Chapter 3

Sing, Goddess, of the Anger of Achilles
Formal Repetition in Storytelling

Imagine a blind old rhapsode, a long time ago, standing in the middle of a circle of eager listeners, about to embark in a long recitation without aids. There can be no mistakes; his livelihood as a wandering poet depends on performing flawlessly every time. He clears his throat, makes himself ready, and begins:

> Sing, goddess, of the anger of Achilles, son of Peleus,
> accursed, which brought countless pains upon the Achaeans.[1]

If you recognise these words, you might feel satisfaction, maybe even awe, as the work they open is recalled to your awareness. Like other ancient works, Homer's *Iliad* begins with the auspicious ritual of invoking the muses, something to be repeated at every performance.[2] This is not only a magical act that connects the poet to divinity, so he can channel the voice of truth and myth for his audience. It is also a prayer, so the bard can remember the roughly 15,000 verses than the epic poem is made of, or at least enough of them to piece a compelling performance together. The muses, goddesses of art, are the daughters of memory, keen on the repetition of form and content to preserve knowledge and tradition. How could one plunge into such a long recitation without their help? Even allowing for slight variations, similar patterns and the exact repetition of certain sequences, this is a huge feat seen from our modern perspective, untrained as we are in the arts of memory.

The famous beginning serves also to situate the tale and focus on one of its main characters, already priming us, revealing who is responsible for the situation. Achilles' stubbornness is about to send many heroes to Hades. Can it all

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[1] The text is provided by the Perseus digital library, based on R. Lattimore's translation from 1951. https://classicalanthology.theclassicslibrary.com/2012/05/30/iliad-1-1-7/.
[2] I am aware of the scholarly disputes surrounding the doubtful existence of Homer as a unique individual (Graziosi, 2002, p. 16), but who compiled the ancient stories or what the origin of the ideas/fragments was has no bearing upon this argument.

really be the fault of just one man? This beginning plunges us *in media res* into the final period of the 10-year Trojan War, whose complicated causes, participants and development we get to know in painstaking detail. After many battles, duels, divine intrigues and deaths, the poem will end with the very same Achilles, his anger now spent, taking pity on his enemies and allowing them to bury their dead, celebrating the funeral of the Trojan Prince Hector. That is, *The Iliad* finishes without getting to the point where the war ends, and it does not tell us either how Achilles indeed is about to die himself, his famous mortal heel pierced by an enemy arrow. The poem shows that despite his victory, Achilles is still devastated, his love lost, even if he has recovered his honour. Could the main lesson of this story be that victory is indeed as expensive for the victors as for the losers? There is no universal agreement on what this ending means, and it remains open to an interpretation that has shifted through time, as we always look at the classic work through whatever current cultural lenses our age favours.

Maybe it is not even an ending, for the story of *The Iliad* continues in another epic poem, *The Odyssey*, which the old rhapsode might agree to sing about in his next performance. Both works have their own storylines, but belong to the same narrative universe and are consecutive in story-time, even invoking the same divine connection, as the sequel poem starts like this:

> O Muse, tell me of that man of many ways, who travelled
> Far and wide, after he sacked the sacred citadel of Troy.[3]

Now, the story follows one of the victorious Greek warriors after the Trojan War has ended: Odysseus, who had had the idea of gifting the Trojans a wooden horse full of soldiers that precipitated the city's downfall, attempts to return home to his island of Ithaca. This takes him no less than 10 years, as his sailing course and plans are thwarted again and again by a vengeful Poseidon, the god of the seas. He encounters the enchantress Circe, the sirens, Calypso, the cyclops and many other monsters and challenges along the way, and finally succeeds in getting home, solving his kingdom's problems with a blood bath.

These cryptic and only slightly parodic summaries do not do justice to the two epic poems, but I am taking the risk of assuming that the reader will know them, either through having read them directly or through one of their adaptations. If not, let this serve as a teaser, an encouragement to immediately get hold of a copy of these foundational stories of the Western Canon, some of the most repeated across any kind of media. *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* together tell a story that many people have known and retold for centuries, even millennia.[4] The texts are so widely versioned and known, that audiences have something at stake, as they

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[3]The text is provided by the Perseus digital library, based on R. Lattimore's translation from 1965. https://classicalanthology.theclassicslibrary.com/2012/05/30/odyssey-1-1-6/.

[4]First, the story was known by regular Greeks, then by cultured people from Rome, and later spread to the rest of Europe (Dark Ages notwithstanding). What were once works of popular storytelling end up as the patrimony of a reduced cultural elite. Cinema and literary adaptations have popularised them again in our time.

are part of nostalgic memories of formative years. My own memories are from high school times, when I studied Classic Greek and Latin. For me, writing now about those opening lines evokes the suffering attached to translating difficult fragments and the mischievous smile of my teacher as she read my inept renderings aloud to the class. But they also rekindle my initial joy at getting immersed in a world of heroes and gods for the first time. Revisiting them is also becoming 16 again. The affective resonance of repetition is not only a matter of the stories themselves but also a subjective dimension of the act of reception across time.

These stories are also an ideal case to introduce this chapter and the next, as they incarnate so many kinds of repetition in relation to narrative structure and content. Both openings focus on one single hero (Achilles, Odysseus) and his personality as catalyst for plot development. A character flaw, perhaps a lack of virtue, pitches a man against the gods and the divine order, causing all sorts of upheaval in their communities. This is the preferred theme of much ancient storytelling, whose main function, no matter how thrilling the many different plots may be, is to be a reminder of the divine and social order. Stories about tragic destinies have the double effect of providing audiences with the voyeuristic pleasure of seeing others suffer just punishment while hopefully deterring them from engaging in similar forbidden behaviours. Homer's works can be placed at the centre of a network of stories that have elicited readers' enthusiasm across time in many individual acts of reception, and that often have a component of pleasurable repetition and recognition. They are not magically called forth from nothing, but are themselves the product of a long tradition of oral storytelling, which some scholars trace as far back as the Bronze Age. As for their projection into the future, they have inspired countless authors to retell or extend the tales, such as Aeschylus does in his *Oresteian Trilogy*, Virgil in *The Aeneid* (which I will zoom into in the next chapter), Shakespeare in *Troilus and Cressida*, Robert Graves in his *Siege and Fall of Troy*, Madeline Miller in *Circe* and Pat Barker in *The Silence of the Girls*; these two latter giving voice to the female characters that had been mute in all the other renderings.

This network of texts (backwards and forwards) contains every kind of sameness and repetition at the core of this chapter and the next. Here, I will focus on form/structure, the realm of *bits, plots, genre and archetypes*. The next chapter deals with content, the conscious efforts at world-making, adaptation and the repetition of actual fragments that get re-used in different productive ways.

The Iliad and *The Odyssey* also allow me to insist on the point that canonical texts are enmeshed in repetitive dynamics, so that repetition is not just a marker of popular culture texts or a result of the laziness of film executives without imagination. Umberto Eco already noted that popular culture is usually judged as 'more or less successful tokens of a given model or type'.[5] What would happen if we were to judge high culture by the same standard? This is not as controversial as it sounds. After all, these two epic poems might be unique now, but there were

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[5]Eco (1990, p. 84).

many other works which they were related to and we have never seen.[6] We cannot know if the lost works were good or bad, or how different they were from the few surviving ones. However, it is reasonable to assume that the poems that have made it through the ages are the most beloved ones, those that got copied over and over, so that at least one manuscript managed to survive the dark middle age – in Eco's words, the most successful token.

When considering the form of storytelling, it makes sense to begin with the smallest unit, and to move slowly upwards in size and even level of abstraction. The boundaries between some of these categories are rather fluid, and I must admit to a certain arbitrariness in deciding where to draw the line. It is my hope that this division can help understanding the different ways in which formal repetition can generate stories, both from a producer perspective and from the position of the audiences receiving and recognising the different traits.

There is an intention in representing the model as a series of concentric circles, like the ripples that appear in the water when we cast a stone (Fig. 1). Closest to the core are the smallest structures that can be contained within the biggest ones. Farthest away are repetitions with a longer cycle, which are more difficult to include in one sole work and rather refer to comparisons between works that share common scaffoldings.

Bits

I have called the smallest unit 'bit' adopting Konstantin Stanislavski's term, which he mentions in several books and explains in *An Actor Prepares*.[7] This is the diary of a fictional student called Kostya, who is learning Stanislavski's acting techniques. In a brilliant chapter called 'Unit and Objectives', Kostya tells about a dinner at the house of Shustov, a famous actor, who illustrates the need to divide a play in smaller units by carving the turkey which the family is going to eat. Shustov explains how the whole turkey is an unmanageable size for consumption, so he carves the largest pieces first: the legs, wings and soft parts of the roast. Then he continues making meal portions which his children start stuffing whole in their mouths, to which he recommends cutting it up even further to suit mouth sizes and appetites. A play is just like that, an unmanageable size if taken as a whole, impossible to comprehend by an actor as anything other than an accumulation of disconnected moments. Actors must make an effort to understand what the biggest chunks are, and how they in turn are divided into smaller units, so that

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[6]We don't have a lot of information about lost oral epics, but other genres provide interesting comparisons. For instance, ancient Greek tragedy. In his two-volume work, *The Lost Plays of Greek Tragedy*, Mathew Wright argues that we have a very skewed picture of this genre, as we base all our analyses and assumptions on 32 existing plays, while there is evidence and fragments of hundreds more (and probably even more of which neither references nor fragments exist!). It is actually not entirely clear if the two poems are a product of oral/traditional composition or if they are a result of literate composition (Kahane, 1994, p. 5).

[7]Stanislavski (1936).
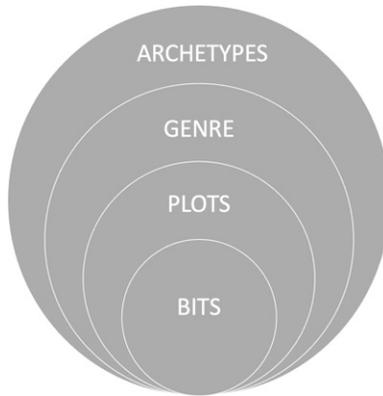
Fig. 1.   The Units of Formal Repetition.

even though one can concentrate on a specific brief fragment, the understanding of the whole is never lost. The division into bits is not set in stone, and Stanislavski admits that what is a unit in one context does not serve in another. For instance, it is one thing to think of the main actions in one play, and then to have to rehearse specifically for one of them, which requires a narrower division in shorter bits. He distinguishes between smaller and larger bits, and worries that such a divisive attitude can cut up a play into too many meaningless pieces. Therefore, an important point is introduced: units are never disengaged from function: 'The division of a play into units, to study its structure, has one purpose (. . .) There is another, far more important, inner reason. At the heart of every unit lies a *creative objective*'.[8] This is crucial in order to be able to decide how small the units can be, for even if very brief, they must have their own objective.

But how do these bits work in practice? Let's turn back to *The Iliad*, which can serve to illustrate all levels of our structural division. If we think of the fragments it could be cut into, there are 24 books, with each book divided into sections, typically indicated in analysis works by noting verse numbers. For instance, the first book contains the sections of the petition of the Trojan priest Chryses for the Greeks to return his daughter to him, Agamemnon's denial, the nine days of plague, the quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles, the seizing of Briseis by Agamemnon, Achilles' declaration that he will not fight for the Greeks any more and lastly Achilles' appeal to his mother Thetis so she will appeal to Zeus to avenge her son's honour. These sections are much too long to be literally repeatable, but some of their components do turn up elsewhere in the long poem, creating an accumulated meaning that is heavy with the weight of foreboding.

Let's look in detail at one of these bits: supplication. In this first book, there are several acts of supplication by various characters (Chryses, Achilles, Thetis), who beg other characters for different kinds of mercy. This happens all through the

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[8]Ibid., p. 116.

book, and also in *The Odyssey*. Every time, there is a physical description of supplication that is repeated and described with similar words: 'the suppliant's gesture of lowering himself to embrace his opponent's knees, thus showing his humility and desperation'.[9] Supplication can be made by strangers or acquaintances (in which case it is less formal and more like an exchange of favours). It can be between humans or gods, but also between humans and gods. Supplication is not just a matter of advancing the plot or creating characterisation; it also shows society's code of behaviour. Supplication is a known ritual which the public would have known well, like the arming of a warrior or the reception of a guest. The poet offers details according to the effect he wants to cause in the audience. Sometimes supplications are richly described if they constitute pivotal actions with important narrative function (like Thetis addressing Zeus in the first book), otherwise they are very schematic. Each act of supplication is something in itself, but it is their repetition that gives them a deeper meaning. Every time a bit is repeated, the question is why is it being repeated, what is the accumulated meaning and what effect is obtained by that repetition. According to Pedrick, the point of supplications in *The Iliad* is to get one's request heard, that is, to get attention without getting killed in the process. However, most supplications fail, despite offers of ransom, appeal to universal virtues (like respect for motherhood) or even the gods. Many supplicants are killed, so supplication is supporting, in fact, the theme of war and vengeance. In *The Odyssey*, the many supplications function in an entirely different way, since Zeus protects supplicants, so their success illuminates the hospitality theme of this work.

Supplication would also be familiar to the listeners of the poem, who might have found themselves at one of the two ends of this act in the course of their lives. That is, beyond their aesthetic weight, bits are also recognisable slices of everyday life, operating like Richard Schechner's concept of restored behaviour, which refers to 'living behaviour treated as a film director treats a strip of film', a collection of small units that can be rearranged in different ways and that structure human interaction at many levels (social, ritualistic and so on).[10] Think of the way in which we go through the motions in a mundane visit to a supermarket: how our bodies stand in line, how we hold the basket until we can put it on the stand to empty it, how we place the goods on the conveyor belt and the words that we and the cashier speak aloud. All gestures and phrases have been said before hundreds of times, repeated like magic formulae. The situation might be boring, but it is safe and recognisable: we know what to expect and what is expected of us. Schechner notes that we do not usually know or care about how restored behaviour first appeared, we have just learnt it by exposure and have become proficient at practicing it.

Consider how many of these bits and pieces we keep in our mind, both in relation to everyday life and in relation to stories, without thinking about them or being able to name them individually. We can combine them as a collective

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[9]Pedrick (1982, p. 125).
[10]Schechner (1981, p. 2).

creative pool that can be arranged and rearranged in every possible way, often in specific ways that respond to genre conventions. The supplication bit is no longer familiar to us in the shape that is presented in *The Iliad*, but we know other bits to beg for mercy (although we might not formulate it like that): someone taking flowers with them when they are going to ask for a favour, or the cheating husband on his knees, begging the wife to take him back. These two bits lead our thoughts towards the romantic genre, in dramatic or comedic versions. In fact, in our part of the world, the position of supplication is no longer done in other contexts than the romantic, as the website TV Tropes proposes in their entry 'The Grovel' (the underlined words are links to other entries)[11,12]:

> One character has hurt or betrayed another, usually their love interest. Perhaps their love learned that they only started dating because of The Bet, or perhaps the offender accuses the other of cheating. In any case, they are now in a Second-Act Breakup.
>
> Eventually, however, the offender decides that they cannot live without their love interest or learns that they were horribly mistaken about them. But how to make it up to them? How to convince them to take you back? By groveling, an act of apology so sincere the love interest will have to forgive you. This may take the form of a long speech but occasionally circumstances call for something more drastic to prove they have really changed.
>
> The offender is usually male and the forgiver usually female, but not always.
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> When done well, this trope provides drama and emotional catharsis for the audience. Debts have been repaid, sins have been forgiven, and the couple will now live Happily Ever After.
>
> When done poorly, this trope can be seen as demeaning or emasculating the offender. The penalty is too harsh for the crime, and the apology is too extravagant for such a minor offense. On the other side of poorly done, this trope can make the forgiver appear weak. If reparations have not been made, a simple apology may be letting the offender off too easily. In real life, the Domestic Abuse cycle often consists of abuse – apology – abuse, which may imply that the abuse will continue.

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[11]Although in other cultures it is still a current bit, for instance in the Japanese, where businessmen or public personalities will apologise for their mistakes using the dogeza (土下座) position.
[12]https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/TheGrovel

> This trope is common in <u>Romance Novels</u>, <u>Breakup Songs</u>, and <u>Romantic Comedies</u>. The <u>Pose of Supplication</u> may or may not be involved. See also <u>Idiot Houdini</u>.

TV Tropes is an online repository, organised as a wiki, which contains thousands upon thousands of entries about all sorts of fragments (tropes) used to tell stories across media (film, TV, games, music and more). It is also a community, with around 16,000 listed contributors and many more people participating in the fora. TV Tropes is the best resource on the Internet to locate and browse through narrative units used in our current popular culture.[13] Tropes vary in size, sometimes overlapping with what I have called bits, sometimes with plots, or genres. The site is a fascinating treasure trove for popular culture enthusiasts, as it wittily associates and explains, performing collective shrewd cultural analysis in a manner that was once the exclusive province of literature professors. The fascinating thing about TV Tropes is that this way of dissecting and relating has become common knowledge, that regular users can navigate and enjoy the pleasures of deconstruction.

Consider again 'The Grovel' entry I reproduced above, and how it connects character function with plot devices, while identifying the most common themes that go together with this structure. I find myself immediately wanting to explore more, clicking on the different links that take me to other entries in a hypertextual excursion that can occupy many long minutes if I am not watchful. Like the *memex* associative trails dreamt up by Vannevar Bush, TV Tropes connects many people's commentary on popular culture in a massive web of meaning and interpretation.[14] There is a very distinctive pleasure of classifying, of knowing, of completing.

For producers and authors of popular culture products, bits are similar to the words that one needs to use in order to speak a specific language, minor design patterns that can be woven into bigger tapestries. The sole use of bits is not an indication of lack of originality, since they can be executed in more or less creative ways. A grovel scene can be cliché, an easy way to signal injustice and the submission of terrified subjects throwing themselves on the floor at the appearance of their ruler. But it can be used to great aesthetic effect. A celebrated grovel in popular culture is, for instance, the scene of *The Last Kingdom* where Uhtred and Alfred have to grovel to avoid being executed for having drawn a sword in the presence of the King. The scene balances comedic effect and true humiliation, building character depth for its two subjects. Or when King Arthur and his

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[13]It is not the only repository of its kind, but the biggest and arguably most successful. It was founded in 2004 by Fast Eddie as a *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fan resource, and it expanded and grew into other shows and genres, becoming the popular culture behemoth that it is today, where the founder is no longer active and a professional team manages the site. It has not been exempt of controversy throughout the years mostly about biases in the way diverse products or tropes are described, which different fandoms have complained about.

[14]Bush (1945).

knights in Monty Python's *The Quest for the Holy Grail* meet God and throw themselves to the ground, at which God exclaims, irritated: 'Oh don't grovel! One thing I can't stand is people grovelling!' He does not want them to apologise or avert their gazes either, he is tired of false expressions of awe and respect. A far cry from the Zeus we started our supplication with.

Plot and Seriality

Plot is the next ring in the water, the causal and temporal patterning that organises a narrative, 'the ways in which the events and characters' actions in a story are arranged and how this arrangement in turn facilitates identification of their motivations and consequences'.[15] Plot is a term used in literary criticism and as a part of everyday discourse. Here, I will be considering it as the structuring of events in a narrative from beginning, to middle, to end. This structuring can serve different functions and seek different kinds of effects, again depending on the nature of the stories and the genre they operate within. Causality is the strongest force behind plot, the glue that makes everything fit together so we can understand the development of the narrative and anticipate what might be coming next, both operations a great source of narrative pleasure.

Plots are made of long strings of bits, but they need to be organised in temporal and causal patterns in order to make sense. In this way, a plot is an overarching scaffold, so abstract that there is not much point insisting that it is always repeated; that is precisely the function of a scaffold, always to be the same, supporting many different kinds of buildings/stories. This is the very abstract sense of plot as skeleton, which is well known from the oft-quoted Aristotelian narrative arc of beginning, middle and end, further developed by Freytag's concept of the climactic plot (Fig. 2).

If we again return to our guiding work in this chapter, *The Iliad*, we can see this plot structure in operation. The poem starts foreshadowing that the rage of Achilles will cause destruction and death. Its introduction/exposition tells us how the hero feels so insulted by Agamemnon stealing his captive Briseis that he refuses to fight for the Greeks any more. The rising complications include illness, battles, the burning of the ships, a lot of fighting and duels between heroes and the fateful death of Achilles' soulmate, Patroclus. This event is the climax of the story as it unleashes the rage of Achilles, who will run amok and slay many enemies, including the Trojan Prince Hector. The return sees the Trojans pushed back to their city, looking on helplessly from their walls at Achilles defiling Hector's corpse. Finally, his rage spent, Achilles accepts Priam's supplication and returns Hector's body to the Trojans so they can bury him. This is the catastrophe, the outcome or denouement of the story.

Nowadays, most commercial storytelling will adopt a three-act scaffolding in one way or another, so the schema in itself is always repeated, imposing a kind of

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[15]Kukkonen, Karin. 2014. 'Plot'. *The Living Handbook of Narratology*. University of Hamburg.
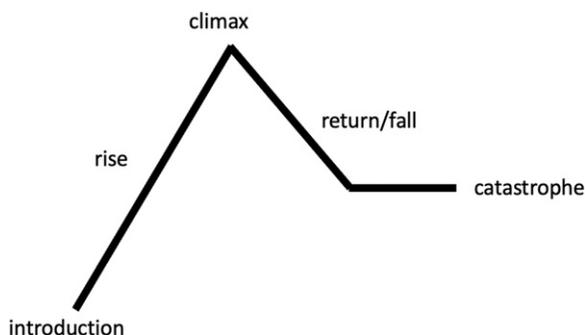
Fig. 2.   Drawn after Freytag.[16]

ordering in the way our stories progress that might not be as 'natural' as we think. As Krystina Madej argues, this way of thinking became established in the nineteenth century, but it fails to explain other ancient ways of telling stories: 'that evolved from the time of Homer such as epic, interlace, and frame structure, which place less emphasis on sequence, on formal beginnings and endings, and on plots, have been more enduring (in some cases by 2,600 years) and are more in accord with the process of peoples' lives'.[17] Indeed, even in *The Iliad*, there are a lot of parallel stories running into each other even as we tend to focus on the rage of Achilles as the overarching one. Madej's concern is that our fixation with the beginning-climax-end structure will blind us to explore alternative ways of organising stories in relation to digital media, where a linear progression is certainly not the only possibility, but somehow has become all-powerful, even in relation to computer games.

Repetition is relevant in relation to plots in two main ways. The first one is the popular conception that there is only a limited number of fixed plots that can be identified in all stories, and the second is the idea of episodic repetition, where plots are both cut up and stretched to make long chains of stories that we call series.

In regards to the first, there have been several proposals to synthetise the number of types of possible plots.[18] One of the best knowns is Christopher Booker's *The Seven Basic Plots*, a monumental book where he, inspired by Jungian psychology, explores how most stories can fit one of these symbolic models (with some of his examples):

(1) Overcoming the monster (*Beowulf, War of the Worlds*)
(2) Rags to riches (*Cinderella, Great Expectations*)
(3) The quest (*The Odyssey, King Solomon's Mines*)

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[17]2008, p. 2.
[18]We can trace this back at least to Polti (1916).

(4) Voyage and return (*Alice in Wonderland*, *Orpheus*)
(5) Comedy (*Aristophanes*, *Much Ado About Nothing*)
(6) Tragedy (*MacBeth*, *Bonnie and Clyde*)
(7) Rebirth or Redemption (*Sleeping Beauty*, *A Christmas Carol*)

According to Brooker, the primary function of storytelling is to educate the coming generations into what is morally correct, to which effect our culture has distilled a series of messages into these seven formats that can accommodate any kind of story. While the first part of the book is interesting from a narrative/structural point of view, Brooker's analyses do not really hold, as he tries to force all fiction to fit a mould that proves excessively reductive. However, the seven plots are useful for those composing stories, at least to think about patterns and their development. In a way, they provide some flesh to the bare bones structure of Freytag's triangle; a slightly more detailed design template.

The second way in which repetition is relevant at the plot level is the production of seriality, which etymologically refers to the property of something being arranged in a series, that is, a row of elements of the same kind appearing one after another. A series provides a story arch and a world in which lesser plot units can be integrated. Although the dominant medium for seriality is now television, it far predates it. In *A Thousand and One Nights*, a previously cuckolded sultan marries a virgin every day, only to have her executed the next morning before she has a chance to be unfaithful to him. Eventually, the country runs out of virgins, and the daughter of the Grand Vizier, Scheherazade, volunteers to marry the cruel ruler against the advice of her family. Close to dawn, she begs for a last favour, to say goodbye to her sister, whom she wishes to tell a story to. The sultan, curious, agrees, and Scheherazade begins narrating an intriguing tale about a merchant and a genie. The morning advances, the hour when she should be executed passes, but the tale is not finished, 'the sultan was so much taken with the beauty and accomplishments of his lady, and his curiosity was so much excited by the interesting story she had begun, that he became irresolute respecting his vow; and talking to his trembling Vizier on other affairs, he left him in suspense also as to the fate of his beloved daughter'.[19]

This famous collection of tales is one of the first examples of a serial framing where stories both can end (partially) in one session, but open up again, directing audiences towards the next episode.[20] Every night, Scheherazade tells enough of the story to keep the sultan entertained, but as the morning comes, she stops at a

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[20]Incidentally, and like Homer, this work is one of the most adapted and transmedially extended of all, with many literary retellings, ballet, opera, music, film and even computer games picking up on some of the most known tales (like Ali Baba or Aladdin) or the whole setup with Scheherazade as the prototypical storyteller.

[19]Full text of *The Thousand and One Nights* available at: https://archive.org/stream/thousandnights00unknuoft/thousandnights00unknuoft_djvu.txt.

[20]Incidentally, and like Homer, this work is one of the most adapted and transmedially extended of all, with many literary retellings, ballet, opera, music, film and even computer games picking up on some of the most known tales (like Ali Baba or Aladdin) or the whole setup with Scheherazade as the prototypical storyteller.

suspenseful point that requires he let her live one more day in order to hear the end of the tale. Her stories keep on getting entangled in new stories, so that resolution is indefinitely postponed. She knows how to keep the audience coming back. Today, Scheherazade would no doubt be hired by a streaming service to write their next blockbuster series. She is a master at what Jennifer Hayward notes is the key to seriality, which 'essentially creates the demand it then feeds'.[21]

The establishment of aesthetic and commercial strategies to support serial storytelling occurs in the nineteenth century. At this time, culture industries are eager to exploit an increasing consumerism of cultural products. Series keep readers coming back for more, as it has been masterfully explained by scholars in the field of French feuilleton, (Balzac and Dumas),[22] or Victorian English literature, (Dickens and Thackeray).[23] There is the wonderful, though perhaps not entirely true, story of *The Old Curiosity Shop*[24] readers flocking to New York harbour to receive the next ship from England with the cry: 'is little Nell dead?'.[25] A serial work like this, distributed in instalments, can hold a mass audience interested for a long time, ensuring the continuous sale of newspapers. Every single part of a series serves as an advertisement for the next one, cultivating the emotional connection to a public caught in a web of ever stretching suspense. I do not choose the spidery metaphor randomly, for it also fits with more philosophical developments. It is around this time that the separation between high culture and popular culture becomes articulated as a question of value versus worthlessness, where the immature mass audiences are held captive in webs of deception.[26] This bias keeps returning, even when cultural commentators want to approach entertainment products in their own terms.

Take Umberto Eco, for whom seriality is the overarching category that defines mass culture production in the twentieth century.[27] He locates the origin of different types of repetition in older works, as he compares high and popular culture. For instance, Shakespeare, who is guilty of a more than fair amount of remakes, might have based his *Much Ado About Nothing* on Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*. As the most prestigious of semioticians, master of ceremonies of high culture, Eco has been determinant in redeeming the study of popular texts. In several of his works he refers to comic books, television and even porn and demonstrates that important insights about the process of meaning making and

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[21]Hayward (1997, p. 3)
[22]Cornejo (2021).
[23]See, for example, the work of J. Don Vann (1985), Jennifer Hayward (1997) or Graham Law (2000).
[24]Dickens (1841).
[25]Glatt (2014).
[26]Hayward traces this position through the Marxist currents of the Frankfurt School and the writings of Gramsci.
[27]He articulates it in such a way that it also includes other kinds of variations, like retakes and remakes that I analyse separately in this book, even including intertextuality as part of serial mechanisms.

reception can be extracted from their analysis. Even though he praises some specific popular works, however, in his view, these are the exceptions that manage to break out of the drudgery of their genre conventions. Originality and uniqueness are for him still the most valuable traits, in relation to mass-produced culture as well as to high culture. He cannot hide a certain contempt, not so much for the serial works themselves, but for what they reveal about their eager audiences, trapped by the 'infantile need of hearing again always the same story, of being consoled by the "return of the identical", superficially disguised' (p. 169) Giving in to seriality is a weakness, maybe even a sin.[28]

Seriality, like Scheherazade, trades in the doubtful currency of seduction, awakening in the audience a sort of dependence that has been frowned upon throughout the history of literary criticism. Seriality is too dionysian, and not apollonian enough. In his famous *Reading for the Plot*, Brooks wants to focus on the property of plot to move forward, making us want more, both in relation to the story and to changes in our state of mind, as we grapple with 'the temporal dynamics that shape narratives in our reading of them, the play of desire in time that makes us turn pages and strive towards narrative ends'.[29] He describes the apparently contradictory pleasures of dilation and closure, by which we desire to stretch the stories we enjoy, just as much as we want to get to their end and find out how everything, finally, makes sense. In his Freudian interpretation, he sees the relationship of a text with its audience as similar to that of the psychoanalyst and their patient, so that we, by reading, working our way through the stories, can bring order to the past. In this way, our looking for the plot is also a way to attain a sort of closure, a way for stories to do something in the world besides entertain us.

Could this therapeutic approach also be applied to our engagement with the repetitive plotting of the serial form? A less stigmatising explanation of our faithfulness to series might simply be that the more time we invest watching them, the more we feel we cannot leave without a reward. A film can be watched in one sitting, a series requires commitment over time, as the different chapters are released. It is of course technically possible to watch a whole season of a series in one go, but most people will slice the experience up into several sessions (the new

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[28]Eco (1985, p. 169). To be fair, Eco's relation to popular culture is more nuanced than this, as Norma Bouchard argues in her essay 'Eco and Popular Culture' where she notes his sometimes contradictory position but concludes positively about Eco's efforts for approaching culture holistically: 'Ultimately Eco's fictional works, combined with the many essays and books he has dedicated to the definition of culture (both popular and lofty), demonstrate that his understanding of culture, in its evolution from the modern specter of Kitsch to the postmodern celebration of intertextuality, suggests an intellectual development growing out of his initial intuitions about the arbitrary and relative nature of various kinds of culture. Eco's collected works emerge as a major contribution to the definition of postmodern culture because they bear eloquent witness to the interconnectivity of lowbrow and highbrow forms of expression in the contemporary world' (Bouchard, 2009, p. 15).
[29]Brooks (1992, p. xiii).

practice of *binging*, or consuming many episodes of a series in one sitting is a testimony of how spellbound we can become as audiences).

Umberto Eco has explored some of the ways in which seriality plays with its audience.[30] He proposes the novels and short stories featuring detective Nero Wolf as a paradigm of mass produced text where 'repetition, iterations obedience to a pre-established schema and redundancy (as opposed to information)' are key. Every text proposes a 'new crime' involving a fresh set of secondary characters and locations, but the underlying story is 'eternal', since the relationships between the regular characters, the modus operandi of the detective and the underlying ethics are always the same.[31,32]

Series reward our ability to foresee and remember, since the timeline is longer than one episode. However, even the longer cycles are for Eco infantile and superficial. He talks of two kinds of audience: the naive and the smart. The naive audience lets itself become immersed in the narrative world and believes that every instantiation of a series is new. The smart audience can see seriality and appreciate the variations. These observations reflect an elitism that Eco has tried to fight against in other places. He cannot see how the less cultured audience would be able to escape the thrall of absolute immersion, that is, they can only relate to the immediate plot before them and are blind to structures. But truly those two things can coexist, for even the less educated of audiences are able to enjoy and understand the pleasures of structural reiteration, as anybody who has watched cartoons with children knows. Take *Dora the Explorer*, whose episodes are all built up in the same way, just like *Colombo*. Dora always has to go on a quest and find a new place where she can solve a problem. Places and problems change, but Dora is always accompanied by her monkey Boots, uses the objects she brings in her backpack (particularly the anthropomorphic Map) and overcomes obstacles along the way (including the fox-thief Swiper) with the 'help' of the children who are encouraged to chant different things from home to assist Dora. Children enjoy the new quests and puzzles, but are also perfectly aware of the underlying structure that is always the same. I have been witness to many playful reenactments of *Dora the Explorer* in the park, where my children and their friends used to invent their own quests and reproduced the structure of the show as efficiently as any Disney manuscript writer.

Maybe Umberto Eco's scepticism is not just a matter of elitism, but it also reflects the fact that our media world has changed enormously in the 40 years since he wrote his text. There has been an audiovisual explosion and a growth in the complexity of content, as television scholars have remarked.[33] Eco's writings depict a much less sophisticated media industry and less literate spectators. Today, we have been trained to operate at different levels of abstraction.

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[30]In several writings but notably in his article from 1985 'Innovation and repetition: Between modern and postmodern aesthetics', which is the source of the quotes here.

[31]Nero Wolf is a character created by author Rex Stout, who published 33 novels and many stories about the extravagant detective from 1934 to 1975.

[32]Eco (1985, p. 162).

[33]See Johnson (2006) and Mittell (2015).

Audiences now can move between 'the dialectical relation among micro-structures (beat and episode) and macro-structures (arch and season)', in a very similar conceptual move to what happens with computer games, as we examined in the previous chapter.[34] Marcel Silva offers a historical explanation of the simplicity of early television, which is due to its double origin as teleplay and feuilleton. Drama on television starts with the teleplay for infrastructural reasons: the unit of action of stories that are finished in one go makes for easier production. When owning a television set begins to be mainstream, infrastructural questions become important, that is, producers need to make sure that there is enough content for people to return to, so series are born. Early series like *Bonanza* 'presented the episode with a unitary plot, which had beginning, middle and ending, restoring moral, unchangeable values of the protagonist's superiority over the antagonist'.[35] The other tradition that influences the shape of early television is that of the feuilleton, which favours a slow unveiling of the plot and expands the storytelling thread as much as it can, delaying the resolution of dramatic situations. This is the tradition that gives birth to the genre of soap operas. Contemporary drama is a result of both, and the best of them, like *Borgen* or *Downtown Abbey*, which Silva praises, are really hybrids that can harness the best of the two traditions:

> …a progressive and complex representation of the World that, little by little, unveils its rhizomatic profundity, whose primeval function is to gradually deteriorate our initial comprehension of the World and to slowly reveal an ambiguous, multiform Truth that inhabits the deep bosom of the characters and their human relations.[36]

Another semiotician with a love for seriality is Omar Calabrese, in the context of his work on the neo-baroque. He proposes a typology of kinds of repetition in television series, going from the simplest of repetitive gags through to long series like *Dallas*, which are tightly designed to always repeat the same overarching structure and then can accommodate variations at various levels.[37] Even though his examples are from the 1980s and 1990s, he stresses the combinatorial aspect of modern television as a key aesthetic feature that connects television to wider cultural movements that have to do with the mediatic acceleration brought about by the neo-baroque, related to 'organized variation, polycentrism and regulated irregularity, and frantic rhythm'.[38]

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[34]Silva (2015, p. 127).
[35]Ibid., p.135.
[36]Ibid., p. 139.
[37]Calabrese (1992, pp. 35–44).
[38]Calabrese (1992, pp. 43–44).

Genre: The Dance of Continuity and Newness

Moving to the next ripple of water from the model in Fig. 1, we come to the topic of genre. There is no doubt that this cultural category is still relevant; genre studies is a thriving research area, with significant contributions across all media arts. After the legitimation of popular media initiated by cultural studies in our omnivorous times, we can find scholarly discussions of genres which would have been considered minor or directly harmful in the past, such as gothic literature, fantasy or science fiction.[39] As Umberto Eco noted, the pleasure of mass media texts often comes from a combination of the recognition of some known schemata and a measure of original content (a variation).[40] That is, knowledge about genre serves audiences in two ways: to help them choose the texts they want to engage with, and to decode them successfully, something that cannot occur without a pre-existing encyclopaedia of formal and semantic components. In this way, genre is a relational concept, which cannot be discussed exclusively in terms of the text, the strategy of the producers or the reception by an audience, but in an integrated manner which takes all three dimensions into account: 'Genres can be defined as patterns/forms/styles/structures which transcend individual art products, and which supervise both their construction by artists and their reading by audiences'.[41] Although Eco refers to genre as the exclusive province of mass media texts, I would argue that the above is true for high cultural products like this chapter's main case. *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are epic poems built upon an existing tradition and received in a specific way by their audiences.

As film scholar Robert Altman has noted, genres have no stable identities and borders, and even our perception of works belonging to one genre or another can change with time.[42] In contemporary media culture, there is an acceleration of the pace with which genres transform and merge with each other, as they are both sensitive to the development of market forces and the events of the world around them. A series like the Korean *All of Us Are Dead*, from 2022, described by Wikipedia as a 'coming-of-age zombie apocalypse horror' would have been impossible in 1978, when the original *Dawn of the Dead* inaugurated the genre. Now, terror can be mixed with adolescent angst, love with gore, tenderness with raw humour. In fact, the characters can even joke about their situation referring to fictions that deal with zombies. At the beginning of the series, when they are trying to figure out what might be the cause of the strange behaviour of people afflicted by a violent 'disease', Lee Cheong-San notes, to the incredulity of his classmates, that they look like the zombies from the film *Train to Busan*. Such self-awareness would be unthinkable in earlier examples of the zombie genre. In *All of Us Are Dead*, the characters can use what they know from popular culture to develop survival strategies. Not only that, the series also cleverly uses the trope

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[39]Warde, A., & Gayo-Cal, M. (2009). The anatomy of cultural omnivorousness: The case of the United Kingdom. *Poetics* (Amsterdam) [Online], *37*(2), 119–145.

[40]1990, p. 85.

[41]Ryall (1975, p. 28).

[42]Altman.

of zombies to harshly critique the conditions of being young in Korea today: the enormous pressure to do well in a draconian school system, the bullying, the estranged relations of youths and their parents and, above all, the unwillingness of the government to help them; a system where the adults let the world go down and young people pay the price. There is also a certain freshness to Korean cinematography, an earnestness that contrasts with the self-irony of many Hollywood productions, and, a sense of hope that raised the show above bleak American genre classics like *The Walking Dead*. Because of the complex articulation of genre as an interplay of a system of production, a text, an author and an audience, the question of originality is not exclusively limited to the inherent qualities of a product, but is always relational. *All of Us Are Dead* was praised for its originality by the international press, a way to breathe life into tired clichés and overused tropes.[43] Originality here does not mean total newness, but clever variations that give the old schemata the opportunity to mean something else, something more. We would probably not consider this renovation of the zombie genre positively if the public had rejected it, of course, but the series was a reception success.[44]

Moreover, originality can also be considered in terms of a single person, for the subjective component of the reception situation means that repetition is also not present/recognisable in the same way to all audiences. Literary critics might care about identifying the first occurrence of a specific theme or the birth of a genre, but this does not matter at all from a reception perspective; it has simply no bearing on the appreciation of the work. After all, no one reads literature or watches films in a chronological order, waiting until they have finished *The Canterbury Tales* before starting on *Paradise Lost*. Or maybe we do, when enroled in literature class. In the real world, we consume fiction across media, high and low, with no regard to production times, in a hodgepodge of fancy, availability and chance. I can illustrate this with another anecdote. Three years ago, I went to see a Kabuki play for the first time in Ginza's Kabukiza Theatre in Tokyo. I did not know that much about Kabuki, other than it is a traditional art form with all-male performers in heavy makeup. I guess I was expecting something similar to Spanish Golden Age or Shakespearean theatre, but I was blown away by the strangeness of the spectacle. The stage design was impressive, the costumes magnificent and the way the actors moved, danced and could strike significant poses impressed me. The play lasted for more than four hours, which, contrary to my expectations, flew by. The recitation style was alien to me; an affected way of speaking, going up and down in pitch in unnatural ways that led attention to the

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[43]https://www.smh.com.au/culture/tv-and-radio/the-zombies-are-alive-and-thirsty-in-korean-series-all-of-us-are-dead-20220204-p59ttx.html, https://www.polygon.com/reviews/22926194/all-of-us-are-dead-review-zombie-shows-walking-dead, https://www.commonsensemedia.org/tv-reviews/all-of-us-are-dead

[44]The series scored 87% audience appreciation in Rotten Tomatoes. For several weeks, it was the most watched Netflix production, globally (https://www.nme.com/news/tv/all-of-us-are-dead-most-watched-third-week-running-netflix-globally-charts-3162625), and it has been renewed for a second season. *All of Us Are Dead* has been approved as worthwhile by the wider interpretive community.

story and the feelings of the characters with a range of very different voices. Fortunately, spectators could rent a small screen where the archaic language was translated simultaneously into English. This way I was able to follow the story of three bandits who despite their crimes manage to be redeemed by their loyalty to each other and are rewarded with a honourable death at the end.[45] This is both a very old play and well known by enthusiasts of this art form, who of course also can appreciate the performance at a different level. The experts could find merit and fault in the different variations, reacting loudly with enthusiasm to different parts that I only could experience it as spectacularly new and strange, and therefore original.

In this way, the originality discussion becomes slippery. We have a tendency to consider it as an absolute quality, but in reality it is extremely contingent, and we would do well of remember this before getting entangled in essentialist discussions. There are numerous examples in media studies of how a genre that has become tired and clichéd in its original culture can flourish when introduced to a new audience. In Russia at the beginning of the 1990s, the whole country was glued to the Mexican series *Los Ricos También Lloran*, notwithstanding the alien cultural references. *Telenovelas* became a global export, where not only Russian but also Chinese, European and African audiences' enthusiasm spawned several local industries that now produce series where the format has been adapted, and developed.[46] Trends travel back and forth, and it is now the Turkish *Dizi* that fascinates Spanish-speaking audiences.[47]

No doubt the contingency of originality means that producers can keep on selling their products, not just in the television industry but also in film, publishing and gaming. Indeed with online repositories of series, films, books and games, old products can always find new audiences, and old audiences keep returning to old content for comfort.[48] In this kind of economy, absolute originality is not a valuable currency.

Widespread online/streaming access also has the advantage of allowing enjoyment of products other than the immediately available ones in our country of residence, widening our cultural and language range. Niche genres can be made more accessible, and the theory of the 'Long Tail' proposed by Chris Anderson encourages producers to 'forget squeezing millions from a few megahits at the top of the charts. The future of entertainment is in the millions of niche markets at the shallow end of the bitstream'.[49] Although his optimism about the availability of

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[45]The play was called 'Sannin Kichisa Tomoe no Shiranami', a major work by Kawatake Mokuami who wrote many plays about bandits. The full-length performance was performed for the first time in 15 years at the Kabukiza Theatre. The Evening Show was followed by a dance performance by Bandō Tamasaburō, adapted from a masterpiece of the Nō Theatre.

[46]Medina and Barron (2011).

[47]Öztürkmen (2018).

[48]https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/aug/21/the-age-of-comfort-tv-why-people-are-secretly-watching-friends-and-the-office-on-a-loop.

[49]Anderson (2004).

content has been recently questioned, his emphasis on abundance and near ubiquitous access is helpful to understand the ways in which genre operates nowadays in the daily saturation of our digital lives.[50]

Conversations about genre are common in the mediascape, where critics and audience can use generic descriptions as communication tools, so that a new film is immediately categorised in a way that can shape its reception. Genres have also found their way as useful categories of our current algorithm-supported cultural consumption, where they morph into tags to influence the content that is presented to us. For instance, if you have told Facebook or BookBub that you are interested in Science Fiction, news about prominent releases in that genre will appear at the top of your feed, and you will be updated on every single Disney new production to do with the *Star Wars* Universe, while the latest Bollywood hit might pass you by. Using genre as a label to filter cultural products in this way is nothing new, bookstores and libraries have always done it, since a great number of material needs to be searchable through recognisable categories. There are, however, crucial differences in the ways classification works in the 'old' vs our current big data days. While bookstore genre divisions are more or less eclectic, libraries operate in a more strict way, using systems like the Universal Decimal Classification System, which combines topic classification with a number that indicates a location in the floor plan of the library.[51] For instance, the 8 numbers are for the general class of linguistic and literature, 82 is specific for literature, 82-3 for fiction and 82-32 for short stories, so this is where I would go to find that collection of disquieting tales I liked so much, even if I did not remember that Edgar Allan Poe was the author. This is an advantage over algorithmic search on a free text box as we know it from search engines like Google, since we do not need to know the exact name of what we are looking for, but use genre and topic to narrow our options. It also allows for serendipitous findings; as we peruse the aisles, inevitably, other materials will arouse our curiosity.

One could ask the critical question of who makes genre nowadays, or for whom. For genre is also very much about marketing. Genre categories are embraced by producers (publishers, film makers, streaming services) in order to segment the market and guide us to the correct box. If anything, the amount of recognisable genres has grown exponentially along the last couple of decades, as producers across the arts have gone from a stable set of limited divisions (comedy, drama, romantic, horror…) to more and more cross-over combinations and specialised labels, like the famous undercategories which Netflix uses to identify films, and that have been reverse-engineered by various cultural outlets.[52] These

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[50]As I take up again on chapter 5.

[51]Based on the Dewey classification system from 1876, this is the most widely library classification system in the world. There are others, like the Library of Congress (US) or the British Museum (UK), and other local ones.

[52]Over the years, Netflix has refined their classification system. They do not release it, but there are several lists that reverse-engineer it, like http://ogres-crypt.com/public/NetFlix-Streaming-Genres2.html. The examples here come from: https://www.finder.com/netflix/genre-list.

categories are the result of accumulating individual tags and provide such entertaining combinations as 'Absurd Cult Comedies from the 80s', 'Understated French Gay and Lesbian movies', 'Quirky Race Against Time Action and Adventure' or even 'Controversial Spiritual Documentaries'. It is difficult to imagine any actual audiences looking specifically for any of these categories beforehand, so this prompts the question of who the tags are for, and maybe why they are not made available as a list of possibilities by Netflix themselves. This is, however, not hard to answer, for such a long list would be too confusing. Effective search by humans is only served by a reasonably limited number of categories, so we can have a complete overview of what to include and exclude. Cumulative tagging like this is by contrast very useful for machines, that can not only identify films as belonging to the same category but also make families of connections where single films share one or more tags, so the machine searches for similarities in order to make recommendations, as we will explore in Chapter 5. The end user does not need to know, and indeed can be left wondering what the specific affinity is behind any recommendation.

An increased knowledge of very specific tagging can, in fact, highlight some of the paradoxes of digitally supported consumer culture. Database consumption encourages acceptance of someone else's classification system, for as I pointed out above, database search only works out for humans if they know *exactly* what to write in the search field. So we learn that it is called 'chick lit', 'young adult dystopia' or 'midlife crisis comedy'. There are many such phrases that we recognise today but would be obscure only 50 years ago. This development might seem harmless enough, unless it hurts our feelings that a favourite movie becomes marked as a banal token of a derided genre. However, hegemonic categorisation practices also have discursive effect, contributing to normalising issues that maybe deserve to be treated more seriously (do midlife crisis exist and are they always ridiculous?). A good illustration of this comes from the realm of pornography, where there is a small body of scholarship on the effects that the tagging of pornographic films has not only for discoverability but also for the kinds of sexual practices that are sanctioned as normal, or on the contrary become underrepresented.[53] Take, for instance, the many tags destined to identify women types, by age (young, MILF, granny...) or ethnicity (latina, Asian...), objectifying them in the process. How are female users supposed to navigate this when looking for films that might potentially appeal to them?

Archetypes and Universals

The last ripple in the water is the most tenuous one: the idea that there is a reduced number of narrative archetypes behind any kind of story, an even more abstract version of the concept of the finite plots I presented above. These archetypes are functional and not thematic, that is, the objects are always exchangeable, but the relations between them are what defines the archetype.

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[53]See, for instance: Mazières et al. (2014), Saunders (2014), and Fesnak (2016).

From this perspective, 'Frodo took the ring to Mordor' and 'I returned the borrowed book to the library' are the same story. There are several notable versions of this very functional perspective, and they have all been influential in the development of the field of digital narrative.[54]

Influenced by the work of Carl Jung, Northrop Frye proposed that all literature can be placed within one of the four narrative archetypes: comedy, romance, tragedy and irony/satire.[55]These archetypes define the conflicts that will occupy the protagonists and antagonists. In comedy, the hero will meet opposition by a representative of the status quo, until he is able to exert change and thus 'win'. In romance, the conflict is that of a noble hero against some form of evil, so this archetype is centred around the fight (agon). In tragedy, a privileged hero makes mistakes (or cannot overcome a flaw) and catastrophe ensues. Finally, in irony/satire, the hero is metaphorically torn to pieces because the flawed society makes it impossible to actually carry out heroic behaviour. We could no doubt make lists of work that fit one or the other category, but this approach has been criticised for being so abstract that it becomes meaningless, and it certainly cannot be applied to do specific literary criticism of any work.

The next often mentioned structuralist author is Vladimir Propp, who based his theories on an exhaustive analysis of Russian fairy tales, in order to identify the different character functions that drive stories forward. In *Morphology of the Folktale*, Propp identifies seven dramatis personae: villain, donor, helper, princess/sought-for-person, dispatcher, hero and false hero. Then he synthesises 31 functions that relate these personae to each other or determine the course of the action, such as 'Absentation', where someone leaves or dies, 'Violation', where someone breaks a rule or 'Trickery', where the villain tricks the hero. These functions can be combined in different ways to analyse any folktale, and the proponents of this theory have demonstrated how it works across many different cultures.[56]

The last of the three chosen authors to illustrate the functionalist perspective is Joseph Campbell, whose *Hero With a Thousand Faces* has influenced countless Hollywood scriptwriters, genre novel writers as well and video game designers. Most notably, the idea of the hero's journey, also called the monomyth, is behind the *Star Wars* series which George Lucas himself has stated was made with the explicit intention of recreating the mythical structure (Fig. 3).[57]

> A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region
> of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and
> a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious
> adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.[58]

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[54]Partly because of Janet Murray's interest in them as presented in her ground-beaking *Hamlet on the Holodeck* in 1997.
[55]Frye (1957).
[56]Propp (1984).
[57]Baxter (1999).
[58]Campbell (1949, p. 23).

A scaffold such as this can be endlessly repeated and is extremely useful to aid production, commercialisation and distribution. This epic master pattern fits very old works like *The Odyssey* as well as the latest Hollywood action or fantasy production. However, it also presents a number of problems, both seen from the production or the reception side. In the first place, it favours a specific kind of mythical story. Most old tales and myth exist often in different versions, but in Campbell's argument, they get flattened to fit the requirements of the monomyth: a male hero who continues his quest undeterred, no matter what happens, while everybody else is an accessory to the plot. These tales are also usually tales of conquest, of dominion, of an individual being placed above a community due to intrinsic questions of value.

From a reception perspective, the monomyth is too abstract to be operationalised as a cognitive clutch or an analysis tool. As was the case with the seven plots, the more stylised the scaffold, the less it can say about specific stories, so we would not get much analytically by trying to establish if a particular story follows it or not, even though (or perhaps because) the character functions and overarching lines are easily recognisable.

There are two more innovative ways of considering abstract patterns (archetypes, folk tales personae, monomyth) in our current media landscape. The first one is in relation to user-generated content, where the kind of cycle at the centre of the hero's journey can be reproduced in much shorter versions, not in 3 hours films but in 30 seconds in a platform like TikTok, which I will explore in Chapter 6. The second consideration is that although these patterns might be more or less timeless, they have not rested unchanged since Frye, Propp and Campbell formulated them. This is related to the high trope literacy of audiences, allowing hero stories to expand their range and to integrate different kinds of semantic units than classic tales of old or twentieth-century cinema.

Consider a work like the comic book series *Rat Queens*, an epic story in which the protagonists are a group of irreverent female warriors (elf, human, dwarf and smidgen) that swear, kill, drink and happily have interspecies sexual relationships without remorse. *Rat Queens* has been praised for the quality of its art, plot and dialogue and displays influences from classic fantasy, but also specially from the world of roleplaying games. Some might say that it is a subversion of the archetype, but from a functional perspective, it is completely classic. For instance, the first volume, tellingly named *Sass and Sorcery*, begins with the reluctant heroes being forced to take on a patrolling mission that will lead them to a trap and a much more complicated story of a bigger evil plan behind the killings of a lot of mercenary adventurers like them. There are thresholds, helpers, mentors, magical objects, challenges and temptations and certainly transformations. But there is also genuine warmth in the way the friendship between the protagonists is depicted. Paradoxically, the characters are both stereotypes (the hot-headed mage, the stubborn warrior...) and at the same time have depth, compelling backstories and meaningful interaction. *Rat Queens* is a brilliant deconstruction of the sword and sorcery (S&S) genre without falling into straight parody (although there is quite a lot of humour). Structurally, there is a very long but direct line from Achilles to Hanna Vizari, who are both responsible for a lot of mayhem, have supernatural parentage and carry the heavy weight of a heroic
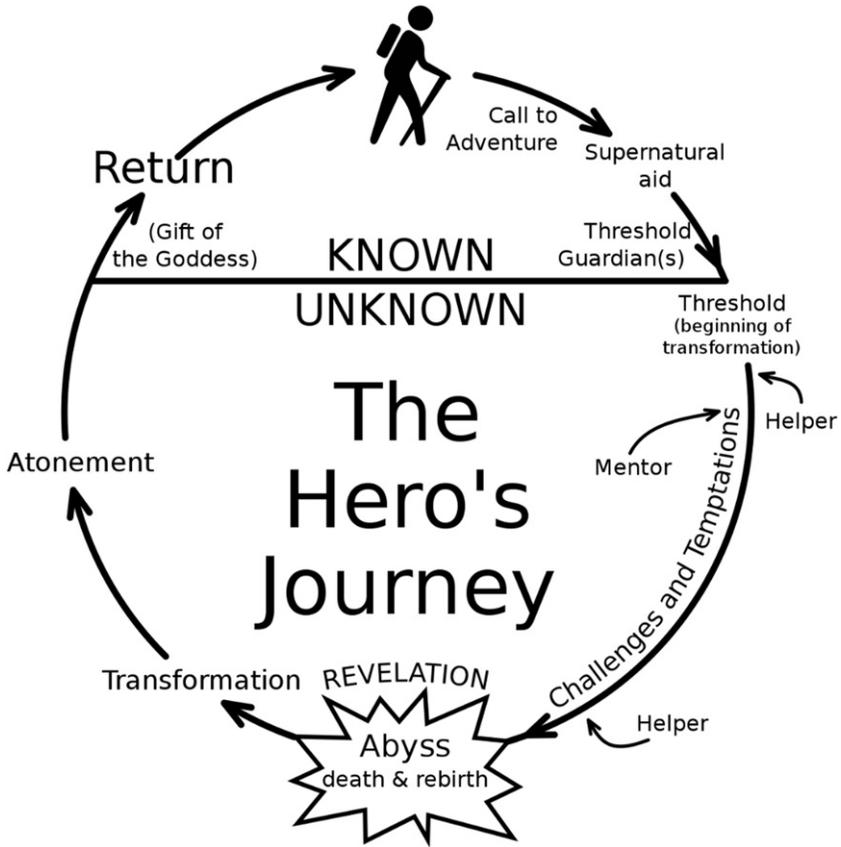
Fig. 3.   The Hero's Journey.[59]

destiny. This kind of new epic is only possible now, in our postmodern times after a lot of antiheroes, cross-over genres and the coming-of-age of transmedial audiences. The hero's journey scaffold is so well known that it can now bear real variations, even subversive ones.

Coda

In this chapter, I have examined the ways in which structure can be repetitive in relation to storytelling. I have distinguished between four levels, related to the scope of each unit: bits, plot, genre and archetypes, each of them illustrated with examples from current media practices.

Bits can be understood as brief units of codified behaviour which make sense in a storytelling situation. Audiences hold many known bits in their repertoires and can also apply them in relation to their everyday lives.

A plot is a medium-level unit that refers to the causal and temporal patterns that organise a whole narrative, like a fairy tale or a film. Plots create suspense and manage the interest of audiences, who get interested in knowing what happens next, longing for a resolution. Plots can also be understood at a more overarching level, based upon the repetition of story units organised in a sequential manner. Seriality is a prominent phenomenon in our contemporary media ecology.

Genre is a relational category that can serve to identify common traits in a great number of works, stories and series alike. A genre is a pattern, useful for creators, and recognisable for audiences, that changes with time.

Archetypes are the most abstract of the categories, and refer to a high-level scaffold that explains the basic functions and essence of a narrative. Archetypes cannot be used for detailed work analysis, but can say something about the overall significance of works and themes and the cultural ideologies behind the stories we keep on telling.

The abundant repetition of these structural patterns in our current media landscape carries the affordance of training audiences in the perception of the dialectics of scheme and variation, as I introduced in Chapter 1. The more repetitive media we consume (stories, series, genre works), the more aware we become of the scaffoldings behind. There is pleasure both in recognising the scheme, identifying something as belonging and in detecting the variation.

Decoding structural repetition is a new competence that plays out in relation to media consumption, but also contributes to boundary dissolution between media, as Ndalianis has remarked.[60] The widespread awareness of the units I have examined in this chapter (bits, plot, genre, archetype) makes for very literate audiences that not only can recognise them across media platforms but also use them to frame their own lives. Like strips of behaviour, they situate us and teach us what to expect, prefiguring plot turns and character positions.

As an example of the first kind of operation, or how fictional structures function as cognitive frames across genres, I have another personal anecdote. I was looking forward to introducing my daughter to the world of Jane Austen, hoping that she would find it as fascinating as I did at her age. So at some point in her teenage years, I gifted her *Pride and Prejudice*. She dutifully digged into it, and to her credit managed to finish it, although she judged it to be slow and boring. It was clear that it did not elicit the sense of wonder that I had hoped to share with her. It was too predictable, she argued, from the very beginning of the novel. When Elizabeth overhears Mr. Darcy say something not very nice about her, making her decide he is an arrogant idiot nor worthy of their time, it was a dead giveaway as to the romance that awaits them at the end of the story, akin to

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[61]'She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me; and I am in no humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men'.
[60]Ndalianis (2004, p. 72).

restored behaviour with fixed patterns.[61] The characters progress through the motions of disliking each other, misinterpreting each other, and then fluctuate between falling in love and being rejected in various ways (often with third parties involved) until all the misunderstandings are solved and true love emerges. Whatever freshness Jane Austen's work possessed in the eighteenth century had been 'ruined' for my daughter by her previous diet of lightweight romantic Hollywood comedies, shōjo manga and Korean TV-drama. It had become a recognisable pattern, so repeated as to become banal. The 'enemies to lovers' pattern has been extremely productive across all sorts of media, including social media. You can, for instance, try to search for related content in YouTube, where fans curate long reel videos of their favourite enemies to lovers stories; Spotify, where there are playlists dedicated to the topic or Instagram, where the hashtag #enemiestolovers is used to tag materials that thematise this apparent contradiction, a big favourite of the grammar of romance in our time.

As for the second cognitive operation, of abstract patterning as a way to understand and express everyday life, there are plenty of examples. To continue with the topic of love, people show awareness of fictional patterns when they talk about their love life in specific ways, situating themselves as protagonists and letting their ex-lover play the villain, for example. This is so common as to be banal. Its very ubiquitousness makes it invisible, but as Lakoff stated 'without our ability to categorise, we would not function at all, either in the physical world or in our social and intellectual lives'.[62] Cognitive linguists Lakoff and Johnson showed how we understand love in very different ways depending on the metaphor we use to describe it (as journey, as natural force, as fire, etc.). Our possibilities for agency and the way we take (or do not take) responsibility for our actions become also facilitated by the dominating metaphor, which mirrors our understanding of love.[63] In their framework, the metaphors that have been used again and again, become crystallised, something available for everybody in that culture to frame and understand their experience in the world. The abstract patterns from storytelling function in the same way.

Maybe this is easier to see with a more spectacular case. We probably all still remember the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, as it was such a shocking event that drastically affected the nature and quality of our everyday lives. Alongside the authorities' information, the constant stream of news and the worried exchange of messages with friends and family, a lot of people were also engaging in humorous distribution of memes comparing the virus outbreak to various zombie movies and television series (Fig. 4). Even the traditional media made use of this frame of reference to understand what we were living through. There were after all no real-life analogies since this was the only pandemic which our generation has ever experienced. Headlines like 'Zombie genre feels real during the pandemic' allowed us to recall the relevant schemata that we have

[61]'She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me; and I am in no humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men'.
[62]Lakoff (1990, p. 6)
[63]Lakoff and Johnson (1980).
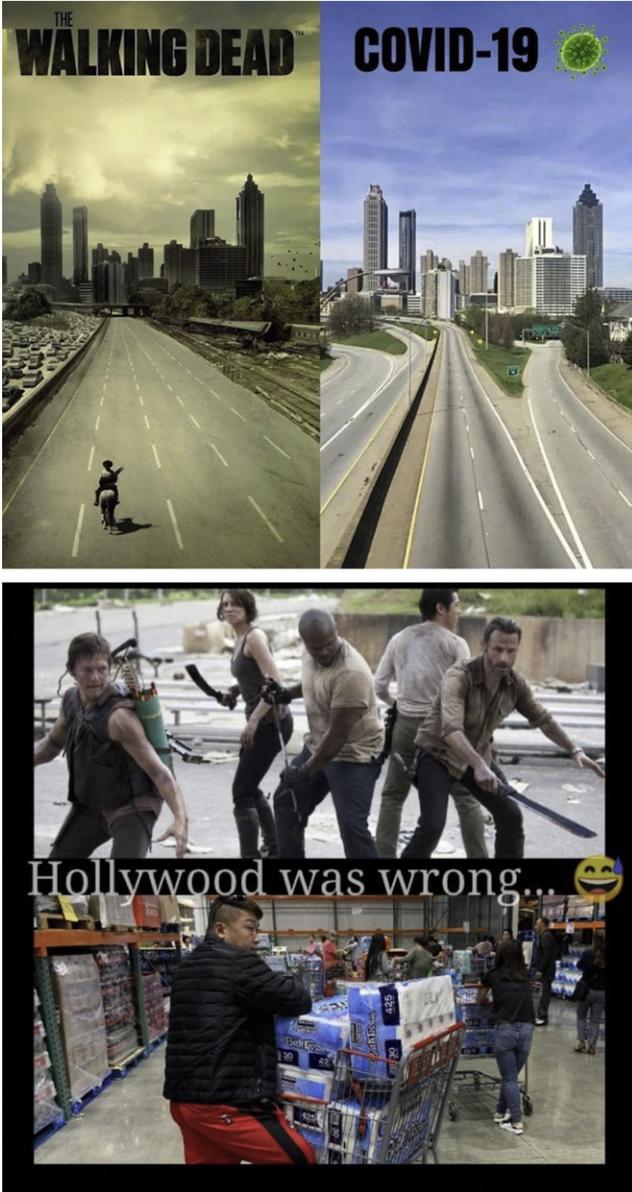
Fig. 4.   Internet Memes at the Beginning of the COVID-19
Lockdowns.

learnt through multiple encounters with zombie genre products: isolation as the only safety, scourged supermarkets and increased risk by going out.[64] Suddenly our streets looked like those post-apocalyptic movies that have been on the rise during the last 20 years. The zombie genre became a schemata to see the world through, perhaps even an aid to survival, like in the above mentioned *All of Us Are Dead*.

This last picture humorously comments on the heroic nature of the zombie genre, in which combat skills are the key to survival. In our much less glamorous reality, survivors hoard toilet paper. So it turns out that the epic schemata ultimately fail to accurately describe our mundane reality. If nothing else, they serve to comment on its most ridiculous side, or the difficulties of heroism in a consumer society. Formal repetitive elements can in any case serve as ways to think about our world, a process that is both playful and serious at the same time, just like the many children that have reenacted the Trojan War, and all the other wars it can stand for, fighting with wooden swords in countless playgrounds through the ages.

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[64]https://pavementpieces.com/zombie-genre-feels-real-during-pandemic/