

## Continuation and Desperation in Contemporary Multi-Season Television Drama

### Introduction

This paper is situated in adaptation studies in multiple ways. Firstly, many of the serials<sup>1</sup> considered derive from literary originals. Hence, it examines, *inter alia*, literature-on-screen, a domain once regarded as synonymous with adaptation but latterly likely to be figured as a subset of the products and processes adaptation encompasses. More broadly, this study engages the ‘comparative tools of adaptation studies’, underpinned by the belief that the texts it considers ‘can be understood in the light of other texts’ (Cutchins, 2018. 3). That such an approach defines the field is not uncontested. Cardwell questions whether the ‘appropriate attitude’ (2018. 8) is enough to warrant characterising a text, or its study, in terms of adaptation, observing that the boundaries between intertextuality and adaptation have become blurred, so that the purview of the adaptation studies scholar threatens to become unmanageably broad, since, following Barthes, intertextuality is ‘the condition of any text whatsoever’ (orig. 1981. 39. cited by Cardwell, 2018. 9). Whilst acknowledging Cardwell’s point, this paper insists on a more plural bailiwick for adaptation studies than characterizing it as a particular variant of intertextual relations. Relatedly, it seeks to practice what Elliott (2020. 8) has identified as the need for the field to deploy a spread of ‘viewing distances’. Many scholars, including Ray (2000) and Cattrysse (2014) have observed the preponderance of ‘case studies’, of papers that examine a single instance of page-to-screen transposition. Although the expansion of the field and proliferation of book-length studies in the last two decades has, arguably, shifted the balance, the case study remains, as any reader of the leading journals would attest, an extremely popular format for scholarly articles. The present study aims for a more ‘macroscopic’ (Elliott. 8) perspective, surveying a broad but necessarily still selective, spread of television shows. A congruence with adaptation studies approaches may be adduced from its conceptual and methodological orientations in that it presupposes that the texts and processes examined are best illuminated, not by an overarching single theory, but by the pragmatic application of a range of amenable approaches and ideas, what Leitch (2017) has described as the deployment of ‘petit theories’. These include comparative textual analysis, structural narratology, audience/reception studies, notions drawn from cultural studies and sociology, and attention of the type championed by Murray (*inter alia* 2012) to industrial determinants. Finally, it is necessary to acknowledge that, in working at the interstices of adaptation studies and television, this paper connects two territories

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<sup>1</sup> This paper mostly examines popular US shows that have garnered worldwide audiences.

frequently described as experiencing a 'golden age'. Yet, in developing the idea of 'desperation' it addresses an aspect of storytelling practice where makers manage a potential problem.

### **Serial or Series?**

Conventionally, 'serial' has described texts where a story unfolds over several parts, while 'series' distinguishes those where key elements, typically characters, recur across multiple parts but each part is a distinct story. This distinction is imperfect in that it groups together works that have very different relationships to story and storylines, as well as to the key phases of beginning, middle, and end. Most obviously, it collocates as serials texts that build towards an ending (e.g., multi-part dramas) and those that avoid one (e.g., soap operas). Although 'order', in the sense of a correct sequence, is important to both, it is apparent that works that build toward an ending have a story, howsoever simple or convoluted, whereas those that resist closure have multiple storylines but no unified narrative trajectory. Whilst one of the important properties of what has come to be described as 'complex' (Mittel, 2015) or 'quality' (Thompson, 1997; Jancovich & Lyons, 2003; McCabe & Akass, 2011) television is its serial storytelling, it is understood that television was delivering complex multi-part narratives long before these descriptors arose to delineate a distinctive body of shows notable for their narrative ambition and differences from the prevailing TV norm of recurring characters and settings with each episode typically constituting a self-contained story. What have been termed 'classic serials', usually adaptations of celebrated literature, are a genre of programming that television inherited from radio. These were often *re*-adaptations that reinstated, like radio, a mode of serial release and consumption that intervening versions (single volume novels, movies) had removed. Where cinematic adaptations of novels are often obliged to compress original material into a manageable running time, not infrequently resulting in the loss of minor characters, subplots, and scenes, as well as curtailing lengthier dialogues, classic serials offered viewers an equality of contact time with readers. As Cardwell observes, 'television's serial form, for example, is often better suited to adapting expansive classic novels than is cinema' (2007. 182).

Although classic serials are typically of a single novel, more extensive variants exist. *The Pallisers* (1974) adapted Trollope's six 'Parliamentary' novels into a twenty-six-part serial, while the two principal television variants of *Poldark* (1975-1977, and 2015-2019) demonstrate the elasticity of serial form in accommodating characters, settings, and events that continue across multiple original novels. The first screen *Poldark* encompassed the content of seven novels across two seasons and twenty-nine episodes of fifty minutes, while the more recent adaptation of the same novels spanned five seasons and forty-three episodes of sixty minutes, creating nearly nineteen hours of additional

screen time. Where continuing shows have their origins in literary originals there exists enormous variability in the extent to which the resulting screen texts adapt a subset, transcribe their totality, or generate additional independent stories having exhausted their literary models. The *Poldark* series (1945-2002) comprises twelve novels and has yet to be adapted as a complete sequence. Indeed, at the time of the first adaptation it was itself unfinished. Conversely, long-running shows that take, and frequently compress, the events of a single novel into an episode, rather than unpacking it incrementally as a mini-series or serial, are especially prone to running out of literary sources. With *Murdoch Mysteries* (2008-) Maureen Jennings' eight novels provided a modest foundation for its 263 episodes (to date), with the show developing an enormous volume of episode-sized stories and longer-running storylines.

The *Poldark* example suggests that the multiple intersection of continuation, seriality, and adaptation/versioning complicates our sense of the boundaries of story. The identity of the novel as a discrete physical artefact, the narrative journey it contains, and, typically, the circumstances of its production and reception, tend to foster a common-sense understanding that a novel equals a story. Even when characters and other matter continue across multiple novels, this understanding still prevails. We do not approach the collected deeds of Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot or Miss Marple as a single story spanning multiple novels. Rather, each novel comprises its own story with its own beginning, middle, and end, and devotes little if any time to addressing events from earlier novels. Each instalment is essentially free-standing, advances from a premise largely unaltered from other instalments, does not rely on memory of prior texts, and is not rendered inoperative if consumed out of sequence. Yet other examples of novels with continuing characters render this distinction much less clear-cut. J K Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels, while strongly focused on delivering equivalent pleasures from one work to the next, cohere in an order that draws on the character development of the *Bildungsroman* and facilitates the accrual of an expansively drawn wizarding world. Adapted for cinema in chronological order, they retained the originals' continuity of events and allowed the child actors to mature at an appropriate pace. Many 'novel sequences' such as Patrick O'Brian's *Aubrey/Maturin* series of twenty completed works are reliant on a 'correct' reading order fully to reveal the meanings, interrelationships, and pleasures of individual novels; and other classificatory terms including the *roman-fleuve*, family saga, multi-part novel, cycle, and trilogy point to structuring and interpretive modes in which novel-sized parts relate sequentially to a larger whole; to stories which collectively comprise an over-arching story. *Poldark's* versionings demonstrate that, in adaptation, the principal narrative units of an original governed and measured in terms of continuation and seriality do not have an automatic equivalent when transposed. Rather, they may be significantly re-cast so that a major juncture in the original, such as the end of a novel,

becomes only the conclusion of an episode in a season comprised of story matter drawn from several novels. Inevitably, this means that events which mark the end of particular novels go on to acquire a different prominence depending on whether their adaptations re-purpose them as conclusions of episodes or of entire seasons. And, despite original and screen versions offering essentially the same characters, settings, events, and order, consumers may well regard different spans and junctures within the over-arching series as constituting different stories, because of where they begin and end.

Classic serials are also relevant to the present argument because their literary origin warrants that they are story experiences which come to a pre-determined end. Whether or not particular viewers are already familiar with the story as readers, the fact of adaptation from a specified source, invariably prominent in their publicity, locates the new work in terms of a pre-existing finality. When viewers already know the story, whether arising from knowledge of the original or previous adaptations, the viewing experience and expectations often assume a comparative dimension. If viewers are as much interested in the 'how' of the versioning as the 'what' of the story, the rendering of key characters and scenes may be evaluated against the original and/or other anterior versions, though always with the knowledge that the transit from a beginning to an end is securely underwritten. With or without a literary source, television serials that address historical individuals work similarly in respect of viewers' knowledge of an ending. Notwithstanding the enormous variety of ways in which the same figures and their times may be represented, an ending is presumed. Viewers' foreknowledge of the subject has a bearing, in that, for example, more viewers are likely to know that Henry VIII does not marry or behead a seventh wife than be familiar with the life-stories of the semi-legendary participants of *Vikings* (2013-2021), which in turn has an influence on the balance of 'how' and 'what' of viewer expectations and pleasure. With *The Crown* (2016-2023) the relative recency of its historical ambit meant that the 'what' of major public events was largely known, leaving speculative behind-closed-doors matters the principal grist for narrative revelations. Equally, the simple fact of historical source matter, like a literary original, cues an expectation of predetermined finality irrespective of audience familiarity with that source. As several scholars have observed - *inter alia* Raw & Tutan (2013), Leitch (2015), and Weiser (2019) – literary adaptation and history share a foundational relationship with sources that shapes the expectations, not least foreknowledge, we bring to our encounters with texts. As per Cutchins' claim cited in the introduction, an understanding of texts in terms of other antecedent matter is operative.

The key comparison here is with multi-part television dramas not derived from well-known literary originals or history. Viewers presented with newly-minted fictional characters are necessarily faced with something that is not already circumscribed. Viewers watching after a show has concluded are

likely to know that its production has ceased, but audiences presented with a new release are in a different situation. If the show is described as a 'limited series' they will generally, though not infallibly, know how much continuation to expect. However, when watching Season 1 of a new drama, continuation beyond that season is no longer influenced by any anterior story, but by a range of industrial determinants, by far the most important of which is whether they, and enough other viewers, wish to continue watching. Our experience of watching other shows that proceed from a first to subsequent seasons means we can usually tell (either from explicitly unresolved storylines, or more open gestures to the futurity of key characters) whether a multi-season continuation is intended, and web searches reveal the status of any show in respect of future seasons, cancellation, move to a different network/producer, or revival. Whilst such precarity is common to many media products, it is especially tricky for multi-season serial dramas (or those that aspire to be) because of their particular relationship to story. A cancelled gameshow does not call time on a story, and series where individual episodes constitute discrete stories, even if characters continue across the series, are not equivalently curtailed since each episode constitutes its own more or less satisfactory closure. In the latter case, there may be viewers who desire continuation, and the final episode(s), if scripted and filmed in the knowledge of the show's impending cessation, may deliver a species of closure within the storyworld. However, the emphasis upon self-contained episodes as the principal narrative business means that the final season or episodes do not carry an impossible burden of closure, of tying up the whole enterprise. Whilst viewers, in particular viewer numbers, have always played a role in the prolonging or curtailment of shows in that, mostly, they persist for as long as sufficient people want them to, this presents materially different narrative challenges when that continuation (or cessation, or resurrection) is not merely of a show, but of a single cumulative story.

### **'Quality' television and the route to an ending**

A key contention of this paper is that shows which depend on the season as a key storytelling unit, and in which seasons accumulate to create an overarching narrative sequence, may experience precisely this difficulty when brought to an end. In particular, it will be argued that it is the junctions between seasons and the overall narrative of a show that emerge as the key recurring sites of strain and shear, the 'joints' at which storytelling experiences the greatest stress. Unsurprisingly then, the type of television which has come to be described as 'quality' or 'complex' is potentially at greater risk of delivering such disappointment because it has so often eschewed the episode as the principal subdivision of narrative completion. Its continuation from a first season into subsequent seasons always necessitates the introduction of fresh matter and typically that matter both fuels and frames

an additional season. Whether constituted literally in a replacement ‘big bad’<sup>2</sup> (Durand, 2009. 59), abetted by a shift to a new setting, introduced as a newly-urgent preoccupation, borne by the introduction of a major new character, or more frequently by a combination of elements, the season is the key unit and measure by which each new encompassing of a show’s expanding totality is charted, like the annual growth ring of a tree. Robin Nelson coined the term ‘flexi-narrative’ to describe emerging forms which combined episodic action with an ‘open-endedness in story-telling with emphasis on human interest’ (1997. 33), understanding the latter as a property of soap opera. Though suggestive, this model does not adequately address the fact that the texts of this (then) emerging format, though clearly long, nonetheless develop towards endings and therefore lack, precisely, that sense of potential perpetual continuation that attends soap opera.

The expansion from episode to season in terms of story duration affords significant opportunities in terms of pace and complexity that align with the salient characteristics of ‘quality’ television. However, it is necessary to acknowledge that these features have, themselves, become increasingly common across the TV landscape. Where shows such as *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991<sup>3</sup>), *The X Files* (1993-2002), *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003,) *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), and *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005) were originally identifiable as distinctive in terms of their complex expansive storytelling and creative ambition, audiences can now access a glut of multi-part and multi-season television narratives with winding plots, deferred endings, ‘cinematic’ production values, ‘literary’ intricacy, explicit content, quirky or otherwise equivocal characters, genre-mixing, and ensemble casts. They do so via a range of viewing platforms and technologies that have significantly evolved since ‘quality’ television came to prominence. Growing viewer numbers access the streaming services into which the specialty cable channels such as HBO, once the purveyors of niche product to niche audiences, have morphed or been absorbed. Likewise, the broadcasters have assayed the outputs of those providers and shaped their own products to align with those characteristics. What had once been a conspicuously rare, even avant-garde, narrative modality has become mainstream. For Millennials and Zoomers raised on boxsets accessed via tablets and smartphones, for whom the TV listings and guides belong to a bygone age, the notion of ‘quality’ or ‘complex’ television as a distinctive category may seem quaint or nonsensical, delineating as it does the attributes of what they may well regard as just television. Graeme Turner acknowledges a related phenomenon when he notes that ‘binge-watching’ may simply be the modern term for ‘watching telly’ (2019). As the viewing environment

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Big bad’ designates a significant antagonist in a multi-season show. Dealing with him/her commonly constitutes a season’s principal theme.

<sup>3</sup> Plus a third season on Showtime in 2017.

has changed, and in line with the characterization of adaptation that frames the process in evolutionary terms (e.g., Bortolotti & Hutcheon, 2007) much television has adapted accordingly.

Shows interpretable as ‘quality’ or ‘complex’ but where characters and narrative arcs are confined to a single season are necessarily less vulnerable to storytelling awkwardness arising from a fluid endpoint that may be imposed, deferred, or repealed. Whether written specifically for television, for example *Mare of Easttown* (2021), derived from a literary original, e.g. *The Queen’s Gambit* (2020), or based on real-life events, such as *Inventing Anna* (2022), these shows do not require the seasonal incorporation and accrual of additional narrative propellant because they are embarked upon a fixed itinerary and duration. Relatedly, anthology shows, where a title, creative personnel and an overarching aesthetic are retained, but each season involves a fresh set of characters and setting, such as *True Detective* (2014-), *The Terror* (2018-19), *American Horror Story* (2011-), and the stories of *Black Mirror* (2011-) are, like ‘one-off’ serial dramas, less vulnerable to endpoint ungainliness than those that incorporate the additional story materials needed to feed their continuation. Adaptation is also a significant factor in terms of endpoint when a proportion of viewers call for a show’s continuation, especially if it is in jeopardy. When unadapted material remains, and especially when that material builds to an overarching conclusion (rather than constituting more-of-the-same via strongly episodic content) the call is for the onscreen realization of an already-completed extant story. Viewers’ relationship to that original material will vary, shaping their relationship to the desired continuing adaptation. For some, the source may be little more than an elaborately crafted spoiler they have no intention of reading. For others, that original may be cherished, with the possible adaptation offering not narrative outcome pleasures of the ‘how-will-it-end?’ variety, but versioning pleasures related, for example, to seeing how a particular set of actors perform key scenes. When no literary source material exists, the call for continuation is, necessarily, a call to craft new story.

Whilst many of the most highly-regarded ‘quality’ or ‘complex’ shows address the serious subject matter and big themes commonly associated with canonical literature and drama, when they conclude they are sometimes structurally hindered from delivering that prized intersection of the thematic and the formal – dramatic unity – because continuation has overloaded their plates with a plethora of characters, plotlines, and preoccupations. Inevitably however, multi-season shows that invite audiences to regard them as weighty cue viewers to expect the entire enterprise to develop an equivalently consequential conclusion. This is not least because the historically prevailing alternatives, the non-endings of soap operas, and the predictable weekly endings of shows where each episode is a story, are conventionally understood as the blueprint of modalities that occupy a meagre place in the cultural pantheon, of the ‘low’ and formulaic. Although formalist ‘New Criticism’

no longer prevails as the dominant academic approach to artworks and stories, especially literature, its valuation of the 'best' texts for their organic unity, for the successful relationship of their parts to their whole, notably the connection between structure and meaning, and for interpretive practices which centre on the discernment of such relationships, still infuses our sense of what makes a story well-constructed.

For O'Sullivan, the action of multiplicity in serial narratives makes them 'genetically predisposed to end messily' (2019. 55). Their many-faceted recursion (of places, people, perspectives) is, in his view, ultimately antithetical to tidily circumscribed closure. With some multi-season shows it is significant that, upon completion, they rarely invite description in terms of their story, despite their makers' desire to have the show's totality feel like a coherent single story, but rather have been sustained by an overlapping succession of (typically season-long) storylines which, like relay runners, have an important but nonetheless temporary responsibility for progressing the show. Hence, it is no surprise that they are commonly discussed using terms like 'running out of steam' or 'just getting into their stride' that prompt evaluation of whether the overall outcome would have been better had they ended earlier or later. Relatedly, it is common for viewers discussing multi-season dramas to identify a point at which they 'gave up' watching. Examples of such shows and underlying reasons for viewer dissatisfaction include: the failure to maintain the tone and qualities that made a successful first season, e.g. *Heroes* (2006-2009)<sup>4</sup>; a conclusion and final episode revelation that seem irreconcilable with previous story events, and/or which deviate significantly from a literary model, as with novel sequence adaptation *Gossip Girl* (2007-2012); and an unsuccessful tying up of unresolved questions over the course of a final season, e.g. *Lost* (2004-2010).

One might contend that this predisposition to messiness arises from the market conditions prevailing in television production and commissioning, namely the imperative for creators seeking backers for a show to deliver a crackerjack premise, a 'grabber' with the potential to endure, rather than to dwell upon (or perhaps plan) an ending; not least because to conjure the end of a lucrative multi-season show, especially before it has begun, is a downer. Better by far to emphasise how a potential show has legs. The role of the showrunner embodies this uneasy dynamic, merging creation and ongoing curation, but not always being able to determine the point of cessation. Whilst some showrunners put an end to their progeny to move on to other projects, the decision is often taken by network executives. Hence, a season finale may have to do an impossible double service as either an absolute ending if the finances or other preconditions for a future season are not agreed or as a set-up for a subsequent season if the show continues. The unsatisfying end of loose historical

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<sup>4</sup> Season two of *Heroes* was hit by the 2007-2008 WGA writers' strike and shortened from 24 to 11 episodes.



adaptation *Marco Polo* (2014-2016), cancelled after two seasons by backers Netflix and The Weinstein Company with much of Polo's story untold, exemplifies this irreconcilable demand.

### **When it works**

Identifying 'quality' or 'complex' multi-season television dramas that conclude satisfactorily has, necessarily, an evaluative and subjective dimension. Hence, as the present study aims to do more than simply enumerate its author's preferred shows, it charts some of the varied mechanisms by which they proceed through continuation to conclusion. *The Sopranos*, as several scholars have identified (e.g., O'Sullivan, 2020), is highly episodic for a continuing drama. Although the show follows a central protagonist and other key figures across six seasons, episodes are not routinely enjambed in terms of ongoing story material, some have a pronounced standalone quality analogous to short stories, and the overall effect is as much fragmentary, collage-like, as straightforwardly linear. Whilst the conclusion of the final episode is ambiguous, the value and pleasures of the show do not require a particular outcome. For some shows and texts, the relationship between continuation and notions of realism or plausibility is key. The 'mounting unlikeliness of recurrence' (Strong, 2021. 128) is a feature of continuing character narratives in which protagonists such as James Bond encounter a succession of homogeneous challenges. When problems and perils seem thinly differentiated from their predecessors, genre (or even show-specific) verisimilitude trumps adequacy to 'real-world' considerations for makers and audiences alike. The expectation and delivery of similar material across the elements that make up the series is itself a central affordance and pleasure. However, for many, though not all, 'quality' or 'complex' shows, a realist intent and preferred interpretive framework may be seen to apply in respect of such considerations as characters' psychology, socio-economic forces, and authenticity of dialogue, setting, etc. On shows such as *The Wire* (2002-2008), *Mad Men* (2007-2015), and *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) though the ongoing production will inevitably evaluate the success of already-released elements as part of its planning, continuation requires something other than the replaying of highly comparable material, necessitating instead storytelling moves more usually associated with the trajectories of unitary narratives that are entire and finite.

The growth of *The Wire* across five seasons was achieved through a steadily accrued rendering of a social and economic panorama, namely the city of Baltimore and its key institutions. Although some characters recurred across the duration, each season also introduced significant new characters as it re-framed and enlarged its milieu to encompass another domain. Its distinctive storytelling mode variously challenged and beguiled many viewers. What commences as a battle of wits between the police department and drug gangs is shown to subsume the port system, city government, schools,

and the print news, in which each institution is revealed to be not merely connected to the others, but dysfunctional in analogous ways, the whole compounding to fail the city and especially its urban poor. Much discussed in terms of its comparability with literature, itself a foundational aspect of 'quality' television (Thompson, 1997), *The Wire's* most frequent comparator has been the work of Charles Dickens. Schelstraete and Buelens identify the 'disempowerment' (2013. 288) of individuals in the face of capitalism and its mechanisms as the principal shared characteristic with *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-1844), *Bleak House* (1852-1853), and *Little Dorrit* (1855-1857), themselves originally serialized texts whose participants cannot circumvent the forces arrayed against them. Mittel observes how *The Wire* develops through 'centrifugal complexity, in which the ongoing narrative pushes outward, spreading characters across an expanding storyworld' (2015. 222). Considered in terms of the route from continuation to conclusion, the show's pessimistic tone, supplemented by viewers' extra-textual knowledge of the real world, cued audiences to expect an ending that would not constitute a resolution to the problems it had so exhaustively catalogued. Our interest in outcomes for individual characters - a mix of grim, upbeat, and equivocal resolutions - meant that although viewers did not regard specific events as being 'on rails', the overarching figuration of the city and its constituent institutions being as broken at the end as at the beginning was effectively guaranteed.

Both *Breaking Bad* and *Mad Men* deliver their continuation in the opposite fashion, through a sustained focus on a central character during a key phase of their life. Although they also feature other significant characters, there is no doubt about who constitutes the principal protagonist. *Breaking Bad* follows the progress of Walter White from milquetoast high school chemistry teacher, through reluctant manufacturer of methamphetamine, to remorseless drug kingpin, when a cancer diagnosis prompts the realization that his teacher's salary and benefits will not provide for his family. In *Mad Men* when viewers first encounter advertising executive Don Draper he is already established as a leading figure in his field, but the show's seasons trace a downturn as his transgressions and infidelities catch up with him, culminating in the revelation that his identity is assumed. Whilst setting and visual style is important to the pleasures of both shows, their continuation rests principally on viewers' interest in a 'journey' that the individual is seemingly powerless to stop. *Breaking Bad* is *Macbeth*-like in that a series of decisions and actions draw that individual ever deeper into iniquity, while *Mad Men*, though still comprising a temporal journey forward, builds towards the unearthing of an anterior cause and critical moral juncture. An early choice made by both characters, albeit revealed to audiences at opposite ends of each show's plot, sets in train their subsequent rise and fall. Where the disempowerment of a multitude of characters in *The Wire* speaks to an insuperable nexus of social and economic forces, the equally implacable determinant of

*Breaking Bad* and *Mad Men* as it acts on individuals, their socio-cultural contexts notwithstanding, is more akin to fate in Greek tragedy. Our sense of the teleology of tragic narratives, of the likely outcomes for those who over-reach, transgress, or endeavour to become what they should not, means that, continuation notwithstanding, an essentially predestined fate awaits Walt, itself indemnified by the foundational cancer diagnosis. In Don's case, the collapse of his Madison Avenue persona and career is flagged and anticipated from early on, though an ambiguous ending, itself redolent of advertising as reinvention and sham, admits the possibility that Don may re-reinvent himself elsewhere, though not within the confines of *Mad Men*. The sense here of a tragic arc may usefully be contrasted with the 'technically' comedic (as opposed to comic) structure of so much episodic television.

Hence it might be contended that one of the key ways in which multi-season 'quality' or 'complex' shows arrive satisfactorily at a conclusion is through that route adhering to a recognizable storytelling model that underwrites our expectations and pleasures. This will not be as exact an expectation as that derived from foreknowledge of a literary original or of a grounding in historical events, but the specifics notwithstanding, it still constitutes a recognizable paradigm that influences the anticipatory parameters with which we approach any text. Creative Writing classes invariably deploy one of several diagrams that render the route of a prototypical story from beginning to end. Typically, a horizontal axis represents the passage of time while the vertical axis denotes action, events, and complication. Commencing from an origin at the intersection, a series of plotted points link the progression of significant story junctures to the temporal sites at which they occur. Some variants show a series of spikes or peaks that build, albeit unevenly, to a culminating zenith before settling to a state of equilibrium on the base of the 'action' axis, while others describe a more graceful arc that nonetheless terminates in the same place. All are premised on a rise and fall. This model bears consideration in terms of what makers and viewers expect of a multi-season continuing drama. Whether imagined in terms of a succession of jagged peaks or an arc, these stories are sometimes expected to perform an unworkable commission, to retain both ongoing continuation and impending conclusion as deliverable possibilities and simultaneously convey a sense that, upon conclusion, they have corresponded – in terms of their trajectory - to such a fundamental figuration of how stories should properly work. If the downward transit from a high or mid-point on the axis of action and complication feels too precipitate, then the conclusion is unlikely to feel 'story-led', and viewers will sense that, whatever the storyworld proffers, they are experiencing the narrative manifestation of an external cause: a termination that is an excuse for an ending. Conversely, a trajectory that bounces repeatedly at the bottom of the graph before soaring into fresh pinnacles of

action, resolving and re-complicating as excuses for continuation are developed, may amount to such a surfeit of pre-endings that the final conclusion feels little different from its predecessors.

### **Desperation**

This paper contends that ‘desperation’ emerges out of the combination of factors we have traced thus far: the trend for the stories of television dramas to stretch beyond episodes; the steady incursion of continuing ‘storylines’, even when they do not constitute the principal story, into forms that used to be entirely or overwhelmingly episodic in terms of their narrative business; the wish for shows to continue *with an ongoing story* beyond a first or subsequent seasons; the need to make an ending, even one not sought by its makers, feel like the measured endpoint of a planned narrative trajectory rather than an emergency landing; or its opposite, the requirement to keep re-fuelling a show in flight to sustain continuation beyond its original anticipated itinerary; or the desire to deliver a satisfying ending-of-endings. It constitutes a storytelling approach born from the competing demands of continuation and completion, and is frequently an endeavour to deliver successive structures of complication-and-resolution within an overarching meta-structure that feels like a unitary and coherent story. It is often worn openly, making if not a virtue, then perhaps something closer to an affordance of the conditions of production. Just as so many of the themes and premises of ‘complex’ and ‘quality’ shows hinge on risky endeavours and improbable undertakings in which characters experience a hazardous adventure, riding their luck and taking their chances, so the life of their shows has a dicey and contingent quality. Set-ups and storyworlds in which characters vault and carom through a succession of tribulations and vicissitudes, perpetually attended by danger and the possibility of annihilation, align a show’s themes and tone with viewers’ awareness that it exists in a cutthroat world. Desperate storytelling is a supply-side solution to a demand-led environment as perilous and pitiless as the societies of *Westworld* (2016-) or *The Walking Dead* (2010-2022). To adopt it is to embrace the provisionality and, not infrequently, the artificiality of continuation. When, in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the term ‘big bad’ made the leap from the technical terminology of the writers’ room to dialogue used by characters<sup>5</sup>, this acknowledged both the imperative of continuation and the show’s principal means of its delivery, paving the way for a host of self-reflexive and knowing shows that punned with and nudged and winked at their audiences, through daring re-sets and reversals, through encores of storytelling keepie-uppie. Comic book adaptation *The Umbrella Academy* (2019-) which blends graphic violence with comedy, and whose byzantine time-travel plot facilitates multiple ends-of-the-world, is currently the most flamboyant embodiment

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<sup>5</sup> ‘Gingerbread’ - episode eleven, season three, 1999.

of this tendency. Finally, 'desperate' is not proposed here as an evaluative classifier, to designate shows that mismanage their storytelling, but neither will it be contended that it always works.

It is probable that what is identified here as desperate storytelling has, at least in part, emerged from its makers' understanding that television watching has changed since the era when there was no real alternative to broadcasting. Traditional 'appointment viewing' has been, if not supplanted, undoubtedly joined by self-determined modes of viewing including concentrated binge-watching and what Rubenking and Bracken characterise as 'serial viewing', 'watching a series, a season, or several seasons of a TV show at one's own pace over the course of several days, weeks, or months' (2021. 2). Jenner observes that the popularity of binge-watching may arise from 'specific textual structures' (2020. 270) and McCormick (2016) charts how early Netflix success *House of Cards* (2013-2018) encouraged a pattern of enjambed viewing through avoiding recaps and repetition of story information, and by the relocation of cliffhangers. The 'full-season release model' adopted by Netflix since 2012 (Steiner, 2022. 11) is clearly relevant, and Jenner notes how Netflix output 'dominates the discussion' of binge-watching. She also observes the role of HBO in encouraging viewing habits associated with the box-set, not least those related to the 'narrative complexity' (270) of its TV products, asking 'is television specifically designed for binge-watching really more complex than what came before?' (274). Our answer is "not necessarily", as the long-standing example of the classic serial demonstrates. But it may well be more desperate.

O'Sullivan observes that 'serial narratives are positioned, more than any other publication method, to gradually map out, fill in, and then re-expand a diegetic universe' (2019. 57). In her analysis of the continuous serial, in particular soap opera *Coronation Street* (1960-), Geraghty contends that longevity requires 'preserving a basic stability while making enough changes to prevent tedious repetition' (1981, 9). When an initial iteration of instalments is successful, typically a first season, and more content is required to meet the demands of continuation, a 'Scheherazade effect' may come into play. Just as the narrator of the *One Thousand and One Nights* must satisfy her audience with fresh material, including the deferral of a definitive ending, or else perish, so many multi-season continuing dramas demand the generation of additional story for their survival. Raymond Reddington, principal protagonist of *The Blacklist* (2013-2023), embodies the Scheherazade effect in an especially unswerving fashion, having to repeatedly offer up to the FBI new targets, each with an associated backstory, every episode. Albeit less literally, much multi-season television drama manifests these characteristics. This is not an argument about the *value* of shows, nor a reintroduction of the timeworn criticism of television as a vapid medium. With *True Blood*, (2008-2014) for example, it is apparent that the 'Scheherazade effect' is imported directly and deliberately from its literary source material, Charlaine Harris' *Southern Vampire Mysteries*. It is reasonable to

assume that these were selected for adaptation largely because the welter of characters and the enormous catalogue of their tangled interactivity could occupy a show for many seasons.

Three very different but commercially and critically successful multi-season ‘quality’ or ‘complex’ shows demonstrate some of the varied ways in which a desperate mode plays out. In espionage thriller *Homeland* (2011-2020), a re-working of Israeli series *Prisoners of War*<sup>6</sup> (2010-2012), desperation is embedded in the psychological dimensions of the show. In season one CIA officer Carrie Mathison believes that marine Nicholas Brody, recently rescued from Al-Qaeda captivity, has been turned. Mathison, who has bipolar disorder, is not believed by her superiors and embarks upon an unauthorized surveillance of Brody that culminates in a sexual relationship. The rendering of Mathison’s conviction about her theory, its escalation into a mania and her increasingly risky pursuit of proof, cultivate a frenetic mood that is compounded with the revelation that her *idée fixe* is correct. Mathison is desperate to be believed and, once viewers recognize she is right, we are desperate for her to be believed; though, naturally, continuation defers and problematizes such vindication. A cliff-hanger season ending shows her consenting to radical therapy for her bipolar condition and, just as the anaesthesia kicks in, piecing together how a verbal slip of Brody’s confirms her worst suspicions. The looming question for continuation to season two is whether the ECT will erase her hard-won knowledge. Race-against-time drama *24* (2001-2014) also makes extensive use of the cliff-hanger, a modality famous for perpetuating a sense of peril, and one consonant with the show’s ‘real time’ narration. With 24 episodes per season and an on-screen clock showing the passage of time, each season represents a frenzied and high-stakes day for agent Jack Bauer. Weaving multiple plotlines and making frequent use of split-screen to show multiple settings simultaneously, *24* conjures its sense of the desperate, of Bauer racing to do ever more difficult things, through a relentless foregrounding of temporality and felicitous periodization of key story junctures. Lastly, *The Good Place* (2016-2020), as a comedy, necessarily develops desperation in a lighter register, revelling in the many dimensions of artificiality of a story where four central characters work out over season one that they have not arrived in heaven, but its opposite. The show enacts what O’Sullivan describes as ‘maximalist seriality’ in which its ‘fundamental viewing pleasures [are] coterminous with the narrative permutations of design’ (2019. 61-2). In particular, the relationship between desperation and continuation becomes thematically and structurally central as the group strive to attain the highest imaginable stakes of continuation, a non-infernal eternity.

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<sup>6</sup> Considered as an intramedial adaptation, *Homeland* is of interest both in terms of how it alters the cultural context and setting while retaining key plot elements, and especially – for the purposes of the present study – for how it far outstrips the original’s volume and duration like certain series originally adapted from novels.

For *Homeland* a significant narrative challenge was to develop fresh complications and situations beyond the dynamic established in season one and especially past the point at which Mathison's interactions with Brody were exhausted. Despite a side-by-side image of Mathison and Brody forming the dominant publicity image of the show at its commencement, Brody ceased to feature from season four. In a revealing insight into the mechanics of continuation, showrunner Alex Gansa stated:

"His shelf life had expired. It was time. We spent a lot of hours in the story room figuring out what we could do with his character, and a lot of the emotional landscape had been crossed."<sup>7</sup>

For the remainder of its eight seasons, storylines leaned on the already established protégé/mentor relationship between Mathison and Saul, her CIA boss, with desperation invariably foregrounded through the fragile balance between Mathison's competence and her instability, and its pivotal relationship to a series of painful choices and their consequences. In *24* the rigid structural deployment of temporality as the key engine of desperation gave each season's story events more of a standalone quality than shows which depend on developing a unitary story spanning multiple seasons. Whilst there is a cumulative aspect to our ongoing engagement with Bauer, especially our interest in his responses to ethical dilemmas concerning the use of violence versus the greater good, this is mostly outweighed by the 're-set' of each new season, its fresh ticking-clock ordeal, and the associated desperate need for Bauer to resolve it within a day. With *The Good Place* a similar challenge to that faced by *Homeland* marks the transition from a first to a second season, namely a substantial revelation at the conclusion of season one that necessitates the positing of a new objective or problem. Showrunner Michael Schur describes the show's transition:

"After *The Good Place* was picked up for season two, the writing staff and I began to map out, as best as we could, the trajectory of the show. Given the ideas we wanted to explore, and the pace at which we wanted to present those ideas, I began to feel like four seasons—just over 50 episodes—was the right lifespan."<sup>8</sup>

His account makes clear both the fundamental importance of a strong first season in ensuring continuation and the extent to which continuation beyond a first season may be mapped out 'on the hoof'. In each of the three subsequent seasons a new goal or problematic is instantiated, each with such potentially momentous consequences as the damnation of all humanity. Though the overall

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<sup>7</sup> [https://www.thedailybeast.com/homeland-creator-why-brody-had-to-die-for-the-show-to-live-and-whats-next-in-season-](https://www.thedailybeast.com/homeland-creator-why-brody-had-to-die-for-the-show-to-live-and-whats-next-in-season-4#:~:text=Why%20did%20Brody%20have%20to,emotional%20landscape%20had%20been%20crossed.)

[4#:~:text=Why%20did%20Brody%20have%20to,emotional%20landscape%20had%20been%20crossed.](https://www.thedailybeast.com/homeland-creator-why-brody-had-to-die-for-the-show-to-live-and-whats-next-in-season-4#:~:text=Why%20did%20Brody%20have%20to,emotional%20landscape%20had%20been%20crossed.)

<sup>8</sup> <https://netflixlife.com/2020/09/28/why-did-the-good-place->

[end/#:~:text=At%20times%20over%20the%20past,season%20will%20be%20our%20last.](https://netflixlife.com/2020/09/28/why-did-the-good-place-end/#:~:text=At%20times%20over%20the%20past,season%20will%20be%20our%20last.)

tenor is light-hearted, the win-or-bust nature of each season's goal and the retention of hammering enjambment established in the opening season ensure an unabated desperation.

What this paper characterises as desperation is not, of course, a new feature of storytelling.

Different genres and forms have engaged it in a host of ways. It is rare, for example, to encounter a thriller or adventure story that does not, at some juncture and howsoever incrementally it has assembled its pieces, switch to a heightened pace and mood in which events succeed each other thick and fast. Desperation was employed programmatically in early movie serials *The Perils of Pauline* (1914) and *The Hazards of Helen* (1914-1917) and later serials e.g., *Flash Gordon* (1936), which all made heavy use of cliff-hanger episode endings, cross-cutting, and enjambment.

Historically, farce has also made significant use of desperation in summoning its effects. This has often required the repeated introduction of new characters and problems to sustain a pell-mell pace and hectic mood. Writing of the Nineteenth century stage farce, Albert Bermel observes how 'Rivers of people flowed through every act. New characters sometimes sauntered in, bringing fresh complications to the plot' (1982. 218). We might note a related tendency in 'complex' or 'quality' television to deliver new snags and obstacles to compound or supplant those already in play, especially as the principal issue or problematic of an opening season is resolved. Where the over-stuffed stage farce offered us a profusion of entrances, exits and trapdoors to facilitate a torrent of new players as well as escalating complexities and crossed paths, multi-season dramas tend to have recourse to an expanding roster of characters, settings, institutions, and time frames.

The expansive world offered by such shows is best understood in terms of accumulation and combinatorial explosion. Two otherwise different shows demonstrably embody this twin track: biker gang drama *Sons of Anarchy* (2008-2014, hereafter *Sons*), and supernatural fantasy adaptation, with a heavy dose of comedy, *True Blood*. *True Blood* opens, in the small town of Bon Temps, Louisiana, where waitress Sookie Stackhouse first encounters vampire Bill Compton, the wider context being that a synthetic human blood replacement has finally enabled vampires to 'come out'. *Sons* commences in the small town of Charming, California, where a gun-dealing outlaw motorcycle club must outwit and/or pay off law enforcement while dealing with a rival MC. The tongue-in-cheek malapropos names of their opening settings are an early nod to the improbable dimensions of what follows, and both unleash a steady flow of additional groupings to those presented at the outset. *True Blood* acquires, in addition to the foundational dyad of humans and vampires: fairies, telepaths, witches, werewolves, vampire-hating evangelicals, shapeshifters, factions within both the vampires and werewolves, practitioners of Mexican *brujería*, and meth-cooking white-trash cat-people. Sookie, Bill, and other significant characters engage in an ever-changing set of interactions with and across these groupings: of friendship, love, enmity, sex, violence, allegiance, betrayal, etc. Like the



numerical possibilities of a rotary combination lock, an exponentially-expanded set of variables are created by these additions. Likewise, *Sons* acquires a procession of new players and problems, accruing a rollcall of additional gangs, agencies, groups, and acronyms: the ATF; IRA; CIA; DEA and DA; Charming PD; Oakland PD; the Grim Bastards; the Aryan Brotherhood; the Niners; the Galindo Cartel; and multiple charters of the SoA. Again, progress through its seasons is marked not only by the addition of new groupings, but by the multiplication of ensuing relationships, with each season commonly built around a new predicament and associated supplementary characters.

In *Sons*, the ambition of central character Jax Teller is to redirect the club from a criminal gun-business onto a legitimate footing. Despite a succession of complex schemes and engagements with additional sets of players, of junctures where he seems tantalizingly close to victory, this outcome is repeatedly deferred until the show's finale and his death by extravagant vehicular suicide. From the outset critics and viewers observed that Jax's situation was derived from *Hamlet*. When the show commences, Jax's father is dead, his mother Gemma has married his father's best friend Clay, who now presides over the MC, and Jax is troubled by his father speaking to him from beyond the grave through a memoir. Yet, if the premise re-works *Hamlet*, Jax's travails across episodes and seasons often feel closer to the stymied desires of Basil Fawlty and his varied, doomed, schemes to achieve profit, pleasure, or escape in *Fawlty Towers* (1975-1979) than to Shakespeare's Prince of Denmark. *Sons* is graphically violent and only intermittently funny, but, like the put-upon hotelier, Jax is endlessly, excruciatingly, systematically, thwarted. Despite dashing from problem to problem, implementing fixes, building relationships, conceiving plans, he can never do enough. He is always tripped-up by the interventions of others, by friends and enemies, by those seeking to help and hinder, ostensibly by chance, and structurally by design. Jax's desperate situation may be rendered in especially vivid strokes, but aligns to a recognizable template in which countless central characters, from Sookie Stackhouse to Walter White, spend successive episodes and seasons trying to fix things, with the solution to one problem invariably planting the seeds of another.

Over the course of seven seasons *Sons* deferred the principal outcomes of the revenge plot - the deaths of Clay (near the end of season six) and Gemma (the penultimate episode of season seven) - for a considerable period, by introducing, developing and exhausting successive desperate storylines essentially unrelated to the *Hamlet* model whilst intermittently and very incrementally returning to more Hamletian questions about Jax's 'true' identity, the circumstances of his father's death, and how he should respond. The *Hamlet* parallels were ham-fistedly telegraphed but the underpinning comparison nonetheless provided a framework for audience expectations as it approached a conclusion, especially in respect of how matters would end for Jax once Tara (in effect 'Ophelia'), Clay ('Claudius'), and Gemma ('Gertrude') were dead. Equally, the stretching out of the interval

between the emergence of Jax's doubts about his father's death and his revenge to sustain seven hectic seasons of action necessarily made the Jax/Hamlet parallel less convincing as his criminal career mutated to include employment as a producer of pornographic films and brothel owner. Whilst the contemplative, even philosophical, dimension of his literary model was occasionally flagged with scenes of Jax poring over his father's journal, this was consistently outweighed by his involvement in extreme and graphically-rendered violence. This, in turn, rather than having the impulsive quality of, for example, Hamlet's killing of Polonius, was often the result of elaborate planning, albeit with the overall aim of saving the motorcycle club, both from its innumerable enemies, and from internal forces that preferred a ruthless criminal enterprise to the fraternity of free-wheeling romantic outlaws his father had originally envisioned. Considered in terms of narrative trajectory, *Sons* takes the arc of *Hamlet* and interposes a lengthy mid-section, a succession of essentially season-based peaks and troughs as fresh ending-deferring complications and outcomes before finally, and perhaps not altogether convincingly, resolving the foundational revenge plot.

Jax's facility as a begetter of elaborate schemes and ruses is fundamental to the continuation of the show through its expanded 'middle' and to its desperate tenor as stratagems multiply and threaten to misfire. In this regard Jax bears analysis in terms of another literary model, the scheming servant. Such characters can be traced back at least as far as 200 BC in the recurrence of a 'Servus Callidus' in the Plautine farces *Bacchides*, *Epidicus*, *Mostellaria*, and *Pseudolus* (Stürner, 2020) and may be identified in such variants as Puss-in-Boots and Jeeves. The *Commedia della Arte's* Arlecchino is a clever rascal servant, but one whose plans do not always pay off as hoped. An Arlecchino is useful for an open-ended story predicated on a series of plans, phases, set-backs and successes, something with "lots of moving parts", as one character observes of a complex scheme in *Sons of Anarchy*; a pertinent figure for the convolutions engendered by desperate continuation. Hence, Jax is readily interpretable as an Arlecchino (an interpretation abetted by the visual cue of his heavily embellished biker's waistcoat/'cut'), as is Nucky Thompson of *Boardwalk Empire* (2010-2014), and, to a certain extent, *Vikings'* Ragnar Lothbruk. All favour complex stratagems and unlikely alliances, but often end up drawn into a violence they had preferred to avoid. More generally, mendacity, chutzpah, and the ability to survive upon one's wits are Arlecchino-esque qualities embodied in a much wider raft of principal characters from 'complex', continuing, and desperate television including Marty McByrde of *Ozark* (2017-2022), *The Blacklist's* Raymond Reddington, *The Good Place's* Eleanor Shellstrop, and Jeff Winger of *Community* (2009-2015).

**Bibles, beginnings, and worlds-without-ends**

Returning to Cutchins' definition of the business of adaptation studies as 'the varied relationships between texts' (2), one is obliged to ask of those continuing dramas that do not derive from a specific literary source, "How could there be texts with which these shows have an equivalent adaptive relationship?" Our answer is that, through continuation, *they adapt themselves*. That is, once commenced, and as we have seen through the analysis of several shows, completed episodes and seasons both set limits upon and generate possibilities for future episodes and seasons. Coupled with popular and critical responses to earlier instalments, and the corresponding desire to build upon well-received elements, these work to establish a template or playbook. The discovery, conflict with, and defeat of a 'big bad' is perhaps the most literal prototype for re-visiting a seasonal narrative arc, but much continuation is fuelled by a looser recombination of extant elements. Hutcheon observes that 'the pleasure of repetition with variation' (2006. 4) is central to understanding adaptation, and continuing shows clearly endeavour to find ways, according to the tenor of each and its verisimilitude, to offer more-of-the-same alongside innovations and surprises. Since production of such shows frequently spans several years with many individuals contributing, including replacement writers, it is unsurprising that, in addition to the substantial corpus of already viewed screen story, a supplementary text often guides the ongoing project. A 'show bible' (Espenson, 2008) or 'series bible', typically devised and updated by those working in the writers' room, informs incoming writers, avoids new material contradicting or otherwise jarring with existing material, functions as a point of reference for development, and sets parameters for the show's fundamental character. It embodies how continuation-to-date comprises a model for continuation-to-come. Intended to facilitate not merely continuity, but continuation itself, show bibles' combination of summarized canonical biographies and deeds, mapping of key relationships, and firm rules for future conduct, is indeed holy writ.

Finally, it is instructive to consider the outlines for continuation set out in a different television artefact, the hypotextual 'pitch bible' or 'pitch document' that may usefully be regarded as a source text. Where the 'show bible' steers an existing show, the 'pitch bible' is originary in nature, the key document through which a prospective show is proposed to potential backers. In his substantial pitch document to HBO for *The Wire*, David Simon is at pains to convey early on that although he is proposing 'in the strictest sense, a police procedural set in the drug culture of an American rust-belt city, a cops-and-players story that exists within the same vernacular as other television fare', he envisages 'far more than a cop show'. He promises 'larger, universal themes that have more to do with the human condition, the nature of the American city and, indeed, the national culture [...] The grand theme here is nothing less than a national existentialism'. Critical responses suggest that, though Simon's proposition smacks of grandiloquence, these ambitions were met. Of particular

interest here is how quickly Simon introduces the idea of *The Wire* as a multi-season show, describing halfway down p.1 how ‘each season of *The Wire* – be it nine or thirteen episodes – exists as a standalone journey. Some characters may progress to the following season for continuity; most others will have their stories resolved in a single season’ (Simon, n.d.). Equally, it is notable that, though the scale and aspiration of the eventual show is anticipated, one of its most acclaimed features – each season’s focus upon a different Baltimore institution – is not. Rather, Simon concludes the pitch document and detailed episode-by-episode breakdown of season one with ‘END OF FIRST CASE’ (78. my italics), which, by implication, still locates additional seasons within the cops-vs.-dealers milieu rather than that more expansive urban canvas. Tendered to its backers as nothing short of a ground-breaking *magnum opus* and commonly described as television’s greatest ever drama series, it nonetheless embarked upon production with key features to-be-confirmed.

The Duffer Brothers’ pitch document for what would become *Stranger Things* (2016-), originally *Montauk*, is tentative in terms of possible continuation, stating in the concluding paragraph, ‘Franchise Potential’, that ‘though *Montauk* is designed as a stand-alone eight-hour tale, the story can continue in subsequent installments {sic}’. The paragraph briefly describes a single ‘hypothetical sequel’ ‘ten years later, in the summer of 1990’ where the ‘kids will now be young adults’, necessitating ‘a new ensemble of actors’ (Duffer & Duffer, n.d. 21). There is a radical change between the potential futurity it suggests and the actual continuation delivered by five seasons of *Stranger Things*. Most notably, the sustained period evocation (of the early to mid-1980s) for which the first season was widely lauded is not jettisoned in favour of a decade-long temporal leap and replacement actors. Rather, the show’s progress became incremental, spanning some 4-5 years, allowing continued engagement with the 1980s music, style, and culture that had hooked audiences, and permitting the retention and maturation of its child actors whom the success of season one had propelled to celebrity. Key dimensions of what made *Stranger Things* an instant hit and how it parlayed that success through continuation into greater success, assaying and judiciously adapting itself through subsequent seasons, were not envisaged from the outset.

Perhaps the most revealing pitch document of all, which accompanied an expensive two-part pilot for ABC, is Abrams and Lindelof’s ‘Series Format’ for *Lost*. Unusually for a multi-season drama show, *Lost* began with an enigma or mystery, with its convoluted narrative trail leading to a deferred answer or resolution in the final episode. Famously, many viewers felt the explanation posited at the show’s conclusion was unsatisfactory. Lindelhof has claimed he hoped to complete *Lost* after only three years, but ABC executives responded “‘Do you understand how hard it is to make a show that people want to watch? And people like the show? So why would we end it?’” (qtd. in Davis, 2020). Whilst partisans for *Lost* and its divisive ending are resistant to the idea that its writers made it up as

they went along (e.g., Elvy, 2019) the founding ‘Series Format’ addresses continuation beyond season one as follows, “The story ideas really are limitless - in fact, we've had several conversations about what a second and third season might look like.” Even with a show that, ostensibly, hinged upon a foundational mystery or question, how it was eventually to be answered was not decided (nor different alternatives proffered) at the outset. Indeed, Abrams and Lindelhof had not conceived *Lost ex nihilo* but were tasked by ABC chairman Lloyd Braun to develop a show that merged aspects of the movie *Cast Away* (2000) with hit show *Survivor* (2000-). Sceptical that the project would be picked up, their pitch assumed a devil-may-care audacity, jettisoning established industry formulae and sketching out an unorthodox venture, loaded with enigmatic intimations of a complex storyworld and correspondingly labyrinthine plot. In short, they conjured the elements that would make the show popular whilst believing they would probably never need to disentangle and resolve them<sup>9</sup>.

Yet *Lost* is not invoked here as an exceptional case in respect of its continuation but, rather, for its typicality. Characterised earlier in this paper as ‘keepie-uppie’, it is apparent and wholly unsurprising that many continuing TV dramas are sustained for as long as they are popular and profitable, with fresh story matter sustaining that continuation. Pitched and bought on the basis of strong beginnings and potential for continuation, the end is figured as something to be deferred, avoided, and often goes superstitiously unmentioned, as though, following Heidegger, ‘naming calls [...] brings closer what it calls’ (2001.196) and, *absit omen*, not invoking an end serves to circumvent one. Whereas it is difficult to imagine a movie script getting greenlit without a final act (the relationship of endings to beginnings and middles constituting a key criterion in assessing their merits and saleability) television shows are routinely proffered, sold, reviewed, praised, and pilloried while incomplete. It is suggested here that the difficulty – creatively, for makers, interpretively, for viewers – is reconciling the inevitability of shows being, to a lesser or greater extent, made up as they go along, with prevailing conceptions of what makes artworks good. For such provisionality, especially in combination with assaying and reworking preexisting material, is precisely at odds with the myth of a clear-cut and unified artistic vision, maintained from conception through completion to deliver a distinctive and original artwork, that has for a considerable time defined great art.

Elliott observes that ‘humanities theorization’s centuries-long preference for difference and abiding hostility to similarity’ (20) has disfavoured adaptation, and it is necessarily the adaptive dimension of continuing storytelling that diverges from such long-standing notions of value. Just as auteur theory strained to frame an equivalence between the literary author and the film director, necessarily

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<sup>9</sup> See Mittel (2015) pp 92-94 for a fuller account.

underplaying collaborative aspects of moviemaking, so deifications of the showrunner perform even greater contortions in seeking to fit that role to the Romantic ideology of creative genius. For, compared to models of *le cinema d'auteur*, showrunner television typically involves more churn of personnel, a longer duration of production, the involvement of other creative contributors as both writers and directors, and can include the departure and replacement of showrunners. Yet, observing that such models are a poor fit for understanding (and, if we choose, evaluating) continuing television dramas is not to say that they resist understanding or evaluation. Better models will specifically recognize and attend to how they move from commencement to continuation, and thence from continuation to conclusion, specifically recognizing the extent to which these texts combine the plotted and the provisional, the authorial and the composite, the fixed and the adaptive. Perhaps, like comprehending team sports (and the analogy is far from specious), our approach to understanding continuing dramas might examine them on the basis that they are ongoing and mutable, examining the interrelationships between those roles equivalent to owners, managers and players (including hiring and firing), surveying the balance between set-pieces and the extempore, recognizing the distinctive character of seasons, and evaluating them according to the ebb and flow of successes and shortcomings, lapses and recoveries, promise and delivery.

### **Conclusion:**

This paper has addressed the range of means through which multi-season drama serials enact continuation across multiple seasons. Examining a variety of US shows with broad global audiences, it has charted the ascent of the season as the principal unit of story and the concomitant waning – though not the demise – of the episode as a standalone narrative entity. Considering the shift towards stories and storylines that run for a season or longer, it has engaged with television storytelling described as ‘quality’ or ‘complex’. It has argued that, as these characteristics become more familiar and frequent, it is increasingly difficult to contend that they still constitute a distinctive and divergent body of screen texts readily differentiated from regular television drama.

‘Desperation’ has been identified and demonstrated to be a recognizable narrative modality that heightens viewers’ awareness of their participation in a continuing story journey where, though episodes remain important units of story delivery, resolutions are far more likely to map onto seasons or, and not always so easily, to the arc of an entire show. Endings, and their deferral have been considered in terms of the heightened challenge for showrunners striving to deliver successive gratifying seasons and a sense of an overall narrative trajectory; a challenge extant across other continuing narrative televisual forms and significant to the specificity of television aesthetics. Potential differences in audience expectations when shows have literary antecedents have also been charted. Adaptation, both in the sense of specific and ‘announced’ (Hutcheon, 2006. 7)

transpositions of texts, and a more diffuse intertextuality of literary models, remakes, and storytelling templates, has been shown to be a consistent presence in television's desperate storytelling. Finally, it has been contended that continuing dramas, with or without a literary source, may be seen to adapt themselves by the manner in which earlier seasons generate models and possibilities for those that follow.

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