



Graat On-Line issue #15 April 2014

**The Yellow Umbrella Syndrome:
Pledging and Delaying Narrative Closure in *How I Met Your Mother***

Florent Favard

Université Bordeaux Montaigne

The year 2030. Two teenagers, sitting in a living room, listen to their father, as he tells how he met their mother. He warns: this story is going to take a while, since he starts to recount, in great detail, his life as a young – and single – architect in New York City, back in 2005. So begins the pilot of the American sitcom *How I Met Your Mother* (CBS, 2005–2014): with a promise that the story will eventually lead to the aforementioned meeting.

The year 2005. As viewers discover Ted Mosby's endless quest to meet the mother of his children, American primetime television storytelling has already entered a new era, one of "narrative complexity" as Jason Mittell notably dubbed it¹. Rooted in the 1990s popular dramas, such as *The X-Files* (Fox, 1993–2002) and premium cable shows like *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999–2007), this narrational mode is "distinct for its use of narrative complexity as an alternative to the conventional episodic and serial forms that have typified most American television since its inception²." That is, a narratively complex show is both *episodic* and *serialized* at the same time, depending on which story arc one is following: the episodic ones, closed at the end of each episode, or the serialized ones, stretched over numerous episodes and even seasons.

The year 2014. While Ted Mosby is about to meet, at last, the woman of his dreams in the midst of his two friends' eventful wedding, narrative complexity, as explored by Mittell and other academics, has become a standard paradigm for

analyzing shows that “represent [...] neither the majority of television nor its most popular programs³”, but challenge the audience and motivate active participation.

The aim of this paper is to work inside this paradigm to isolate and describe the aesthetics of a specific subset of television shows that manifest an extreme modality of narrative complexity. With the sitcom *How I Met Your Mother* as its primary focus, it explores specific aesthetic patterns induced by an intradiegetic promise of closure in contemporary American television. It first describes this narrational mode within the television industry landscape, then isolates four storytelling mechanisms: reiterating the initial promise, using reflexivity to reinforce it, creating playful proleptic signifiers, and networking complex timeframes. It finally explores the very thing promised by *How I Met Your Mother*: its ending.

The (in)finite model

While the idea of a plot having a beginning, a middle and an end dates back to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, and can be applied to self-contained novels or feature films, it is not a model built for the television industry. Says Mittell:

[...] a successful television series typically lacks a crucial element that has long been hailed as of supreme importance for a well-told story: an ending. Unlike nearly every other narrative medium, American commercial television operates on what might be termed the “infinite model” of storytelling – a series is deemed a success only as long as it keeps going⁴.

With the notable exception of science fiction television series *Babylon 5* (PTEN/TNT, 1993–1998), and its five-year story arc outlined by its creator J. Michael Straczynski well before the broadcasting of its backdoor pilot⁵, shows designed to run for multiple seasons are written as they are produced and broadcast, in a constant flux⁶. Each of them is, as Martin Winckler puts it, a work in progress⁷. Considering economic pressure, particularly on network television financed by advertising (and thereby relying on ratings), and shifting crews, such as key actors or writers leaving the team, one can hardly bet on the future of a television program over the years. But

as Michael Z. Newman observes, “American television’s mission of selling viewers consumer products and services does not negate its possibilities for creative expression⁸.” Many television shows, from networks and cable alike, have been putting in motion massive story arcs stretching over entire seasons, if not complete programs. Even more, with long-term scheduled endings, popular series like *Lost* (ABC, 2004–2010) or *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008–2013) are questioning the very *infinite model*⁹ that defined television production over decades. Long-term story arcs¹⁰ have become a key feature of the serialization in primetime television. They may even be, somehow, counterproductive, as Ronald D. Moore, creator and showrunner of *Battlestar Galactica* (Sci Fi, 2003–2009), explained in a 2013 interview:

“[The networks executives] [a]re starting to sort of talk themselves into believing that if you walk in and you've got it all worked out in advance, that's the ticket to success,” Moore said. “And the truth is, *Lost* and *Battlestar* and shows like that— we kind of made it up as we went along, and you discover things, you improve things, you make corrections... Networks, in classic network fashion, are talking themselves into believing, 'Well, if we can just get them to tell us everything at the beginning,' then a show will succeed¹¹.”

What more and more network executives want, according to Moore, is the kind of long-term planning that Straczynski used in the 1990's for *Babylon 5*. If the writers of *Lost* and *Battlestar Galactica* may not have used such detailed long-term planning, they did promise an ending, as their story arcs call for a *maximal* closure that, if reached, would end the plot, or force it to reconfigure its entire fictional world. *Battlestar Galactica*, a quest across the galaxy to find Earth, sets a common objective to Colonials and Cylons alike, as humans and androids slaughter each other in a desperate race to find the pale blue dot. Time is of the essence, as the opening credits indicate the decreasing count of colonial survivors, and as the mystery of the twelve Cylon human-like models, infiltrated aboard the colonial fleet, is slowly uncovered season after season. What happens when the Colonials find Earth, or? When the Twelve Cylons Models identities are revealed? Does the show end, or does it make a bold move, reconfiguring its entire fictional world from a closed system bound to

entropy (the very essence of its aesthetic identity), to a trench war with unlimited supplies on the planet? *Lost* poses a similar conundrum: as some of the castaways realize, during Season Three, that leaving the Island on which their plane crashed was useless, the true nature of the show is revealed to be an enigma (not a robinsonade). They have to understand the mysteries of the Island to truly leave it. What happens, then, when all the secrets are out, and the show goes so far as to explain the origins of the infamous smoke monster?

These overarching questions beg for what Noël Carroll defines as “narrative closure”: many narratives play with the reader’s or viewer’s curiosity about the solution of an enigma or the destiny of a character, and “closure correlates with answering all the [questions] that the story has proposed¹².” Television series do use what could be defined as “closure-driven” story arcs: they “supply temporary satisfactions and yet promise continuing dramatic developments¹³” according to David Lavery, and may employ what Esquenazi sees as local enigmas¹⁴, such as “what is inside the hatch?”, a mystery set in Season One, and uncovered in Season Two of *Lost*. But the end of the main quest, or the solution to the broader enigma of a television series – questions “that structure an entire text¹⁵”, that could be defined as “maximal closure-driven story arcs” – may still be a counter-intuitive move in the classic infinite model of television production. If the plot relies on a promised – *pledged* may be a stronger word – closure, then how is it supposed to deal with it from the beginning? How do you pledge to find Earth, to leave the Island, to meet the Mother, when, as writers of an ongoing program, of a work in progress, you have no idea when the show will end? If the show is successful, and new seasons are ordered by the network, how far in the future can you delay the end until you lose the plot in an “endless middle¹⁶”?

Writers are not the only ones who may be asking those questions, as they affect viewers as well. Today, any viewer looking for information about a television series can encounter bold declarations from writers or producers. For instance, Joseph Malozzi (*Stargate Universe*, Syfy, 2009–2011) stated on his personal blog, during Season Two, that “ideally, we’d get five years to tell the entire story in satisfactory fashion but, if it came down to it, we could pay it off over the course of a single season¹⁷” – a few months before the show was cancelled by Syfy without granting it

a “proper ending.” It is virtually impossible to rely on the public declarations of writers and producers, in interviews, during conventions or on social networks, for they may be calculated, designed to present the show in a better light, or even controlled by networks¹⁸. For instance, viewers of *Lost* learned not to trust Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse, and Ivan Askwith detailed the paradoxical position in which the showrunners found themselves: they promised an ending while being perfectly aware that “television does not work that way.”¹⁹ Yet, like *Lost*, the creative legacy of many narratively complex shows “will eventually hinge, in large part, on whether the writers were able to finish what they started.”²⁰ The stakes were just as high for Carter Bays and Craig Thomas, creators and executive producers of a sitcom that promised a *dénouement* in its very title.

It is a fact that sitcoms and dramas do not approach episodic and serial forms from the same vantage point. Mittell explains that many sitcoms use narrative complexity to undermine storytelling conventions, such as “the ambiguous expectations over which transformations are “reset” after each episode” of *The Simpsons* (Fox, 1989–present), but they may “demand little explicit knowledge from episode to episode”, compared to the intricate ongoing story arc surrounding the alien invasion in *The X-Files*²¹. Yet, a sitcom like *How I Met Your Mother* goes a little further, for it presents key features similar to some of the narratively complex series frequently analyzed by Mittell and others²². It may neither have the same generic identity, being comedy rather than sci-fi or fantasy, nor the same narrative model, but *How I Met Your Mother* employs a maximal closure-driven story arc akin to those used by *Lost* and *Battlestar Galactica*: its entire narrative revolves around an inevitable ending. More than a sitcom, *HIMYM* is a hybrid program, blending the typical comedic focus on characters with an overarching plot thread. It is a good place to start to explore the storytelling mechanisms linked to the promise of maximal closure, laid bare by its direct, light-hearted plot. Analyzing those mechanisms may shed a new light on more complex, evasive and multi-layered “closure pledges” in other programs.

“Kids, I’m gonna tell you an incredible story”: promising closure

A promise of some sort is always at the heart of storytelling, whether it is a promise of adventure, of a good laugh, or a goal that will prove to be a driving force for the characters. This promise can be assimilated to John Truby's notion of premise²³, except it is designed with a long-term evolution in mind, as television series are written in progress.

How I Met Your Mother states very clearly the driving force of its story in the first minute of the pilot episode:

Future Ted – Kids, I’m gonna tell you an incredible story. The story of how I met your mother.

Boy – Are we being punished for something?

Future Ted – No.

Girl – Yeah, is this gonna take a while?

Future Ted – Yes. (S01E01)

One question is obvious to the viewer: *how* and *when* did Ted Mosby meet *the Mother*? Another is covert, but as the sitcom refuses to reveal her identity, it may become important: *who* is the Mother?

2030’s Ted Mosby – whom I will designate as “Future Ted” from now on – then proceeds to tell how, 25 years ago, he was living “a whole other life” in New York. The title card appears, a few pictures depicts 27 years old Ted Mosby and his friend Marshall, before the beginning of what can be conceived as one of the longest flashbacks in the history of television. In other words, what Paul Booth qualifies as an “extensive flashback,” meaning that “a television show’s entire narrative is presented as a flashback²⁴.” As Future Ted would say, “we’ll get back to that” notion of non-linear narrative. What is important here is the *formulation* of a specific pledge: Future Ted is already revealing the end of the story, but the viewers, and the “kids” who stand as mediators between them and Future Ted, are not given a single clue as to the timeframe between the beginning of the story (2005) and its ending. Will 2005 Ted meet the Mother one month from the beginning of Future Ted's story? One year from the beginning? The pilot’s trick consists in making the viewer believe that

Robin Sherbastky, whom Ted and his friends meet in their favorite bar, may be the Mother. Only at the end of the episode are we given an answer: we switch back to 2030, and Future Ted explains:

Future Ted - Because that, kids, is the true story of how I met your aunt Robin.

Boy - Aunt Robin?

Girl - I thought this was how you met mom!

Future Ted - Would you relax, I'm getting to it. Like I said: it's a long story. (S01E01)

Almost every episode is narrated by Future Ted's voice-over, and during the first eight seasons of the show, 56 episodes feature at some point the same shot with the kids listening to their father in the living room. As Future Ted continues his story at the beginning of Season Two, his daughter interrupts him: "Dad, can't you just skip ahead to the part where you meet mom? It feels like you've been talking for like a year." (S02E01) Future Ted dismisses this intended reference to "plot time" and "screen time" –or more adequately, "broadcast time" (each season except Season Nine is broadcast from September to May, and covers one year of Ted's life) –and argues that every detail is important for the "overarching story." Yet, he doesn't forget the questions that dictate the ineluctable closure of his tale, for he plays with it in a cunning way. After a first false alarm in the pilot, Future Ted lies about the identity of the Mother in at least two other episodes: S01E09, where he jokes about the Mother being a lap dancer he met in a strip club, and S06E24, in which an orchid he intended to offer to Zoey inadvertently ends up with an unknown woman who smiles at him. Future Ted also explains how he dated Cindy, the roommate of the Mother, in S05E12. When Ted seems more interested in Cindy's roommate, though she describes her in the worst possible light, they break up; Ted leaves the apartment, and catches only a glimpse of the Mother's foot while she passes from the bathroom to her bedroom. He then forgets his yellow umbrella in the apartment, which is only fair, given he stole it in a club where the Mother forgot it in the first place. "But we'll get to that."

Future Ted, as powerful a storytelling force as he is, is not the only one making the promise to find the Mother. Ted – that is, the Ted in the “present,” living in the same decade as the viewer – is also pledging to find the woman of his dreams. He sets this goal in the pilot as well, when his best friends Marshall and Lily decide to get married. A close analysis of the show reveals that this story arc is predominant, with, during the first eight seasons, 120 out of 184 episodes during which Ted is shown either dating, trying to date, or reconsidering his options in this endless quest – notably regarding the ongoing “will they/won’t they” story arc between him and Robin, reminiscent of the same mechanism between Ross and Rachel in NBC’s *Friends* (1993–2004).

Just as agent Mulder investigates the eponymous *X-Files* not for the paycheck, but with a more personal goal in mind (finding his sister abducted by extraterrestrials), Ted does not date women for the sheer pleasure of adding them to his list, as his friend Barney does. He dates women in the hope that he will eventually meet his soul mate. Not only does this validate the very title of the show – especially during the first four seasons – but it constitutes the essence of the character, a hopeful romantic trying to live up to his dreams, escaping both a struggling career as an architect in the first seasons, and his reluctant bachelor status, given the fact once Barney proposes to Robin in Season Eight, he is the last single man in his circle of friends. Ted frequently refers to “the one” when he meets women, including Robin, to whom he declared his love on the first date in the pilot episode. He is a man with a goal, and nothing seems to stop him, except his aborted wedding with Stella, who leaves him at the altar in S04E05. After that episode, Ted Mosby’s quest is somewhat more erratic, crippled with huge gaps in Seasons Four, Five and Seven, during which he doesn’t even try to date women, and therefore this ceases to be the driving force of the show in the extensive flashback: Future Ted is the one reminding the viewer of the promise he made.

A reflexive pledge

HIMYM builds upon this call for closure to create its very own aesthetic identity: an intricate *mise en abyme* of the storytelling act on which its “narrative coherence²⁵” is built. Obviously, Future Ted is the primary vector of reflexivity: an

unreliable narrator, he tells his kids intimate details about his life – and that of their aunts and uncles –, but as early as Season Three, replaces anything related to his marijuana smoking by the word “sandwich”, and addresses his neighbors having sex as “playing bagpipes” (S05E06). He (apparently) refuses to tell his kids about the time he may have ended up in a threesome (S03E03), and can’t remember the name of the girl he dated in S03E05, calling her “Blah Blah.” Moreover, he is sometimes confused about the timing of key events.

In “The Mermaid Theory” (S06E11), he struggles to recall the evening Barney and Lily spent together, as Robin challenged Marshall to have dinner with her, and Ted was invited to a Frank Lloyd Wright retrospective. Future Ted tries to assemble the bits and pieces of that evening in an incoherent mashup, where Lily cries for no reason when Barney calls her an “octopus,” and he is able to put a beer bottle in mid-air above her belly, before stopping her from being hit by a motorcycle. Future Ted recalls Lily saying to Barney “you saved us,” but assumes she was talking about her and her ice cream. It is only near the end of the episode that he remembers that Lily was pregnant during that infamous evening, and that this particular story does not take place in 2010 (in other words, in Season Six) but in 2011, when Lily is pregnant. This is not news to the kids, who already know their cousin Marvin, but this information is a proleptic clue for the viewer, who learns that Marshall and Lily will finally have a baby by Season Seven.

Future Ted most notable incoherency surrounds “The Goat,” one of the most peculiar stories in his *repertoire*. The goat is first heard of in S01E21: as Ted celebrates his 28th birthday, Future Ted, in voice-over, admits he also enjoyed his 30th, apart from the “thing with the goat.” The animal reappears, as planned, during Ted’s 30th birthday in S03E17: Future Ted proceeds to tell how Missy, a domestic goat, ended up in his apartment because Lily decided to save the animal. When the story is about to reach its climax, as the goat is damaging the apartment, Future Ted remembers that the story didn’t happen on his 30th birthday, but one year later. As promised, the final episode of Season Four, “The Leap” (S04E24), reveals what happens when Ted, now 31, forbids Missy to eat a towel: he is beaten down by the animal.

Future Ted is repeatedly proven to be an unreliable narrator who lies, omits, modifies and doesn’t accurately recall events of his life; however, this does not make

the story more confusing. It is this unreliability, the erratic nature of Future Ted's storytelling, that constantly reminds us of his position of power, and enables both the kids and the viewer to catch proleptic glimpses of events to come: Missy the goat, but also Robin's many trips around the world (S02E22), the release of the movie *The Wedding Bride* written by Stella's husband (S04E23), Robin's romantic interest in Nick (S06E21) and, of course, hints about the identity of the Mother.

As the whole program deals with storytelling by framing Ted's life as a flashback from Future Ted's vantage point, another level of *mise en abyme* emanates from *within* Future Ted's story. Just as misunderstanding was the cornerstone of *Friends*, and erratic, constantly rebooted narratives are *The Simpsons'* signature, the storytelling act is at the heart of the character dynamics in *HIMYM*. Ted and his friends are constantly telling each other what happened to them. In the first eight seasons, approximately 110 out of 184 episodes deal with at least one member of "the gang" telling or imagining a story. While many are just recounting events that prompt the rest of the gang to react, a great number of episodes go further. In "Game Night" (S01E15), each member of "the gang" share their most humiliating stories in exchange for Barney's, who delivers his story in little, frustrating bits to taunt them. As the gang shares stories about their loss of virginity in S02E12, Barney tries to lie by recounting a scene from *Dirty Dancing* (Ardolino, 1987), complete with a fake flashback using actual material from the feature film, and Barney disguised as romantic lead Johnny Castle. "The Platinum Rule" (S03E11) features three flashbacks embedded in each other like a matryoshka doll. Paul Booth, exploring what he calls "memory temporality" in his article dealing with narrative complexity²⁶, also mentions "Murtaugh" (S04E19), in which Marshall's story about a basketball game gets more surreal as time passes, and "How I Met Everyone Else" (S03E15), with flashbacks completing each other. And the list goes on, as many episodes go beyond recounting events to play with matters of episodic storytelling, unreliability and audience reaction.

But if, on the first level, Future Ted is a powerful narrator figure, on this second level, it is Barney who stands out as a master of storytelling. Womanizer, liar, and coward, with a taste for suits, magic and *mise-en-scène*, Barney Stinson uses storytelling as an art of living, and especially of dating. He uses "plays" from his

Playbook to impersonate extravagant characters and seduce countless women; he also invents absurd stories set in the past to explain the origin of “The Sexless Innkeeper” (S05E04), the imaginary curse surrounding his family in “Coming Back” (S09E02), or even the origins of the *Bro Code*, a set of rules for “bros” he wrote: in “The Goat” (S03E17), he pretends the document was created by Benjamin Franklin and George Washington, and in “The Broken Code” (S09E04), explains that historical figures such as “Broses” and “Christopher Brolumbus” were also involved. On occasions, he also goes well beyond the simple “play” and creates elaborate lies, complete with actors and sets, the most notable of which being the last addition to the Playbook, entitled “the Robin”: in “The Final Page part 2” (S08E12), it is revealed that his inconsistent behavior of previous episodes (dating Patrice, breaking Robin’s heart) was in fact a trick, as it turns out to be a wedding proposal to Robin. Barney is similar to Benjamin Linus in *Lost*, a liar and untrustworthy figure—as well as, ultimately, one of the most sincere characters.

The comparison doesn’t end here. Other shows promising closure have used this kind of *mise en abyme*. This is not to say that this narrative device always deals with *storytelling* itself: the reflexive pledge seems to concern the very mechanism that conveys the closure promised in the first place. Take *Lost*, for instance. Its closure pledge is linked to the mysteries of the island, to the very enigma posed by the smoke monster, Jacob, and time-travelling bunnies. *Lost* also uses two levels of *mise en abyme*, not of the storytelling act, but of notions of enigmas, games and manipulation. From a formal and aesthetic perspective, the show itself is built like a maze with multiple, non-linear entries, and a transmedia experience complete with Alternate Reality Games and a videogame. Easter eggs are hidden in every episode, with only the most dedicated fans finding all of them to piece together the greater picture behind DHARMA and the Others²⁷. On a second, intradiegetic level, *Lost* is filled with dubious figures (Benjamin Linus, of course, but also conman Sawyer, manipulative Widmore, and expert liar Kate Austen), and games are an important part of the mythology: Locke uses backgammon to explain the balance of power between two sides (S01E02), a “cheating” chess computer protects secret controls in the Flame station (S03E11), and Jacob and his unnamed brother can be seen playing an ancient Egyptian game (S06E15). Pledging closure, when framed into the aesthetic

components of a television series, seems to call for this kind of *mise en abyme*. But this is not the only way the aesthetics of a show can reflect on an inevitable, and yet delayed, closure.

The Yellow Umbrella as proleptic signifier

Future Ted – Kids, there’s more than one story of how I met your mother. You know the short version, the thing with your mom's yellow umbrella. But there’s a bigger story, the story of how I became who I had to become before I could meet her.

At the beginning of the Season Three premiere, “Wait for It” (S0301), we go back to 2030 and the kids in the living room. Future Ted mentions the yellow umbrella for the first time; a brief shot of said umbrella dragged by the wind in an empty street remains evasive: is it a true flashback (from Future Ted’s point of view) or a metaphorical version of the eponymous meeting?

This is not the last we see of the yellow umbrella. The American DVD box set features the prop on the covers of Seasons Four through Eight. Like the Doctor’s iconic sonic screwdriver (*Doctor Who*, BBC1, 2005–present) or *Fringe*’s white tulip (Fox, 2008–2013), the yellow umbrella has become a powerful synecdoche referring precisely to the Mother that the viewer finally glimpsed in “Something New” (S08E24). The yellow umbrella is hiding the Mother in “No Tomorrow” (S03E12), as she attends the same Saint Patrick’s Day party where Ted meets a married woman. If Future Ted does acknowledge the Mother’s presence, strengthening the synecdoche for the viewer, 2008 Ted does not see her; instead, going back to the club the day after to retrieve his phone, he spots the yellow umbrella the Mother forgot and takes it, since it is raining outside. Future Ted’s voice-over then hints at the long-awaited meeting, saying that “[his] luck was about to turn.” But this reference is a trick, since it is not linked with the Mother and the yellow umbrella; as the following episodes reveal, Ted is bound to meet Stella.

In “Right Place, Right Time” (S04E22), the viewer is bound to believe Ted might meet the Mother. Future Ted explains that a precise life-changing chain of events led him to a crosswalk on a rainy day: he is holding the yellow umbrella

when a mysterious woman touches his shoulder. Delaying the climax of the episode, Future Ted explains why each event happened the way it happened—for example, why he stopped at a newsstand. At the end of the episode, the woman is revealed to be Stella, who left Ted at the altar earlier in the season, leaving the viewer with a taunting cliffhanger: is Stella the Mother after all? Only during the next episode is the life-changing event explained: Stella's ex-husband and new fiancé, Tony, offers him a position as a professor at Columbia university. This somewhat deceptive answer is set back on track in the season finale, as Ted, attacked by Missy the goat and realizing his career as an architect is currently leading him nowhere, accepts the position. A flashforward shows him, a few months later, in a classroom, as Future Ted reveals that the Mother "was in that class." The "life-changing event" involving the umbrella finally lived up to the expectations, but the meeting promised in the title is still far, far away.

As I said earlier, Ted unknowingly gives back the umbrella to the Mother by forgetting it in her apartment, as he dates her roommate Cindy (S05E12). Apart from the metaphorical ocean of possibilities Ted discovers after gaining some closure with Robin (S07E17), the yellow umbrella is next seen only in flashforwards from the viewer's point of view, specifically in flashes concerning the wedding weekend in May 2013, on which the entire ninth season is focused. During that weekend, the Mother is seen buying a train ticket for Farhampton (where the wedding takes place) while holding her umbrella in S08E24; as it rains on Sunday, Marshall asks Ted if he brought an umbrella (S06E01); in S08E01, the Mother and Ted end up, after the wedding, at the Farhampton train station while it's pouring rain²⁸. The Mother, of course, is hidden under her yellow umbrella. More than a synecdoche, the umbrella seems to be a metaphor for the closure itself, since it is confirmed by Future Ted as a key element of their meeting in S03E01. Starting from Season Four, it also seems to be used to counteract the erratic behavior of Ted, who lacks efficiency in his quest after Stella leaves him at the altar. The umbrella is there to comfort the viewer in the hope that the denouement of the story will still take place, even if Ted himself seems to doubt it will ever happen.

This kind of proleptic signifier—that is, symbols, objects, places or even people referring to the future of the plot—is a narrative device used frequently in *Battlestar*

Galactica: the colorful mandala that Kara Thrace painted in her apartment (S02E02) is the same as the Eye of Jupiter in the Temple of Five, which itself is based on the supernovae it predicts (S03E11 & S03E12); linked to Kara Thrace's destiny, the mandala reappears in dripping wax, and on the gas giant, in the eye of the storm in which she falls in S03E17. The Opera House is another rich proleptic signifier: an imaginary place visited by many characters, it is the harbinger of Hera's destiny (S01E13, S03E19, S04E20) and the identity of the Final Five Cylons (S03E12). The Music is also a proleptic signifier, an audio cue linked to the quest for Earth, from S03E19, through S04E17, up until the series finale²⁹.

In that sense, the yellow umbrella is a more powerful proleptic signifier than the recurring shot of the kids in the living room, facing their off-camera dad. While the children appear every episode from S01E01 to S01E09, they are then seen sporadically: for instance, they are present in every season premiere except for S05E01, S08E01 and S09E01. In fifteen episodes directly addressing the Mother matter during the first eight seasons, about half contain the recurring shot. Aesthetically, the kids' main function may be to serve as mediators for the audience, for they do not seem to be linked to key moments where the viewer learns new information about the Mother. On two occasions, however, they mean something entirely different. The kids, now with blond hair (and played by different actors), appear in "Shelter Island" (S04E05) when Ted imagines that Stella will be the mother of his children, right before she leaves him at the altar. They represent a future that could have been, and constitute a sly reference to a hypothesis that caused much discussion amongst both critics and fans for months after Ted's proposal in the Season Three finale. "Symphony of Illumination" (S07E12) presents another set of kids, in a different living-room: this time and this time only (at the time of writing), it seems that Future Robin is the narrator, as she reveals to her kids how she and their father Barney took the news when she thought she was pregnant. We then learn that it was a false positive, as Robin is told by a doctor that she will never have children. The imaginary kids she is talking to disappear at the end of the episode, revealing that 2011 Robin was the narrator, talking to herself in order to deal with the news. Those kids represent a future that never will be. Ironically, the kids are powerful proleptic signifiers, playing with possible closures, when they are not

played by Lyndsy Fonseca and David Henrie, the “original” kids. After the Season Two premiere, one has to wait six years to see them address the matter of closure again, in a non-canon, parodic video first released at the *HIMYM* panel at San Diego Comic Con in 2013. It shows the kids, played by now grown-up Fonseca and Henrie, as they really should be after what has been, from the viewer’s perspective, eight years of broadcast time listening to Future Ted’s story. Future Ted is telling about his favorite falafel place in New York and wondering what kind of yoghurt he had (a reference to his obsessively detailed story), but the kids interrupt him. It is now 2038, they are still wearing the same clothes and look awful; they “missed college,” have been eating spiders, and they want their dad to “wrap it up” immediately. Future Ted finally accepts to get to the point where he meets their mom. This video was used as a trailer for Season Nine, which is, indeed, the final act of the story. “But we’ll get to that.” What is worth noting is that this parody, produced by CBS, reveals another aspect of the aesthetics of *HIMYM*, and the main problem when dealing with a maximal closure-driven story arc: time itself.

Setting a network of timeframes as diversion tactics

“Time is not of the essence, it is the essence.” These words, uttered by Pierre Chang, a character from *Lost*, in a similar teasing video from San Diego Comic Con 2008, could easily be applied to the way *HIMYM* approached the matter of time during its entire run. Paul Booth discusses temporal displacement in contemporary television, stating that, “by playing with the sense of time, the producers of *Lost*, as well as of other temporally displaced shows such as *How I Met Your Mother* and *Life on Mars*, create an aesthetically complex text³⁰” that can motivate an emotional attachment, as well as establish the kind of narrative special effect Mittell isolated in contemporary television and cinema³¹. Booth assimilates the non-linearity trend in television to a “postmodern schizophrenia” in the age of “über-simultaneity” that technology makes possible today; building on the works of Baudrillard, Jameson, Kogen and others, he argues that since we live in a state of “temporal malaise,” mastering the narrative temporal tricks of complex television series may help us regain a sense of control over time itself. Mittell goes on a parallel path, exploring the specific cues used by contemporary shows to help viewers reactivate, in their

short-term memory, story arcs that are sometimes lying dormant for numerous episodes, if not entire seasons³². Both Booth and Mittell propose useful tools to understand the way *HIMYM* deals with time, sometimes even competing with the multi-layered chronological maze that is *Lost*.

As I said earlier, *HIMYM* can be defined, in Booth's terminology, as an extensive flashback from Future Ted's point of view. While Ted's quest to find "the one" is the core of the show, the *HIMYM* plot really begins in 2030. The pilot episode shows us the kids and their off-camera dad, voiced by Bob Saget, who then proceeds to tell his story. Every single flashback, every non-linear direction the plot suddenly takes in the entire run of the show is dictated by its intradiegetic narrator, Future Ted. Every flash is, as Mittell explains, a subjective flashback³³. Not a single one brings us to a point *after* 2030, and the only "flashbacks" to a period *before* Ted's birth are Barney's imaginary tales.

This is important, for it determines a set of three intertwined timeframes to Future Ted's story. The first timeframe is the main story, which Future Ted sets between September 2005 (the point in time he chooses as a beginning in the pilot) and late May 2013, during Barney and Robin's wedding, when Ted finally meets the Mother. We can refer to this as the "main timeframe", the one that evolves chronologically, synchronized with the initial broadcast time (e. g. an episode broadcast in 2007 will usually deal with events happening in 2007) during the first eight seasons (the ninth season covers approximately three days in 2013).

There is a second, more extended timeframe: Future Ted sometimes ventures before 2005, or after 2013, to recount precise events that are always linked to another event set in the main timeframe. For example, in 2011, when Barney fails to take his revenge on Marshall for mocking a stain on his beloved tie in "The Exploding Meatball Sub" (S06E20), a flashforward at the end of the episode shows events set ten years later, in 2021: Barney sets up another of his elaborate lies, as he tricks his friends into believing he is on his death bed, before giving Marshall the exploding sub as a bequest, finally getting his long-anticipated revenge. In another episode, "Columns" (S02E13), Future Ted goes back to 1982 to explain that he always wanted to be an architect; the episode deals with his conflict with his former boss Hammond Druthers at his architecture firm. This second timeframe, which we will refer to as

“Future Ted's timeframe”, often gives glimpses of a version of Ted as yet unfamiliar to the viewer: one who comes into being after Ted’s bachelor life has come to a close, but before he becomes the off-camera dad whose voice-over narrates most of the episodes; an “Intermediate Ted” learning to be a husband and a dad, with grey hair at his temples and a holographic phone (for example, in S06E17).

The last timeframe features embedded or framed flashbacks of Ted and his friends, inside Future Ted’s extensive flashback, what we might call “the Gang timeframe.” As the gang frequently recount events, flashbacks are usually associated with the storytelling. They can be pre-2005 or post-2005 sequences, but they never venture in the future, for the characters cannot recount events that have not happened yet from their perspective (Future Ted, on the other hand, can muse over events up until 2030, and sometimes comments on the consequences of his and his friends’ decisions). As the show progresses, the characters sometimes blend flashbacks from before and after 2005, creating a rich and complete tapestry of what Booth calls memory temporality; these flashbacks are associated with visual and auditory cues (a rapid, blurry, lateral tracking shot and a “whoosh,” just a step away from the sound used for *Lost*’s flashbacks) that create the “aesthetic code” of *HIMYM*’s temporal shifts³⁴. Episodes like “Trilogy Time” (S07E20) go further, as they blur the distinction between timeframes: when the gang, in 2012, observes once again the tradition of watching the *Star Wars* trilogy, something they do every three years, they recall what happened in 2000, 2003, 2006 and 2009. What we see can be defined as either Future Ted’s flashbacks (Future Ted's timeframe), or their own subjective flashbacks (the Gang timeframe), without the distinction being really clear. Future Ted then adds up another flash from Future Ted's timeframe: he explains what happened in 2015 (two years after he met the Mother), as he initiated his newborn daughter to Trilogy time. In theory, isolating the three timeframes is easy, but in practice, *HIMYM* may play exactly the role Paul Booth ascribes to contemporary complex narratives: the show is dealing not only with “issues of narrative complexity but also issues of fictionality,” in that it exposes the complex and erratic way human memory works, from its twisted non-linearity to the fact that many of our memories may have been fictionalized over time, whether it be the

events happened to us or those that were recounted to us by others. Future Ted may be an unreliable narrator, but would we do better telling the same story?

Maybe we would get to the end in a more direct way. Future Ted seems to be more interested in the broader set of events that led him to meet the Mother, than in the meeting itself. It creates a paradoxical sense of wandering in time while, at the same time, aiming at an objective made clear from the beginning. Future Ted not only delays the ending, but uses it as the nexus of an intricate path in time, one that is both linear (as it roughly follows the chronological order) and structured like a network that sometimes evokes Freudian free association. In “The Best Man” (S07E01), as the episode begins in 2030 with the kids, Future Ted explains: “Kids, if there's one big theme to this story – and I swear we're totally, almost, not really that close to the end – it's timing. Timing is everything.” But during the episode, as he discusses Barney's wedding, he remembers about the “Ducky Tie” (that Barney is forced to wear during the first half of Season Seven): “The Ducky Tie! That's a good story, kids, I'll get to that. Man, we are not even close to the end.” In a playful use of storytelling, Future Ted travels in his own memory on an ultimately non-linear path. Yet, he still manages to create a sense of closure, as many long-term story arcs give a structure to the sitcom: Ted's relationship with Victoria (Season One), Robin (Season Two), Stella (Seasons Three and Four) and so on, but also Barney's complex relationships with his future wife Robin (Season Four to Season Nine) and with his father, who he never knew until 2011 (Season Two to Season Nine).

Future Ted also focuses on specific events before or after 2005 (in the Main timeframe and/or Future Ted's timeframe), to which he'll eventually come back with more information, changing not the event itself, but the viewer's point of view about it. I want to clearly distinguish this narrative trope from “retroactive continuity.”³⁵ The infamous “retcon” consists of a rewriting of an event already established in the canon – such as Bobby Ewing coming back from the dead in *Dallas* (CBS, 1978–1991), thus negating the entire ninth season dealing with the aftermath of his death, afterwards revealed to be a dream. Lies and omissions, both from Future Ted and members of the gang, often lead to a playful and reflexive use of retroactive continuity; for example, Doug the barman is digitally included in flashbacks of numerous key events that happened in MacLaren's Pub, when, in S04E10, Future

Ted suddenly remembers him. But few events have been retconned on a large scale, and this usually happens because a character lied (we discover in S01E15 that Ted lied about being “vomit-free since '93” in S01E10) or because Future Ted’s minor proleptic clues are undermined by ongoing story developments (he says in S01E10 that he never saw Trudy again, and yet he sees her again in S03E03). Sometimes, these revisions hardly qualify as a blunt rewriting of events in the fictional world—because they are validated, intradiegetically, by the unreliability of the narrators, rather than appearing only as the writers’ decision.

Instead, Future Ted and the gang are accustomed to what I would qualify as “retroactive completeness,” in which a past event is not rewritten, not negated or modified, but new information is added that helps the viewer to a deeper understanding of it, or changes the viewer's point of view³⁶. For example, a key event in the Gang timeframe is the meeting of Marshall and Lily in 1996, back at Wesleyan University. This event is explored numerous times through Marshall and Lily's flashbacks, often completed with additional information. “Best Prom Ever” (S01E20) sets the foundations of this event, showing Lily in her dorm room, thanking Marshall for fixing her stereo-set. As the gang share the stories of how they met each other to Blah Blah (S03E05), we learn more about Marshall and Lily's meeting through their own flashbacks, but also through 2007 Ted's. A shot of Lily going to Ted and Marshall's dorm room to ask the latter to fix her stereo—a shot frequently seen in the show—is followed by detailed flashbacks from both Ted and Lily, who confess that they may have kissed each other during a party the day before Lily met Marshall. Marshall corrects them by explaining that they both kissed other students, not each other. Ted accepts this version of events, in order to preserve the romantic story of his friends, but is still convinced that he kissed Lily. A flashforward set in 2020 finally establishes the truth: at a College Reunion, Ted learns that he, in fact, kissed Alexa Leskys. The episode does not play with *de facto* retroactive continuity, but rather with the erratic and untrustworthy human memory; it initially endangers the established story, but ultimately saves it and expands the seminal event of Marshall and Lily's relationship. “P.S. I Love You” (S08E15) reuses the shot of Lily going to Ted and Marshall's dorm room in 1996, as Marshall recalls their meeting as being “written in the stars.” Lily finally reveals that the romanticized version of her

going straight through the corridor to Marshall's dorm room did not happen exactly as pictured before; she broke her stereo-set on purpose to have an excuse to meet Marshall, and knocked on numerous doors before finding him. Again, the event is not rewritten: Lily still knocked on that door, she still met Marshall. The (already) acknowledged romantic version of this event is completed by a set of facts that change the point of view on it. Just as Lily did not go straight into the corridor before meeting Marshall, so Future Ted, through his systematic temporal shifts, does not use a straightforward mode of storytelling, and frequently uses retroactive completeness.

While it offers a playful take on the mechanics of human memory, this temporal aesthetic, similar to *Lost*'s chronological maze, seems to be designed with one purpose in mind: offering distracting ways of delaying the end of the plot every time the writers need it. If *HIMYM* had been a straightforward story from 2005 to 2013, it may have been a very different show, as the viewers would have been entirely focused on the promised ending, rendering its constant delay all the more problematic. But *HIMYM* is more of a queer narrative³⁷ built on revelations through recounted events, and non-linearity. Just like the distracting hand waving used in Barney's magic tricks, the setting of two additional timeframes besides the Main timeframe is a diversion: it allows the series to playfully travel in time, while using retroactive continuity and completeness to avoid repetition, in order to hide the fact that its writers don't know when it will end. *Lost* uses a similar structure. Its Main timeframe is the time effectively spent on the Island by the castaways, and it is accompanied by parallel timeframes: the Subjective Flashback timeframe, dealing with events both on- and off-Island, stretching to decades, centuries and even millennia over the course of the series; the Flashforward timeframe, which then becomes part of the Subjective Flashback timeframe as early as Season Five; and finally, the evasive Flashsideways timeframe. A television series can always go back in time at some point to expand on its own fictional world; what is peculiar about *HIMYM* and *Lost* is that these diversion tactics, designed to delay closure and create a rich fictional world, have been recognized as part of their aesthetic ever since their pilot episodes – it is embedded in the genetic code of these shows.

The End

At the time of writing, while Season Nine of *HIMYM* is in the middle of its run, it is yet to be known if the sitcom will establish a clear, definite fourth timeframe—its *own*. The three timeframes I described do not cover the entire series, for the 2030 shots of the kids and their off-camera dad are not subjected to Future Ted's influence: they are not part of his story. Because the kids never change clothes, and do not address plot time (that is, the time Future Ted takes to tell his story) beyond the parodic reference to “a year” made by the daughter in S02E01, father and children seem to be suspended in time. It is yet to be seen if the series finale, for example, will show us what happens *after* Future Ted ends his story – that is, if the viewer will ever sense the flow of time in what is, at the moment, an evasive fourth timeframe. On an aesthetic level, the “activation” of this fourth timeframe may be as important as the way Ted Mosby will meet his soul mate, for it would give the viewer a new perspective on Future Ted's story: time would then find its way back into this living room, life would carry on in the Mosby family, without any clue that it was ever suspended, that the kids ever spent what felt like nine years listening to their father.

What *How I Met Your Mother* has already established is its clear intention of actually delivering an ending. While it was designed to delay through a complex set of intertwined timeframes, its use of proleptic signifiers and reflexivity underlines its pledge. But on an extradiegetic level, the end was all but obvious for the series. As the eighth season debuted on CBS in September 2012, Carter Bays and Craig Thomas were not on the same wavelength with the network: while the creators of *HIMYM* were writing this eighth season “like it's the end,³⁸” CBS was still “very optimistic” about a ninth season³⁹. Bays and Thomas then designed Season Eight with two possible outcomes in mind, waiting for an answer from the network concerning the “new deals that had to be struck,” especially with Jason Segel (playing Marshall Eriksen) who reportedly hesitated until the last second⁴⁰. Indeed, the ending does not depend solely on aesthetic criteria, but also on economic decisions and storytelling strategies evolving over time.

While *How I Met Your Mother* will end in March 2014, however, CBS does not seem to be ready to end its collaboration with Bays, Thomas and the *How I Met*

successful formula. The network recently announced that a spin-off, *How I Met Your Dad*, received a pilot order⁴¹. As Ted Mosby ends his story, a mother will start hers. The question, like the title, remains the same: will that story get an end?

Works Cited

- Andreeva, Nellie, "'How I Met Your Mother' Spinoff Officially A Go At CBS With Pilot Order', *Deadline.com* <<http://www.deadline.com/2013/11/how-i-met-your-mother-spinoff-cbs-pilot/>> [accessed 12 December 2013].
- Askwith, Ivan, "'Do you even know where this is going?' : Lost viewers and narrative premeditation' in Pearson, Roberta, *Reading Lost: Perspectives on a Hit Television Show* (I. B. Tauris, 2009), pp. 159-180.
- Booth, Paul, 'Memories, Temporalities, Fictions: Temporal Displacement in Contemporary Television', *Television & New Media*, 12 (2011), pp. 370-388.
- Carroll, Noël, 'Narrative Closure', *Philosophical Studies*, 135 (2007), pp. 1-15.
- Davis, Glyn, Needham, Gary, 'Queer(ying) Lost' in Pearson, Roberta, *Reading Lost: Perspectives on a Hit Television Show* (I. B. Tauris, 2009), pp. 261-279.
- Goldman, Eric, 'How I Met Your Mother Creators on Beginning the Final Season (...Unless the Show Gets a Season 9)', *IGN*, 2012 <<http://uk.ign.com/articles/2012/09/18/how-i-met-your-mother-creators-on-beginning-the-final-season-unless-the-show-gets-a-season-9>> [accessed 12 December 2013].
- Esquenazi, Jean-Pierre, *Les séries télévisées: l'avenir du cinéma* (Paris: A. Colin, 2010).
- Lancaster, Kurt, *Interacting with Babylon 5: Fan Performance in a Media Universe* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001).
- Genette, Gérard, *Discours du récit* (Paris: Seuil, 2007).
- Goldman, Eric, 'CBS "Very Optimistic" About How I Met Your Mother: Season 9', *IGN*, 2012 <<http://uk.ign.com/articles/2012/07/29/cbs-very-optimistic-about-how-i-met-your-mother-season-9>> [accessed 12 December 2013].
- Goldman, Eric, 'How I Met Your Mother Creators on Beginning the Final Season (...Unless the Show Gets a Season 9)', *IGN*, 2012

<<http://uk.ign.com/articles/2012/09/18/how-i-met-your-mother-creators-on-beginning-the-final-season-unless-the-show-gets-a-season-9>> [accessed 12 December 2013].

Lavery, David, 'Lost and Long-Term Television Narrative', in Harrigan, Pat, and Noah Wardrip-Fruin, *Third Person: Authoring and Exploring Vast Narratives* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009).

Michlin, Monica, 'More, More, More', *Mise au point. Cahiers de l'association française des enseignants et chercheurs en cinéma et audiovisuel*, 2011.

Mitovich, Matt, 'Report: How I Met Your Mother Renewed for 9th Season After Jason Segel's 11th-Hour Reversal', *TVLine* <<http://tvline.com/2012/12/21/how-i-met-your-mother-renewed-season-9/>> [accessed 12 December 2013].

Mittell, Jason, 'Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television', *The Velvet Light Trap*, 2006, pp. 29-40.

Mittell, Jason, 'Lost in a Great Story: Evaluation in Narrative Television (and Television Studies)', in *Reading LOST: Perspectives on a Hit Television Show*, ed. by Roberta Pearson (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), pp. 119-38.

Mittell, Jason, 'Previously On: Prime Time Serials and the Mechanics of Memory', in *Intermediality and Storytelling*, ed. by Marina Grishakova and Marie-Laure Ryan (Walter de Gruyter, 2010), pp. 78-98.

Newman, Michael, 'From Beats to Arcs: Toward a Poetics of Television Narrative', *The Velvet Light Trap*, 2006, pp. 16-28.

Ryan, Maureen, "'Battlestar Galactica' Executive Producer On Adama's Legacy 10 Years Later', *Huffington Post*, 12-05/20

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/12/05/battlestar-galactica-legacy_n_4391961.html> [accessed 11 December 2013].

Truby, John, *Anatomie du scénario: Cinéma, littérature, séries télé* (CDE, 2011).

Winckler, Martin, *Les miroirs de la vie: histoire des séries américaines* (Paris: Le Passage, 2002).

Wolf, Mark J. P, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 212-216.

Notes

¹ Mittell, Jason, 'Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television', *The Velvet Light Trap*, 2006, 29-40.

² Mittell, Jason, *ibid.*

³ Mittell, *ibid.*

⁴ Mittell, Jason, 'Previously On: Prime Time Serials and the Mechanics of Memory', in *Intermediality and Storytelling*, ed. by Marina Grishakova and Marie-Laure Ryan (Walter de Gruyter, 2010), pp. 78-98.

⁵ See for example Lancaster, Kurt, *Interacting with Babylon 5: Fan Performance in a Media Universe* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001). J. Michael Straczynski interacted extensively with fans on the Internet, discussing the show's long-term narrative arcs and fictional world.

⁶ Miniseries do not follow the same production pattern, as they tell a single story with a definite end, and do not call for renewal - except, of course, if they serve as a backdoor pilot, as it was the case, for instance, with the three-hour miniseries *Battlestar Galactica*, broadcast in December 2003 on Sci Fi.

⁷ Winckler, Martin, *Les miroirs de la vie: histoire des séries américaines* (Paris: Le Passage, 2002).

⁸ Newman, Michael, 'From Beats to Arcs: Toward a Poetics of Television Narrative', *The Velvet Light Trap*, 2006, pp. 16-28.

⁹ Mittell, *ibid.*

¹⁰ In this paper, I use a broader definition for "arcs" compared to the typology proposed by Michael Newman, for whom an arc typically extends between sweeps (Nielsen audience measurement), across six to eight episodes. In order to clearly distinguish those long-term arcs from the more systematic, audience measurement-related arcs Newman identifies, I use the general term "story arc." See Newman, *ibid.*

¹¹ Ryan, Maureen, "'Battlestar Galactica' Executive Producer On Adama's Legacy 10 Years Later', *Huffington Post*, 12-05/20 <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/12/05/battlestar-galactica-legacy_n_4391961.html> [accessed 11 December 2013]. For the complete podcast of Moore's interview, see also 'Talking "Battlestar Galactica" 10 Years Later With Ron Moore', *Talking TV With Ryan and Ryan*, 12-05, <<http://talkingtvwithryanandryan.libsyn.com/talking-tv-with-ryan-and-ryan-episode-85-talking-battlestar-galactica-10-years-later-with-ron-moore>> [accessed 11 December 2013].

¹² For reasons of space, I will not detail the typology of *questions* that Carroll develops. See Carroll, Noël, 'Narrative Closure', *Philosophical Studies*, 135 (2007), 1-15.

¹³ Lavery, David, 'Lost and Long-Term Television Narrative', in Harrigan, Pat, and Noah Wardrip-Fruin, *Third Person: Authoring and Exploring Vast Narratives* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009).

¹⁴ Esquenazi, Jean-Pierre, *Les séries télévisées: l'avenir du cinéma* (Paris: A. Colin, 2010)

¹⁵ What Carroll defines as "presiding macro-questions": the main questions set by a narrative, that if answered, bring completeness and closure to the plot. If closure is not a default setting of television series, it is not a defining feature of all narratives in general, as Carroll reminds us. See Carroll, *ibid.*

¹⁶ Askwith, Ivan, "'Do you even know where this is going?' : Lost viewers and narrative premeditation' in Pearson, Roberta, *Reading Lost: Perspectives on a Hit Television Show* (I. B. Tauris, 2009), pp. 159-180.

¹⁷ 'November 11, 2010: Mystery Vid! What Are YOU Watching? Mailbag!', *Josephmallozzi's Weblog* <<http://josephmallozzi.wordpress.com/2010/11/11/november-11-2010-mystery-vid-what-are-you-watching-mailbag/>> [accessed 11 December 2013].

¹⁸ One of the main reasons this paper will not go further in examining production and reception, as its focus is on aesthetic components.

¹⁹ Askwith, *ibid.*

²⁰ Askwith, *ibid.*

²¹ Mittell, Jason, 'Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television', *ibid.*

²² For instance, Paul Booth sees *HIMYM* as belonging to a group of temporally complex narratives, such as *Arrested Development* (Fox, 2003–2006, Netflix, 2013), *Lost* and *FlashForward* (ABC, 2009-2010). See Booth, Paul, 'Memories, Temporalities, Fictions: Temporal Displacement in Contemporary Television', *Television & New Media*, 12 (2011), 370-388.

²³ Truby, John, *Anatomie du scénario: Cinéma, littérature, séries télé* (CDE, 2011).

²⁴ Booth, Paul, *ibid.*

²⁵ Monica Michlin briefly explores reflexivity in her article on complex narrative on television; she muses on its capacities to extend a fictional universe, as well as revealing the entropy of this universe as it is "dying", having been stretched too thin over the years. While *HIMYM* initially intends to use reflexivity in a different way, these observations are still relevant to this particular sitcom, since many critics have pointed to this entropy over its last seasons. See Michlin, Monica, 'More, More, More', *Mise au point. Cahiers de l'association française des enseignants et chercheurs en cinéma et audiovisuel*, 2011.

²⁶ Booth, *ibid.*

²⁷ Mittell, Jason, 'Lost in a Great Story: Evaluation in Narrative Television (and Television Studies)', in *Reading LOST: Perspectives on a Hit Television Show*, ed. by Roberta Pearson (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), pp. 119-38.

²⁸ Here, I am referring to events in story order, not plot order.

²⁹ I discussed these particular proleptic signifiers – especially the ones linked to music – in a paper given at Nantes University on the 31st of May, 2013. See <http://webtv.univ-nantes.fr/fiche/3446/florent-favard-it-s-in-the-frakkin-ship-la-reflexivite-musicale-dans-battlestar-galactica>.

³⁰ Booth, *ibid.*

³¹ Mittell, *ibid.*

³² Mittell, Jason, 'Previously On: Prime Time Serials and the Mechanics of Memory', *ibid.*

³³ Mittell, *ibid.*

³⁴ Booth builds on the works of Fiske and Hartley to explore the way memory temporality brings with it a set of specific cues that the viewer can quickly spot. See Booth, *ibid.*

³⁵ Wolf, Mark J. P, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 212-216. See also 'Main/Retcon - Television Tropes & Idioms' <<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/Retcon>> [accessed 10 December 2013]

³⁶ Retroactive continuity rewrites events in the fictional world. Retroactive completeness expands them; only the viewer's knowledge and point of view on this event truly change. Here, I build on observations by Monica Michlin on "reviewing as re-interpretation." See Michlin, *ibid.*

³⁷ Davis, Glyn, Needham, Gary, 'Queer(ying) Lost' in Pearson, Roberta, *Reading Lost: Perspectives on a Hit Television Show* (I. B. Tauris, 2009), pp. 261-279.

³⁸ Goldman, Eric, 'How I Met Your Mother Creators on Beginning the Final Season (...Unless the Show Gets a Season 9)', *IGN*, 2012 <<http://uk.ign.com/articles/2012/09/18/how-i-met-your-mother-creators-on-beginning-the-final-season-unless-the-show-gets-a-season-9>> [accessed 12 December 2013].

³⁹ Goldman, Eric, 'CBS "Very Optimistic" About How I Met Your Mother: Season 9', *IGN*, 2012 <<http://uk.ign.com/articles/2012/07/29/cbs-very-optimistic-about-how-i-met-your-mother-season-9>> [accessed 12 December 2013].

⁴⁰ Mitovich, Matt, 'Report: How I Met Your Mother Renewed for 9th Season After Jason Segel's 11th-Hour Reversal', *TVLine* <<http://tvline.com/2012/12/21/how-i-met-your-mother-renewed-season-9/>> [accessed 12 December 2013].

⁴¹ Andreeva, Nellie, "'How I Met Your Mother' Spinoff Officially A Go At CBS With Pilot Order', *Deadline.com* <<http://www.deadline.com/2013/11/how-i-met-your-mother-spinoff-cbs-pilot/>> [accessed 12 December 2013].

© 2014 Florent Flavard & GRAAT On-Line