

## Flashbacks in Netflix Original TV Series (2013–2017): Predominant Categories, Formal Features, and Semantic Effects

JOSÉ ANTONIO PLANES  
Universidad de Medellín, Colombia

ALBERTO N. GARCÍA  
Universidad de Navarra, Spain

ERNESTO PÉREZ-MORÁN  
Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain

This article presents a quantitative and qualitative analysis of formal and semantic trends of the flashback in Netflix original drama series between 2013 and 2017. The purpose is to determine whether such temporal digressions are commonplace to develop a better understanding of the evolution of television storytelling in the streaming era. The method applied involves a scene-by-scene quantitative analysis of temporality in 33 pilot episodes, an original methodology in television narratology. This is followed by a theoretical definition of the five categories of flashback: delimited, expository, undefined, independent, and oneiric. Tables displaying the data support the results of the study. The subsequent discussion combines the data with a qualitative analysis to identify patterns in how Netflix dramas juxtapose the five categories of flashbacks. Three conclusions are offered: the prevalence of temporal disruptions; the wide variety of flashback categories appearing in Netflix drama series; and the formal simplicity using these tropes.

*Keywords:* narrative, Netflix, narratology, flashback, television, serial

“I’ve always loved getting clean” (Kohan, Friedman, & Trim, 2013, 0:13), begins Piper’s voice-over, over a scene showing her mother washing her in the kitchen sink when she was a baby. “I love baths” (Kohan et al., 2013, 0:16), she continues, as we cut to a shot of her as a little girl all lathered in soap, this time in a bathtub. “I love showers” (Kohan et al., 2013, 0:20), she adds, and now we see her as an adult, naked in the shower, kissing Alex. “It’s my happy place” (Kohan et al., 2013, 0:29), she concludes, over another shot showing her romping in a tub with her boyfriend. In just 20 seconds, the spectator has been taken to four idyllic moments of the past that the protagonist recalls with wistful longing. Then suddenly a shrill whistle blows, and the sharp contrast between the happy memories of

---

José Antonio Planes: [jplanes@udemedellin.edu.co](mailto:jplanes@udemedellin.edu.co)

Alberto N. García: [albgarcia@unav.es](mailto:albgarcia@unav.es)

Ernesto Pérez-Morán: [ernesper@ucm.es](mailto:ernesper@ucm.es)

Date submitted: 2021-11-18

Copyright © 2022 (José Antonio Planes, Alberto N. García, and Ernesto Pérez-Morán). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at <http://ijoc.org>.

the past and the harsh reality of the present is revealed: Piper washing herself in a squalid, ugly shower in the women's prison she has been sent to for drug trafficking. Thus begins *Orange Is the New Black* (Kohan, 2013), an emblematic series for the streaming platform founded by Reed Hastings. The series revolves around Piper Chapman, an upper-class New Yorker in her 30s who is sentenced to 15 months in a federal minimum-security women's prison. This series was released in July 2013 as one of Netflix's first original productions. It is also the 40-minute fiction series with the most episodes on the platform, and one of its most popular and critically acclaimed.

The opening minute just described serves as an example of the importance that temporal complexity has acquired in contemporary seriality. As Mittell (2015) observes, the landscape of television production has become a place "where complex and innovative storytelling can succeed both creatively and economically, while a series with a safe, conventional approach can become a commercial failure" (p. 2). This does not necessarily mean that narrative complexity and innovation are inextricably associated with the use of time jumps, but it does mean that a narratological analysis could shed some light on creative patterns and aesthetic trends. This type of approach has acquired even greater relevance now that streaming platforms have boosted the consumption of television series, turning the small screen into the global benchmark for narrative entertainment—especially given that the COVID-19 pandemic forced the closure of movie theatres (see Horeck, 2021; Johnson & Dempsey, 2020; Miklos, 2020).

For this analysis, we have chosen series produced by one of the most popular streaming platforms in the world today. Expanding on its role in series distribution and consumption (Lobato, 2019) with the release of *House of Cards* (Willimon, 2013) in February 2013, Netflix began streaming series produced exclusively for its platform. The number of Netflix's own titles grew exponentially in the years that followed, and it soon became the platform with the most original programming, by a huge margin: In June 2020, an analysis by the streaming aggregator Reelgood identified 674 original series produced by Netflix since its foundation, well above the 190 by HBO Max and the 134 by Prime Video (Griffith, 2020).

Thus, tying together the global popularity of the streaming service with our interest in narratology (which we consider a key field for analyzing television storytelling), this article offers a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the use of flashbacks in original series streamed by Netflix between 2013 and 2017. We chose this period for two main reasons. First, we wanted a fixed time span that would allow us to analyze the beginnings of Netflix's original productions—the so-called Netflix Originals. And second, this was the period when Netflix was consolidating its strategy to become a leading online platform by offering its own TV series in addition to acquired content. In this context, the focus of the study is on determining how common the use of time-shifts is in Netflix productions. How often do temporal disruptions appear in these series, given the extended nature of television narratives? As Mittell (2015) explores, television storytelling has been characterized by playing with narrative structures since the beginning of the Third Golden Age,<sup>1</sup> even adopting what he refers to as "narrative

---

<sup>1</sup> As Harris (2021) has noted, it has become increasingly difficult to reach a consensus regarding the specificities of TV's Golden Ages:

special effects” as part of its strategy for seducing audiences. Are such sophisticated time structures still a key feature of seriality now that it has become a global phenomenon driven by streaming platforms like Netflix?

The starting point for this study is thus encapsulated in the following research questions:

- RQ1: Are there any predominant characteristics and categories of flashbacks in Netflix series? If so, what are the semantic implications of these narrative patterns in relation to underlying discourses and character conflicts?*
- RQ2: Is the configuration of the flashback a complex expressive procedure, that is, does it overlap with other temporal complexities (such as flash-forwards or mental images) or other devices (such as metalepsis)?*
- RQ3: How common is this strategy in contemporary television fiction, especially on a platform whose decision to produce its own content has turned it into the most widely viewed streaming service in the world? Does Netflix’s popular style of serial storytelling tend to lean more toward narrative linearity or toward temporal disruptions?*

To answer these questions, this article first outlines the method adopted for the study, as well as the limitations of the sample, which are especially important to consider given the vast number of television series produced by Netflix. It is also important to stress that the consideration of numerical data represents a new approach in narratological studies, which are usually limited to the analysis of reception, production, or representation. Two of the most noteworthy interdisciplinary approaches to date in the form of books dedicated to Netflix—Jenner (2018) and McDonald and Smith-Rowsey (2018)—focus on distribution, customer loyalty strategies, or binge-watching, while using quantitative methods for “understanding the Netflix Catalog System” (Lobato, 2018) or the statistical analysis by Feuerverger, He, and Khatri (2012). However, questions related more to modes of storytelling, screenplays, or narrative structures (supporting the aforementioned objectives) have generally been ignored by these types of approaches.

When data collection has a quantitative focus, the objective tends to be more specific, such as Darwish and Ain’s (2020) content analysis of the series *Jinn* (Zamani, 2019) examining the use of taboo language by means of a meticulous quantification and classification process, or Burroughs’s (2018) study of *House of Cards* (Willimon, 2013). However, there were no studies of this kind using a general corpus of series or taking a comparative approach, or quantitative studies focusing on the screenplay, until recently (Planes, 2020). We would therefore argue that numerical analysis offers new possibilities for

---

Especially in more recent instances, we see references not only to the Golden Age of Television, but to several golden ages, often numbered, ranked or otherwise qualified in terms of technological evolution, aesthetics or content. This has resulted in a confusing and redundant means of classification, which has the tendency to recourse to evaluative claims that are difficult to systematize and often problematic in their own right. (p. 53)

television studies because it adds a dimension that, without ignoring the creation of meaning, could facilitate comparisons of narrative patterns between different networks or countries. We also believe that this approach can provide a far more detailed picture of the flashback and its predominant features than has been offered to date, given the absence of similar studies of this expressive device.

The next section describes the theoretical framework used for this study, which draws on classical narratology adapted to the audiovisual medium: the flashback as a narrative device and the different modes it can adopt in serial storytelling. This is followed by an outline of the raw figures, supported by tables displaying the results of the analysis of the 33 series that make up the sample. The Results section offers a quantitative picture, and the Analysis section explores specific cases to provide a qualitative perspective on the predominant features of the flashbacks. Finally, the conclusions attempt to connect data and analysis with a view to positing a theory for the prevalence of flashbacks on the streaming giant.

### Sample and Methodology

The sample selection was drawn from the Netflix Media Center, which provides the release dates of all Netflix Originals; this was judged to be the most reliable primary source (cf. Only on Netflix, n.d.). A total of 272 titles were released between January 2013 and December 2017. Of these titles, only dramas were selected to obtain a more manageable sample that was as homogeneous as possible. Other categories of series were therefore eliminated, such as sitcoms (this genre obeys a very different logic<sup>2</sup>), and miniseries (because they are not designed on the basis of potential continuity that underpins regular series, which may affect their narrative structures). Finally, any dramas or dramedies with an episode duration under 40 minutes were eliminated because the focus was on the traditional drama format of the one-hour episode, a standard established during television's Third Golden Age (1990s and 2000s). As shown in Table 1, five pilot episodes exceeded this 60-minute limit. However, we decided to include these in the sample because the rest of the episodes in these series conformed to the characteristics of the dramas selected. Indeed, it is quite common for a series pilot to have a longer duration (e.g., a double-length first episode).

This resulted in an initial sample of 81 titles, but only 33 of these were actually produced or coproduced by Netflix, according to information collected from different databases, especially IMDb. The rest were dramas that had already been broadcast on different networks and had found in Netflix a new window for global distribution, such as *Better Call Saul* (Gould, 2015) and *Designated Survivor* (Guggenheim, 2016). The study sample was thus reduced to the series listed in Table 1.

---

<sup>2</sup> This different logic can be seen in the sitcom's historical need for episodic closure (Feuer, 1984) by means of what Austerlitz (2014) calls sitcom "constancy," which establishes the permanence of sets, spaces, and even themes, and in the admissions of all those authors who, when trying to equate sitcoms with forms of drama, end up acknowledging the peculiarity of the genre (see Mills, 2009; Newcomb, 1974).

**Table 1. The 33 Episodes Included in the Final Sample.**

TV Series	Year	Pilot Title	Running Time
<b>3%</b>	2016	Chapter 01: Cubes	00:49:49
<b>13 Reasons Why</b>	2017	Tape 1, Side A	00:54:16
<b>Between</b>	2015	School's Out	00:44:37
<b>Bloodline</b>	2015	Part 1	00:59:32
<b>Daredevil</b>	2015	Into the Ring	00:54:02
<b>Dark</b>	2017	Secrets	00:51:31
<b>El Chapo</b>	2017	Episodio #1.1	00:55:13
<b>Estocolmo</b>	2016	La Chica Desaparecida	00:44:18
<b>Good Morning Call</b>	2016	Alone at Last	00:49:53
<b>Gypsy</b>	2017	The Rabbit Hole	00:58:06
<b>Hemlock Grove</b>	2013	Jellyfish in the Sky	00:50:28
<b>Hibana: Spark</b>	2016	Episode #1.1	00:46:16
<b>House of Cards</b>	2013	Chapter 1	00:56:36
<b>Ingobernable</b>	2017	The Decision	00:39:16
<b>Iron Fist</b>	2017	Snow Gives Way	00:57:01
<b>Jessica Jones</b>	2015	AKA Ladies Night	00:53:07
<b>Cable Girls</b>	2017	Los Sueños	00:54:04
<b>Luke Cage</b>	2016	Moment of Truth	00:55:09
<b>Marco Polo</b>	2014	The Wayfarer	00:51:00
<b>Marseille</b>	2016	20 Ans	00:43:44
<b>Mindhunter</b>	2017	Episode 1	01:00:18
<b>Narcos</b>	2015	Descenso	00:55:18
<b>Orange Is the New Black</b>	2013	I Wasn't Ready	00:52:16
<b>Ozark</b>	2017	Sugarwood	00:58:24
<b>Paranoid</b>	2015	Episode 1	00:45:40
<b>Sense8</b>	2015	Limbic Resonance	01:07:08
<b>Stranger Things</b>	2016	Chapter One: The . . .	00:48:51
<b>Suburra</b>	2017	21 Days	01:02:40
<b>The Crown</b>	2016	Wolferton Splash	00:57:03
<b>The Get Down</b>	2016	Where There Is Ruin . . .	01:33:09
<b>The OA</b>	2016	Homecoming	01:11:25
<b>The Punisher</b>	2017	3 AM	00:51:22
<b>Travelers</b>	2016	Travelers	00:50:13

The pilot episode for each television series in the sample was analyzed in depth because pilots generally have the basic features that will ultimately characterize the series (Douglas, 2007). Moreover, as Mittell (2015) explains, a television pilot always serves a dual function: On the one hand, it serves to establish the diegetic universe of the series, offering the spectator a set of specific thematic and dramatic

coordinates that effectively introduce the story; on the other, it constitutes a kind of instruction manual for decoding the story that it introduces. Thus, based on this dual role of television serial storytelling that Mittell identified, the pilot episode was assumed to contain the seeds of the narrative structure of the rest of the series—that is, the basic arsenal of narrative strategies, including the use (or absence) of time-shifts, would generally be found in that first episode so that the audience can “learn” to read them in each series that they begin watching.

Data collection on each scene facilitated the extraction of the most important information on the 33 pilots. For this study, we have adopted Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith’s (2017) definition of scene: “A segment in a narrative film that takes place in one time and space or that uses crosscutting to show two or more simultaneous actions” (p. 504). Four categories of temporal complexities were established: flashback, flash-forward, mental image, and mixed device. We also analyzed whether time jumps were “embedded” within others (flashbacks within flashbacks, mental images within flashbacks, etc.). In addition, the categories were analyzed using a predetermined taxonomy, as detailed next.

### **Theoretical Framework: The Flashback and Its Categories**

Genette’s (1972) seminal analysis on Proust’s novel *In Search of Lost Time* laid the foundations for modern narratology. With only very slight differences, what Genette described as analepsis in literature has also been referred to as retroversion (Bal, 2017). However, the conception of the flashback adopted for this study is based on Gaudreault and Jost’s (2017) description of it as the a posteriori evocation of a past event in the present, a definition in consonance with those offered by authors like Bordwell and colleagues (2017), Königsberg (1987), and Turim (1989). Genette’s (1983) criteria for categorizing analepses is based on when the events depicted in them took place: They may be events that occurred before the start of the “first narrative” (external), or events that occurred earlier within the first narrative (internal). Genette (1983) also considers a combination of these two possibilities (mixed) as well as other subcategories. However, for this study, we focus mostly on the agents of the flashback, meaning the individuals who trigger the immersion in the past. They can be divided into two categories: characters who are in the story being told to us, and the creative agent of the narrative, referred to by Gaudreault and Jost (2017) as the *meganarrator* or *grand imaginer*—that is, an agent positioned outside the story (and therefore extra-diegetic) who organizes the formal discourse of the work we are watching. We can thus distinguish between a flashback’s diegetic causes (characters) and its extra-diegetic causes (meganarrator). However, it is worth considering Clark’s (2010) reflections on *Lost* (Cuse & Lindelof, 2004), a paradigmatic text in relation to the use of analepsis in contemporary audiovisual narrative. In his analysis, Clark (2010) suggests that there are not always “enough narrative or stylistic cues to definitely attribute the depiction of the past to either [a character] or to a higher storytelling authority” (p. 133). In any case, five types of flashback can thus be identified based on the cause behind them, following a taxonomy developed by Planes (2018):

Delimited: A flashback triggered by a very specific stimulus, such as a particular object, noise, situation, or setting, subsequently identified, although with variations, in the retrospective sequence.

Expository: The depiction of a memory that a narrator begins to recount, either to another character or to the spectator, which may involve the use of a voice-over or off-screen narration as the sequence progresses.

Undefined: A past event evoked by a character with no connection to any of that character's current circumstances.

Independent: A flashback that emerges autonomously in the story, which is not associated with a character but instigated by the meganarrator or grand imaginer. This category is similar to Branigan's (1992) "objective flashback."

Oneiric: A past event that is relived during a dream.

To qualify as a flashback in the chain of narrative sequences of a television series, the analepsis must fill an interval inserted between two points in the present in the diegesis, whether that interval is only a fleeting image, or one or more scenes and/or sequences. By this we mean that every flashback has been counted regardless of its extension, that is, the time it takes up in the episode (Gaudreault & Jost, 2017). What we consider important to calculate in an audiovisual narrative is therefore the number of times that a past moment is inserted between two moments on the primary narrative level of the story. The fifth section, which presents the qualitative analysis, does take extension into account to better contextualize some of the predominant features of flashbacks.

Although this article focuses mainly on flashbacks, it is also worth briefly describing three other devices that come into play in both the data collected and their subsequent analysis. The first of these is the flash-forward, referring to the depiction of an event that has yet to happen at the moment of the story—that is, any shift from the present into the future and then returning to the present (either to the same point where the time jump occurred, or a later point in the story after an ellipsis). Flash-forwards may be triggered by characters or by the meganarrator. Another of the temporal disruptions identified in this study is the mental image, a device associated with any product of the mind: fantasies, dreams, nightmares, or hallucinations. It therefore involves a materialization of what is going on in a character's mind, although it may also be an invention attributable to the creative agent of the story. Like flashbacks, mental images can also occur on a conscious level, as mental or narrative acts of characters (fantasies). Finally, there is what we call a mixed device, referring to scenes in which real and fictitious elements are so intertwined that content that would normally be described as oneiric can only be classified as mixed.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> A specific example may help to better explain this category of mixed technique. In a scene from the pilot episode for *Sense8* (Straczynski, Wachowski, & Wachowski, 2015), Will has a dream in which he sees himself as a small boy running through a forest after a girl who has asked for his help and who leads him to an abandoned house. Later in the series, we discover that the girl in the dream is a childhood friend who was the victim of a murder that was never solved and that has obsessed Will ever since. Although the scene has a connection with reality, it is impossible to separate the real from the imagined, and thus it should be classified as a mixed device.

## Results

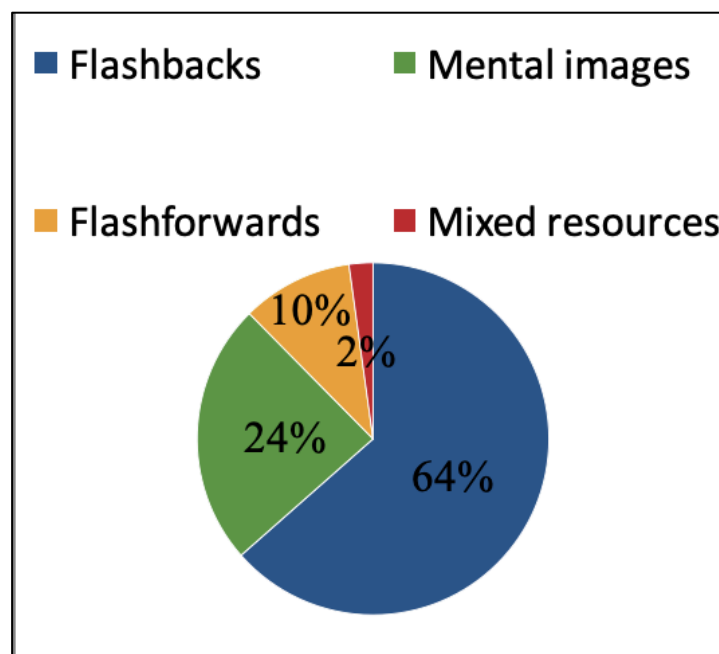
After developing the 33 outlines, a preliminary task before focusing on the most widely used device (the flashback) was to quantify the different categories of temporal disruptions. In this way, we could determine the predominance of the four narrative devices defined in the theoretical framework: flashback, mental image, flash-forward, and mixed device. As can be seen in Table 2 and Figure 1, the flashback is the most commonly used device (87 times), followed by mental images (33), flash-forwards (14), and mixed devices (3). This last number is particularly significant because it demonstrates that the episodes selected for study rarely depict ambiguous, confusing, or overlapping situations. In general terms, the borders are clearly demarcated, making the shifts in narrative time frames in the episodes studied easy to interpret on the basis of the preestablished definitions.

**Table 2. Number of Temporal Disruption Devices in Each Series.**

TV Series	Flashbacks	Mental Images	Flash-Forwards	Mixed Devices	Total
<b>3%</b>	4	0	0	0	4
<b>13 Reasons Why</b>	12	1	0	1	14
<b>Between</b>	1	2	2	0	5
<b>Bloodline</b>	3	5	8	0	16
<b>Daredevil</b>	1	0	0	0	2
<b>Dark</b>	1	0	0	0	1
<b>El Chapo</b>	5	0	0	0	5
<b>Estocolmo</b>	1	0	0	0	1
<b>Good Morning Call</b>	5	1	0	0	6
<b>Gypsy</b>	0	4	0	0	4
<b>Hemlock Grove</b>	4	2	0	0	6
<b>Hibana: Spark</b>	2	0	0	0	2
<b>House of Cards</b>	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Ingobernable</b>	1	0	0	0	1
<b>Iron Fist</b>	6	0	0	0	6
<b>Jessica Jones</b>	0	4	0	1	5
<b>Cable Girls</b>	1	1	0	1	3
<b>Luke Cage</b>	2	0	0	0	2
<b>Marco Polo</b>	1	0	0	0	1
<b>Marseille</b>	1	0	0	0	1
<b>Mindhunter</b>	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Narcos</b>	2	0	0	0	2
<b>Orange Is the New Black</b>	8	0	0	0	8
<b>Ozark</b>	1	1	1	0	3
<b>Paranoid</b>	0	0	0	0	0



<b><i>Sense8</i></b>	5	11	0	0	16
<b><i>Stranger Things</i></b>	1	0	0	0	1
<b><i>Suburra</i></b>	1	0	0	0	1
<b><i>The Crown</i></b>	0	0	0	0	0
<b><i>The Get Down</i></b>	1	2	0	0	3
<b><i>The OA</i></b>	3	2	0	0	5
<b><i>The Punisher</i></b>	11	1	3	0	15
<b><i>Travelers</i></b>	3	0	0	0	3
<b>Total</b>	87	37	14	3	141



**Figure 1. Percentage of temporal disruption devices.**

There are thus 137 cases of jumps out of the present and into the past (flashback), the imagination (mental image), the future (flash-forward), or a dimension in which two of these three procedures are intertwined (mixed). Moreover, as Table 2 shows, four of the 33 pilots exhibit an especially high level of temporal complexity: 16 temporal disruption devices in *Bloodline* (Kessler, 2015), 16 in *Sense8* (Straczynski et al., 2015), 15 in *The Punisher* (Lightfoot, 2017), and 14 in *13 Reasons Why* (Yorkey, 2017). Moreover, it is worth highlighting that only five series offer linear narratives with no chronological divergences at all: *Paranoid* (Gallagher, 2015), *Gypsy* (Rubin, 2017), *Mindhunter* (Penhall, 2017), *House of Cards* (Willimon, 2013), and *The Crown* (Morgan, 2016).

Given that this research involved the analysis of 1,900 scenes, 137 time jumps may seem quite a small number. However, it is important to bear in mind that any individual case in which one of these devices

is used may involve more than one scene. As Table 3 shows, the 1,900 scenes studied can be broken down into 1,358 that occur in the present and 542 in other time frames. This represents 28% of all the scenes in the pilot episodes analyzed. In fact, just six pilot episodes contain far more scenes in other time frames than in the present: 50 compared with five in *Between* (McGowan, 2015), 37 compared with six in *Estocolmo* (Palacio, 2016), 57 compared with 12 in *Suburra* (Gardini, Chimenz, & Tozzi, 2017), 62 compared with eight in *El Chapo* (Lee, 2017), 54 compared with 14 in *Narcos* (Newman, 2015), and 28 compared with six in *Orange Is The New Black* (Kohan, 2013). It is no mere coincidence that in these six series, the scenes set outside the present are all in the past, and their narrative structures are articulated around extended flashbacks that cover a significant proportion of the storyline. In the other 27 episodes, the opposite is the case: Scenes taking place in the present outnumber the scenes set in the past. Only *Hemlock Grove* (Egglee, 2013) and *13 Reasons Why* (Yorkey, 2017) exhibit some degree of parity—31 compared with 32 in the former, 25 compared with 34 in the latter.

**Table 3. Ratio of Total Scenes to Scenes Set in the Present.**

TV Series	Number of Scenes	Number of Temporal Resources	Scenes in Other Temporal Levels	Scenes in the Present
<b>3%</b>	41	4	2	39
<b>13 Reasons Why</b>	59	14	25	34
<b>Between</b>	55	5	50	5
<b>Bloodline</b>	62	15	10	52
<b>Daredevil</b>	40	1	1	39
<b>Dark</b>	63	1	1	62
<b>El Chapo</b>	70	5	62	8
<b>Estocolmo</b>	43	1	37	6
<b>Good Morning Call</b>	70	6	8	62
<b>Gypsy</b>	50	0	0	50
<b>Hemlock Grove</b>	63	6	31	32
<b>Hibana: Spark</b>	49	2	5	44
<b>House of Cards</b>	68	0	0	68
<b>Ingobernable</b>	78	1	2	76
<b>Iron Fist</b>	40	6	5	35
<b>Jessica Jones</b>	61	5	6	55
<b>Cable Girls</b>	73	3	4	69
<b>Luke Cage</b>	38	2	2	36
<b>Marco Polo</b>	49	1	16	33
<b>Marseille</b>	76	1	1	75
<b>Mindhunter</b>	42	0	0	42
<b>Narcos</b>	68	2	54	14
<b>Orange Is the New Black</b>	34	8	28	6
<b>Ozark</b>	46	3	10	36

<b>Paranoid</b>	43	0	0	43
<b>Sense8</b>	60	16	15	45
<b>Stranger Things</b>	62	1	1	61
<b>Suburra</b>	69	1	57	12
<b>The Crown</b>	53	0	0	53
<b>The Get Down</b>	87	3	83	4
<b>The OA</b>	60	5	16	44
<b>The Punisher</b>	60	16	7	53
<b>Travelers</b>	68	3	3	65
<b>Total</b>	1,900	137	542	1,358

As reflected in Table 2 and noted in the discussion earlier, the most prominent time jump device is the flashback, which is the main focus of this article. Eighty-seven flashbacks were identified in the study sample, compared with 33 mental images, 14 flash-forwards, and three mixed devices. With the aim of clarifying how all these narrative strategies are used, we also considered whether the device is itself “embedded” in other time frames outside the present. In other words, whether flashbacks, mental images, or flash-forwards occur inside other flashbacks, mental images, or flash-forwards, in a kind of *mise en abyme*. As reflected in Table 4, the data collected on this question are not significant: Only 21 of the 137 jumps into another dimension of the story occur within other sequences set outside the present. This suggests that framed narratives constitute a relatively rare phenomenon in these series. In fact, 25 television series from our sample—including 3% (Aguilera, 2016), *Good Morning Call* (Kawahara, 2016), and *Luke Cage* (Hodari Coker, 2016)—have zero embedded time-jumps.

**Table 4. Embedded Time Jumps.**

TV Series	Embedded Flashbacks	Embedded MImages	Embedded F-Forwards	Embedded MDevices	Total
<b>3%</b>	0	0	0	0	0
<b>13 Reasons Why</b>	2	0	0	0	2
<b>Between</b>	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Bloodline</b>	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Daredevil</b>	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Dark</b>	0	0	0	0	0
<b>El Chapo</b>	4	1	0	0	5
<b>Estocolmo</b>	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Good Morning Call</b>	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Gypsy</b>	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Hemlock Grove</b>	1	0	0	0	1
<b>Hibana: Spark</b>	0	0	0	0	0
<b>House of Cards</b>	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Ingobernable</b>	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Iron Fist</b>	0	0	0	0	0

<b>Jessica Jones</b>	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Cable Girls</b>	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Luke Cage</b>	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Marco Polo</b>	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Marseille</b>	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Mindhunter</b>	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Narcos</b>	1	0	0	0	1
<b>Orange Is the New Black</b>	6	0	0	0	6
<b>Ozark</b>	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Paranoid</b>	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Sense8</b>	0	2	0	0	2
<b>Stranger Things</b>	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Suburra</b>	0	0	0	0	0
<b>The Crown</b>	0	0	0	0	0
<b>The Get Down</b>	0	2	0	0	2
<b>The OA</b>	0	2	0	0	2
<b>The Punisher</b>	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Travelers</b>	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	14	7	0	0	21

In the specific case of flashbacks, the data displayed in Table 5 reveal that three pilot episodes make particularly extensive use of this device: *13 Reasons Why* (Yorkey, 2017) uses 12 flashbacks, *The Punisher* (Lightfoot, 2017) uses 11, and *Orange Is the New Black* (Kohan, 2013) uses eight. The others range from six flashbacks—*Iron Fist* (Buck, 2017)—to just one in 13 series. In addition, as noted, five episodes in the sample have no flashbacks at all.

**Table 5. Number of Flashbacks in Each Series, According to the Established Typology.**

TV Series	Delimited	Expository	Undefined	Independent	Oneiric	Total
<b>3%</b>	4	0	0	0	0	4
<b>13 Reasons Why</b>	4	8	0	0	0	12
<b>Between</b>	0	0	0	1	0	1
<b>Bloodline</b>	0	0	2	0	0	3
<b>Daredevil</b>	0	0	0	0	1	1
<b>Dark</b>	0	0	0	0	1	1
<b>El Chapo</b>	0	0	0	5	0	5
<b>Estocolmo</b>	0	0	0	1	0	1
<b>Good Morning Call</b>	4	0	1	0	0	5

<b>Gypsy</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Hemlock Grove</b>	0	0	0	4	0	4
<b>Hibana: Spark</b>	0	1	1	0	0	2
<b>House of Cards</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Ingobernable</b>	0	0	0	1	0	1
<b>Iron Fist</b>	2	0	1	0	3	6
<b>Jessica Jones</b>	1	0	0	0	0	1
<b>Cable Girls</b>	1	0	0	0	0	1
<b>Luke Cage</b>	2	0	0	0	0	2
<b>Marco Polo</b>	0	0	0	1	0	1
<b>Marseille</b>	1	0	0	0	0	1
<b>Mindhunter</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Narcos</b>	0	1	0	1	0	2
<b>Orange Is the New Black</b>	4	0	0	4	0	8
<b>Ozark</b>	1	0	0	0	0	1
<b>Paranoid</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Sense8</b>	1	2	1	0	1	5
<b>Stranger Things</b>	1	0	0	0	0	1
<b>Suburra</b>	0	0	0	1	0	1
<b>The Crown</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>The Get Down</b>	0	1	0	0	0	1
<b>The OA</b>	0	3	0	0	0	3
<b>The Punisher</b>	3	0	7	0	1	11
<b>Travelers</b>	0	3	0	0	0	3
<b>Total</b>	29	19	13	19	7	87

Of the five categories of flashback described in the theoretical framework presented earlier, the delimited flashback is the most prominent. Of the 87 instances, 29 belong to this category, where recollections are triggered by situations, conversations, or objects in the present that bear some similarity or connection to a past experience of the individual (who is always a character in the fictional universe). The second most frequently used types of flashbacks are expository and independent, each with 19 appearances in the sample. While the former are triggered by stories told by characters, the latter involve jumps into the past instigated by the meganarrator. Less common among Netflix original series are undefined flashbacks (triggered arbitrarily by characters) and oneiric flashbacks (memories evoked while a character is unconscious), with 13 and seven appearances, respectively.

In relation to the other narrative procedures (see Table 6), it is worth noting that in the category of mental images (identified 33 times), there is a fairly even balance between delimited (12) and undefined (10), while among flash-forwards (14) the independent variety predominates (12). As noted earlier, only

three cases were identified in which two of the three devices were mixed together, making the results for this category insignificant.

**Table 6. Total Number of Uses of Each Narrative Device, by Category.**

Narrative device	Delimited	Expository	Undefined	Independent	Oneiric	Total
<b>Flashbacks</b>	29	19	13	19	7	87
<b>Mental Images</b>	12	2	10	2	7	33
<b>Flash-Forwards</b>	1	0	0	12	1	14
<b>Mixed Resources</b>	0	1	0	1	1	3

### Analysis

Having outlined the quantitative data, we offer in this section a detailed description of the characteristics of the flashbacks according to the five categories described in the theoretical framework. This analysis of flashbacks in Netflix original series takes a qualitative perspective, with a view to clarifying their dramatic and aesthetic effects.

#### ***Delimited Flashbacks***

The delimited flashback is one of the most common flashback types in film and television because it is triggered by a very specific catalyst in the present (objects, characters, locations, conversations, etc.), which will reappear in the past time frame with the same or similar visual qualities. This connection facilitates a more fluid time jump than other types of flashbacks for which the diegetic justification is either minimal or nonexistent. The spectator is encouraged to establish parallels and contrasts between the two time frames, and even to identify links and echoes between the compositional patterns of the images in each one.

The visual correlation between present and past helps to foreground analogies or disparities between the two temporal levels. An example of this can be found in the only flashback in the pilot episode for *Marseille* (Siri, 2016), in which the retrospective content aims to convey the regrets that plague the series's antagonist, Lucas Barres, who intends to replace Robert Taro, the leading character, as mayor of Marseille. While standing in the city council chamber, completely empty in the present, Lucas recalls a council session in the past when Robert Taro appointed him as deputy mayor. That the memory is triggered in the same place where it occurred, but now with only the character who recalls it present, highlights that Lucas has come to this place of his own volition, that he has allowed himself to be drawn back into the past, and that he harbors mixed emotions about his current mission to bring down his former mentor. The confrontation takes on a tragic tone in relation to the evolution of the characters and the sharp contrasts that emerge between the different emotions experienced: What in the past was friendship and solidarity is now solitude and betrayal. The applause of the council members at the meeting in the past contrasts with the silence that pervades in the present.

Underlying associations like these is a kind of ironic reflection on the passage of time and the inscrutable and/or inexorable nature of the characters' fates. At the same time, they pose a paradox through the evocation

of contrary emotions arising from aspects of the characters' current reality that were already present in their past. The clash between past and present often gives rise to a mindset that idealizes the past while casting a shadow over the present, although it might also have the reverse effect, or there may even be a similar emotional reaction to the two time frames. This happens, for example, in *Ozark* (Mundy, 2017), which tells the story of Marty Byrde, a financial adviser who drags his family from Chicago to the Lake of the Ozarks in Missouri; there, he must launder \$500 million in five years to appease a drug boss. In a scene from the pilot, Marty instinctively shuts his eyes when a gun is pointed at his head, and he is taken back to a moment in the past when he also had his eyes closed, but the emotional attitudes in the two situations are completely opposed: In the present, it is the fear of death that provokes this reaction, while in the past, it is a vivid expression of joy, as his children are jumping on a mat lying on top of him in a garden.

The 29 delimited flashbacks identified in the study sample (Table 5) are mostly brief and spontaneous, that is, they are restricted to isolated fragments or incidents. In fact, we identified only one flashback comprising a four-scene sequence, which was in the pilot episode for *Orange Is the New Black* (Kohan, 2013). However, the formal and semantic possibilities offered by the delimited flashback are exploited in only 18 of the 29 (62% of the total). In the other 11, the triggers for the flashbacks are too vague or insubstantial to identify strategies to establish parallels and contrasts between the two time frames. In these cases, the flashback serves simply to develop the story with new information: These are time jumps that are justifiable in diegetic terms because they facilitate the spectator's orientation in the different time frames of the fictional universe, but they do not take advantage of the expressive potential of this type of flashback.

### ***Expository Flashbacks***

Nineteen expository flashbacks were identified in seven different series, although their frequency is very uneven, ranging from a high number of appearances in one series, *13 Reasons Why* (Yorkey, 2017), to a single, extended expository flashback that takes up the whole narrative in another, *The Get Down* (Luhmann, 2016). For the purposes of the qualitative analysis of these data, it is important to remember that, as its name suggests, the expository flashback is intended to describe and explain something. Actually, all five categories of flashback have this purpose in a general sense, given that all are narrative devices. Nevertheless, the expository flashback tends to be more self-explanatory because it depicts a character explicitly revealing one of his or her own memories to another. Thus, by their very nature, expository flashbacks tell a story about the past, but viewed from the present. They thus usually share a backstory or information on an earlier stage in a character's life for explanatory or analytical purposes. This is why some of the TV series that use this type of flashback offer a long, extended gaze on the past, often narrating the story of someone who is recalling a whole series of events. The musical drama *The Get Down* (Luhmann, 2016), for example, uses this device practically throughout the whole episode: A singer in the present *travels* to the past, to his teenage years, to explain how his music career began. The series is set in the 1970s in the Bronx and depicts the rise of hip-hop and disco music from the perspective of a group of teenagers. As may be expected, this structure necessarily gives the story a nostalgic air; in general, because they are prominently verbal, expository flashbacks tend to be much more nostalgic than delimited flashbacks.

*The Get Down* (Luhmann, 2016) makes use of the expository flashback to provide a backstory, in a kind of narrative that conforms to the "this is how I came to be who I am now" format. Booth (2011)

offers a useful concept for this kind of narrative, the *extensive flashback*, although he seems to make no distinction between long time-shifts instigated by a character and those resulting from the narrative itself—a distinction that is crucial for our taxonomy. This same pattern informs *Hibana: Spark* (Lee & Okamoto, 2016), *Sense8* (Straczynski et al., 2015), and *The OA* (Marling, 2016). In *Hibana: Spark* (Lee & Okamoto, 2016)—a story about a young and inexperienced stand-up comedian—the expository flashback complements an undefined flashback that precedes it and thus helps explain a childhood experience that inspired the character to pursue a career in comedy. *Sense8* (Straczynski et al., 2015), on the other hand, makes use of this type of flashback to tell the story of two characters who are romantically involved in the present. The two time jumps serve to highlight a contrast in their relationship over time: difficult at first, but smoother now. These two characters are part of an ensemble cast in a story about eight people living in different countries and circumstances who begin to experience mental and emotional connections with each other. Finally, in the case of *The OA* (Marling, 2016), the intriguing opening scene of its pilot raises various questions. When Prairie Johnson, a young blind girl who has been missing for seven years, suddenly reappears in a hospital with her eyesight restored after jumping off a bridge, she refuses to tell FBI agents or her adoptive parents where she was or how she overcame her blindness. Why was Prairie blind? Why did she try to kill herself? And what brought her out of her coma? The narrative composition of *The OA* (Marling, 2016) includes an extended flashback taking up the last 11 minutes of the episode. In this final sequence, Prairie's past is revealed, establishing an identification between two characters who are actually the same person, although they inhabit different spatiotemporal levels: Nina and Prairie.

Flashbacks also have this explanatory function in *Travelers* (Wright, 2016), in which five humans from the future are sent back in time to inhabit the bodies of five people from the present to save humanity from a catastrophe. In this case, the three expository flashbacks are much shorter, but they serve the same narrative purpose as the one in *The OA* (Marling, 2016): to reveal the mystery established in the first part of the episode for both the characters and the audience. The objective of shedding light on the past constitutes the central pillar of the series *13 Reasons Why* (Yorkey, 2017). The series revolves around high school student Clay and the aftermath of fellow student Hannah's suicide. Before her death, Hannah leaves behind a box of cassette tapes in which she details the reasons why she chose to end her life as well as the people she believes are responsible for her death. From the second scene, when we hear Hannah's voice on a cassette, the story focuses explicitly on delving into a dark past. Her opening monologue serves as a kind of instruction manual for the episode (and the whole series); her recorded confession provides detailed explanations of the recurring flashbacks, which become a dramatic structural feature of the narrative. It is revealing that eight of the 12 flashbacks in the pilot episode to this teen drama are expository, precisely because the whole story is itself an exposition of reasons—that is, the factors that led to Hannah's suicide. In this sense, both delimited and expository flashbacks share the same purpose of providing narrative orientation, although they are activated by different triggers.

### ***Independent Flashbacks***

In aesthetic terms, the independent flashback could be said to constitute the least complex flashback category analyzed here. As noted earlier, the meganarrator directly instigates this type of journey back to the past. It is therefore a device that has few notable effects other than mere narrative expansion. It performs what is mainly an explanatory, clarifying function for the development of the plot. In other



words, it is a simple way of providing additional information necessary for the audience to make sense of the story. This is what it does in the nine series in which it appears.

Because the appearance of this type of flashback is not associated with the memory of any character or with any object of importance in the story, its narrative simplicity can explain its length. Indeed, *Narcos* (Newman, 2015), *El Chapo* (Lee, 2017), *Suburra* (Gardini et al., 2017), and *Between* (McGowan, 2015) are all organized structurally around independent flashbacks that extend throughout practically the entire episode in each case. The independent flashbacks in *Hemlock Grove* (Egglee, 2013) and *Marco Polo* (Fusco, 2014; one in each episode) are also of considerable length: 23 minutes in *Hemlock Grove* and nine minutes in *Marco Polo*. The only exception to this norm of independent flashbacks of long duration can be found in the Mexican political drama *Ingobernable* (Avni & Veytia, 2017): In less than a minute, the Mexican president is shown falling from a balcony onto the roof of a car, a key event in the story.

The extended duration that characterizes independent flashbacks in Netflix pilot episodes is associated with two factors: the need to explain events that occurred before the beginning of the story, and the profusion of narratives of ascent. It is no coincidence that both *Hemlock Grove* (Egglee, 2013) and *Suburra* (Gardini et al., 2017) begin their lengthy independent flashbacks right after violent deaths. In each case, the death comes as a shock to the spectator, and the flashback constitutes a “narrative rescue” designed to explain the reasons for the character’s demise. As noted earlier, their function is much more explanatory than aesthetic or symbolic. A similar approach is adopted in both *Between* (McGowan, 2015) and *El Chapo* (Lee, 2017), although the trigger event is the arrest rather than the death of the character. The pilot episodes of both of these series begin *in medias res*, and after a few scenes (only one in *Between*), the narrative turns to the past to explain the development of a pandemic (*Between*) or the rise of a drug lord (*El Chapo*). In this sense, these four examples are simplistic in both aesthetic and narrative terms; the flashback is used for the purpose of a simple narrative surprise.

*Orange Is the New Black* (Kohan, 2013) is the only series that attempts to make a more complex and nuanced use of independent flashbacks. In general, all the flashbacks shed light on the background story of Piper, the protagonist, to explain how she ended up in prison. What is original about their use here is that they depict different moments in the past, and their combination with delimited flashbacks gives the episode a more persuasive narrative structure as they play with contradiction, irony, and dialogue between different past events.

### **Undefined Flashbacks**

In this study, 13 undefined flashbacks were identified in just five different pilot episodes, the outstanding case being *The Punisher* (Lightfoot, 2017), with seven. Because of the relatively small number of flashbacks in this category compared with delimited, expository, and independent flashbacks, it is difficult to determine a predominant discourse or tendency in their use; nevertheless, it is possible to identify a few significant features. As explained earlier, an undefined flashback is triggered by a character in a conscious state. However, it is not mediated by an object, situation, or figure in the present that could serve as a nexus between the two time frames. What distinguishes this category of flashback is therefore its unexpected and random nature. It is also characterized by the marked distance between present and past

resulting from the absence of a clear transition—a feature that is clearly evident in the undefined flashbacks in this sample.

Indeed, that this type of flashback emerges with no connection to the circumstances of the present vests the time jump with a spontaneous, disruptive quality: While the connection inherent in a flashback triggered by a catalyst that can be found in the character's present tells us that the time jump has a material justification, in the undefined flashback, no such justification exists; thus, the visual abruptness of the change has an alienating effect resulting from the juxtaposition of two time frames that in principle bear no resemblance to one another. This juxtaposition creates a sense of opposition, of dichotomy between two narrative levels. The yawning chasm that opens up between present and past can be seen clearly in a flashback in *Sense8* (Straczynski et al., 2015): Riley, under the effects of a drug she has taken, recalls a memory of herself as a child walking along a beach and entering a strikingly beautiful cave. The apathetic malaise that plagues her in the present (in addition to the sordid conditions in which she is taking drugs) is counteracted by this recollection that has suddenly offered her a few happy and pleasant feelings.

The memory in the undefined flashback is unexpected for the character because it has a higher degree of autonomy and arbitrariness than the expository or delimited flashback. It also lacks the dialectical relationship that the delimited flashback establishes between the time frames of the story. All these features are evident to varying degrees in all 13 cases in which this type of flashback is used in the episodes mentioned, although they are all marked clearly by one prevailing emotion: the anxiety experienced by the character. In the seven undefined flashbacks in *The Punisher* (Lightfoot, 2017), for example, we are offered a skewed picture of an idealized family life as recalled by Frank, the protagonist, a former marine who becomes a vigilante to avenge the murder of his family. The most emblematic aspect of these flashbacks without the slightest apparent connection to the present is that all but one of them occur while the character, an army vet with an obscure past, is working on a construction site, knocking down walls. It is obvious that the force exerted by the character as he swings the sledgehammer is a way of releasing the resentment and hatred he feels every time the memories of his wife and kids come back to him—even though, as we later discover, he already had the chance to avenge their deaths.

### ***Oneiric Flashbacks***

Because oneiric flashbacks constitute the least used category in our study sample, our description of their features and uses is relatively limited. However, one striking aspect of the seven flashbacks identified in this category is the traumatic nature of the past events they depict. In these flashbacks, either the characters have passed out—*Daredevil* (Goddard, 2015) and *Iron Fist* (Buck, 2017)—or they are dreaming while images come to them that will reveal tragic aspects of their identities. Unsurprisingly, six of these seven flashbacks involve scenes with family members of the character concerned who disappeared under dramatic circumstances and whose absence is the source of various levels of grief. These unconscious evocations can sometimes form part of broader memory processes. Combined with other memories that arise while conscious (potentially integrating expository, delimited, and undefined flashbacks), the cumulative effect can be to highlight the character's obsession with reliving the past—*The Punisher* (Lightfoot, 2017) and *Iron Fist* (Buck, 2017). But when limited to oneiric flashbacks, such journeys to other stages in the character's life may also suggest an identity crisis, even if the memories arise more sporadically

or their emergence has yet to turn into a habit—as in the flashback sequences in *Dark* (Friese, 2017) or *Sense8* (Straczynski et al., 2015).

Nevertheless, oneiric flashbacks, when not accompanied by other memories while the character is conscious, also offer the unique advantage of being able to reveal issues and conflicts that continue to affect the character on a psychological level, even when that character gives the impression of having overcome the trauma alluded to. In this sense, unless it forms part of a broader mnemonic process, this type of flashback can hint at wounds and weak spots concealed in the darkest corners of the character's psyche. While they may not interfere with the character's everyday life or constitute a tangible source of pain or dissatisfaction—as they do in the cases of the aforementioned characters in *The Punisher* (Lightfoot, 2017), *Iron Fist* (Buck, 2017), *Dark* (Friese, 2017), or *Sense8* (Straczynski et al., 2015)—these hidden problems will inevitably be faced sooner or later.

Moreover, because they occur while the character is unconscious, oneiric flashbacks tend to include traces of fantasy in the midst of the action, but in a localized way, so that the spectator is able to separate fiction from reality. However, sometimes the real and the fictitious are so intertwined that the dream scene has to be classified as a mixed case, even though this is a device rarely used in our sample, as noted earlier. On the other hand, formal techniques used in other cases with the aim of highlighting the illusory or subjective nature of the experience (the use of a filter that alters the color of the scene, for example) do not necessarily have to undermine the veracity of the sequence as a whole. This second option is notable in the oneiric flashbacks identified in Netflix original series: Signals of the scene's imaginary nature are kept to a minimum, leaving no doubt as to the reality of the event depicted.

### **Conclusions**

Based on the description and qualitative analysis of the data outlined earlier, a number of general conclusions can be drawn in relation to the use of flashbacks in the original series streamed by Netflix between 2013 and 2017. Each of the three propositions set out in the following sections responds to the research questions stated at the beginning of this article: the semantic implications of the predominant flashback categories; their level of narrative complexity; and how common temporal disruptions are in Netflix original series.

### **Heterogeneity**

The first and most obvious conclusion is that it is impossible to speak of a narrative style or structure that characterizes Netflix series, even in general terms. This responds to our first research question. However, beyond the predominance of the flashback over other temporal disruption devices (flash-forwards, mental images, and mixed devices), what is especially noteworthy is the variety of uses made of the five categories of flashbacks, much like their diversity in literature and film. Although it is true that delimited flashbacks are the dominant category, and oneiric flashbacks are the rarest, in qualitative terms, there is no consistent pattern of use. In other words, flashbacks of the same category tend to fulfill somewhat similar narrative and expressive purposes; however, these do not appear to have been conceived, in the context of the television series in which they appear, as part of a more cohesive strategy suggestive

of a predominant type of flashback, a category that would determine the content of the storyline and its semantic effects over and above other formal aspects.

Although there are series that in quantitative terms only include a single flashback—such as *The Get Down* (Luhmann, 2016)—that flashback can take up practically the entire episode. Conversely, while *The Punisher*, for example, includes 11 flashbacks, most of the story takes place in the present. Moreover, some series mix different types of flashbacks without any signs of a sophisticated aesthetic objective in the combination, beyond the intention to clarify aspects of the past for narrative purposes. This is the case, for example, in *Hibana: Spark* (Lee & Okamoto, 2016) and *Narcos* (Newman, 2015). Some are nominal contributions to the storyline, like the short, isolated flashbacks in *Ingobernable* (Avni & Veytia, 2017), *Stranger Things* (Duffer & Duffer, 2016), and *Ozark* (Mundy, 2017); others, equally brief, provide essential clues for making sense of the story, such as the oneiric flashback that opens *Dark* (Friese, 2017)—when viewers are provided with a key date in the storyline—or the delimited flashback in neo-noir series *Jessica Jones* (Rosenberg, 2015), which reveals the trauma she suffered with Kilgrave.

The reasons for this diversity in the narrative use of the flashback are complex and multifaceted, and therefore require further research. However, a few explanations can certainly be ventured here. One of these is the commercial structure of Netflix, a global platform that has seen exponential growth in the past few years, forming partnerships with studios in different countries and with different stylistic approaches. Among the original productions analyzed are Spanish period series like *Cable Girls* (Campos & Fernández-Valdés, 2017). Alongside this more locally oriented content is a high-concept series that emulated the antihero epic of cable television: *House of Cards* (Willimon, 2013). The creative team behind this Machiavellian political drama included a top-level director (David Fincher) and an internationally known Oscar-winning actor (Kevin Spacey).

Another possible factor is related to the status of narrative as a brand characteristic. As noted earlier, in their day, both basic and premium cable networks sought to consolidate their brand images through their own fiction productions. This sometimes involved a predilection for certain genres, such as in TNT's slogan "We Know Drama"; for a slow-burning style of storytelling, evident in AMC's slogan "The Story Matters Here" positioning for the release of *Mad Men* (Weiner, 2007) and *Breaking Bad* (Gilligan, 2008); or for breaking the standard boundaries for topics and approaches, indicated by the "No Limits" slogan adopted by Showtime when, emulating its premium competitor HBO, it released groundbreaking series like *Californication* (Kapinos, 2007), *The Tudors* (Hirst, 2007), and *Dexter* (Colleton & Goldwyn, 2006). These assorted examples reflect a strategy that at least partially influenced the type of aesthetic or narrative approaches adopted by these networks. Netflix's brand image strategy seems to lack this kind of focus, which could also explain the heterogeneity of its use of narrative devices.

### **Formal Simplicity**

However, despite this diversity, this study does not seem to suggest that Netflix series are characterized by an especially complex narrative structure. This conclusion addresses our second research question: *Does the flashback overlap with other temporal complexities (such as flash-forwards or mental images) or other devices (such as metalepsis)?* Two factors may serve to clarify this idea. The first, as noted

at the beginning of the article, citing Mittell (2015), is that playing with time has become a common feature of contemporary seriality. In other words, the growing popularity of television series has been partly associated with a generic visual experience of narratological concepts among audiences, who have become increasingly accustomed to tackling puzzles in the stories they watch. The second factor is also related to the broad and diverse target audience that characterizes Netflix. This may explain why the vast majority of flashbacks are quite easy to understand, and their aesthetic and narrative implications are minimal in most cases. Indeed, it is hardly surprising that the type of flashback most likely to contain unreal elements (oneiric) is the type that is used least in the sample for this study, making only seven appearances. Added to this is the very low number of mixed devices (three of 137), suggesting that on Netflix, the use of flashbacks and any other narrative devices poses no problems of classification because they rarely overlap or combine with flash-forwards or mental images.

### ***Importance of Temporality***

In any case, it is noteworthy that practically all the original series in the sample— with the exception of *Paranoid* (Gallagher, 2015), *Gypsy* (Rubin, 2017), *Mindhunter* (Penhall, 2017), *House of Cards* (Willimon, 2013), and *The Crown* (Morgan, 2016)—include some kind of narrative complexity, albeit with different degrees of dramatic importance and duration, as discussed earlier. As Table 3 shows, nearly 30% of the scenes in the pilots to Netflix original series take place in time frames outside the present. In other words, more than a quarter of the scenes in these series involve some form of time jump. This is a striking number that serves as a tentative answer to our third research question: *How common is this device in contemporary television fiction? Does the serial narrative lean toward narrative linearity or toward temporal disruptions?* Of the 33 series studied, all from the most popular streaming platform in the world, 28 (nearly 85%) break with linear, chronological narration. Moreover, of the 1,900 scenes contained in these 33 series, 542 (28.5%) make use of devices that abandon chronological linearity. It would therefore seem reasonable to assert that temporal disruptions play an important role in contemporary seriality, given that they take up more than a quarter of the scenes in the series analyzed here.

According to academic convention, a conclusion should include a discussion of the limitations of the study and propose possibilities for future research. The biggest limitation of this research lies in its failure to consider the serial continuity of the narratives analyzed. For reasons explained in the methodology section, we determined it necessary to limit the analysis to pilot episodes. The obvious problem with this approach is that a story that continues over multiple episodes and seasons can develop a narrative complexity that would not yet be apparent in the pilot. The clearest example of this is *Dark* (Friese, 2017), a German series that is largely ignored in this study because its pilot episode contains only one temporal disruption. However, as Anna Batori (2021) has recently demonstrated, narrative puzzles are one of the defining features of this series.

While the first limitation of this study is thus vertical (the narrative extension of the series analyzed), the second could be classified as horizontal: the fact that these narrative devices in Netflix series are not compared here with the platform's competitors. This would require similar studies of other platforms or networks to determine whether use of temporal disruptions in Netflix series, indicated by the findings

here, differs substantially from that in series on HBO or Amazon Prime, for example. This is a question we intend to explore in future research.

### References

- Aguilera, P. (Producer). (2016). *3%* [Television series]. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix; São Paulo, Brazil: Boutique Filmes.
- Austerlitz, S. (2014). *Sitcom: A history in 24 episodes from I Love Lucy to Community*. Chicago, IL: Chicago Review Press.
- Avni, S., & Veytia, O. (Producers). (2017). *Ingobernable* [Television series]. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix; Mexico City, Mexico: Argos Producciones.
- Bal, M. (2017). *Narratology: Introduction to the theory of narrative*. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.
- Batori, A. (2021). "Everything is connected": Narratives of temporal and spatial transgression in *Dark*. *VIEW: Journal of European Television History and Culture*, 10(19), 112–124. doi:10.18146/view.246
- Booth, P. (2011). Memories, temporalities, fictions: Temporal displacement in contemporary television. *Television & New Media*, 12(4), 370–388. doi:10.1177/1527476410392806
- Bordwell, D., Thompson, K., & Smith, J. (2017). *Film art: An introduction*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Branigan, E. (1992). *Narrative comprehension and film*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Buck, S. (Producer). (2017). *Iron fist* [Television series]. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix; Burbank, CA: Marvel Television.
- Burroughs, B. (2018). House of Netflix: Streaming media and digital lore. *Popular Communication*, 17(1), 1–17. doi:10.1080/15405702.2017.1343948
- Campos, R., & Fernández-Valdés, T. (Producers). (2017). *Cable girls* [Television series]. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix; Madrid, Spain: Bambú Producciones.
- Clark, M. J. (2010). *Lost and mastermind*. *Television & New Media*, 11(2), 123–142. doi:10.1177/1527476409344435
- Colleton, S., & Goldwyn, J. (Producers). (2006). *Dexter* [Television series]. West Hollywood, CA: Showtime Networks.

- Cuse, C., & Lindelof, D. (Producers). (2004). *Lost* [Television series]. Santa Monica, CA: Bad Robot Productions.
- Darwish, I., & Ain, N. (2020). Foul language on Arabic television: A case study of the first Jordanian Arabic Netflix series. *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 9(1), 83–90. doi:10.36941/ajis-2020-0007
- Douglas, P. (2007). *Writing the TV drama series*. Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions.
- Duffer, M., & Duffer, R. (Producers). (2016). *Stranger things* [Television series]. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix; Los Angeles, CA: 21 Laps Entertainment.
- Egglee, C. H. (Producer). (2013). *Hemlock Grove* [Television series]. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix; West Hollywood, CA: ShineBox SMC.
- Feuer, J. (1984). The MTM style. In J. Feuer, P. Kerr, & T. Vahimagi (Eds.), *MTM: Quality television* (pp. 32–60). London, UK: British Film Institute.
- Feuerverger, A., He, Y., & Khatri, S. (2012). Statistical significance of the Netflix challenge. *Statistical Science*, 27(2), 202–231. doi:10.1214/11-STS368
- Friese, J. (Producer). (2017). *Dark* [Television series]. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix; Munich, Germany: W&B Television.
- Fusco, J. (Producer). (2014). *Marco Polo* [Television series]. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix; New York, NY: Electus.
- Gallagher, B. (Producer). (2015). *Paranoid* [Television series]. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix; Manchester, UK: Red Production Company.
- Gardini, G., Chimenz, M., & Tozzi, R. (Producers). (2017). *Suburra* [Television series]. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix; Rome, Italy: Cattleya.
- Gaudreault, A., & Jost, F. (2017). *Le récit cinématographique. Films et séries télévisées* [The cinematographic narrative. Films and television series]. Paris, France: Armand Colin.
- Genette, G. (1972). *Figures III (Poétique)* [Figures III (Poetics)]. Paris, France: Editions du Seuil.
- Genette, G. (1983). *Narrative discourse. An essay in method*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Gilligan, V. (Producer). (2008). *Breaking bad* [Television series]. New York, NY: American Movie Classics.
- Goddard, D. (Producer). (2015). *Daredevil* [Television series]. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix; Burbank, CA: ABC Signature.

- Gould, P. (Producer). (2015). *Better call Saul* [Television series]. New York, NY: American Movie Classics.
- Griffith, E. (2020, July 22). Netflix has the most original TV shows, but Disney+ shows the best originals. *PCMag*. Retrieved from <https://www.pcmag.com/news/netflix-has-the-most-original-tv-shows-but-disney-plus-shows-the-best-originals>
- Guggenheim, D. (Producer). (2016). *Designated survivor* [Television series]. Los Angeles, CA: The Mark Gordon Company.
- Harris, C. E. (2021). The cinematic-televisual: Rethinking medium specificity in television's new Golden Age. In A. Hudelet & A. Crémieux (Eds.), *Exploring seriality on screen: Audiovisual narratives in film and television* (pp. 53–76). New York, NY: Routledge. doi:10.4324/9781003044772
- Hirst, M. (Producer). (2007). *The Tudors* [Television series]. West Hollywood, CA: Showtime Networks.
- Hodari Coker, C. (Producer). (2016). *Luke Cage* [Television series]. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix; Burbank, CA: Marvel Television.
- Horeck, T. (2021). "Netflix and heal": The shifting meanings of binge-watching during the COVID-19 crisis. *Film Quarterly*, 75(1), 35–40. doi:10.1525/fq.2021.75.1.35
- Jenner, M. (Ed.). (2018). *Netflix and the re-invention of television*. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan. doi:10.1007/978-3-319-94316-9
- Johnson, C., & Dempsey, L. (2020, November 11). How coronavirus might have changed TV viewing habits for good—New research. *The Conversation*. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/how-coronavirus-might-have-changed-tv-viewing-habits-for-good-new-research-146040>
- Kapinos, T. (Producer). (2007). *Californication* [Television series]. West Hollywood, CA: Showtime Networks.
- Kawahara, Y. (Director). (2016). *Good morning call* [Television series]. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix; Tokyo, Japan: Telepack.
- Kessler, T. A. (Producer). (2015). *Bloodline* [Television series]. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix; Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures Television.
- Kohan, J. (Producer). (2013). *Orange is the new black* [Television series]. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix; Santa Monica, CA: Lionsgate Television.



- Kohan, J., Friedman, L. (Writer), & Trim, M. (Director). (2013, July 11). I wasn't ready [Television series episode]. In J. Kohan (Executive producer), *Orange is the new black*. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix; Santa Monica, CA: Lionsgate Television.
- Konigsberg, I. (1987). *The complete film dictionary*. New York, NY: Nal Books.
- Lee, D., & Okamoto, A. (Producers). (2016). *Hibana: Spark* [Television series]. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix.
- Lee, I. (Producer). (2017). *El Chapo* [Television series]. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix; Miami, FL: Univision Studios.
- Lightfoot, S. (Producer). (2017). *The Punisher* [Television series]. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix; Burbank, CA: Marvel Television.
- Lobato, R. (2018). Rethinking international TV flows research in the age of Netflix. *Television & New Media*, 19(3), 241–256. doi:10.1177/1527476417708245
- Lobato, R. (2019). *Netflix nations: The geography of digital distribution*. New York: New York University Press. doi:10.18574/nyu/9781479882281.001.0001
- Luhrmann, B. (Producer). (2016). *The get down* [Television series]. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix; Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures Television.
- Marling, B. (Producer). (2016). *The OA* [Television series]. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix; Culver City, CA: Anonymous Content.
- McDonald, K., & Smith-Rowsey, D. (2018). *The Netflix effect: Technology and entertainment in the 21st century*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic. doi:10.5040/9781501309410
- McGowan, M. (Producer). (2015). *Between* [Television series]. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix; Toronto, Canada: Don Carmody Television.
- Miklos, L. (2020). Film and television production and consumption in times of the COVID-19 pandemic—the case of Germany. *Baltic Screen Media Review*, 8(1), 30–34. doi:10.2478/bsmr-2020-0004
- Mills, B. (2009). *The sitcom*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press.
- Mittell, J. (2015). *Complex TV: The poetics of contemporary television storytelling*. New York: New York University Press.
- Morgan, P. (Producer). (2016). *The crown* [Television series]. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix; London, UK: Left Bank Pictures.

- Mundy, C. (Producer). (2017). *Ozark* [Television series]. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix; Los Angeles, CA: Zero Gravity Management.
- Newcomb, H. (1974). *TV: The most popular art*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press.
- Newman, E. (Producer). (2015). *Narcos* [Television series]. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix; Bogotá, Colombia: Dynamo.
- Only on Netflix. (n.d.). *Netflix Media Center*. Retrieved June 6, 2019, from <https://media.netflix.com/en/only-on-netflix#/all?page=1> <<https://media.netflix.com/en/only-on-netflix#/all?page=1>
- Palacio, D. (Producer). (2016). *Estocolmo* [Television series]. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix; Buenos Aires, Argentina: Storylab.
- Penhall, J. (Producer). (2017). *Mindhunter* [Television series]. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix.
- Planes, J. A. (2018). El presente devorado por el pasado: Declinaciones del *flashback* metaléptico y sus resonancias en el discurso memorístico de *La prima Angélica* [The present devoured by the past: Declensions of the metaleptic flashback and its resonances in the memorial discourse of *La prima Angelica*]. *Hispanic Research Journal*, 19(1), 89–104. doi:10.1080/14682737.2018.1419005
- Planes, J. A. (2020). Actitudes ante el recuerdo en el cine de ficción de Carlos Saura durante el tardofranquismo y la Transición española: De la memoria activa de *Los ojos vendados* (1978) a la memoria pasiva de *Dulces horas* (1982) [Remembrance attitudes in the fiction movies of Carlos Saura over late Francoism and Spanish transition: From the active memory of *Los ojos vendados* (1978) to the passive memory of *Dulces horas* (1982)]. *Historia y Comunicación Social*, 25(1), 151–159. doi:10.5209/hics.69233
- Rosenberg, M. (Producer). (2015). *Jessica Jones* [Television series]. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix; Burbank, CA: Marvel Television.
- Rubin, L. (Producer). (2017). *Gypsy* [Television series]. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix; London, UK: Working Title Television.
- Siri, F. E. (Producer). (2016). *Marseille* [Television series]. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix; Paris, France: Federation Entertainment.
- Straczynski, J. M., Wachowski, L., & Wachowski, L. (Producers). (2015). *Sense8* [Television series]. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix; Los Angeles, CA: Georgeville Television.
- Turim, M. (1989). *Flashbacks in film: Memory & history*. London, UK: Routledge.

Weiner, M. (Producer). (2007). *Mad men* [Television series]. New York, NY: American Movie Classics.

Willimon, B. (Producer). (2013). *House of cards* [Television series]. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix; Beverly Hills, CA: Media Rights Capital.

Wright, B. (Producer). (2016). *Travelers* [Television series]. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix; Toronto, Canada: Peacock Alley Entertainment.

Yorkey, B. (Producer). (2017). *13 reasons why* [Television series]. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix; Los Angeles, CA: July Moon Productions.

Zamani, Z. (Producer). (2019). *Jinn* [Television series]. Gemmayzeh, Lebanon: Kabreet Productions.