The forms of characters. Typologies, morphologies and relational systems in contemporary TV serial narrations

Sara Casoli / Ph.D Thesis Abstract[1]
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Fictional characters have demonstrated to be ubiquitous and protean entities, and it's because of the semantic slipperiness of their essence that the importance and pivotal role of these narrative elements have been neglected for a long time. Even when taken into consideration and observed through the lens of this or that approach – from Aristotle to Romanticism, from Structuralism to Postmodernism, from Cognitive Theory to Narratologies, and so on – characters still remain a theoretical challenge and a knotty object of study[2] built on the balance of two faces, a textual construction expressed by a medium, and a "quasi-persona" existing in a diegetic space.

The vagueness of the concept concerns characters in every media product, and serial TV narratives are no exception. Nevertheless, in an era dominated by the aesthetic and productive paradigm of "complex television",[3] where characters fulfil a substantial role in shaping the aesthetic layout of contemporary TV series and influencing audience participation, we have to reflect upon them. The aim of this work is to investigate characters in contemporary drama TV series produced in the USA, with the purpose of unearthing their features and specificities, as well as proposing a typology of their manifestations. In order to achieve this goal, we will rely on a methodology that merges TV and Media Studies with Narratology. In fact, in the plethora of different attitudes through which it is possible to analyse fictional beings, Post-Classical Narratology appears to be a fruitful way in order to outline those processes that generate the identity of serial characters and their characterization. In this perspective, thanks to the momentum given by the latest contributions in Narratology[4] – which takes into account cultures and societies, as well as textual and aesthetic structures – it is possible to conceive characters as *both*

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[2] Jens Eder, Fotis Jannidis and Ralph Schneider, *Characters in Fictional Worlds. Understanding Imaginary Beings in Literature, Film, and Other Media* (New York and London: De Gruyter, 2010).
[3] Jason Mittell, *Complex TV. The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).
[4] *Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis*, ed. by David Herman (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999); *Postclassical Narratology: Approaches and Analyses*, ed. by Jan Alber, Monika Fludernick (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010).

textual constructions with certain features (mediality, textuality, narrative strategies, etc.) and contextual figures, namely considering how these fictional beings act, react and behave in the storyworld. Bearing in mind this intrinsic duplicity, a suitable methodology that takes both sides into account, offering a theoretical toolkit through which we examine TV series characters and their textual and contextual (aka cultural) components, is provided by a particular branch of Post-Classical Narratology: the Neo-Formalism.[5] This approach considers as a "form" every arrangement of elements, regardless of the fact that there are textual strategies, such as narrative and figurative features, aesthetic strategies and the medium, or contextual strategies, by which we mean socio-cultural themes and issues.

We propose to examine characters in contemporary TV serial narratives as they were composed, or better, *co-formed* by different forms, both textual and socio-cultural ones, clashing with one another. To put it in other terms, we consider these characters as battlefields, where many different textual and socio-cultural forms come into contact and collide, shaping the identity of these fictional beings on the textual level and their appearance on the diegetic one. The benefit of such approach relies on the possibility of decomposing these figures into their components and forms, observing the specifities beneath the conformation of their identity and the process of characterization.

Conducting a neo-formalist analysis on contemporary TV serial characters means taking into account two distinct but interconnected generative factors of serial characters identity and characterization. On the one hand, there is morphology, which implies those elements that "internally" affect the construction of characters, from the point of view of the aesthetic materials and that of the cultural functions. Basically, the identity of a character can be considered morphologically simple, with a stable kernel of traits repeated in every instalment, or complex, with some variations operating on the identity of the character. On the other hand, there is the relationship system, which involves the placement of the character in a narrative world with specific characteristics (type of seriality, transmediality, intertextuality, transtextuality,[6] etc.) and the network it creates with other fictional beings. Here again, the relational system can be simple, with one or few characters stably performing the role of protagonist(s) and existing in tendentially closed narratives, or it can be complex, where the plenitude of interconnected storylines, even not necessarily belonging to the same series or to same narrative world, produces a turnover of different protagonists. Looking at the many characters we can experience in nowadays TV serial narratives within the neo-formalist framework, and considering their morphology and relational system, it is possible to detect some "family resemblances"[7] between them, i.e.

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[5] Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

[6] Richard Saint-Gelais, *Fictions transfuges* (Paris: Edition du Seuil, 2011).

[7] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001).

similar morphological assets and analogous ways to create relations with the narrative space and its cast of characters. When tracking these similarities, we group peculiar manifestations of serial characters into categories, thus creating a typology. Practically speaking, by crossing the two generative factors discussed above, in light of both their simplicity or complexity, we get four types of serial characters: the *stereotypical* character (both morphology and relational systems are simple), the *individualized* character (complex morphology and simple relational system), the *popular* character (simple morphology and complex relational system) and the *replicating* character (both the morphology and relational systems are complex).

Through this typology and the examination of the types composing it, we propose a "distant reading"[8] on serial characters. This view allows us to radiograph the ways they come into existence in the contemporary televisual scenario, and to consider the complexity and the manifold nature of these narrative elements as a general theoretical problem, instead of focalizing the analytical efforts on particular case studies.

[8] Franco Moretti*, La letteratura vista da lontano* (Torino: Einaudi, 2003) and *Distant Reading* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2013).