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## The Plot Twist in TV Serial Narratives

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**Abstract:** This article explores the use of the plot twist in screen fictions. This is a largely unexplored area, as interest in this phenomenon has largely focused on the so-called “plot twist movie,” which is an older narrative tradition. In order to explain this aesthetic phenomenon, it draws on the model of surprise originally proposed by the cognitive psychologists Wulf Meyer, Rainer Reisenzein, and Achim Schützwohl. Plot twists are characterized by three distinct but intimately intertwined temporal segments and their corresponding functions, which are explained by this model. The objective of this article is to explore how cognitive-emotional interactions shape the aesthetic viewing experience and to identify how that experience relates to shows’ artistic qualities. *Game of Thrones* (S01 and S03), *Homeland* (S01), and *Westworld* (S01) will be used as test cases. In each of the three plot segments, there are specific processes that distinguish the experience of surprise as an aesthetic phenomenon.

**Keywords:** aesthetic experience, multiplot structure, plot twist, surprise, temporal prolongation, TV serials

My aim in this article is to contribute to the existing literature on the plot twist in screen fictions.

The plot twist is a narrative device designed to turn the reception of a narration into an experience dominated by surprise, influencing how the spectator understands and values it

aesthetically. I am interested in contributing to a better understanding of the plot twist in aesthetic terms, identifying precisely what it is about plot twists that elicits aesthetic appreciation and how it works. My narratological approach identifies qualities of the phenomenon that provoke certain emotional reactions in the spectator that could be said to play a relevant role in the configuration of their aesthetic experience. The clearest example is where the emotion of surprise provoked by a plot twist leads to a positive appreciative judgment of the show. It is normal for this surprise to stimulate the spectator's curiosity about the story, orienting it mainly toward the identification of the artistic qualities that orchestrate the strategy of the surprise, feeding an evaluative process that enriches the appreciative act.

Therefore, assuming that there are certain elements of the narrative that provoke the surprise and that this emotion encourages the spectator to evaluate and appreciate the show, the objectives of this article are to explore how cognitive-emotional interactions shape aesthetic experience and to identify how that experience relates to the artistic qualities of the show. Developing a more precise understanding of the specific emotional and cognitive interactions that take place in an aesthetic experience of serial television will also enable us to distinguish more clearly the specific artistic qualities that support it. An in-depth examination of a show from this perspective points to the conclusion that artists implicitly develop a fairly sophisticated understanding of these interactions, and base their creative proposal on an exploration of their possibilities. The great diversity of types of plot twists (Strank 2014, 167–219) can be understood in this sense. Moreover, other approaches based on cognitivism and narratology also implicitly assume these interactions in the plot twist, clearly distinguishing the sequence of and causal relationships between cognitive and emotional processes (Plantinga 2009b; Tobin 2018).

These perspectives examine the plot twist not only in terms of the moment of surprise when the spectator witnesses an unexpected turn of events in the narrative, but also in terms of the narrative sequence leading up to the twist, considering its causes and often relating the intensity of the twist to its cognitive consequences.

The perspective I have chosen for this study could very well be considered a naturalized aesthetics approach, because I adhere to its basic argument that “aesthetics, or at least a branch of it, cannot and should not remain too far removed from the sciences” (M. Smith 2017, 29). I will draw on a scientific theory in cognitive psychology that has allowed me to analyze the interaction between emotion and cognition with greater precision than any other approach to the surprising event: the model of surprise originally proposed by the cognitive psychologists Wulf Meyer and colleagues (1997), and which has recently been given positive empirical support (Reisenzein et al. 2019).

I will not be offering an empirical study here, nor is it my ambition to corroborate a scientific theory on such an important aspect of human experience. It is important to note that the theory of surprise does not speak of only one emotion but conceptualizes a complex phenomenon consisting of cognitive and emotional processes interacting with one another. It proposes that surprise is evoked by events that are schema-discrepant, that is, that disconfirm implicitly or explicitly held beliefs about events. In addition to giving rise to the experience of surprise, the detection of a schema discrepancy is assumed also to cause an interruption of ongoing processing and a reallocation of processing resources to the surprising event. These processes are assumed to “enable and prepare the subsequent analysis and evaluation of the unexpected event plus—if this analysis suggests so—immediate reactions to this event and/or the updating, extension, or

revision of the schema or schemas that gave rise to the discrepancy” (Reisenzein et al. 2012, 566).

The main advantage of taking this theory as a reference model is that, when we look at the narrative, we realize that plot twists are also characterized by three distinct but intimately intertwined temporal segments and their corresponding functions: (1) the narrative up to the twist, which serves the aim of cultivating particular schemas or beliefs about the story; (2) the event or events that constitute the twist, which aim to disconfirm these beliefs, thereby surprising the spectator; and finally (3) the “after-the-twist” segment, where the spectator will find different cues to engage in intense cognitive activity aimed at adapting to the new reality revealed by the twist and to reflect on the artistic effect. This is analogous to the three phases of the surprise process: (1) the establishment of a belief; (2) the disconfirmation of that belief and the resulting feeling of surprise; and (3) the subsequent cognitive restructuring activity. Given these striking parallels, I believe that this theory of surprise, formulated by cognitive psychologists, is ideally suited to support our quest for precision in explaining the relationships between the artistic features of a show and the aesthetic experience of watching said show, since that explanation depends, as we shall see, on the nature of the relationship between the emotional and cognitive aspects described in the theory of surprise. Thus, the analysis presented in this article is structured according to the sequential organization of the theory of surprise, whose tripartite temporal structure and implicit causality will also be applied in the present analysis.

This exploration will deal specifically with TV series that exhibit a structure marked by interepisodic narrative arcs, a focus that has been suggested by recent developments in the American television industry.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, a number of the most successful and important TV serials

of the current decade have made use of this narrative feature: *Game of Thrones* (David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, 2011–2019); *Homeland* (Alex Gansa and Howard Gordon, 2011–2020); *Mr. Robot* (Sam Esmail, 2015–2019); *The Leftovers* (Damon Lindelof and Tom Perrotta, 2014–2017); *The Affair* (Hagai Levi and Sarah Treem, 2014–); *Westworld* (Lisa Joy and Jonathan Nolan, 2016–); *Big Little Lies* (David E. Kelley, 2017–2019); and *Sherlock* (Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat, 2010–).

The plot twist in TV serials has not been addressed yet, as interest in this phenomenon has largely focused on the so-called “plot twist movie,” which is an older narrative tradition. Beginning with seminal works like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1920), every decade of film history has produced its plot twist movies, including films as significant as *The Wizard of Oz* (Viktor Fleming, 1939), *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), *The Woman in the Window* (Fritz Lang, 1944), *Les Diaboliques* (Henri-Georges Clouzot, 1955), *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), *Planet of the Apes* (Franklin J. Schaffner, 1968), *Murder on the Orient Express* (Sidney Lumet, 1974), *Brazil* (Terry Gilliam, 1985), and *The Usual Suspects* (Bryan Singer, 1995). In such a review, plot twist episodes in major anthology series on television should not be forgotten either, such as *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (Alfred Hitcock, 1955–1962; 1985–1989) and *The Twilight Zone* (Rod Serling, 1959–1964; Simon Kinberg, Jordan Peele, and Marco Ramirez, 2019–).<sup>2</sup>

In recent years, plot twist movies have become extraordinarily popular, as evidenced by the fact that rankings and lists of the best films of this kind have flourished online (Strank 2014, 42–46). The success of a group of films that appeared within just a few years of each other, including *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999), *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan, 1999),

*Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000), and *The Others* (Alejandro Amenábar, 2001), also stimulated scholarly interest in plot twist movies. George M. Wilson (2006) explores the epistemic conditions of film sequences that involve a shift in perspective in films such as *Fight Club* and *The Others*. A few years later came the publication of *Puzzle Films* (so called because they pose a cognitive challenge to the viewer), an anthology that contextualized the rise of the plot twist film as part of a broader trend in complex narrative storytelling (Buckland 2009). More recently, Warren Buckland has edited another volume, *Hollywood Puzzle Films*, the fifth chapter of which focuses again on the plot twist, with a comparison of the narrative structures of *Shutter Island* (Martin Scorsese, 2010) and *Inception* (Christopher Nolan, 2010) (2014, 89–108).<sup>3</sup>

However, contributions on the plot twist in television have been much rarer. Jason Mittell (2015) has referred to the phenomenon in his discussions of *Seinfeld* (Larry David, Jerry Seinfeld, 1989–1998), *The Simpsons* (James L. Brooks, Matt Groening, and Sam Simon, 1989–), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Joss Whedon, 1997–2003), *Scrubs* (Bill Lawrence, 2001–2010), *Lost* (J. J. Abrams, Jeffrey Lieber, and Damon Lindelof, 2004–2010), and *24* (Robert Cochran and Joel Surnow, 2001–2010), but he has not addressed it in depth. He characterizes the plot twist in serial television as a mimetic derivation of the movie plot twist and/or as influenced by *The Twilight Zone*, thereby reducing it to a repetition of the same form in an episodic context (Mittell 2015, 51). The only author who has dealt specifically with the plot twist in television has been Carl Plantinga (2009a) in his analysis of the series *The Twilight Zone*, which links the twist closely to the episodic nature of the anthology series. Thus, of all the existing research on complex narratives there are only two authors who have dealt with plot twists in television, and both have considered cases in which its use was strictly episodic.

However, as noted above, my aim here is to analyze interepisodic aspects characteristic of serials, shows marked by two qualities that will be of special interest to this article: temporal prolongation and the multiplot structure. The main plot twists of three TV series I will discuss (*Game of Thrones*, *Homeland*, and *Westworld*) have been selected to illustrate the three proposed components of the plot twist structure: (1) the construction of beliefs over a prolonged period and the multiplot design that lays the foundations for the surprise (*Game of Thrones* S01 and S03); (2) the multiplot structure of the surprising event itself (*Homeland* S01); and (3) the cognitive adaptation and evaluative activity after the surprising event, involving both temporal prolongation and the multiplot structure (*Westworld* S01). The criteria for the selection of the case studies were intended to combine two aspects that are by no means mutually exclusive in contemporary serial fiction: (1) popularity with audiences; and (2) a certain artistic quality and sometimes innovative character that successfully adapts formulas previously used in shorter narratives.

### ***Game of Thrones*: Belief Construction**

Numerous rankings and expressions of social impact on the internet identify *Game of Thrones* as one of the most notable serials for plot twists. In this series, the surprise always involves the death of a protagonist: Ned Stark (Sean Bean) in the first season; Robb (Richard Madden), Talisa (Oona Chaplin), and Catelyn Stark (Michelle Fairley) and 15,000 soldiers in the Red Wedding in the third season; and Jon Snow (Kit Harington) in the fifth (see Pérez and Reizenzein 2019).

According to the theory of surprise, viewers held a belief that was radically contradicted by these events. What belief was it and how was it nurtured by the narrative's seriality?



The most plausible hypothesis is that we establish beliefs about the continuity of characters and also about the continuity of the narrative, and these two elements are interrelated: “Our brains conspire with stories to knit material together and produce an illusion—or perhaps let’s say impression—of continuity. This impression is an important ingredient in many of the satisfactions that plot can offer, but it is also crucial to the satisfactions of character development and to many other elements of narrative pleasure” (Tobin 2018, 2). These beliefs are generated in us as readers and viewers as a result of our exposure to the way narrative usually behaves. If a plot is in full development, the disappearance of the character that drives it will be surprising, because in the vast majority of narrations what happens is exactly the opposite: the protagonist is kept alive while the narration is *in medias res*. Thus, the degree of participation of characters in the evolution of the narration is important for our belief in their continuity. Our expectations about the continued presence of a character in a given plot is correlated with their degree of participation in the plot. The more they participate, the more surprised we are if they are removed from it, and vice versa. In addition, for a greater surprise effect, the character must be perceived as essential to the narration, driving one or more relevant plots. This belief may also be strengthened by expectations about the character’s participation in the future evolution of the plot. In *Game of Thrones*’s narrative structure, the most important plots are shaken by characters’ deaths just when those plots are in full development.

The narrative importance of Ned Stark is obvious, as he is the character who, after being made Hand of the King to Robert Baratheon (Mark Addy), provokes the main conflict throughout the series with his discovery of Jon Arryn’s (John Standing) murderer, his discovery that Cersei Lannister’s (Lena Heady) children are the product of incest with her brother Jaime

(Nicolaj Coster-Waldau), and finally his positioning of himself in clear opposition to all members of the Lannister family by supporting Stannis Baratheon's (Stephen Dillane) claim to the throne. Ned thus becomes the source of a conflict that is at the very heart of the whole series: the confrontation between the Lannister House and the Stark House. In quantitative terms, his onscreen presence comes to a total of 143 minutes in 9 episodes, making an average of more than 15 minutes per episode. His preeminence becomes clear if we consider that the character with the most time onscreen overall in *Game of Thrones*, Tyrion Lannister (Peter Dinklage), appears for less than 10 minutes per episode.

Having thus established his importance, can we say that his death comes as a logical result at that point, given the evolution of the different plots? On the contrary, it is the product of a sentence handed down by an inexperienced and sadistic newly appointed king, Joffrey Baratheon (Jack Gleeson), drunk on his own power and spurred on by a crowd thirsting for brutality. His capricious and illogical decision is surprising even to Ned Stark's worst enemy, Cersei, because it comes after Ned has agreed to make a false confession of treason and publicly declares his recognition of Joffrey as king. The spectators are thus encouraged to believe in the continuity of this character through his positioning at the heart of the narrative, with no clue given as to the possibility of the interruption of the plots in which he participates.

It is true that many readers of the *Game of Thrones* book series, as well as seasoned spectators and promoters of certain fan theories, anticipated or at least suspected this twist and were not surprised in the least. However, there is enough evidence that many spectators were surprised, and the theory of surprise tells us that this had to do with the establishment of spectator beliefs. There is nothing particularly special about a narrative doing what most

narratives do, developing a story with an important character. But if we consider the temporal prolongation of the series, the perspective changes because, at the time of Ned's death, *Game of Thrones* still has many episodes ahead. How can the series overcome this loss and the break in continuity that it causes?

The value of this twist lies in the fact that the plot of the Lannister–Stark conflict originally fueled by Ned will increase in intensity when other characters, motivated by outrage at his unjust murder, assume the role that Ned had. From that moment on in the war of the five kings for the throne, Ned's personal conflict with the Lannisters becomes a family feud that ties into the central plot of the war for the throne, which is driven by Robb and Catelyn Stark and which the remaining members of the Stark family will also try to influence. The extraordinarily rich multiplot structure of the show, with such a large number of characters participating in the main storylines, makes it possible to transform the death of a character into a moment of narrative growth, like when the cutting of a main branch off a large tree ultimately serves to stimulate the growth of smaller branches and reinvigorate the tree.

The symbiosis between the multiplot structure and the plot twist does not end here, but can be considered an even more important ingredient in the massacre at the Red Wedding. Indeed, if a plot twist transforms a plot, then this event could be described as a multiplot twist, as the deaths of numerous main characters break the continuity of several plots: the love story between Robb and Talisa, with the expectation of the birth of Robb's heir; the plot of the relationship between Robb and his mother, which has been marked by moments of mistrust; and of course the plot of the wars between the two kings (Stark and Lannister), which is brought to an abrupt end because there is no (Stark) army left to wage it.

We can explain the massacre according to the theory of surprise, starting with the establishment of belief, in a similar way to the case of Ned's execution, although with some nuances and differences. It is important to consider that Ned's death established a precedent that could potentially undermine the effectiveness of subsequent plot twists, and thus the second major plot twist had to differ from the first one. But how could this be achieved? By decimating an entire family, killing the King in the North, his mother, his wife, his heir in her womb, and his wolf, along with an entire army. The magnitude of this catastrophe in narrative terms effectively brings an end once and for all to the main plot of the family war between the Starks and the Lannisters. Therefore, together with the importance of the characters killed in the massacre such as Catelyn and Robb, who had increased their presence onscreen in Seasons 2 and 3 significantly compared to Season 1, we must consider the importance of a plot that has been central for many episodes.

In addition, the creators of *Game of Thrones* made this second plot twist even more unpredictable by means of a very clear strategy to locate the event at a time when viewers could hardly have doubts about the continuity of the plot. In fact, after the many difficulties that Robb Stark and his army have suffered, and after being abandoned by the Karstarks, the moment is initially presented as a positive turning point in the plot's evolution. Robb concocts the plan to attack the Lannisters directly at Casterly Rock, for which he needs the alliance with Walder Frey (David Bradley). The negotiation is successful and thus the celebration they are holding when the massacre takes place is the very moment of an apparently positive turn for the Starks in the long and bleak story of their feud with the Lannisters.

Examining these two plot twists together reveals a strategy that combines the resources of multiplot structure and temporal prolongation characteristic of serials in a remarkably coherent way. Both are orchestrated with extraordinary precision, which is evident in the fact that the design of the second plot twist not only concludes the plot introduced by the first one, but also offers a viewer experience that is only possible thanks to the temporal prolongation of the serial format, because the viewing of this second plot twist will inevitably conjure up memories of the first one.

### ***Homeland: The Multiplot Structure of the Twist***

In this section, I will explore the arrangement of the events that give rise to the twist, the moment when the surprise occurs, and its aesthetic construction. The series *Homeland* will serve as an example of how the convergence of different plots becomes the key narrative strategy for provoking surprise. Although a narrative design based on the use of different plots is one of the most widespread practices in contemporary serial television, it has received only limited scholarly attention. Greg Smith referred to it in his analysis in 1995 of the most successful TV series at that time, *Seinfeld*, and some years later Michael Z. Newman (2006) showed how important such a strategy had become in more recent serial productions, where longer arcs often depend on interaction between the objectives of different characters and how this shapes their respective plotlines (2006; see also Nelson 1997). It is important to note that when storylines features relationships between plots, these reflect or express cognitive situations that are present in our real lives, such as inferences about the influence of an event on one's own life, or reflections on parallels or contrasts, or even uniquely rich cognitive emotional experiences, such

as surprise. I would like to explore this idea further here by reflecting on the twist in *Homeland's* first season, specifically at the moment where the main plotlines collide in Episode 7. This plot convergence required a subtle preparation over the course of the preceding six episodes that will need to be described briefly.

The very first scene of *Homeland* shows a Muslim informant telling Carrie (Claire Danes) that a US marine has been recruited by Al Qaeda. From that moment on, Carrie is convinced that Brody (Damian Lewis), a recently rescued sergeant who was held as a prisoner of war by al-Qaeda terrorists for eight years, is the marine in question, and that he is planning to carry out terrorist activity in the United States. Her efforts to test this hypothesis make up the main plot of Season 1. During her investigations, a subplot emerges that is related to the relationship between Brody and fellow marine Thomas Walker (Chris Chalk). Spectators eventually learn, via flashback images of Brody's captivity, that Brody killed Walker. As the narrative develops, Carrie's suspicions appear to be confirmed; for example, over the course of the subsequent episodes it is revealed that Brody received protection from the terrorist Abu Nazir (Navid Negahban) and that he has converted to Islam. In short, the narrative clearly orients the spectator toward this hypothesis, although without actually confirming it.

The third main plot appears almost incidentally in Episode 5, when Carrie and Brody begin a series of sexual encounters. Since this affair does not appear to be a professional tactic but suggests a genuine romantic attachment between the two characters, it can be deemed to constitute a whole new plot. However, in Episode 7, when Carrie and Brody spend a couple of days together in a cabin, an intimate conversation between them turns into what is practically an interrogation. The two appear to have developed feelings for each other, but there is no definitive

proof that Carrie has overcome her doubts about Brody. In what seems a context of sincere expression, the mix of passion and suspicion between them results in Carrie barraging Brody with questions that ultimately lead to two revelations of crucial importance to the development of their relationship: Brody confesses that he has converted to Islam, and Carrie tells him that she knows he is the infiltrator she was informed about by her Iraqi contacts. He denies the accusation and prepares to leave, his pride apparently wounded. This whole scene is probably one of the most intense emotional moments of the season because of the sudden emergence of an unexpected resolution to the main plot: Brody is the terrorist that Carrie was looking for.

However, this point is precisely when the surprising moment takes place: Saul Berenson (Mandy Patinkin), her colleague and friend, calls Carrie to inform her that Walker has been identified as the terrorist infiltrator. This revelation is the resolution of a third parallel plot that has been developing since Episode 5: the CIA investigation conducted by Saul. The surprise here arises from the conflict between our belief that Walker is dead (strongly suggested by Brody's flashbacks to his experience of being kidnapped, in which he violently beats Walker and then buries his body) and the news that Saul shares with Carrie. Additionally, the news about Walker is surprising because it contradicts the hypothesis—toward which many viewers would have been leaning at this point—that the infiltrator is Brody.

The perspective established one minute earlier is thus suddenly turned on its head, very probably resulting in confused bewilderment. Narrative events in general resembles certain kinds of real-life events where the situation in which the surprise is delivered shapes our reaction. For example, our surprise at the news of an unexpected death may be made more intense if we know that the victim was enjoying a moment of great success just at the time of his or her death. In the

case of the plot twist examined here, the revelation that Walker is alive is especially intense because it involves such a huge shift of attention, as the spectator is completely absorbed in the emotional scene between Brody and Carrie at that moment.

Thus, the orchestration of the narrative over an extended period of time can be effective to the point of resembling real-life cognitive experiences of surprise that are marked by the coincidence of diverse elements. This should not be taken to mean that the surprise is necessarily more intense in a multiplot formulation than in a simpler one, but the artistically effective design turns the experience of surprise into a significant aesthetic experience, one that stands out as an emotional-cognitive event that will probably make it more memorable. The moment will also stand out because, as well as being the trigger for the surprise, it can also add to the questions posed by the twist.

The plot of the CIA investigation raises questions about the plausibility of what we have been told: How can we understand the images of the flashback plot that showed Brody as responsible for Walker's murder? Was it orchestrated by Abu Nazir to deceive both of them? The continuity of the main plot seems to have been deeply affected by the twist, and this leads to further questions: If it is true that Brody is not the infiltrator as Carrie suspected, how can the main plot, which revolved around this question, progress any further? Moreover, with respect to the subplot of Carrie and Brody's romance, our expectations have taken a sharp turn.

Immediately after her call with Saul, Carrie apologizes to Brody for accusing him of working for Abu Nazir: "I made a terrible mistake . . . This weekend, this time that we spent together, it was real." This suggests that Carrie's feelings for Brody are genuine after all, thereby introducing new expectations into a subplot whose continuity had seemed so definitively threatened only



moments earlier. From this point on, the story of their love affair will develop constantly in the final episodes of Season 1 and become the main plotline in Season 2. In short, the analysis in this section suggests that the moment of surprise is an event whose emotional-cognitive richness, based on a carefully prolonged multiplot strategy, might define the singularity of an aesthetic experience (Pearce et al. 2016).

### ***Westworld: Post-Twist Game and Aesthetic Evaluation***

As can be seen from the example discussed in the previous section, the main event of a plot twist, as predicted by the theory of surprise, also serves as a stimulus for subsequent cognitive processes: “In addition to its informational function, the experience of surprise can also be ascribed a motivational function, for it is likely the feeling of surprise that triggers the conscious analysis of the surprising event, or at least provides an initial impetus for this analysis” (Reisenzein et al. 2012, 567). Hence, the cognitive model of surprise predicts that the surprising event will trigger conscious cognitive processes aimed at making sense of the event and its implications; or, in other words, “to make even the unintelligible seem decodable in retrospect” (Tobin 2018, 283). Does the narration contain ingredients intentionally designed to respond to the questions that viewers ask themselves after the plot twist, or clues that might guide the search for narrative coherence again after the logic has been so violently disrupted? My aim here is to demonstrate that the narrative offers a wide range of options for adapting to the new cognitive context, from answering the questions posed by the twist while offering new expectations for the continuity of the serial, to facilitating a reconstruction of the storyline up to the twist, like reorganizing the pieces of a puzzle. Such elements also raise other metanarrative

questions concerning the plausibility and coherence of the narrative as well as the evaluation of its formal features. Indeed, it is worth highlighting the relationship between the processes of cognitive adaptation and the development of a formal consciousness and its consequences in terms of aesthetic evaluation. If a narration does not facilitate the viewer's cognitive adaptation by offering alternatives that support a coherent understanding of the post-twist state of affairs, the whole narrational device implied by the twist will seem unjustifiable, resulting in a negative aesthetic evaluation. Of course, not all plot twists are equally valued by viewers; some may be considered effective and others deemed unsatisfactory, and judgments about them may even define the assessment of the narrative as a whole.

This third stage of the plot twist as an aesthetic device needs to be explored by considering these two different but related kinds of activity. In order to illustrate how these processes occur, I will focus on Season 1 of *Westworld*, a sci-fi series set in a Wild West theme park where androids are almost indistinguishable from humans. Westworld is a park where visitors can live a second life and interact with the robots in any way they choose. Designed for rich vacationers by a pair of enigmatic characters, Dr. Robert Ford (Anthony Hopkins) and Arnold Weber (Jeffrey Wright), the park encourages its visitors to live out their wildest fantasies without fear of their robot hosts, who are prevented by their programming from harming humans. The main plot begins when some of the hosts, led by the oldest and most charismatic, Dolores Abernathy (Evan Rachel Wood), start remembering painful events that they are not supposed to recall, with the unexpected result of awakening their consciousness so that they can develop their own identities. *Westworld* is probably one of the most demanding TV serials in terms of

cognitive effort, due to the design of a rich system of interdependent storylines and a double plot twist structure that reveals false identities and produces temporal disruption.

The first twist takes place at the very end of Episode 7, when we discover that Bernard Lowe (Jeffrey Wright), Head of Behavior at Westworld and Dr. Ford's righthand man, is in fact a robot made by Ford himself. This revelation comes when Ford commands Bernard to murder Theresa Cullen (Sidse Babett Knudsen), a startling act of violence that amplifies the emotional impact of the twist. In his analysis of a plot twist in the series *The Twilight Zone*, Carl Plantinga points out that viewer reflection mostly takes place in the time between episodes: "The most important such thinking occurs after the viewing" (2009a, 49). This is also true for this first plot twist in *Westworld*, which allows time for reflection because the surprising event has been strategically located at the end of an episode. Viewers can therefore indulge in the elaboration of hypotheses based on questions like "Was Bernard behaving as a perfect follower of Mr. Ford's orders, or was he acting as a support to the other rebel hosts?" Such questions might lead to the retrospective evaluation of certain events prior to the twist—for example, when he whispers something in the ear of Dolores's father (Peter Abernathy) in Episode 1. Scenes like this one, together with the location of the twist at the end of the episode, constitute clear examples of elements designed to enhance the spectator's post-twist cognitive activity. At the same time, the formulation of hypotheses in itself stimulates viewer interest in the continuation of the narrative. But here, unlike an episodic plot twist, the reconstruction process will also be supported by the subsequent progression of the narrative, specifically by the revelation that Bernard was constructed as a replica of Ford's late partner, Arnold Weber. This will enhance spectator interest

in the plotline related to Arnold, due to the need to work out a new time frame for the scenes when Arnold meets with Dolores.

The spectator's experience will be further enhanced by the information revealed in the second plot twist. This takes place in the last episode of the season, when we discover that the protagonists of two main plotlines, William (Jimmi Simpson) and the Man in Black (Ed Harris), are not two different visitors but the same person separated by a gap of thirty years. This revelation will almost certainly prompt the spectator to question how a character like William could have become The Man in Black, given the stark differences between the two characters. Viewers will thus begin searching for clues in the storylines in which William has participated. But the change represented by the plot twist requires spectators to revisit not just one plotline, but most of the storylines in the series. In doing so, the intricate web of relationships that connect the different plots will certainly need to be reconstructed. For example, the evolution from William to the Man in Black needs to be consistent with the evolution of Dolores, who relates to William and the Man in Black differently. Such reinterpretations of the relationships between plots might also aid in piecing together the new revelations after the two plot twists. Another example is the first scene of Episode 4, which presents a conversation between Dolores and Bernard, which after the twist will be understood as a conversation between Dolores and Arnold. It is an important narrative moment, as Dolores expresses her own understanding of the pain of self-awareness and Arnold invites her to try the Maze if she wishes to be free. This scene can be interpreted as a key moment in Arnold's life: his recognition of the magnitude of his creation. If we understand this conversation as an event that took place sometime before the scenes that follow, in which the plotline involving Dolores and William develops, our previous knowledge

should serve to explain Dolores's episodes of psychological pain and anguished memories, as well as her affair with William, as consequences of her previous confession to Arnold.

The questions, doubts, and new expectations pointed out here may be consciously assessed in terms of whether the cognitive challenge can be understood in itself as an aesthetic experience. And possibly it can be: just as there is pleasure in trying to solve a puzzle, the indeterminacy of certain crossroads of a narrative, even when questions cannot be answered (Berliner 2013), can also be aesthetically challenging for viewers.

But this does not cover all aspects of the aesthetic experience that a plot twist can provoke. Once the viewer has reinterpreted and made sense of the narrative, the more the content is appreciated as cognitively valuable (for example, as an interesting and stimulating reflection on reality), the more likely it is that the formal features of that content will be evaluated positively in aesthetic terms. In short, a positive assessment of the way the narrative unfolds a new reality will result in a positive aesthetic evaluation of the whole narrative strategy of a plot twist that is understood as having served that end.

But the opposite may also happen. For example, William's transformation may be seen as poorly explained and justified (in fact, many criticisms of the series go in this direction, and in the second season there are even flashbacks that try to explain these aspects better), in which case the plot twist highlights how trivially the park can influence the lives of visitors, rather than evidencing this as a positive aspect in terms of cognitive richness. This perception may lead to the conclusion that the purpose of the formal narrative strategy was merely to provoke a gratuitous shock, a sort of narrative special effect (Mittell 2015, 43), and there may be spectators

who even feel betrayed or manipulated by a strategy that could be negatively evaluated as being clumsy or superficial.

Thus, it seems that plot twists can serve as effective mechanisms for aesthetic evaluation, because the cognitive activity that they stimulate can make viewers aware of the relationship between formal features and meaning in a narration in a way that may even be powerful enough to encompass the concepts of aesthetic interest (Logan 2016, 46) and aesthetic evaluation (Cardwell 2006; Nannicelli 2017) proposed in television studies.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this article has been to explore the narrative structure of plot twists in a number of contemporary serials that share a set of features specific to the medium. To do this, I have considered the hypothesis that plot twists in TV serials obey the logic of the cognitive model of surprise. This scientific model's effective representation of cognitive and emotional interaction throughout its characteristic three stages has facilitated a detailed analysis of the cases chosen. First, I have shown how a strategy to induce a particular belief is structured over different seasons and the importance of medium-specific factors such as multiplot structure and temporal prolongation in eliciting and sustaining spectator belief within a fictional context.

Second, I have considered how a multiplot structure also serves to give aesthetic prominence to the moment of surprise, with the surprising event located at a moment of emotional climax that results in a major attention shift.

Finally, I have argued that the post-twist stage of the narrative is characterized by two main surprise-instigated cognitive processes: on the one hand, an attempt to solve the puzzle

created by the twist by rethinking and possibly even actively rewatching the preceding episodes, and, on the other hand, a metanarrative process involving the cognitive and aesthetic evaluation of the narrative. Aesthetic evaluation may go even further to include, for example, the comparison of the aesthetic richness and effectiveness of the twist with the cognitive benefits that it offers for the comprehension of the story. In each of these three stages I have identified specific processes in which the temporal prolongation of the serial medium, and with it the possibility of playing with rich plot structures, distinguishes the experience of surprise in TV series as a unique aesthetic phenomenon. However, it is important to qualify this conclusion of uniqueness with the caveat that, although I have focused on certain characteristic features of serials, these cannot be considered medium-specific in an absolute sense. After all, there are films of long duration with rich plot structures and episodic elements. Furthermore, the plot twist in cinema does share many elements in common with its counterpart in television: both are fictional narrative phenomena and both depend on the interaction of emotional and cognitive processes in a similar way. The differences between them should not be viewed as qualitative, or as suggesting that some are better than others, but as quantitative. Television series almost always have a much longer duration than films, and this characteristic facilitates a richer narrative architecture. In order to try to understand the specific aesthetic experience of a plot twist in a series, I believe it is necessary to consider those aspects more characteristic of series than of films. In this sense, the processes described above can be considered original in the same sense that cinema was also original when it adapted the plot twist of literature to its medium. It is always interesting to explore cases in which creators have been able to adapt old ingredients to new conditions in a quest to forge new creative pathways of aesthetic experience. Finally, I wish

to stress that my objective has not been to suggest that the plot twist is identical to surprise as described in the theory, but merely to use a scientific model of a given reality in order to better understand a phenomenon that bears the hallmarks of a fictional variant of that reality. However, the results of this study suggest that the plot twist could be considered a subform of the surprising event, since, despite its fictional nature, the relationships between emotions and cognition described by the scientific theory of surprise are substantially maintained.

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## Notes

1. This article does not attempt to deal with every specific aspect of the phenomenon of the plot twist in TV serials. For example, how screenwriters and producers may use the plot twist as a means of maintaining viewer interest in the series in the gap between episodes or seasons (e.g., by stimulating discussions of the serial on internet forums) or how they revive interest in a serial when its popularity is apparently declining have only been alluded to here (in references to the strategic location of twists as cliffhangers at the end of episodes or whole seasons), yet it is certainly plausible that the plot twist can serve such objectives. I have explored, in collaboration with Rainer Reisenzein, elements of this broader context, referring especially to the participatory phenomenon of fandom in *Game of Thrones* [] (Pérez and Reisenzein 2019).

2. There is, of course, a tradition that goes farther back than cinema. Indeed, the most comprehensive study of surprise in narration is devoted to written literature, with special attention to classic authors of English-language literature such as Mark Twain, Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brönte, and Virginia Woolf. Vera Tobin (2018) provides a flexible and broad notion of “well-made” surprise plots that is applicable to true plot twists as well as to short narrations as brief as jokes and even visual art.

3. Other contributions have come from Germany (Strank 2014), which has produced the only book devoted entirely to the topic (albeit only to one kind of plot twist, the final twist); from Italy, with the publication of a compilation with a similar scope and focus to that of Buckland’s anthology (Ghislotti 2011); and from Spain, where an issue of the journal *L’Atalante* was devoted to “mind game” film narratives (Bort Gual and García Catalán 2013). There is of course a much vaster collection of literature on complex storytelling in general, but I refer here only to works that have at least partly addressed the concept and/or phenomenon of the plot twist movie.