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Writing an article about television, the series and seriality, the temptation was too great: I simply had to begin by retelling the events that occurred in that infamous final episode of *The Colbys* (1985-1987). *The Colbys'* narrative premise centred on the exploits, loves, hates, and intrigues of the wealthy Colby family and other characters that entered their story space. Week after week, audiences watched as characters fell in love, fell out of love, fell into comas, were kidnapped, blackmailed, and murdered. A labyrinthine web of stories unravelled at a pace that left the day time soap story lines miles behind in the drama stakes. Then, during the final season of 1987, the ABC network announced that the show was to be cancelled. In a strategy that is, to this day, unparalleled for its sheer audacity, the writers decided to let the series go out with a bang. One of the show's main characters, Fallon Carrington Colby, the wife of Jeff Colby, had spent many seasons suffering from amnesiac episodes. In the final episode, Fallon is driven by an inner urge to take to the Californian highway in her car, as if drawn by some mysterious energy. As her family search for her (a story line that itself follows narrative paths too complex to go into), Fallon experiences 'technical difficulties' with her car, which eventually goes totally dead in the middle of the desert, miles from anywhere. Looking up at the sky, she sees fantastic lights that lure her out of her car. Then, in a scene that would do Steven Spielberg of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) and Chris Carter of *The X-Files* (1994-2002) fame proud, an enormous space ship lands, its doors open, the silhouetted figure of a spindly alien emerges, and Fallon disappears into the ship, the willing recipient of the alien's embrace. And as the space ship takes off, and the mystery of Fallon's amnesia is resolved (clearly, she had been victim to numerous alien abductions), *The Colbys* presence in television history comes to an end. This was sheer television magic!

But this wasn't the end. *The Colbys* had been a spin off of the other popular ABC series *Dynasty* (1981-1989), which had itself copied the successful CBS series *Dallas* (1978-1991). Having migrated to *The Colbys* from *Dynasty*, the producers wanted this popular character back on the earlier series, and come back she did: yes, Fallon was found again, suffering yet another amnesiac episode that was conveniently denied the fantastical conclusion provided in *The Colbys*. It was replaced instead with a rational one – Fallon was, according to doctors, suffering from a case of severe neurotic episodes. However, while relishing the virtuoso finale of *The Colbys*, audiences also did not find it too difficult to accept this alternate explanation offered by *Dynasty*, which shared a narrative reality with its spin off.¹

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If anything, the narrative scenarios of these shows reveal the extent to which television series since the 1950s have increasingly favoured an open narrative form that not only weaves into and between multiple story formations that traverse episode and series time, but that also cross over distinct television series into other spin off shows. The series (which consists of a succession of self-contained narrative episodes that progress in a sequence) and the serial (which comprises a series of episodes whose narratives resist closure and continue into the next episode(s) within the sequence) have increasingly collapsed into one another, so much so that, in more recent times it has become difficult to distinguish one form from another. Since *The Colbys* and *Dynasty*, the series format integral to television has become even more rampant, and writers and producers have become more sophisticated in juggling, dispensing of, and returning to story formations in strategic and ingenious ways that keep audiences actively engaged with the narrative universes presented.

From its inception in the 1940s, television learned a valuable formal lesson from the comic book industry: like comics, which had flourished since the creation of Superman and Batman in the late 1930s, television's fundamental logic relies heavily on the series format. By giving media consumers familiar characters and continuing storylines, it was more likely that these fictional universes could weave themselves within the everyday world of the viewer. This new medium asserted and ensured the success of what it had to offer, managing to rely especially on serial motivation that steadily expanded its market and warded off loss of audience to other media competitors. It became a successful strategy, one that the cinema experienced to its detriment during the 1950s and 1960s. However, while the series has always been integral to television, its formal properties become more extreme as it approaches the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries during which time it has succumbed to the serial format.

In an article written about the function of the serial in popular culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Roger Hagedorn² has argued that serials tend to dominate as a narrative form within a specific medium when the competition of other media becomes more prominent. Operating on a cliffhanger logic, serial narratives strategically delay closure. Instead, the reader or viewer is woven into one or multiple narrative threads that remain unresolved within one independent episode, the result being that consumers are encouraged to return for more. Considering Hagedorn's assertion that series and, in particular, the serial, tend to dominate during periods of intense media competition, it comes as no surprise that today's entertainment media are imbued with a serial structure the likes of which has not been witnessed before.

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Many of the aesthetic and formal transformations currently confronting the television series are played out against and informed by cultural and socio-economic transformations. Since the 1980s, national markets have been integrated into an expansive system of economics that spans the globe through transnational corporations whose concern for capital expands across multiple countries and multiple media.³ The conglomeration of the entertainment industry has resulted in an industry that has multiple media interests. The outcome has been new convergences between diverse entertainment forms – comic books, computer games, theme park attractions, and television programs. All these configurations have formal repercussions. Even when part of the same conglomerate, subsidiary companies must still vie for audience attention by offering their own media-specific experiences, and they attempt to ensure success and a faithful audience by relying on a serial logic. This market is intensely competitive and each medium struggles to draw attention to its presence. Television – like the other media it competes with – is a dynamic being that has had to redefine itself in the midst of intense competition. So, where do we begin in mapping out the nature of these transformations? One pattern is certain: the television series has become more excessively serial-like. The ‘relationship between economics and aesthetics’ evident in the formal properties of entertainment media: economics gives rise to new aesthetics and to new formal patterns⁴ – evident, in this instance, in the shape of serial narrative formations. Reflecting the multicentered rationale of the economic infrastructure that supports it, narrative ‘meaning’ becomes increasingly reliant upon an audience that is capable of traversing multiple ‘texts’ in order to give coherence to an independent episode within a series. As Omar Calabrese explains, the result is a ‘polycentric’, open structure.⁵

In *The Open Work* Umberto Eco states that the ‘theory of the open work is none other than a poetics of serial thought’ which is ‘open and polyvalent’.⁶ The poetics of the open work is characteristic of our contemporary era, an era that Eco was to characterize as the ‘neo-baroque’.⁷ It is the articulation of the neo-baroque aesthetics inherent within the television series as serial that concern me in this essay. Whereas structural thought is concerned with discovering and tracing signs back to an original source, serial thought develops along alternate paths: it is intent on destabilizing the singular, linear paths that are familiar to classical, Aristotelian narrative patterns – Eco’s ‘structural thought’. Instead, it is concerned with form itself, with what Deleuze has called the ‘infinite work in process’.⁸ The formal logic of the neo-baroque narrative (Eco’s ‘serial thought’) is to resist classical attention to linearity and closure. Writing in the 1960s, Eco was more concerned with the seriality typical of modernist traditions of writing and in the possibilities inherent in interpreting a work ‘in a way that differs from the intentions of the author’.⁹ In Eco’s Foreword to Calabrese’s *Neo-Baroque: a Sign of the Times* he states that, in the 1960s, openness was a phenomenon found in

the avant-garde but extraneous to the messages circulating in mass media. However, 'Since the 1980s the distance between the avant-garde and mass media has closed. We are no longer dealing with works and interpreters but with processes, flows and interpretative drifts that concern not single works, but the totality of messages that circulate in the area of communication'.¹⁰ Clearly, this shift that Eco locates is one that is aligned with the phenomenon of postmodernism. In this essay, however, I follow the lead of Omar Calabrese who embraces the neo-baroque and the postmodern as kindred spirits. Like Calabrese, I suggest that the neo-baroque (as the late twentieth-early twenty-first century manifestation of its more famous seventeenth century baroque counterpart) provides a more focused method with which to analyze the formal properties that are inherent to postmodernism. It is a specifically neo-baroque spatial logic that is embedded within the postmodern that remains the primary point of reference. The central characteristic of the neo-baroque that informs the analysis that follows is the lack of respect for the limits of the frame. Closed narrative forms associated with the classical are replaced by neo-baroque open structures that favour the movement of the serial – the 'infinite work in process'.

As I have argued elsewhere¹¹, the baroque is not merely a specific period situated within the seventeenth century (its traditional, temporal home), but a formal quality that crosses the boundaries of historical periodisation.¹² Formally reflecting the open and multifarious nature of the redefined entertainment industry, the protean forms in the television series reveal a fascinating metamorphosis from a closed, structural form to an open neo-baroque form that displays 'a loss of entirety, totality, and system in favour of instability, polydimensionality, and change'.¹³ While cultural theorists such as Martin Jay and Christine Buci-Glucksmann¹⁴ have also liberated the baroque from its historical confines, they have persisted in understanding the baroque as a form primarily associated with the visual – or, more precisely, the spectacular. However, the inherent 'madness of vision' that Buci-Glucksmann associates with the baroque is equally manifest as a 'madness' of narrative formations. The seriality and polycentrism that began to emerge in television shows from the 1950s with increased fervour is typical of a shift towards a neo-baroque attitude toward narrative space. Henri Focillon, for example, has stated that baroque forms

pass into an undulating continuity where both beginning and end are carefully hidden... [The baroque reveals] 'the system of the series' – a system composed of discontinuous elements sharply outlined, strongly rhythmical and... [that] eventually becomes 'the system of the labyrinth', which, by means of mobile synthesis, stretches itself out in a realm of glittering movement...¹⁵

Neo-baroque narratives draw the audience into potentially infinite or, at least, multiple directions that rhythmically recall what Focillon labels the 'system of the series', or the 'system of the labyrinth'. While the porosity of narrative form that is the result of seriality has been present throughout television's history, it was not until the 1950s and especially the 1960s that the serial became more prominent as a narrative system within popular culture. It is television, in particular, that had a fundamental role to play in familiarizing audiences with serial form. While television turned to the series as a strategy that could maintain a constant audience, its lesson, in turn, came to dominate the entertainment industry on a grander scale. Evaluating the development of the series within the context of television, Calabrese outlines the evolving polycentrism of five neo-baroque narrative prototypes.¹⁶ Significantly, as each prototype moves progressively from the 1950s towards the 1980s the polycentrism becomes far more evident in the form of story arcs and multiple storylines that unravel within and beyond single episodes and, eventually, across the series whole, revealing a shift in preference for the series as serial. The analysis that follows is greatly indebted to Calabrese's ideas, but, in addition to diagrammatically displaying each prototype, I will also move beyond the 1980s to consider the ways in which Calabrese's model has transformed over the last two decades. Specifically, whereas Calabrese understands the movement from prototypes 1 to 5 as a linear and evolving one (with points of overlap occurring when one prototype is being replaced by the other), it will be argued that, since the 1980s, all five prototypes have returned and co-exist. As will become clearer below, while dominant prototype patterns remain distinct, the tendency in contemporary television series has been to also blur the boundaries by sharing characteristics with other prototypes.

Figure 1: The First Prototype – Distinct episodes with common characters but no overall series narrative

For Calabrese, the first prototype embodies the series as adopted by television in the late 1950s and 60s. Including television shows such as *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957), *The Honeymooners* (1955-1956), *The Adventures of Rin Tin Tin* (1954-1959), *Star Trek* (1966-1969), and the earlier seasons of *Get Smart* (1965-1970), within the first prototype each episode repeats the same main characters and remains self-contained, sacrificing overall serial development for the sake of the closed, self-sustained narrative episode. In this sense, each episode within the series is influenced by and contains within it the classical (Eco's structural) form embodied in the cinema by the classical Hollywood paradigm.¹⁷ If we consider classical narrative forms as

being contained by the limits of the frame (as manifested in continuity, linearity, and 'beginnings and endings'), then the perforation of the frame – the hidden beginnings and endings that Focillon speaks of – are typical of the neo-baroque. Classical systems remain centred, ensuring narrative clarity and symmetry of organization and closure. A complete story is enclosed by each episode, and no serial effect is produced because no episode story branches beyond or reveals an awareness of events occurring in prior episodes. Nevertheless, seriality is implied in the repetition of characters and narrative patterns beyond single episodes. Diagrammatically, the first prototype may be visualized as a series of distinct narratives (the ellipses) that multiply themselves as the series progresses [Figure 1]. Each episode's connection to the series is reflected in the partial containment provided by the open-ended rectangle, which then repeats itself as the next season of series is aired.

While Calabrese suggests that this first prototype dominated in the earlier period of the television series' history, more recently there has been a return to this formal structure – but with variations. The NBC shows *Law and Order* (1990-), *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* (1999-), *Dragnet* (2002-), *Law and Order: Criminal Intent* (2000-), *CSI* (2000-) and *CSI: Miami* (2002-) typify this structure (although, as I will suggest below, *Law and Order: Criminal Intent*, *CSI* and its spin off series primarily succumb to the logic of the fourth prototype, while also occasionally crossing over into prototype 3). As is the case with the classical narrative familiar to the cinema, each episode places emphasis on goal-oriented characters, and a causal story structure that presents the viewer with a distinct sense of a beginning, middle, and an end. In the case of *Law & Order*, for example, the show begins with the discovery of a murdered victim. Enter the 'Law' and the episode narrative goal: to determine who committed the crime and to see that justice is done. Enter 'Order', the driven District Attorneys and their assistants who argue on behalf of the people, and who seek narrative closure by ensuring that justice prevails. Often, justice does not prevail, but happy endings are not always a prerequisite for narrative closure.

In *Law & Order* it is the accumulation of stories contained within distinct episodes that are important, which possibly explains the continued success of the show despite the frequent replacement of main characters (and the actors who play them) that have passed through the series. As is typical of prototype 1, little or no information about the main characters is provided to the viewer beyond its significance to the unravelling episode story-line. One of the few exceptions is Detective Lennie Briscoe: in the twelve seasons this character has been in the show, the small amount of information the viewer has managed to glean about his personal life is that he served in the Armed Forces, he is a recovering alcoholic, he was investigated for corruption but was cleared, and that his daughter was killed by a drug dealer.¹⁸ However,

while the shows within this prototype 'frame' their narrative universes within the confines of the episode format (and ensure that the self-contained stories presented are devoid of diverging stories that leak beyond episode time) a neo-baroque polycentricism is reflected in the way further episodes persistently rupture this frame by endlessly multiplying it and reopening it in new story scenarios, and new crimes that must be solved in the following episodes. In a sense, that which emerges is the multiplication of classical narratives; narratives that, through their duplication and extension, create a dynamic and rhythmic interrelation and ultimate transformation into a neo-baroque logic.

Additionally, comparing 1950s and 1960s versions of this prototype to the more recent variation found in examples like *Law & Order*, it is clear that neo-baroque concern with open form is more rampant. Over the last decade, the addition to the schema involves the further rupture of the classical narration that typifies the first prototype – not only through episodic cadence, but also through a slippage of story-framing elements that occurs through the removal or introduction of additional characters. No longer are the main characters stable and consistent from episode to episode. In *Law & Order's* thirteen year history, a stream of District Attorneys, Assistant District Attorneys, and Detectives have appeared in the show. This character exchange opens up the structure of the series further by suggesting the existence of narrative spaces outside the episode and series' reality. The revised version of the first prototype returns to the earlier form but, in the process, initiates a neo-baroque motion that is even more fluid. The current variation of the first prototype abandons the stricter insistence on classical framing – a fact revealed in the serial-like rotation and replacement of characters/actors across the series, or in the way episodic closure is occasionally ruptured by also bleeding into other prototypes (as will be discussed below).

Furthermore, the character John 'Munch' (played by Richard Belzer) was originally introduced in *Homicide: Life on the Streets* (1993-1999). Munch has opened the form of the first prototype further still. *Law & Order* and *Homicide: Life on the Streets* – both NBC series – began a number of cross over episodes that usually commenced with a crime being committed in one show's reality, which then required collaboration between the New York and Baltimore crime fighters. Beginning stories in one show, then continuing them later in the week in the other is not only clever marketing (it increases the possibility that a viewer hooked on one of the series, but not the other, may become an avid viewer of the other NBC series as well), it also reflects a marked neo-baroque attitude towards space. The character who consistently appeared in these crossover episodes was Detective John Munch, and when *Homicide: Life on the Streets* was cancelled in 1999, in addition to making cameos (as Munch) in television shows like *The Beat* (a Barry Levinson and Tom Fontana collaboration that followed in the wake of

Homicide in 2000) and *The X-Files* (in an episode that retold an earlier adventure of the Lone Gunmen), Munch's character transferred from Baltimore to New York, becoming one of the main detectives in the new *Law & Order: SVU*.¹⁹ While pre-80's television series often indulged in crossovers in order to introduce viewers to spin off shows and their characters,²⁰ in the case of the more recent variation reflected in Munch's roaming tendencies (or Ellenor's in *The Practice* [1997-]), there are more radical formal repercussions in that actual story arcs develop, which abandon episodic closure for temporary serial development both within the one show *and* across other television shows that have their own distinctive story and character realities. As an example of the post-1980s variation of Prototype 1, *Law & Order* reveals the rhythmic and polycentric organization that is typical of neo-baroque aesthetics. While reflecting a classical preference for framing the narrative within the borders of episode time, the post-1980s variant of the first prototype is more prone to destabilise the classical closure that is more typical of the 1950s and 60s: the neo-baroque delight with open form is more prominent.

Figure 2: The Second Prototype – self-contained episodes, entire series has single narrative goal.

In the second prototype – early examples of which include *Zorro* (1957-1961), *Ivanhoe* (1958-1959) and *Gilligan's Island* (1964-1967) – complete stories are contained within a single episode, however, the entire series is also constructed according to a single narrative progression that looks towards a final resolution. The form becomes slightly more open in that, while each episode is autonomous, it constitutes one episode in an entire series journey. In *Gilligan's Island*, for example, the series' narrative goal is to get the 'fearless crew' and passengers off the island and back home, suggesting an open form that gives each episode a sense of serial flow – one that leads towards one structuring goal. Each episode, however, also consists of the various autonomous adventures of Gilligan and company, with few episodes referring to story events or character developments occurring in prior episodes. In the second prototype, the classical and baroque begin to intersect more forcefully: while a serial narrative structure is initiated, the open form of the baroque is contained both by the self contained narratives that are resolved at the conclusion of each episode, and by the overall narrative goal of the series which implies (eventual) closure (even if, as was the case in *Gilligan's Island*, the goal of rescue was not to be achieved until the television movie was released nearly two decades after the series was cancelled). The episode connection to an overall series

narrative is reflected in *Figure 2* in the arrows that suggest each episode is both enclosed and continuing.

As is the case with the first prototype, there are fewer examples of this form once television moves into the 1970s. Already during the 1960s the drive of the television series is towards an increasingly more open format, one that moves steadily towards a seemingly chaotic 'madness' of narrative formation. For example, *I Dream of Jeannie* (1965-1970) begins as a typical example of this second prototype. Jeannie's goal is to marry her master in the overall series progression, while each episode involves the singular, self-contained situations that Jeannie, Major Nelson and Major Healy find themselves in. The closer Jeannie gets to attaining her goal the more the episodic form begins to break down. Story arcs that continue across numerous episodes become more and more frequent (for example, the story arc dealing with the discovery of Jeannie's birthday, the one covering her master's pilgrimage to Bagdad, or that of the wedding itself). By the time *I Dream of Jeannie* reaches its final seasons, it slips into the logic of prototype three (see below).

Television shows today that still adhere to this format are most often found in game shows or reality television series like *Survivor* (2000-), *The Bachelor* (2001-), and *Big Brother* (2000-). The overall series goal is clear – to be the final survivor (and win lots of cash), to be chosen as the bachelor's partner (or to have the option of winning lots of cash), to be last out to the Big Brother house (and win lots of cash). Each episode consists of formulaic tasks or rituals such as the struggle for reward and immunity in *Survivor*, and each series ends by eliminating contestants at the end of each episode (or, in the case of *Big Brother*, at the end of the week). *Star Trek: Voyager* (1995-2001) and *Monk* (2002-) also contain elements of the second prototype, however, as is typical of television shows of the last two decades, there is a general tendency towards slippage between a number of prototypes. In the case of *Star Trek: Voyager*, for example, the series goal is reminiscent of *Gilligan's Island*: the fearless crew are lost in space, millions of miles away from their solar system, and the series goal is to find their way home. *Star Trek: Voyager*, however, also slips into the third prototype in also favouring a more open structure that can allow the story to escape the limits of the episode. Similarly, the goal of Monk in *Monk* is to discover who murdered his wife and daughter, however, as will be revealed, the show also succumbs to the logic of the fourth prototype.

Figure 3: The Third Prototype – self-contained episodes, an expanding series time, and character progression throughout the series.

In the late 60s, the series and serial structure opened up further, following a movement away from self-contained episodes, to episodes that increasingly weave their stories across the series as a whole, producing a serial pattern familiar to the story arc. The movement is from a dominant closed order (prototypes 1 and 2), which contains elements of a more open, neo-baroque, to a dominant neo-baroque order, which contains elements of the classical. The initiating impulse of a more consistently neo-baroque open form is found in the third prototype that Calabrese suggests is marked by *Bonanza* (1959-1973), especially as it developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As he explains, the innovative elements of this series lay in the relationship between episode time (which was closed, contained, and concluded), series time (which was open, had no narrative goal, and presented an infinite time frame), and narrated time (which was also open in that characters developed and there was a greater flow and dependence on preceding episodes, thus reflecting features of the serial). Connections between episodes become more pronounced and, as *Figure 3* suggests, narratives become more reliant on the stories of prior episodes. In *Bonanza* we find a reflection of what Calabrese states is the American television series' capacity to simultaneously produce an episodic, open, baroque form, and a closed, classical form. This combined state of classical within the baroque is typical of many contemporary entertainment stories.²¹ As mentioned above, *I Dream of Jeannie* transforms into this prototype in the later seasons, as does *Get Smart* (which, early on, was more typical of prototype 1).

This form of neo-baroque seriality has continued to dominate and is found today in numerous cop shows like *NYPD Blue* (1993-), and *Homicide: Life on the Streets*, investigative-focused series like *Crossing Jordan* (2001-) and *Picket Fences* (1992-1996), and science fiction shows like *Star Trek: the Next Generation* (1987-1994) and *Stargate SG-1* (1997-). Even *The Simpsons* (1989-), which has strong echoes of the first prototype (in its focus on self-contained episodes and, generally, its lack of character progression – let's face it, baby Maggie has not aged a day in the show's fourteen year life span) crosses into the territory of this third prototype in its occasional 'serial' developments of some story lines – such as the death of Ned Flanders wife and his subsequent search for a new partner, the continuing episodes that see Homer's brother appearing in the show, or the flowering romance between Principal Skinner and Edna Krabappel.

Figure 4: The Fourth Prototype – Series as variation on a theme producing a palimpsest effect

Prototype 4 introduces yet another variation to neo-baroque seriality. Calabrese cites *Columbo* (1971-1993) as the series (actually, a series of tv movies) that introduced the fourth prototype in the 1970s. The fourth schema relies on the technique of 'variation on a theme' and on the personality of the main character (in this case, Columbo, played by Peter Falk). There is no overall series story that closes the show's form and, like examples in the third prototype, the series could continue indefinitely. More recently, shows that have adopted this form include *Law & Order: Criminal Intent* (2001-), *Monk* (2002-), *CSI* (2000-) and *CSI: Miami* (2002-). Episodes build upon the model established in prior episodes. The episode narratives remain the same (a crime is committed in the beginning and the investigators solve it), yet different in that there are always slight variations in terms of the method of the crime, and in how the main characters expose the criminal. Unlike its predecessors *Law & Order* and *Law & Order: SVU*, *Law & Order: Criminal Intent* begins with a crime that more often than not reveals who the killer is. Enter Detective Robert Goren, played by Vincent d'Onofrio and his partner Detective Alexandra Eames (Kathryn Erbe). The show is also increasingly becoming known by its adopted subtitle 'The Vincent d'Onofrio Show' for good reasons: viewers watch in avid fascination week after week as d'Onofrio surprises, teases and wins over the viewer through virtuoso performances that would do Columbo and Sherlock Holmes proud. The awkward and, at times, disturbing stances and head angles that disorient the suspects, the Holmes-like investigative deductions that lead him to expose the perpetrator, the episodes of sheer brilliance in which he stuns his diegetic audience with his encyclopaedic knowledge – all are presented week after week with subtle variations, twists and surprises, always making the viewer wonder 'what will he do next?'.²² A similar virtuosity is evident in *Monk*, but in this case, the investigator is not only brilliant – he also suffers from an extreme case of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. The tactic of outperforming and offering variations on a theme appears, in this instance, in the way *Monk* attempts to solve a crime while also trying to negotiate a world around him that is full of germs, chaotic events, and people who insist on shaking hands.

CSI and *CSI: Miami* are slightly different in that the virtuosity comes from the stylistic properties of television production. The performance here is that of the special effect that offers astounding insight into the crimes. Crime

scene investigators Nick Stokes and Gil Grissom discuss what happens to a victim when he is shot through the heart, and there is a cut to a bullet being fired, the camera following its motion at a ferocious speed, then, it punctures human flesh and plummets towards the targeted organ, which we see pumping blood through arteries: as the bullet ruptures the heart, the flow through the arteries slows down then, eventually, comes to a standstill. The virtuosity comes from making visible to the viewer that which is invisible to the naked eye.

In the fourth prototype, each episode therefore functions as a self-contained fragment, but to recognize the variation the audience must have an understanding of how crimes were committed and solved in pre-existing episodes. Each variation of a theme repeats previous episode patterns in order to out-perform them. Diagrammatically, the dynamic interaction between episode fragments and the series whole may be viewed as producing overlapping functions similar to prototype 3 (*Figure 4*). However, rather than episodes intersecting in ways that suggest narrative extension, the fourth prototype suggests a multi-layered structure that resembles a palimpsest. Each additional episode lays itself over prior episodes in an attempt to perfect on predecessors and, partially at least, erase their presence through out performance. An integral aspect of audience reception involves active participation in an aesthetic of repetition through the principle of variation on a theme. Integral to the strategy of 'variation of a theme' is the neo-baroque principle of virtuosity. Virtuosity and variation on a theme rely on the active engagement of an audience familiar with prior episodes in the series. In addition to simply repeating, virtuosity relies on varying and out-performing the characterisations, narratives, or performances of its predecessors. Through virtuosity these examples aim at creating their own centres and perfecting their forms while still maintaining a relationship to a multi-centred narrative universe.²³

Figure 5: The Fifth Prototype – continuing episodes and multiple narrative formations

The fifth prototype, which is without doubt the most dominant serial form in television series today, has also become a significant form in contemporary entertainment media in general. It is characterized by dynamic narrative

structures with multiple centres. As a prototype more typical of the post 1970s, however, closed narrative formations are unsettled more dramatically, taking the third prototype's form to extreme. Calabrese suggests that it was the television show *Dallas* that popularized this form. In its wake, however, *Dallas* has been followed by shows as diverse as *Hill Street Blues* (1981-1987), *Miami Vice* (1984-1989), *The X-Files*, *Millennium* (1996-1999), *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (1993-1999), *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002), *The Sopranos* (1999-), *Alias* (2001-), *Six Feet Under* (2001-), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and *Angel* (1999-2004). The episode borders of these series remain in continual states of flux encompassing aspects of all prior prototypes. They are the series as serial in that throughout the entire series the viewer becomes embroiled in the changing lives and stories of multiple characters. These series therefore retain a sense of historicity and progress through the focus on characters that develop from episode to episode. Often, as with *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under*, the series time is potentially infinite with no overall narrative target in place. In the case of *The X-files* traits of the second prototype are revealed in the show's respective goals of attaining the 'Truth'.

Additionally, throughout the fifth prototype no stable, singular, linear framework dominates [Figure 5]. The shows are riddled with multiple narrative formations that stress polycentrism within the series itself. While one story may be introduced and resolved in a single episode, or across a series of episodes, other narrative situations may open up, extending the stories of multiple characters beyond a single episode and across the entire series. For example, while *Buffy the Vampire Slayer's* 'Hush' episode dealt with a self-contained episode storyline in which frightening 'gentlemen' in suits arrived in Sunnydale and, in addition to ensuring that Sunnydale citizen's lost their capacity to speak, some also lost their hearts – literally. While this story was introduced and concluded within a single episode, the serialised narrative dealing with Buffy and Riley's relationship and the revelation of their respective secrets (Buffy is the Slayer and Riley is an agent of the Initiative) wove its way through numerous episodes, coming to a head, ironically, in the 'Hush' episode that is about silence.

In examples of the last two decades, the episode fragment and the series whole co-exist and interact in ways that suggest more complex neo-baroque relationships, especially when compared to the interaction between fragment and whole that dominated in the 1950's and 60's versions of the first and second prototypes. Episode and series borders are more readily ruptured, in the process creating a situation that requires that the viewer functions like a puzzle solver or labyrinth traverser: in order to understand the meaning of the whole, it is also necessary to piece together and understand the relevance of the multiple and divergent story fragments that constitute the whole. For example, consider the convoluted, multiple story lines that

diverge and connect in *Alias*, which centre on Sydney Bristow, an agent of SD-6, a top-secret division of the CIA, which turns out not to be a division of the CIA (and the good guys) but of the Alliance (the bad guys), the discovery of which then convinces Syd to become a secret agent of the real CIA (under the command of the very handsome Vaughan), and thus a double agent, which she later discovers her father (Jack) also is, as was her mother (who Syd believed was dead, but who later turned up very much alive), though, as Syd discovers later, was really working for the bad guys. Or was she? Add to this overall series story line a combination of single episode story lines and (more frequently) multiple episode story arcs that rely heavily of cliffhanger tactics, and we have an extremely dense series of story scenarios that are mind-numbingly difficult to make sense of if you have not been an avid viewer of the series from its beginning.

In addition to the complex seriality that extends across episodes and seasons within series such as *Alias*, since the 1980s further transformations have occurred within the fifth prototype that complicate the relationship and articulation of story fragments and the series whole. Television has begun to experiment with the serial, and the result has been some creative scenarios that complicate narrative processes further still. The popular series *24* (2001-), is an interesting case in point. The title '24' places a limitation and goal end point to the show, but the show returns each season for a further 24 hours. In addition to presenting the multiple story lines that diverge and intersect and which are typical of the fifth prototype, the variation of the split screen technique also introduces a new aspect to the serial. The show does not only reveal its serial story formations in a singular, linear sequence where one story action is followed by the other. Often, up to four alternate story lines are onscreen simultaneously. The effect of seeing multiple events occurring concurrently, obviously, amplifies the suspense and impels the spectator in their desire to ride the conflict until resolution is ultimately attained, but it also shifts the presentation to a literal multi-linearity – a fact that highlights yet another articulation of neo-baroque polycentric logic, opening up narrative form in ways that are more indicative of the hypertextual/hypermediated form familiar to the computer screen.

The show *Boomtown* (2001-) experiments with multi-linearity from an alternate perspective. *Boomtown* implements a storytelling device that differs to other examples in this prototype. Drawing on elements of prototype 1, each episode is self contained in that the focus is on a single crime (although, aspects of the main characters' lives slip ever so gently across episodes), however, it serializes its structure from *within* the episode: each crime is revisited from the perspectives of a combination of characters. In the fourth episode of the season one ('Reelin' in the Years'), for example, the show begins with the arrest of a woman who, it is believed, killed a policeman 26 years earlier in a bank robbery. Two of the robbers were shot, one was later arrested, and 26 years later, Nora Jean Flannery (real name

Sharon Lofton) was apprehended while going for a jog. We witness the arrest, first from the perspective of the patrol officers Ray, then Joel, Fearless and finally the suspect Nora Jean Flannery – each view point being signaled by the inclusion of the characters' names onscreen as their version begins. In the second part of the episode, a series of characters retell their version of the day of the bank robbery 26 years earlier when the off duty cop was killed. The tale begins with Kevin van Horn (who was wrongfully jailed for the murder), then details are added to the story through the perspectives of Andrea (a reporter), Paul (the dead cop's partner), Tom (patrol officer and son of Paul), Victor (the dead cop) and finally Sharon Renee Lofton (the killer) who insists she did not pull the trigger while the visuals show us otherwise. Revealing overtones of the fourth prototype's 'variation on a theme', the variations embodied in the retellings are now played out within the single episode.

Episodes such as those found more recently in the fifth prototype are indicative of a complexity that is driven by a concern with formal experimentation with the narrative possibilities of the series. The neo-baroque aesthetics that Calabrese assigned to pre-1990s television series has become more intense, revealing a dynamism that tests story boundaries to the extreme. When writing in the late 1980s, the five prototypes that Calabrese defined tended to develop from the 1950s in a sequential order from prototype to prototype (with points of co-existence). As has been argued, however, earlier prototypes have returned in the last two decades, revising their previous structural logic by embracing the formal properties of other prototypes, while still adhering to the dominant rules of their own system. Revealing a neo-baroque attitude to space, the co-existence of the prototypes creates greater slippage between previously distinct systems: episode stories continue into other episodes and across series, prototypes merge their rules with those of other prototypes, distinct television shows intersect their storylines with other television shows, and characters from one show traverse their series boundaries by travelling to other television series spaces, sometimes returning home or, sometimes, continuing on new journeys within an alternate narrative reality. All the while, the borders keep stretching as the series and serial continue to redefine their parameters. For Deleuze, the labyrinthine complexity that characterizes baroque form is visualized by the metaphor of the fold, or, rather, endless folds that double over one another in continuous motions. The world of the baroque fold is a world of 'converging series' and each fold expresses only 'one portion of the series' that converges into the next.²⁴ The neo-baroque example of the television series reveals a convergence of folds that continue to multiply. Given the increased emphasis on the cross media development of the stories of shows like *Alias*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Law and Order*, and *Star Trek* into computer games, novels, comic books, theme park attractions and fan fiction, the seriality inherent to television will need further revision. Cross media narrativizations are, in some instances, becoming important

disseminators of story information within the franchise as it disperses its form not only across the series of its own medium, but across multiple media. Eco's 'poetics of serial thought' must undergo yet another re-evaluation. But that's another story.

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Notes

1 . In fact, this cliffhanger ending was given some kind of logical closure. The same

could not be said for the 1985 season of *Dallas*, when audiences were thrust into a convoluted narrative serial web the likes of which is yet to be outdone. So confused was this narrative that it has gone down in history as defying the spatio-temporal logic that a shared narrative reality should adhere to. Of course, I refer to the 1984-5 season of *Dallas*: Bobby Ewing had been murdered (and his alter-ego, Patrick Duffy quit the show). The entire 1985-6 season continued without the popular Bobby, that is, until the final episode when, in the final scene, Pam Ewing, Bobby's wife, woke up and, cut to the bath room, Bobby was revealed having a shower. As every tv-fie knows, the next season began with the revelation that Pam had only *dreamed* that Bobby had died – in fact, she had dreamed the story events of the entire previous season. The only problem with this narrative revelation was that *Dallas* had also been responsible for further extending its narrative universe into another spin off series in 1979. That series was *Knots Landing* (1979-1993), and in the "Bobby is dead" season of *Dallas*, the characters and storylines of *Knots Landing* had responded to the tragedy as if it were a real event. The narrative repercussions were, in the end, impossible to untangle in order to give them any semblance of an agreed upon reality.

2. See Roger Hagedorn "Technology and Economic Exploitation", 1988, pp. 4-12, for a detailed overview on the development and economic motivations of early series and serial forms.

3. See Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi, "Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue", 1998, pp.55-57.

4 . Justin Wyatt, *High Concept*, 1994, p.160.

5. Omar Calabrese, *Neo-Baroque*, 1992.

6. Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, 1989, p.218.

7. Eco in Omar Calabrese, *Neo-Baroque*, 1992, pp.viii-ix.

8. Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold*, 1993, p.34.

9. Eco in Omar Calabrese, *Neo-Baroque*, 1992, p.ix.

10. Eco in Omar Calabrese, *Neo-Baroque*, 1992, p.ix.

11. Angela Ndalani, *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics*, 2004.

12. To distinguish the current articulation of the baroque from its earlier variation, I opt for Calabrese's preference of the term 'neo-baroque'. Omar Calabrese, *Neo-Baroque*, 1992, p.14.

13. Eco in Omar Calabrese, *Neo-Baroque*, 1992, p.xii.

14. Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 1994; Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *La Folie du Voir*, 1986 and

Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Baroque Reason*, 1994.

15. Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms*, 1992, p.67.

16. Calabrese discusses the five televisual serial prototypes in his chapter "Rhythm and Repetition", ch.2.

17. Classical formal traits have also been acknowledged as features that dominate the cinema of the classical Hollywood period of c.1910s-1950. For Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, characteristics of this cinema's classic aesthetic norms included a narrative structure that reflected closure through its cyclical nature, which shifts from equilibrium, disequilibrium and narrative conflict, to the reestablishment of equilibrium and a return to a status quo. See in particular, David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art*, 1993 and David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 1985.

18. A similar minor revelation of character pasts slips into the episode reality of *CSI*, for example, in the occasional mention made of Catherine Willow's past life as a stripper. Other similar serial narratives emerge but are never permitted to overtake the self-contained episode story.

19. Other such crossovers occurred between *Ally McBeal* and *The Practice*, *Law & Order: SVU* and *The Practice*, *Boston Public* and *The Practice*. Unlike Dick Wolf's *Law and Order* dramas, David Kelly's productions favour a more overt serial form familiar to the third and fifth prototypes.

20. For example, *The Danny Thomas Show* (1953-1965) introduced audiences to *The Andy Griffith Show* (1960-1968); *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962-1971), crossed over with *Petticoat Junction* (1963-1970), and *Green Acres* (1965-1971); *Adam 12* (1968-1975) with *Dragnet* (1967-1970); *Happy Days* introduced Laverne and Shirley from *Laverne and Shirley*; *The Six Million Dollar Man* (1974-1978) and *The Bionic Woman* (1976-1978); and *Soap* (1977-1981) and *Benson* 1979-1986).

21. Calabrese rejects Focillon's evolutionary model of distinct systems, stating instead that the classical and baroque are found throughout the history of art, co-existing with one another, with one system often dominating over the other.

22. *Law & Order: Criminal Intent* also slips out of the fourth and into the third prototype on occasion, particular in the way the show taunts the viewer with Goren's past and family history.

23. The strategies of the fourth prototype have also become a feature of blockbuster film sequels.

24. Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold*, 1993, p.50.

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