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MASTER'S THESIS

SCREENWRITING IN THE ERA OF BINGE-WATCHING

An Analysis of Story Complexity Afforded by Serialized
Content Intended for Rapid Consumption.

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Režie

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

SCENÁRISTIKA V DOBĚ BINGE-WATCHINGU

Analýza spletitosti příběhů, kterou si může dovolit
seriálový obsah určený pro rychlou spotřebu.

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D e c l a r a t i o n

I declare that I have prepared my Bachelor's Thesis/Master's Thesis, Dissertation independently on the following topic:

SCREENWRITING IN THE ERA OF BINGE-WATCHING
An Analysis of Story Complexity Afforded by Serialized Content Intended for
Rapid Consumption.

under the expert guidance of my thesis advisor and with the use of the cited literature and sources.

Prague, May 7th 2018

.....
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Abstract

The prevalence of video on demand has given rise to a new form of content consumption: binge-watching.

This thesis explores how that shift has started to influence the scriptwriting of shows that are conceived from inception to be binge-watched. It describes the industry context in which binge watching emerges and it explores the reasons why the serial format, among the traditional TV Drama formats, is the one benefitting most from binge-viewing. Finally, it offers the breakdown and comparison of two similarly themed TV show episodes written and produced for the traditional and new forms of distribution and consumption.

By using Conflict as the basic unit of Drama, it concludes for the more complex layering of motivations and obstacles to be found in hyper-serialized shows written as a single story for rapid marathon viewing.

Abstrakt

Nástup VOD přinesl novou formu spotřeby obsahu: binge-watching.

Tato práce zkoumá, jak tento posun začal ovlivňovat scénář seriálů, které jsou koncipovány tak, aby byly zhlédnuty hned po sobě (binge-watched). Práce popisuje kontext odvětví, v němž se fenomén objevuje. Zkoumá důvody, proč seriálový formát mezi tradičními formáty televizních dramát je profituje z nového trendu binge-watchingu. A nakonec nabízí rozdělení a srovnání dvou podobných epizod televizních pořadů psaných a vyrobených pro tradiční a nové formy distribuce a spotřeby.

Uzavírá to na složitější vrstvení dramatických konfliktů, které lze nalézt v hyper-serializovaných přehlídkách psaných jako jediný příběh pro rychlé sledování maratónu.

"I hate television. I hate it as much as peanuts. But I can't stop eating peanuts."

-Orson Welles

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Introduction

The Phenomenon and its Relevance

“Binge-viewing is one of the most profound changes to hit the smallscreen business in memory, a revolution in the way TV is distributed and consumed.”(Verini 2014)

With the rise, and predictions of continued growth in the coming years(Statista 2016) of online streaming platforms, a new phenomenon has emerged in the consumption of serialized TV Dramas: Binge watching.

Netflix, the world’s leading platform for on demand TV Shows(Statista 2016), conducted a survey through Harris Interactive that asked viewers to define what constitutes binge watching. Seventy-three percent (73%) of respondents agreed it was defined as “watching between 2-6 episodes of the same TV show in one sitting”(Interactive 2013).

That definition has been echoed and embraced by specialized and general media (Deadline 2013; Feeney 2014; Page 2017; Spangler 2013; Stelter 2013a)and cited in multiple research papers on the subject(Davis 2016; Jenner 2015). It has become the de facto metric for the phenomenon, despite some criticism, for example by journalist Nolan Feeney. Particularly, for not taking into account the length of episodes(Feeney 2014).

A 2017 Pew Research Center survey indicates a major milestone of streaming content adoption with 61% of young adults ages 18-29 reporting the “primary way they watch television now is with streaming services on the internet”.(Rainie 2017) Netflix’s own 2013 data analysis of their customers showed the binge-watching practice had been adopted by 63% of their American customers. And in 2016 a Deloitte report stated “70% of consumers, and more than 80% of Millennials, binge-watch TV content. Among those, nearly a third of consumers are binge-watching shows weekly.”(Deloitte 2016)

Considering the above facts, it is clear the binge watching phenomenon is at an ever increasing pace and has reached a point where TV producers and broadcast networks must take it into account when developing new content. Further, as we'll see below, this trend was in fact made widespread starting in 2013 with the Netflix release House of Cards.

In the continuation of this introductory chapter we will look into the origin of the term and the history of this phenomenon and how it fits within the Film and TV industry; we will then establish a proposition and framework for the comparison of sample episodes intended for this new and for the traditional distribution format. Lastly explore the academic context and related published works.

History and Industry Context of Binge Watching

Origins of the Term Binge-Watching

The term binge-watching, sometimes binge-viewing or marathon-viewing, came into the general public's attention in the years 2013 to 2016.

Google Trends, a service that shows how often a specific search term is entered into Google's search engine, shows binge-watching peaking in number of searches in the week between late May and early June 2016 (Google Trends 2018). A few months earlier in November 2015, the Collins English Dictionary selected the term as the "Word of the Year 2015" (Flood 2015). Yet, even two years prior in August 2013 a small controversy had erupted and brought attention to term in the media. House of Cards lead actor Kevin Spacey delivered a lecture, and an op-ed, to TV executives in an annual industry gathering in Edinburgh encouraging them to embrace binge-watching formatted shows (Spacey 2013). It prompted British channel ITV's Director of Television Peter Finchman to react by claiming binge-watching was detrimental to the social value of television - "[to] *what makes it watercooler television.*" although conceding he is an "absolute believer in box sets and binge viewing and watching TV in the way you want to."

With the data and key events mentioned above we can pinpoint and demonstrate how recent the widespread adoption of the concept is. Conversely, it is worth noting its history goes back a few decades. The phenomenon and the term didn't emerge overnight with the release of the very first show originally created for the format, House of Cards.

Language columnist Ben Zimmer, on assignment for Visual Thesaurus, researched the very first use of the expression:

The earliest examples that I dug up for binge-watching come from Usenet discussions among fans of "The X-Files." On a New England newsgroup, one fan put out a call for videotapes of the show in 1996:

I've just become hooked on the X-Files, so I'm a little behind... Does anyone by ANY chance have tapes of this show back to season 1 they'd be willing to lend me so I can effectively catch up? I'd be more than happy to travel out to wherever to get them and then bring them back (actually there are three of us who all got hooked at the same time, so I'd predict that there'd be some MASSIVE binge watching right away! :-)

—Bob Donahue, ne.general, Feb. 9, 1996

Two years later, binge-watching had already spawned the back-formation binge-watch in the "X-Files" community, as in this post presenting a mock diagnosis of addiction to the show:

Do you ever binge watch (marathon)?

—GregSerl, alt.tv.x-files.analysis, Dec. 20, 1998

It is interesting to note that the term is already used in the context of a TV show, as opposed to a film with sequels, for example. Coincidentally and of anecdotal value the communication itself happens online. Incidentally as well, X-Files was due for another season in January 2016. And while it has some claim to the title as “the first series to be binge-watched” and called by that name, in its 2016 reincarnation, in the era of mainstream binge-watching, it was released as a weekly broadcast with 6 episodes.

However, as Ben Zimmer notes in the continuation of his article:

“It would take another five years before binge-watching got picked up by mainstream media commentators, and by that time viewers could watch their favorite TV shows on DVD compilations, allowing for more intensive binges. This 2003 article reviews a DVD set of the animated show "Family Guy":

While binge-watching an entire season's worth of a series in a couple of sittings can lead to such revelations as network meddling (cough, cough, Sports Night), Family Guy has the opposite effect.

—Brill Bundy, Tribune Media Services, Apr. 18, 2003

Having established the origin of the term, we will now look at how its practice actually pre-dates the terminology and streaming itself; and begin to explore its impacts.

Binge-Watching in the Context of the Film and TV Industry

Cinema's development, more than in any other art form, is intrinsically influenced by its industry, technology and audience. Unlike any other art forms, cinema started as a technological breakthrough and as a novelty.

Today we live through another major technological shift. This time in the film distribution system: streaming, digital piracy and VOD (video on demand). As every other disruption in the previous establishment, it has started to influence and change the film business, film studies, and more importantly to this paper, the art and craft of the screenwriting.

Surprisingly, in an age of rapid consumption, when many predicted the shortening of the attention span in audiences would lead to shorter-length material being produced, a disruptive phenomenon had been gaining traction to the point of affecting film content and format: binge-watching.

For a little over the past decade, especially since the mainstream adoption of online video with the launch of YouTube in 2005, critics and researchers delved into analyzing how the instantaneous access to video content, often in portable devices, would change film and video. The reasoning opposed the ritual of movie-going or scheduled broadcasts on TV (appointment viewing), to content that was meant to be consumed on-the-go. Length and complexity, they feared, would eventually be diminished to accommodate the new viewing experience.(Heffernan 2010)

Ironically, a different revolution in audience habits was well under way in the privacy of individuals homes and portable devices. Additionally it had been going on for far longer than the advent of streaming.(Pena 2015)

Programmable VCRs and Digital Video Records were first feared by the TV and Film industry for their capability of undermining its main revenue streams: advertising and profits from concessions sold at movie theaters. Audiences were required to attend at a certain time and place, and/or sit through commercials in exchange for their movie or TV entertainment. But “time-shifting” viewing of TV and Film content were just the tipping point of a more thorough change in habits. While at first it simply offered the power of deciding when it was most convenient for the audience to watch their favorite shows, it slowly opened up a different twist on the viewing experience. VHS and DVD “Box Sets” brought new revenue to producers that made up for the loss of advertising money. But they also enabled viewers to enjoy serialized content in a brand new way: wholesale.

It is a fairly familiar scenario to those who have adopted the practice: with unrestrained access to an entire season of a show, as soon as credits start to roll, they reach for the remote (or whatever input device controls their media-player) and skip to the next chapter, episode or film, fast forwarding through the still fairly common “previously-on-this-show” section.

It may have started as early as the first VCR taped shows were available and reinforced with networks marathon reruns(Pena 2015), but as with so many industries, along came the internet, making it easier and cheaper. Or even free if one is ok with online piracy. Today, Netflix is generally held responsible for having pushed the phenomenon even further at different times(Deadline 2013). At first it made catalogs

of films and shows available in its entirety and instantly. At any time, viewers could access complete multiple-season shows and watch it as if they had been conceived as a single piece of work.

While the industry, critics and academics discussed the impact of short content to be delivered on low bandwidth connections over the internet, audiences were getting hooked on this new form of content consumption: Long, uninterrupted, focused, where no detail was forgotten from one episode to the next. A form of consumption that rewarded content structured in a way that did not fit the industry's revenue methods. Five-act episodes of similar length, cliffhangers to keep audiences seated through commercials, exposition-heavy sequences at the start of shows to recap the previous episode, story arcs that wrapped up neatly at the end of each week's episode among other tried and tested practices served purposes that didn't seem to apply to this new experience. With an audience committed to several-hour-long marathons, there was plenty of time to develop increasingly more complex stories, characters and plots. Earlier conventions, experienced in this new way, worked well. However, some started to feel out place, while others could now be utilized differently.

Digital streaming also gave Netflix an unprecedented look at viewer's habits through the data it is able to collect. A tipping point came in 2011 with the release of the first 3 seasons of *Breaking Bad* for instant streaming. Then, 73% percent of the viewers that streamed the Pilot episode, viewed all 7 episodes of the first season in one session(Jurgensen 2013a). *Breaking Bad*, which hadn't attracted that much attention when it was first broadcasted on AMC, became a sudden hit and synonymous with binge watching. For the 5th season premiere on AMC, after the release of the previous seasons on Netflix, the show attracted 5.9 million viewers, more than double the previous season's first episode (Kissell 2013). The success was rapidly attributed to new viewers that discovered the show and binge watched it on Netflix to catch up with upcoming new season (Wallenstein 2013).

In 2013, Netflix hit another blow to TV networks with the release of *House of Cards*. The series was made specifically for online streaming and completely thought out to be binge-watched. As reported by *The New York Times* a few days before the shows release: ““Our goal is to shut down a portion of America for a whole day,” the producer Beau Willimon said with a laugh.”(Stelter 2013b) By then, knowing how its

customers enjoyed consuming the TV series in their library, Netflix did what no other TV Network could: it released all 13 episodes of the first season at once. This was not a back-catalog series or, as with *Breaking Bad*, an on-air show releasing its old seasons. It was the global premiere of a brand new TV Show. It meant it didn't come with an already established audience or die-hard fans looking to revisit a favorite show. Unlike in the regular broadcast format, it meant also having no chance to course-correct the story over the weeks based on the audience's reaction. This was a 100-million-dollar make it or break it bet for Netflix. With a business model that does not depend on advertising and with no fixed broadcast schedule to follow, Netflix gave its clients full control over how they enjoy their content. According to Netflix's numbers, within a week of its release 48% of viewers had viewed the entire 13-episode season.(Jurgensen 2013b)

A new form of screenwriting for TV seemed to have been kick-started. Anecdotally, Netflix's Chief Content Officer summed it up: [the show] "assumes you know what's happening all the time, whereas television has to assume that a big chunk of the audience is always just tuning in". There was no need for recaps, re-exposition or flashback of previous events. No one in the audience would be "just tuning in" or had missed the previous episode. If they had, they could easily catch up, anytime, from anywhere and on any device. With that change in mindset and perception of the audience's behavior, there was potentially more room for subtlety, complex references, longer and variable arc lengths that require the knowledge of more details to pay-off. And as we will see in our analysis and comparison, *House of Cards* delivered on that.

It also triggered writers and producers to explore new narrative opportunities. *Arrested Development*, which was revived for a 4th season on Netflix after being cancelled on Fox, took full advantage, and a gamble, with the new delivery format. The season consisted of 15 episodes that all took place over the same period of time in the show's universe. Each episode followed a different character and they were made available at the same time. Episodes would only partially reveal their plot which would later be filled in by subsequent ones. It meant viewers could at any time skip to a different episode if they wanted to know what a different character was doing. Admittedly, it wasn't a successful experiment and the show did not fare very well.(Lacob 2013) Nevertheless, it serves to illustrate some of the narrative experiments that were made possible and how the new format could fail. A year after

its broadcast, a new version of the season was edited to tell the story chronologically in twenty-two episodes following the traditional format of the series.(Schneider 2016)

This paper will focus on examining this apparent shift in screenwriting. It will look into the restrictions lifted, opportunities created and further if and how this new trend is affecting streaming TV content.

Proposition and Framework

The aim of this paper, with its research, analysis and comparison, is to shed a light on the impact of binge watching on the screenwriting craft. Starting by contrasting exemplary episodes that serve similar dramatic function in comparable TV shows - one produced for the traditional weekly broadcast format and the other for on-demand, binge-ready consumption. We will examine how this new form of content consumption affords writers the possibility of more complexity by layering characters' motivations and obstacles throughout multiple episodes and seasons.

We will focus on how this new format of distribution and of enjoying serialized content has already influenced the very first show written specifically to be distributed as a single body of work delivered to the public all at once, *House of Cards* (2013).

In the continuation of this introduction we will explore the body of Academic work done on this topic and see how, despite the reasonable number of papers on binge-watching itself and its behavioral impacts, little attention has been given to its consequences to screenwriting. There will also be a more in-depth look and criticism of a particular thesis, written by Francine Fokkema, that more closely resembles the objectives of this research.

While the conceptualization of the binge-watching phenomenon utilizes academic literature and vast resources of published data, to explore the regular weekly broadcast format, we will also include the published books of professional script consultants, script editors and script readers from major American networks and production companies. They are agents of big impact on what ends up being produced and made available to audiences. Therefore, their perspective on what is expected

from a TV Drama, ultimately and directly, impact the work of screenwriters. To leave their perspective out of this analysis would undermine the practical utility of the research.

For similar reasons, and as noted above due to the small amount of research available on the impacts of binge watching on the writing process, we will also collect anecdotal evidence from interviews given by contemporary show writers as it relates to their recent work in shows meant to be streamed.

The Viewing Experience chapter will breakdown the aspects that constitute the differences in experience between the traditional syndication format of shows in weekly broadcasts and the “wholesale” multi-platform approach Netflix has introduced for new content with the release of House of Cards in 2013.

Next, we will examine the classic structure formats and conventions of TV Drama that were, and still are, imposed on shows that have regular weekly broadcast. Additionally, we explore its limitations, draw comparisons and highlight changes for these same formats in the new distribution method. It will also be demonstrated how the Serial format is the most fitting and most successful in this new form of content consumption.

In the Anthologies sub-chapter, we will draw a short comparison between episodes of the show Black Mirror as an example of a series that changed distribution platforms between seasons. Black Mirror, however, is not suited to be the main sample of our comparison analysis due to its anthological format. As noted above, serialized shows are far more popular for binge-watching.

In the Episode Comparison chapter, the relevance of the sample choices made and, by breaking down their segments and storylines, the different needs, challenges and possibilities for the screenwriter of this new platform will be shown. We will highlight how the experience of drama differs, and in some ways has the potential to be more varied and complete in shows thought out to be binge watched. More specifically we will breakdown and draw comparisons between individual episodes of The West Wing and House of Cards that fit in similar moments of the respective shows.

In presenting the reasoning for the sample choices and the way in which they will be compared, we will refer to the choices made by Francine Fokkema and offer arguments to why our methods and approaches differ.

Finally, we will draw conclusions and point out the limitations of this research as it deals with the impacts of a nascent phenomenon in a very experimental phase of the discovery of its own potential. That, nevertheless, also contributes to making it an exciting and worthwhile subject of research.

The topic is of great interest and frequency in the TV and Film industry's conversations and specialized press. This paper will attempt to pick apart fact from guesswork and frame the discussion in the context of the writing of new shows tailored for binge-viewing.

Academic Context

While the TV industry has already begun to adapt its shows to this new viewing habit, academic research in the field, while plenty, has been focused primarily on the behavioral, psychological and social impacts of the practice.(Flayelle et al. 2017; Horvath et al. 2017; Jenner 2015; Mareike 2016; Prinsen 2017; Shim and Kim 2018; Walton-Pattison et al. 2018)

Nearly all of the work on the subject focuses on its possible consequences to the individual and social group. It has been studied as form of addiction(Flayelle, Maurage and Billieux 2017) that may isolate the individual, as well as a way of making fandom groups mainstream.(Jenner 2015)

Attention has been given to understanding the reasons that induce people to binge watch(Shim and Kim 2018); to try and answer just "*How much binge watching is too much?*" and even to study the health consequences of the practice.(Plepler and Camarata 2015; Prinsen 2017)

However, with a notable exception published at the end of 2016 while research for this thesis was ongoing, little attention in the academic world, has been given to

how this new viewing experience impacts the craft of writing those shows. It's important to note however, the topic is not unheard of in the media. It's become a common point discussed in interviews with the authors of newly released shows. Questions regarding whether the writer had in mind that their audience will likely devour the show in a few hours or days; or whether that's something the author wants or feels benefit their work; have become practically a cliché on the series of interviews show-runners do upon the release of a new show.(Lynch 2015) (Feinberg 2017)

The exception to be found is Francine Fokkema's Thesis from the University of Utrecht - "Television Content vs. Netflix Content - A content analysis regarding to the storylines and character development in House of Cards"(Fokkema 2016). She concluded her research and analysis in the end of 2016, making it public when this author's research was ongoing and upending the perception that this was an untouched territory in academic research. Her work must therefore be acknowledged and examined here. It does affirm the perception of how little attention the subject has received in relation to the craft of the content itself. From Fokkema's own research (emphasis added):

*"A significant body of academic papers studies Netflix from the perspective of technological affordances, viewer behaviors and business models, such as Jenner, Simon Shim and Yen-Jen Lee, Teresa Ojer and Elena Capapé, Alvaro Raba and others as stated in the introduction. **However, this analysis will give insight in specific differences regarding to content in HOUSE OF CARDS broadcast television series and HOUSE OF CARDS Netflix series.**"(Fokkema 2016)*

Fokkema herself acknowledges future analysis of content will help paint a broader picture of this shift:

"In the future, this study in combination with more content related studies could contribute to make connections with research on changing viewing behavior and business models."(Fokkema 2016)

It is thus imperative to point out the limits of Francine's work and how this paper differs in its approach. Those points will be addressed on the Episode Comparison

chapter when justifying the sample choices made for this paper. First, we will look at how the binge-watching experience differs from the traditional appointment viewing and its impacts on traditional TV Drama formats.

The Viewing Experience

Binge-Watching as a Movie-Literature Hybrid.

“Notice how patiently and expressly the thing has to be planned for presentation in fragments, and yet for afterwards fusing together as an uninterrupted whole.”

Dickens, Charles. Letter to Jane Brookfield. 20 February 1866

Whether by Netflix’s CEO, with a clear vested interest, or by academics and journalists, binge-watching is often likened to the experience of reading a book.

Robert Thompson, founding director of the Bleier Center for Television and Popular Culture and a Trustee Professor of Television and Popular Culture at Syracuse University, details the experience in the following way:

“I think with these new serialized, high-profile, high pedigree novelistic [shows] the best way to watch them is through binge-viewing... the same way you'd read a novel -- and you wouldn't read one chapter of 'Moby Dick' per week.”(Herbert 2013)

The quote from an interview to the Syracuse University website encompasses the main difference in how shows before and after serialization are conceived - self-contained or as part of a whole. What binge-watching has done is tip that scale further to the side of serialization. Episodes are not only part of a longer story, but hyper-serialized to be consumed as a single piece. Much like a book, the story is conceived as a whole; and while the author will pace its chapters the ultimate control over its consumption is turned over to the viewer/reader.

Breaking down the aspects that impact the viewing experience of an episode, regardless of its content but focusing on structural elements, we will establish distinctions in experience between the traditional network show and those being currently binge watched on streaming platforms and see how they fit within the book analogy.

Pacing - Rhythm of Narrative

In both formats the speed in which the story of an episode is presented to the audience remains a choice of its authors - writer, director, producer, show-runner and/or editor. Shows can still be fast-paced or “slow burns” regardless of their broadcast format. Much like in literature it is in the author’s hands to determine how fast the plot will advance and how much time the audience/reader will stay within a single moment.

However, in a traditional hour-long Drama, we could expect that pacing comes with the limitation of duration. Should a writer prefer a slower pace to a story, he or she still needs, by convention, to wrap up the plot, or at least provide a sense of closure at the end of each episode. That in practice may result in less complex plots to fit within the hour, or plots that move at a faster pace at the expense of proper characterization, with the aid of expository dialogue, or artificially heightened drama as we’ll see below when discussing the classic TV drama formats.

Pacing - Breaks

There are none. And that has the potential to directly impact pacing. TV Shows had to rely on frequent cliff-hangers to keep audiences tuned in during commercial breaks. Every 7-9 minutes of a TV show required a critical moment. That is the one aspect over which filmmakers now might have more control than ever. There should be no need to follow convention and pace a story to accommodate breaks - although those short arcs can be useful in keeping the audience engaged. Even the “breaks” between episodes are uncertain. Having episodes aired once a week, required a lot of exposition and recap to make sure audiences could connect plot points. Or, as we expect to see in the comparison, required plot lines to be simpler and more concise. A filmmaker couldn’t have a fairly complex plot line spanning 4 or 5 episodes to be aired over a month and reasonably expect audiences to keep track of minute details to make sense of it. With the average viewer now watching a whole season in 3-7 days, there is little need to remind them of those details and authors are free to craft more intricate plots.

Duration - Length of Content

Here the distribution formats start to diverge and binge-ready shows lean closer to the book-reading experience. Regular broadcast shows still have somewhat standardized requirements. Although they've grown more flexible, episodes still must fit in a network's time slots and allow for commercial breaks. A usual American network TV drama episode runs 42 minutes for hour-long shows, while in Britain they get to around 45-48 minutes.(Volpe 2017)

Full-season deliveries like Netflix does, remove some requirements and specifications. Although episodes still run for about 1 hour, there is no control over how many episodes will be watched in one viewing session or the need for regular act breaks for commercials. In that sense, those episodes are a lot more like chapters in a book. A chapter is usually related to a change of theme or event, not necessarily concluding a story.

The traditional TV requirement to close an episode is removed. The duration of acts varies according to the needs of the story. In the Black Mirror case study, we will see a concrete example of how the show shifted from the 45-48 minutes range expected in British networks, to varying its episode lengths from 41 to 89 minutes in online streaming formats.

Time of Viewing

Movie theaters have Matinee and Night time showings. In TV Networks, concepts as Daytime Television, Night Time, and Prime Time directly dictate content, audience demographics and even available budget. When pitching a show to a network the producer or writer needs to be aware, or be told by the network, of the time slot intended for the show. That will in turn setup expectations of tone, themes and content the story can explore. Time-related aspects are removed from streaming.

While online platforms and to an extent cable networks, still shop for shows for certain demographic groups, the viewing experience will be dictated by the audience. Aside from the possibility of time-shifting shows, the multi-platform and portable nature of streaming makes watching shows a more personal, and if so desired private,

experience. A night time show might be watched in the early morning commute on a tablet. A morning cartoon for kids might become bedtime viewing for kids. Traditionally daytime shows might be binge-watched during a holiday break. It's a similar portable and personal experience afforded by a book.

Location

Location independent viewing for audiovisual media actually presents new technical and artistic challenges to filmmakers. Unlike books, that only require enough light and attention to be consumed, film and TV content are very dependent on viewing location and equipment. Image quality, brightness, accuracy, screen size, audio fidelity, volume and many other aspects directly impact how an audience reacts to a piece of moving image.

Visual details, how loud sounds are heard and how accurate the colors are rendered all affect the overall mood and intent of film or show. That is something filmmakers now need to take into account when producing their work. Their content might be watched in a state-of-the-art big screen home theater or through tiny headphones on a 4-inch phone screen in a crowded cafe.

To put it in context of how widespread the practice of binge watching away from a big flat screen TV in a controlled living room environment is, a 2017 study by SurveyMonkey revealed 67% percent of viewers stream shows in public, including 37% who do it at their workplace. And 12% who admitted to indulging in their TV habit in public restrooms.(HPM DIGITAL TEAM 2017)

In this case the streaming experience does approximate that of reading a book but to its detriment. The portable multi-platform format, for now, represents an obstacle contemporary filmmakers must be aware of and do their best to deal with. As of the time of this research there are no relevant examples of shows that have used the portability of streaming shows as a creative tool to enrich the overall experience.

Considering the above comparisons, it becomes apparent that today's on-demand, multi-platform, binge-watching experience of entire seasons of TV Shows does share a lot in common with the way people normally consume literature. Robert

Thompson's assertion of this new kind of show as "high pedigree novelistic," seems well founded. In detailing how the new format compares to the classic standards of network shows and by breaking down and comparing episodes from the two eras, we will demonstrate how the writing and storytelling of this new breed has also borrowed from the layered and more nuanced structures of novels.

TV Drama Traditional Formats and their Current Transformation

Pamela Douglas, a tenured Professor at USC Cinematic Arts on her book “Writing the TV Series Drama” last published in 2011 and therefore prior to binge-watching becoming an influence, categorizes 3 forms of Long Narrative Episodic Drama which we’ll define and analyze how they are being impacted by the new distribution model of streaming .(Douglas 2011)

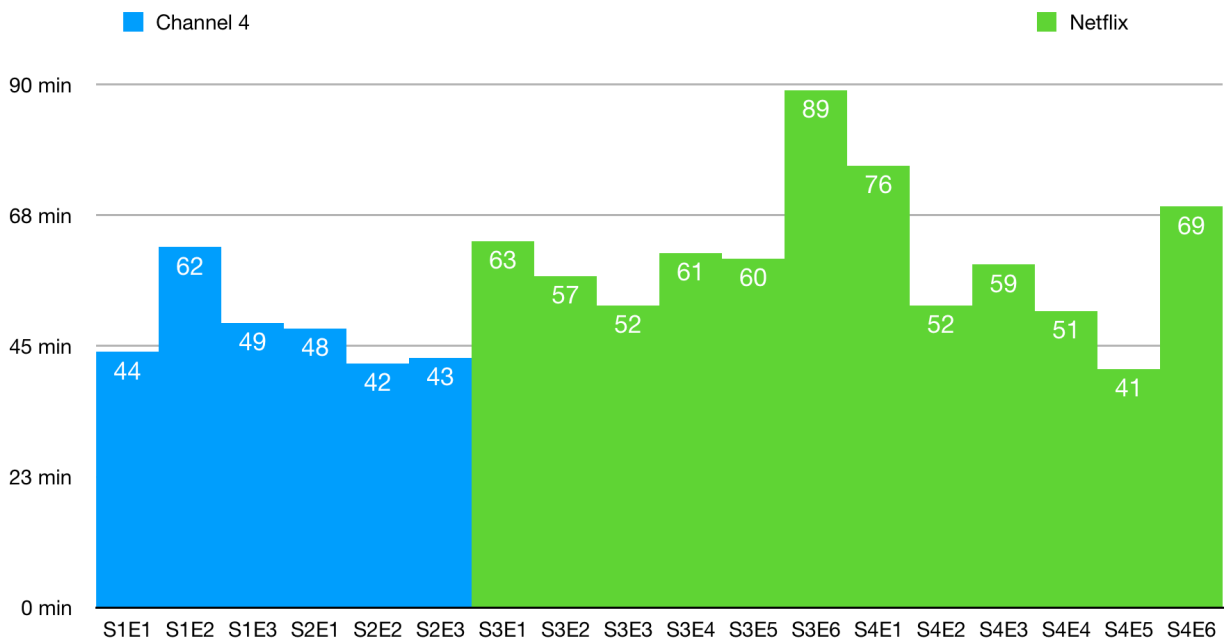
Anthologies

“Anthologies are free-standing stories, like short movies, unconnected to other installments except by a frame. The Twilight Zone had a continuing host, style and franchise, but the casts were different each week. Anthologies are rare today, and we are not focusing on writing them.” (Douglas 2011)

The excerpt above reveals the fast and sudden change TV series are currently going through. On December 2011, the year the 3rd and latest edition of Pamela Douglas’ book was published, Black Mirror premiered. It’s not only a prime example of an anthology series, but one that drew inspiration directly from The Twilight Zone and achieved tremendous critical acclaim and audience success. First produced by the British Channel 4, its production moved to Netflix in 2014. It’s been renewed for 4 seasons with episodes varying in length from 41 to 89 minutes. Black Mirror is a remarkable example of the impact of streaming and binge watching not only on serialized content, but also for anthologies that can benefit from its flexibility in regards to episode duration. In this particular case we can see in the chart below how running times varied according to the distribution contract in place for the series.

In the first two seasons (6 episodes) produced for Channel 4, the running time varied from 42 to 49 minutes to be aired in 60-minute slots, with the notable exception of Episode 2 at 62 minutes. Charlie Brooker, the episode’s writer explains in an interview that “the second episode was the first script to be done”(Brooker 2012) and when Channel 4 agreed to commission the series the episode that actually aired as the first wasn’t even written. In that sense, Episode 2 was written as a sort of Pilot for

the series. Pilots tend to run longer as they introduce the viewer to the world of the show. Mr. Brooker goes on to concede that Episode 2 “[is] very unusual, in TV terms”.(Brooker 2012)



The following 12 episodes, which were actually commissioned by Netflix at once (Birnbaum 2015) and later split into two seasons, show the new latitude the shift in distribution afforded. Keeping in mind they were commissioned as a single season, the episodes range from Black Mirror’s shortest at 41 minutes to its longest at 89 minutes. The latter surpassing even the stand alone Christmas Special commissioned by Channel 4 which clocked in at 73 minutes.

Brooker himself puts the move to Netflix as “the most fitting platform imaginable”(Birnbaum 2015)and points to another way of how regular broadcast networks influence the writing of a show. As episodes are broadcast over a long period of time, networks check audience ratings and poll viewers on their thoughts. Netflix with its model of delivering entire seasons on a single day, also commission entire seasons, or more, at once. So, when the episodes are released there’s no pulling them back for re-edits and adjustments.

“My god, it’s great. You’re desperately aware if you’ve done something and it doesn’t do well in the ratings,” he says of previous experiences with broadcast television. “Obviously, you want people to watch what you’re doing but that shouldn’t

become the story and, with a lot of broadcast shows, that becomes the story in their first couple of weeks. It can take a while to build an audience.”(Grater 2017)

While an episode comparison of Black Mirror before and after the change from Channel 4 to Netflix would be interesting, being an Anthology makes it one of a kind. Despite its huge success with audiences, its independent stories centered on a common theme would prove restrictive when trying to draw broader conclusions of the new possibilities and challenges of the advent of marathon viewing. It is notable how even non-serialized formats have been affected by the phenomenon. Writers have greater freedom in developing their stories at the appropriate pace, length and with no interference of weekly ratings.

Procedurals / Series with Closure

“Series with closure have continuing main casts but new situations that conclude at the end of each episode; they close. This is especially true of “procedurals” like CSI, NCIS, any version of Law & Order, and in fact the majority of fare on the traditional broadcast networks. Syndicators and cable channels that run repeats prefer this kind of show because they buy large packages and sell them to local and overseas stations who may rerun them in any order.”(Douglas 2011)

The above description is the format we are most accustomed to and the one that is currently losing space with the advent of binge-watching. Professor Douglas does indicate the beginning of a change in the format but does not seem to predict the size of the change that is about to occur:

“If the episodes have no “memory”, [...] the order of the episodes isn’t supposed to matter. Or so the thinking goes. [...] Today, the best shows that close each episode also have ongoing dramatic stories. However, from a writing point of view, they are constructed as procedurals.”(Douglas 2011)

Procedurals, as we’ll note in the list of “First Binges” bellow, seem to have not yet found a relevant place in the world of original content for binge-streaming. While

they are perfectly fitted for weekly broadcasts with stories that conclude and restart anew, they, by design, fail to take advantage of the longer attention span online viewers are willing to devote to new content. Some shows have made their way in the form of back catalog acquisitions and a few new ones have been attempted in the lower end of the budget spectrum. But as online platforms fight over the next binge inducing series it's hard to predict the scenario changing in the short term.

Robert Thompson, in the same interview as in the previous chapter, offers us the following comparison when watching a series with stand-alone episodes:

“That wasn't true of television in the old days before serialization. The idea of watching 'The Beverly Hillbillies' -- a show which I liked and I think is funny -- I can't imagine watching seven hours of it. And there's no need to. Every episode is self-contained.”(Herbert 2013)

His hunch about how self-contained stories are not best enjoyed in a marathon format are backed up by the available data on the audience's preferences when binge-watching shows. Netflix in 2018 released a list of the shows that introduced viewers to binge watching. Those are the shows that made viewers for the first time watch 3 or more episodes in a single sitting.

Top 10 “First Binges” Globally on Netflix:(Netflix Media Center 2018)

Breaking Bad
Orange is the New Black
The Walking Dead
Stranger Things
Narcos
House of Cards
Prison Break
13 Reasons Why
Grey's Anatomy
American Horror Story

Out of the 10 shows on the list, the 1st to 8th are serialized dramas. Grey's Anatomy at 9th is the closest to a procedural that has serialization elements. Grey's Anatomy is; however, a catalog acquisition. Netflix is currently streaming the first 13 seasons of the show, while the 14th is being broadcast weekly on ABC. It is safe to say the thirteen-year-old show has come to Netflix with an established audience eager to revisit old seasons. American Horror Story, also an acquisition with seven seasons, it's a notable hybrid format example. Labeled as a horror anthology, it changes its story and cast every season. The seasons themselves however are serialized mini-series.

It follows from the above that when it comes to long stretches in front of the TV, procedurals don't fare well; not unexpected for a format that evolved through the years to fit into a commercial broadcast model.

Serials

The final category Professor Douglas describes is the one that served as the basis to the current hyper-serialized format of binge worthy shows. But her presentation of it comes with a big caveat, which she addresses explicitly.

“Serials: Now, there's a dirty word in some minds because it also describes “soap operas.” [...] primetime producers don't like to be identified with them because of the heightened melodrama (which is needed to drive the story enough to run five days a week), and the speed with which episodes are produced too often results in stereotypical characters, dialogue that lacks subtlety, and unbelievable situations. [...] But most primetime series aren't like that anymore.”(Douglas 2011)

The paragraph clarifies the legacy on which the new breed of what's called Premium Television was built upon. Serials were, and still are, a difficult task. Now, with the counterpoint of serials available on demand, we have a new perspective on where the problem in its creation was. When network broadcast were the sole form of syndication for a show, producers were faced with only two options: To produce a daily show, which Douglas points out leads to melodramatic moments, unbelievable plots and stereotypical characters; Or to produce them for weekly broadcast, which while

solving the problems of the daily schedule now required that even serials worked into their structure some sense of closure in every episode “[...] most of the acclaimed series on networks and other cable outlets use serialized storytelling along with closed stories”.

Both options represented compromises as a result of scheduling needs: Melodrama for daily shows; closed stories for weekly syndication. It’s not surprising that with streaming removing those limitations and turning over the control of the shows scheduling to the viewer those artificial impositions were removed as well. In a real sense, the scheduling of the shows was now a result of the writer’s work and not the other way around. Up until streaming came along, writers had the job to fit their stories to the network’s schedules. Now their stories will influence the audience’s decision on how to program their viewing.

Professor Douglas characterizes serials as “the epitome of what episodic television can offer: not one tale that ties up in an hour or two, but lives that play out over hundreds of hours”. Although the passage in its context refers more precisely to serialized shows with closures at the end of episodes, it does describe the potential on which the new form of serialization is based on. It’s the opportunity to watch “lives that play out” that sets serials apart from movies for example. Movies will generally focus on once in a lifetime events while episodic dramas will reveal their character through many (a series of) events. On-demand serials paradoxically sit in-between and beyond both. They allow both single events to be played out over many hours and examined in more detail than movies can. This in addition to exploring a number of events that involve certain characters in more complex and nuanced ways. It is within that flexibility to fit the needs of particular stories that lies the attraction of this new experience.

The loss of control over how much content will be consumed at once might at first seem like the loss of a creative tool. Although, it might as well be used by authors in their creative choices. Structurally, it allows writers to use varying dramatic arc lengths. Writers now have the option to spread out stories in as many episodes as they feel are needed instead of having to conform stories to set durations. Todd Kessler, creator of the show *Bloodline* for Netflix, described that flexibility on an interview to news website Quartz explaining how an entire season of the show was conceived as a 13-hour movie.

“Because there is less pressure for each episode of a Netflix series to stand on its own, “it allowed us to say, we’re going to approach the first three episodes as the first act of our story,” Todd Kessler told Quartz. “Episodes 4, 5, 6 and 7 is the second act of our story, and then 8 through 13 is the third act.”(Lynch 2015)

Instead of 13 stand-alone stories under a unifying season arc, Kessler and his team were able to split their season arc in irregular acts - Act One, 3 episodes; Act Two, 4 episodes; Act Three, 6 episodes. Glenn Kessler, co-writer of the show concludes in another interview:

“With ‘Damages,’ we started out telling 42-minute stories with commercials [on FX], then went to 60 minutes with no commercials once a week [on DirecTV],” says Glenn Kessler. “Now we’re trying to tailor a show to be binge-watched.”(Jurgensen 2015)

Peter Morgan, writer and creator of The Crown, on a video interview to The Hollywood Reporter describes a similar situation explaining how being aware of the different viewing habits of the audience he now writes episodes “sometimes in twos, sometimes as a triplet and sometimes single episodes... to shake things up and make the flow inside a season be more interesting”.(Feinberg 2017)

There are other TV formats, either derivative ones such as web series, hybrids of procedurals and serials and dramedy (Calvisi 2016) which for the purposes of this analyzes offer no new insights on the major aspects of screenwriting; or that are outside of the scope of drama, such as sitcoms. However, having looked at the major classic formats for TV Dramas we can establish that the serial format is the one that benefit the most from a non-restrictive distribution format. As such, we’ll focus our episode comparison on shows that fall within that category.

Analysis - Episode Comparison

Sample Choices

Comparing two distinct works is always a difficult proposition. The differences and similarities noted can always be attributed to a writer's choice and style. However, this analysis will focus on the structure and setup of each episode's narrative and limit its commentary on content to how it relates to the overall structure complexity. To further dampen the possible influence of outside factors, we will work with series that share the same genre, subject and hour-long episode length.

One key difference in terms of length, although they are both hour-long episodes, is that the pre-binge sample was syndicated with commercial breaks, while the binge-watching sample was streamed on Netflix, commercial-free. Therefore, the former runs 41:32, and the latter 52:17.

We will also compare episodes that fit within similar moments of each series. Specifically, the episodes are situated towards the end of a season and not in the first season of the series. The intention is to avoid Pilot and Finale episodes that tend to have special structures, and also to compare how those episodes interact with all the information that users already know about the story and characters from previous episodes and seasons.

As introduced in the Academic Context subchapter, a thesis similar in scope was published by the University of Utrecht in 2016, by Francine Fokkema. (Fokkema 2016)

For her content comparison, Fokkema selected two versions of the House of Cards show. The first made for and aired on British television in 1990; and the second version made for and aired on Netflix starting in 2013, transplanted to an American setting. Her comparison of both is thorough and sound. However, its reach is limited by the elements of comparison chosen and the nature of the production of the sample shows.

A major aspect to be pointed out is that the different versions of House of Cards had different series formats. The original British one - based on the novel by Michael Dobbs (Dobbs 1989) - was conceived as a 4-part miniseries, with episodes running 55 minutes. While the Netflix 2013 version, besides transplanting the entire setting from the UK's Parliamentary system centered in London to the American presidential system establishment in Washington, was conceived to be a long running multiple season show.

In order to make them comparable, Francine takes the first 4 episodes of Netflix's first season (which had a total of 12 episodes) and compares them to the complete 4-part British mini-series. She goes on to conclude that *"because HOUSE OF CARDS 2013 has more storylines there could be more complex intertwining of storylines and therefore more complexity in general."*

The main criticism to be offered here is that the difference in intended format must be a great contributor to the complexity within those four episodes. In other words, in the Netflix version those episodes are the setup, or first act, in a season that will continue for another eight episodes. In the British version all storylines opened in those 4 episodes are expected to be concluded by the end of the 4th episode. While Fokkema doesn't establish the difference in terms of the function of those episodes in the wider context of a season she does remark that:

"However also the differences in lengths of the series influences the content. These influences of other components [...] in storytelling aren't studied in this research and therefore I suggest that in further research these components are incorporated." (Fokkema 2016)

All of the above considered, Francine Fokkema's work is incredibly valuable, and reinforces the need for more research in this direction. It is; however, ultimately distinct in its approach and methodology, and in some ways in its objective, to what this thesis aims to achieve. While Fokkema focused on different adaptations of the same story to different formats, we will demonstrate how different narrative structures in episodes and seasons are emerging in this new distribution technology for shows that have the same serialized drama format.

Episode Samples

The West Wing - Season 2, Episode 17

The West Wing was also a very popular political drama series. It aired from 1999 to 2006, which puts it just before the growth of online video streaming. For reference, YouTube was founded in 2005, Netflix, which started as mail-in DVD rental business in 1997, only introduced online streaming to its services in 2007. The West Wing was written by a master screenwriter Aaron Sorkin. Admittedly Sorkin is known for his heavy use of stylistic dialogue. In his forays in feature films (i.e. The Social Network (2010), A Few Good Men (1992)) his dialogue-based scenes work to reveal character traits and within a carefully defined structure that elevates tension and conflict. In parallel, in The West Wing, the artifice is used generally to deliver exposition. As will be demonstrated the need for this type of quick exposition is a requirement of the network weekly show format. Sorkin's mastery of it allows for a very sophisticated series that yet stills follows closely the needs of commercial broadcasting. His stylistic approach becomes an artifice attempting to hide a lack of dramatic tension instead of as a tool that heightens it.

House of Cards - Season 03, Episode 11

House of Cards was a milestone in regards to the binge-watching phenomenon. While not the first available in the format, together with Breaking Bad, it made binge watching mainstream. As one of the first conceived with the binge-watching audience in mind, the show took some of the first experimental steps in the format. After this first wave of shows to be binge watched, several others came along specially in the thriller and horror genres. To illustrate the binge effect of House of Cards, in the first weekend of the Season 2 release, 670 000 Netflix subscribers in the U.S. watched all 13 episodes. The median amount of time to finish a season of House of Cards is about 6 in comparison to the 13 weeks that a traditional 13-episode show would take). (Cullen 2014)

We will look at how both sample episodes are structured in its parts and how that setup informs the type of experience the viewer will have.

Episode Analysis

Simply breaking the episodes down into plot storylines would serve us well to explore the selected episode of West Wing. It sets up a few storylines at the start and wraps them up at its conclusion leaving two main lines open to be developed throughout the rest of the season. However, when approaching the episode of House of Cards, the model doesn't hold up as well. As we will see, House of Cards while containing episodic plot lines, is mainly driven by conflicts, characters motivations and the obstacles on their way. And those motivations and obstacles shift, layer upon each other, and contradict one another, between and within episodes and within storylines as well.

There is a consensus among dramaturgists about the main driving force of a story: conflict. Robert McKee puts it as "Nothing moves forward in a story except through conflict"(McKee 1997). Jack Bickham: "A story is a formed record of a character tested in conflict."(Bickham 1999) Or John Truby: ""Who fights whom over what?" The answer to that is what your story is really about".(Truby 2007) Michael Hauge offers a helpful clarification and definition of the term: "Conflict is whatever stands in the way of a character achieving her motivation."(Hauge 2011)

We will choose then to explore how complex, intertwined, how rich and dramatic each story is through the conflicts our characters must deal with. For the purposes of this Analysis, storylines and arcs are therefore defined in relation to conflict. That is to say, the lines and arcs connecting the motivation and goals that drive the characters and what are the obstacles they need to overcome to achieve them.

We will identify storylines in each episode based on the relationship between objectives being pursued (whether by a single character or a group) and the external or internal aspects in their way. We'll further categorize them between Episode Arcs - conflicts that emerge and conclude within the episode - Open Season Arcs - conflicts that will continue to play out in upcoming episodes - and Closing Season Arcs - conflicts that have their origins in previous episodes but come to a resolution in this episode.

The West Wing - Season 2, Episode 17

From the perspective of conflict driving characters, the episode of The West Wing offers us 5 storylines. Of those three are episode arcs as defined above and two season long arcs.

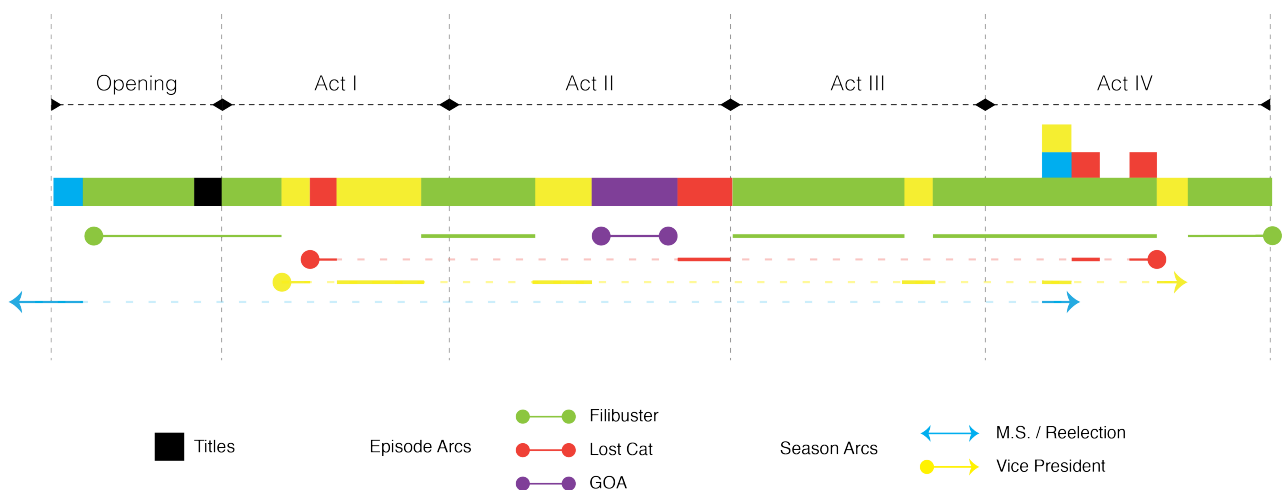
The main storyline is the one that gives the episode its title: the (Stackhouse) Filibuster. Senator Stackhouse has taken to the floor to delay the voting and passing of a bill in the Senate. That is the main obstacle for our characters. It's interesting to note that as The West Wing is an ensemble cast type of show, that same obstacle affects every character in the show. CJ, Josh, Sam, Leo and every other staff member have their own reason why they want to leave work on Friday night. And despite each character having their personal motivation, none of them actually affect the story. They are reasons mentioned in emails, phone calls, voice over or lines of dialogue, without direct impact in the direction of the story. The desire of ending the Filibuster so they can all leave is a single conflict and storyline in which characters work together to overcome it. It's a storyline that starts and end within the episode.

The 2 other episode arcs are small subplots that stand alone. In the "Lost Cat" line, we learn an Egyptian official is coming to visit the White House and a porcelain cat statue he gifted the present is nowhere to be found. It is CJ's job to find it but we learn that CJ broke it along the way. She is afraid of telling the president about it, but never gets to do so and we never get to see the Egyptian official visit the White House nor if there were any consequences to it. While there was a goal and an obstacle (the statue was broken) there is no resolution to the conflict.

The other subplot is a single flashback scene. Sam, while dealing with reports for the GOA (Government's Office of Accountability), is confronted by a young intern that proves to be very smart and points out the flaws of his work. He tries and fails to outsmart her; although, in the end he is impressed and says when she is out of school he will hire her. While the scene is funny, has a clear conflict between the two, and reveals a bit of Sam's character, the character of the intern never returns to the show and the scene itself does not impact any other storyline.

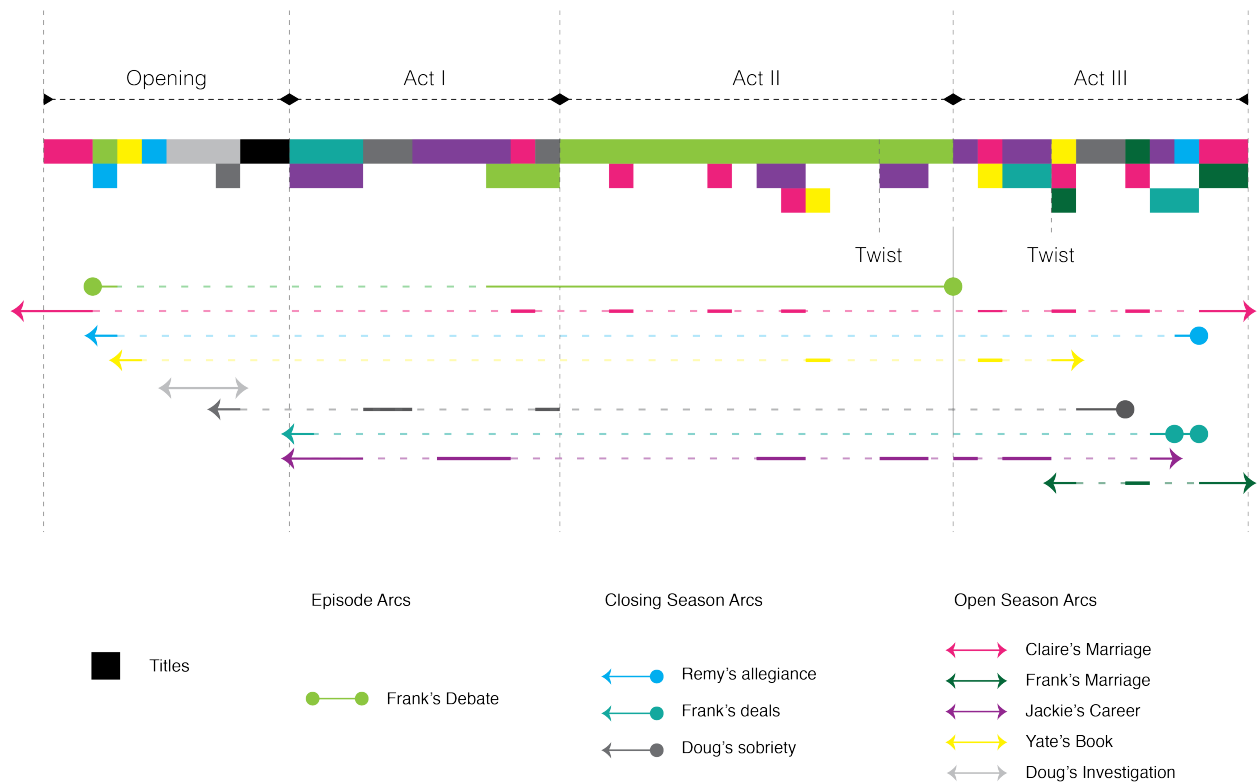
From the Season Arc lines, the main one is the President's dilemma of whether to run for a second term (his goal) having been diagnosed with M.S. (Multiple Sclerosis) - the obstacle. It's a line that has been open in previous episodes and will remain open. We are reminded of it in the opening segment and that is followed by a single other mention while the president dines with Leo in the final act of the episode. The scenes are a mere reminder. Their function is to offer context for the other Season Arc at play. The last arc/storyline revolves around the vice-president, who to everyone's surprise starts issuing statements to the press attacking the oil industry lobby. The arc revolves around figuring out the VP's goal with such a change in his position. In the episode's climax in Act Four it's revealed he is aware of the President's M.S. and intends to run against him. Fighting the oil industry lobby is part of his strategy. This final line is opened in this episode and will continue throughout the season.

The chart below maps how the episode is fairly regularly structured in an Opening plus four Acts of similar lengths. We can notice how the filibuster line (in green) drives the entire episode while subplots are setup in Act One and II and pay off on Act Four, leaving Act Three to center around the main storyline of the episode. Additionally, the main season Arc of the president's condition is brought in the very beginning then picked up again in the final act as a setup for future episodes. Notably, most of the screen time is devoted to storylines which are contained within the episode.



House of Cards - Season 03, Episode 11

In order to make the comparison and contrast between the chart structures easier to visualize we will present the chart for House of Cards first and detail it below.



In terms of Act structures, House of Cards has a significantly more complex opening sequence that sets up 6 of its conflicts. It has no recap segment and unlike The West Wing, this sample does not need to achieve a cliffhanger before breaking for its long title sequence. It is also notable that this particular episode has an opening plus a 3-act structure. Most House of Cards episodes have the more usual 4 or 5 acts. The writers; however, opted here to keep the debate sequence uninterrupted. Without the requirements of commercial breaks, that was possible.

The number of conflict storylines is also much larger. Unlike The West Wing that presents a main obstacle that characters orbit around - the filibuster - House of Cards has its characters deal with multiple objectives concurrently. For example, Frank Underwood, the main character, in this single episode has 3 different objectives and obstacles. As part of the contained episode arc, he wants to win the debate. His

obstacle, that is introduced and dealt with in this episode, are the two other candidates. We will witness him prepping as well as trying to make deals with Jackie to attack Dunbar (the other candidates) ultimately succeeding in winning the debate. In a parallel effort, he's been trying to gather support and put together a team for his reelection bid in a season long arc. That includes negotiations with a potential VP candidate, Jackie and Remy. His obstacle here is himself. His obsession with power and unethical ways drive those that could support him away. Finally, once the debate and negotiations, which he fails on, are over, Frank is faced with a twist in Act Three when Claire collapses during a campaign event. That brings back to the surface a multiple season conflict of Frank's, his marriage. At that moment in Act Three, Frank leaves behind every other goal to focus, showing Claire she is the priority. Those 3 different goals drive Frank's actions in different and contradictory directions forcing him to make difficult choices.

Frank's debate storyline is the only episode-contained arc. This episode being in the final third of the season, 3 long running arcs come to an end: Remy's allegiance to Frank is put to test since he fell in love with Jackie and is forced to choose between her and Frank to whom he has been loyal so far; Doug's fight to stay sober (he succeeds and his brother can go back to his family); and Frank's negotiations to build a reelection campaign (he has got Seth, Claire and a hopeful VP candidate; but lost Jackie, Remy and Doug).

There are still 3 other open season arcs that play a part in the episode: Claire's decision to support Frank's campaign in an attempt to save their marriage; Doug's investigation of the murder of his girlfriend (of which we only get a single, but rather long scene) and Yate's journey in trying to understand the Underwoods in order to write his book about them.

As we see above, despite there being a clear self-contained episode arc, the debate, House of Cards being thought out as single story to be watched in a short period of time can afford to layer multiple objectives and conflicts for its characters. The same approach for a weekly broadcast would likely leave viewers confused.

The West Wing introduces and closes three of its stories within the episode and has viewers following one season arc, the President's reelection bid while with M.S.;

then introduces a new one, the Vice President going rogue. House of Cards has a single self-contained arc, three other arcs that started in previous episodes and conclude within this episode; and four that run over the entire season. The more compact nature of the how the story is received in a binge experience has not only a quantitative advantage but also makes callbacks to past motivations and goals more organic to the story. They feel cohesive and not artificially used when needed.

A deeper dive into the episodes and their main content and beats will reveal how the interplay of those lines of conflicts elicit drama in different ways. We will start with a closer look of their opening sequences. Then examine how the episodes are structured to interact with storylines within the episode and throughout the entire seasons.

The Opening Sequences

The West Wing - Season 2, Episode 17

The West Wing starts us off with a short four seconds of opening titles followed with the conventional, “previously on The West Wing”. Short clips of crucial tense revelation moments we need to remember as they will likely be referred to in this coming episode. Those are usually a collection of dialogue lines, that being taken out of the context of their original scenes become re-exposition, as they are the quickest way to deliver information. We get introduced with lines such as “Do you get that you have MS?”. We are taken through five soundbites like that until the title card for the episode at 0:33.

From there we move to establishing shots of Washington. It’s overlaid with a VO of our protagonist, C.J., reading an email she is about to send her dad explaining she won’t make it to his birthday because of what will happen next. Essentially, we are quickly set within a framing device, the email, that will serve as VO throughout the episode. We are told right away how important this really is: she will miss her dad’s birthday. In the email she promises her dad once he understands what she is doing, he will forgive her.

The next few minutes of the show takes us through a fast paced walk through of the hallways of Congress in Washington where other characters are introduced. All for the same reason, they want to leave for the weekend but C.J. won't let them. There is a filibuster delaying a bill to be voted and she needs everyone working to get it approved. At around the five-minute mark, C.J. has made the rounds with her staff, told them they have to stay and has been presented with a few obstacles to her goal of approving the bill. She is now back at her desk, still writing the email and she tells her dad: This doesn't feel like any old filibuster. That's the hook or cliffhanger to hold people in their seats through the credits and/or commercial break. We cut to 43 seconds of credits.

There is a lot to be noted in those short five minutes that reveal the influence of the broadcasting format.

Being a weekly broadcast, *The West Wing* couldn't escape the need of reminding the audience of important plot points. Those, however, must be delivered in "bombastic" and quick ways. The audience might be flipping through channels, or just tuning in. Having a set air time also means that viewers might not be in a quiet room, fully engaged, devoting their attention entirely to watching the show. That makes it necessary to make the action fast and urgent while creating the feeling that if you blink you might just miss something really important.

Having week-long breaks between episodes also makes it necessary to reset stories and wrap them up. We can see how this episode works a stand-alone piece. Even without knowing much about the characters or the main story arcs we can still follow along: C.J. is established as a Washington insider working in congress. She lets us know what she is up against; approving the bill while the filibuster delay attempts to empty the house. Then what the stakes are; she'll miss an important family event in California. In the first few minutes we already see the obstacles she will face. The episode introduces all the elements a stand-alone story needs. Character, goal, obstacles and stakes are all reintroduced at the beginning of each episode and we will see below how they are tied up neatly at the end, or in some cases, just one or two of those things are left open-ended.

The season arcs and episode arcs are loosely connected. But more importantly, in network television shows, the episodes must be broken down into smaller arcs that fit in-between commercial breaks. In this episode the first arc runs from C.J. announcing she needs to miss the birthday, through fighting with her staff to stay over the weekend, winning those fights and going back to continue the email confirming she has achieved her first goal: she and the staff will stay over the weekend until the filibuster is over. It's a complete story told in less than 4 minutes: objective, obstacles, goal achieved. Concluding with a hook and the promise that this is "not any old filibuster".

Achieving complete stories in short periods of time when dealing with a subject such as political procedures is not an easy task. It's not surprising then that we end up with so much expository dialogue. Within roughly a minute of the show we can collect:

Voice Over:

0:43 - Dear Dad, let me explain why...

0:57 - I'm going to explain all this...

1:03 - Everyone trying to get out, I won't let them.

1:54 - The reason they need to stick around is...

Those are moments when we are being told step-by-step the reasons for all we see onscreen. While they make for quick delivery of information, without having context setup around them they don't carry a dramatic charge. We don't get to enjoy seeing the moment of understanding what is happening, what the intentions are, or the dramatic situations behind actions. To compensate for that, all those lines are delivered over very fast paced action, with characters walking and talking through hallways and corridors filled with extras moving around, while a Steadicam glides in front of our characters. Non-stop action for creating a sense of urgency without dramatic urgency that we can experience in the scene, as we are just being told facts.

In conclusion, as an introduction of a network TV show episode rooted on the conventions of the time, the opening act of the episode sets up a brand new story for the episode, reminds us of where we are in the longer season arc, reestablishes goals, sets us within a particular world - which usually is unchanged through much of the season or entire show. Most importantly, for this analysis, is the fact that aside from

the “previously” segment, we don’t really “need” to know where we are in the longer season arc. There is no relevant information needed from other episodes to make sense of this particular one. Or, as it would be even better, to elevate the dramatic tension of those situations. As we will see with House of Cards, the possibility of connecting episodes together is what creates a layered sustained dramatic tension throughout the entire show.

House of Cards - Season 03, Episode 11

The episode starts off with a 1:40 long scene. The first few shots glide us through glasses of Champagne in a luxurious home where a group of visibly wealthy women listen to a voice we recognize as Claire’s. The camera floats until it finds the back of Claire’s head as she promotes her husband’s candidacy for reelection as president. At the end of the scene, one of the women in the audience says she believes Claire, but she is not as convinced of her husband’s honesty. Claire naturally reaffirms her trust in her husband.

Taken alone, the scene feels quite bland in comparison to West Wing’s introduction. We are not presented with urgency, reminded of crucial plot points, or told the stakes for this particular moment. It’s in a way an expected moment: Frank is running for reelection; his wife is campaigning for him. There is nothing unusual or dramatic about this. It’s only when taken in the context of the entire season that the scene reveals itself.

After the first opening shots establishing the environment, the camera reveals the back of Claire’s head of blonde hair. There is no other reference made to her hair until she is asked about it 40 minutes later in the episode. However, this is a show to be binge-watched. Viewers will know exactly what is implied here. Claire’s hair color has been a subtle motif throughout the season. She is a natural blonde and the Underwood’s marriage has always been a troubled one. Earlier in the season when Frank started his campaign for reelection and against his political advisors’ recommendation, Claire changed her hair color to brunette. In episode 7, when Claire and Frank had found some common ground and decided to renew their wedding vows, she surprised us by showing up to the ceremony as a brunette. She was in a bid to

become the American Ambassador to the UN and had been inspired by another character that represented everything she was not (independent from her husband). That change of color for her renewal vows sent a clear message: she would continue alongside Frank but on her own terms. Despite the outcry from Frank's campaign staff, Claire didn't submit. She is a strong woman with convictions. It had a motivation planted through the first 6 episodes of the season to pay off in the 7th. In a gesture Frank and the audience, clearly understood without the need of words for it. That's the kind of moment and intertwining symbolism that creates an intimate relationship between audience and characters. When we are in the same mindset as our characters to understand the secret language of their marriage.

However, through episodes 8 - 11, trouble starts again as Claire strives to position herself as a plausible candidate for the US Ambassadorship in the United Nations. She embarks on a series of international travels to boost her foreign relation credentials. Other world leaders read through her hair color change as a sign of desperation and question how strong she really is for such position. In episode 10 her relationship with Frank is clearly shaken again and it's not clear whether Claire will support Frank's campaign at all. It would be a disaster for a candidate not to have his own wife endorse him. That brings us back to this crucial unspoken moment: the back of Claire's blonde head.

No expository Voice Over is needed. No dialogues reminding us of details, no comments made of the color change. Should this have been a weekly TV broadcast show and we would have been months away from when all of the backstory that happened and the moment would feel as flat and bland as it sounds when read without context. It's only because all thirteen hours of material are meant to be enjoyed in a short period time (as pointed out before, in a median of six days) that it is possible to create such a layered moment, with so much meaning involved, without the need of exposition, and that creates the feeling in the audience of truly understanding the minds of the characters. No one in the room reacts to her hair color. It's a moment between Claire and the audience. Unlike *The West Wing*, there is no need to let the audience know of a birthday being missed, or how this is not "any old filibuster". With all the other ten hours that preceded this moment, there was enough time to get the audience so close and intimate to the character that the subtlest things become crystal clear insights into their thoughts.

Now in context, that scene reveals itself to us: Claire is falling apart. Their marriage is not as recovered as they tried to make it seem. She is campaigning for him as a last hope to save her marriage and herself. Is she being honest? Does she have a hidden agenda of her own? Can she be trusted? Ironically the scene ends with the woman that tells Claire she trusts her but is not sure about Frank's honesty. We, the audience, read it completely different: Can we be sure of Claire's honesty? Claire responds with a wide smile reaffirming Frank's honesty. But we know Claire, she doesn't do wide smiles. This is desperation and before the episode ends we'll see Claire literally collapse and pass out while campaigning.

The amount of necessary backstory above that had to be put in context to understand this third shot of the episode, exemplifies how different the experience becomes when watching a series meant as a long-form story. There are other ways in which it impacts the episode structures themselves. The rest of the episode's introduction sets up only one new storyline while the other lines simply pick up where we last left our characters. Claire is campaigning, Frank is preparing for an upcoming debate, Remy seems uncomfortable with Frank, Yates observes Claire for the book he's writing, and finally Doug, who is investigating the death of a former lover, is given a hint she might still be alive. So we are assured of what is to come but no clear cliffhanger is stated. There is no expectation that Doug's girlfriend might show up alive (and she doesn't). Only a sustained dramatic tension exists: We know how the death of Doug's lover has destroyed him before and fueled his alcoholism. The introduction lasts about seven minutes and is followed by the opening titles - a full one minute forty seconds of title sequence. Although not dramatically relevant, it clearly demonstrates there is no concern about people leaving or changing channels. There is no need to repeatedly offer reasons or try to draw attention back to the screen.

Episode Structure

Regular Act Breaks vs. Sustained Dramatic Tension

The West Wing's episode will continue in a cyclical, regular, timed structure. Every 7-8 minutes or so a new act is introduced. New obstacles imposed to our

characters with a few side stories, but ultimately leading to a small victory followed by a small setup for the next act's obstacle. For example, around the 14-minute mark, C.J. is back at her laptop writing the email in voice over saying the filibuster has gone into its 8th hour, escalating the suspense of whether they'll manage to keep the house full to have a vote and pass the bill. Once again, reminding us through the email what she is sacrificing to be there. Unsurprisingly, at twenty-three minutes we have the same scene again with C.J. declaring there is no way the filibuster can go on for another two hours when she has a deadline for the print edition of newspaper to run the story of the bill she is trying to approve. The show becomes a series of in-between moments heightening the stakes but eventually coming back to those points that re-establish the timeline and offers a cliffhanger for the next act.

As an example of the possibilities of House of Cards' flexible act structure, eighteen minutes into the show, all the characters meet around the first presidential debate, either present there or watching it on TV and for the next fifteen minutes we get to watch a televised debate in real-time. There are no cuts to highlights of the debate or montages of the best moments. We just watch a regular debate, happening in the usual structure we are used to: opening statements, questions, discussions.

In knowing so intimately our characters we get to enjoy watching their strategies develop. Mingled within their speeches there are hints of words and actions that refer to moments that carry a lot of meaning. We know those references. The debate audience in the show doesn't. That dramatic irony makes us the accomplices to the characters. What could have turned out to be a boring overly long sequence becomes an intense rediscovery of how well we know the characters. We know each one of them so well, we have such a long shared rapport with them that there is no need for cutaways to reactions or commentary from other characters highlighting key moments. It flows without the need for act breaks that wrap up and setup again.

The debate goes in a crescendo of dramatic tension with more and more references to tougher choices they've made through the season and culminate on Frank betraying the trust of an ally. It is a climactic moment that brings us to the end of an act that ran much longer than the two previous ones. It took exactly the time required for effect. The first two acts of the episode took seven and nine minutes each. This one, fifteen. They each took the time needed to reach their culmination. Once that

was reached a new act starts fresh, without a clear hook or cliffhanger to follow. Surely they continue to rely heavily on all that came before it, but the audience is not stirred in a particular direction of what to expect. They are brought along their characters, discovering what's next together.

Self-Contained vs. Chapter Plot Structure

Having examined how individual acts in a weekly broadcast open and close in regular lengths and conclude their arcs contrast to the more flexible approach that the long-form binge-watching format offers we will now dissect how that extrapolates to entire episode and season arcs.

Mainly, we will look at how the need of the self-contained story arc of weekly episodes approximates *The West Wing* to a procedural series format despite *The West Wing* clearly having relevant season arcs which are usually not as relevant in procedurals. In Season 2 their main arc revolves around the President's revelation of his Multiple Sclerosis condition. On the very first episode of the season he reveals his disease to his staff and the public catches word of it and at the season finale he confirms it to the press. In turn they question whether he will still run for a second-term setting up a hook for season 3.

Although the arc runs in the background for the entire season it offers no change of direction in the story until the very last episode. And when the potential for change appears, it's as a setup for the next season. With twenty-two episodes in between those actual plot points, very little attention or consequence arises from this central premise. As we will go into detail with the analysis of Episode 17, the episodes' stories become iterative and independent, to the point where their order in season matters very little. Despite a continuity detail here and there, those stories don't affect the direction of the season in a substantial way enough to make them necessary.

In contrast, Episode 11 of *House of Cards*, in a single swoop changes the roles, directions or goals of four of its storylines in a way that would make it impossible to skip it.

The aim here is not to make a value or merit judgment, but to highlight how both structures work in, and because of, their own broadcast format. The audience is thrilled to revisit their beloved characters in *The West Wing* in weekly doses of adventures and challenges. Having a regular structure and independent story for each works perfectly for that experience and form of consumption. It's something the viewer can enjoy and have more of in a week's time.

House of Cards, however, with its thirteen episodes in Season 3 which were meant to be watched over a few days faces different challenges and opportunities.

It can't rely on repeating episode structures that will quickly become apparent to the viewer after a few episodes watched back to back and risk boring them. Also, as episodes are watched in rapid succession, having questions laid out in the first episode and not dealt with can become frustrating and distracting. Unlike *The West Wing* that has a "cool off" period of a week during which it can reestablish itself on a "fresh" viewer every week, *House of Cards* viewers have just watched the previous episode and have opted to watch another because of the questions that have been presented to them. Continuously offering new plot lines without showing the consequences and change of directions of the previous lines would eventually become a frustrating experience. While a setup or two can, and are extended, over multiple episodes, an inconsequential series of plots would soon have the viewer needing a break instead of enjoying the way in which the plot thickens.

The *West Wing* episode in question revolves around the filibuster put forward by Senator Stackhouse to impede the voting of a bill. Stackhouse wants a provision of funds added to the bill for children's autism research. As we follow CJ's attempts to get the bill passed, Stackhouse is the well-intentioned antagonist of the story. At stake for the protagonist is the fact she will miss her dad's 70th birthday. It's relevant to note here this is Stackhouse's first ever appearance. The same can be said of the issue at hand (funds for autism research) and the stake for CJ (the birthday). All those fundamental elements of the story are being introduced for the very first time in this episode. These issues are not issues the viewer cared, expected or even knew about. And as we will see, they will be gone as soon as the episode ends.

As pointed out above, the acts escalate as Stackhouse's filibuster drags on. CJ reminds us at the end of the first three acts that "this isn't any old filibuster", "It's been going on for 8 hours", "It can't possibly go on for another 2 hours". For the end of the fourth act, an aide while having dinner with the president receives a call and announces that "there is no end in sight" for the filibuster". It's an iterative process that does not take new directions. We follow dead ends that remain within the scope of the story and its original goal until a revelation happens in act four. Another call informs CJ's staff that Stackhouse has a grandson with autism. Now understanding the personal nature of Stackhouse's actions they change strategies by showing sympathy to his cause and allowing him a platform to bring attention to the issue. CJ and the president sacrifice the morning news deadline to make sure Stackhouse has enough time to bring attention to his cause and to have the morning headlines to himself. Although he won't have the funds he requests, he will have brought attention to a problem that is important to him. Act five resolves the situation and ends with CJ sending another email to her parents saying she will be on the first flight in the morning to California and hopes she makes it in time to be with them.

While the story does a good job of illuminating a humane aspect of politics and its characters it stands alone within the overall arc of the season. We won't see or hear about Stackhouse until another episode in season 4, in an unrelated story. The outcome of CJ being present at her dad's birthday is also irrelevant to the character's story and no other character had much invested in how the things played out. For example, CJ's co-worker Josh, another important character in the series, is only concerned in getting the bill passed quickly so he can make it to Florida to watch a training game of his favorite basketball team. He makes it in time in the end as well.

If we were to imagine a viewer missing out on this particular episode, there would be little to no consequence to the understanding and enjoyment of the rest of the show. There is a moment in act four that introduces the vice president speaking to the press against the oil industry lobbying. It's a setup for issues that will be resolved in subsequent episodes. But it's merely that - an introduction - a hint of what's to come and not a revelation that changes the course of the story. Our imagined viewer would not need to know about Stackhouse, the autism initiative or CJ dad's birthday, to follow along the season arc of the president's MS condition being a secret. The episode could have been omitted or presented at any other time without any real consequence.

The House of Card's episode, on the other hand, centers around a Primary Democratic debate to be held in Iowa involving the 3 frontrunner candidates, Underwood, Dunbar and Jackie. As we are not offered a "previously on House of Cards" segment, to be able to follow the story of the debate viewers must be aware of each candidates story up to this point. Dunbar was an attorney that defended the government and Underwood's actions in court (Episode 4) until turning on his unethical tactics and deciding to run, herself, against him. Jackie has agreed to drop out of the campaign and support Underwood in exchange for the position of Vice President and will be his pawn to attack Dunbar.

In the other storylines we have Claire deciding to go back to supporting her husband's campaign and to fully appreciate what this means we need to understand their marriage. Also, Doug's storyline as the former ruthless aide of the president who has sobered up from a drinking problem but now struggles not to fall back as he mourns his girlfriend's death, which he just learned might have been faked.

From here we can start drawing comparisons to The West Wing episode. The goals and obstacles for our 3 main characters (Underwood, Claire, Doug) are not introduced or restated at the beginning of the episode - Underwood wants reelection and has Dunbar as an antagonist and Jackie as help; Claire wants to save her marriage but has Underwood's obsession with power as her obstacle; and Doug wants to remain sober but has the mystery over his girlfriend's death haunting and tempting him. All those goals and obstacles derive from the story we've been told this far. They are not artifices created to tell this particular episode. They are a natural occurrence of the moment we are in the season Arc. The characters involved are not the same as they were when we first met them. Dunbar was an ally, now she is the antagonist. Jackie is an ally but by the end of the episode she will turn her allegiance to Dunbar. Claire started out as Underwood's strongest supporter, then turned on him to pursue her own interests and their marriage nearly fell apart. Now she is resigned and desperately attempting to rescue it. And Underwood, whose power hunger drives the entire show will find its limit. By the end of the episode he takes a break from campaigning to be with Claire after she collapses while, as it is ironically noted, literally giving blood as part of a PR stunt for his campaign.

Those goals and obstacles are motivated and were planted during the previous 10 episodes of this season. And while they could of course have been reestablished with a recap segment that would strip them of dramatic and emotional resonance. Surely a movie we are watching for the first time may start establishing the world we'll embark into as the one we have here. A former drunk, a politician seeking reelection and a wife trying to save her marriage. But used that way, those factors claim a different role, they are the preexisting conditions of this world. We take them as a starting point. We'll only be emotionally invested once we start seeing changes and concrete struggles they bring. We don't feel sympathy, fear or repulsion for a former alcoholic just by being told they are one. It's by seeing how it came about, what actions it lead to and the struggle involved in escaping it, through which we get invested in the character. It's that understanding and intimacy that allows us to relate to the characters beyond their stereotypes. With Doug we know the conflicts of self-identity and family relationship involved in his struggle along with his ruthlessness and loyalty. That, for a secondary character, was built during in this season over the past 10 hours. Should this have been a weekly show, a lot of what informs his current state would have had its dramatic effect diluted. A screenwriter would be hard pressed to rely on those previous moments if they were part of an episode aired 3 months prior in an independently plotted episode. His alcoholism could certainly be brought back at any time. We are not suggesting the audience would forget such a defining character trait. But there is a big gap between a stated character flaw and the emotional momentum built up on the series of consequences that keep affecting the character and leading their lives in different directions in a cohesive narrative. Banking on that dramatic momentum allows the writer to operate in a very different set of motivations than with stand-alone stories. While the goals described above are the triggers of this particular episode, unlike in *The West Wing*, characters will act in response to their core values over immediate motivations and those are the unique and thrilling moments that the format allows for.

In our *The West Wing* sample, characters act coherently according to their stated objectives for the episode - get the bill passed; get to California in time; getting attention to autism. There is never a contradiction in their actions and that comes from the fact that episodes are not layered with consequences of its prior stories. If they acted against their own stated self-interest, viewers would have a hard time trying to dig up anything in the months ago episodes that could possibly justify it. Further,

because goals are quickly reestablished in every episode they tend to be simple, to the point goals with easily evaluated metrics of success: Did she get there in time? Did he get the funding?

When goals have been built over a long episodic development as in *House of Cards*, we can see the nuances at play interfering with each other. Two examples come to mind.

Underwood's stated goal is to do well in the debate in hopes of winning reelection. To do that, he enlists the help of Jackie. They plan attacks on Dunbar during the debate. However, during the planning Jackie stands up to Underwood disagreeing with him on how far they should go into Dunbar's family life in order to discredit her. Underwood is enraged that Jackie believes they are on the same level as partners and she backs down, agreeing to follow his instructions. Underwood won that fight. Jackie submitted and when the debate happens we see her follow Underwood's orders to perfection. He is ahead, he has her under control, his plan is working. And yet, he attacks Jackie in the debate. He brings Jackie's own family issue into the debate to humiliate her and assert his dominance. It serves no purpose to his objective. In fact, it hurts it as that triggers Jackie to eventually switch sides. But the scene lands perfectly as it relies on the emotional understanding that Underwood's ultimate goal is power itself at every level. The presidency is just legitimacy to his inner truth, power is everything. His overarching goal of power trumps over his episode's goal. It turns things in a complete new direction that will not be wrapped up and concluded in this episode and was not motivated within the episode itself.

Another of those moments of conflicting motivations happens to Doug. His brother Gary has come to keep an eye on him making sure he stays sober. Doug is dismissive of him as unnecessary right from the start. However, when Doug has a weak moment and is about to leave his place for alcohol but manages to stop himself. He makes a point of sitting down on the stairs that lead to the door and waits for his brother to come home. As he states: "I wanted to prove to you that I can control myself". On its own this seems like a moment of defiance. It appears to be Doug acting towards his goal of getting rid of his brother. But once again, the scene needs to be put in a longer context. Gary first came to stay with Doug in Episode 1 of this season. Having Gary come to stay with him helped Doug get discharged from the hospital after a

severe beating. Their very first interaction had Doug telling Gary he can go away. They hadn't really spoken in ten years. Gary has built a picture perfect family life that we learn Doug envies viscerally. Having no family or meaningful relationships is what drives Doug's extreme loyalty to Underwood and fuels his alcoholism. So when given the option to hide his moment of weakness, which would make sense in his immediate goal to get rid of Gary, Doug is instead driven by his core need of family approval. He wants Gary to acknowledge this little victory of his and be proud of him in the way he looks up to Gary's accomplishments.

Being both minor characters that present themselves as temporary antagonists to immediate goals of the protagonists we can draw comparisons on how Gary and Stackhouse fit in each show's structure. Stackhouse is first introduced in the beginning of Episode 17, poses an obstacle to CJ and thirty minutes later reveals his motivation that in turn becomes what CJ needs to know in order to surpass that obstacle. In the final act of the same episode CJ is able to get rid of him, and he is gone until two seasons later when he is brought in for another storyline. Gary, on the other hand, is first introduced in Episode 1 of Season 3. Their estranged relationship is established and Gary is sent away. In Episode 9, Doug gets drunk again after learning his ex-girlfriend is dead. That triggers Gary coming back on episode 10 when we dive deeper into how Doug's resentment of the family Gary has built, and Doug has not, is part of his drinking problem.

Finally, in Episode 11 we get to the moment when Doug acts in contradiction to his goal but in accordance to what he really needs, which is his brother's recognition and approval. Only after that moment is Doug really ready to let Gary go back to his family with a renewed relationship with his brother. What plays out as a drinking problem in this episode is in fact a family issue in the wider context of the show. None of the family motivated reasons for Doug's alcoholism are brought up in the actual episode where this scene takes place. Without that dramatic momentum built up in the viewer, this scene would have a completely different reading. This irregularly timed development of the storyline couldn't be expected to work unless the season was taken in as a single piece of work. It's a very small moment that delivers a huge emotional impact precisely because of its nuances and build up. If it were a weekly show, the simple time gap between those subtle dramatic moments would have diluted them to the point they couldn't work as complete arc. They would most likely have been

squeezed into a single episode much like in *The West Wing* and the entire episode would have centered around this single conflict.

By having the freedom to work in flexible and irregular increments, as opposed to around center pieces, the world of *House of Cards* feels richer. With the need to develop the entire Stackhouse plot in a single episode, every other character's action must gravitate around it. It simply needs as much screen time as possible to be fully delivered. We end up with CJ, Josh, the president, the vice president and every other staff member dealing with the same issue while exposing their personal stakes; the birthday, the basketball game and the reelection bid. While we hear about all those extraneous events, all we see on screen revolves around the filibuster.

In contrast, Doug's plot line with his brother is his own. Doug continues to participate in the main storyline involving Underwood's and Dunbar's fight for the White House. The show can afford to pace the delivery of its subplots independently. We are allowed time in the character's private lives that will expose their behavior and decisions for the main storyline. That is certainly not an exclusive trait of the long-form made for bingeing format. A vast number shows rely on the distinction of private and professional or public life of the characters. However, the subplots are generally entirely conveyed in a single episode in two or three quick scenes. Weekly shows rarely extend their A Line stories over more than an episode risking confusing the casual viewer. *House of Cards*, in this example, does it with its C Line. The A line being the campaign, and the B being the Underwood's marriage. To expect the viewer to follow the small nuances of a C Line plot over the span of multiple episodes in a weekly format show would not have been this effective.

The layering of different storylines that run at their required pace and length over multiple episodes, instead of a reset and conclude approach, enables not only a more complex plot but also allows themes to be explored in more detail. This flexibility takes us into different dramaturgic directions within a situation without wrapping them up by the end of each episode. Doug's struggle, for example, could be left unresolved and pointing towards what ultimately was not its resolution. This added complexity and room for misdirection offers a more layered experience for the audience. Emotional wounds and values can rarely be so clearly distilled in a few successive steps that lead to a satisfactory conclusion. Yet, the weekly format forced that adaptation of form in

order to deliver complete pieces. Issues that required a more detailed approach had to be more limited in number. A show in this format could attempt to tackle one or two as an overarching season theme. Additionally, there would be simply not enough screen time to tell a complete and compelling story for every new episode.

The long-form format does away with the reestablishment of the episodes' structure. In terms of function, the first act of The West Wing episode is absent from House of Cards. The first 5-7 minutes spent on setting up the Stackhouse filibuster story and the needs of our characters to get it done as quickly as possible does not happen in House of Cards. It's assumed the viewer has just recently watched the previous episode, knows what's about to come, what the stakes are and the obstacles ahead. It allows the show to jump straight ahead to the nuances surrounding the main plot event. The Iowa campaigning plot, of which the debate is a chapter, have been going on since Episode 9. The partnership with Jackie, which will fall apart as a result of the debate, was first suggested in Episode 4 and confirmed in Episode 5. Claire's coming back to Frank Underwood's support has been in the making since their marriage vows renewal in Episode 7. All the necessary parts to setup the Debate plot of Episode 11 are already in place. It's that freedom from outlining the plot in every new episode that allows us to focus on how Underwood's real ambition is power itself; how Claire's fight for her marriage is in fact a search for her identity outside of Frank's orbit.

This deeper dive can be also exemplified by how much more specific the motivations are in House of Cards. In contrast to those core values moving the characters as described above, in The West Wing motivations need to be objective and general. We know about nothing that makes CJ's relationship to her dad special and unique. All we are exposed to is that she is a daughter so her dad's birthday is important. It is a generalization that the audience can quickly assimilate and get on board with. The same can be said about Stackhouse as he wants to approve the funds because his grandson has autism. While unique to this character, it is not something we get to experience with him. They are easy to understand reasons that can be delivered in a single line. And they in fact are: CJ's as a voice over of her email; and Stackhouse's with a staffer walking into the room and announcing it as a discovery. The dramatic intents become stated facts that justify the movement of the plot forward. We never engaged in CJ's relationship with her dad or Stackhouse's with his grandson. We accept the justification and focus back on the politics. Once we reach the end of

the episode those justifications are discarded instead of built upon for the rest of the season.

Conclusion

The comparison of two distinct audiovisual works inherently carries limitations that can be attributed to the style of the authors, influences at the time of conception and requirements presented by producers. However, some of those limitations are the subject of the comparison drawn here. Specifically, the changes in technology, format, viewer's habit and what audiences and producers consider an engaging experience after the advent and widespread adoption of binge-watching.

By comparing both samples, it was possible to outline key distinctions that contribute to this new form of enjoying serialized stories. With less time between episodes, without the need for recapitulation of key plot points or to setup entire new storylines, the writer is allowed more screen time to be devoted in furthering aspects of the overarching story and the development of characters.

The removal of breaks, whether between acts, through commercials or between episodes, allows more flexibility with varied act durations or with the use of multiple episodes to deliver what would previously need to fit a single episode of precise length. Those new conventions enable authors to work with pacing and duration the might be more suited to a particular story and to elicit a new form of engagement in drama.

That rapid continuity between episodes also enables plots to rely on elements from previous episodes while maintaining their emotional momentum. They don't require being reestablished to be reutilized.

All those distinctions laid out, it's important to reinforce how much hasn't changed. The conventions developed over decades of weekly broadcasts are still to be found as the backbone of the TV Drama structure. Those conventions are what led people to first experiment with binge-watching, long before online streaming. The fast-paced acts and their cliffhangers turned out to be an exciting experience when consumed without the actual time gaps for commercials or weekly waits. The shift we see now is that those conventions that emerged to solve network requirements have become creative tools for the writer to work with to their fullest potential.

While a widespread habit by now, binge-ready shows are still not the norm. As a recent phenomenon, a lot more development in the area can be expected. Although future analyses of more samples are necessary to confirm that those are indeed new characteristics of TV screenwriting and not restricted to the samples at hand; this thesis finds attributes in its samples that suggest a change in writing paradigms is underway. It does not represent a rejection of the traditional TV drama format but the continued creative development in response to technological development.

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