the idea that people are going to watch all the episodes in order. This is something we as audiences take for granted, but you can’t take it for granted when you’re working on a show for a more traditional network.

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83 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 181.
84 Ibid., 165.
Traditionally, every episode needs to work as an entrance to the series even if you’ve never seen the show before... We didn’t have to constantly reintroduce the characters and the premise, and we could have the characters and the premise change. This influenced everything we did.\textsuperscript{85}

\textit{House of Cards}, along with all other Netflix original series, forgoes the “previously on” segment, seeing as the previous episode is immediately accessible for viewers to watch or re-watch. Furthermore, the series lacks much of the diegetic retelling found on traditional television, as Willimon asserted, “We always assume that we’ve got a smart audience that have a good memory, that we don’t have to repeat a lot.”\textsuperscript{86} Because the platform lets viewers control the pace of their watching and allows them to repeat episodes if necessary, the series generally operates under the assumption that the viewer has watched and retained the previous episodes.

This approach to storytelling can potentially hinder viewer comprehension as well. In the absence of weekly appointment viewing, the platform makes it just as easy for viewers to let several days or weeks pass before returning to a series. For a show like \textit{House of Cards}, the barrier to restarting is probably greater than it would be for a traditional show. Without a recap segment preceding each episode, the series necessitates that a returning viewer sacrifice a degree of comprehension or take the time to repeat earlier episodes. \textit{House of Cards}, like several other Netflix series,


accepts this as a possibility but still maintains some reminders and dialogue cues within the narrative to jog the viewer’s memory. As with traditional television shows, Netflix series must write for a spectrum of viewers. But rather than accounting for differences in the amount that viewers have seen, creators must consider different viewing paces.

GLOBAL STORYTELLING

“You are witnessing the birth of a global TV network,” declared Reed Hastings, upon adding 130 more countries to the streaming service.87 While more than half of all total subscribers are in the United States, Netflix is the only service that distributes its series with such global scope. As of January 2016, Netflix has 45 million domestic subscribers and 75 million total global subscribers.88 Most networks release their programs within their home countries and then separately license out content to regional channels for international distribution. The fact that Netflix serves such a diverse subscriber base has serious implications on the creative possibilities for its original series. While traditional television networks’ content decisions are based on domestic viewership or subscriptions, Netflix’s business model allows for its programming to cater both to broad swathes of its global subscriber base and to niche audiences within specific countries and language communities.

88 Spangler, “Netflix Hits 75 Million.”
Though not all Netflix scripted series choose to take advantage of the platform’s multinational presence, some programs tap into the unique aesthetic opportunities that it offers. Club de Cuervos (Alazraki and Lam, 2015-present) is a Spanish-language comedy-drama series created for Netflix by U.S.-based producers. Co-creator Gaz Alazraki, who was born and raised in Mexico, set out to tell this story using American comedy writers who were experienced in Hollywood scripted television. According to showrunner Jay Dyer, the writing process was carried out in English, and Alazraki, who also comprised the writer’s room, would translate scripts into Spanish. This writing approach has repercussions on the show’s comedic style, as writer Alessia Costantini explained:

We quickly learned that we couldn’t rely on clever wordplay, or turns of phrase, because those would be lost in translation. It forced us to dig deeper and write character-driven humor that resonated from a story perspective, more than the classical set-up/punchline construction. Constantini’s comments attribute the series’ international appeal to its writing, which is not tied to any one culture’s sensibility or language. Though her remarks during this promotional interview carry some bias, they help describe the influence of the Netflix model, which in this case encourages universal over regional appeal. Due to the unique offerings of the platform, Club de Cuervos represents a deviation from traditional television, combining Hispanic


91 Gruber, “Club De Cuervos.”
actors, subject matter, and settings with Hollywood television comedy writing and thus catering to a global audience.

*Narcos* utilizes Netflix’s global presence to authentically tell a story that takes place primarily in Colombia. Shot on location, the series’ documentary-style approach to the story of Pablo Escobar’s Medellín cartel calls for a certain degree of realism. The series aims to give viewers access to the multidimensionality of Escobar and his world without obstruction or distraction from historically implausible English dialogue or being tied to an American point of view. Because Netflix services several Spanish-speaking countries in addition to the United States, which itself contains a sizable Latino population, *Narcos* is afforded the opportunity to portray characters as speaking their native languages.

According to industry lore, American audiences are notoriously averse to subtitled dialogue.\(^2\) Netflix’s unique subscriber make-up helps explain the program’s break from traditional American television, where foreign characters often speak accented English or lack substantial screen time.\(^3\) One anomalous example from traditional television is *The Bridge* (Stiehm and Reid, 2013-2014), which takes place on the U.S.-Mexico border and contains both English and Spanish dialogue. However, the series, which aired on FX, does not approach the level of bilingualism found in *Narcos* and was cancelled after two seasons due to very low ratings. Traditional television

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networks are not in the same position as Netflix to produce multilingual content (especially with a sizable budget), seeing as they depend solely on domestic viewership or subscriptions to rule on a show’s success. According to Netflix executive Cindy Holland, the company, which collects data on subscriber viewing behavior, inferred that an American audience existed for this type of series based on the popularity of foreign films among its subscribers.94

Not only does Narcos contain Spanish dialogue, but it also frequently prioritizes the Colombian narco storyline over the American drug-enforcement one. The inclusion of an English-speaking narrator likely allays American viewers’ sense of foreignness regarding the program. An article by The Washington Post claimed, “The subtitles are stealthily delivered,” adding that the show’s marketing was strategically centered on American character Steve Murphy, whose presence onscreen is hardly its primary focus.95 Furthermore, the proportion of Spanish-dialogue scenes within each episode seems to increase once the season progresses past the first few episodes. As mentioned earlier, the Netflix model enables narrative techniques to evolve over the course of the season, allowing for later episodes that notably differ from earlier ones. For instance, episode two of Narcos, which features the official conception of the Medellin cartel, contains approximately 15 minutes and 47 seconds of Spanish dialogue, representing 34% of the episode’s


95 Merry, “Tricking American Audiences.”
running time. Meanwhile, episode seven, which represents a major turning point in the war against the narcos and finds Escobar on the defensive, spends 30 minutes and 33 seconds, or 60% of the episode, showing characters speaking Spanish. From episode two to episode seven, the proportion of Spanish dialogue nearly doubles. Admittedly, other narrative factors likely figure into the inclusion of Spanish-dialogue scenes. However, these specific examples fit in line with a broader development observed across the season. The season begins by initially using heavy narration and scenes of English dialogue to familiarize viewers with the world, its characters, and the relevant plotlines. In this way, the program effectively eases English-speaking viewers into following a story that ultimately is told primarily in Spanish.

**COMPLEX COMEDY**

Television comedies are traditionally characterized by lower degrees of seriality than dramas. Even in the realm of complex television, comedic programs generally tend to veer more toward the episodic than their counterparts in drama, which rely more heavily on serial plotting to achieve their narrative goals. According to screenwriting instructor Robert McKee, “Comedy allows the writer to halt narrative drive, the forward projecting mind of the audience, and interpolate into the telling a scene with no story purpose.”⁹⁶ Still, comedy series implement seriality to varying degrees and to achieve various ends. However, because comedy has an inherently different

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relationship with seriality from drama, the Netflix all-at-once release model offers some unique aesthetic opportunities to comedy series in particular.

Many complex comedies invoke the “operational aesthetic,” whereby viewers receive pleasure and laughs not only through the story world, but also through an appreciation for the narrative mechanics used to achieve complex plot structures. Some traditionally televised series, such as *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (David, 2000-2011), *How I Met Your Mother* (Bays and Thomas, 2005-2014), and *Arrested Development*, utilize explicitly reflexive mechanics and innovative plotting to call attention to their artful construction and play with viewers’ anticipation of the unfolding narrative. In its fourth season, which was created for Netflix instead of Fox, *Arrested Development* continues to employ strategies aimed at operational pleasures but adapts them to the streaming model.

*Arrested Development*, during its original run on Fox, experiments with the conventions of the sitcom genre, drawing on its well-established rules to subvert viewer’s expectations and create self-reflexive comedy. The manner in which the show plays with its construction and designs its narrative takes root in the audience’s own experiences with television sitcoms. The fourth season of *Arrested Development* attempts to apply this same experimental comedic approach to Netflix’s all-at-once release model. This season presents what is essentially the same story over and over again, and the various episodes cover the action from different perspectives and time

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97 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 42.
frames, creating gaps in the narrative. With each subsequent episode, viewers are meant to receive pleasure, often with a comedic punch, through interactions with previous installments. Each episode presents new narrative threads that cue viewers to anticipate future collisions or coincidences, serving as set-ups for impending punchlines and comedic sequences. The operational aesthetic becomes reliant on the viewer’s ability to keep track of these intersections across episodes, which can often prove challenging.

While the first three seasons often feature multiple interwoven storylines that produce twists, coincidences, and convergences within each episode, season four stretches these storylines across the entirety of the season, using character-centric episodic installments to serve as pieces of a greater narrative puzzle.

Upon its release, season four of *Arrested Development* received an extremely mixed response from critics and viewers alike. The wide range of reactions may be due in part to the amount of control afforded by the Netflix model. Given that viewers have control over the pacing and the manner in which they watch, there is not one single way of meeting the show. Some viewers may rewind and rewatch sections to eagerly explore the season’s operational layers, while others may allow significant gaps of time to elapse between viewings. This degree of variation can yield wildly different viewing experiences. Even creator Mitch Hurwitz struggled to figure out the best way to watch the season. Hurwitz initially claimed that viewers should watch
season four in any order they please.\textsuperscript{98} Upon further reflection, he redacted that statement, urging viewers to watch the season in order. The fact that even the creator grappled with this very basic issue indicates where the main difficulties lie for this season of the show. The first three seasons of \textit{Arrested Development} drew on rules from the sitcom, a genre of television that has been around for decades. Hurwitz’s decision to apply this same degree of experimentation to the all-at-once release model disregards the fact that it has not been in place long enough for most viewers to derive pleasure from the operational aesthetic it inspires. At the time of its conception and production, Netflix had not yet released a single original series, and there existed no canon against which to compare. This season of \textit{Arrested Development} represents an untethered experiment on the narrative possibilities offered by the platform. Its missteps reveal a key challenge with crafting a Netflix comedy that targets operational pleasures across episodes, which is that the creator wields little control over the way that viewers will watch a given season.

Traditional comedy series experiment with serial narratives to varying degrees. Even highly episodic sitcoms, such as \textit{I Love Lucy} (Oppenheimer, Carroll, and Davis, 1951-1957), employ seriality in the sense that their settings and characters remain consistent from one episode to the next.\textsuperscript{99} In keeping with Mittell, sometimes traditional comedy series implement

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\item \textsuperscript{99} Mittell, \textit{Complex TV}, 235.
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serialized plotlines to enhance the viewer’s appreciation of the world. For instance, the will they/won’t they relationship between Ross and Rachel in Friends (Crane and Kauffman, 1994-2004) generates several serialized story arcs throughout the series’ run. However, these ongoing plots seldom require significant cumulative knowledge to engage with an individual episode, rather serving as a backdrop upon which to present comedic situations or referential humor. Some complex comedies, such as Seinfeld (David and Seinfeld, 1989-1998) and It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia (McElhenney, 2005-present), exhibit conditional seriality, using the episodic structure to subvert conventions by selectively employing seriality. These types of shows build on the audience’s familiarity with the rules and conventions that typically define the sitcom. Oftentimes, comedic programs that exhibit heavy seriality are labeled as “dramedies,” suggesting a perceived tension between serial plotting and humor. In such cases, series may foreground plot and character development, employing humor situationally within these serial plots.

Netflix’s animated sitcom BoJack Horseman utilizes the platform’s unique qualities to present an alternative to traditional relationships between seriality and comedy on television. In line with the seasons of other Netflix shows, the first half of season one of BoJack measurably differs from the second half in terms of narrative, tone, and seriality. In fact, the website Indiewire changed its review policy in direct response to the first season of BoJack Horseman, deciding thereafter to watch all episodes of the season.

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100 Ibid., 20-21.
101 Ibid., 21.
before filing a review for any Netflix series. For the first six episodes of the season, *BoJack* follows a fairly episodic narrative structure centered on a washed-up actor (who also happens to be a horse) living in Hollywood and in many ways functions as a show business satire. Set in a world where animal-people live amongst humans, the first few episodes draw comedy from the wackiness of the world. For instance, BoJack’s agent is a cat named Princess Carolyn, who bats at a mouse toy on her desk while she does business on the phone. The sheer absurdity of the story world, in combination with BoJack’s acerbic demeanor largely fuel the comedy for this opening half of the season.

The reality of BoJack’s depression, narcissism, and alcoholism, which is initially buried beneath the strangeness, eventually comes to the fore and provides the basis for empathy and pathos in the season’s darker second half. Explaining the evolution of the season, creator Raphael Bob-Waksberg said:

I want this to be more sincere than maybe you’re expecting it to be. You don’t even realize it’s there when you first start watching and you gradually get sucked into it, and by the end of the season you’re thinking, ‘Oh my god, I actually care about these characters…how did that happen?’

In many ways, the absurdity of the world is what allows for this gradual dawning of darker themes. By creating a wacky universe where animals are

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like people, the show initially almost distracts the viewer from contemplating
the character’s sadness. At the same time, the inherent wackiness allows the
series to veer into darker territory while still maintaining the comedy. Bob-
Waksberg explained:

We’re going to darker places than you could in live-action. A lot of
things we write, if it was a live-action show, I think would feel very
indulgent or feel very saccharine…but because you have cartoon
characters saying them, it opens up your heart a little bit.104

Had the show begun with this level of emotional depth, viewers would not
have been given the opportunity to properly engage with the absurdist humor
of the story world. The Netflix model allows the show to take its time in
exploring the sadness behind the absurdity by practically ensuring that
viewers watch the season in order from the beginning.

This progression toward deeper emotional alignment is coupled with
greater seriality. Supervising director Mike Hollingsworth, when asked about
the effect of the Netflix release model on planning and production, explained:

BoJack, unlike other cartoons that I can think of, is a linear story. It
doesn’t reset at the beginning of every episode like The Simpsons or
Family Guy; his house and all of his relationships are slowly destroyed
throughout the season.105

While there actually do exist some examples from traditional television of
serialized animated storytelling, the degree of seriality demonstrated by
BoJack regarding relationships, emotional states, and narrative events is
virtually unparalleled among sitcoms, let alone animation. In episode six of

104 Todd VanDerWerff, “Why Is Bojack Horseman, Netflix’s Best Show, So Very Good? Let’s Ask its
interview.
105 Edwards, “Behind ‘Bojack Horseman.’”
the first season, BoJack drunkenly steals the “D” from the Hollywood sign in order to impress his ghostwriter Diane, with whom he has fallen in love. From this point forward in the series, Hollywood is referred to as “Hollywoo,” a consistent reminder that emotional and physical repercussions persist beyond the parameters of an episode. After BoJack steals the “D,” the remainder of season one follows the once stagnant character on an emotional tailspin, employing heavier narrative seriality in order to uncover the self-hatred and misguided emotions behind his actions. By the end of season one, BoJack realizes he needs to move forward with his life.

Season two of BoJack Horseman finds BoJack struggling to improve himself, still grappling with depression and his past. Given that viewers have already been primed in the previous season to expect sadness existing alongside humor, season two doubles down on this commitment, expanding its focus to include other members of the ensemble in its long-form character development. Even characters that once seemed too bizarre to take seriously evoke moments of poignancy. Bob-Waksberg explained, “I think part of the fun of the show for me is, what’s the silliest, wackiest thing I can think of, and then let’s take that thing really seriously, let’s hack away at it until we find the heart beating underneath.”

For example, Vincent Adultman is a character that Princess Carolyn picks up in a bar during season one to make BoJack jealous. In actuality,

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Vincent is three young boys stacked on top of each other in a trench coat, but BoJack is seemingly the only one aware of this. In episode four of season two, Princess Carolyn breaks things off with him after realizing that she got into this relationship for the wrong reasons. Still oblivious to the truth about Vincent, she admits that “wanting to believe something isn’t the same as something being real.” For Carolyn, this moment represents an important realization about herself and signals a new direction for her character. Simultaneously, the inherent silliness that Vincent brings to the scene, combined with the irony in Carolyn’s obliviousness, maintains a thread of humor throughout. The scene exemplifies the series’ unique blend of poignancy and absurdity, concepts that become more closely wedded in season two. A review for Slant observed, “The series no longer oscillates between comedy and drama in the relatively clean either/or alternation that defined the first season; those moods are now merged and subsumed into a surprisingly terse satire of capitalism.”

Though season two fully commits to tracking the emotional development of these characters, it does not forsake comedy. In fact, from season one to season two, the density of joke-telling actually increases. One review of the second season for the A.V. Club contended, “Not since the early seasons of Arrested Development or the best years of 30 Rock has a series committed to the joke-a-second model like BoJack Horseman does.”

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108 Murthi, “Absurdist Humor, Biting Drama.”
Furthermore, while *BoJack* uses serialized storytelling to follow the emotional consequences and developments of its characters and their relationships, it hardly abandons episodic form. In fact, most episodes feature discrete plots, alternating between A- and B-storylines and occasionally showcasing unique narrative structures or points of view. Meanwhile, character development across the season does not adhere to straightforward arcs but rather takes an open-ended approach, as the characters take steps backward and forward trying to improve over time. *BoJack Horseman* is able to achieve these narrative goals concurrently due to the unique properties of Netflix. The all-at-once release model raises the importance of the season and allows for greater seriality but does not render the episode insignificant. In the case of *BoJack*, individual episodes have their own self-contained structures, but the emotional weight of their consequences carry on to future episodes, necessitating serial viewing.

**Authorship and Creative Control**

Discussing authorship within the context of any collaborative medium is a difficult task because numerous individuals are involved throughout the production process. In television specifically, series can potentially run for hundreds of episodes and several years, rendering it challenging to ascribe authorship to any one person without discounting the contributions of many others. Still, authorship remains an important part of how series are developed, promoted, and received. Mittell states, “Even though such images of authorship as a singular entity are clearly an inaccurate reflection of
production practices, such conceptions still function in our understanding of television narrative,” adding that “authorial branding functions as an anchor for understanding programming, delimiting potential appeals, tone, style, and genre.” Therefore, while authorship may not accurately reflect the collaborative production process, it nonetheless plays a valuable role in the viewing experience.

According to Mittell, television’s serial form has an effect on the attribution of authorship. Due to the need to simultaneously oversee multiple episodes at various stages in production, television is frequently considered a producer’s medium. Usually, the executive producer in charge of managing a series is the head writer, who runs a room of writers and maintains stylistic consistency. Still, the ongoing, seemingly open-ended quality of serial form, combined with the fragmentation of traditional episodic form, muddles the delineation of authorial roles. The Netflix model, by altering the nature of serial and episodic form, offers opportunities to redefine traditional notions of authorship.

For instance, Sense8 is a Netflix show that was largely billed as the creative vision of the Wachowskis, the writing-directing team behind such films as The Matrix (1999) and Cloud Atlas (2012). Coming from film to television, the Wachowskis did not adhere to many of the traditional rules of television production, in large part due to the freedoms offered by Netflix. For one, the Wachowskis, in collaboration with co-creator J. Michael Straczynski,

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109 Mittell, Complex TV, 95-97.
110 Ibid., 110.
wrote three hour-long spec scripts before pitching the series, conceiving of
the season as a whole rather than through a pilot. The three creators co-
wrote every script, and the Wachowskis directed most of the season’s
episodes. While a few basic cable and premium cable outlets will also allow
some creators to write and/or direct multiple episodes, the creators’ season-
level approach to storytelling further contributed to Sense8’s unique authorial
voice. They structured and wrote the season as three four-hour acts, a
creative decision that influenced the production process and united the
season under a singular vision. Rather than assigning directors to
individual episodes, directors would be in charge of specific locations, given
that Sense8 was shot on location in nine different cities. Even in locations
that they did not direct, the Wachowskis would collaborate with the attached
directors, even stepping in to direct action sequences. Supervision over
these action sequences represents an essential component of the
Wachowskis’ authorship, seeing as their films are known for their innovative
action scenes. Because of the long-term storytelling techniques encouraged
by the Netflix model, the creators of Sense8 exercise a form of authorship
that is unconventional for both film and television.

111 Cynthia Littleton, “Wachowskis Shopping Their First TV Series,” Variety, October 2, 2012,
112 Casey Rackham, “‘Sense8’ Explained: Not TV, Not a Movie… It’s ‘Some Weird New Thing,’”
Zap2it, June 5, 2015, http://zap2it.com/2015/06/sense8-explained-not-tv-not-movie-some-weird-new-
thing/.
113 J. Michael Straczynski, Twitter Post, June 8, 2015, 10:13 PM,
hits://twitter.com/straczynski/status/608139836961099776.
114 Nick Newman, “John Toll Talks Adjusting for the Small Screen, ‘Sense8,’ the Wachowskis, and
More,” The Film Stage, November 24, 2015, http://thefilmstage.com/features/john-toll-talks-adjusting-
for-the-small-screen-sense8-the-wachowskis-more/.
In traditional television, the head writer, or showrunner, must often answer to network and studio executives, who provide notes as well as approve scripts and casting decisions. This dynamic may result in some tension between the creator’s vision for the show and executives’ expectations for the network and its brand. Netflix, on the other hand, does not have a brand identity in the same sense as traditional television networks. Traditional networks tailor and shape their programming to differentiate themselves from other channels and maintain certain relationships with viewers, advertisers, and/or affiliate organizations. Meanwhile, Netflix’s brand, if such a thing exists, centers on viewer access and creative control, concepts that, by definition, span a wide range of genres, tastes, and storytelling approaches. Ted Sarandos articulated Netflix’s role in the creative process:

[W]e built the company on this in this internal culture of freedom and responsibility, and we really did apply that to our showrunners too. We decided it would be our role not to coach the creatives because it really wasn’t our wheelhouse. It was going to be our role to pick the right projects, pick the right worlds, pick the right talent to run those shows, and then really try to create an environment for them to do the best work of their lives.115

This hands-off approach to developing and producing series has certain aesthetic implications, as it facilitates some nontraditional creative decisions. *Master of None* (Ansari and Yang, 2015-present) is a Netflix series that demonstrates some of the creative liberties that the model offers producers. In an interview with *Deadline*, co-creator Aziz Ansari explained that he

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One example of this flexibility comes in the form of episode lengths. Traditional television shows must adhere to strict length restrictions, as the program is tied to a weekly timeslot. Episodes of \textit{Master of None} are roughly thirty minutes long, but producers do not feel compelled to add or remove scenes to hit a certain runtime. Similarly, the fourth season of \textit{Arrested Development}, which was created for Netflix, also varies the runtime of its episodes, which range from 28 to 37 minutes in length.

Another area affected by Netflix’s approach to the creative process is casting. Traditional networks usually require approval for casting decisions, while Netflix leaves these decisions to be made by creators. In fact, one episode of \textit{Master of None}, “Indians on TV,” deals with this subject, lamenting the existence of de facto racial quotas on traditional television: “There can be one [Indian character], but there can’t be two.” The series’ cast of characters, which includes Ansari’s own parents, is diverse in terms of both ethnicity and age. While it is difficult to ascertain whether these casting decisions would have been approved on traditional television, Netflix’s hands-off approach to
casting likely encouraged these unconventional choices. The casting director for *Orange Is the New Black* corroborated this sentiment, saying, “The show gives these people that would normally play ‘Cop No. 3’ in one episode, 10 episodes to create a character.” These observations express a noteworthy departure from traditional television norms. However, the amount to which these unconventional decisions can be attributed to the Netflix model is ambiguous. Delineating the effects of expanded creative freedom is an inherently complicated task that involves some extrapolation.

More broadly speaking, defining the aesthetic effects of the Netflix model is a similarly complex challenge. Each creative decision represents a confluence of relevant factors, and attributing the on-screen result to any one source can be overly simplistic. Furthermore, in this so-called second golden age of television, the norms of traditional television are not easily definable. Mittell notes, “[C]omplex television’s most defining characteristic might be its unconventionality.” Each new series, whether for traditional television or Netflix, hopes to contribute original stories and innovative ideas, if at the very least to differentiate itself amidst the sea of competing programming. Therefore, while some creative decisions are encouraged more than others by the Netflix model, these same decisions could still possibly manifest themselves on traditional television.

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119 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 18.
Nonetheless, the Netflix model fundamentally alters some of the central norms traditionally associated with television. Chief among these changes is the all-at-once release of its seasons, which has significant repercussions for balancing serial and episodic form. Mittell, who argues that the temporal gaps between episodes are what “define the serial experience,” claims that by “forgoing the gap-filled serial broadcast experience altogether,” Netflix poses the “question as to whether these multiepisode narratives can be considered serial at all.” Truly, Netflix asks creators and viewers alike to reevaluate their preconceptions for what television storytelling entails. By changing the ways that series are made and watched, the platform offers a distinct toolbox of aesthetic possibilities that encourages certain creative choices over others. Producers can do with this toolbox what they please, as it is not a rulebook but rather, a set of opportunities.

120 Ibid., 27, 41.
CHAPTER 3

SENSE8 AND SEASON-LEVEL STORYTELLING

The Netflix series Sense8 presents a cogent opportunity to study in depth the impacts of the streaming model on television storytelling. The series serves as a particularly compelling example, as it exhibits creative decisions that take maximal advantage of the aforementioned aesthetic toolbox encouraged by the platform. That is, Sense8 crafts a narrative that treats the season rather than the episode as the basic unit of the series, fully embracing the unique qualities of the all-at-once release model. In combination with the creators' unencumbered authorship, this unconventional narrative draws a contrast with the storytelling approaches typically encouraged by traditional platforms. This chapter engages in a season-level analysis of Sense8, while the subsequent chapter discusses smaller-scale, episode-level storytelling choices. Both segments of this case study aim to illuminate the unique formal decisions facilitated by the streaming platform.

Differentiating between season- and episode-level creative decisions can prove troublesome, as these layers of storytelling are intrinsically linked within a serialized narrative. Yet while their roles in the series are intertwined, their goals can often be at odds with each other. The season narrative encompasses the character and plot development that occurs across multiple episodes or perhaps the entire season. Season-level storytelling can range from highly structured plotting with thematic unity to, simply, continuity of characters and settings. Of course, this information and action are delivered
within the context of an episode, as the season’s narrative is not continuous in the manner of feature films. Therefore, episode-level storytelling, especially in the case of highly serialized shows, involves balancing narrative priorities within each episode against season-level concerns. Because there exists much overlap between these levels of storytelling, we will differentiate them based on their respective objectives. Episode-level storytelling aims to engage the viewer within the boundaries of each individual installment, while season-level storytelling involves continuous viewer engagement and creating narrative meaning across several episodes.

*Sense8* was created by filmmakers Lilly and Lana Wachowski (*The Matrix, Cloud Atlas*) and television writer-producer J. Michael Straczynski (*Babylon 5*). Released all at once in June 2015, the series currently includes one 12-episode season and has been picked up for a second. Its premise involves eight strangers, each from different parts of the world, who suddenly discover that they are mentally, emotionally, and physically connected. These linkages initially manifest themselves subtly but grow stronger and more pronounced over the course of the season. Concurrently, the show gradually unfurls the enigmatic mythology behind the phenomenon of “sensates.” Sensates are otherwise human but have the ability to share senses, emotions, knowledge, and skills within a “cluster” of other such beings. The series’ eight main characters together comprise a single cluster. Through this premise, the creators aim to tell a science-fiction story that positions character-based drama at the forefront, in hopes of tackling themes that are
atypical of the genre. Straczynski, who is a veteran of the genre, explained the show’s relationship with science fiction:

[Science fiction] tends to be a genre about the gimmick, and not as strongly oriented toward character or the journey... There’s always been this weird dance between science fiction and politics, how much one will get into the other, and the way science fiction television has dealt with this has been just to ignore politics, gender, and sexuality unless they could attach it to some other race. So we have aliens that can change gender and isn't it amazing? That lets them explore general themes without making it about real people. We just figured we’d go for broke and make this about us going through these things. To use the show to examine issues of sexuality, gender, privacy, politics, and religion, not from some weird alien race, but from ourselves.\(^{121}\)

In keeping with the genre, *Sense8* does center around a gimmick, but by infusing the character experience into the mythology, it places an emphasis on the emotional journey and explores divergent themes from those expected of science fiction.

Across the season, the eight main characters face conflicts in their individual lives and within the context of their shared cluster. As their connections grow, many of these conflicts and storylines become increasingly intertwined and/or complementary. The characters begin to play larger roles in each other’s lives, and their newfound abilities start to serve greater functions as both tools and obstacles within the narrative. What results is a season of television that progresses from a surface-level depiction of disparate elements and stories toward a more cohesive, complex narrative that builds and relies on the accumulated storytelling preceding it.

ACT STRUCTURE AND SEASON-LEVEL PLOTTING

In telling this multifarious story, the creators capitalize on Netflix’s all-at-once release model to unfurl an extended narrative that spans the entire season. The result is a decidedly ambitious televisual experiment that heavily prioritizes season-level storytelling. Straczynski argued, “I want people to watch all 12 hours, straight through…From our point of view, it’s written as a 12-hour movie.” Speaking on the structure of the series, Straczynski elaborated, “The first act is setting up the mystery and what the hell’s going on. But the deeper you go, the more everything lines up and everything gets explained.” “Each four-hour block is like an act,” he added in another promotional interview, “This isn’t a television show, this isn’t a movie, it’s some weird new thing.” The “it’s not TV” approach is hardly unique to Netflix, seeing as HBO practically built a brand around the concept. However, it is worth noting that Netflix has a propensity to attract creators who do not fit the traditional television mold. From David Fincher and Beau Willimon (House of Cards) to José Padilha and Doug Miro (Narcos), the streaming service has cited creative freedom as a reason many filmmakers choose Netflix for their first foray into television.

Similarly, Sense8 is the Wachowskis’ first and only television project, as they have built a career from filmmaking. However, Ted Sarandos

124 Rackham, “‘Sense8’ Explained.”
suggested that longer-form storytelling may be better suited to their style, saying:

Their film reviews have been brutal and everything after *The Matrix* didn’t go well, but if you look at the earlier cuts of their films before they had to jam them down to 120 minutes, it’s amazing. There’s a four-hour cut of *Cloud Atlas* that will blow you away.\(^\text{125}\)

Meanwhile, Straczynski’s sci-fi series *Babylon 5* (Straczynski, 1993-1998) became famous for its unprecedented five-year story arc, highlighting a common thread in the creative team.\(^\text{126}\) Accordingly, these three storytellers collaborate to create a 12-hour, three-act long-form narrative in *Sense8*.

The series follows eight protagonists who live distinct lives in different parts of the world. Perhaps in the interest of maintaining viewer engagement, their respective storylines do not adhere to a single plotting pattern across the season. Rather, the series varies and organizes its prioritization of individual character plotlines to tell these stories concurrently. The dips in certain storylines make room for the swells in others, and vice-versa. As a result, each episode need not cover every character’s storyline with equal weight and can devote greater focus to a particular character or group of characters than would otherwise be possible. This storytelling approach allows for deeper levels of character development over the season, as the viewer spends longer periods of time with each character. Furthermore, it creates a

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\(^{126}\)“Interview: J. Michael Straczynski.”
multilayered design for the season, wherein individual storylines are staggered amidst the overall act structure.

Some traditional television programs, such as *Game of Thrones* (Benioff and Weiss, 2011-present) and *Lost* (Lieber, Abrams, and Lindelof, 2004-2010), similarly juggle multiple characters and storylines. However, *Sense8* deviates from these series by feeding these character-based stories into a broader season arc that unites them and relies on their development. *Game of Thrones* and *Lost* begin with relatively intimate character-centric stories but gradually expand their narrative universes over time, adding more characters and divergent storylines. Meanwhile, *Sense8* begins by providing a cursory glance at each of its characters, relying heavily on their contrasting environments to offer somewhat stereotypical characterization. As the season progresses, the characters become more rounded, and the grand narrative gains more coherence. The individual storylines converge, and the scope of the story contracts, creating an inverse effect from those of the aforementioned series. The long-term storytelling decisions of *Game of Thrones* and *Lost* reflect the season-level considerations of many traditional television series, involving the perpetuation of an open-ended narrative. The nature of the television medium makes it so that few series work toward a satisfying and conclusive ending, focusing rather on continuation and advancement.\(^{127}\) The unconventional approach by *Sense8* more closely resembles the modus operandi of a feature film, albeit in an amended form.

\(^{127}\) Mittell, *Complex TV*, 321.
While the series structures its season-level narrative into three acts, the first season of *Sense8* itself functions as one act of a greater story, tracking the assembly of a united cluster. When speaking on the long-term narrative plan for the series, Straczynski stated, “We ended up looking at a rough five-year structure with year one being kind of the origin story for our characters.”\(^\text{128}\) This line of thinking supports the view that the season is the basic unit of a series, as he refers to season one as the first installment in a five-part series. The season’s three-act structure reinforces this notion of an origin story. Act one introduces the characters separately and explains their superhuman connections. It also establishes threats facing the cluster but clouds them in mystery. Act two finds them exploring these connections, as they intensify and play a greater role in their lives. During this time, the threats against them become articulated more clearly. In act three, their connections become vital for survival, as the danger from antagonist Whispers threatens their existence as a cluster. By the end of the final act, the sensates prove that they can work together as a cluster to evade Whispers, but several threats and questions still remain for next season.

The three-act structure of *Sense8*’s first season captures a narrative progression taking the ensemble of characters from disparate individuals to a dynamic cluster. While the individual storylines certainly play a role in the broader arc of the season and the timing of the breaks, the overall narrative structure is not tied to any one character’s journey, instead tracking

\(^{128}\) Fienberg, “J. Michael Straczynski.”
developments in the cluster at large. This broader “cluster-level” narrative relates more closely to the science-fiction mythology, while the separate personal plotlines are generally more grounded in character-based drama. This approach to telling parallel stories resembles what Bordwell refers to as a network narrative. This cinematic storytelling strategy, often found in art films, incorporates multiple protagonists following separate storylines that occasionally intersect and commingle.\textsuperscript{129} 

Sense8 takes an organizational tactic typical of art cinema and adapts it within a televisual framework. In arranging these character storylines within the season act structure, the series staggers the timing of their individual act breaks. This allows the show to juggle several story arcs at once but also poses potential challenges for viewer comprehension and engagement.

The overall act breaks for this season align with those of the series’ mythology and the cluster as a whole. The individual characters’ storylines still interact with the mythology plot and contribute to the construction of the acts. Some characters, including Nomi, Riley, and Will, play a larger role than others in the overall mythology of the world due to their unique circumstances. Will has a mysterious childhood connection to sensates. Over the course of the season, we learn that he met a sensate girl named Sara Patrell as a young boy, and she was captured and lobotomized by the chief antagonist, Whispers. Combined with his innate protective spirit as a police officer, this background motivates him to assume an unofficial role of

caretaker in the cluster. Meanwhile, both Nomi and Riley become victims to Whispers’ captures but escape before he can lobotomize them or make eye contact (i.e. gain access to their thoughts). Therefore, the storylines of these three characters correspond more intimately with the cluster-level narrative. They act as ambassadors from the individual storylines through whom the cluster’s grander story is told. Likely due to their narrative proximity to the mythology of the show, their stories are characterized by greater degrees of obscurity than the others. By looking at the relationship between the individual storylines and the overarching act structure, we can better understand Sense8’s approach to season-level narrative structure.

Act one, which consists of the first four episodes, establishes the fundamental mystery facing the cluster. A great deal of this first act serves to raise questions that will later be answered in the second and third acts. For most of the characters, the primary conflict within their individual storylines is introduced during this act, as they are also confronted by early manifestations of their interconnectedness. The first act is prefaced by a teaser, an enigmatic scene, in which Angelica, who is writhing in pain, is visited by her lover Jonas in a dark abandoned church. By occasionally intercutting with shots of Angelica sitting alone, the scene suggests that Jonas is not actually physically present. He urges her to give birth to the cluster, noting that “they will be hunted” regardless. She cries out in pain before saying that she can see them. A montage depicts Angelica visiting each of the eight characters in their various locations, with a specific emphasis on contrast. Through a series of
shot reverse shots, she appears to them individually, and they look back at her puzzled. This sequence, which represents Angelica giving birth to the sensates, establishes the sprawling scope of the series without providing much detail or explanation. Suddenly, an apparition of Whispers also visits Angelica, but their dialogue suggests that Whispers and Jonas cannot see each other. Whispers acknowledges that she has been hiding from him. Angelica makes Jonas leave and reaches for a gun. Whispers taunts her, seemingly assured that she will not use it. As the real Whispers enters the church with a group of men, she puts the gun in her mouth and shoots.

Whispers, Jonas, and Angelica each represent key figures in the mythology of the series, but these early appearances confound rather than clarify their roles within the story. The opening teaser raises a host of questions and provides little exposition, keeping the viewer largely in the dark.

Such is the case for most of act one with regard to the mysterious connections that bind the characters. Straczynski compared this first act to the setup of a film, explaining:

“If you walk into a mystery film at a local cinema…and after the first, say, 15 minutes of seeing all the setup, walked out of the theater of a mystery, you wouldn't know what was going on. But you know that if you stay with it over the course of those two hours, eventually all those mysterious points will be cleared. Our structure is the same thing.”

His comments reflect that Sense8 fully embraces the season-level seriality encouraged by the Netflix all-at-once release model, requiring us to watch multiple episodes before receiving key payoffs and explanations. At the same

130 Fienberg, “J. Michael Straczynski.”
time, by placing the viewer in a state of relative confusion for the first act, the show aligns us with the characters, who are similarly unaware of what is happening to them. Throughout episode one, many of the characters remark to their friends or family about seeing visions of Angelica killing herself. Several of them also complain of migraines and experience unexplained sensory feelings. However, for the most part, they go about their normal lives, offering an opportunity for the viewer to receive some character exposition.

As the sensates become increasingly cognizant of these supernatural occurrences, we begin to receive more articulate information about the phenomenon, namely through Jonas, who acts as a mentor to the cluster. All the while, their connections grow stronger and more intense. The Wachowskis, who are routinely attracted to mysterious high-concept premises, use a similar device to aid viewer comprehension in *The Matrix* (The Wachowskis, 1999), through the character of Morpheus. However, whereas Morpheus delivers a lengthy exposition rundown all at once in *The Matrix*, Jonas’ commentary occurs in a more piecemeal fashion over the course of the first act. This drawn out form of information delivery could represent the Wachowskis’ televisual variation on the Morpheus moment for solving the exposition problem in *Sense8*. In episode two, when Nomi becomes hospitalized and at risk of being lobotomized, Jonas finds Will in Chicago to alert him to save her. He also succinctly imparts some facts about being sensate, telling Will that Angelica birthed him, that connections flow both ways, and that migraines and unexplained sensations are just the
beginning of what he will experience. Additionally, he visits Nomi to warn her to escape because her doctor, Dr. Metzger, is planning to lobotomize her. The characters are skeptical to trust him and assume that they are going crazy, but since our relationship with Jonas extends back to the opening scene with Angelica, our faith in him is stronger.

In episode four, Jonas is mysteriously detained at the police station in Chicago. Will tries to see him to no avail, but Jonas visits him from his prison cell. They touch hands and can feel each other, establishing that a visiting sensate is more than just a hallucination. Here, Jonas explains the difference between visiting and sharing, two types of superhuman interactions that can occur between sensates. He teaches Will, and the viewer, that members of a cluster can visit each other instinctively, but sensates outside of the cluster (like Jonas) can only visit once they have made visual contact. Meanwhile, sharing can only happen inside a cluster and allows sensates to access each other’s skills, language, and knowledge. He also explains what it means to be part of a cluster, adding that Will has “seven other selves.” Jonas’ function within these four episodes is to explain the fundamental rules and boundaries of these characters’ new lives and to hint at the greater existential threat facing them. He presents a great deal of information answering some important questions, but his mysterious fugitive status and efforts to save Nomi suggest that there is more at play.

Throughout act one, the eight protagonists become gradually more aware of their bizarre situation, and Jonas’ presence helps clarify and shape
the enigma. These happenings represent developments in the broader mythology plot that binds the sensates. That is, while each character has unique stories and motivations within his or her location, the supernatural elements of the show, which involve Jonas, Angelica, and Whispers, concern them all—in most cases, indirectly. Nomi’s and Will’s individual storylines are more directly related to the mythology but are still grounded in personal elements.

We first see Will, a Chicago cop, waking up from a nightmare, in which his younger self follows a girl through a forest into a dark building. Transforming into his adult self, he finds Angelica’s body before she sits up and shoots herself. From the beginning, Will’s story is tied to this mystery. The girl, whose name is later revealed to be Sara Patrell, becomes a motivating force behind Will’s efforts throughout this first act, even though the details of her story are not discussed explicitly until later. In episode two, Will studies security footage from outside the church where Angelica died and finds that it has been tampered with. He mentions Sara to his retired policeman father, who warns him that he will be taken off the force for psychiatric reasons if he brings up her case at work. In the same episode, Jonas tells him that Nomi needs his help, just like Sara needed it. Will, having previously seen a report claiming Jonas to be a terrorist and perturbed by his mention of Sara, pursues him in a car chase. In the next episode, Will has a cryptic dream of Whispers lobotomizing Sara, motivating him to seek out Jonas, who has been detained. He spends part of episode three reading files
about Sara’s case, but the process reveals no further details to the viewer. During episode four, Jonas reaches him once again to tell him to save Nomi. Later, he wakes up from a nap to find himself shackled to a gurney. He escapes from the restraints and, in the process, saves Nomi from her lobotomy, effectively achieving with Nomi what he apparently could not with Sara. These four episodes illuminate ties between Will’s past and present. He investigates the mystery surrounding Angelica’s death and receives information from Jonah, while also reliving his mysterious past with Sara Patrell. Because little information is given on her case aside from brief cryptic references by the characters, Sara Patrell likely occupies a minimal role in the viewer’s long-term recall. However, these repeated allusions to an ambiguous past maintain a hazy veil over Will’s storyline. On one hand, this obscurity ties in with the enigmatic mythology plot during act one; on the other, it poses potential problems regarding viewer comprehension. Will’s back-story serves to explain why he, of all the sensates, becomes involved in this cluster-level plot to save Nomi.

Meanwhile, this first act brings Nomi dangerously close to becoming the victim of a mysterious attack. The first episode establishes her life as a transgender woman living with her girlfriend Amanita in San Francisco. In episode two, we learn more about her background through expositional dialogue, as she tells Amanita about her past life as a hacker and learning to embrace who she is. Later in the episode, Nomi falls off of a motorcycle during the pride parade when she makes eye contact with Jonas in the crowd.
This inciting moment lands her in the hospital, where Dr. Metzger and his team are strangely antagonistic toward her, insisting on an aggressive operation and refusing to release her. Her hospitalization is tied in to her mother's gripes about her sexuality, as she sees the operation as a cure for her transgenderism. Through her sexuality, Nomi’s character story ties into the mythology and the season-level themes of identity and intolerance. Jonas visits the hospital and warns her to leave, but Nomi fears that he is a hallucination. When Amanita calls and tells her that Jonas appears in photos from the parade, Nomi realizes he is real, solidifying her goal of escaping. This perceived threat intensifies in episode three. When she refuses her medication, the nurse calls in officers to enforce her cooperation. In this dimly lit scene, the officers’ bodies gradually fill the frame of a low-angle shot, as they approach her with restraints. All the while, Nomi repeatedly says, “No.” The scene evokes helplessness and entrapment, building tension for the moment when Metzger begins to take her into surgery. Suddenly, Amanita pulls the fire alarm, causing them to postpone the operation. This last-minute stunt briefly relieves the tension, but the threat remains. The incident essentially extends the action of Nomi’s plotline into the next episode. In episode four, she comes even closer to having the procedure, and while she is sedated in the operating room, Will shares her body to help her escape. Both characters’ storylines break acts at the end of the fourth episode, which also serves as the season’s overall cluster-level act break. Because of their relevance to the broader season-long plot, these characters’ storylines
narratively bind this first act. By the end of act one, Will’s role as the cluster’s protector becomes solidified, and Nomi survives a brush with the cluster’s main existential threat. Together, their storylines also pose the most questions regarding the mythology and future fate of the cluster. Dr. Metzger’s motivations are still largely unknown, but he represents a serious danger, as outlined by Jonas. This source of peril eventually gains clarity in the second act and poses a serious threat to the cluster in act three. While act one presents an impending threat against the cluster through Nomi, the mystery behind their connections maintains an air of confusion across the storylines. The viewer understands more than the characters through an omniscient perspective and Jonas’ guidance, but the details of the greater mythology remain foggy until act two.

As Will and Nomi become entangled in the season-level mythology plot, the other sensates’ storylines remain tied to their individual lives. For most of the characters, the first few episodes establish a conflict or obstacle. However, the points at which they each break into their second act vary. In London, Riley witnesses a tumultuous and bloody showdown between her boyfriend and his associates over drug money. She spends the next two episodes abandoning her apartment, getting rid of the drugs, and finding refuge at a friend’s house. In episode four, her father leaves her a voicemail asking her to come home to Iceland. Riley faces the decision to go home, but we are still not privy to what is holding her back. This moment signals the end of act one for her story, as it sets up the forces pulling her toward Iceland. As
she ends up becoming looped into the mythology plot for act three, it makes sense that her storyline would break acts in the same episode as the overall season act break. As with Will, her back-story is tied to the current story, and obscure flashbacks intersperse the first act to hint at this connection. However, these references may be lost on the viewer by the time later episodes impart their meaning, indicating a potential comprehension issue within the network narrative.

Wolfgang’s storyline, which takes place in Berlin, also breaks acts in episode four, perhaps partly due to the fact that his act three climax roughly coincides with the overall cluster-level climax. He executes a diamond heist in episode one, showcasing his safe-cracking talents and criminal behavior. This episode also introduces the rivalry between his cousin Steiner and him, as Steiner was planning to rob the same museum. Furthermore, while he is cracking the safe, he watches a singing contest on television, triggering a flashback to a scene from his childhood when his father laughed at his stage fright during a school recital. The following two episodes do not move his storyline further, which may pose a problem for long-term viewer recall of plot points. In episode four, he and his best friend Felix find a dealer to sell the diamonds. Complications ensue later on when Steiner discovers what they did, but these events set the stage for those later conflicts. The fourth episode concludes with him conquering his stage fright at a karaoke bar, calling back to the moment from episode one. While he is singing, the rest of the cluster sings along from their various locations, fueling him with the confidence he
needs to push past the memory of his father. This moment provides a mini-resolution for Wolfgang, who still continues to struggle with his upbringing but finds some solace within the cluster. However, this turning point may fail to resonate with some viewers, due to the gap in narration between episodes one and four.

Capheus and Lito break acts relatively early in the season, as both characters’ storylines have shorter first and last acts and longer second acts. Perhaps because these characters have simpler narratives, the season extends their middle acts to suspend and delay the action while more confounding complications ensue in other storylines. In Mexico City, episode one introduces Lito as a charismatic actor, while withholding the information that he is secretly gay. The second episode finds him rejecting his costar Daniela’s aggressive advances. After he arrives home to his boyfriend Hernando, she shows up to his apartment and discovers his secret. Pleasantly surprised at this arrangement, Daniela climbs into bed between them and insists on staying. This short, efficient first act sets up Lito’s closeted sexuality and the new arrival of Daniela, laying the foundation for future complications. In Nairobi, episode one sets up Capheus’ baseline situation, depicting his struggling van driving business and AIDS-stricken mother. His storyline does not feature in episode two, but the final scenes of the third episode see him defeat the dangerous Superpower gang after they rob his van. Act one for Capheus introduces the threat of the Superpower gang, which returns in act three, and sets the stage for obstacles in the form
of crime boss Silas Kabaka in act two. Both of these two-episode acts feature fairly straightforward narratives. Wolfgang’s first act also comprises two episodes, but the lengthy gap between them, along with a more complicated personal thread, creates the potential for comprehension issues.

Conversely, Sun’s and Kala’s storylines feature comparatively longer first acts. The reasons for this are likely attributed to the fact that neither storyline reaches its third act by the end of the season. In Seoul, Sun, a businesswoman, spends the first two episodes ignoring calls from a man named Mr. Jeong, as the viewer collects exposition on her character. We see that her brother acts dismissively toward her in the office and that she releases her aggression in an underground fighting ring. In episode four, she confronts her father and brother with the news that auditors are aware of embezzlement in the company, which her father owns. Her brother Joong-Ki, who is truly responsible, begs her to take the fall in order to save him and the company. Throughout the episode, we see flashbacks of Sun’s late mother telling her as a child to protect her family. After spending episode five grappling with the decision to punish or protect, Sun signals her decision to go to prison at the episode’s conclusion, which doubles as her act break. This slow-burn pace mirrors Sun’s demeanor and provides a valuable counterpoint to the more fast-paced narratives. Furthermore, her storyline frequently engages in diegetic retelling to maintain viewer comprehension across the lengthy first act. Flashbacks of her mother in episodes three and four underscore her sense of duty, and a conversation with Capheus in
episode five reiterates her conflict. In Mumbai, Kala reveals while praying in episode one that she is engaged to a man whom she does not love. Her family and friends spend the next three episodes extolling her ostensibly perfect fiancée Rajan, establishing that, though this is not an arranged marriage, she still feels pressured to follow through with it. Over the same period, Kala’s connection with her fellow sensate Wolfgang grows stronger, hinting at a possible romance. Despite still not loving Rajan, she decides to go through with her wedding in episode five, but a fully nude Wolfgang suddenly visits during the ceremony, causing her to faint. This final moment of episode five signals a turning point, as the conflict between passion and obligation rears its head. Due to the relative simplicity of Kala’s storyline and regular reiteration of her ambivalence in each episode, the length of the first act does not sacrifice comprehension. However, on the other side of the same coin, her storyline has a tendency to repeatedly tread over the same narrative beats, potentially causing some viewers to become disinterested. Herein lies a significant challenge of Sense8’s network narrative, as the series enlists itself in a careful balancing act between comprehension and engagement of the viewer. It is when making these tradeoffs that the series performs most of its perceived missteps.

Act two of the season raises additional obstacles for the cluster and clarifies the elements that comprise the central conflict. The storylines of Will, Riley, and Nomi progress toward the cluster-level conflict that dominates the final act, which involves Whispers’ capture of Riley. While the first act largely
focuses on explaining the nature of sensate connections, the second act explores and delineates the threats posed against the cluster. Will’s and Nomi’s stories bring to light the true nature of the threat that eventually confronts Riley in Iceland, while Riley travels to Iceland in spite of her fears of a curse. Despite Straczynski’s claims that the season splits evenly into three four-hour acts, the cluster plot actually appears to break into act three at the end of episode 10. This moment, in which Riley faints in the concert hall, sets off the events of her capture leading up to the climax.

The second act of Will’s storyline follows his search for answers regarding Angelica’s suicide and Nomi’s hospitalization, while also kindling his romance with Riley and establishing his role in her rescue. In episode five, Will and his partner Diego track down a witness he spotted near the site of Angelica’s suicide in the second episode, but they lose him during the pursuit. The storyline continues in episode seven when Deshawn, the boy Will saved in episode one, leads them to a gang who agrees to cut a deal for the information. These moments represent the delayed realization of plot points started in the first act, a reflection of the series’ season-level storytelling. Though it is possible that these links are lost on some viewers, the episodes facilitate comprehension by not relying too heavily on them. The gang member shows them pictures from outside the church, which depict Whispers and his men loading something into a van, raising further questions for Will. Between this episode and episode eight, Will researches the case. He presents his findings to Diego, concluding that BPO is the company behind it
all. At this point, Nomi has also recently discovered the organization, and they remotely visit each other to discuss what they know. When Whispers arrives with his agents at Nomi’s door, Will helps her escape. These interactions solidify the interdependent relationship that Nomi and Will carry into act three. Also in episode eight, Will and Riley finally share a kiss, solidifying their connection in preparation for the final act. The episode ends with the captain suspending him for circumventing authority to pursue this case, which ties his hands going into act three but also frees him up to focus his full attention on Riley.

Having achieved much of his expositional purpose in act one, Jonas hardly plays a role in the first part of act two. However, in episode nine, he visits Will to tell him he has been captured by Whispers. This revelation suggests that the threat from BPO is growing larger and closer. Jonas urges Will to get Riley out of Iceland, where BPO conducts a great deal of research. Episode 10 sees Will speaking at length with Jonas about the mythology of sensates. Jonas says that normal humans evolved from sensates, arguing that their emotional disconnectedness allowed them to kill more easily, a point that ties in with the season-long theme of intolerance. Jonas assumes a larger presence in this second half of act two, as he did in act one. However, his teachings are less related to the experience of being sensate and more on the broader mythology of the species and the threats that face them. The existential emphasis of his commentary fits with the larger conflicts of the impending final act. Furthermore, by speaking on larger-scale issues, he
addresses some of the questions raised at the beginning of the series. For example, after Jonas explains that Whispers will use him to get to Will and his cluster, Will realizes that Angelica committed suicide to protect the cluster from Whispers. That the series withholds these answers until just before the final act, when they become most relevant, is indicative of its commitment to season-level unity and payoffs.

This second act introduces Nomi’s abilities as a hacker and establishes what the cluster is up against with Whispers and BPO. Nomi begins act two recovering from her attempted lobotomy, which eventually motivates her to look into the matter further. During episodes five and six, Nomi and Amanita find their apartment ransacked and decide to hide out at Amanita’s mother’s house. In episode seven, Nomi procures some hacking equipment and uses it to track Dr. Metzger’s phone. She and Amanita discover that he has performed the lobotomy procedure on several other patients, including a man named Niles Bolger, whom they visit and find to be practically brain dead. They break into Metzger’s house to copy his hard drive, but he ends up catching them. When Nomi reveals that she briefly talked to Whispers on the phone (though she was not aware it was him), Metzger becomes worried, and Jonas visits to urge her to escape. A fully functioning Niles Bolger suddenly enters and starts fighting Metzger. The women watch Niles shoot and kill Metzger before turning the gun on himself. As he shoots, Nomi sees the reflection of another man in the mirror, who we know to be Whispers. This scene aims to surprise and baffle, but in addition
to raising questions, it also brings Whispers to the forefront of this central conflict. This represents Nomi’s midpoint, as it recontextualizes her conflict (and the cluster’s) by replacing Metzger with Whispers as their primary foe. In episode eight, Nomi collaborates with Will to gather information on BPO, concluding that it is a well-funded multinational organization that poses a serious danger. Whispers arrives at the door with several men, and she successfully escapes with help from fellow sensates. After she escapes from Whispers, the next two episodes do not move her storyline further, serving rather to delay her character’s action until Riley needs her help in act three. Will’s action also slows down around this point, but his story fills the time through interactions with Riley and Jonas that further the romance and mythology threads, which figure into the finale. Meanwhile, episode ten features a sex scene between Nomi and Amanita that does not have any basis in the plot. For this reason, some viewers may find the scene gratuitous. This potential point of criticism exemplifies one of the challenges of juggling multiple storylines. The need to reconcile the two plotlines for the cluster’s final act forces the creators to suspend and delay the action in Nomi’s storyline in anticipation for Riley’s capture.

Riley’s second act tracks her decision to go back home to Iceland and sees her revisit past traumas that later play a role in act three. She remains in London for the first part of act two. However, in episode six, one of the men from the first episode’s drug dispute violently ambushes her, cueing Will to take hold of her body and save her. At the end of the episode, when Sun and
Riley visit each other, Riley explains that she wants to go home but that an elf convinced her when she was young that she was hexed. This conversation provides the explanation for why Riley has hesitated so long to go back to Iceland, as bad things have happened to her there. Ultimately, Sun convinces her to face her fear, motivating Riley to leave London in episode seven. This moment is Riley’s midpoint, as it sends her in an ill-fated new direction. While she is home, comforted by her father’s company, she hears a voice telling her she should not have returned, hinting at the imminent danger before her. At the same time, these episodes further develop her romance with Will. After they have a lengthy conversation in episode five, episode eight sees them visit each other’s homes in a moment of intimacy that leads to their first kiss. By cementing this bond between them, the second act prepares the viewer for the substantial role that Will later plays in saving her. Riley spends episode nine meeting Yrsa, the sensate who posed as an elf and told her she was hexed as a girl. Yrsa warns her of BPO hunting sensates and says that a simple hospital visit could lead to her capture, making it seem as though danger is practically predestined for Riley in Iceland. Riley and Will visit each other while speaking separately to Jonas and Yrsa, once again reiterating their special bond. Riley’s break into act three at the end of episode 10 doubles at the season’s act break. In this scene, Riley and the rest of the cluster simultaneously relive their births while she attends her father’s symphony performance. At the end of the performance, Riley sees a brief vision of her own child’s birth before collapsing in the concert hall. Paired with
Yrsa’s warnings from episode nine, this moment ignites the threat that has loomed over Riley since she arrived in Iceland. Also, the brief flash of her tragic childbearing experience alludes to her mysterious trauma that comes to the surface in the final episode. Will’s and Nomi’s storylines break acts slightly after the cluster’s act break. In episode 11, Will visits Nomi to discuss how to save Riley, resuming their partnership. Jonas visits and tells them that time is up and that Whispers is one step ahead of them. This scene signals a break into act three for Will and Nomi, as it sets up seemingly insurmountable obstacles but also introduces Will’s plan to fly to Iceland.

Meanwhile, the other individual storylines break acts at various points, while some do not reach a third act at all. Lito’s story features a lengthy act two. In episode three, he tries to get Daniela to leave their house, but she explains that she must stay with them to evade her abusive boyfriend Joaquin. This and the next episode hint at the threat from Joaquin and develop the relationship between the three new housemates. Lito’s state of affairs reaches a midpoint in episode seven when Joaquin steals Daniela’s phone and finds pictures of Hernando and him having sex, reorienting his goals and desires. Daniela gets back together with Joaquin to keep him from outing Lito and tarnishing his image as a macho actor. When Lito stands by and lets her return to her abuser, Hernando breaks up with him, disgusted that he would put his career over their love and her safety. In episode nine, Lito faces a crossroads between his life as an actor and his real life, exposing the thematic tension between fantasy and authenticity. He ends the episode
at rock bottom, getting drunk and repeatedly leaving messages on Hernando’s voicemail. After helping Wolfgang defeat Steiner in episode 10, he becomes inspired to fix his problems, representing his break into act three. Wolfgang begins his second act by meeting with Steiner’s father, who suspects him of stealing the diamonds. Wolfgang denies any involvement, but in episode seven, Steiner critically injures Felix in a drive-by shooting. In episode eight, Wolfgang sits at Felix’s hospital bedside, grief-stricken. However, over the next two episodes, his uncle and Steiner visit him separately to deliver threats. These events help transform his sadness into anger, as we transition into his third act in episode 10.

Capheus enters his second act in episode five with a booming van business as a result of his victory over the Superpower gang. He catches the eye of Silas Kabaka, a dangerous crime lord who promises him medicine for his dying mother in exchange for work. The introduction of Kabaka complicates Capheus’ struggle. After Kabaka determines that he is trustworthy, he assigns him to drive his cancer-stricken daughter Amondi to her hospital visits. Capheus and Amondi develop a kinship, but in episode seven Kabaka cuts off a man’s hands in a gruesome display of punishment, causing Capheus to reevaluate his involvement with the crime boss. Just as Capheus decides he must find a way out of this arrangement in episode eight, the Superpower gang comes to his house threatening him to kidnap Amondi and bring her to them. This represents his break into act three, as the threats are mounted against him in anticipation for his climax.
In the meantime, Kala’s and Sun’s storylines conclude before reaching their third acts. During this second act, Kala’s connection with Wolfgang grows, as her relationship with Rajan becomes more complicated. After she faints during the wedding, Rajan reaffirms his commitment to her in episode six. Episode seven sees her deepen her emotional connection with Wolfgang, as she sits with him by Felix’s bedside. In the final scene of episode eight, Rajan’s father Manendra is stabbed at the temple while telling Kala not to marry Rajan. This moment is her storyline’s midpoint, as she must reevaluate her conflict in light of this new development. She spends the following episodes dealing with the fallout from Manendra’s stabbing. Rajan remains committed, but she becomes increasingly attracted to Wolfgang. They share a kiss in episode eleven when she urges him not to seek revenge from his uncle. In episode twelve, she watches him brutally kill his uncle. Wolfgang insists that she choose Rajan because he is a monster. At the end of season one, the deeply religious Kala finds herself in love with a violent and broken man, exacerbating her ambivalence. Sun begins her second act turning herself in and entering jail in episode six. In episode seven and eight, we follow a two-episode arc within the prison, an attempt at viewer engagement within her static situation. She becomes friends with a fellow inmate, Soo-Jin, and observes a woman bullying her. In episode eight, Sun fights this bully in the prison yard, landing herself in solitary confinement. Over the course of these episodes, Sun progresses from freedom to captivity, realizing along the way she may have made the wrong choice coming to prison. Her midpoint
comes in episode nine when her guilty father visits to apologize. In the next episode, a lawyer visits her saying that her father will give a testimony that will free her and imprison her brother. In episode eleven, her brother Joong-Ki comes to her with the story that their father committed suicide. Sun realizes that he has actually murdered him to prevent his testimony, and she brutally attacks him in the visitation room. It is here that Sun’s season-long story ends, as her one chance of getting out has been violently extinguished.

Episode eleven concludes with a scene of Kala visiting Sun in solitary confinement. The characters, whose storylines both remain unresolved by the season’s end, discuss the hardships of life. Sun tells Kala that she channels her pain into his fists, advising her to fight. By bringing these characters together at the season’s end, the show acknowledges that their conflicts remain unsettled and essentially pauses their storylines to give way to episode twelve’s cluster-level climax.

Most of the characters’ storylines wrap up their third acts before the climactic final episode, which devotes most of its time to the cluster’s efforts to rescue Riley. One exception is Wolfgang’s storyline, which extends through episode 12 and serves as a B-plot to the main action in that episode. In episode 10, Wolfgang meets Steiner and his men to offer up the diamonds but, with Lito’s help, turns the tables on them, ultimately taking out Steiner with a rocket launcher. In episode 12, he turns his attention to his uncle, eventually killing him with multiple shots point blank. Wolfgang exacts his revenge against his family members but remains haunted by their past
abuses, a bittersweet resolution for a tortured hero. After helping Wolfgang defeat Steiner in episode 10, Lito becomes inspired to fix his problems. He fights Joaquin, with Wolfgang’s reciprocal support, and rescues Daniela before reuniting with Hernando. Ultimately, he chooses love over his career and reality over fantasy. Capheus has a quick final act, which climaxes and resolves in episode eleven. At the start of the episode, he drops Amondi off at his friend’s house, leaving the viewer in the dark on his plan. He confronts the Superpower gang with a bait-and-switch, offering himself in Amondi’s place. The gang members reveal that they have Kabaka in custody and command Capheus to kill him. By sharing Sun’s fighting skills, he defeats the gang members, and with Will’s support, he escapes in his van with Kabaka in tow. He reunites an appreciative Kabaka with his daughter, conclusively ending the immediate threats that imperiled him during the season.

The third act for the cluster-level storyline begins with Riley’s hospitalization, which prompts Will and Nomi to devise a plan to help her escape. Eventually, the cluster coagulates around this mission to save one of its own. While in the hospital during episode 11, Riley repeatedly experiences visions of a car crash she suffered while in labor, as the doctors discover the unusual brain activity that leads to her capture. Meanwhile, Nomi becomes aware of Riley’s situation through their sensate connection and works to delay her transfer to BPO by using her hacking skills to impede hospital communication. These events serve to postpone the main action until the finale as well as to establish Nomi’s involvement in the rescue efforts. The
final episode, episode 12, tracks Will's efforts to fly to Iceland and save Riley before Whispers arrives. Will’s mission is propelled forward by a series of sensate connections, as each cluster member takes turns sharing his body to accomplish tasks that require specific characters’ skills. Meanwhile, Riley’s procedure is delayed when she reaches for an officer’s gun to shoot herself. After a full flashback to the car crash that led to the deaths of both her husband and her newborn daughter, Yrsa visits her encouraging her to protect the cluster. Since learning of the motivations behind Angelica’s suicide, the viewer is familiar with this concept of sacrificing oneself for the safety of the cluster. This knowledge raises suspense, as Riley grabs the gun and brings it to her mouth. Suddenly, Will and the rest of the cluster appear before her, convincing her to put the gun down. This moment prompts the nurses to drug her into unconsciousness, effectively blocking Whispers from telepathically accessing her and buying the cluster some time to save her. Will eventually escapes with Riley, but he makes eye-contact with Whispers on the way out, allowing him access to his thoughts. As Will and Riley drive away from the research facility, they must take the same road where Riley suffered the car crash. The resultant scene forces Riley to confront her past, and the pain virtually incapacitates her. At the same time, Will injects himself with a drug to block out Whispers. He uses his empathetic connection with Riley to express his love for her and his understanding of her pain. Will slips into unconsciousness before leaving the responsibility of saving the cluster with Riley. After an ellipsis, the next scene finds Riley on a boat singing to
Will, as he wakes up. The revelation that she has saved them provides a resolution to her struggle during act three to move past the traumatic car crash. The rest of the cluster join them, as they ride away together on the boat. By concluding with this image of the united cluster, the third act suggests that they not only survived but became even more connected as a result of this ordeal.

The three-act season structure that *Sense8* employs in the first season helps organize the unfolding of the complicated mythology and track the formation and survival of the cluster. The show sets out to accomplish several goals over the course of these three narrative acts. It develops a plot that follows Whispers and BPO’s efforts to hunt down the cluster. The season ties this cluster-level story into the character storylines of Nomi, Riley, and Will, playing on their individual strengths, weaknesses, and back-stories. Simultaneously, the three-act structure organizes the explanation and development of the sensate connections, relying considerably on Jonas to facilitate comprehension. This steady growth in interconnectivity intermingles with the cluster-level plot. Will’s sensate connections with Riley result in a romance, justifying his commitment to saving her. These linkages also allow Nomi and Will to utilize their combined skill set to uncover information and engineer a rescue plan. Finally, the cluster’s combined network becomes essential for their own survival. All the while, each character has his or her own individual storyline, whose plot structures are staggered amongst the season-level breaks.
The juggling act that Sense8 must perform to deliver all of this narrative information within its first season inevitably results in some challenges. The season repeatedly encounters a trade-off between comprehension and engagement with regard to the viewer, and a great deal of the show’s criticism arises from this narrative issue. For one, there exists a tension between the overall cluster plotline and the individual stories. For Will, Nomi, and Riley, this strain is even more apparent, as they are pulling double duty. For instance, Will’s storyline is tied to the cluster plot through his mysterious history with Sara Patrell, his mentorship from Jonas, and his relationship with Riley. However, other elements of his life, including his dealings with gang violence and his relationship with his father, take a less prominent role but remain a part of his character. Due to the split focus of his storyline, the latter subjects may get lost in the shuffle for viewers, potentially weakening both engagement and comprehension. For this reason, some of the simpler storylines, such as Lito’s and Kala’s, likely do not face the same comprehension problems. However, especially in the case of Kala’s story, a lack of forward movement may sacrifice viewer engagement. The series’ problems with comprehension and engagement are par for the course, as its ambition to tell a complex story overwhelms the season structure with narrative ground to cover. Furthermore, by choosing to align the viewer in the characters’ confusion and cloak the mythology with an air of enigma, the show must withhold a degree of information while still maintaining the viewer’s interest. A great deal of this struggle stems from the decision to
execute a feature film strategy for a season of television. Straczynski’s assertion that the first act of Sense8’s first season is akin to the first 15 minutes of a mystery film exposes this challenge.131 15 minutes of set up is drastically different from four episodes, and the fact that the series attempts to manage similar goals and expectations over a significantly wider span of time points to a potential length issue. The series combines the feature film tactics of network narratives and mystery thrillers, extending and apportioning them over 12 episodes. The ambition of this season-level storytelling strategy is decidedly influenced by the all-at-once release model, as are the challenges that accompany it.

**NARRATIVE ACCUMULATION AND VIEWER COMPREHENSION**

Season-level storytelling in Sense8 features a narrative in which connections, moments, and information aggregate to generate greater levels of complexity and interaction over time. The series’ dependence on narrative accumulation contributes to its prioritization of season-level storytelling over episodic plots. This aggregation of story moments and narrative information parallels the sensates’ gradual progression toward greater connectedness. As these superhuman connections grow stronger, interactions between characters deepen and vary. Each subsequent iteration of these sensate communications builds on earlier ones, illustrating that the sensations are augmenting and intensifying. Furthermore, by allowing the linkages to amplify over time, the series gradually acclimates the characters, as well as the

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131 Fienberg, “J. Michael Straczynski.”
viewers, to greater levels of complexity. While the narrative does not necessarily get simpler, the accrual of causal links begins to clarify the initial sources of confusion, resulting in a more straightforward viewing experience over time. By affixing its narrative experimentation to the character experience, Sense8 allows the viewer to comprehend and appreciate a complex story world that would otherwise seem impenetrable.

What distinguishes this strategy of narrative accumulation from a conventional linear progressive narrative is that it functions continuously within the framework of a three-act structure to help inform and influence its development over the course of the season. In fact, this cluster-level accumulation occurs alongside multiple character storylines as well as the broader mythology plot, as each of them incorporates progressively higher degrees of interactivity. Therefore, the narrative aggregation does not tell a story on its own but critically informs the various lines of storytelling across the season. One significant role assumed by this narrative device involves comprehension. Particularly, repetition and variation of sensate connections across episodes allow the viewer to amass an understanding for how the phenomenon operates and enables the creators to capitalize on this knowledge to facilitate engagement and develop narrative threads. While feature films often engage in this mode of narrative delivery, seasons of television tend not to rely so greatly on accumulation to guide the viewer’s understanding of the action.
The series depends on narrative accumulation to train the viewer to recognize, understand, and engage with the various sensate interactions that occur across the season. As the characters progress from minimal connectivity to becoming a network-like entity, their modes of communication develop from rudimentary to purposeful. Early iterations of these connections serve to confront and confound the viewer, paralleling the experiences of the characters. However, as the characters and the viewer become more aware and experienced with the phenomenon in the second act, the connections supplant obscurity with clarity to perform a more substantial story function. By the third act, the characters are fully cognizant of the connections, and the story occasionally uses this awareness to create self-reflexive narrative moments. The depiction of sensate communication does not follow a strictly additive progression, whereby each subsequent connection employs successively deeper and more complex levels of interaction. Instead, by the series’ end, the viewer has mentally gathered a collection of possibilities from which the narrative can pull to tell an engaging and complex story.

The series begins with the mysterious suicide of Angelica, who “gives birth” to the cluster. This action instantaneously causes the eight characters to become reborn as sensates, activating these connections for the very first time. By entering the world at ground zero with the birth of the cluster, the narrative construction parallels the experience of the viewer. The Netflix platform enables and encourages each viewer to begin a series with episode one, so the viewer, along with the characters, follows the sensate experience
from its onset. The often subjective style of presentation reinforces this relationship with the viewer. It cues us to align with the confusion and surprise felt by the characters, as we all attempt to make sense of this phenomenon of telepathic and empathetic connectivity.

Early on in the season, these newly formed relationships are depicted subtly, as the characters proceed with their individual lives. Many of these initial connections manifest through unexplained sensory experiences (i.e. mysterious sounds, visions, tastes, etc.). For instance, in the first scene after Angelica’s suicide, we find Will bombarded by blaring dance music in his apartment in the middle of the night. There is no reason for he or the viewer to suspect that these sounds are coming from anywhere other than his physical environment in Chicago. However, once he follows the source of the music to the neighboring apartment, he opens the unlocked door to find it completely empty, at which point the sound abruptly subsides. A medium close-up shot lingers on his confused countenance before a resurgence of dance music precedes the cut to a crowded London nightclub, where fellow sensate Riley is DJing a gig. The viewer is cued to share in Will’s surprise when the music silences, but unlike Will, we are offered an explanation for the source of the sound, alleviating some—but not all—confusion. In this series, the viewer’s alignment is not with any individual character but with the cluster as a whole. Our expanded point of view allows for somewhat greater comprehension of the phenomenon, especially while the sensate connections are still in their early stages.
Several similar instances of sensory overlap occur between the main characters over the course of the first two episodes, when the sensate concept is still being introduced. In episode one, Capheus receives a chicken as payment in Nairobi before we cut to a chicken landing on Sun’s desk in Seoul. The abrupt nature of the cut, coupled with Sun’s scream, cues us to join in her surprise. But when we cut to an over-the-shoulder shot from behind Sun revealing a chicken-less desk, our responses diverge. While Sun expresses confusion over her perceived hallucination, the viewer is encouraged to relate this incident to the previously observed sensate experiences. In this case, after having only previously witnessed sound being carried between characters, we are prompted to expand our expectations to include visual apparitions as possible sensory transmissions. By utilizing conventional editing techniques for indicating subjectivity, these early sequences introduce to the viewer the concept of a collective subjectivity.

In episode two, these sensory experiences begin to take on a more substantial narrative role by suggesting a relationship between characters. After a scene of Wolfgang having sex in Berlin, we cut to Kala at her engagement party in Mumbai. She complains to her friend about suddenly feeling hot. Back in Berlin, Wolfgang mentions to his lover that he has a craving for Indian food. Not only does this interaction elaborate on the types of sensory overlaps that can occur between sensates, but it also unites Kala and Wolfgang within the narrative, laying the groundwork for their impending romance. Even by the second episode, accumulated iterations of these
sensory overlaps allow for the device to progress beyond merely spurring surprise and confusion and serve a more meaningful narrative function than the ones before it. These types of sensory interactions occur less frequently as the season continues, likely due to the fact that the extent of the device’s narrative capability is fairly limited. As the story moves beyond teaching the viewer the rules of the world, sensory overlaps become increasingly rare.

Another type of connection that repeats, varies, and develops over the course of the season is termed “sharing,” whereby a sensate takes on the body of another cluster member. Through sharing interactions, characters become able to utilize the knowledge and abilities of their fellow sensates. Unlike sensory overlaps, these types of interactions can provide characters with tools to help them carry out actions within the narrative. However, in order to build up to this more tangible and consequential function of sharing, the series first introduces the viewer to the rules and visual language of the device. The season continues to incorporate sharing throughout the season, often including at least one instance per episode. But especially in later episodes, sharing interactions serve a particular purpose in advancing the narrative, such as fighting an enemy. Therefore, the device’s occurrence does not necessarily increase across the season, as the show typically only uses it when the narrative calls for it.

In episode four, Jonas defines and explains the term to Will, but we begin witnessing the qualities and capabilities of sharing much earlier. In episode one, Riley, having a conversation in London at night, turns her head
to the side, motivating a pan to the right. The shot seamlessly transitions to a
daylight setting and glides past a woman’s head in the foreground, settling on
Riley sitting across from her. She is shot with similar medium close-up
framing to the shot in London. By panning from the initial location to the next,
the sequence draws attention to the change of space. This allows the viewer
slightly more comprehension than Riley, as she experiences a more
instantaneous transition. Her facial expression denotes disorientation, and the
high-pitched score suggests tension and suspense. We cut to an extreme
wide shot of a park pavilion where two costumed men are dancing,
establishing a new location without clarifying exactly what it is. Next, a cut in
to the men dancing in slow motion is punctuated by a sudden shift in the
score to psychedelic rock music. The camera slowly pans away from the men
and rests on Riley with her seated companion positioned in the foreground.
Riley still appears confused, but the change in score, coupled with the slow
motion, imbues the tension with surreality. Through a wandering camera,
slow motion, and muted diegetic sound, the sequence places emphasis on
the experiential, encouraging the viewer to share in Riley’s dreamlike
subjectivity. The camera tracks right and pans left to reveal that the woman
opposite her is Amanita, the girlfriend of sensate Nomi who was already
introduced in a previous scene. As the shot continues to track right, Nomi
enters the frame in Riley’s place, speaking animatedly with muted dialogue.
By including Nomi and Riley in the same continuous shot, the camera elicits
intrigue and also clarifies the rules of the device. The sequence serves as a
transition from Riley’s scene in London into Nomi’s in San Francisco. This also represents the first time that the viewer has witnessed a sensate sharing the body of another. Rather than serve a specific narrative purpose within the episode, this incident briefly introduces the viewer to the season-long device of sharing. By withholding its full capabilities, the sequence aligns us with her confusion and plants a seed for future episodes’ interactions.

Subsequent episodes build upon the foundation set by this moment, implementing more complex examples of sharing that demonstrate a strengthening of the bond between the sensates and greater degrees of control and comprehension regarding the ability. As soon as episode three, the sensates demonstrate a capability to use sharing as a means of survival. When the Superpower gang robs his van and steals his mother’s AIDS medicine, Capheus must fight them to retrieve it. He channels Will’s shooting skills and Sun’s fighting ability to successfully overcome this challenge. In previous instances, sharing had been used to motivate confusion and suggest connections between characters. In this moment of peril, the device, for the first time, becomes not just useful but necessary to defeat the threat faced by a fellow sensate. Capheus’ pursuit after the gang members is intercut with scenes of Will entering a shooting range and Sun beginning a kickboxing match. This use of cross-cutting visually establishes the unique skills possessed by the other sensates, priming the viewer for the sharing that will occur. At this point, the viewer and the characters are both unaware that skills can be transferred in such a way between sensates. In later episodes, once
the viewer has accumulated some familiarity with the device, sensates are shown to be sharing their skills even when they are not utilizing them contemporaneously in their own physical space. Additionally, Sun’s scene also serves to reveal her secret life as an underground fighter, furthering her character development and expanding the collective skill set of the cluster moving forward. By tying the device to character and motivation within the context of the narrative, the series eases the viewer into engaging with this level of complexity.

In a moment of vulnerability when the gang members’ car approaches in the distance, Capheus looks down at a gun on the ground. We cut to Capheus’ black hand reaching for a gun in the shooting range. Cutting back to Nairobi, a white hand picks up the gun, and we tilt up to see that it belongs to Will. As Will takes in his new surroundings, we get a similarly framed medium close-up of Capheus looking around the shooting range. By blurring the physical boundaries between them, this series of shots introduces the concept of sharing between Will and Capheus. The sequence proceeds utilizing intercutting and matches on action to create the perception that Will and Capheus are in both places at once, sharing Will’s abilities to shoot both the shooting range targets and the gang members’ car. The frequent pace of these editing devices, combined with slow motion, serves to encourage viewer comprehension and establish rules regarding this novel interaction. In further iterations of sharing, the presentation is not so deliberate, suggesting a reliance on narrative accumulation over redundancy. In other words, once
the visual language for this device has been already established, the series
no longer feels the need to restate it to maintain comprehension. When
Capheus later channels Sun’s fighting skills in the same scene, Sun takes the
place of his body in Nairobi for the full duration of the fight sequence, and he
does not visually replace her body in the ring. Rather, cross-cutting and
matches on action convey Sun as using the same fighting moves
simultaneously against different enemies in separate locations. An example of
small-scale accumulation, Sun and Capheus’ sharing sequence builds on the
preceding one. That is, the viewer assumably now realizes that Sun is acting
through Capheus’ body and not teleporting across the world. This point is
underscored by the gang members’ performances, as they do not seem to
acknowledge Sun’s presence. For the rest of the season, the qualities and
rules of the sharing connection are never again depicted as deliberately and
comprehensively as they are in this scene. Later episodes assume that the
viewer has already accrued this knowledge, a mark of this show’s continuous
seriality.

In episode 10, the sharing connection develops further through a self-
aware presentation that acknowledges the viewer’s (and the characters’) accumulated familiarity with the device. Wolfgang is lying on the ground held
at gunpoint by his cousin Steiner. Steiner repeatedly yells at him to tell the
truth about the diamond robbery, which Wolfgang has already done to no
avail. After some brief cross-cutting between Lito and Wolfgang in Mexico and
Berlin, respectively, a shot of Wolfgang at ground level tilts up to reveal Lito
standing behind him. This type of connection is what Jonas calls “visiting,” whereby a sensate physically appears in the vicinity of another sensate without sharing his or her body. A shot taken from below Wolfgang’s car exposes a gun strapped underneath, just out of his reach. At this point, a slow motion tracking shot laterally glides behind Lito’s head to reveal Wolfgang, who appears externalized from his body, standing to his right. Steiner and Wolfgang’s interaction is framed in the background between them, as Lito and the second Wolfgang turn their heads to each other. Dialogue is muted, and the image is slowed down to the extent that the action in front of them appears to be virtually paused. After the cut, they proceed to have a conversation in real time, analyzing the situation before them. Any audio or visual from the real-world Wolfgang and Steiner are absent from this exchange, giving the impression that the situation is suspended in time while they speak. Lito suggests that Wolfgang tell Steiner something that he wants to hear in order to buy himself some more time. Wolfgang counters by saying that he is unable to do so, out of hatred for the man. Lito asks Wolfgang’s permission to take over his body (“May I?”) before stepping out of frame. In no previous episode has a sensate requested to take the body of another or discussed the situation before doing so. This demonstration of increased control and awareness regarding sharing is indicative of the level of knowledge and experiences accrued by both the viewer and the characters up until this point. The scene recognizes the viewer’s and the characters’
experience with the device by employing a self-reflexive style of presentation that calls attention to the characters’ participation in the process.

Signaling an end to this tête-à-tête, diegetic sound resumes, as a shot of Wolfgang at gunpoint moves up along Steiner’s arm and rests on his face. Steiner commands him to tell the truth, prompting the camera to track back down his arm, finding Lito at the end of the gun in Wolfgang’s place. Here, the sequence utilizes continuous camera movement to convey sharing in a similar way as the initial interaction between Riley and Nomi in the park (and others since then), an instance of repetition and variation that reinforces and draws from our understanding of the device’s visual language. Lito, who is a film actor, has the ability to lie convincingly. He possesses Wolfgang’s body to tell Steiner a fabricated story that causes him to drop his guard, granting him the opportunity to grab the gun from under the car. Wolfgang then retakes his body to defeat Steiner and his associates. This example of sharing between sensates differs from the previous ones, in that it involves the transfer of a non-physical skill (i.e. acting) to accomplish a task. Assuming that the viewer has developed a familiarity with Lito’s talents and the mechanics of sharing, this scene can execute this complex connection with minimal explanation while still maintaining comprehension.

Visiting connections, which allow sensates to physically appear before one another, also evolve as the series unfolds. This device is closely tied to the development of sensate relationships over time. Eventually, the characters become able to utilize visiting to seek guidance, develop romantic
relationships, and troubleshoot problems within their cluster. However, this level of connection necessitates a certain degree of narrative accumulation. Therefore, the different examples of visiting across the season vary considerably based on when in the season-level narrative they occur. Instances of visiting become more frequent as the season progresses, reflecting the greater presence that the sensates take on in each other’s lives. Also, this type of interaction places more emphasis on clarity and connection, so it would make sense that these occurrences would increase across the season.

The sensates’ preliminary experiences with visiting introduce the viewer and the characters to the simple fact that they are capable of these types of interactions. Furthermore, they create implicit connections within the cluster that gain significance later in the season. Episode one concludes with the first instance of visiting among cluster members. Riley visits Will in Chicago at the site of Angelica’s suicide, where they briefly converse. As opposed to early occurrences of sensory overlap or sharing, this visiting interaction prioritizes connection and poignancy over confrontation and confusion. In fact, their conversation helps illuminate and clarify some aspects of the central enigma for both the viewer and the characters. Riley, who has never been to America, marvels at the fact that she is standing in Chicago, while Will expresses bafflement over her presence. They do not understand what is happening, and at this point, the viewer does not fully grasp the situation either. However, this moment unites them in their bewilderment. This
exchange not only informs the viewer that sensates have the ability to visit
one another and that they cannot yet comprehend it, but it also establishes a
connection between the two characters that only deepens as the season
progresses. Over the course of the first season, Riley and Will gradually
develop a romance, which culminates in a tense finale revolving around Will’s
efforts to save Riley. By choosing these two characters to be the first
sensates to experience a visiting connection, the series signals that they may
share an even deeper relationship with each other than with the rest of the
cluster.

As these early visiting events accumulate, subsequent visits begin to
allow characters to interact more deeply with one another and further address
their connectivity. In episode six, Riley and Will visit each other again, and
this time, they have a proper conversation. The two sensates talk over beers,
simultaneously at bars in London and Chicago. Though they have not spoken
since their first exchange, the experiences that they (and the viewer) have
accrued since that moment allow them to move past the peculiarity of their
situation and speak more candidly. After Will sits down beside her, they raise
their glasses in Chicago and clink them in London. The cross-cutting here and
throughout the sequence aims to seamlessly bind the two bars, focusing the
viewer’s attention on the conversation rather than the disparity in locations. In
other words, the use of continuity editing serves to minimize the sense of
physical distance between the couple and maximize feelings of connection.

For a new viewer, this frequent cross-cutting would likely be a distraction,
raising questions as to why these characters are in two places at once. However, this scene does not spend its time clarifying this point. The encounter is reminiscent of a first date, as they formally introduce themselves to each other and discuss their jobs. Riley asks if they are going crazy, which provokes Will to attempt an experiment of sorts. He asks for her phone and calls himself from it. When it rings, he walks over to his friend Diego and tells him to answer it. That Diego is able hear Riley’s voice convinces them that they are not simply hallucinating, though the viewer already knows this. Will takes back the phone and speaks into it himself, as he and Riley walk away from Diego. Due to the fact that they are visiting each other, each line of dialogue repeats as a time-delayed echo. The phone experiment, in addition to furthering the bond between Riley and Will, helps restate the rules of the world to the viewer. The moment also exploits the comprehension developed by the viewer over the season in order to elicit satisfaction from being able to connect the dots of this complex phenomenon.

While visiting is certainly used to develop romantic relationships between characters and to facilitate discussions on their shared sensate experience, the series also employs this device to allow them to discuss their personal problems with each other. Just as sharing often allows characters to help each other overcome obstacles in their individual storylines, visiting capitalizes on their empathetic connectivity, allowing them to motivate, advise, and guide fellow sensates by imparting their own stories and wisdom. The first time this type of interaction occurs is in episode five, in which Sun
must decide whether or not to take the fall for her brother’s embezzlement scheme. The reason that characters do not visit each other in this way earlier in the season relates back to *Sense8’s* storytelling emphasis on narrative aggregation. These sensate conversations rely on accumulated expository information, which allows the viewer to understand both characters’ situations and draw parallels between them without lengthy explanation. In this case, Capheus and Sun visit each other and compare their dilemmas. As with Riley and Will’s bar conversation, continuity editing works to blend their respective locations in Nairobi and Seoul to instead place the viewer’s attention on their dialogue. Capheus explains that he made a promise to his mother to protect her, while Sun says she promised her late mother that she would protect her father and brother. Both must make personal sacrifices to follow through on these vows. Capheus must surrender his safety to secure his mother’s medicine, and Sun would need to go to prison to keep her father’s company from crumbling. The goal of this interaction is to illuminate common truths between both of their problems, rather than to dwell on details that have been covered in previous episodes. Their conversation also involves both characters briefly restating their basic conflicts, an instance of diegetic retelling that aims to ensure viewer comprehension. Capheus narrates over a flashback of his mother protecting him as a child. His comments emphasize the importance of community over the individual, falling in line with the broader thematic strokes of the series. This conversation motivates Sun to drop off her dog at her trainer’s house at the end of the episode, a sign that
she has decided to go to jail. By highlighting the universality of her predicament, Sun’s exchange with Capheus underscores the thematic significance of her decision to keep her promise and protect her family.

In this scene, Sun’s choice to go to prison draws motivation from outside her storyline through a visiting interaction. The show engineers this complex narrative contortion in large part by relying on narrative information that the viewer has collected thus far. Assuming that the viewer understands that Sun and Capheus are physically situated in different countries, the scene moves past this point and focuses on their commonalities. The inclusion of a flashback to accompany Capheus’ story builds on the season-long repeated device of flashbacks for illuminating back-story. Also, the resulting character action relies on an indirect connection that the viewer must make from earlier in the episode. Understanding the weight of this action involves knowledge of events leading up to this episode. For a new viewer who must sift through these multiple layers of complexity, this scene would likely offer little narrative meaning.

As repeated examples of visiting and sharing, along with character exposition, collect over the course of the season, increasingly complex sensate interactions become possible. Some of these connections, such as the one between Wolfgang and Lito in episode 10, simultaneously incorporate both visiting and sharing. The final episode of the season includes a fairly complicated series of connections, in which several sensates collaborate to save Riley. In this episode, Will has flown to Iceland to rescue Riley from the
BPO research facility. Nomi assists him from her apartment in his efforts to break into the building. He visits her and she him, as she instructs him on how to create a diversion and sends him a forged ID pass. She continues to walk alongside him inside the building, as they discuss how to find Riley’s room.

Suddenly, we hear Lito’s voice off-screen, offering his help. Lito and Will both appear visiting Nomi’s apartment, and Will asks Lito if they know each other. Given that their only past interaction occurred during a multi-sensate orgy in episode six, Lito simply states, “Yes. We had sex.” Will begins to stammer nervously, prompting Nomi to intervene and get them back on track. Though stakes and tensions are very high in this moment, this interaction plays to comedic effect. The humor here heavily relies on the viewer’s long-term memory from episode six, once again evidencing the season-level storytelling. Furthermore, this moment sets the tone for the following sequence, in which Lito takes over Will’s body and uses his acting chops to flirt with a nurse to figure out Riley’s room information. For this instance of sharing, there are no stylistic signals to indicate that Lito is sharing Will’s body, relying instead on the viewer’s prior familiarity with the phenomenon. We simply cut to Lito walking into the break room dressed in a lab coat. Posing as a new co-worker, he successfully wins over the nurse, at which point we cut out to a wider shot framed on either side by the heads of Nomi and Will looking on. Lito looks up and winks at them. This momentary shift away from the otherwise tense and urgent tone of the scene is allowed in part by the accumulated experiences that the viewer has amassed with Lito.
Partially inspired by his world of telenovelas and celebrity, Lito’s storyline consistently maintains a more playful, campy tone than the others. Therefore, when his character enters this scene, its tone recalibrates to support his established persona. That the scene briefly switches tones in this way reflects an acknowledgement of the prior experiences that the viewer has carried into the episode, as engagement with this moment is conditional on long-form viewing.

The episode continues along this path, as other sensates take on Will’s body to offer their unique skills to help rescue Riley. Nomi continues to visit and guide him along the way. After Lito makes his contribution, Sun shares Will’s body to take out the guards blocking Riley’s room. Next, Kala employs her pharmacy skills to concoct an adrenaline shot to wake up Riley. When the keys are missing to the getaway car, Capheus steps in to hotwire the vehicle. Finally, Wolfgang’s fearlessness allows Will to drive straight into an opposing helicopter, forcing it to yield the way. Like clockwork, the sensates step in and out of Will’s body, as Nomi serves as a visiting guide. The ease with which these transitions are executed rests heavily on accumulated narrative information. Assuming that the viewer already understands each of the sensates’ skill-sets and the rules for the sensate connections, the sequence need not deviate or distract from the main action to explain these ancillary elements. In executing this string of sharing interactions, the sequence features a series of coincidences, whereby Will happens to only encounter problems that align with the cluster’s collective skill-set. While a new viewer
would likely balk at the contrived nature of these circumstances, a consistent viewer, who derives pleasure from the activation of previously amassed information, may be more inclined to look past the overreliance on coincidence.

This demonstration of teamwork among the cluster represents a significant moment for character development. Over the span of the first season, these eight individuals struggle to understand, harness, and utilize this newfound ability. The final episode, which sees them exercise this ability to save one of their own, signifies a capstone in that development. The situation itself is a fairly straightforward hostage rescue. By using a conventional action film plot as a framework for this complex cluster-wide collaboration, the show encourages coherence and signals a grand climactic end to the entire season’s action. The season begins with a high level of obscurity and confusion and continually works toward greater comprehension and simplicity. This progression reflects the series’ central themes of universality and oneness, as the characters ultimately become able to act as a single sentient being. Given the highly complex mechanisms upon which this notion rests, the series expects a great deal from the viewer as far as comprehension. In order to experiment with complexity without sacrificing understanding, the series relies on a feature film technique of narrative accumulation, whereby each episode assumes that the viewer has retained a set of experiences and information from prior viewing. This willingness to lean on long-term recall enables the show to sustain forward movement and feed
its various narrative strands into a three-act season plot that erupts in a single cinematic climax. Though, possible challenges arise when the series expects too much from the viewer. In order to account for the excessive length, the series often engages in retelling through repetition of devices and narrative information. A great deal of this responsibility falls on the episode level, where the storytelling must reconcile the maintenance of season-level comprehension with the small-scale engagement of each individual unit.
CHAPTER 4

SENSE8 AND EPISODE-LEVEL STORYTELLING

Traditional television programs are typically commissioned, created, and distributed at the episode level. In the case of Sense8, which was commissioned, created, and distributed at the season level, the narrative function of the episode comes into question. In other words, what is the storytelling role of each individual episode in a series that heavily favors season-level storytelling? To dismiss the distinct creative contributions of the episode unit would be to ignore one of the basic organizing qualities of the television medium. Even though the series’ overall narrative arcs and developments are primarily organized on the season level, the first season of Sense8 still consists of twelve discrete units as opposed to a single continuous movie. These built-in breaks in the narrative have several implications for creative decision-making. Through a thorough examination of these episode-level storytelling decisions in Sense8, we can better discern the influence of the all-at-once streaming model on television storytelling.

TRADITIONAL EPISODE STRUCTURE

Linear weekly television offers several variations on episode narrative structure. Due to the ad-supported revenue model, broadcast television series generally structure their episode narratives around the commercial breaks. For network primetime dramas, this model typically produces a four-act structure, in which the act breaks represent dramatic crescendos positioned just before the commercial break. The number of acts can vary based on the
number of commercial breaks programmed by the network. Often, these acts are comprised of short narrative beats that build up to a mini-climax, which ends abruptly before cutting to commercial. This rigid episode structure reflects the mandate for forward progress imposed by a platform that relies heavily on advertising viewership.

Basic cable shows occupy a middle ground between broadcast and premium, as they include commercial breaks but do not impose strict narrative restrictions on episode construction. Therefore, they offer the potential for more prolonged beats but usually maintain the episode act structure. Meanwhile, premium cable channels, while they do not air commercials, do not necessarily encourage the subversion of this episode structure. In many cases, episodes of premium cable series similarly conform to a conventional act structure but allow for more flexibility in terms of beat construction and transitions between acts. Hence, the commercial act structure remains the most prevalent form of episode design across all traditional platforms, even in the absence of ad breaks. Thompson highlights the universal incentives of this type of template:

Such divisions of programs into acts, whether rigidly or flexibly proportioned, are not simply arbitrary. They give an episode a sense of structure...They provide the spectator with a sense of progress and guarantee the introduction of dramatic new premises or obstacles at intervals. They allow for the rising and falling action that many writers refer to as crucial to good plots.132

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Cable series, particularly on premium cable, are free to depart from the standard episode structure and several choose to take advantage of this freedom. However, traditional television shows are repeatedly drawn to this template because it gives the basic installment of the series a sense of progress and structure, helping it function as an autonomous unit.

The imperative remains for each of these traditional platforms to construct narratives that satisfy a weekly viewer or even a new one. While broadcast series often build episodes that require minimal prior knowledge and conclude with fewer open-ended storylines, the borders around cable episodes are relatively more permeable but still clearly defined. Episodes for Netflix series need not explicitly enforce these boundaries. The all-at-once release permits more heavily serialized season-level storytelling because it is unlikely that a new viewer would jump into a series in the middle of the season. While a traditional television series apportions its act breaks within the span of an episode, Sense8 does so on the season level. In Sense8, each episode functions much like a cross-section of several season-level storylines, as opposed to working independently. Episode lengths range from 45 to 67 minutes, implying that while the borders between these units are not quite as opaque as those found in traditional television, the placement of the breaks is deliberate.

In the absence of contained episodic plots, Sense8 encounters several challenges on the episode level with regard to structure and coherence. Each episode must delineate its own boundaries while still shepherding and
developing the season-level storylines. The management of narrative priorities within each installment requires tactful manipulation of the onscreen relationship between various threads and story events to maintain comprehension. At the same time, each episode has an obligation to keep the viewer engaged on the small scale, seeing as the large-scale storytelling delivers payoffs that are spaced out across a lengthy season. In order to generate viewer engagement in the absence of standalone plots, episodes utilize various narrative devices to artfully design their architecture. While an episode of traditional television may have its own independent narrative structure, Sense8 uses an assortment of tools, including juxtapositions, parallels, and motifs, to loosely unify its episode-level storytelling within a season-long narrative.

**Contrasts**

For the most part, the creative process for traditional television series is organized on the episode level. Writers and directors are usually assigned by episode, and episodes, while not always filmed in order, are generally produced individually. The creators of Sense8 take a divergent approach to television creation, and these points of departure illuminate some of the contributing factors that figure into the show’s episode construction. The three creators, the Wachowskis and J. Michael Straczynski, co-wrote every script, which is atypical but not unheard-of in traditional television. However, instead of having directors in charge of individual episodes, directorial duties were assigned by location, an unconventional method inspired by the fact that each
character’s storyline is set in a different part of the world. In order to shoot scenes in which the characters visit each other and trade bodies, the entire cast of sensates physically traveled to these locations in lieu of special effects. Certain sequences, which include performances that take place in multiple cities at once, required that the same action be shot over and over in different locations and by different directors before being edited together into a single seamless scene. These sequences essentially represent the work of multiple directors stitched together. Along these lines, each episode of Sense8 embraces a patchwork approach to narrative that promotes a sense of contrast while also stitching connections between seemingly disparate storylines.

The series’ emphasis on contrast is reflected through its casting and location choices, as well as its episode narratives. On the topic of locations, Straczynski explained:

We were looking for the places that would kind of contrast visually with each other and that would give us the widest range of different kinds of people…We cut from an exterior of a Nairobi slum to a pretty house in San Francisco, but they’re both dealing with the same problems, suddenly it illuminates the fact that…we all want the same things for ourselves.133

Sense8’s preoccupation with contrast is rooted in its central themes of universality and interconnectedness. It also showcases the show’s production values and reminds viewers of its novelty. Within each episode, this is visually and narratively conveyed in large part through editing. Episode one, “Limbic Resonance,” introduces these season-long priorities by first establishing the

133 Fienberg, “Straczynski.”
diversity of its characters’ stories and then varying its editing pattern to suggest connections between them. The episode provides our first glimpse at the main characters through a brief montage, in which their cluster mother Angelica visits them one by one. In addition to signaling the birth of the cluster, this montage visually evokes a sense of contrast through mise-en-scene and character design. The shots representing each sensate are location- or character-specific, tying each cluster member to easily identifiable qualities or images that make him or her unique. Sun practicing tai chi in front of the Seoul skyline is juxtaposed against Wolfgang dancing in a Berlin nightclub. A costumed Lito encounters Angelica in an ornate Mexican church before we cut to Nomi injecting herself with hormones in her colorfully decorated San Francisco loft. This sequence of images distills the characters into superficial portraits for the sake of expressing contrast. At the same time, this serves to distinguish the ensemble of characters and orient viewers to the show’s structure.

The subsequent series of scenes, which properly introduces each of the characters in their various locales, continues to perform this function. These initial scenes offer cursory characterizations of the eight protagonists, giving relatively equal weight to each character. After cutting between expository sequences establishing the eight characters and their situations, the episode revisits each locale for follow-up scenes. Nomi and Riley both feature in a total of three introductory sequences, while the others receive two. The additional emphasis on Riley may be attributed to her role in the
climactic final scene of the episode, while the extra attention on Nomi could be related to the fact that she undergoes the most pronounced character arc during act one. Regardless, the relatively even distribution of character scenes in this first part of episode one reflects its goal of establishing the sprawling scope of the series’ narration.

The manner in which “Limbic Resonance” handles its multiple storylines is indicative but not necessarily representative of future episode narrative structuring. Character depth and development increase over the course of the season, but on the episode level, this attention to contrast consistently remains a priority. While later episodes do not distribute emphasis as evenly between the characters as the first episode does, they do often splice together contrasting vignettes of action from among the various storylines. Sometimes these adjoining scenes are thematically related, and other times they are unrelated. However, the mere fact that they are edited together encourages the viewer to compare and contrast them. As the sensates’ connections intensify on the season level, these episode-level contrasts gradually gain more meaning. In the face of heightened interconnectedness, the storylines’ visual and circumstantial dissimilarities contribute to the series’ theme of universality with respect to the human experience.

As these characters begin to develop, each storyline establishes a unique narrative voice that figures into the tone, style, and subject matter that the viewer comes to expect from that character. Some of these storylines are
more rooted in genre, while others maintain a more ambiguous classification. Regardless, the result is an episode design that expresses contrast through visuals, as well as through genre and tone. Lito’s story resembles a campy telenovela-inspired drama, as it incorporates a great deal of theatrics and humor. Sun’s storyline begins as a workplace melodrama but evolves in episode three when we discover that she uses martial arts as an outlet for her pent-up anger. Meanwhile, Will’s storyline contains elements of a police procedural but also incorporates psychological drama and science fiction through its relationship with the cluster-level plot. In this respect, all of the storylines carry some elements of science fiction, creating some continuity between the contrasting threads. Not every line of action can be associated with a specific genre, but they each develop a unique attitude toward the narrative that fosters certain expectations from viewers. If a viewer is not a fan of a particular storyline, he or she need not wait long before being transported to another story world. Each episode of Sense8, while not punctuated by act breaks to encourage forward movement, keeps the viewer engaged partly through these frequent shifts in genre and tone.

Episodes often use these contrasting narrative threads to engage the viewer by deliberately cutting to another line of action at points where it interrupts and delays something the viewer is interested in seeing. By managing the different storylines in this way, they effectively manufacture a structure of suspense in the absence of commercial breaks. For example, episode three begins with Will waking up from a nightmare in a hospital bed.
Upon waking, Will hurries out of the room to locate Jonas, as the nurse tries to stop him. Given that the prior episode concluded with a car chase between Will and Jonas that ended in a crash, this tense opening scene cues the viewer’s desire to follow Will’s search for answers. Instead, we cut to a television screen showing a hospital scene from one of Lito’s telenovelas. The camera tracks out to find Hernando exaggeratedly mouthing the dialogue from the scene, accompanied by its somber score. Cutting to a reverse angle shot, we see Lito smiling at his theatrics, establishing that this is a playful interaction in which Hernando is poking fun at him. The contrast between the tones of the two scenes is striking. As we move from the tense urgency of Will’s scene to the endearing humor of Lito’s, the resultant suspense is akin to a commercial break interrupting a cliffhanger in a traditional show. The procedural qualities of Will’s storyline enhance this effect. In the police procedural genre, characters typically investigate and find solutions on the viewer’s behalf, leading to a viewing relationship that revolves around the anticipation of their success. By delaying Will’s pursuit of Jonas, this scene transition generates suspense in the viewer. Furthermore, the episode constructs a transition around the shared setting of a hospital. But while the setting and the stakes for Will are real, Lito’s emotional hospital scene is entirely artificial and even becomes a subject for mockery. The commonalities around this transition heighten the sense of contrast, while also exposing a point of comparison between the two divergent scenes. While not all
instances make use of a shared pivot point, episodes of Sense8 routinely cut between storylines to similarly concoct forward movement through suspense.

**Parallels**

A decent amount of Sense8’s thematic and narrative goals are tied to the concept of creating similarities out of differences. The diversity of the cluster serves to further this point in the wake of their connection and collaboration. While each episode derives its structure and seeks viewing pleasures from juxtapositions and disparities within the narrative, these devices are met with other techniques that highlight the parallels and linkages between the contrasting storylines. In creating these associations between different locations and storylines, editing devices, such as cross-cutting and scene transitions, take on a significant role with regard to episode-level storytelling.

Sense8 often maintains viewer engagement through cross-cutting between separate stories that are not otherwise explicitly connected in the narrative. In the latter half of episode one, the narrative aims attention at three characters—Will, Riley, and Wolfgang. Through frequent intercutting between Wolfgang performing a diamond robbery and Will pursuing reports of gunfire, the episode builds tension by combining the suspense created by these two unrelated sequences. The scene compounds the sequences’ individual tensions by treating the two as if they were part of a single line of action, unified by an anxious musical score. For example, after a nurse refuses to treat Deshawn’s gunshot wound, Will insists that he will die before they get
somewhere else, emphasizing a limited time frame. We cut from a shot of his bleeding wound to the nurse’s face. After tensely lingering on her face, we cut back to Wolfgang working on the safe. A timer goes off, and Felix tells him they are out of time, building on the suspense of the deadline set up by Will’s action. The cross-cutting of this scene operates such that the two sequences follow a common rhythm, subject to similar stakes and time constraints. By establishing this relationship through editing, the scene allows their separate tensions to reverberate off of one another and amplify the whole. At one point, we cut to Riley in London, who reacts to sounds of sirens and lock clicks. Due to the parallel editing, we can infer that these sounds are directly subjective, originating from Will’s cop car and Wolfgang’s diamond safe, respectively. In addition to implying a supernatural connection, the inclusion of this moment with Riley perpetuates the tension, as it suggests that the energy from Will’s and Wolfgang’s storylines is audibly spilling into Riley’s.

The way that “Limbic Resonance” manipulates narrative rhythm by varying editing across storylines continues to be a prevalent device within later episodes. As the season goes on and connections within the cluster strengthen, these editing patterns tend to incorporate greater degrees of direct interaction between storylines through sharing and visiting. Still, the fundamental function remains to manufacture dramatic beats and progressions by manipulating the on-screen relationship between storylines. For instance, in a scene from episode three “Smart Money’s on the Skinny Bitch,” Will and Sun are both in their offices intently reading files, the contents
of which are unclear to the viewer. We understand from the first two episodes that Will is researching a mysterious missing person’s case that has some personal significance to him and that Sun has been dodging calls from an unknown Mr. Jeong. However, this scene does not produce any significant revelations that further our understanding of the narrative. Instead, the parallel editing establishes a relationship between the two actions, and they jointly generate intrigue and build up a sense of tension.

Initially, a series of matches on action serve to bind Will and Sun within the narrative, as each of them unlocks a safe in his or her respective office and removes a file. The cross-cutting establishes visual fluidity between the two sequences, cuing the viewer not only to compare the two actions but also to view them as interconnected. Frequent cross-cutting ensues, as they inspect these papers in their respective settings. Restless camera movement, along with the frequent intercutting, injects energy into these static procedures. Then, through a series of over-the-shoulder and reverse angle shots, we see Sun and Will physically change places and occupy each other’s spaces, an early manifestation of the sharing connection. By blurring the physical boundaries between the sensates and implying a shared subjectivity, the scene links the two characters emotionally and physically, but it also creates a narrative event out of what is otherwise a non-event. This fluidity is buttressed by the soundtrack, which binds the parts through a single brooding score and through sound bridges. At one point, a train passes by Will’s window in Chicago, and the sound carries over the cut to a shot of Sun in
Seoul. This scene eventually builds to the moment when Sun’s secretary enters to notify her that Mr. Jeong is threatening to call the police. While we recognize Mr. Jeong’s name from the repeated cell phone calls, we remain in the dark as to why he would be calling the police. Still, this action infuses a sense of urgency into the nervous tension already established by the cross-cutting between Will and Sun. We cut to Will getting up from his desk in the precinct office, and the momentum translates over the cut to a shot that pans and follows Sun approaching her father’s secretary’s desk. When the secretary tells her to leave a message, Sun abruptly punches a hole in the desk and walks away. This moment elicits surprise in the viewer, as Sun’s demeanor has been quite reserved up until this point in the season. It also foreshadows a scene later on in the episode that reveals that Sun is secretly an underground fighter. In addition, Sun’s unexpected show of aggression represents a break in the tension built up through intercutting. The scene essentially manufactures a narrative progression by playing Will’s and Sun’s actions off of one another, akin to the way that Wolfgang’s and Will’s scenes build as a single rhythm in “Limbic Resonance.” However in this case, the body swapping between Will and Sun affixes an additional layer of connectivity to the scene, while also acclimating the viewer to the visual language of these newfound connections, albeit in an enigmatic manner. Along these lines, future episodes repeatedly use this intercutting device to shape and guide the narrative, but they vary the execution to account for the ever-deepening sensate connections.
While episodes relate actions through cross-cutting to manipulate our sense of progression, they also utilize loose associations between scenes in order to bind them within the narrative. Sometimes, these structural links can be as simple as extending sound across the cut to ease a scene transition and punctuate a moment. In episode two, “I Am Also a We,” Lito rejects Daniela’s brazen sexual advances, which makes her want him even more. Daniela watches him, smoldering, as he walks away. While lingering on this shot of her face, we begin to hear sensual moans on the soundtrack, which continue when we cut to the reverse shot of Lito walking away. Then, we cut to Wolfgang having sex in the next scene, explaining the source of the sounds. By having the audio significantly precede the cut to Wolfgang’s sex scene, the episode implicitly binds the two scenes, superimposing the sounds of Daniela’s desires onto the image of her longing. This editing device aims to form associations and linkages on the episode level in the absence of direct narrative causality. Moreover, while a sound bridge typically connotes a relationship between two scenes, in Sense8, the device has a diegetic motivation, as its characters are literally connected. Therefore, these types of transitions not only function as a structural device on the episode level, but they are also steeped in narrative meaning that ties in with the overall story.

An even more overt example of this type of associative scene transition occurs in episode eight, “We Will All Be Judged By the Courage of Our Heart.” The episode begins with Nomi and her girlfriend Amanita trying to grapple with having recently witnessed a murder-suicide. Nomi compares the
situation to the “feeling when you’re sitting in a movie theater, and everyone’s laughing at something and you just don’t get it.” After briefly discussing its relevance to her current state of mind, the sound of roaring laughter precedes the cut to a boisterous movie theater where Kala is sitting with her family. Kala appears to possess the single sullen face in a sea of smiles, exemplifying precisely the incongruity that Nomi was describing. After cutting in to a close-up, the raucous sounds become muffled and replaced with the beep of a heart monitor. We follow the sound across the cut to find Wolfgang sitting solemnly at Felix’s bedside. This series of scene transitions promotes a sense of forward progress across three separate storylines. Nomi’s dialogue paints a picture that Kala’s scene exhibits, relying on a thematic connection rather than a narrative one to motivate the cut. On the other hand, the transition from Kala’s scene to Wolfgang’s implies a narrative relationship, as the reason for Kala’s sorrow lacks an explanation within the story world but ultimately finds one in Wolfgang’s storyline. In the absence of episode-level plotting, Sense8 often relies on these types of scene transitions to propel the viewer forward across contrasting stories. Here, the show uses these techniques both for expressive commentary and for direct causal storytelling.

Throughout the season, episodes utilize paralleling techniques to express thematic or tonal relationships, as well as narrative progressions. However, instances in which scene transitions or cross-cutting suggests direct causal connections are rare at first but occur more frequently as the season progresses and the sensate linkages strengthen. Therefore, as the
cluster becomes increasingly integrated, episodes continue to employ similar devices to express narrative relationships and create a sense of structure, but their motivation within the story world evolves to fit the deepening connectivity among the characters.

Sensate Connections

While depictions of these sensate connections serve several narrative functions on the season level, they often work as structural devices within individual episodes. Episode five, “Art Is Like Religion,” uses an extended connection between Lito and Sun to construct a self-contained narrative thread within the episode. The episode relates to the broader story of Lito’s identity crisis. An actor both on and off screen, Lito uses the macho bravado of his onscreen persona to bury his true emotion and mask his homosexuality. By utilizing the connection with Sun to create an emotional conflict in Lito, the episode assembles a unified storyline that moves forward through these sensate interactions.

The episode begins by cross-cutting between scenes of the two characters. While Sun wakes up in her apartment and goes to the bathroom, Lito sits in a trailer getting his makeup done. A Mexican song on the soundtrack complements the editing to tie Sun’s actions to Lito. We cut from Sun looking in her mirror to Lito leaning into his reflection in the make-up trailer, as he complains about feeling bloated. Next, we cut to Sun inserting a tampon before cutting to Lito asking the make-up artist for an Advil. This series of shots establishes a connection between Sun and Lito first through
editing and later through a shared experience of discomfort, a suggestion that Sun’s PMS is having an effect on Lito. In the next set of shots, they unintentionally visit each other’s locations and do a double take, orienting the viewer to the device while also eliciting humor. This moment of physical comedy is facilitated by the blending of Sun’s storyline with Lito’s, as Lito brings a lighter tone to Sun’s story world. This emotional and physical connection between Sun and Lito persists as an ongoing narrative thread throughout this episode.

The next time we see Lito, he is shooting a movie scene, struggling to play a sexy hero. In the middle of the scene, he begins to cry and exaggeratedly expresses his emotional state, to comedic effect. The episode utilizes the initially established sensate connection as a tool for comedy in a later scene, as well as to pose an episode-level conflict threatening his masculinity. Later in the episode, Lito sits in traffic talking to his boyfriend Hernando on the phone. Through a performance wrought with hyperbole, Lito’s emotions shift from worry to panic to anger to sadness, as he laments his inexplicable discomfort. Here, we see a man, who is used to burying his emotions, pouring them all out at once. While screaming at another car on the road, Lito inadvertently becomes transported to Seoul, where Sun is practicing Tai Chi and silently crying. The juxtaposition between Lito’s kinetic performance and Sun’s restrained one creates yet another humorous moment.
Further on in the episode, Lito’s director tells him he needs to deliver a gritty, real performance for the next scene. We begin cross-cutting with a scene of Will pursuing a lead on a witness. When his witness makes a run for it, the action picks up, as Will and his partner pursue him. During this time, Will involuntarily visits Lito's action film set intermittently and executes the action sequence on his behalf. The director yells cut and lauds him for an excellent performance. While Sense8 is undoubtedly a heavily serialized show, Lito’s storyline in “Art Is Like Religion” represents the series’ version of an episodic plot. The story utilizes the viewer’s prior understanding of Lito’s personal struggle as well as the emotional and physical connections between characters, but the narrative events largely function independently. The episode introduces a new problem to Lito’s life through Sun’s PMS and builds on it and develops it until a climactic resolution with Will. While the episode certainly provides insight into his character’s struggle, it does not move forward Lito’s season-level storyline. Instead, the initial conflict originates and develops through a connection with Sun and becomes resolved through a connection with Will. The episode uses sensate connections to unite its narrative threads around a single, contained story beat.

In this same episode, sensate connections more loosely contribute to the architecture of the episode by setting up a recurring motif that unifies the storylines. Similar to “Limbic Resonance,” in which many of the characters individually relive visions of Angelica and experience migraines, “Art Is Like Religion” finds several cluster members discovering the implications of their
connections on language comprehension. When questioned on why *Sense8* does not have its characters speaking their native languages, Straczynski responded:

> What you don’t see in the first three [episodes], which we do see coming later on, we didn’t want them to all speak English all the time…The first time they meet each other, they’re speaking their actual language. So for instance the scene where Capheus meets Sun for the first time, he’s speaking to her in Swahili and we subtitle it in English. And she’s speaking to him in Korean and we subtitle it in English. And what made sense, you know, “Do you speak Swahili?” “No, do you speak Korean?” He says, “No.” “Well how are we understanding each other?” So over the course of the show we do it now as if they are speaking their own language, it’s not English.\(^{134}\)

As mentioned earlier in Chapter 2, the Netflix model allows for greater levels of subtitled and multilingual storytelling due to its global audience. However, *Sense8* justifies its reluctance to take advantage of this opportunity through the narrative. Since members of a cluster become able to share each other’s knowledge and skills, it makes sense that the characters can understand each other in spite of speaking different languages. Thus, the creators argue that the characters are in fact speaking their respective mother tongues but that the viewer receives them as a single language, English. There are several potential reasons for this creative choice, one being that writing dialogue for multiple different languages poses a logistical problem, especially when a non-native speaker must share the body of a native speaker. Furthermore, in a series so committed to the concept of interconnectedness, discordant dialogue would create a barrier where there should otherwise be connection. This could create one dissonance too many to absorb the

\(^{134}\) Fienberg, “J. Michael Straczynski.”
primarily English speaking audience. Moreover, the decision to include multilingual dialogue would likely alienate many viewers. Not only do subtitles often vex viewers, particularly in the United States, but this creative choice also would not fit with the style of the show, as it generally prioritizes thematic consistency and narrative complexity over realism.

“Art Is Like Religion” includes many of the first verbal interactions between cluster members and takes this opportunity to explain the language issue. In fact, this is the only episode that directly addresses this issue, and this serves as an episode structuring tool as well as a season-level narrative clarification device. Several sensate interactions throughout the episode call attention to language barriers between the characters. “Art Is Like Religion” repeats and varies the language motif within its confines to create a self-contained pattern that benefits from the degree of familiarity afforded to the viewer by the episode unit. The episode raises questions and proceeds to answer them through these sensate connections, engineering a narrative pay off within its limits.

When Sun and Lito first meet at the beginning of the episode, they both ask each other, “Are you for real?” in Korean and Spanish, respectively. This moment represents the second time two members of the cluster speak to each other, the first being in “Limbic Resonance” when Riley visits Will in the abandoned church. In that case, both characters speak English, so there is no need to address the issue of language comprehension so early on. When Sun and Lito have that first interaction, they do not acknowledge the fact that
they spoke to each other in different languages. The episode introduces this motif in its barest form, wherein the characters speak the same phrase and refrain from commenting on it, before later developing on it further. This initial interaction simply presents the language barrier to the viewer in order to generate intrigue.

The next sensate connection of the episode involves Capheus and Riley spontaneously visiting each other. Capheus begins speaking to her in Swahili, but she cannot understand it, so they switch to English, which they can both understand. This scene involves Riley directly commenting on the language issue and may imply that the sharing of skill sets has not yet reached full fidelity. Just as the characters do not begin the season uniformly linked with every other cluster member, their levels of language comprehension appear to be inconsistent while the connections are still forming. This point supports the choice to tackle this issue in episode five, which takes place early enough in the season for them to still be learning about their abilities and late enough for these abilities to have developed. Perhaps even more importantly, the viewer presumably has a grasp of the rules that govern sensate connections by this point in the season.

When Sun and Lito meet again, Sun tells Lito in Korean to stop screaming. In what we hear as English, he screams, “I’m not screaming.” His response proves that he can understand what she is saying. He yells this instinctively before realizing he is suddenly standing in Seoul, at which points he starts asking where he is in Spanish. He then tells Hernando on the phone
in English that he sees a crying Korean woman. She insists in English, “I’m not crying.” In a humorous rebuttal, Lito shouts in English that she is not crying in the same way that he is not screaming. This interaction blends the characters’ native language dialogue with English dialogue to demonstrate that they are actually one and the same. Both Sun and Lito seem to understand each other throughout the interaction, further building on the motif and elucidating the rules.

The next iteration of this type of connection occurs between Wolfgang and Kala. Wolfgang enters a club bathroom in Berlin and burps. This sound provokes Kala, standing in her own bathroom in Mumbai, to ask who is there in Hindi. Wolfgang answers in German, believing her to be located in the next stall. Meanwhile, Kala speaks to him as if he is positioned behind her closed bathroom door, telling him to go away. By capitalizing on these visually obscured portions of their respective locations, the sequence generates a candid conversation in which Kala and Wolfgang believe they are talking to nearby strangers. While this scene builds on the season-long romance that develops between the characters, it also functions within the episode structure, answering questions that have built up over the arc. This interaction demonstrates that the characters can understand each other by perceiving that the other person is speaking their own language. The fact that Wolfgang does not realize she is speaking Hindi and that Kala cannot differentiate between his voice and a native speaker illustrates the fluid nature of language comprehension between sensates. This point justifies the choice to uniformly
use English for dialogue in later episodes, as the perceptual borders differentiating the languages disintegrate. At the end of the interaction, Wolfgang speaks aloud in Hindi. Felix enters the bathroom asking him what language he is speaking, but Wolfgang is oblivious to what he is talking about. Felix’s comments and Wolfgang’s confused response suggest that while Wolfgang perceives himself to be speaking German because that is his first language, he may actually be communicating in a different language depending on whom he is talking to within the cluster. By involving a third party observer, this scene elaborates on previous instances of the language motif.

The final scene to incorporate this issue deals with it head on. Sun and Capheus visit each other and have a conversation. They begin by each asking where the other is located. They speak their native tongues and have no problems understanding each other. Then, Capheus exclaims something in Korean, and Sun asks in English if he speaks Korean. He denies this and asks in English if she speaks Swahili, to which she responds no. They both express puzzlement at the fact that they can communicate with each other, but they cannot explain why. After several previous versions of this type of sensate interaction, this conversation involves the first acknowledgement of the language issue by the speaking characters, expanding on Felix’s third-party commentary in the earlier scene and creating a moment of closure.

The repetition and variation of these sequences, in which the characters encounter and acknowledge the language issue, establishes a
narrative pattern over the course of the episode that gives it a sense of unity. Over the span of the episode, several characters interact with this motif in various ways, allowing the viewer to develop an understanding of how they are able to communicate within the cluster. Though recognition of this concept certainly improves the viewer’s general comprehension of the sensate phenomenon, it does not prepare us for any future narrative developments in the season. It may clear up some confusion as to how the characters can understand each other, but in the absence of this episode, viewers would likely suspend disbelief to engage with the story. That this concept does not directly inform future narrative comprehension underscores the argument that the language motif functions as a structural tool on the episode level. This episode-level unifying device allows the episode to become the unit of narrative within a series that heavily favors season-level storytelling.

**MOMENTS**

Overall, the series tends to prioritize season-level storytelling over episode-level storytelling. Still, while its general narrative priorities remain on the season level, the breadth of its form does not permit it to rely as heavily on large-scale plot movements as would a feature film. The progressions and payoffs do not occur quickly enough to independently maintain viewer engagement. Individual episodes attempt to engage viewers through several of the aforementioned techniques (i.e. contrast, cross-cutting, related sensate interactions, transitions, etc.). In the absence of episode-level plots
punctuated by act breaks, episodes of *Sense8* incorporate these structural devices and depend on them to loosely unite and shape the units that comprise the season. However, these episode-level storytelling devices alone do not necessarily captivate viewers. Rather, they mostly function as organizing forces to balance and integrate the season-level storytelling with the moment level.

Moment-level storytelling involves the relationship between the viewer and specific scenes, sequences, or interactions within the narrative. These small-scale pleasures play a considerable role in the viewing experience but, unlike episodes and seasons, do not fit neatly into unitary blocks. Perhaps due to this fact, there exists some overlap between what one could consider moment-level and episode-level storytelling. Especially in *Sense8*, which places substantial weight on the overarching season-level narrative, engaging moments keep the viewer captivated throughout the lengthy acts. In this series, the primary source of moment-level engagement involves interactions within the cluster, as this is the principal innovation of the show. However, moment-level pleasures can arise within individual storylines as well, whether through humor, action, sexuality, or other sources. A great deal of the episode-level storytelling in *Sense8* involves tying together these moments in a coherent, cohesive, and engaging fashion, while still capturing progressions in the broader season-level plot. Traditional television series derive viewer pleasure on the moment level as well, but those series also generally place more emphasis on the episode than the season. By reallocating attention
from the episode to the season, *Sense8* puts a greater responsibility on the moment level to provide small-scale viewer satisfaction.

The most compelling source of moment-level pleasures in *Sense8* arises from the supernatural connections between the sensates. The artful manipulation of sound and image to convey communication and collaboration between people situated in different parts of the world is the main hook of the show, as well as its clearest display of overt narrative innovation. However, in order for these momentous events to take place, the series must first explain and develop the linkages between the characters, which is a season-level issue. As a result, some viewers may react unfavorably to the delayed fulfillment of this primary source of attraction. One review from *The Atlantic* claimed:

> It’s a cool idea that pays off with some spine-tingling moments in the three episodes screened for critics…Towards the end of one episode, a hijacking unfolds in Africa as a kickboxing match goes down in South Korea, resulting in a cross-continental martial-arts sequence. At another moment, love scenes transpire in India, Germany, and Mexico, resulting in some amusingly overlapping emotions for those involved. But gosh-wow moments like those are rare, at least so far…It’s frustrating, because there are flashes of fascination in here. \(^{135}\)

These criticisms, which are hardly unique to this reviewer, reveal the potential shortcomings of *Sense8’s* narrative design. By softening the narrative role of each episode, the series places significant pressure on the moment level to keep the viewer interested. However, when the foremost source of moment-

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level engagement is tied to the gradually unfolding season-level narrative, the show delays gratification and tests the patience of the viewer.

As mentioned above in the *Atlantic* review, the visual interplay between Sun and Capheus at the end of episode three represents a momentous payoff after a lengthy narrative build up. The scene capitalizes on the Wachowskis’ reputation for innovative fight sequences to enthrall viewers with the cinematic capabilities of the cluster’s connectivity. Likely for this reason, Netflix found it was with this episode that viewers became “hooked.” That is, 70% of viewers who watched episode three went on to complete the full season. While this speaks to the attraction of that particular moment, the fact that the series waits until episode three to unveil its central hook points to a possible inconsistency in the viewing experience.

After this moment between Capheus and Sun, later episodes incorporate these sensate moments with greater frequency. These sequences help lend some structure to each episode, creating high points within the architecture of the episode that punctuate the narrative similarly to how act breaks organize a traditional television episode. Because of this dependence on sensate moments, episodes never quite settle into a regular rhythm of action. In addition to the one-on-one connections that occur throughout the season, some particularly significant moments involve ensemble participation, uniting multiple sensates in a single experience. Oftentimes, an episode will dwell on these ensemble moments, allowing them

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to dominate the episode narrative in a way that other scenes do not. This willingness of an episode to give itself over to the moment level speaks to the malleability of Sense8’s episode structure.

Episode four, “What’s Going On?” concludes with the first genuine ensemble interaction among the cluster. The scene, which consumes over ten minutes out of the total 50 minutes of screen time, begins with Wolfgang getting pressured into singing karaoke at a bar in Berlin. The narrative event builds slowly, as Wolfgang first has a flashback of his father laughing at his stage fright as a child. He begins drunkenly yelling, “Fuck you,” into the microphone as a response. The sense of anger aids the transition to Sun who is passionately hitting a punching bag. She receives a text from her brother, which angers her further. Next, we cut to Riley sitting on a ledge overlooking London. She selects a song on her iPod: “What’s Up” by 4 Non Blondes. The music begins playing through her headphones before we cut back to Wolfgang at the karaoke bar. The song seamlessly continues into his scene but adapts to the change in the diegesis. After being filtered to subjectively convey the sound from Riley’s headphones, its timbre changes to connote that the music is playing from the bar speakers. This transition suggests that the song is continuously playing across their separate story worlds. Subsequent shots show Lito lying in bed tapping his foot to the rhythm and Capheus humming along while driving his van. We return to Wolfgang, as he nervously prepares to sing the song. Throughout the sequence, we frequently cut away to the various cluster members, including the previously angry Sun,
responding positively to the song, as Wolfgang gradually gains confidence in his performance. The ensuing effect is a cluster-wide sing-along experience that achieves the narrative goal of helping Wolfgang conquer his stage fright.

Wolfgang’s character development here technically operates on the season level, as he experienced the same childhood flashback while watching a singing competition show in episode one. However, due to the amount of time elapsed since that earlier plot point and the reiteration of the conflict here through a repeated flashback, the sequence largely functions on the moment level. It is also important to note that Wolfgang’s stage fright conflict does not operate on the episode level, as previous scenes of Wolfgang in this episode find him securing a diamond deal with Felix. Only in this moment does the stage fright issue finally come to light. After Wolfgang overcomes his fear, the sequence proceeds to tie into the season-level and episode-level stories. Kala and Wolfgang visit each other and sing together, sharing a tender moment that helps ignite their season-long romance.

Suddenly, Kala’s roommate opens the curtains, interrupting the moment and pausing the music. In an extended break from the sing-along, we cut to Will sleeping and softly singing a capella. He wakes up sharing Nomi’s body on Metzger’s operating table and helps her remove her restraints. After a tense escape sequence, Nomi rides away in a cab with Amanita. We cut to Riley singing along to “What’s Up,” played through filtered audio from her headphones, when she notices Nomi positioned next to her in the foreground. Back in the cab, as the audio from Riley’s scene continues, Nomi mentions
the song to Amanita, who is familiar with it. They begin softly singing it together, as the soundtrack transitions from the diegetic headphone filter to high fidelity background music for dramatic effect. We cut to Riley and Nomi singing together in London and then back to the cab, where Nomi genuinely speaks the question, “What’s going on?”

This sequence of events with Nomi ties together season-, episode-, and moment-level storytelling to provide a fitting conclusion to act one. On the season level, Nomi evades the threat that has been facing her since episode two and that will later come back with a vengeance against Riley in act three. In the context of the episode, the scene ties together Metzger’s decision to immediately operate on Nomi and Jonas’ warning to Will to save her. Finally, Nomi’s addition to the sing-along reignites and completes the cluster-wide experience in a way that provides viewer satisfaction on the moment level.

For the first ensemble moment of the season, the show weaves in multiple layers of narrative meaning, utilizing it as a conclusive end point for the first act. After starting out largely focused on the moment level with Wolfgang’s karaoke scene, it evolves to capture broader story elements to round out the act. Various scales of storytelling converge around the act break here in a way that similarly occurs at the break into act three when Riley attends her father’s concert, and the sensates take turns sharing her body.

As the season advances, subsequent examples of ensemble interactions operate more autonomously on the moment level. In episode six, “Demons,” an orgy involving multiple sensates occupies over six minutes of a
47-minute episode while hardly contributing any story progression on either the episode or season level. Rather, the sequence functions as an engaging exercise on the possibilities provided by the physical and emotional connections between the sensates. This relatively self-contained moment finds the creators’ experimenting with the cinematic opportunities posed by the premise, unrestrained by a need to tie it to a specific story function. The feature film version of this premise could not afford to include many of these types of scenes because its form demands efficiency. In Sense8, the moment level offers the Wachowskis a stage for experimentation that their features could not equally provide.

The orgy sequence in “Demons” deliberately builds up to a tantric rhythm that permeates various characters and locations before finishing with a satisfying climax. This sequence provides an opportunity for the creators to play with sexuality and identity in a way that relates to the central premise. Meant to mimic the flow of a sexual encounter, the pacing for this scene operates autonomously from the rest of the episode. The sequence begins with Nomi lying next to Amanita before waking her up and beginning to kiss her. During this interaction, a song (“Demons” by Fatboy Slim) begins softly playing on the soundtrack. The music amplifies just before a cut to Will working out at the gym with his partner Diego. The music continues, as we cut to Hernando spotting and stroking Lito, who is bench pressing dumbbells. We cut to Will grunting while lifting a barbell, as Diego eggs him on. Cutting back to Lito in Mexico, we see him kissing Hernando on the forehead while he
lifts weights. Back in Chicago, Diego compliments Will’s body while he works out. This initial series of shots uses the sexual energy of Nomi’s scene to preface the development of an association between Will’s and Lito’s exercise scenes. The sequence repeatedly juxtaposes the intimate workout dynamic between boyfriends Hernando and Lito against the platonically affectionate interactions between partners Will and Diego, infusing the latter scene with sexual tension and homoeroticism. The background music, which originates in Nomi’s scene, extends forward that initial sense of eroticism to form a tonal spine that unites the following shots. While the orgy sequence functions as a stand-alone unit, the manner in which it deals with eroticism ties into the show’s broader agenda to play with sexual norms. By visually and audibly uniting two same-sex relationships and a platonic male friendship within this shared thread of sexual tension, the show encourages the viewer to reevaluate the social constructs surrounding sexual attraction.

Over the next few shots, the supposed “foreplay” of the sequence continues. Diego dances and gives Hernando a lap dance, while Daniela watches. As Will sits on a weight bench, Diego walks by and motions to a pair of women. Meanwhile, we find a nude Wolfgang lying back in a hot tub. This introduces his involvement in this sexually-charged montage, which has incorporated no sensate interactions as of yet. Up to this point, the editing pattern has drawn no motivation from the diegesis, and the separate lines of action have remained just that. Instead, the cutting has been an invention by the creators to make a thematic argument. By creating these associations
through editing, they call for a blurring of the boundaries between these various scenes before eventually doing away with the boundaries altogether. After a shot of Will bench pressing, we cut to Lito kissing Hernando. The next shot shows a profile of Will lying on the bench. He lowers the barbell, and it completely obscures the frame. After he lifts it up, Lito suddenly appears behind him, his face situated just above Will’s. This artful visual trick offers the first instance of visiting in this sequence, teasing forthcoming interactions and easing the viewer into Will’s sexual experimentation.

The next series of shots features the only season-level narrative event of the sequence. While Hernando and Lito are dancing and kissing, Daniela looks on and takes pictures of them on her phone. This action foreshadows the events of the following episode, in which Daniela’s ex-boyfriend steals her phone and threatens to leak the photos of Lito and Hernando. Interestingly, if there is any moment that seems out of step with the rhythm and flow of the sequence, this is the one. This point highlights the challenges of delivering large-scale narrative information within a sequence that operates primarily through visual and emotional cues on a moment level.

In order to transition into the sensates’ sexual interaction, we cut from Nomi telling Amanita, “I am going to make love to you…,” to Lito finishing her sentence with Hernando, “…like the first time we kissed.” We cut to Nomi kissing Amanita before cutting to Nomi, in Lito’s place, kissing Hernando. Another cut takes us to Lito, in Nomi’s place, kissing Amanita, before cutting to Nomi back in her own body and Lito back in his. This sharing interaction
gradually escalates the sexual interaction within the ensemble, beginning by establishing a link between two characters, Lito and Nomi. The linkages grow and multiply, as the sequence progresses. Will, doing sit-ups on a medicine ball, leans forward and appears to react to a sudden sensation. A few shots later, Will completes another sit up and finds Nomi crouched in front of him, teasing his shirt as he leans backward on the ball. The next time we see Will on the medicine ball, Lito guides his sit-up by pulling him up by his shirt. Once he is upright, the camera reveals Nomi seated in front of him, as she leans in to kiss him. The gradual build-up aids in enacting the creators’ critique on straightness through Will’s character. In a sort of rhetorical structure, each successive iteration escalates toward a gay moment for Will. This pattern of escalation continues throughout the sequence, across the various locations. For instance, the first time we see Wolfgang, he is alone in the tub. Later, Nomi joins him, and the next time, Lito appears as well. Finally, Will, Nomi, and Lito all visit Wolfgang simultaneously, touching and kissing his reclined body. Again, the creators are gradually dissolving the borders that separate the spaces, the characters, and their sexual identities.

Ultimately, this additive process culminates in multiple different sexual encounters happening in different locations at once. The frequent usage of slow-motion not only helps maintain a hypnotic sensual atmosphere that envelops the viewer, but it also allows us to make sense of the various tangles of flesh that fill the screen. Across the various settings, the manner and degree of sexual interaction vary according to the environment, meaning
that intercutting between them evokes a sense of contrast. At this point, the story world participates in the commentary set up by the initial editing pattern. What once were individual characters divided by sexuality, locality, and gender now become naked pansexual bodies that seemingly transcend physical space. In keeping with the show’s thematic concerns, this sequence seeks out unity amidst diversity and connection amidst contrast. The progressive accumulation of erotic tension and sexual partners is not unlike the accumulation of narrative events and information that occurs across the season. In a sense, this sequence seeks to accomplish what the season does for the overarching storylines, but on a moment level. However, in this case, the payoffs are more immediate, and the progression maintains a singular focus, suggesting that moment-level storytelling does not entail the same types of challenges when it comes to maintaining viewer engagement and comprehension.

Seeing as the episode derives its title from the song played during the orgy, it is evident that this moment constitutes the main attraction of this episode. Accordingly, the episode attempts to adapt its narrative design to coalesce around it. “Demons” weaves into the narrative a running thread of intimacy and eroticism leading up to the orgy sequence. After beginning with a conversation between Riley and Will that involves some light flirting, the episode turns to Kala, who fainted in the last episode after a naked Wolfgang visited during her wedding. A playful interaction between Kala and Wolfgang ensues when she finds him naked in her bed. They flirt with each other, but
because she cannot explain his presence, she calls him a “demon,” referencing the episode title. Later, Lito inadvertently shares Sun’s body while she is being questioned by the prison doctor. In a humorous scene, the doctor asks a confused Lito (in Sun’s body) personal questions about his sexual history and instructs him to squat over a mirror. Soon after this scene, the orgy begins. After the sensates climax, we cut to Capheus, who was not involved in the sex scene. While watching a Van Damme film, he readjusts his seating, implying that he has an unexplained erection. A comedic consequence of the orgy, this moment also alludes to the perceived homoeroticism of the action film, extending the episode-level commentary on sexuality and masculinity. The decision to include these loosely related narrative events reflects a desire to tailor episode-level storytelling around a specific moment. Because Sense8 does not follow a strict episode structure or carry out fully formed episode-level plots, moment-level engagement often influences the overall design of the episode. Certainly, one could argue that “Demons” is an episode about sex and that the orgy scene is one component of that. These observations suggest that the distinctions between the episode and the moment are ambiguous. Especially given the inability to explicitly define the boundaries of the moment level, this scale of storytelling remains interwoven with the episode level.

The emphasis by Sense8 on narrative moments is reflected in the way the creators discuss and promote the show. Upon its release, the series was marketed and received as an auteurist work by the Wachowskis, diminishing
the perceived role of co-creator J. Michael Straczynski. However, in addition to the Wachowskis being a more prominent force in the industry, the main draws of the series also carry the mark of their authorship. Straczynski stated in an interview, “If [the Wachowskis] have their strengths, first it’s action and character, then plot and structure… I’m a structure demon… So the good thing is that you lay our two skills over one another, and it’s a perfect fit.”

Straczynski’s comments indicate that the Wachowskis’ strengths are best served on the moment level, which is where the major hooks take place for the viewer. It is noteworthy that the “hooked” episode, as researched by Netflix, is episode three, which includes the first fight sequence, as opposed to episode four, which wraps up act one. In a promotional interview prior to the series’ release, the Wachowskis devoted minimal time to speaking about the season-long story, choosing instead to focus on the contrasting locations and the moments, such as “crazy psychic orgies with all sorts of different bodies” and “live births.” Though these statements do not prove the significance of individual moments to the series, they do illuminate the creative forces behind the work and how they choose to guide viewer expectations.

On the topic of auteurism and narrative meaning, Lilly Wachowski argued:

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Even when we talk about our films, it’s reductive. I mean, you’re setting this definition—certainly film as a collaborative medium---there are many ideas put forth into the film...Because there is meaning that has been put in by the actors, there’s meaning that is put in by the production designer, by the costumers. [The director defining the film] feels sort of narrow-minded.139

Regardless of whether the Wachowskis approve of the auteur label, audiences and critics have routinely ascribed it to them, as their films often tread similar thematic ground and maintain some consistent strokes of form and style. Lana Wachowski stated, “In a way all of our movies are about interconnectivity and about truth beneath the surface...There are parts of me and parts of Andy [as Lilly was formerly known] in all of them.”140 These comments, which come from a promotional interview for the film Cloud Atlas (The Wachowskis and Tykwer, 2012), can be extended to apply to Sense8, which foregrounds this concept of interconnectivity in the premise and the narrative. Also, the transgender character of Nomi represents an opportunity for the siblings, who are both trans, to explore more personal themes through character. Other concepts with which the directors repeatedly grapple include sexuality, spirituality, oppression, and identity. In Sense8, the Wachowskis are able to spend time experimenting with these issues in a way that the feature film format does not easily permit. A reviewer for The Verge wrote:

[A]s [Sense8] picks up steam and begins delving into the familiar Wachowski themes—that we are all interconnected, across lines of race, sexuality, gender, and class—it begins to establish its own sense

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of identity. By the end of the third episode, when the show finally gets the chance to add the Wachowskis’ penchant for action choreography to the mix, the combination had me fully on board.141

This review points to the manner in which the Wachowskis weave their signature themes and style into the series. As the season gradually unravels its enigmatic premise and establishes the linkages between its characters, the creators increasingly experiment with the thematic questions posed by these connections. Fittingly, the reviewer, like most viewers, became hooked on the season after episode three, which, through Capheus/Sun’s fight scene, provides the type of moment-level engagement that audiences have come to expect from the Wachowskis. In Sense8, the Wachowskis express their auteurial voice through the broad thematic strokes of the season-long story as well as through small-scale experiments with familiar concepts and the moving image. At the episode level, the show must balance and reconcile these scales of storytelling to convey a unified narrative voice.

Conventions

As much as has been said about Sense8’s unconventional episode-level organization and design, the series retains many of the conventional episodic techniques found in traditional television, modifying them to accommodate to its unique brand of storytelling. Due to the very fact that it tells a story over 12 installments, episode-level creative decision-making becomes affected by some of the basic challenges of the television medium.

Episodes must acknowledge issues of comprehension and organization as they pertain to the season-long narrative. They must also set the borders for how and where to begin and end each installment. It is in facing these fundamental challenges that the show exposes some of the tensions between its season-level narrative and the televisual form.

One common feature of episode-level storytelling, especially for shows that exhibit episodic seriality, is the issue of delay. When creators stretch out a narrative over several episodes or seasons, they must often come up with ways to fill the time in between plot points and maintain viewer engagement without sacrificing comprehension. Sense8, in particular, grapples with this issue, as it must juggle eight different character storylines, along with a cluster-level mythology plot. The series frequently utilizes episode-level delays in order to carry out its staggered season-level narrative. For example, in episode three, Metzger prepares Nomi for a lobotomy, but before they are able to begin operating, Amanita pulls the fire alarm and saves her. This episode takes her to the brink of defeat before reverting back to her baseline situation, choosing to delay her resolution until the fourth episode when it coincides with the act break. The series uses this delay as a method for getting more than one episode out of a single dramatic situation. By repeating and varying the same scenario, the show also aids viewer comprehension while establishing a narratively satisfying pattern. In some instances, Sense8’s narrative delays potentially pose problems for viewer engagement. Riley’s storyline spends several episodes putting off her trip to Iceland. The
season-level motivation for this decision is that her arrival to Iceland sets off the events of act three, but the episode-level result is that early sightings of Riley potentially inspire disinterest. The timing and execution of these delays, while useful for structuring the season-long narrative, may threaten viewer engagement at the episode level. For instance, episode three finds Riley meeting up with old friends to seek refuge. The show spends little time developing these characters and hardly features them within the narrative past their initial introduction. Their primary function in her storyline is to provide her temporary residence before she leaves for Iceland. Therefore, this story thread likely spurs disinterest in some viewers.

Episodes of Sense8 do not have a set running time, as they range from 45 to 67 minutes in length. This variation indicates that the series does not arbitrarily divide its three-act season narrative into 12 equal parts, as one may assume given Straczynski’s claim that the season is “written as a 12-hour movie.” Rather, in the spirit of traditional television, the show judiciously chooses the moment that each episode begins and, perhaps more importantly, the event that concludes it. The episode openings do not necessarily follow a set pattern. Some begin enigmatically (“Smart Money Is on the Skinny Bitch”), and others begin with a straightforward continuation of the narrative (“What’s Going On?,” “W. W. N. Double D?”). Some episodes pick up with the same storyline that concluded the previous one (“We Will All Be Judged by the Courage of Our Hearts”), and some start with a different

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142 Radish, “J. Michael Straczynski Talks Collaborating.”
character's storyline ("Art Is Like Religion"). These episode openings represent the creators experimenting with entering the world from different angles. The lack of strict episode-level plotting allows for greater freedom when it comes to openers, since they are not introducing a new plot each time. Meanwhile, the episode conclusions exhibit a greater sense of consistency. The Netflix interface encourages viewers to watch multiple episodes in one sitting, as the end of one episode prompts the next one to automatically queue up. The creators of Sense8 may have taken this experience into account when composing its episode endings, as they often end installments with an exciting twist, thrilling sequence, or provocative event. Many traditional shows also aim to conclude episodes in this way. But while traditional series tend to build episodes toward a certain climactic resolution, Sense8 does not aim for that same sense of closure within the confines of the episode, suggesting that, in some ways, the show manufactures endings to a greater degree. Some of these endings may provide a compelling hook into the next episode, such as the fight sequence shared by Sun and Capheus at the end of episode three. Others may catch the viewer off guard. For example, episode eight ends suddenly with the stabbing of Manendra, Kala’s soon-to-be father-in-law, by religious extremists. Episode four includes a brief mention of Manendra’s notorious opposition to the temple, but this narrative information could likely get buried in the viewer’s long-term recall beneath the weight of the other storylines. If this were a traditional television series, the earlier scene could have been
included in a “Previously On” segment prefacing the episode to prime the viewer for the final twist. Regardless, the abruptness of this event cues us to feel shocked, mirroring Kala’s own reaction. The decision to end episodes on powerful beats of surprise, closure, or enigma parallels the way in which many traditional episodes of television manufacture strong beats, or crescendos, before the cut to commercial. These similar but varying approaches to beat construction reflect a shared interest in promoting forward movement but a difference in scale. While Sense8 encourages momentum from episode to episode through crescendos, traditional ad-driven shows use a similar device to cue viewers to watch across the commercial break between episode acts.

The final episode, “I Can’t Leave Her,” possibly adheres most closely to conventional episodic form. By this point, all the character storylines, save for Wolfgang’s, have concluded for the season, leaving the primary focus to be on Riley’s rescue and the preservation of the cluster. Furthermore, the season-long accumulation of sensate connections finally comes to a head in this episode when the cluster comes together and operates as one. Without the burden of balancing multiple storylines and perpetuating season-long threads, this episode is able to operate similarly to a traditional television episode. The A-plot, which follows Will and the sensates’ efforts to save Riley, dominates the action and abides by a fully-formed structure across the episode. Meanwhile, a B-plot runs alongside it, tracking Wolfgang’s efforts to kill his uncle. The B-plot concludes halfway through the episode but intersects
briefly with the A-plot later on when Will calls on Wolfgang’s fearlessness to help him escape. This clears the path for the main action to build to a climactic conclusion, which doubles as a resolution to the third act and the season a whole.

In a way, “I Can’t Leave Her” provides a glimpse into how Sense8 would operate if it were a traditional television series, but one must not discount the steps the series takes to reach this point. When compared to the first episode “Limbic Resonance,” which contains enormous breadth but little depth, the final episode seems to have an inverse objective. This point speaks to the effect of season-level progression on episode design in Sense8, as the narrative accumulation and development that occur between these two episodes gradually alter the viewer’s relationship with the story world. The story evolves from a fractured story about generic characters to a unified story with deeper characters. There is real pleasure in knowing that the characters have departed from their simplistic origins by this final episode.

This observation raises an important question: How will a season two episode of Sense8 differ from season one, if at all? The first season establishes certain organizational and narrative trends that come to define the show’s episode-level storytelling. Now that the season-level progression toward a fully integrated cluster has been completed, season two may structure episodes more cohesively around the collective actions of the cluster. This type of shift in the storytelling could potentially dissatisfy returning viewers, as season one has fostered a certain set of expectations
that a second season may struggle to meet. The first season is built on gradually revealing a complex narrative premise and progressively building toward greater connection between its characters. Each episode derives engagement through contributing to this advancement. Along the same lines, the first two seasons of *House of Cards* engage viewers by incrementally advancing toward a single objective: Frank becoming president. Once that objective is reached at the very end of season two, the relative stagnation that characterizes season three’s narrative leaves many viewers disappointed, as the primary source of their pleasure has been removed. The second season of *Sense8* faces a similar juncture in its storytelling, and it remains to be seen how the story unfolds. That the future of *Sense8*’s narrative construction is clouded in ambiguity signals the unconventional relationship between the show’s season-level and episode-level storytelling.

The Netflix model encourages creators to rethink this relationship, as it applies to their story worlds, by releasing seasons all at once and removing the serial gaps between episodes. *Sense8* is a series that takes full advantage of this opportunity, offering its unique interpretation of televisual storytelling. As Netflix continues to release scripted series, more and more shows will continually offer their own takes. In just three years of Netflix original programming, a diverse array of storytelling strategies have emerged, to varying degrees of experimentation. Perhaps, storytellers will eventually reach an equilibrium point on how best to create for this platform. However, given the current trajectory, this seems unlikely.
Conclusion. *TV, Disrupted*

The prevailing discourse surrounding Netflix and future of television raises more questions than it answers. Countless theories and predictions have been made, and the thesaurus on “groundbreaking” has been exhausted. This thesis cuts through the noise to bring the conversation back to the storytelling at the heart of the matter. First, we tracked the historical precedents that make up the evolutionary skeleton of the Netflix model. After locating its position within the television landscape, we unpacked the aesthetic toolbox that Netflix offers creators, drawing evidence from its existing original series. Finally, we analyzed the specific ways that *Sense8* utilizes some of these tools to tell a televisual story through its season and episodes. By taking this incremental approach to understanding the relationship between streaming and storytelling, we account for the similarities and differences that Netflix shares with traditional television before applying that knowledge to a formal analysis.

In the months since I began work on this thesis, Netflix has released eight new original series and two new seasons of returning series. The sheer pace at which Netflix commissions shows has only accelerated in recent months and shows no signs of slowing down. Having just started releasing original series in 2013, the streaming service has covered considerable ground over the last three years, and their series have incrementally expanded the definition of what it means to be a Netflix show. At this rate, the
Netflix of tomorrow may look dramatically different from the Netflix of which we speak today. For these reasons, my formal analysis of *Sense8* does not apply broadly to every original series on the platform, as I could not possibly cast a net wide enough to encompass such a diverse array of stories. Instead, through these discussions on season-level and episode-level storytelling in *Sense8*, I develop a vocabulary for analyzing the effect of distributional shifts on creative decision-making.

The Netflix effect does not represent a replacement of television as we know it, but it does signal a disruption. The president of Showtime, David Nevins, resolutely declared, “2015 will be remembered as the year that the disruption hit everyone.” ¹⁴³ Over the years, viewers, creators, and platforms have adopted new technologies and innovations with increasing speed, and the rise of streaming is consistent with this pattern. However, the degree of disruption by the streaming model has more to do with traditional television’s dependence on an aging model than with the novelty of streaming. Linear television binds platforms to third-party affiliates (i.e. cable providers, satellite companies, advertisers, etc.), whose business interests run counter to those of streaming. Due to their independence from advertising, premium cable channels are restrained to a lesser degree, but they still must answer to the cable, satellite, and telecom providers that distribute their content. Amid these constraints, traditional television companies are struggling (some may say scrambling) to adapt to the new media climate.

Chief among their fears is the impending threat of cord-cutting. Ever since Netflix jump-started the popularity of over-the-top content distribution, many have speculated over a possible cord-cutting revolution, in which viewers cancel their cable subscriptions and flock en masse toward streaming. However, dreams (or nightmares, depending on whom you ask) of a mass exodus from traditional pay television have yet to be realized. Still, cord-cutting is real, but the transition has been gradual, and no one is quite sure how the dust will settle. In December 2015, Pew Research Center included cord-cutting statistics for the first time in its annual broadband survey, reporting that 24% of Americans do not subscribe to cable or satellite television. Of those, 15% have cut the cord in recent years, and 9% are considered “cord nevers,” people—often young adults—who have never subscribed to pay TV. Two-thirds of those without cable or satellite service cite online streaming as a reason for abstaining. Clearly, cord-cutting is not a myth, but traditional television companies had treated it as such until recently.

Having studied the impacts of the streaming model on television storytelling on Netflix, a valuable topic for further discussion would be the effect of cord-cutting and new entrants on traditional television programming. Recently, linear television platforms have made some unconventional choices regarding business and programming, a possible indication of an industry in transition. To a certain extent, some of these decisions appear to be part of an effort to emulate the attractive features of Netflix and other streaming

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services. We already covered some examples of this in Chapter 1, such as TBS's *Angie Tribeca*. “Releasing all episodes of a show for binge watching ahead of the linear premiere has become a popular experiment for television programmers,” reported *Variety*, before adding, “But such binge releases have yielded mixed results.”\(^{145}\) Perhaps, the lack-luster success of this strategy can be attributed to the incongruity between the ad-supported model and the all-at-once release. This may be a case of traditional television networks attempting to have their cake and eat it too.

On the other hand, we see more and more that linear platforms—specifically basic cable and broadcast networks—are seeking to demonstrate to viewers the value of live appointment viewing. Networks are more often building programming and marketing around live viewing by promoting social media conversation and commissioning so-called water-cooler shows. The ABC drama *Scandal* pioneered the practice of having stars and writers live-tweet episodes to generate a communal viewing experience through the Internet, and other series such as Fox’s *Empire* have followed in its footsteps. *AMC’s Talking Dead*, a companion series to zombie drama *The Walking Dead* (Darabont, 2010-present), helped popularize the concept of live recap shows, which immediately follow airings of scripted series. These recap shows not only aim to absorb viewership from highly-rated series, but they also encourage real-time discourse among fans, highlighting the value of a collective live audience. In April 2016, HBO announced that it would be

following *Game of Thrones* with its own recap show *After the Thrones*. That an ad-free network would employ this same strategy suggests that the intuition behind these programs goes beyond just sopping up ratings. Event programming, such as *Scandal, Game of Thrones*, and *The Walking Dead*, serve as an argument against the Netflix model, contending that the communal experience of watching TV still holds value.

Furthermore, at a time when many viewers are watching scripted series via DVR or streaming, networks have boosted their efforts to encourage live viewing through other avenues, such as live specials and talk shows. The most consistent ratings bet for traditional platforms remains sports programming, but beyond that, networks have made further attempts to expand live options for viewers. In 2013, NBC made an ambitious bet on the value of event programming by airing a live musical special of *The Sound of Music*. *The Sound of Music Live!* proved to be a ratings success, motivating the network to begin an annual tradition of airing different live musicals. Fox followed suit in 2016, airing both *Grease: Live* and the partially live musical *The Passion*. When NBC made the initial $9 million commitment on *Sound of Music Live!*,* The Hollywood Reporter* called the move a “big gamble,” paralleling the commentary surrounding Netflix’s two-season deal for *House of Cards*. On both sides of the equation, a TV landscape in flux encourages platforms to make more risky decisions in hopes of striking gold. In recent

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years, there has also been a proliferation of topical late-night talk shows. A long-time staple of broadcast television, late-night talk shows have become increasingly prevalent on basic cable channels as of late. Not only do these types of shows encourage live viewing due to their time-sensitive nature, but they have also proven to be dependable draws for creating viral video clips online. In this case, traditional networks depend on streaming through outlets such as YouTube to promote and maintain buzz around their live programming.

As linear platforms are both emulating streaming and arguing the worth of live TV, Netflix has taken steps toward programming that in many ways resembles traditional television. In March 2016, Chelsea Handler announced the format for her upcoming Netflix talk show, *Chelsea*, saying that the show would be pre-taped but would air three days a week rather than all at once. This variation on the Netflix release model reflects a desire by the streaming network to incorporate as many types of programming as possible within its global mass-market service. Still, Netflix has stopped short of offering sports programming since its time-sensitive nature does not seemingly fit in line with the company’s on-demand ethos, as it stands. Sarandos predicted:

I think what’s going to happen with linear television is it’s going to become more linear. It’s going to become more about events and more about award shows, live sports—all those things that, really, you can’t replicate…When the attribute is really the on-demandness—which is
really about scripted programming—then Netflix is a great solution for consumers.¹⁴⁷

In terms of scripted series, Netflix has made clear its intention to beat linear television at its own game, so to speak, by commissioning programs that resemble or, in many cases, revive traditional network shows. Netflix has gotten in the habit of resurrecting series that were previously cancelled by traditional networks. Along with Arrested Development (originally at Fox), Netflix has commissioned additional seasons of AMC’s The Killing (Sud, 2011-2014), A&E Network’s Longmire (Coveny and Baldwin, 2012-potential), and others. Moreover, the streaming service has also rebooted long-cancelled shows, such as ABC’s Full House (Franklin, 1987-1995) and The WB/The CW’s Gilmore Girls (Sherman-Palladino, 2000-2006), through its original series Fuller House and an upcoming as-yet-untitled Gilmore Girls miniseries. These revival efforts shed light on Netflix’s attitude toward traditional television. The service does not apparently seek to differentiate itself from network series in the way that HBO and other premium outlets have done, insisting instead on absorbing that business from linear TV. In April 2016, Netflix released The Ranch (Reo and Patterson, 2016-present), a series that appropriates network television’s decades-long mode of televisual comedy, the multi-camera sitcom. Slate’s TV critic Willa Paskin argued:

[The Ranch] is engineered to compete with network TV...[Netflix] can air multi-camera sitcoms with a widely accessible comedic style without

worrying about attracting a large audience. As network audiences are dwindling and more and more sitcoms are becoming single-camera, the multi-camera sitcom is becoming a niche product…Netflix is designed to serve niches, while niches are the bane of the networks’ existence.¹⁴⁸

By co-opting one of the most conventional formats of traditional television, the series illustrates the scope of Netflix’s ambitions while also demonstrating its unique ability to service different types of viewers simultaneously. As Paskin put it, “Netflix doesn’t want to become HBO. Netflix wants to become every channel on your television.”¹⁴⁹

As the platform continues to expand its offerings, there will be more and more opportunities to investigate the link between distribution and storytelling. For example, by looking at how The Ranch breaks with traditional multi-camera sitcom conventions, we could gain some insight into the genre and its relationship with serial form. Through this thesis, I have designed a way of thinking about these issues, incorporating historical context, formal analysis, and the unique offerings of the model to extract meaning from what we see on screen. This approach to analysis is not limited to Netflix and its scripted series, as it can be applied to any platform’s programming to study the effects of its delivery mechanisms on the viewing relationship.

The relationship that television shares with the viewer remains very much intact in a post-Netflix world. The main difference is that the types of


¹⁴⁹ Ibid.
relationships that exist are more varied than ever before. The binge-viewer signs up for a short-lived but intense love affair. After bingeing season one, we may return for the next installment only to find that the show has changed, making us forget why we fell so hard for it in the first place. Another breed of viewer may engage in an on-again/off-again relationship, abandoning the show for whatever reason before revisiting it weeks later, albeit with a learning curve to get back in the swing of things. Meanwhile, the highly regimented viewer may impose a weekly schedule on shows that do not ask for it. With the advent of Netflix, what has changed is that the viewer’s personality and preferences now have greater clout in dictating the terms of the relationship. By endowing creators with this knowledge, the platform encourages them to experiment with television’s capacity for telling stories. At the compelling core of this medium is the opportunity to connect with characters and follow their stories over time. Netflix provides a distinct prism through which to view these stories, but its differences from traditional television are illuminated by the overwhelming commonalities. Netflix flipped the script on television, but they most certainly took a look at it first.
SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

NETFLIX ORIGINALS:


ADDITIONAL SERIES:


*Empire*. Creators: Lee Daniels, Danny Strong. Fox. 2015-present.


Films:


Bibliography


