

# Aesthetics of the Narrative Climax in Contemporary TV Serials

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## ABSTRACT

This article draws on concepts from cognitive psychology to explore the significance of the narrative climax, focusing on the final climax of the series *The Americans* as a case study. Two aspects of the aesthetic experience are considered: the special intensity that climaxes elicit, and the diversity of the cognitive content they generate, which can include both aesthetic and non-aesthetic properties. The climax is experienced in a state of absorption triggered by a set of strategies of temporal prolongation related to the main suspenseful moments and plotlines, to character engagement, and to the multiplot structure, involving the content of the narrative itself (narrative absorption) and the aesthetic qualities that define it (artifact absorption). The source of this absorption during the climax lies in the interplay between emotion and cognition in a temporal process that may last for a whole series. To demonstrate this idea, this study identifies key narrative comprehension processes, drawing on the explanatory potential of mental model theory to clarify the importance of memory and interrelated inferential processes. The aim of this research is to contribute to explanations of the role of the climax in serialized television and other artistic works.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The objective of this article is to explore the meaning of the concept of the narrative climax. More specifically, it presents the results of an effort to understand the aesthetic experience of the narrative climax by attempting to identify the interacting cognitive and emotional processes that occur while viewing it. To this end, it takes the television series *The Americans*, comprising six seasons and a total of seventy-five episodes, as a case study. This series serves as a good example of a temporally prolonged narrative, an aspect that is of particular interest for this analysis.

The term ‘climax’ is commonly used with reference to the arts most suited to the expression or representation of a temporal development, such as music, or literary or audiovisual narrative. Many moments in these arts are identified as climaxes, often with what seems an intuitive use of the word. Its general application to peak moments of emotional arousal suggests such a vague understanding of the term that there is a risk of its being used to group together quite disparate phenomena. There seems to be little agreement, for example, on the length of the process that supposedly leads to a climax, or on whether a work can contain one or several climaxes. Some musicologists speak of multiple climaxes in Mozart’s piano sonatas, as the culmination of relatively short expressive trajectories (see [Hatten 2010](#), 71–5). In contrast, in extensive works such as Gustav Mahler’s symphonies, or entire operas, such as *Salome* or *Tristan and Isolde*, other authors identify a single climactic moment, which is described as key to their artistic significance.<sup>1</sup> The same can be said of narrative, as in a film, each individual scene or act may have its own climax, but there may also be a climax to the work as a whole, or to its main plot.<sup>2</sup>

But given its free and intuitive use, can the term be said to designate comparable aesthetic experiences in so many different cases? Since a climax in a work as brief as a poem or a song would obviously

be an ephemeral moment lasting no longer than a minute, perhaps we should think of different types of climax responding to different cognitive processes in rather the same way that we speak of short-term and long-term memory. Henry Jenkins, for example, points out a difference between climaxes in short plays and longer ones, suggesting that in the former the spectacle predominates, while in the latter the use of storytelling prevails (Jenkins 2007, 5).

Although the musical climax is not the focus of this article, part of this introductory section is dedicated to the theory of tragedy and its parallel with music theory, which offer some of the most original and ambitious reflections on the climax, as a means of introducing the approach taken in this study. In particular, both fields conceive of the climax as a process in an aesthetic experience that goes beyond the peak of emotional arousal to consider a temporally extended process involving the work as a whole.

The first author to formulate a theory of the climax was the playwright Gustav Freytag, who in 1863 proposed it as a key to his poetics of tragedy. Freytag analyzed plays by Sophocles, Euripides, Shakespeare, Lessing, and Schiller, and argued that their structure was determined by a conflict between the hero and his antagonist in a progressive rise and fall. He posited a pyramid structure for the tragedy, divided into five parts: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and catastrophe. The climax is presented as the apex of the pyramid, resulting from the rising action (which is the widest section of the dramatic work) and succeeded by the falling action. Freytag gives as an example some Shakespearean plays, such as *Macbeth*, where he places the climax just after the night of the murder, in the banquet scene:

the murderer's struggle with the ghost, and the fearful struggles with his conscience, in the restless scene to which the social festivity and royal splendor give the most effective contrasts, are pictured with a truth, and in a wild kind of poetic frenzy, which make the hearer's heart throb and shudder. (1894, 130)

The aesthetic value of such moments is itself one of the key qualities of the work: “The poet needs to use all the splendor of poetry, all the dramatic skill of his art, in order to make vividly conspicuous this middle point of his artistic creation” (128–9). At such moments, in Greek tragedies for example, Freytag notes that the rhythmic language of the hero is even transformed into song.

In the field of music theory, some decades after Freytag's essay Ernst Kurth reconsidered the concept with reference to Anton Bruckner's symphonies, a corpus of long and complex works. Kurth's approach exhibits an interesting parallel with Freytag's theory: the idea of wide dynamic arcs, with a section of initiation and a section of ascent preceding the climax, similar to Freytag's pyramid. Kurth's work has had a significant influence on music theory. A good example of this can be found in the recent work of Ji Yeon Lee, who has developed the most detailed theoretical model to date on climax, strategically oriented toward narration, since it has been designed considering the interaction between drama and music that characterizes operas (Lee 2018, 2020). Lee conceives the climactic stage itself in clear continuity with the preceding process, as the energy level produced by the complementary or cumulative action of various parameters: “two rhetorical (dynamic and melodic motion/pitch) and one structural (harmony)” (Lee 2018, 161). Examples of the moments of intensity described by Lee can be found in works such as in the orchestral interlude of *Die Walküre* Act 3, Scene 3, “Wotan's Farewell,” where the climax is “a moment of coincidence between the meanings on the local and structural levels” (187), in which there is also a narrative layer, presented as a turning point that accompanies a profound change in Wotan's attitude toward Brunhilde. Thus, the orchestral climax is the key moment of the opera, in the sense of absolute music as Wagner conceived it:

Interpolated in the middle of the final monologue of *Die Walküre*, the interlude accompanies neither any spectacular stage event nor the characters' singing. Instead, the profundity of drama, the intense psychological dynamic between the two characters, is conveyed to listeners by the orchestral music itself. The climax archetype convincingly deciphers this invisible but deeply heartfelt psychological journey. (189)

The approaches of the three authors presented converge decisively in one point with the perspective taken in this article: the climax results of a progressive temporal process extending from back to front able to provoke in the viewer or listener a temporal cognitive involvement in these processes. In spite of the different cognitive content of this moment in each of the authors, in all of them this temporal development needed for the climax seems to be clear.

In Freytag's case the action must be provoked by the hero's mental processes to endow the climax with true artistic range. This requires some preparation time dedicated to the psychological development of the main character, so that at the climactic moment the character's nature can be expressed with all its dramatic force. The central position of the climax, as the place where the course of the main action changes, makes it the most important section of the tragedy. Freytag asserts that the more powerful the climax is, the more effective the sections subsequent to it will be (Freytag 1894, 135). The whole relationship of the climax with the preceding and subsequent parts of the work is, therefore, a clear expression of the ambition of Freytag's theory, presenting the climax not merely as a momentary aesthetic experience, but a key element for an aesthetic experience that involves temporally the work as a whole, since both what precedes it and what follows it can be evaluated in relation to it. The central concept of Kurth's theory of climax is that of the "highpoint surmounting," described as a series of multiple dynamic waves, each reaching a highpoint surmounted by that of the following wave, producing a flow of successive highpoints. It may happen, for example, that a highpoint occurring in one instrumental voice is surmounted by a more powerful highpoint in another instrumental voice. For Kurth, it is important to describe the effects of this highpoint surmounting perceived by listeners as a whole, rather than heard as isolated moments—a kind of *gestalt* perception. In this sense, climaxes are not individual moments but musical sequences, just as Freytag considered narrative climaxes as scenes generally of a significant length: "Bruckner's climaxes are often not an instant, but rather fantastic violent events of entire climax sections, above all, of course, those which, after multiple partial waves, bring an overall increase to the discharge" (Kurth, 1925, 411).

Finally, Lee's hybrid, musical and narrative, and more analytically sophisticated view somehow confirms the affinity of Freytag's and Kurth's perspectives on narrative climax and musical climax. Considering the interaction of creative processes that require a certain duration necessary to reach a point of confluence, her model aims to better explain the musical architecture of richly complex operas, understanding them in terms of an organic creative process, capturing their fluid nature, as a point of connection between their musical and their narrative and dramatic aspects. One of the most significant aspects of Lee's model, is that it identifies the perception of a type of repetition of the element that will be climactic in a previous formula before it occurs. An example of this is *Tristan und Isolde*, Act 2, Scene 3, mm. 93–100 (Lee 2018, 174), a climax that has a foreshadowing one scene earlier, in the so-called "Tagesgespräch" passage (176). The same is true of the other climax that she discusses at length, the orchestral interlude of the aforementioned *Die Walküre*, which is preceded by the "Wälsgung's Love' motive (*Wälsgungenliebe*), first heard at the end of Brünnhilde's explanation of how and why she took Siegmund's side against Wotan's orders (P274 plus anacrusis–274/3/3)" (178).

Freytag, Kurth, and Lee all relate the climax to a temporally extended viewer or listener experience that involves its connections to the sections preceding and following it, considering it a key element in an organic view of the work in aesthetic terms. Drawing on this idea, this article explores how the climax can work aesthetically in a context that is even more extended over time. With special attention to the temporal dimensions of the work, it explores how the viewer can experience climaxes both cognitively and emotionally. The key interest here is the interaction between those two elements that we normally experience together: emotions and knowledge.

It is argued here that narrative climaxes in television serials involve a moment of emotional intensity associated with a cognitive act: the recognition that a main narrative has reached a decisive moment. A certain duration is needed to give the viewer sufficient time to become emotionally involved with the characters in the story, and for the events to evolve towards a key moment.<sup>3</sup> Even when the climactic events have an extraordinary capacity to produce emotional excitement, such as the battle scenes in *Game of Thrones*, viewers who have watched all previous episodes, participating in an intensification process, are not engaged by the events or the atmosphere of such battles alone, but by the recognition of their importance for the evolution of the story, after having been engaging with that story for a certain period of time. For example, "Blackwater" (Season 2, Episode 9) and

“Battle of the Bastards” (Season 6, Episode 9); both these climactic episodes are placed near the end of their respective seasons and are decisive to the evolution of the main plots of each season.<sup>4</sup> In order to examine this phenomenon in depth, this study focuses the concept of aesthetic experience on two aspects: the special intensity that climaxes elicit, and the diversity of the cognitive content the climax generates, which can include both aesthetic and non-aesthetic properties.

## II. SERIAL CLIMAX AND AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

A few years ago, in her attempt to introduce philosophical aesthetics to television studies, Sarah Cardwell posited the following description of aesthetic experience: “First, sense experience and perception are key: ‘aesthetic vision’ (contrasted with ‘ordinary vision’) entails a heightened alertness to the formal, sensory and ‘design’ qualities of the artwork under scrutiny. Second, the observer experiences a specific kind of fulfilling emotional engagement with the work” (Cardwell 2013, 32). To develop an approach to the climax on the basis of this definition, research in psychology offers the interesting concept of narrative absorption.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the crucial cognitive and emotional elements Cardwell attributes to the aesthetic experience are among the main aspects that have been identified in the experience of such absorption. On the one hand, this concept is related to the emotional side of the aesthetic experience; there is evidence to suggest that greater immersion precipitates more intense emotional responses (this may refer both to fictional world emotions and to those of an aesthetic nature, or “artefact emotions”).<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, absorption also stimulates cognitive activity: “In the case of narrative then, flow should be centered on the construction of meaning. ... This narrative experience is engaging to the extent that cognitions are focused on assembling coherent models of the setting, events, characters, and their relationships, as well as hypothesizing explanations and anticipating incoming information” (Busselle and Bilandzik 2008, 261). The reflective capacity developed during an experience of narrative absorption is related to the construction of meaning. How do viewers make sense of a climactic scene? How do they connect it to the rest of the episode and the other episodes in the season? Discourse psychology has done important work in narrative fields such as cinema, literature, and comics, and also in the field of serial television field with some pioneering analysis that clearly establishes the conceptual tools to identify the cognitive processes that support comprehension of serial narratives. Jeffrey E. Saerys-Foy and Joseph P. Magliano (Saerys-Foy and Magliano 2022) propose the concept of mental models as the basic mechanism of viewer comprehension, suggesting that our main cognitive activity involves the construction of a network of connected propositions based on the content conveyed and inferences drawn. Mental models include three types of knowledge: surface form, referring to memory of explicit details like image and sound; textbase, referring to memory of the gist of events conveyed; and situation model, which includes inferences that establish how events are related and connected in space, time, and causality (Saerys-Foy and Magliano 2022, 99–100). To define the interaction between cognitive levels and varieties more precisely, Saerys-Foy and Magliano speak of an integrative model that involves front-end processes, which govern the viewers’ attentions and extraction of information, and back-end processes, which trigger the viewer’s memory so that, through inferences about content with a certain degree of abstraction, they can progress from comprehension of the scenes, including even the most complex ones, to enrichment of the mental model. Fundamental activities in this phase of back-end processing include event segmentation, inference generation, and updating. This processing involves a moment of integration that, for example, produces an account of the development of characters and events throughout the narrative.

To conclude this brief account of the theoretical framework for this study, one question of central importance for this analysis is whether absorption could involve areas of reflection more specific to the aesthetic experience, such as those focusing on formal proprieties. Moniek Kuijpers and colleagues have recently proposed an aesthetic variant of relevance to this study: artifact absorption, referring to reflective and evaluative processes of an aesthetic nature that may lie at the heart of an absorbed condition (See Kuijpers et al. 2017, 40–2). This article will explore the climax by proposing certain processes, ranging from meaning construction to evaluation, which might be defined as fitting into this new category.



I argue for a conception of aesthetic experience that will require special attention to temporal prolongation—a main differentiating feature of serials, as pointed out by Ted Nannicelli (2017, 68), who defines it as a condition intentionally designed to produce specific aesthetic effects, such as the viewer's prolonged subjective access to fictional characters or the sustaining of suspense. In addition, another aspect of importance for the way series organize their narrative structure in terms of time needs to be taken into account: the multi-plot structure. The relatively long duration of series and serials has often been exploited by scriptwriters to enrich the narration by introducing multiple storylines, broadening their cognitive reach.<sup>7</sup> The inclusion of multiple storylines, in all their diversity, becomes decisively more valuable when they intertwine as a result of their evolution over an extended timeframe. A climactic moment could in fact be considered the point at which the relationships between plots reach a definitive point of convergence, producing outcomes in the narrative that dramatically reduce the chances of further development or completion, as David Bordwell and Kristen Thompson put it.<sup>8</sup> In this sense, the multi-plot structure seems to prepare a climax through the presentation of the storylines, their alternation, and temporal coexistence, configuring the moment in which they all converge.

### III. THE AMERICANS S06: THE CLIMAX OF A WHOLE SERIAL

In this section, the object of study is a climax that brings a whole series to its culmination, in the last episode of the sixth and final season of *The Americans* (Joe Weisberg, 2013–2018). A sophisticated plot design effectively narrates not only the espionage activity of the protagonists, KGB agents Elizabeth (Keri Russell) and Philip (Matthew Rhys) Jennings, but also how their and their children's personal lives are transformed by that activity. In her essay on the relationship between *The Americans* and the contemporary American political context, Smita A. Rahman suggests that “*The Americans* is at its best and most complex when it highlights [the] interpenetration of the state and the family and the multiplicity of anxieties it generates” (Rahman 2018, 601). This interpenetration can be observed as a factor of narrative continuity and coherence in all six seasons and seventy-five episodes of the series. Indeed, the incisive dramatic representation of personal and family storylines increases as the series progresses by showing the effects of such interaction: for example, in Seasons 3 and 4, with its exploration of the effect on Paige (Holly Taylor) of her discovery that her parents are spies; or Philip's definitive crisis in Season 5, which will lead him to abandon his career in espionage and become a simple travel agent in Season 6. In addition, the friendship between the Jennings family and the FBI counterintelligence agent Stan Beeman (Noah Emmerich) has a six-season evolution that develops some crucial storylines around the conflict between the political sphere and the private lives of the protagonists.

The climactic moments of all these seasons occur at decisive turning points in these plots, such as the moment in Season 3, Episode 10, when Elizabeth and Philip confess to Paige that they are spies, or the long scene showing the murder of Anna M. Prokopchuk (Irina Dubova) in Season 5, Episode 11. Finally, the climax of the concluding season involves the most deeply developed relationship in the entire series, that between Stan Beeman and the Jennings. The scene shows Stan's final discovery that the Jennings, with whom he has developed a close relationship, are the spies he has been looking for (and who have been deceiving him) for years. Stan's discovery of the truth is far from sudden or unexpected, as he has already come dangerously close to uncovering it in previous seasons of the series, in a slow build-up that configures the crucial element of suspense to prepare the effect of the final climax. If the aesthetic experience in the climax includes narrative absorption, the first ingredient to achieve it here is suspense, intensified by the repetition of an event. It first appears as early as in Episode 1, when Beeman links Philip's car to the kidnapping of Tymoshev (David Vadim), a Russian deserter, although his suspicions are not confirmed. In contrast to this isolated moment in that episode, the danger will become a central motif in the third season, intensifying when the FBI discovers that a KGB agent (Philip) has been spying on Martha (Allison Wright), who works with Stan Beeman. The cognitive structure underlying the suspense is the establishment of a situation model, the content of which is the event of Stan discovering who the Jennings are, which is subsequently reactivated and updated in different contexts. Repetition and updating over a long span of time extended over seasons is thus important, because they intensify the absorption effect insofar as they directly feed the viewer's

emotion of suspense. Stan's personality is constructed through the development of his relationship with the Jennings family, so that over the course of the serial he becomes Philip's loyal friend and a mentor to his son Henry, while Stan's son, Mathew Beeman (Daniel Flaherty), becomes Paige's boyfriend. Indeed, their relationship becomes so close that, as the Jennings suspect, the KGB even goes as far as planting another agent to spy on Stan, a woman with whom he falls in love and ends up marrying in Season 5. In this way, through its multiplot architecture the series portrays the development of a close bond between Stan and the Jennings family that grows closer season by season. At the very end, this will be crucial for the viewer's experience of the climax, as the situation model created around the event will be updated with the contextual element of the relationship between the Jennings and Stan that has been developing in different plotlines. This cognitive process of updating, contributing to the enrichment of a mental model for the viewer, can be another source of emotional intensity, especially if over time he or she has developed sympathetic bonds with the characters. In short, this serial, through its long duration, allows the spectator to connect knowledge and emotions in such a way that the climax arrives at a moment of maximum expectation, in ideal conditions for an absorbing experience.

The climactic moment for the whole serial starts when Beeman discovers the Jennings in a garage ready to make their escape to Russia. The scene features a tense exchange in which Stan speaks of the betrayal of their relationship. The dialog is crafted to maintain and control the tension for almost eleven minutes, making it the longest scene of the whole serial.<sup>9</sup> As Philip tries to stress the value of their friendship, it is likely that many spectators (like me) want him to convince Stan, under the influence of an emotional bond with the Jennings established through years of watching them and engaging aesthetically with their story, and also because Philip's references to authenticity recall many moments when he has treated Stan like a real friend in previous seasons. Emotions and memories interact in what is the moment of greatest suspense in the entire serial: will Philip's words be enough? As the apprehension over the outcome builds, spectators begin trying to imagine what is going on in Stan's mind. The absorption triggered by the suspense will prompt the spectator to pay special attention to all the elements that offer information on the denouement during the dialog in the garage. Almost all the narrative weight falls on Philip's efforts to convince Stan of the veracity of his feelings for him, as expressed in Mathew Rhys' words and gestures. Equally important is Noah Emmerich's performance of Stan's gestures and words, the physical performance of the other actors in the main roles, and the dialog written by Joel Fields and Joe Weisberg. Narrative absorption can thus encourage viewers to focus intensely on the aforementioned aesthetic traits, developing the climactic experience in a mix between narrative and artifact absorption. Moreover, the aesthetic appreciation of a certain group of climactic elements will probably be dependent on the efficacy with which they can serve to expressively convey the meaning they have for the narrative. This broad conception of aesthetic experience (Goldman 2013) assumes that cognitive value often relies on the effectiveness of the aesthetic properties (Alcaraz 2018).

When Philip has finished speaking, Stan's facial expression, often shown in close-ups, reveals the intense effect the words have had on him, although he remains silent. Philip tells him that they are going to get in the car and leave; Stan remains rigid in front of the car until finally he moves out of the way. Yet the viewer still does not know what is going on in his mind. Why would an American agent, a paragon of professional integrity convinced of his duty to his nation, who has sacrificed so much of his personal life for his profession, and who has pursued the Jennings relentlessly as soon as he has the slightest suspicion about them, decide to let them go, to fail in his most important professional mission at the last moment, when all the work was done? Stan's passivity results in a final twist, a surprise that, as is often the case, signifies not only an emotional but a cognitive stimulus, a frame shifter "particularly suited to the elicitation of perspective-taking and to the exercise of the human imagination" (Plantinga 2018, 218).

The climax is over, but the big question about what Stan was thinking still lingers, and the last minutes of epilog offer certain clues for retrospective reflection, a process that has been related very closely to narrative absorption (Hamby, Brinberg, and Daniloski 2017).

In the seventy-four episodes preceding the climax and finale, *The Americans* creates a pattern for viewers interested in knowing what it is like to live the life of a spy, whereby they will need to engage in an act of imagination as part of the game. Many of the scenes stimulate empathic imagination as characters

move constantly in an environment of double meanings and play acting in the series (García and Castrillo 2020). This is probably one of the main ways in which the spectator's activity becomes a pleasurable aesthetic experience, understood in a broad sense that includes cognition in this case related to the spies' life experiences.

The question "what was Stan Beeman thinking when he decided to let the Jennings go?" leads to a phase of new activity in the mind of the spectators, who are now occupied with putting the finishing touches on the construction of their character model for Stan, a process of updating that should enable them to understand his decision.

In the very last moment of the climax, there is a hint in the dialog that may help viewers imagine what led Stan to make that decision: just before saying goodbye, when Philip intuits that Stan is going to let them go, he tells him that he suspects his wife Renee (Laurie Holden) of being a KGB agent. This detail may be related to a situation that occurs in the epilog when Stan meets up with his wife again. While other FBI agents are searching the Jennings's home, Stan looks affectionately at his wife, Renee, who smiles as she watches what is happening (as a good spy would). Stan does not seem to have taken on board what Philip told him about her. As he did with the Jennings, he turns a blind eye. There is an important similarity between the two cases: they are both very important human relationships for him, connections he has built his personal life around. All this could lead the viewer to infer that Stan does not want his work to turn his private life into an illusion, but to accept it for what it is. In positing this hypothesis, the viewer may be prompted to recall the character's vulnerability revealed in previous seasons. The dialog in the climax elicits recollections that connect it to earlier moments in the series, such as when his wife left him because she could not stand his enslavement to his job, or the way he acted towards Nina, another KGB agent with whom he had an intense emotional relationship, who died when he refused to help her at the last moment. All these processes, based on memorization, form part of an updating of Stan's character model, a dynamic model right up to the last moment of the series based on the activation of previous knowledge, in this case from other episodes, in what Saerys-Foy and Magliano (2002, 98) call back-end processes.

Having outlined the crucial aspects that can determine a climax, both in emotional and cognitive terms, at this point it is worth recalling the affinity between the three conceptual approaches discussed in the introduction. All three take an organic view of the relations between the climax and the work of which it forms a part. The key to this view is an understanding of the climax as part of a temporally extended viewer or listener experience that involves the sections preceding and following it. Of the three, Freytag is the most explicit in stressing this integral character, especially when he suggests that "the more powerful the climax," the more effective the sections subsequent to it will be (135), conceiving the climax as an aesthetic experience that involves the work as a whole, since both what precedes it and what follows it can be evaluated in relation to it.

The concept of narrative climax discussed in this article also views it as an important moment in the work when it achieves an organic design that should be reflected in the experience of the work. The experience of the intensity of the characteristic aesthetic properties of the series during the climax gives rise to processes of reflection on the work as a unified whole, prompting an appreciation that often involves an overall evaluation.

Climaxes are usually close to the end of the narrative, when questions about the story's meaning can finally be asked. For example, we might assess whether Stan's decision is consistent with the overall direction of the narrative. We could compare elements of his character model with other very dynamic situation models. If his decision is the product of an awareness of the vulnerability of the secret agent's private life, this could prompt us to recall crucial elements of the dramatic progression of the series, such as the evolution of the relationship between Philip and Elizabeth.<sup>10</sup> Although the triumph of private life over the constraints of politics is in no way presented as a clean and victimless victory, even in the worst moments, life wins out over loyalty to the State: the fake family, itself created as a government strategy, has grown and turned into something beyond the control of the political powers. Although Philip and Elizabeth Jennings take different paths, especially in Seasons 5 and 6, their personal bond, a side effect of their sham marriage, remains unbroken until the series concludes. It may thus be considered a coherent narrative strategy that Stan has decided to accept the fruits of his life as a spy as good, as do the Jennings.

#### IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study has sought to explore the significance of narrative climax with concepts drawn from cognitive psychology, confirming the usefulness of this field for analyzing one of the most influential and popular forms of contemporary narrative: the television serial. The specific serial chosen offers a wealth of cognitive and emotional interaction, much of it dependent on long temporal processes. Indeed, the main contribution of this study to the definition of the concept of the climax is the identification and description of the interactions that occur between emotion and cognition, with reference to one of the key concepts in contemporary narrative psychology research: the concept of narrative absorption. My main argument has been that the aesthetic experience of the climax unfolds in a state of absorption, either involving the content of the narrative (narrative absorption) or the aesthetic qualities that define it (artifact absorption), or possibly both at the same time. I have suggested that the climactic experience has the qualities of absorption, that is, a heightening of both attention and emotion, especially in relation to the three most prominent narrative emotions: curiosity, suspense, and surprise. I have proposed that the source of this absorption during the climax lies in the interplay between emotion and cognition in a temporal process that may last for a whole series, probably fueled by emotions arising from a long-term attachment to the characters. To demonstrate this, I have used conceptual tools to identify key narrative comprehension processes, drawing on the explanatory potential of mental model theory to clarify the importance of memory and the cognitive dynamism involved in a series.

It is hoped that this description may serve to clarify the role of the climax as a moment of maximum cognitive-emotional interaction. In addition, I have also proposed that the climax has a continuity in the phase after the climax, because it may be the trigger for key reflective processes in the overall evaluation of the work. I chose *The Americans* as a case study because it is key to the aesthetic experience and appreciation of the work in its entirety. The temporal dimensions of a work will to a large extent shape the aesthetic experience it offers, triggering cognitive processes that are typical of aesthetic appreciation, such as the evaluation of the story's general coherence and its ultimate meaning. All this suggests that the aesthetic experience of the climax plays an important role in the aesthetic experience of the series as a whole, as the elements introduced in the climax, and their evaluation, may prove key to the viewer's overall appreciation of the work.

But can this case study help shed light on other climaxes? I believe that the conceptual elements that are proposed here as tools for understanding the climax could be effectively applied to other cases of artworks with an extended temporal development, such as other series or novels. There are many examples of climaxes of exceptional quality that offer a rich experience of interaction between cognition and emotion in season finales, including some mentioned above, such as the final battle scenes "Blackwater" (Season 2, Episode 9) and "Battle of the Bastards" (Season 6, Episode 9) in *Game of Thrones*. Others include the final episode of the first season of the Danish series *Bron/Broen*, when the killer blackmails Martin on the bridge, telling him that he must do what he asks to prevent the death of his son and of the many passengers on the train on the bridge; the shootout scene at the Motor Motel in *Fargo* Season 2, Episode 9; the conclusion to Arthur Mitchell's character arc in the season finale when Dexter Morgan kills him in *Dexter* (Season 4, Episode 12); or the final meeting between Elena and Lila after a long time without seeing each other, when Elena gives Lila the story "The Blue Fairy," in *My Brilliant Friend* (Season 2, Episode 8). The list could go on, as there are numerous series seasons that culminate in a highly effective climax.

Finding series that do this successfully in their final season is not easy, which may perhaps have something to do with the complex problem of serial endings discussed by Margrethe Brun Vaage, who identifies a number of aspects of the series as hindering a satisfactory closure: the number of characters and corresponding plots, the mix of genres, the complexity of the characters, and the big issue of the tensions between the artistic and commercial dimensions of the series (Vaage 2022, 161).

But in series with an organic design that concludes coherently, there are some excellent final climaxes, such as in the famous episode "Felina" from *Breaking Bad* (Season 5, Episode 16), in "Goodbye, Farewell, and Amen" from *M.A.S.H.* (Season 11, Episode 16), and in "Everyone's Waiting" from *Six Feet Under* (Season 5, Episode 12). The diversity of all these climaxes would even admit a taxonomy, but all of them have in common the capacity to offer an experience of absorption, which has been fed by cognitive-emotional interactions over the extended length of each series.



In conclusion, the aesthetic experience in a serial narrative climax involves a peak of cognitive and emotional intensity in terms of narrative and aesthetic absorption, whose effect is determined by narrative strategies aimed at integrating the emotional and cognitive experiences of the spectator in a prolonged temporal process. This experience marks the culmination of the mental models that have evolved and the emotions that have accompanied them over years of viewing. This needs to happen in a consistent way, both in terms of narrative content and the way it is expressed through the aesthetic properties of the work. This culmination usually gives rise to an evaluative process, in which spectators assess the consistency of these aspects with their previous experience of them.<sup>11</sup>

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 See Johnston (2014). With respect to Mahler, see Davies (2013, 271).
- 2 See the different cases in the analysis by Murtagh, Ganz, and McKie (2008).
- 3 This is the point at which, according to Bordwell and Thompson, the possible resolutions to the story are drastically reduced: “[t]he narrative will typically resolve its causal issues by bringing the development to a high point, or climax. In the climax, the action is presented as having a narrow range of possible outcomes” (Bordwell and Thompson 2009, 83).
- 4 It is true, however, that spectators may sometimes recognize a climactic moment without having witnessed the whole development that led to it, if they possess sufficient experience with narratives. Jason Mittell refers to these kinds of acts of recognition in relation to *Alias*, *The West Wing* and *Veronica Mars* (Mittell 2015, 10). All three series adopt a now familiar strategy with their openings, presenting future climactic moments in the form of flashforwards.
- 5 In one of the few passages describing the physiology of the climax, Cutting refers to this concept as follows: “In viewers, heart rate and skin conductance should rise, and viewer absorption in the movie is likely to be at its peak. Many of these changes will last until the protagonist’s goal is attained, and then there is typically a turn into the epilog.” (Cutting 2016, 1736).
- 6 See Visch, Tan, and Molenaar (2010, 1443), and Plantinga (2018, 224).
- 7 Although it has been present in cinema since its origins, the art of structuring narrative in multiple storylines truly matured in the most temporally prolonged serials: soap operas. From there it entered prime time TV, with programs like *Hill Street Blues*, and today most contemporary serials, many of them distributed worldwide on digital platforms, share this feature as if it were a grammatical rule of their language. A concise and revealing historical account on the role of soap operas as a precursor to this interesting “multiplot revolution” in serials is provided by Hagedorn (1995, 27–48).
- 8 This refers to aesthetic interactionism, in the sense described by María José Alcaraz (2018, 21–31).
- 9 When Noah Emmerich, the actor who played Stan, was asked what the mood was like on set while shooting this scene, he answered: “It was sort of an electrified mood, because it was a scene that the show was building toward for six years.” He referred to it as the longest scene he had performed in his career, a sort of “theatrical” whole act. See <https://ew.com/tv/2018/05/30/the-americans-noah-emmerich-stan-beeman-series-finale-renee-henry/>.
- 10 The only character who shows true resilience, strategically embodying the concept of honor in a female character, as Rahman (2018) argues, is Elizabeth Jennings.
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