

Memories, Temporalities, Fictions:

Temporal Displacement in Contemporary Television

Booth, Paul. "Memories, Temporalities, Fictions: Temporal Displacement in Contemporary Television." *Television and New Media* 12, no. 4 (2011): 370–388. First published online 2010, doi: 10.1177/1527476410392806.

Television scholar Jason Mittell coined the term "narrative complexity" to describe television shows that feature serialized plots within episodic television. In this article I examine a specific form of narrative complexity, temporal displacement, as a salient feature of contemporary television programs. I argue that shows that rely on temporal displacement illustrate the industry's reaction to and the audience's resolution of a sense of postmodern schizophrenia. Further, I demonstrate how the contemporary digital media landscape not only encourages, but also seemingly necessitates, a complex interaction with temporality. I conclude that temporal displacement is a palliative consequence that is beginning to inscribe our interaction with all media.

Keywords: Temporality, Television, Narrative, Digital, New Media, Long-Form Storytelling, Seriality, Web 2.0, Postmodernism, schizophrenia

Memories, Temporalities, Fictions:**Temporal Displacement in Contemporary Television****Introduction**

In the 2007 *Doctor Who* episode “Blink,” the time travelling titular character is once again stuck in a perilous situation. Trapped in the year 1963, and his time machine in 2007, the Doctor must somehow find a way to communicate with the inhabitants of 2007 in order to get them to send his vessel. But how to communicate across the span of forty–odd years? His solution is ingenious in its complexity: by encoding Easter Eggs onto DVDs¹, the Doctor communicates through the televisual medium to his friend Sally, whose collection of DVDs spurs the Doctor to come up with this plan.² Her confusion over the situation is palpable, so the Doctor explains temporal mechanics the best way he can: “People assume that time is a strict progression of cause to effect, but actually from a non-linear, non-subjective viewpoint—it’s more like a big ball of wibbly wobbly, time-y wimey, stuff” (Moffatt 2007).

Although certainly not the most scientific way of describing the temporal effects of time travel, the Doctor’s discussion of time as “a big ball of wibbly wobbly, time-y wimey, stuff” gives a reasonably accurate articulation of an evolving temporal complexity in television narratives. Indeed, if the technical language escapes him, the general point is well taken: the human temporal experience, especially when mediated through television and other electronic media, subverts our traditional linear expectations of temporality. A serialized television program like *Doctor Who* represents many of the complicated issues and detailed facets involved in the construction of complex television (Perryman 2008; Parkin 2009). As Mittell (2006, 32) established, narrative complexity encompasses “a redefinition of episodic forms under the

influence of serial narration—not necessarily a complete merger of episodic and serial forms but a shifting balance.” In other words, a show is narratively complex if it rejects the need for closure after every episode, allows for the development of an over-arching story to develop across episodes, and creates an elaborate, interconnected network of characters, actions, locations, props and plots. A television show that demonstrates narrative complexity is, as the Doctor might say, a big ball of wibbly wobbly, *story worey*, stuff.

Yet, as Mittell intimates, the issue of “narrative complexity” is itself a complex one, and there are unexplored facets to this type of storytelling. In this essay, I explore in greater detail one dimension of narrative complexity in contemporary television: the temporal displacement of contemporary narrative action. I use the term “displacement” on purpose to indicate not just that narrative *time* affects narrative complexity, but that the concept of *time-space* can as well; as Moores (2005) puts it, the modern mass media are not just based in temporal situations, but are also based on particular time-space modalities. I argue that, generally over the past decade, there has been a surge in the number and type of television narratives that have focused on the aesthetics of temporal distortion. Importantly, I believe these shows focus on temporality in part as both an industrial resistance to and an audience’s resolution of postmodern schizophrenia. Using features of temporal complexity, such as flashforwards, flashbacks, time travel, and changes in memory/recall, shows such as *Family Guy*, *Arrested Development*, *Lost*, *How I Met Your Mother*, *Life on Mars*, *Ashes to Ashes*, *Dollhouse*, *Lie to Me*, and *FlashForward*, among others, use the spectacle of a temporally complex narrative to heighten the audience’s acceptance of temporal discontinuity. Schizophrenia, in this sense, becomes a metaphor for how audiences respond to temporal complexity.

In order to describe this complication, I explore how television producers “play” with the textual existence of temporality in television narratives to create *affect* in the viewer: to give the viewer what Jenkins might call a “wow” moment (Jenkins 2007). Although many factors influence this increase in contemporary temporal complexity—including the advent of new technology (for example, the time-shifting of the DVD (Kompare 2006)), new industry practices (see Lotz 2007; Clarke 2010) that take account of these technologies, and audiences more attuned to complexity (see Johnson 2006)—I want to explore an as-of-yet largely untapped area: the way these complex narratives are symptomatic of larger cultural issues which have also been made salient through online digital technologies. I do not dismiss the influence of DVDs or DVRs on television viewership, nor do I want to write off the impact of new industrial practices; however, due to space I will be limiting this article’s examination to the reception of temporal complexity within contemporary television from a cultural studies point of view. First, I describe in more detail the concept of narrative complexity in contemporary television. Second, I illustrate how one form of narrative complexity, temporal displacement, creates an affective experience of the text. When viewed through Jameson’s (1991) reading of Lacanian schizophrenia, this affective experience can be seen as a reaction to a subjective loss of temporality. Further, I describe three types of temporal displacement in television narratives, and the ideological implications of this temporal displacement. Finally, I examine some of the implications of this dual coherence and distancing in terms of the popularity of online, interactive technologies.

Narrative Complexity in Television

For Mittell (2006), narrative complexity is more than just a serialized plot. Indeed, it is complex interaction of both episodic and seriality across the range of episodes of a television series. To be narratively complex, a television show must have conclusions (or resolutions) for most episodes, while also continuing a larger story arc across the series. For example, the British *Life on Mars* had a continuing story-line across the seasons which didn't resolve until the end of the series; but each episode also featured its own mystery that resolved at the conclusion of that episode. Indeed, Mittell adroitly describes the relationship of narrative complexity to different television genres and series, but his analysis ends without descriptions either the *levels* of complexity or the *types* of complexity that exist. In the remainder of this section of the essay, I hope to elucidate both in more detail.

In the case of the *levels* of complexity, Newman (2006) is instructive for pointing out how the complexity of a narrative can be tied to the relationship between narrative elements. Using a structuralist view of narrative production, Newman illustrates three different levels of narrative storytelling in shows with narrative complexity: beats, episodes and arcs. Episodic “beats” are usually under two minutes in length, and represent the unfolding of narrative information at a single point in a show. The beat tells the audience something new, while amplifying the audience’s desire to see more. The consolidation of six or eight beats is what Newman defines as the middle level of television storytelling: the episode. An episode is a single block of television viewing, in American terms usually thirty or sixty minutes long. The most common units of television storytelling, episodes of television are constructed into patterns of problem/solution: a central conflict each week allows for some closure while a greater problem may still exist. Finally, Newman posits the “arc” as the ultimate level of narrative complexity. The arc represents mini-season plotlines that carry across episodes. Even in shows with a tightly

focused season-long plot like *24*, “the conception of arcs happens in a more piecemeal fashion. *24* does not plot out its whole season in advance... [but rather] breaks the story into groups of six or eight episodes” (Newman 2006, 24). These mini-seasons are structured along commercial imperatives, as each builds to a climax which premieres during a sweeps period.

Both Newman (2006) and Mittell (2006) write persuasively about the existence of narratively complex television programs. As they indicate, not every new television show is narratively complex, but there has been enough of a shift in televisual narrative form over the past ten years that more and more new shows have narratively complex plots. Although Newman deals the *level* of complexity, and Mittell points out some general characteristics, neither one has the space to go into great detail about the *types* of narrative complexity demonstrated by television shows.

I believe that the temporal displacement of narrative action is a significant type of narrative complexity in contemporary television narrative. By “temporal displacement” I refer to the presence of narrative action in different temporal localities within the narrative of the show itself. This can be as analepses (or alternations in chronology) such as flashbacks or framing devices. In this case, the story is seen as a memory which is recounted by a character: for example, the television show *Oliver Beene* (2003) is narrated from the point of view of one character relating his memories of growing up. Temporal displacement can also be recognized as different timelines which take place simultaneously. For example, during the fifth season of *Lost*, some characters (like Sawyer, Juliet and Miles) jumped from time-frame to time-frame, some characters (like Jack, Kate, and Hurley) remained in the present, but eventually all characters ended up in the past. Yet these three temporal structures were all shown simultaneously on *Lost*.

Indeed, it is this simultaneity within the structure of *Lost* and other shows that I believe parallels a growing concern of audiences with the immateriality and timelessness of interactive, online digital technologies. A focus on chronology and temporality has been used as an investigatory device for exploring contemporary society and technology before: as Kogan (2006, 50) points out, the “temporal non-linearity in a [contemporary] narrative format ... reflects the simultaneity present in our everyday lives.” For Kogan, there is always a relationship between time, temporality, and media in society. She (53) describes *Lost* as the apotheosis of the temporal stimulation of “a new generation of media savants” (see also Booth 2008). As I show in the next section, Kogan’s (2006) work tying the temporal stimulation of contemporary viewers with the interaction of digital technology finds a complement with the theoretical work of Jenkins (2007) on the aesthetics of spectacle as popular entertainment.

Interactive Audiences and Affective Temporality

One important point about complex narratives on which Mittell, Newman and Kogan all agree is that complexity cannot be completed without the aesthetic appreciation of an active, participatory audience. The concentration on temporal displacement within a complex narrative coheres an audience to a text, allowing members to piece into a linear structure what may be non-linearly organized in the television text. As Jenkins (2007, 3) writes, “most popular culture is shaped by a logic of emotional intensification...at its best, [it] makes us think by making us feel.” Gray (2008, 55) shows that one of the key creative powers of television entertainment is its “ability to move us.” Spectacle, as aesthetic appreciation, is integral to television viewership. Yet, a finely tuned narrative can create an affective moment of “wow” in the audience, just as a moment of spectacle can. As Sconce (2004, 109) has pointed out, contemporary television

storytelling often plays with the stylistics of the storytelling to ask the audience “What If” questions—questions that directly pose alternate viewpoints on specific characters. The concept of narrative complexity offers a similar type of affect: “these moments push the operational aesthetic to the foreground, calling attention to the constructed nature of the narration and asking us to marvel at how the writers pulled it off” (Mittell 2006, 35).

Previous cultural studies research into participatory audiences, including the work of Fiske (1992) and Jenkins (1992), describe this coherence in spatial terms. From de Certeau’s (1984, 37) classic *The Practice of Everyday Life*, this research sees audience members in “the space of the other [media producers].” Current work on convergence by Jenkins (2006) and on distributed narrative by Walker (2007) describes “transmediated” narratives similarly through spatial language: narratives may sprawl in one medium or may be dispersed among many, allowing audiences to explore different facets of narrative information. Large, fan-created wikis like Lostpedia are one example of an audience’s spatial exploration of narrative exposition (Booth 2010; Mittell 2009). As Gwenllian Jones (2002, 84, italics mine) has described, “The appeal of these vast, transmedia fictions lies precisely in their invitations to immersion and interactivity; they are constructed, marketed, and used by fans not as ‘texts’ to be ‘read’ but as cosmologies to be *entered, experienced and imaginatively interacted with*” (see also Hills 2002).

Yet, a spatial understanding of reception is ultimately limited, and opening up the television analysis to *temporal* affect is useful for television studies as well. Temporal displacement can also create emotional affect in the audiences of the shows. As Kogan (2006, 53) persuasively illustrates, one of the key features of *Lost* that intrigues the fan base is the non-linearity of the series: it “tries in every way possible to interweave a ... sense of temporality [in]... its various clues.” By playing with the sense of time, the producers of *Lost*, as well as of

other temporally displaced shows such as *How I Met Your Mother* and *Life on Mars* create an aesthetically complex text to which fans become emotionally attached.

In terms of television shows with narrative complexity, nothing can elicit spectator attention and emotional attachment more so than a well-executed moment of temporal disorientation. Narrative affect can become spectacle in and of itself. The audience may experience breaks in the temporal structure of the narrative, only to “wow” at their return to the relative “present” of the show with their knowledge of the narrative somehow altered. A particularly salient example appears at the end of the third season of *Lost*. Already used to temporal shifts through two seasons’ worth of flashbacks, viewers of the third season had seen jumps in time to Jack on the island and to Jack off the island at “Hoffs-Drawlar Funeral Parlor.” The oddly named location offered an anagrammatic clue to a change in the temporal shifting: Hoffs-Drawlar rearranges to spell “Flash Forward.” Indeed, the flashbacks that many in the audience thought they were watching for the third season were revealed in that last episode to be flash *forwards*, taking place in the narrative future, a narrative shock that could only be answered with a “wow” (see Clarke 2010 for more on the anagram Hoffs-Drawlar and the “mastermind narration” behind it).

Temporal Affect for the Postmodern Schizophrenic

For narratively complex shows like *Lost*, temporal displacement offers the industry a density that engenders in the audience an ability to watch the show again (through DVD, DVR or online channels like Hulu), and represents for the viewer a reaction to what Jameson has termed postmodern schizophrenia. For theorists of the postmodern, the contemporary era creates a certain temporal misalignment. There is no sense of the “past” or “future,” but rather an

instantaneous and vacuous sense of the “present.” Postmodern schizophrenia is characterized by “the absolute proximity, the total instantaneity of things” (Baudrillard 1983, 133): we have entered an age of über-simultaneity where we experience many different temporalities all at once as a “temporal malaise” (Kogan 2006, 50). It’s not that we have no concept of the past or of the future; rather, it’s that we both as experience a continuous, stimulated present. To “know” past from present, future from past, present from future, we must experience mediated *time* in a constant, unfailing way. Popular media leads us to understand time differently and Jameson’s (1991, 27) analysis is understandably dire:

If we are unable to unify the past, present and future of the sentence, then we are similarly unable to unify the past, present and future of our own biographical experience or psychic life. With the breakdown of the signifying chain, therefore, the schizophrenic is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers, or, in other words, of a series of pure and unrelated presents in time.”

What we lack today, according to Bruno (1987, 61, 70), is a sense of history: we are “condemned to a life composed only of a present tense [with] ... neither past nor memory... no conceivable future.”

Whilst encouraging this type of temporal *misalignment*, through episode breaks, rerun schedules (see Kompare 2004) and new technology like DVDs, traditional broadcast media also offer a sense of temporal *permanence*: as Moores (2005, 16) points out, the “dailiness” of most radio and television ensures “a continuously flowing service for users,” who then “expect it ... as a routine and reliable aspect of their days.”³ Indeed, the fact that TV is available on Hulu or Netflix Streaming means that many television shows are literally never unavailable. What is at stake here is whether broadcast media suggest a stable, permanent point-of-reference for history:

do they, in other words, *lock history in time*? I do not mean to ask whether broadcast media give *accurate* representations of history, or whether history itself becomes important through broadcasting; rather, I mean to indicate that broadcast media situate moments of time—past, present, future—within a stable set of bounds. Media lock and are locked: the past is what was on television before; the present is what is on now; the future is “next, on.” As Moores (2005, 20) has shown, that there are “fixed schedules” of television that mean “audiences can come to find the overall shape of output to be ordered and predictable.” Through the stability of the temporal location of the television *show*, the play of temporality in a show itself becomes a liberating factor for audiences. To play with time in a television show can be cathartic. It gives the audience the escape of the semblance of control over time: it seems to say, *if you can understand Lost’s bizarre time jumping, then you can control your understanding of any temporal discrepancy*. Broadcast media can play with time because it offers viewers greater control of their own linearity.

In contrast, however, the increased usage of online technology has intimately changed our culture’s relationship with time. Indeed, new media is reworking the temporal arrangements of media in both reception and production arenas. As locations where reception is intimately tied to production, interactive websites such as Wikipedia and RSS-powered news and blog feeds like Google Reader and Digg.com are inherently unstable entities: what is posted one moment can be changed the next. For example, a news-aggregating site like Digg.com values stories based on popularity: a popular story like “Hybrid Batteries: Good But Getting Better” can be replaced moments later by “Scientists Make Temperature-Regulating Coffee Mug.” With seemingly little individual influence over the stability of the medium, users of Digg.com and other interactive websites sacrifice temporal control for interactive mechanics.

Thus, the temporal complexity of the contemporary television show leads to both the aesthetic appreciation of the narrative and the feeling of disorientation within postmodern schizophrenia. Of course, postmodernism (by definition) cannot be a totalizing force for understanding what is at work here: I don't mean to overplay the postmodern card. But in terms of understanding how viewers engage with, embrace, and respond to temporal displacement in their narratives, it is a useful heuristic for examining audiences' temporal instability. In the next section, I detail three types of temporal displacements that have become more common over the last ten years of television broadcasting, then return to a discussion of temporality and digital technology.

Temporal Displacement: Flashback, Memory, Characterization

In this section, I elaborate upon three uses of temporal displacement within contemporary American network television: extensive flashback, memory temporality, and character temporality. I do not intend to suggest that temporal displacement is unique to the past ten years of television. After all, 1950s staple *I Love Lucy* used flashbacks, and the 1980s show *Newhart* famously ended (in 1990) with a surprise "this-is-all-a-dream" ending that flashed-back to Bob Newhart's earlier *The Bob Newhart Show*. I contend, however, that these contemporary shows *rely inherently on temporal displacement*. Each one of these types of temporal displacements is well-represented by a number of generically diverse shows, and different shows can feature different levels of temporal complexity. Although some of these shows have not been commercial successes, their very existence proves that a study of temporally complex narratives can significantly contribute to television studies.

Extensive Flashback

By “extensive flashback” I mean that a television show’s entire narrative is presented as a flashback. These types of shows are usually framed by events which take place in the future of the narrative portrayed onscreen. For example, almost every episode of *How I Met Your Mother* opens with a two-shot of two children and the on-screen title “2030” —indicating that the show takes place almost thirty years in the future. The first episode of the series, “Pilot,” depicts the narrative situation: the off-screen narrator, talking to the children, elucidates that he is going to “tell the story” of how he met their mother. Occasionally, the action of the contemporary narrative cuts back to these two children and their father, who comment on the plot. In this way, the show seemingly tells two stories: the first is the titular one of how the main character (Ted) finds and falls in love with his spouse; the second story is the narration of the first story to the children and their reaction to that story.

In other words, for shows with this form of extensive flashback, the temporal displacement occurs within the show’s narrative structural frame itself. Mittell (2006, 36) describes these forms of flashbacks as “alterations in chronology,” which serve to “to frame an entire episode’s action in the past tense.” The complexity forms through the viewer’s reconciliation that what he/she sees as a narrative is actually another person’s memory of that (fictional) narrative. Indeed, not just issues of narrative complexity, but also issues of fictionality are at stake here. The idea of a show-as-memory is not unique to contemporary television narratives. For example, the episode titled “Normal Again” of *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* features a demon that stabs Buffy with a strange serum; the episode becomes a series of flashes between Buffy’s “real” life (the diegetic world the audience has watched for years) and her real “life” as a patient in a mental ward, merely dreaming the past six season’s worth of episodes. The viewer

spends the episode believing that Buffy is dreaming her existence the mental ward—until the final scene when it is revealed that the mental ward may be the “reality” of the show and the narrative of the show may be Buffy’s crazed dream. Further, in the show *Dallas*, the entire ninth season is revealed to be the dream of Pamela Barnes Ewing.⁴ Recently, the finale of *Six Feet Under* ended by following each of the characters lives until the audience witnesses their deaths years in the future. These examples, however, are isolated incidents within a long-running show (*Buffy* for seven years; *Dallas* for fourteen; *Six Feet Under* for five.). A crucial difference in contemporary complex television narratives is that the *audience is aware from the beginning* that the entire show is a flashback. Shows that also fit this mold include *Oliver Beene*, *The Black Donnellys*, *The Nine*, and *Jack and Bobby*. The effect of this is to increase the audience’s aesthetic appreciation for narratives twists, turns, and oddities by focusing on the concept of the narrator.

For example, in the show *Jack and Bobby*, the titular characters are two brothers whose story is punctuated (and paralleled) by a number of interviews and reminiscences from characters from the shows’ chronological future. During the first episode, the audience is told at the onset that one of the characters is going to grow up to be President; the enjoyment of the episode lies not just in the unfolding of the narrative, but also in deciding which of the brothers would become the President. The moment when it is revealed that Bobby will become President but Jack will die becomes a “wow” moment for the audience, whose allegiance to one brother over another may create an aesthetic (dis)pleasure in the text. The temporal displacement of the narrative—the audience knowing some facts but not knowing others—not only creates suspense (in the classic Hitchcockian sense, see Truffaut 1985), but also create a particular pleasure for the audience: a pleasure constructed from the dissonance between different temporal frames.

The focus on the narrator is a central theme to an extensive flashback. As Bal (1991, 78) shows, “examining the temporal aspect of the narrating requires one already to take into account the ‘person’ of the narrator.” For example, the narrator of *The Black Donnellys* retells the events in the lives of the brothers from his jail cell. Early in the show’s run, this narrator is revealed as unreliable (see Booth 1961): he forgets details, revises history, and tells the same story with different outcomes. In the world of television temporality, the moments when the narrator shows unreliability are moments when the audience must face the realization that everything they are watching might be suspect; might be a fiction.⁵ The attuned viewer exclaims surprise, rethinks the past episodes, and thus alters his/her view of the story itself. The purpose of the temporally displaced narrator, therefore, is to force the television show into a new storytelling mode: on predicated on meta-comments and the hypermediality of the narrative.

In an interesting twist to this extensive flashback, the show *FlashForward* recently upended the trope by adjusting the temporal shift: instead of flashing back to points previously in the narrative, characters (and, by extension, the audience watching them) flash forward to a particular point in time six months in the future. Each character “sees” him/herself in a vision, but doesn’t know how he/she could get to that point. A former alcoholic sees himself drunk; a war veteran finds his thought-dead daughter very much alive; a childless lesbian sees her in-utero fetus in a sonogram; an FBI agent sees nothing at all (and consequently thinks that he will die in the next six months). Interestingly, as the show continued towards the end of the series, both flashforwards and flashbacks featured into the narrative, as character histories were also explored in detail. In the case of *FlashForward*, the temporally displaced narrative—the audience sees pieces of future events—not only makes obvious the narration, but also forces the narrative arc into a binary adventure: will these visions come true or not? The narrative questions, the queries

that keep the audience of this serial narrative guessing, force a reconceptualization of the role of the “answer” in long-form narrative. In *FlashForward*, the audience already knows the answers; the narrative becomes an understanding of how we get to them.

Television shows use extensive flashback or flashforward in similar ways to confuse the temporal location of the narrative. The pleasure of the text lies not in what Barthes (1975) calls a “readerly” text, in which the audience passively enjoys the pleasures of the text, but rather in the “writerly” aspects of the text, as audience (re)-constructions of the temporal situation. For the viewer this reconstruction factors into the schizophrenic notion of cohesive time in contemporary society: by structuring a narrator with uneasiness and unreliability, the creators of temporally displaced narratives offer viewers a window to their own temporally displaced lives, and a coherent set of mechanisms to resolve them.

Memory temporality

By the phrase “memory temporality” I reference television shows that use analepses (any change in temporal structure) as a form of memory/recall for characters within the show’s narrative. Shows with memory temporality typically include some type of regular visual, auditory or textual “clue” or trope to indicate the shift in narrative temporality, what Fiske and Hartley (2003, 43–4) define as an aesthetic code. The aforementioned *FlashForward* inscribes a complex series of images, sounds and music to indicate to the audience that what they are watching takes place in the future: swirling images, flashing faster than the human eye can decipher, obfuscate the screen.

In another example, the animated show *Family Guy* typically uses flashbacks as a form of humor based on juxtaposition, and signals the start of a flashback through one of the characters

remarking, “that’s just like the time I...” or “Haven't felt this [emotion] since [thing we're about to see]” (Flashback 2009). The narrative then jumps in time to that moment to juxtapose the remark with the action in that flashback. The humor often arrives from the literalness of the situation. In an early episode titled “I Never Met the Dead Man,” father and patriarch Peter defends his daughter Meg’s car crash by telling the people of the city: “Come on, you guys, we all did stupid stuff when we were kids, right? I remember when I tried to sneak into an R-rated movie....” The narrative then flashes back to a lobby of a movie theatre and an adult Peter runs in—disguised as a shrub. The flashback functions as a juxtaposition of what we expect (a teenage Peter pretending to be a grown-up) with the literalness of the remark (a grown-up Peter dressed as a bush) as a coded cultural reference to sneaking around (a common trope of many media texts is for the hero to hide in bushes to escape detection).

How I Met Your Mother offers another aesthetic type of flashback. As we’ve seen, the entire show is a flashback, but within this framework exist more flashbacks in each episode. This aesthetic appreciation works in many ways: for example, in the episode “Murtaugh” in *How I Met Your Mother*, Marshall recounts his attempt at coaching a kindergarten basketball team. As he describes the trials of his team, the episode breaks with the temporal structure of the narrative to illustrate his memory. During the beginning of his exaggerated story, the team facing his kindergarteners consisted of professional basketball players. Marshall then tells the same story, but this time through, includes a werewolf opponent. Finally, the flashback shows several shots of the werewolf slam-dunking the basketball, in an obvious homage to the classic teen comedy *Teen Wolf*. The continued temporal displacement of the re-telling of the narrative builds the audience’s expectations, which is eventually paid off with the visual quotation of *Teen Wolf*, a move which both satisfies the building anticipation of the joke while at the same time eliciting a

direct affirmation of the spectacle of the show. Meanwhile, as the audience appreciates the spectacle of *How I Met Your Mother*'s temporal displacement, their affect for the character Marshall—built up over four previous seasons' complex storylines—increases as well. Another pertinent example from *How I Met Your Mother* reveals a “Telescoping Flashback”—telling a story entirely through flashbacks within flashbacks (Shulman 1948). In the third season episode “How I Met Everyone Else,” for example, each main character recounts the story of how each met the others: humorously filling in the gaps of other people's memories through their own recounting.

Flashbacks do not have to be humorous to have a similar effect on an audience. In the show *Lost*, for example, each episode details the lives of the survivors of a plane crash on a mysterious island, and also flashes back or forward to depict periods of time in a particular character's life. During the initial few seasons of the show, such flashbacks were indicated by a camera track to a character's face and a distinctive “woosh”-ing noise. Often, these camera moves focused on the eye. The flashbacks in *Lost* occur at moments in the narrative action that paralleled situations in the flashback, or during enigmatic moments that the flashback elucidates more clearly. The focus on the character's eye and the trope of the camera move and the sound are often generically coded as memories.

Of course, flashbacks of this type are not unique either. Shows have been using flashbacks as key plot elements since very nearly the beginning of television entertainment. The point here is not that any show that uses flashbacks fits within the narrative complexity framework set out by Mittell *because* it uses flashbacks, but rather that the temporally displaced narrative occurs across a confluence of a *number* of shows all of which *rely* on memory temporality as a key element of the show's identity. Other examples of shows that use this form

of temporal complexity include *How I Met Your Mother*, *Arrested Development*, and *Lie to Me*. In each of these shows, the extensive use of the flashback becomes a defining feature of the show: it is not an isolated incident within the show's structure, or a special event used to get ratings during sweeps. Rather, it is a deliberate and general part of the show's brand.

For example, *Lie to Me* presents a special case of memory temporality, as its memories are presented technologically. The plot of the show follows a group of people trained in lie detection, meaning they can watch a person's face and see when they are not being truthful. During the course of an investigation, the group often videotapes the accused and rewatches the tape in order to determine if he/she is lying. The "memory" here is technologically-augmented, but more importantly, actually resides outside of the narrative itself.

By claiming that the memory resides outside the diegetic narrative, I mean that the "memory" being referenced is not one of the characters', but rather is the memory of the audience, who not only watched the initial dialogue with the accused, but then also watched the recording of that initial dialogue. The audience's memory of the interview with the suspect becomes the focus of the analepses; *Lie to Me* relies on an implied participation of the audience with the television text. Tellingly, the show gives the appearance of granting the audience some control of the temporality of the narrative. Given that the audience (after one or two episodes) recognizes the plot structure, they can retain the visual information of that first encounter and can later augment their reading of the second encounter. This control over the temporal knowledge of the narrative becomes a way of arresting time: of freezing the schizophrenic notion of temporal displacement of a show into identifiable moments. The procedural, in other words, becomes prescriptural.

Character temporality

The third form of temporal displacement that occurs in contemporary television has a peculiar notion of displacement: by “character temporality,” I mean that this form of temporal displacement features characters who exist separated from their own temporal context, estranged from their “normal” time-space arena. In shows of this nature, characters can be disembodied, or they can be taken from their own temporal realm and transported elsewhere. Shows of this type tend to aggregate temporality and spatiality into a time-space amalgam, in which a character’s temporal displacement is mirrored by a similar spatial distortion.

Two examples from the BBC are the television show *Life on Mars* and its sequel *Ashes to Ashes*. In *Life on Mars*, Manchester police officer Sam Tyler is hit by a car in 2006 and awakens in the year 1973. He finds himself working for the same police department thirty three years in the past, under the command of Chief Inspector Gene Hunt. The rationale behind Tyler’s exile to the past is the resounding serial arc of the show, but within that one character displacement, much temporal complexity can be observed. At times Tyler—and thus, the audience who identifies with him—doesn’t know whether he has really time travelled or if he is lying in a hospital, dreaming of this time period in a coma. To investigate, Tyler starts to venture into his own life, as he was a child growing up in Manchester in 1973. A crucial scene in the first season’s finale finds Tyler talking to himself as a child: and during the conversation, he realizes that his memories are in fact being formed at that moment as he communicates with himself. The temporal loop closes as past, present, and future Sam Tyler all converge on this one temporal location: a precise demonstration of Jameson’s (1991, 27) “presents in time.”

The sequel to *Life on Mars*, *Ashes to Ashes*, tells a similar plotline with the police officer hired to find out what happened to Tyler in 2006. In this case, officer Alex Drake is shot and

wakes up in 1981—during the time period when she was just a child. In this show, however, the temporal lines fold even greater, as the first season's plot revolves around Alex's parents' death. Images of the elder Alex's memories of the time period are interspersed with the young Alex's experiences of those memories, and the audience's realization that those images are changing due to the elder Alex's presence back in time. In other words, Alex comes to terms with her parent's death by visiting the site of their killing in the past and then *revisiting* it in her memory while there. Saliently personified by the character of Gene Hunt, tellingly present in Alex's past as well as Tyler's, Alex finds that memories of her guardian are replaced by memories of Hunt—and observes how these memories form simultaneously.

Character dislocation is a valuable method of portraying temporal displacement, as the audience's identification with the characters effectively reflects and rhetorically displays the schizophrenic modalities of the postmodern audience. Character identification is key in other shows as well: for example, *Dollhouse* features characters (“dolls”) whose personalities are downloaded out of their bodies and replaced by other personalities. Wealthy business people can special-order particular personalities to be placed in young, attractive bodies, for a specified amount of time. The doll is a complete realization of the new personality—no trace of the old is supposed to surface—and thus subscribes to a true Cartesian dualism. The show follows one doll, Caroline, as she is imprinted with different characteristics and personalities during the show. For the character as well as for the audience—that is, the imprint of the bodiless character with whom the audience identifies—time shifts. This is perhaps best illustrated in the season one finale, “Epitaph One,” which takes place ten years after the events portrayed in the first season. In this episode, the technology used to imprint dolls has been co-opted by governments around the world to imprint citizens against their will. The world has devolved into global apocalypse,

as those imprinted (working for the government) attempt to subvert or kill those resisting the imprint process. A group of “actuals” (non-imprints) use Caroline’s memories, stored in a computer disc, to uncover secrets about the imprinting process. They put her memories in the body of a 10-year-old girl. Importantly, when Caroline “wakes up” in this body, she sighs, and asks what the year is. When told 2019, she exclaims under her breath, “10 years...” indicating a jump of a decade for the character.⁶

Furthermore, Caroline then exclaims, “great, puberty again.” Her “mind” has effectively traversed a temporal dislocation: the jump in time becomes significant for her character and for the audience, as the information supplied to her to “fill in the gaps” of the narrative becomes similar background information for the audience. This form of temporal displacement allows the character a time-shifting ability that creates a complex understanding of both the plot and the character. In an episode like “Epitaph One,” and especially in the final two episodes of the series, “Epitaph Two” which concludes the mysteries of “Epitaph One,” the audience has to keep in mind at least two separate timeframes: the temporal situation of the main narrative of the show and the temporal placement of each characters’ personality within that narrative. The complexity of this analepsis offers a spectacle to the audience. By complicating the temporal situations of the characters, *Dollhouse* creates complex moments that, upon resolution, appear magisterial: the audience is wowed by the sheer dexterity at the completion of the episode. The complexity of *Dollhouse* is mirrored in the show *Lost*, as well, as the character Desmond has the ability to travel in time and affect the events in different time streams. In the fourth season, Desmond time travels in the episode “The Constant.” In this episode, Desmond is able to send his consciousness back and forth between himself in the present and himself in the past. Using knowledge gained

in the present, Desmond is able to help himself stop time and space jumping; along the way, he uncovers powerful secrets in the past that he is able to take to the present.

The American remake of *Life on Mars* represents another television show that attempts character temporality, but ultimately changes its type to extensive flashback at the end, subverting its temporal complexity for narrative closure. This adaptation of the UK *Life on Mars* similarly follows a 2008 New York City police officer who, after getting hit by a car, awakens in 1973 with all his 2008 memories intact. In the finale, however, he learns that *both* 1973 and 2008 were virtual reality simulations created by a computer on a spacecraft taking him to the planet Mars.⁷ *Life on Mars* takes a series based in character temporality and, almost literally at the last minute, changes it to an extensive flashback form of temporal displacement. As Hellkeson (2009, ¶ 3.1) states in her review of the final episode of the American series, this ending simply “fails because it is literal.” The temporal displacement of the characters throughout the majority of the series leaves deliberate ambiguities for the audience. These ambiguities lie at the heart of narrative complexity: they are the fragments of a narrative that fans can use to expand the narrative world (Hills 2002, 137; also Gwennlian Jones 2004). By explaining them away in a convenient “it was all a dream” situation, the show backtracks on its initial form of temporal displacement, and the complexity is instead explained differently, changing the rules of the show.

Furthermore, another type of character dislocation exists in television programs where characters remain affixed in time but the context around them time shifts. Time shifting is the inverse of character temporality. Instead of finding themselves outside of time, characters in time shifting narratives find themselves in the same time, but the world itself has changed. The most recent (2010) season of the Sy-Fy channel’s *Eureka* demonstrates this form of change in

character temporality. In the first two episodes of the fourth series, five of the series regulars (Jack, Allison, Henry, Jo and Fargo) were accidentally transported to their hometown of Eureka in 1947: same place, different time. Upon their return to the “present,” they find that slight changes in the past have had an enormous effect on the present. For example, upon their return, Allison finds that her autistic son Kevin is no longer autistic and life-long bachelor Henry discovers that he is married.

The pleasure of these narrative spectacles lies not just in experiencing the on-going serial plot about what happens to the characters, but also in acknowledging and experiencing those temporal changes—the paradox of the Butterfly Effect—as moments of narrative aesthetics. It’s interesting that Fargo is now head of Global Dynamics, but it’s only narratively and aesthetically pleasing if we also know that he *used* to be the butt of GD’s workforce. Of course, characters who exist outside of time are not new. The long-running *Doctor Who* (1963), for example, features a time traveling alien who, in almost every episode, travels to a different temporal location. Yet, today’s character temporality is qualitatively different: characters cannot control their temporal shifting and plots revolve around the acceptance of their situation. In *Doctor Who*, we can see this change as characters take much longer in contemporary episodes to come to terms with their time travel: in early episodes from the beginning of the show, characters got used to time travel quite quickly.

Temporal Displacement

For contemporary viewers, the world is itself seen as a constant displacement from temporality: we have entered what, as we have seen, “a series of pure and unrelated presents in time” (Jameson 1991, 27). One of the major effects of digital technology is to separate out the

time it takes to communicate from the process of communication. The sheer instantaneousness of communication and the inherent multi-linearity of online technology create a new sense of temporality for audiences. Of course, I'm not saying that digital technology has confused people's sense of time, or that audiences understand complex temporality in television because of the Internet—that form of determinism is far too simplistic to address the complex interaction between these diverse media. However, the interaction between contemporary television's use of temporal displacement and the rise of digital technology indicates an emphasis on a larger issue in society: namely, a shifting notion of time and temporality in general.

As I have argued, contemporary narrative television has focused on the aesthetic pleasures and fears of temporal distortion as a response to postmodern schizophrenia, and audiences have reacted to this schizophrenia with an interactive, affective experience. Although I have focused in this article on television, I believe other media also demonstrate these new forms of temporality: cinema texts like *The Usual Suspects*, *Donnie Darko*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Memento*, and *Run Lola Run*; video game narratives (see Jones 2008, especially the first chapter's musing on *Lost* as a video game), massively multiplayer online roleplaying games, etc. Yet television is the most visible, most watched, most familiar media technology in our lives today, and the impact of these temporally displaced complex narratives is far-reaching. The transmediated interaction between the television and the web is specifically dramatic. The rise in the past five years of web technology—specifically, interactive web technologies—also renders user contributions ultimately insubstantial. Contemporary television narrative parallels concerns brought about by the time-shifting impermanence of digital technology: a deterministic reading of contemporary culture might see this as a Platonic loss of “memory” due to the media institution's awareness of the emergence of—and uncritical fear of—DVR, TiVO, television on

demand, and DVDs. Not to discount the impact of these important technologies on the development of television narratives, I rather see a sense of impermanence in the contributions of users on the Internet as another mitigating factor.

For example, on a wiki, anyone can contribute to a webpage: authoring is limited only to those with an internet connection and an idea. One can change edit, adjust or delete any text. This ability to alter or change anything on a wiki is part of what makes a wiki appealing: a web page can be almost contemporaneous with current events, as users can post real-time reports about situations around the world. At the same time, the fact that anything can be changed on a wiki means that no one contribution has any sense of permanence. Unless a contributor is willing to monitor whether his/her writings are unchanged, the possibility always exists that one's contributions can be deleted. This sense of impermanence contrasts strongly with a historical notion of the permanence of writing, as Bolter (2001) has suggested.

Similarly, the idea of social network sites, on which users can friend other people and contribute to a network of linked users, also relies on the notion of impermanence. The home page for any user is a conglomeration of their own personal information (which they can update or change at any time) as well as the input of their friends. As Booth (2010) has pointed out, any social network site is constructed from the input of others, as friends leave notes, memos, videos, thoughts and comments on each other's pages. No page is permanent, as the output of friends will change the home page continuously. In an era when our digital identity can be based on what we put on a social network site, the fact that the site can be in continuous flux quite literally means that our digital personality is never constant.

Further, although a blog might be considered a simple online diary on which users can post their thoughts, the technology of the blog is a great deal more complicated (Serfaty 2004).

The blog actually consists of two different textual areas: the post, which is usually authored by one person, and the comments, which are usually authored by many. Each comment builds upon the blog text: the complete blog grows with every comment. However, amid the many comments, the voices of many may drown a single voice out, or the author of the blog post may decide to delete it entirely. The possibility that one's unique contribution to a digital text may be ignored or removed highlights the insubstantiality of digital technology. Thus, as more and more people use digital technology like blogs, social network sites and wikis, the insubstantial temporal existence of any contribution becomes more and more likely. Users may exalt the ability of digital technology to be updatable and uniquely interactive, but the possibility of the elimination of any one contribution may also be terrifying, and put to a head the notion of a postmodern diaphanousness.

Conclusion

The realization of an unstable temporality is dangerous and debilitating: it registers as a complete break with the notion of historical identity and place. This form of negativity, however, hides the complex interactions between an audience and a complex text of the type Mittell (2006) describes. An audience's interaction with a complex narrative, their increased attention and mental reimagining, is, as Johnson (2006, 70) describes, a process of creating "cognitive changes in the popular mind." Temporal displacement highlights this notion of temporal instability that plays out in structured and narratively satisfying ways on the TV. By demonstrating the collective power of the audience to control and handle the temporal displacement of a complex narrative, television shows with temporal displacement foster an ability of the audience to tolerate temporal ambiguity. Audience members feel in control of

temporal distortion because they interact with narrative complexity, experience the affective power, and then witness the narratively satisfying closure. Temporal displacement allows the audience to come to terms with a complex, postmodern culture. This schizophrenia, exacerbated by digital technology's insubstantiality, is then tempered by the complexity audiences navigate in the television show. By demonstrating mastery over the temporality of a narrative television show, active viewers can satisfyingly return to their digital technology, with all its insubstantial temporality in check.

As we have seen, the hypermediality of the temporality on these shows coupled with the repeated jumps in time and the audience's understanding of complex narratives represents an attempt to make sense of an out-of-control temporality. Three types of temporal displacement in complex narratives contribute to this hypermediality: extensive flashback, memory temporality, and character temporality. In each of these cases, the play in and of the temporal structure of the narrative creates complexity, but the interaction of the audience with the text combined with the narrative spectacle of the resolution of these temporal displacements creates a feeling of control in the viewer. To study temporally complex narratives gives us a greater understanding not just of contemporary television, but also of the contemporary cultural moment. It forces us to rethink modes of storytelling, reception, and theorization. In an era of digital technology's reliance on impermanence, this control helps the viewer deal with the feeling of insubstantiality in a postmodern world. For active viewers of contemporary complex narratives that present temporal displacement, the experience of time does not appear as "a strict progression of cause to effect," but rather is "a big ball of wibbly wobbly, time-y wimey, stuff" (Moffatt 2007). And who would know more about that than a time traveler?

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to the editor and the anonymous reviewers for their excellent suggestions and ideas. I also want to thank Greg Bianchini for his insightful discussions about temporal displacement during the writing of this paper.

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Notes

¹ Easter Eggs are clips on DVDs that are not advertised on the box, but are hidden within the menu text of DVDs.

² Paradoxically, he only gets the list of her DVDs because Sally gives it to him later (earlier?) in 2008, which is her future. For the time traveler, however, that moment in 2008 existed in his past. Hence, he knew he would eventually escape. Time isn't linear for the time traveler.

³ This is not to say TV and radio cannot also be problematically schizophrenic, and can function as a "medium of [historical] deterrence" (see Baudrillard 1984, 50).

⁴ For a full synopsis of the season, see "Ultimate Dallas," <http://www.ultimatedallas.com/episodeguide/dreamzone.htm> (accessed 05 Sept 2009).

⁵ Never minding the fact that the show itself is fictional. As qualitative research into audience studies has shown, an audience often responds to a fictional text as if it were real if a text is emotionally real; that is, if the audience can recognize similar patterns in their own life reflected on the screen,

⁶ The conclusion of the story represents another break in traditional television temporality and format: the finale of the second season concludes the episode that concluded the first season, even though the conclusion of the first season only appeared on DVD and never aired.

⁷ This ending differs considerably from the UK version, which, as Karen Hellekson states, is more in keeping with the tone of the show — Tyler realizes he is dead in 2006 and decides to stay in 1973.