

University of Iceland

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Film Studies

The Movie-Episode

*Structural Relationships Between Television Sitcoms and Their
Feature-Length Installments*

B.A. Essay

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Abstract

This essay explores the subject of the “movie-episode”, i.e. a feature length installment in a television series, in order to uncover its relationship with the established structural patterns of the series. It argues that many television series function as their own distinct structural systems, using three examples of the half-hour sitcom format to illustrate its point.

The first section offers a brief overview of the history of structural analysis, emphasizing the commonalities that govern certain genres in order to draw a parallel between said genres and the internal structural systems of television shows. Afterwards, it focuses in on the mediums of film and television and offers a more concrete definition of the “movie-episode” concept.

The second section looks at the structural relationship between *The Simpsons* and *The Simpsons Movie*, exploring how the latter differentiates itself from regular episodes of the former while simultaneously existing within the series as a whole. After that, there is a section on *Futurama* and the four films it spawned that specifically looks at how the nature of the films’ production affected their structure.

The third section concerns a serialized Icelandic comedy series (referred to as “the *Shift* tetralogy” for the purposes of this essay) whose movie-episode serves as the series finale. Here, the focus is on how serialized television operates on multiple structural levels and the techniques that this show specifically uses to continuously evolve its narrative, culminating in the feature-length, theatrically released finale.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Narrative as a “transmedium activity”

In a chapter of his book *Poetics of Cinema* devoted to narrative studies, David Bordwell submits that we tend to think of narrative as a “transmedium activity” (albeit one with roots in the spoken storytelling tradition).¹ Essentially, this means that any medium can accommodate a narrative, though obviously all storytelling media come with their own sets of conditions that inevitably affect said narrative in some way (pp. 87-88). As a result, Bordwell is skeptical about the idea of a universal underlying structure governing all narrative, preferring instead to look at similarities within certain mediums or genres (pg. 102). In doing this, Bordwell is openly and intentionally continuing in the tradition of Aristotle, whose essay *Poetics* is more or less a precursor to all modern discourse on narrative structure.² Primarily a study of contemporary Greek tragedy, the *Poetics* is undeniably dated in many respects. For example, according to Aristotle it was only proper for the narratives of his time to exhibit social attitudes about class and women that seem downright bizarre from a modern perspective (pg. 53). It could be argued that Aristotle also displays this kind of staunch conservatism in his somewhat prescriptive favoring of certain structural conventions over others when it comes to tragedy (for example, he delineates exactly what kind of person the protagonist of a tragedy should be, leaving no room for innovation or experimentation) (pp. 45-53). In spite of this, his analysis of the generic formula of tragedy endures largely because of its postscriptive attributes, i.e. its accurate summation of the commonalities between all works in the genre. For one thing, Aristotle’s accounts of certain structural phenomena (e.g. the beginning, middle and end of a story and what they entail for the narrative) are applicable to most things that we conventionally define as narrative.³ In detecting the

¹ David Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema*, London and New York: Routledge, 2008, pg. 87.

² Aristotle, “Poetics”, *Aristotle’s Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, translated by S. H. Butcher, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1951, pp. 5-111.

³ Same publication, pg. 31.

patterns of Greek tragedy specifically, however, Aristotle provides a template that is applicable to all sorts of different narrative fields (i.e. mediums, genres and so on).

In the 1920s, Vladimir Propp took on a similar task, analyzing a wide variety of folk tales in order to discover their common elements.⁴ Propp found that a large number of folk tales are essentially variations on the same basic structure, with individual characters merely filling the roles of specific plot devices that reoccur across the board.⁵ This is in line with Aristotle's view of actions as the main driving force of narrative, with characters playing a secondary role.⁶ This concept of action-centered narrative versus agent-centered narrative has been subject to some debate; Bordwell convincingly argues that neither approach is universally applicable and that the significance of each depends on the individual narrative (or, perhaps, genre).⁷ Nonetheless, the main takeaway here is that common structure, recurring tropes and general patterns can be traced in specific narrative fields.

The Russian formalists also grappled with the underlying systems of narrative, approaching them by looking for the common elements that united literature and separated it from other kinds of texts.⁸ They eventually arrived at the concepts of "familiarization" – the process by which literature (either within a single work or across all literature) makes us familiar with its devices to the point where we do not notice them – and "defamiliarization" – the process by which literature calls attention to said devices and thus to itself.⁹ Whichever element of the narrative undergoes which process is entirely dependent upon context.¹⁰ This idea was developed further by the Prague structuralists, who ultimately evolved it into the more concretely structural concept of "foregrounding": the element that draws attention to itself works in tandem with the

⁴ Hans Bertens, *Literary Theory: The Basics*, London and New York: Routledge, 2014, pg. 33.

⁵ Same publication, pp. 33-34.

⁶ Aristotle, "Poetics", pp. 25-29.

⁷ David Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema*, pp. 88-90.

⁸ Hans Bertens, *Literary Theory: The Basics*, pg. 30.

⁹ Same publication, pp. 29-32, 36-38.

¹⁰ Same publication, pg. 37.

elements surrounding it, which are placed in the background.¹¹ In other words, in order for an element to break away from a pattern, the pattern must first be in place. This is echoed in French structuralism, which postulates that an underlying structure must be in place before any sort of meaning can materialize.¹² While the formalists and structuralists were primarily concerned with literary texts, we will see that their conception of narrative can also be applied to other media.

Indeed, formalism and structuralism were soon brought over into film theory. Sergei Eisenstein wrote a multitude of essays about film form and structure, which naturally adhered to his theory of shots and montage as the building blocks of film “language” (while also lamenting the perceived stagnation of the art form after the early days of Soviet filmmaking had run their course).¹³ Rudolf Arnheim had a similarly prescriptive view of film, believing that the medium’s artistic merit was to be found in the formal aspects through which film differentiated itself not just from other mediums (as with the Russian formalists’ focus on literary differentiation) but from real life itself.¹⁴ Arnheim spends most of his book-long essay *Film as Art* enumerating the various ways in which our perception of film differs from our perception of reality. While some of these differences are largely specific to the films of the silent era, others are more universally applicable, such as the ones having to do with narration; that is, the ways in which the film itself delivers information to the audience. For example, one early section has Arnheim discussing the movement of the camera in relation to audience perception, propounding the idea that film creates a wholly unique effect by only providing information for one of our senses: vision (pp. 30-34). Although part of this effect was lost with the advent of sound cinema, camera movement is still undeniably a unique feature of filmic narration. David Bordwell devotes a whole sub-

¹¹ Same publication, pp. 40-41.

¹² Same publication, pp. 47-52.

¹³ Sergei Eisenstein, “A Dialectic Approach to Film Form”, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, edited and translated by Jay Leyda, New York and London: Harvest/HBJ, 1977, pp. 45-63, here pg. 48. Sergei Eisenstein, “Film Language”, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, edited and translated by Jay Leyda, New York and London: Harvest/HBJ, 1977, pp. 108-21.

¹⁴ Rudolf Arnheim, *Film as Art*, Berkeley and California: University of California Press, 1957, pp. 8-9.

chapter of *Poetics in Cinema* to narration in film, highlighting aspects of narration that are specific to the medium, such as how film is able to show multiple events simultaneously on the screen, whereas simultaneous events must be described one after the other in literature (pg. 100). Since the medium of film is home to such unique narrational devices, it stands to reason that it also has its own set of structural devices.

1.2. Hollywood-style structure, television structure, and the movie-episode

Continuing in Propp's tradition, Joseph Campbell studied a wide variety of myths and concluded that they all had the same underlying structure, which he dubbed the Hero's Journey or, alternatively, the "monomyth".¹⁵ His work ended up influencing Hollywood screenwriters as well as Christopher Vogler's writing manual *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, which makes extensive use of Campbell's structural concepts.¹⁶ Hollywood genres provide an obvious analogue to the underlying similarity in the narratives analyzed by Propp and Campbell. Westerns, for example, have a lot of elements in common – tropes, character archetypes, and arc structure all reoccur throughout films belonging to the genre. However, there is also evidence of a general structure governing most (if not all) narrative films regardless of genre. In spite of Bordwell's skepticism towards the idea of a universal narrative structure, he nonetheless provides an outline of classical Hollywood-style structure based on the writings of Kristin Thompson.¹⁷ Thompson's model re-examines the widespread idea of the three act structure, positing instead that the classical structure consists of four acts (or sections): Setup, Complicating Action, Development and Climax.¹⁸ Using *You've Got Mail* (1998, Nora Ephron) as an example of a "formulaic movie" and *Boyz n the Hood* (1991, John Singleton) as "an example that might seem less formulaic", Bordwell

¹⁵ Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, Studio City: Michael Wiese Productions, 2007, pp. 3-5. See also Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004.

¹⁶ Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey*, pp. 3-5.

¹⁷ David Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema*, pp. 105-06.

¹⁸ Same publication, pp. 105-06.

determines that both films adhere to classical story structure and reminds us that structural analysis is not a qualitative assessment.¹⁹ However, there is obviously a great multitude of films that do not follow this type of structure. Works that tend to be classified as “art films”, “experimental cinema”, and so on often dispense with notions of beginning, middle, and end; characterization; narrative arcs and so forth. These will not be elaborated on here as this essay is chiefly concerned with more “conventional” narratives in Western media.

As a narrative medium, television is closely related to film – in fact, it could be argued that it constitutes a branch of film rather than a different medium, a position that is given credence when, for example, fully serialized television shows are referred to as multi-hour movies in casual conversation. Television studies were first conducted by members of the Frankfurt School (such as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Leo Löwenthal) as part of their intensive focus on “cultural industries”, i.e. Western media and mass culture as dictated by the forces of capitalism, commercialism, and consumerism.²⁰ Though flawed in many respects and ultimately rather dated, the Frankfurt School’s (still largely accurate) conception of television as a highly commercialized medium had an immense influence on later television studies.²¹ Its relevance here lies in the fact that the narrative structures of television shows were largely shaped by capitalistic forces. A vast number of U.S. shows must be written to accommodate commercial breaks. For example, most American half-hour sitcoms have a three-act structure, with commercials in-between the acts. In fact, the term “half-hour sitcom” can hardly be said to refer to the show itself. While a sitcom of this kind will take up a half-hour slot, several minutes of that slot will be taken up by commercials, meaning that the show itself usually runs about 20-24 minutes long. In some cases, there may even be an additional break near the end of a show, necessitating a tag at the end that can only really serve as a sort of dénouement or extraneous bit that may potentially take time away from the story. This is not necessarily a negative thing,

¹⁹ Same publication, pp. 106-08.

²⁰ Doug Kellner, “Critical Perspectives on Television from the Frankfurt School to Postmodernism”, *A Companion to Television*, edited by Janet Wasko, Malden, Oxford and Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, pp. 29-33.

²¹ Same publication, pp. 33-35.

however. Structure being defined by limitations imposed by external forces is hardly a new development brought on by television; David Bordwell refers to this phenomenon as “external structures”.²² Bordwell’s example of an external structure in film is reel-by-reel plotting, i.e. the planning of story beats according to the beginning and end of each reel as necessitated by the fact that each reel could only include a portion of a full-length film.²³ Thus, reel-by-reel plotting is a sort of early film antecedent to television acts, though in this case the structure was imposed by technological limitations as opposed to network demands.

Contrary to the idea of commercialism governing every aspect of the medium, then, narrative television is in many ways a unique creative field. Any ongoing television series has the opportunity to become its own distinctive structural system by developing internal patterns and formulae over time. This leads us to the main subject of this essay, one that is particularly intriguing when considering television shows as their own structural systems. This concept will be referred to here as the “movie-episode” in the absence of a previously existing phrase. Due to the somewhat nebulous nature of the concept, a definition is in order: the movie-episode is not a film adaptation of a television series in the sense that we usually think of when we hear the word “adaptation”. Rather it is a feature-length installment *in* a television series, set in the same continuity and ideally (though not necessarily) made by the same creative team as the rest of the series.²⁴ A movie-episode may or may not be given a theatrical release; an initially stand-alone film that later gets a spin-off in the form of a television series is not

²² David Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema*, pp. 103-04.

²³ Same publication, pp. 103-04.

²⁴ Using the word “continuity” in this context may prove dubious when applied to certain examples, such as *Aqua Teen Hunger Force Colon Movie Film for Theaters* (2007, Matt Maiellaro and Dave Willis). While the film is undoubtedly an example of a movie-episode, the series that spawned it, *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* (2001, created by Dave Willis and Matt Maiellaro), has an extremely loose relationship with inter-episode continuity up to the point of frequently killing off regular characters in one episode only to bring them back with no explanation in the next. A more appropriate term in this case may be “universe”, though that comes with its own set of problems when applied too liberally.

an example of a movie-episode.²⁵ Therefore the movie-episode can most accurately be defined as a *movie* that also happens to be a feature-length *episode* of a pre-existing television series; a part of a larger whole rather than a substitute for said whole, though in many cases it is designed to be enjoyable on its own merits even if the viewer has no prior knowledge of the series surrounding it.

Of primary interest here is the jump from episode to feature-length film, how the structural patterns of the show are reflected in the film, and where the similarities and differences between film and show lie. Half-hour sitcoms provide a particularly dramatic shift in runtime and scope; as a result, the bulk of this essay will cover three sitcoms (two animated and one live-action) with feature film installments that are distinct from each other in some way. The first section, focusing on two animated sitcoms created by Matt Groening, will first examine the structural relationship between regular episodes of *The Simpsons* (1989–present) and *The Simpsons Movie* (2007, David Silverman), then discuss how the four film installments of *Futurama* (1999–2013) were produced as a television season and how it affected their structure. The second section will cover an Icelandic comedy series consisting of three TV seasons – *Næturvaktin* (2007, Ragnar Bragason), *Dagvaktin* (2008, Ragnar Bragason) and *Fangavaktin* (2009, Ragnar Bragason) – and the movie *Bjarnfreðarson* (2009, Ragnar Bragason). In this case, the film serves as the finale of a serialized story told over the course of the whole series, which creates a very specific sort of structural relationship between individual episodes, whole seasons and the movie. It should be noted here that the essay as a whole is predominantly analytical, with a large focus on some of the concepts discussed previously (namely Hollywood-style structure as defined by Thompson and foregrounding).

²⁵ However, in the case of a series that begins with a feature-length pilot/premiere (e.g. *Samurai Jack*, “Samurai Jack: The Premiere Movie” (2001, Genndy Tartakovsky, also series creator)), the movie in question does technically meet the criteria of a movie-episode on the basis that it was produced with a series in mind. This type of film will not be covered in extensive detail here, primarily because it comes at the beginning of a series, before it has had the chance to develop an identity and rhythm of its own.

2. The stand-alone movie-episode

2.1. Structure and narrative in *The Simpsons*

The Simpsons is ideal for exploring the idea of a television series as its own structural system, having run for more than 600 episodes over almost three decades. Its evolution can actually be traced back even further: it began as a series of interstitial shorts on *The Tracey Ullman Show* (1987–1990, created by James L. Brooks, Jerry Belson, Ken Estin and Heide Perlman) in 1987, ultimately premiering as a half-hour series in December 1989. The next several years saw *The Simpsons*' writers build up a massive stock of recurring characters, settings, catchphrases and running gags while developing the show's unique comic rhythm and a style that blended character-based comedy, satire, and sentiment. They also developed a unique structural template that eventually became one of the show's hallmarks. This formula is largely based around the externally imposed three-act structure (as explained earlier in this essay).²⁶ In its most basic form, the first act of an episode is only tenuously linked to the second and third acts, where the main story of the episode is told (often cutting between the A-plot and an additional B-plot that may or may not be set up during the unrelated first act). Season 5's "Boy-Scoutz 'n the Hood" is a typical example of this formula: the first act has eldest Simpson child Bart (Nancy Cartwright) and his friend Milhouse (Pamela Hayden) enter an altered state fuelled by sugar and meant to evoke an experience with hallucinogenic drugs. Just before the first act break, it is revealed (to Bart and the audience) that Bart joined a boy scout organization called the Junior Campers during his "trip". The two acts that follow concern Bart's acceptance of his new role as a Junior Camper while his father, Homer (Dan Castellaneta) disapproves. While the first act takes up roughly a fourth of the episode's runtime (corresponding with Kristin Thompson's four act model) and does ultimately set up the ostensible main story, it is nonetheless unusual (though typical among *Simpsons* episodes) in that these two plot threads are only linked by causality.²⁷ Any further ramifications of the first act's events are dropped as soon as Bart

²⁶ Later episodes of *The Simpsons* also include a tag in-between the third act and the end credits for the sake of a third commercial break.

²⁷ David Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema*, pp. 105-106.

becomes enthusiastic about the Junior Campers. The first act mostly functions as a vignette separate from the rest of the story, with only the last 30 seconds or so really being used for set-up.

This structural template is hardly the only one *The Simpsons* employs, nor is it era-specific: the same season is also home to episodes like “Homer the Vigilante” that tell one continuous story from beginning to end. Yet another fifth-season episode, “Sweet Seymour Skinner’s Baadasssss Song” features a loosely-related first act that nonetheless has emotional ramifications for the characters that last long after the initial plot is resolved. Still, the unrelated first act is ubiquitous enough among *Simpsons* episodes that the show was mining it for self-parody by season 13: the first two minutes of “Homer the Moe” are given over to a narrative about Bart digging a hole in the Simpsons’ backyard that is ultimately interrupted before it can receive any sort of resolution when it is revealed to be an in-universe story made up by Homer. Other episodes’ narratives are dictated purely by causality: the first act of “Weekend at Burnsie’s” (also from season 13) is entirely about the Simpsons’ interactions with a group of crows, the second act revolves around Homer first using and then campaigning for medicinal marijuana, and the parody of *Weekend at Bernie’s* (1989, Ted Kotcheff) that inspired the episode’s title is relegated entirely to the last three minutes. In spite of how disjointed this summary makes “Weekend at Burnsie’s” sound, the episode’s plot threads all segue into each other more-or-less organically. Whether or not they form a single, coherent narrative may be up for debate, however. At any rate, the most common narrative building blocks of *Simpsons* episodes seem to be vignettes that lead into one another, forming a segmented narrative of sorts that still ultimately follows the Thompson model of story structure, albeit in an unconventional manner.²⁸ Sometimes, the writers use vignette construction to experiment with the form of an episode, such as in the annual “Treehouse of Horror” Halloween specials that each form a triptych of short, non-canonical stories; “The Seemingly Never-Ending Story”, which makes use of nested narratives that all coalesce at the end; “22 Short Films About Springfield”, which

²⁸ This kind of structure was discouraged by Aristotle, who had little tolerance for meandering (or “Epeisodic”) plots. See Aristotle, “Poetics”, pp. 37-39.

fully embraced the stream-of-consciousness nature of the show's vignette structure by shifting it into sketch comedy based around the show's ensemble cast, etc.²⁹

In general, the show's free-form approach to narrative may have come about due to another reality of network television, namely the fact that the show needs to fill a half-hour time slot. Each episode's runtime is consequently fixed at roughly 20-24 minutes regardless of the amount of time needed to tell the episode's main story. Rather than attempt to fit a single story to said runtime in every episode, the show usually relies on comedy to carry itself through, as in the "Homer the Moe" example, where the first two minutes form a meta-joke about the show's general disregard for the laws of narrative, or "The Front", which ends on a completely irrelevant half-minute segment with its own theme song centered around the Simpsons' neighbor Ned Flanders (Harry Shearer). In spite of this, the narrative world of *The Simpsons* does in fact obey certain rules.

2.2. Status quo and *The Simpsons Movie's* relationship to *The Simpsons*

While the vast majority of *Simpsons* episodes are stand-alone narratives, the series clearly implies that most of them take place in the same "story world" that keeps going in-between episodes (the exceptions being explicitly non-canonical material like the aforementioned "Treehouse of Horror" specials). Call-backs are frequent and certain episodes' stories are caused by the events of earlier episodes, such as "Cape Feare", in which recurring villain Sideshow Bob (Kelsey Grammer) takes revenge upon Bart for foiling his two previous schemes in "Krusty Gets Busted" and "Black Widower". This can be tied to the Russian formalists' concepts of *fabula* (the events of a narrative as they occur in-universe) and *syuzhet* (the way the story presents these events).³⁰ In theory, *The Simpsons* has one continuous *fabula* that the show divides into multiple *syuzhets* (each *syuzhet* belonging to one episode, though, again, the non-canon "Treehouse of Horror" segments and the like derive their *syuzhet* from a different *fabula*

²⁹ "Stream-of-consciousness" here means an unbroken narrative that connects a series of otherwise unrelated scenes.

³⁰ David Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema*, pg. 98.

altogether).³¹ Since every episode is stand-alone, however (the sole exception being the two-parter “Who Shot Mr. Burns”), the general rule is that each story must involve a return to the status quo by the end. For example, if Homer quits or otherwise loses his job at the Springfield Nuclear Power Plant, tradition dictates that he should get it back by episode’s end. Even if the change remains unresolved in the end, the situation will be reset by the start of the next episode. In cases like this, the writers rely on the viewers’ familiarity with the show’s usual patterns to fill in the gap and imply an off-screen return to the status quo in-between episodes (however comically improbable said return may be). Despite this general pattern, there have been a few long-term changes to the show’s universe, including the deaths of minor characters Maude Flanders (Maggie Roswell, Marcia Mitzman Gaven) in “Alone Again, Natura-Diddly” and Bleeding Gums Murphy (Ron Taylor) in “Round Springfield”, among others.³² Nonetheless, these changes only affect recurring characters who are not as important to the show as the Simpsons themselves. Moreover, said changes are never done in the service of a multi-episode arc of any kind; a character death in one episode generally does not come up at all in the next. Less drastic changes need not be permanent: Milhouse’s parents’ divorce in season 8’s “A Milhouse Divided” was eventually undone in season 17’s “Milhouse of Sand and Fog”; in both cases the change in status quo was entirely in service of a single episode’s story. We can surmise from this that long-term consequences only affect characters who are not the Simpsons themselves, the reason being that episodes of the show are designed to be watched in any order. An episode of *The Simpsons* – and by extension *The Simpsons Movie* – serves no greater narrative purpose than its own.

Keeping all of this in mind, we can examine how *The Simpsons Movie* set out to tell a “bigger” story that, by its nature, could not have any long-lasting impact on the story world. While it is ultimately beholden to the show’s “status quo” rule, *The*

³¹ This also applies to movies and their sequels (if they are set in the same story world).

³² Maude Flanders’ death came about due to a pay dispute with her voice actor, Maggie Roswell, while Bleeding Gums Murphy was a guest character to begin with; his death was the focus of his second appearance on the show and presumably a creative decision. See Paul Brownfield, “*Simpsons* Actor Disputes Fox on Reason for Leaving”, *Los Angeles Times*, February 4, 2000, checked May 8, 2018 at <http://articles.latimes.com/2000/feb/04/entertainment/ca-60883>.

Simpsons Movie marks itself as a special occasion through the balancing act of differentiating itself from regular episodes of *The Simpsons* while maintaining the series' identity and comic rhythm. Most obviously, the film was a heavily marketed summer blockbuster produced from the start as a theatrical release, unlike a regular episode. As such, the film's narrative structure is in no way constrained by commercial breaks or a fixed runtime (aside from having to be feature-length). The film's writers (all veterans of the TV series) adapted the series' structural conventions to fit within a classical feature-length Hollywood narrative. This is especially apparent in the first act, which is the main focus of this section. Here it may be pertinent to recall Thompson's model of Hollywood-style structure.³³ Thompson's conception of act breaks is largely defined by the goals of the protagonist; i.e. how said goals evolve over the course of the narrative. *The Simpsons Movie*, however, does not establish any relevant goals at first due to its structural peculiarities. The film eventually sets up Homer Simpson as the main protagonist, though not until the end of the first act – the Setup section as defined by Thompson (pg. 105). True to form, *The Simpsons Movie*'s Setup section is basically an extended “unrelated first act”, though it nonetheless sets up major character conflicts and subplots that carry on through the rest of the film. To elaborate, this section consists of a few separate plot threads revolving around different Simpson family members: Homer adopts a pig; his wife Marge (Julie Kavner) attempts to decipher a cryptic vision that “Grampa” Abe Simpson (Dan Castellaneta) had in church; Homer and Marge's daughter Lisa (Yeardley Smith) successfully lobbies to have the people of Springfield clean up their lake; Bart starts to resent Homer due to his bad parenting and looks to Ned Flanders as a father figure instead. The film has no clear main protagonist until the pivotal moment when Homer, ignoring Marge's instructions to properly dispose of a silo full of pig feces, secretly dumps it into the newly-cleaned Springfield Lake. This marks the end of the Setup and the beginning of what Thompson calls the Complicating Action, as the resulting pollution leads to the US government placing an enormous glass dome over Springfield and sealing the townspeople inside.

While most of the aforementioned plot threads are rendered irrelevant by the end of the Setup, they are nonetheless used to plant the seeds of the main plot in a way the

³³ David Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema*, pp. 105-106.

“unrelated first act” often does not on the show. Abe’s vision, which turns out to be a prophecy about the dome, occurs near the beginning of the narrative and thus provides ominous foreshadowing that the first act is going to lead to something bigger. Marge’s efforts to understand said prophecy serve as a reminder to the audience throughout the first act. In conjunction with Homer’s pig storyline, this plot thread also set up a major conflict as Marge gets increasingly frustrated with Homer’s inability to consider her viewpoint (i.e. that the prophecy should be taken seriously and that Homer should get rid of the pig). Lisa’s plot thread is also vital, since Homer’s impulsive destruction of the lake not only serves to undo all her hard work but also dooms all the townspeople who helped her clean up the lake. The end of the Setup thus sees multiple seemingly unrelated plot threads coalesce on a character-based level (and this includes Bart’s subplot, which keeps going through the rest of the film): Homer has let down not only his immediate family, but also the entire town of Springfield. The rest of the film ultimately becomes a redemption story for Homer as he eventually takes responsibility for his actions, works through personal issues with his immediate family members and saves Springfield (thereby resetting the film’s events, as tradition dictates). The film uses the show’s usual comedy-driven stream-of-consciousness approach to set up character arcs in the first act, then pivots into a larger, more focused plot for the rest of its runtime.

To explore another way in which the film differentiates itself, we can return to the concept of foregrounding.³⁴ The show’s established patterns – running gags and character functions – are used as a background for differentiation (or “defamiliarization”) in *The Simpsons Movie*. In other words, various jokes call attention to themselves by subverting the norms established by the series. This includes scenes like the routinely tormented Martin (Russi Taylor) standing up to his bullies in a comically uncharacteristic and violent fashion. That type of joke does occur in regular episodes of the show, however, which means that *The Simpsons Movie*’s primary asset in subverting the show’s conventions is its PG-13 rating. The film involves rude hand gestures, swearing, on-screen drug use and a brief shot of Bart’s genitals, none of which would be allowed on the show’s usual network television home. Thus, in spite of the

³⁴ See Hans Bertens, *Literary Theory: The Basics*, pp. 40-41.

fact that it has no more bearing on the series' narrative world than a regular episode, *The Simpsons Movie* marks itself as a special occasion by standing out against *The Simpsons* proper while simultaneously affirming its place in the series' canon.

2.3. Structure affected by production in the *Futurama* movies

Matt Groening's second animated sitcom, *Futurama*, premiered in 1999 when *The Simpsons* had been running for almost a decade. The show revolves around 20th century everyman Philip J. Fry (Billy West), who accidentally gets frozen in a cryonic tube, awakening in the year 3000, where he begins working for an intergalactic delivery company known as the Planet Express. The writing staff included former *Simpsons* writers, most notably David X. Cohen, who was Groening's co-developer on *Futurama*. As might be expected, *Futurama* borrows several elements from *The Simpsons*, such as its visual design aesthetic, satirical tone, and (in some respects) structural patterns. Nonetheless, *Futurama* tends to be more focused in its story structure than *The Simpsons*, usually setting up character arcs early in the first act of an episode even if the main plot mostly takes place in the second and third act. A substantial difference between the two shows is that *Futurama* is a science fiction adventure series set in the far-off future that often involves much higher stakes in its stories as a result. It also puts a greater emphasis on plotting, occasionally to ambitious levels. For example, multiple episodes ("The Luck of the Fryrish", "Jurassic Bark", and "Cold Warriors", to name a few) tell parallel stories that switch between the show's usual future setting and Fry's past in the 20th century. Still, a few episodes (like "Three Hundred Big Boys" and "Free Will Hunting") utilize a more free-form structure akin to that of *The Simpsons*. In addition, *Futurama* places a bit more importance on continuity than its sister series, including frequent references to previous episodes and developing character relationships over time. The show remains firmly episodic for the most part, however, generally sticking to the status quo in everything but character dynamics.

The four *Futurama* films were released straight-to-DVD and produced as a sixteen-episode television season, designed in such a way that each film could be presented as a single, continuous movie on DVD while being split into four serialized episodes in syndication (featuring recaps at the start of each episode that required one).

This very obviously affected their structure, as the writers had to accommodate television conventions such as act breaks in each film and make each part work on both an episodic level and as a piece of a larger, long-form narrative. This resulted in a lot of narrative abnormalities, most notably in the third film but discernible across all four. The first film, *Futurama: Bender's Big Score* (2007, Dwayne Carey-Hill), mostly functions as a coherent whole. Its narrative revolves around a complex time travel plot, part of which takes place in Fry's past. This leads to another usage of the aforementioned structural template wherein the story switches between a plot thread in Fry's past and another one in the show's present (i.e. the future). However, since the events of the "past" storyline are set up via time travel during the main story, the switching-back-and-forth structure is only present in the latter half of the film (in other words, the third and fourth "episodes"). While this undoubtedly makes more sense on an episodic level, the structural oddity is ultimately obscured by *Bender's Big Score's* overall narrative complexity: due to the time travel concept, the story involves several interlocking and looping plot threads that keep the "past" storyline from sticking out too much. On the other hand, issues with the "four-episode movie" format start to show in the second film, *Futurama: The Beast with a Billion Backs* (2008, Peter Avanzino). The film's comparatively straightforward narrative picks up from a cliffhanger at the end of *Bender's Big Score*, in which a time paradox results in an enormous rift in the fabric of the universe. Indeed, the main plot of *Beast with a Billion Backs* concerns this space anomaly, or rather what lies beyond it: a gigantic monster named Yivo (David Cross) who eventually ends up in a love affair with the entire population of the universe. However, Yivo's introduction does not occur until the film's midway point. Instead, the focus shifts toward various subplots in the first "episode" of the film, only one of which involves the anomaly in any capacity until the second "episode". While the subplots provide both thematic structure (most of them involve romantic relationships, tying into the film's central theme of love) and foreshadowing (Fry ends up in a polygamous relationship at the start, which is echoed later in the film with Yivo's more absurd, universe-spanning version of same), they nonetheless constitute a largely disconnected Setup section that lasts for the entire first half of the film. The slow pacing in the first

half thus robs the film of the sense of urgency that this type of story practically demands, though these issues mostly disappear in the second half.³⁵

The third film, *Futurama: Bender's Game* (2008, Dwayne Carey-Hill), is where the degree to which the *Futurama* films were affected by their production becomes blatantly obvious. The film's title and marketing were centered around the show's characters entering a classic fantasy environment (altogether unlike the show's usual science fiction setting). The fantasy segment is set up via a subplot in which the Planet Express' sole robot employee, Bender (John DiMaggio), starts using his imagination in conjunction with fantasy role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons*, eventually conjuring up an entire fantasy universe in real space, which the cast gets trapped in. However, despite ostensibly being the film's main story, the fantasy segment does not begin until roughly 50 minutes into an 84 minute movie (not counting the end credits), effectively interrupting what had been the main plot until that point. While the events of the fantasy segment form several parallels to the story being told beforehand, essentially reintroducing the film's central conflict with a fantasy veneer, it still plays as a complete departure from the overall story rather than the central plot it was marketed as. The fourth film, *Futurama: Into the Wild Green Yonder* (2009, Peter Avanzino), mostly revolves around a single, continuous narrative divided into a few interrelated subplots. Even here there is a unique structural oddity, however: the film features a subplot involving Bender that is only present in the first 24 minutes (mostly the first "episode", though it has a brief dénouement at the beginning of the second) and has absolutely no bearing on the rest of the narrative. It is somewhat similar to the *Simpsons*-style "unrelated first act" in that regard, the difference being that it does not function as Setup, existing purely for its own sake. Notably, this type of subplot also occurs in the double-length *Simpsons* episode "The Great Phatsby", which was produced as two episodes. It is clear, then, that these narratives were structured in favor of the episodic versions of the films; their structural units are designed more like individual episodes in a serialized story arc than the acts of a feature-length film. *Futurama*'s movie-episodes thus provide an interesting look at the results of applying a structural approach from a

³⁵ Compare Zack Handlen, "*Futurama: The Beast With A Billion Backs*", *The A.V. Club*, August 27, 2015, checked May 8, 2018 at <https://tv.avclub.com/futurama-the-beast-with-a-billion-backs-1798184720>.

short-form narrative format to a long-form one without properly adapting it to the requirements of the latter.

3. The movie-episode as part of a serialized narrative

3.1. Serialization and the structural units of the *Shift* tetralogy

Serialized television tends to follow structural rules that differ significantly from those of wholly episodic television. Shows like *The Wire* (2002–2008, created by David Simon), for example, have been described as novelistic in the sense that each episode is merely a chapter in a much larger structural unit (recalling the serialization of novels in newspapers, magazines, and the like).³⁶ If we take a closer look, however, we can deduce that *The Wire* operates on multiple structural levels. While it is true that a single episode of *The Wire* constitutes a fragment of the overall story, each of its five seasons nonetheless forms a clear narrative with a beginning, middle, and end (even if certain plot threads are picked up again in subsequent seasons). Each season grapples with a different facet of the main themes that are present throughout the entire series: the effects that institutions have on people's lives and the near-impossibility of reform within said institutions. Thus, *The Wire* is a single, continuous narrative that is broken up into five smaller narratives, each of which is itself broken up into several chapters (episodes). It should be noted here that there are different kinds of serialization. While shows like *The Wire* are fully serialized, with each episode following directly from the previous one, other shows may involve a season-long or series-wide arc that is told through smaller, more self-contained stories or sub-arcs and does not necessarily come up in every episode. The main focus in this section is an Icelandic series consisting of three television seasons with different titles (*Næturvaktin*, *Dagvaktin*, and *Fangavaktin*) and the theatrically-released film *Bjarnfreðarson*, which serves as the series finale. To simplify, the series (including the movie) will be collectively referred to as the *Shift* tetralogy here (since the season titles translate to *The Night Shift*, *The Day Shift*, and *The Prison Shift* respectively). The *Shift* tetralogy's structural units consist of single episodes, entire seasons, the movie, and the series as a whole. Once again, we can return to Thompson's analytical formula to examine the series' structure, though in this case it

³⁶ Brian G. Rose, "The Wire", *The Essential HBO Reader*, edited by Gary R. Edgerton and Jeffrey P. Jones, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008, pp. 82-91, here pp. 82-83.

applies to the serialized narrative of an entire television series, including its movie-episode.³⁷

Næturvaktin (the first season, consisting of twelve episodes) introduces us to three characters who have found themselves working the night shift at a gas station in Reykjavík, Iceland: Daníel Sævarsson (Jörundur Ragnarsson), a young medical student who dropped out of school due to stress shortly before the beginning of the series; Ólafur Ragnar Hannesson (Pétur Jóhann Sigfússon), a naïve loafer in his thirties who sees the job as a transitional phase before his life truly gets going; and Georg Bjarnfreðarson, the power-hungry shift manager whose delusions of grandeur lead him to impose his personal philosophy and work guidelines on his underlings. *Næturvaktin* has little in the way of plot momentum, at least in comparison to the rest of the series. This forms something of a structural parallel to the three main characters' state of affairs; their lives are all at a standstill, though Georg and Ólafur are largely oblivious. The season largely consists of a series of comic vignettes set at the gas station. Nonetheless, there are a few minor plot threads running through the season, notably Georg's preoccupation with a staff fund that he wants to use on a trip to Sweden. Certain episodes have self-contained, sitcom-style stories alongside the serialized elements, such as Ólafur's attempts to get into a singing competition in the fourth episode. Some of the vignettes also shed light on the characters' backstories and relationships with their families, setting up major plot threads for the rest of the series to explore. Occasional visits from Daníel's perpetually disappointed parents Sævar (Arnar Jónsson) and María (Anna Kristín Arngrímsdóttir) make it clear that they pressured him into attending medical school entirely against his will (particularly his father, who is also a doctor). Georg's autocratic demeanor is contrasted with the submissive manner in which he interacts with his domineering mother, Bjarnfreður (Margrét Helga Jóhannsdóttir); meanwhile, he utterly fails to connect or even meaningfully engage with his own son, Flemming (Arnar Freyr Karlsson). Ólafur lives with his sister and brother-in-law, who despise him (largely due to his relentless money troubles); he also moonlights as the incompetent manager for *Sólin*, a band fronted by his cousin, Kiddi Casio (Halldór Gylfason).

³⁷ See David Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema*, pg. 105-06.

The series quickly sets up a dynamic between the three main characters. As previously mentioned, Georg goes to great lengths to control his co-workers, particularly Ólafur, with whom he constantly finds fault. Daniél is more willing to stand up to Georg than Ólafur, though he usually remains quiet and reserved. He nonetheless forms a bond with Ólafur over the course of the season and begins to take photographs around the gas station, indicating where his true passion lies. The various minor plot threads of *Næturvaktin* come to a head in the season finale, in which the main trio grapples with the knowledge that the night shift is being discontinued, costing them their jobs. Georg suffers a mental breakdown, then uses the staff fund to buy three tickets to Sweden. Ólafur is initially undisturbed, but he is finally forced to confront the reality of his situation after Kiddi shows up at the gas station in order to fire him as *Sólin*'s manager. Daniél is the only member of the trio who exits the first season in a better state than he was in when he entered it, having momentarily gotten over the anxiety induced by his medical studies and more or less severed ties with his parents. The season finale thus functions as a Climax for the season as a whole, framing it as a full narrative in its own right, albeit a rather minimalistic one. For the *Shift* tetralogy as a whole, however, *Næturvaktin* primarily functions as Setup, introducing the characters, their personal conflicts and their dynamic, all of which continue to be a driving force through the rest of the series' overall narrative.

3.2. Narrative evolution through form in *Dagvaktin*, *Fangavaktin*, and *Bjarnfreðarson*

Having named *Næturvaktin* as the Setup of the *Shift* tetralogy as a whole, it is only natural to apply Thompson's terms to the rest of the series' major structural units. Thus, we can refer to *Dagvaktin* (the second season, eleven episodes) as the Complicating Action, *Fangavaktin* (the third season, seven episodes) as the Development, and *Bjarnfreðarson* (the film) as the Climax.³⁸ Much like *Næturvaktin*, each of these units is also a full sub-narrative in its own right, with its own Setup, Complicating Action, Development, and Climax. However, they will mainly be discussed here in relation to the overall narrative of the *Shift* tetralogy. The Complicating Action as defined by

³⁸ See David Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema*, pg. 105-06.

Thompson is all about redefining the protagonist's goals (or outright replacing them); it ends with "a new set of circumstances governing the action" (in Bordwell's words).³⁹ *Dagvaktin*'s narrative begins with a reunited Georg and Ólafur finding work at a hotel in Iceland's Westfjords where, it turns out, Daniél is already working. Georg finds himself at the bottom of the hotel staff's pecking order, so his main goal for the season becomes seizing power by taking over the hotel. This ties into his overall goal throughout the series – as we find out later, his mother instilled in him the intent to become "a great man", a goal which he pursues with obsessive zeal. Daniél, meanwhile, thinks he has achieved his goals of getting over his anxiety and living his life for himself, but the season's disastrous events end up reversing his initial situation. Ólafur's goal remains more or less the same as in the first season: he wants to achieve some form of success. Over the course of *Dagvaktin*, however, he becomes much more desperate and aware of his failure to achieve said goal as multiple people take advantage of him in one way or another.

In discussing the narrative of the *Shift* tetralogy, it is apt to return to the subjects of foregrounding and filmic narration in order to explore how the series uses stylistic and tonal shifts as a means to convey narrative evolution.⁴⁰ *Næturvaktin* has a minimalistic, naturalistic style. It features straightforward, linear storytelling and no non-diegetic music apart from the opening and closing credits of each episode – even a montage in its penultimate episode is silent apart from a voice-over and environmental noise. Excepting a few brief scenes, the vast majority of *Næturvaktin* takes place in and around the gas station at night until the season finale, which ends by breaking the season's established format with Georg, Daniél, and Ólafur's experiences in Sweden. *Dagvaktin* continues this format-breaking, setting itself apart from the previous season by breaking most of its self-imposed rules. The characters are no longer bound to one setting and the cinematography and editing are a bit more stylized. For example, the second episode of *Dagvaktin* opens with a montage depicting Daniél's idyllic life as a hotel chef, set to a licensed song that nonetheless turns out to be diegetic; we hear it

³⁹ Same publication.

⁴⁰ See Hans Bertens, *Literary Theory: The Basics*, pp. 40-41. See also David Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema*, pp. 93-110.

playing on Daníel's headphones at the end of the montage. Some episodes later in the season even start to incorporate brief snippets of non-diegetic music. Essentially, the series is transitioning from one approach to the medium of film to another, starting off with an emphasis on "realism" in *Næturvaktin* before gradually embracing more and more of Arnheim's film philosophy (i.e. the idea of film's artistic merit being derived from its difference from real life).⁴¹

Dagvaktin's turning point comes when a drunken encounter with predatory hotel manager Gugga (Ólafía Hrönn Jónsdóttir) leads Georg to knock her unconscious with a frying pan in self-defense. This pivotal moment is introduced via the series' first flashback (which serves to explain Georg's revulsion towards female sexuality), breaking yet another one of the stylistic rules set up by *Næturvaktin*. Georg manages to convince Daníel that he was the one who hit Gugga, bringing about a tonal shift into much darker comedy than before. Gugga's eventual death leads them to confess and by the third season premiere they find themselves in prison. The *Shift* tetralogy continues to evolve in said third season, *Fangavaktin*, which constitutes its Development section. As is typical for the Development, the characters are kept from their goals during this season (Daníel is forced to reconnect with his parents and pressured into continuing his medical studies while in prison, Ólafur continues to pursue career options that he is ill-suited for, and Georg once again tries to seize power but is ultimately unable to transcend his role as a prison inmate).⁴² Here, as before, there is a change in tone as the season's prison setting reinforces the show's major themes of consequences and responsibility. The season finale in particular is more somber and introspective than the series has been up to that point. There, Georg has an epiphany regarding his behavior and quietly resolves to take personal responsibility for his actions for the first time in his life. This "puts the achievement of goals into a crisis" (Bordwell's words) in the sense that Georg is now more concerned with becoming a good person than a "great man", setting up the *Shift* tetralogy's Climax.⁴³ The season concludes with a lengthy montage set to fully non-diegetic music, once again signifying a change in the narrative

⁴¹ Rudolf Arnheim, *Film as Art*, pp. 8-9.

⁴² David Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema*, pg. 105.

⁴³ Same publication.

through a change in the presentation. The season also subtly conveys its role as the lead-in to the finale by using a slightly wider aspect ratio than the first two seasons did; *Bjarnfreðarson* takes this change further by using an even wider, more cinematic ratio.

Bjarnfreðarson serves as the series' Climax and conclusion, revolving around the protagonists' failure or success in achieving their goals.⁴⁴ For Georg, this means a confrontation with his past; for Daníel, a confrontation with the people controlling his life; for Ólafur, simply finding a line of work that suits him. It should be clear by now that Thompson's structural model, while designed to analyze stand-alone films, is also applicable to serialized narratives on a macro-level.⁴⁵ As *Bjarnfreðarson* brings the characters' story to a close, it also completes the tonal and formal transformation that began in the first season finale. The low-key comedy and naturalistic presentation of *Næturvaktin*'s first eleven episodes is fully replaced here with comedy-drama and a storytelling style that includes multiple flashbacks as well as a full, non-diegetic musical score. Each season (or movie) of the *Shift* tetralogy stands out against the previous one, thus calling attention to itself by way of differentiation (or "defamiliarization").⁴⁶ Thus, the series uses foregrounding to provide the narrative with a starting point which it can continuously evolve from, producing a cumulative effect that ultimately reaches a conclusion.⁴⁷ Unlike *The Simpsons Movie*, then, the *Shift* tetralogy's movie-episode is a culmination; the natural end point that the series has been leading up to since it began.

⁴⁴ David Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema*, pp. 105-06.

⁴⁵ In fact, it may also serve to blur the line between the structural conventions of half-hour sitcoms and one-hour prestige dramas: *The Wire*'s structural format is ultimately somewhat similar to that of the *Shift* tetralogy. Both tell a large, series-spanning story that is neatly divided into season-long arcs. Fitting Thompson's model exactly to *The Wire* may prove to be a more complicated matter due to its five-season run, though Thompson does account for the doubling of certain acts in longer film narratives. At any rate, *The Wire*'s first season basically serves as its Setup section in much the same way as *Næturvaktin* does for the *Shift* tetralogy. (Perhaps by sheer coincidence, both shows also begin each episode with some sort of quotation relating to the theme or plot of said episode, though it is possible that the *Shift* tetralogy was directly inspired by *The Wire* with regards to that conceit.)

⁴⁶ See Hans Bertens, *Literary Theory: The Basics*, pp. 29-32.

⁴⁷ See same publication, pp. 40-41.

4. Conclusion

We can surmise from all this that the movie-episode is a multifaceted concept, with several possible roles to play with regards to the series that spawns it. It can serve as simply another episode of a wholly episodic series, albeit one that happens to be feature-length and, in many cases, theatrically released. On the other hand, the rare circumstances surrounding the movie-episode (i.e. first and foremost that it is a feature-length installment, but also potentially the way in which it is released if it is not simply a television movie) can be used to make it stand out from the rest of the series by way of foregrounding. A movie-episode may require a different storytelling approach from the rest of the series; otherwise its structure may be severely affected. In addition, a movie-episode can serve as a structural unit in a much larger narrative (i.e. a serialized television show) while also forming its own complete sub-narrative. The structure of a movie-episode, then, tends to have a direct relationship with the structural patterns of the show it belongs to.

None of the examples listed in this essay replicate the structural patterns of their shows *exactly*, however – even the *Futurama* movies ended up having somewhat different structural patterns from those of regular episodes simply due to their extended runtime. This suggests that one of the major aspects distinguishing the mediums of television and film is the fixed runtime of television narratives – generally, they tend to be either much shorter (as in a half-hour or quarter-hour comedy) or much longer (as in a full season of a serialized drama) than a film (though obviously there is a multitude of exceptions, not to mention the fact that streaming television has led to looser rules governing individual episode runtimes in recent years). At any rate, the movie-episode seems to occupy a slightly different medium than that of regular episodes and that tends to lead to a slight difference in structure, though the movie-episode usually belongs firmly within the structural system set up by the series as a whole. Bordwell’s apt description of narrative as a “transmedium activity”, then, can also apply to narrative structure, though both concepts always require at least some level of adjustment when making the jump from medium to medium.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ David Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema*, pg. 87.

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