



## ANIMATED SERIES IN THE 90s, BETWEEN PROCEDURAL SERIES AND SERIAL Format and Possible World of Spider-Man (1994-1998)

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*Fiction Format*  
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*Possible Worlds*  
*Procedural Series*  
*Serial*  
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### ABSTRACT

*The first contribution of the article is the delimitation of the fictional format of an animated series, Spider-Man (1994-1998), a procedural series with serial aspects. The second innovation is methodological, since it adds to the study of the format the mimesis of the world, the object of study of the hermeneutics of possible worlds. In this way, it is understood that the recurring narrative elements in a series not only respond to production factors, but also constitute the regularities that suggest the order and meaning of both the socially instituted world in the plot and the personal world of the protagonist.*

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## 1. Introduction

This article examines the TV fiction format and textual world of the series *Spider-Man* (Bob Richardson, 1994-1998), which is taken as a representative example of the type of American animated series produced for television in the 1990s. In order to understand the novelty of this research proposal, it is necessary to take stock of the state of the art in the field of fiction formats and the place of animated series within it (1.1. of this article). After this mapping, the contribution of the research will be announced, as well as the objectives to be achieved (1.2.).

### 1.1. State of Play

In fiction series, there are certain production parameters that largely determine both the narrative composition of their episodes and their seasons. These aspects relate to spaces, characters, plots, duration, periodicity and aesthetic development and help to distinguish, to give four examples, between sitcoms, dramedies, serials and procedural TV series. In the field of audiovisual production, a distinction is made between genres —for example, the sitcom— and formats —specific, different and subject to commercial rights modes in which a series belonging to a genre is produced— (Creeber, 2015; on the relationship between genre and format, see Tous, 2010, pp. 43-65). From a narrative perspective, a distinction is made between a major format —the sitcom, for example— and the specific titles of fiction series that develop it in their own way within the general framework of the major format, with their own particular diegetic characteristics and commercial rights (Gómez Martínez and García García 2010; to some extent also Gutiérrez Delgado, 2023). The present study uses this second terminology.

Provisionally, as has been pointed out in several studies (especially Gómez Martínez and García García, 2010, pp. 111-167; see also Aronson 2000, pp. 1-20; Saló, 2003, pp. 175-192 Douglas, 2007; Mills, 2009; Gómez Martínez, 2015; Creeber, 2015, pp.17-91; Chalaby, 2016, pp.172-184), some relevant characteristics can be listed for formats such as the sitcom, the procedural series, the dramedy and the serial (see Table 1):

**Table 1.** Parameters per episode of major fiction series formats

	Sitcom	Procedural	Dramedy	Serial
<b>Plot</b>	1-3 plots, 2 acts with prologue and epilogue, self-conclusive	1-3 plots, 3 acts, self-conclusive main plot, some continuity in the secondary plot.	3 plots, 3 acts + epilogue, 1-4 series plots	12 plots of great variety, open-ended, lots of continuity and simplicity.
<b>Characters</b>	5-10 main, 1-5 secondary, simple, with little or no evolution, caricatured	1-5 main, about 10 secondary, little or no development	10-20 major, 4-8 minor, moderate evolution and importance of past history	20-30 between main and secondary, long arc of transformation and importance of past history.
<b>Scenario</b>	3-4 permanent, 1-2 swings	Around 5 permanent staff and a variable number of swings	5-10 permanent, 3-5 swings, 40% exterior	15-20 permanent, variable number of swings, 2 exterior
<b>Duration</b>	25 minutes	30-45 minutes	45-65 minutes	30-45 minutes
<b>Periodicity</b>	Weekly	Weekly	Weekly	Weekly/daily

Source: Own elaboration based on Gómez Martínez and García García 2010; Aronson 2000; Saló 2003; Douglas 2007; Mills 2009; Gómez Martínez 2015; Creeber 2015; Chalaby 2016.

From a narrative point of view, the most decisive parameters in defining a major format are the degree of continuity of the plots and the construction of the characters. The other parameters —some of which are listed in Table 1— are either the result of the requirements of the plots and characters or remain more or less constant due to industry conventions but are not as decisive as these two. This leads us to distinguish between two types of regularities within a fictional series: those that belong to a major format and those that are specific to the series that make up that format; it is possible that the former, which are common to many series, have certain generalised tendencies in the latter. A separate

phenomenon is the transition of a series from one format to another, known as mutation (Gómez Martínez and García García, 2010). Finally, if one chooses to emphasise the narrative dimension in the study of format, the door remains open to investigate the possible relationship between the narrative regularities of a format and the type of world communicated by these constants, that is, the order and meaning that dominate this audiovisual narrative, with all the social, political, ethical and poetic considerations that this implies.

Most TV fiction formats are typical of live-action series. Perhaps the only exception is the sitcom, as there are animated series that largely follow its narrative conventions, such as *The Simpsons* (James L. Brooks, Matt Groening & Sam Simon, 1989-). Brooks, Matt Groening & Sam Simon, 1989-). The systematic study of the formats of animated fiction series is still an open task<sup>1</sup>. To begin this undertaking, we propose to turn to an animated series with historical value and global impact: *Spider-Man*. This title belongs to the silver age of animation on television —as Perlmutter (2018, pp. xxiv-xxvi) calls the period of the nineties— a time before SVOD platforms, when production standards were more rigid due to the need to adapt to programming schedules, time slots and commercial breaks, which influenced the approach to the narrative design of fiction series episodes. *Spider-Man* is one of the most popular of the nineties, a possible example of a way of making fiction that now seems to belong to an outdated stage in the history of television, but whose parameters are still valid today.

There is some information about the Spider-Man format that is easily known. It has five seasons, each consisting of an average of thirteen or fourteen episodes, each lasting around twenty-two minutes. The series itself reports, through the mouth of the protagonist in an ironic register, both the weekly periodicity —"You hatch a different crazy scheme every week, Fisk. What makes this one so special?" (5x03)— and the day of the broadcast —"Kingpin, now you sound like a Saturday morning cartoon villain" (5x03). Also well-known are the negotiations between Fox, the network that originally aired *Spider-Man*, which preferred an episodic format, and Marvel, which owns the comic books that the series adapts and which are serial in nature.

These parameters are similar to other series from the 1990s that also adapted Marvel character stories for television, such as *X-Men* (Mark Edward Edens, Sidney Iwanter & Eric Lewald, 1992-1997) and *Silver Surfer* (Larry Brody, 1998). Regarding other parameters of the *Spider-Man* format, such as the two most important —plots and characters— and whether they are more or less homogeneous, some data should be collected.

## 1.2. Hypotheses and Objectives

The article hypothesizes that in *Spider-Man*, there is a tension between its procedural TV series format and the narrative construction and the protagonist's arc, which demands a definitive shift towards the serial format. Episodes generally employ narrative devices that nuance the specific format of the series and reinforce this conflict between the format and the protagonist's desired narrative. This clash invites a meta-narrative reading and develops the opposition between the protagonist's personal world and his social world. The confrontation of "worlds" could reveal both characteristics of the historical and social panorama in which the series was generated, as well as the more universal vital orientations contained in it. Thus, the study of formats and possible worlds appears to be highly relevant to the investigation of the practical issues dealt with in fiction series.

The following objectives must be achieved in order to verify the hypothesis:

OBJ1: To study the most easily quantifiable narrative parameters of *Spider-Man*'s major format and its particular format.

OBJ2: To clarify qualitative narrative parameters of the series, namely dramatic action and character development, in order to complete the picture of the narrative constants of the series.

OBJ3: Interpret the above characteristics of the format of the series in order to understand what kind of world it builds through its narrative regularities.

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<sup>1</sup> There is recent research on animated seriality that cannot be ignored and that contributes to clarifying aspects of fictional formats in animation, such as Loriguillo-López's (2021) study on narrative complexity in anime —a work that complements and completes previously published works— where there are comments on some narrative particularities of the OVA format, genres and sub-genres within Japanese animation.

## 2. Methodology

Each research objective is associated with a methodological moment appropriate to the type of knowledge sought, and each new stage requires the data obtained in the previous one. In some cases, a level of exhaustiveness in data collection is introduced that is not always usual, but which is necessary for our purposes: on the one hand, to understand in detail the specific format of *Spider-Man* and, on the other, to check how these narrative regularities of this series contribute to the construction of its own fictional world.

In the case of OBJ1, a methodology will be needed that can capture the regular narrative elements of a quantitative nature or "invariants" (Tous, 2010, p.64) of *Spider-Man*: firstly, quantifiable aspects of plots and characters; secondly, data related to scenes and scenarios.

Following Tobias (1993, pp.7-8), it can be admitted that the plot organises some facts, revealing the unity between them, their order and meaning. The plot follows a dramatic logic, that is, it revolves around a dramatic question or conflict, that is, what is presented to the protagonist as a problem to be solved (Sánchez-Escalonilla, 2014, pp.232-241). The number of plots in an episode is thus identified with the number of dramatic issues that are at stake in the episode and that represent a sufficient development. The plots of an episode of a fictional series can, in principle, be classified into three main groups according to their level of plot continuity: self-conclusive, when the dramatic issue is raised and resolved in the same episode; short-cycle, also called 'arc', when the main conflict is resolved in two or more episodes, although without taking up the entire season; seasonal, when the dramatic issue is developed in all or most of the episodes of a season.

In principle, there are three possible dramatic structures. On the one hand, the classical peripeteia in three acts or parts, as Aristotle (1974, 1450b25-32) points out, which in audiovisual writing has been structured according to the dramatic path leading from the ordinary world and the trigger to the climax and resolution. On the other hand, there are the two-act narratives, those in which the initial situation is disturbed by a crisis point that gives rise to a second situation. Finally, there is the one-act narrative landscape, or part of it, because the characters do not actively confront a conflict.

The distinction between major and minor characters is based on their relationship to the conflict of a plot. The protagonist and antagonist are major characters because they are directly and intimately affected by the dramatic issue, while minor characters are those who work with them to achieve their goals.

In order to identify the number of scenes in each episode, we accept a notion of 'scene' that is close to that postulated by Figuro Espadas (2019, p. 271) or Bordwell, Thompson and Smith (2020, p. 504), which is generally consistent with what is considered a scene in audiovisual scriptwriting: a narrative unit of time that takes place in one or more spaces, all of which are strictly contiguous. In a scene, the flow of time is continuous and has no ellipses. If a scene is interrupted by a fade to black, then the moment when the series resumes the action after the pause is counted as a new scene.

The scenario is the space where the action of a scene takes place. In sitcoms and dramas, for example, a distinction is made between permanent and swings (Gómez Martínez and García García, 2010, pp. 112-114; 142-145). In this research, scenarios are identified as regular if they appear two or more times in a season, and as exclusive if they appear in only one episode of the season, based on their frequency of appearance in *Spider-Man*.

In order to resolve OBJ2, without abandoning the monitoring of some quantifiable elements, aspects of the plots and the protagonist's transformation arc are studied in more qualitative terms. At this point, many narrative elements can be highlighted that would be too long to list here. Among all of them — actions, circumstances, events and diegetic resources— attention will be paid to those that, taking advantage of the temporal extension offered by television (García Martínez & Nannicelli, 2021), acquire a high degree of recurrence, a narrative accumulation that generates expectations, allows aesthetic possibilities and suggests structural keys. The study of the constants that, through their recurrence, define the narrative and dramatic identity of the series has its antecedents in studies such as those by Propp (1998), Durand (2007) or Balló and Pérez (1997), among others.

OBJ3, understanding the structure and dynamics of the textual world of *Spider-Man*, requires a hermeneutic approach. The incorporation of the study of world mimesis (García-Noblejas, 2005; Abellán-García Barrio, 2023) is a methodological novelty in the study of TV fiction formats and represents a continuation of other works that study anthropology and ethics in fictional series (e.g. García Martínez, Castrillo Maortua & Echart Orús, 2019; Catela Marcos & Agejas Esteban, 2020). From

this perspective, it has recently been shown how dramatic and narrative structures reveal existential questions that communicate a mimesis of the world (Encinas Cantalapiedra & Reviejo Martín, 2023). The series stages a causal way of how things happen, it raises the possible and the desirable, which implicitly presupposes a structure and a dynamism of the world of the text.

In principle, two types of world are considered: the personal world of a character, to which theorists have referred in different ways (Ryan, 2006; Albaladejo Mayordomo, 1998; Hernández Ruiz, 2022), and the socially instituted world of the plot, which can be understood, for example, as a system of social enforcement (Abellán-García Barrio, 2020; 2023; pp. 294-297) and which is usually charged with practical considerations, i.e. poetic, rhetorical, ethical, aesthetic and political (García-Noblejas, 2005, p.236).

In this dialogue between the social world and the personal world, two concepts are fundamental: the circumstance, identified with the surrounding totality, is the reality that surrounds the person; and the aspiration, from which each person places him or herself in relation to this circumstance and which always aims at happiness itself, projects the person into a future towards which all existence is set in motion (Abellán-García Barrio, 2023, pp. 287-290). Through this proposal for analysis, the aim is to understand how the characteristics of the fictional format of *Spider-Man* configure some aspects of the world of the audiovisual text<sup>2</sup>.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. The Spider-Man Fiction Format

Below (see Table 2) are the parameters of the fictional format of *Spider-Man* in its first season. The scene column lists the number of scenes, and in parentheses the lengths of the shortest and longest scenes, separated by a dash. The Scenario column lists the number of regular (R) and exclusive (E) scenarios, separated by dashes. The main plot and subplot columns show the degree of continuity, separated by dashes, summarised as self-contained (SeC), short cycle (ShC) and seasonal (S), followed by the number of parts or acts that make up the plot; the number of main characters (MC), counting both protagonists and antagonists; and the number of secondary characters (SC). The next column shows the total number of characters (C's), both main and secondary. This avoids the mistake of increasing the total number of characters, since, for example, the main character of a main plot could be a secondary character in a secondary plot. Finally, the number of fades to black (FN) in the episode is given. If any of the above elements are missing, this is indicated by a (-) sign.

**Table 2.** General parameters of the fictional format of the first season of *Spider-Man*

Ep	Scenes	Scenarios	Main plot	Subplot	C's	FB
1	21 (17"-4'42")	3R-9E	ASeC-2MC-4SC	S3-2MC-3SC	9	2
2	20 (10"-2'12")	3R-8E	ShC3-3MC-8SC	ShC1-2MC-3SC	12	2
3	29 (9"-1'40")	2R-6E	ShC3-2MC-7SC	S1-2MC-1SC	11	2
4	25 (5"-1'40")	3R-12E	SeC3-2MC-2SC	SeC3-2 MC-	6	2
5	20 (6"-2'41")	4R-12E	SeC3-2MC-5SC	SeC2-2 MC-1SC	8	2
6	18 (8"-2'55")	4R-2E	SeC3-2MC-4SC	SeC2-2MC-	7	2
7	25 (6"-2'56")	2R-7E	SeC3-2MC-4SC	S3-2MC-3SC	8	2
8	19 (10"-2'9")	5R-5E	ShC3-2MC-5SC	ShC2-2MC-4SC / ShC2-1MC-4SC	12	3
9	20 (10"-1'49")	4R-8E	ShC3-1MC-6SC	ShC3-2MC-5SC / ShC3-1MC-5SC	8	2

<sup>2</sup> This sense of "world" could complement political and cultural approaches to television seriality featuring Marvel characters, such as Iturrégui's recent study (2023), which explores how the narrative of *WandaVision* (Jac Schaeffer, 2021) offers a metaphor for US ideology and its view of the geopolitical context.

10	18 (13"-2'50")	2R-4E	ShC3-2MC-6SC	SeC3-2MC-1SC	10	2
11	21 (8"-2'44")	4R-8E	ShC2-4MC-5SC	SeC3-2MC-1SC	11	2
12	24 (5"-2'55')	1R-6E	ShC2-4MC-2SC	SeC3-2MC-2PS / ShC2-2MC-1SC	9	2
13	20 (17"-2'44")	6R-11E	SeC3-2MC-6SC	SeC3-2MC-1SC	8	2

Source: Own elaboration.

In the first season of *Spider-Man*, there are an average of 21 scenes per episode. The scenes, with a few exceptions, range in length from 10 seconds to 2 minutes. The shortest scenes, for example, show why a character leaves a scene to move the action to another location, and the longest scenes show the final battle between Spider-Man and a villain.

There are about eleven scenarios in each episode. Three are usually regular —e.g. May Parker's house— where the protagonist is introduced in his civilian identity as Peter Parker. Eight scenes are usually exclusive —such as villains' lairs— and appear in the main plot. In seasons two through five, the number and types of scenarios do not differ significantly from season one, with a few exceptions.

The main plot of an episode consists of three parts or acts if it is a self-contained plot. If the main storyline is short cycle, it may have two or three parts or acts per episode. It is more common for subplots to have a greater degree of continuity throughout the season. The subplot takes up two or three scenes, preferably at the beginning and end of the episode, and sometimes one or two scenes in the middle. The subplot can have between one and three parts or acts.

It is common to find nine characters per episode. The main characters are Spider-Man as the protagonist and the villain of the episode as the antagonist. Only in some episodes, such as 4x11, is the protagonist a different character —in this case, Hobie Brown/Prowler. The secondary characters are part of the social environment of the main characters. Peter Parker is the main character in the subplot and the secondary characters are his family, friends and acquaintances.

The first fade to black of the episode occurs before the first five minutes and the first four scenes have elapsed, sometimes coinciding with the main plot trigger. The second fade to black occurs in the middle of the episode, sometimes coinciding with the middle of the action, preceded by about seven scenes and followed by about eleven. The fade to black acts as a cliffhanger, interrupting an action that continues after the pause it introduces. There is rarely a change of time, place or character after the first fade (3x10, 3x12, 4x01, 4x07, 4x08, 4x10, 5x02, 5x03, 5x08, 5x10) and even less after the second (1x13, 2x12, 3x14, 5x03, 5x05).

These early details of the *Spider-Man* format seem typical of procedural TV series or even dramedies, but the second season resembles the plots of a serial, especially the seasonal plots (S) of Parker's mutation (1) and his love life (10), in addition to eight other short-cycle plots (ShC) (see Table 3).

**Table 3.** Scenes and plots in season two of *Spider-Man*

Ep	Scenes	Main plot	Subplot
1	38	1) S2-1MC / 2) ShC2-7MC-2SC	10) S2-2MC-1SC
2	28	1) S1-1MC-1PS / 2) ShC2-7MC-3SC	10) S1-1MC-2SC
3	24	SeC3-3MC	10) S3-2SC
4	24	1) S1-1MC-7SC / 3) ShC2-4MC-7SC	4) ShC2-3MC-2SC
5	24	1) S1-1MC-1SC / 3) ShC2-4MC-7SC	4) ShC2-3MC-2SC
6	29	1) S2-1MC-2MC-2SC / 5) ShC3-2MC-1SC	10) S1-1MC-1SC
7	32	1) S2-1MC-3SC / 6) ShC2-2MC-1SC	5) ShC1-2MC-1PS / 10) S1-2MC
8	26	1) S2-1MC-4SC / 6) ShC2-2MC-2SC	5) ShC1-2MC-3SC

9	20	1) S1-1MC-2SC / 7) ShC2-2MC-1SC	10) S1-1MC-2SC
		5) ShC2-3MC-1SC	
10	25	1) S1-1MC-1SC / 7) ShC3-2MC-4SC	10) S1-2MC
		5) ShC2-3MC-2SC	
11	31	1) S1-1MC-1SC / 8) ShC2-4MC-5SC	10) S1-1MC-3SC
12	24	8) ShC2-4MC-5SC	1) S1-1MC-1SC
13	35	1) S1-1MC / 9) ShC2-2MC-5SC	10) S1-1MC-1SC
14	20	1) S2-1MC-4SC / 9) ShC2-2MC-3SC	10) S1-1MC-1SC

Source: Own elaboration.

The second season has an average of twenty-seven scenes per episode, an increase over the first season that is explained by the increase in plots and characters. This second season has the title 'Neogenic Nightmare', which is already a warning of its unity of plot around the plot of Peter Parker/Spider-Man's monstrous mutation, which begins, develops and is resolved in the same season.

Seasons one and two establish the two extremes of the dramatic model —plot continuity and its impact on the characters— between which the next three seasons move. The third and fourth seasons offer a series of mostly self-contained episodes in the main storyline, and the continuity of the secondary, usually amorous storyline —involving M.J. and Felicia Hardy/Black Cat— is greatly enhanced, although it has little impact on the plot of the main storyline. The final season is something of a mixture or synthesis of procedural and serial narrative models. It begins with a self-contained episode about Parker and M.J.'s wedding, followed by three major plots that follow each other in three separate blocks of episodes, albeit with just the right amount of continuity between them: the return of Captain America & The Forgotten Warriors (5x02-5x06); the plot in which it is discovered that this M.J. is not the one who disappeared in 3x14, but a clone created from Hydro-Man, ending with the death of this fake M.J. (5x07-5x08), and a plot in which Madame Web and the Beyonder test Spider-Man ("Secret War", 5x09 to 5x11) to face a danger that could end the cosmos together with Spider-Men from other dimensions ("Spider Wars", 5x12 to 5x13).

### 3.2. Spider-Man's Narrative Framework

The study of plot continuity in the previous section suggests that *Spider-Man* prefers to operate within the parameters of the procedural TV series, with the exception of the serial features of the second season. It is now necessary, on the one hand, to extend the study of the dramatic and narrative aspects common to most of the episodes (this section 3.2.) in order to know the parameters of the specific format of *Spider-Man*, and, on the other hand, to look at the second element relevant to the general format, the construction of the characters, especially the protagonist (this section 3.3.).

If we look at the first season of *Spider-Man*, it is very common for the narrative structure of the episode to consist of a succession of stages or sequences, usually appearing in the following order, always after the opening: 1) The protagonist's interior monologue, interrupted by an initial obstacle, usually with the trigger montage and followed by a fade to black; 2) The appearance of the subplot, almost always relating to Peter Parker's love life; 3) The introduction of the dramatic problem and how to deal with it; 4) Spider-Man's first confrontation with the villain, often followed by a fade to black; this first skirmish usually allows the protagonist to measure his strength with the adversary and get to know him better, it is a moment of great cognitive value; 5) Strategies for stopping the antagonist; 6) Intermediate moment in which the subplot briefly reappears; 7) The villain carries out a kidnapping; 8) Strategies for stopping the villain; 9) Final battle against the villain and rescue of the kidnapped person, often in a scene that is the longest in the chapter; 10) Return and restoration of the world; 11) Conclusion of the subplot, usually presented as a reward or a disappointment in love, and the protagonist's internal monologue. Flashbacks are a recurring narrative element in the series, reinforcing the idea of continuity, although they do not have stable structural functions that allow them to be included in a consistent scheme with the whole series<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> The flashback is rare in the first season but becomes more common after that. It is used for a variety of purposes: to present a moment from Parker's past, especially in relation to his uncle Ben Parker (1x04, 2x04, 2x07, 2x13, 5x13) or the origin of his

The scheme, more or less consistent throughout the first season, undergoes modifications in the rest of the series, most notably the inclusion of three (3x11; 5x05) or more confrontations (3x12; 5x06) in the episode; the *in medias res* start followed by a return to the beginning of the plot (3x06 and 4x11); the absence of Parker in the early scenes (3x10 and 4x08); the reunion of many characters from other episodes (as in 4x05); the increasing importance of the dramatic development of villains and supporting characters (4x02, 4x03 and 3x05); the chorus of protagonists (as in 4x07); or when Parker is the antagonist, as when he becomes Man-Spider and other characters must resolve the conflict (2x06 to 2x08).

In addition, the flexible structure of eleven sequences is not fully manifested in episodes that are part of a dramatic cycle that takes place over several episodes. It is common in the second and third episodes of a cycle, after a summary of the previous episode and the opening, for the action to begin with a chase or confrontation, followed by a moment of calm in which the characters have a chance to reflect, reorganise and implement a new plan to resolve the conflict.

Of the narrative elements mentioned, two are worth mentioning: the voice-over and the kidnappings. The voice-over makes Peter Parker/Spider-Man's thoughts audible. At the beginning of the episode, these thoughts provide background —plot continuity— and show Parker's sense of entitlement to his circumstances. By the middle of the episode, the thoughts are calculations and deductions aimed at solving the dramatic problem, while also showing the emotions the main plot is stirring in the superhero. He also expresses remorse for neglecting his loved ones. The voice-over after the climax often expresses satisfaction at the villain's downfall —the main plot— and a growing frustration with himself and his situation of separation from others —the subplot. The fourth season, which is particularly stormy for the protagonist, intensifies the use of voice-over to the point where the viewer can hear the inner voice of another character, Felicia Hardy/Black Cat (4x04 and 4x05). This adds to the many similarities between her and Peter Parker/Spider-Man. In the show's overtly self-aware and meta-referential fifth season, Dr Curt Connors/Lizard tells a meditating Spider-Man, "A penny for your thoughts" (5x09).

Finally, it is noticeable that kidnappings are present in most episodes of *Spider-Man* (1x08, 1x10, 3x02, 3x05 and 3x10 being a few exceptions). As the seasons go on, the kidnappings become mechanically repetitive, losing some of the real power they had in the first season. Far from diminishing their interest, this increases it, as it reaffirms the narrative importance of the abduction, which sometimes occurs several times in an episode (2x10, 2x11, 3x04, 5x03, 5x05). The inadvertent removal of someone from their usual place reveals their value to the whole, in individual and collective terms, and often reveals the need to return them to their former place —when Smythe kidnaps the Black Cat, Parker thinks: "I never realised how much the Black Cat meant to me until now" (4x05). Characters who have been somewhat ignored by Peter Parker in the subplot then reclaim all his superhero efforts in the main plot when they are held against their will by a villain.

### 3.3. Subplots and the Protagonist's Arc

The subplot provides a great deal of continuity within and between seasons, showing Parker as someone who is not just Spider-Man and who has a private life that he often neglects: his longings for friendship and relationships are postponed or cancelled due to his activity as Spider-Man in the main plot: "Save the world, lose the girl" (2x13). As a result, the subplot is often underdeveloped or ends with a negative climax for Parker. Paradoxically, the events of the subplot have more impact on the protagonist's transformation arc than what happens in the main plot.

Character development thus remains within the confines of the procedural series, as the character does not evolve significantly or undergoes only moderate changes over a very long period of time. In the first season in particular, Parker is content with this and uses a certain amount of humour to deal with the setbacks that hinder his character's development. This changes in the second season, when the problem of his mutation is unleashed and the possibilities of a relationship with Mary Jane Watson

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superpowers (2x01, 3x02); to introduce the past history of new characters (2x07, 2x08, 2x09, 3x01, 3x06, 5x11); Show aspects of the past lives of minor characters (1x06, 3x09, 4x02, 4x04, 5x03, 5x05, 5x08, 5x11, 5x12) or antagonists (3x04, 3x07, 3x08, 3x09, 4x01, 4x04, 4x09, 4x10, 5x01, 5x08, 5x11); Recalling scenes from past episodes (2x07, 2x08, 3x10, 3x13, 4x04, 4x05, 4x06, 4x07, 4x08, 4x09, 5x07, 5x08); Rescuing an event from the past (2x11; 5x10); Taking the viewer back to the beginning of a new season (4x01). In some episodes, flashbacks take up about half the narrative material (3x02; 4x11; 5x04), or their presence is very high, with five or more appearances (4x09; 5x11; 5x12).



blossom. In the following seasons, the character is tormented by his lack of development. What's more, the change is presented as monstrous: the second season arc, "Neogenic Nightmare", suggests this by showing Parker's mutation into a giant spider, Man-Spider.

The kind of evolution that Peter Parker seeks is most authentically manifested in a partnership that culminates in marriage, and secondarily in true friendships. On more than a few occasions, Uncle Ben Parker's motto — "With great power must come great responsibility!" (3x11, 3x12, 4x07, 5x11, 5x12)— appears as a justification for the main character's abandonment of his vital progress in favour of the successes of his superheroic activities. M.J. puts it this way: "Peter, with you it's always a little later. I won't deal with that anymore" (2x10). This abandonment motivates the young redhead to get engaged to Harry Osborn in the third season: "He gives me a lot of attention. He seems like he'll be there for me" (3x08). At the end of the same episode, the engagement is called off, and in 3x12, M.J. accepts that Peter has to disappear for work from time to time and that she will love him anyway. At the end of the season, Parker tells Madame Web: "I have everything I ever wanted. Mary Jane loves me and I love her [...] My life is complete" (3x14).

However, everything seems to conspire to keep the protagonist within the conventions of the procedural. At the end of the third season, M.J. disappears with Norman Osborn/Green Goblin, sucked into an interdimensional portal. She reappears at the end of season four, where she is engaged to Parker. In season five, however, the young woman is discovered to be a clone of the real M.J., and this duplicate evaporates. This loss is followed by the two major arcs of the final season, which ends with Madame Web's promise to find M.J., so the series ends with a promise, not the intended fulfilment.

### 3.4. Dramatic Aspects and World Mimesis in Spider-Man

*Spider-Man* represents two closely related and conflicting worlds. The first is a social world that calls upon Spider-Man whenever significant changes occur in New York. These disruptions, which overturn a given order, act as a call —a summons— for the superhero to restore the previous configuration of the main storyline, which mostly takes place in exclusive scenarios, an expression of the novelty it is meant to neutralise.

The design of the show's social world seems to constantly return Spider-Man to the starting point of the first season, marked by the superhero's loneliness. In contrast, the show presents the vigilante with a host of super-powered, vigilante types who have or had a mentor or sidekick (1x13, 2x04, 2x07, 2x08, 2x09, 2x10, 3x01, 3x06, 3x10, 3x11, 4x07). For this and other reasons, Parker wants to stop being Spider-Man on several occasions, and something always happens to convince him not to abandon his role as a conservative agent of the structure of the world (as in 3x02 and 3x03).

The second world is Peter Parker's personal world. In it, there is a pretence of happiness that tends to establish a new order, which seems impossible, as the changes in his life are usually traumatic —such as the transformation caused by the symbiote (1x08 to 1x10) and the monstrous mutation of the second season— or short-lived —such as moving into Harry Osborn's house (1x11 and 1x12) and marrying fake Mary Jane (5x01). The dynamics of the world around him— the circumstances —often take Peter Parker back to the beginning of the first season. The preferred arena for these issues is the subplot, where Parker's individual demands are often frustrated by the achievement of the main plot's goals<sup>4</sup>. The scenarios in which these issues usually play out are often regular ones, namely those that remain, such as Parker's apparent existential hiatus.

Loneliness also characterises Peter Parker's personal world. In his environment, couples are formed in which the female part (Debra, Felicia or Mary Jane) has usually been discarded by Parker. This aspect can be better understood by looking at the villains' romantic partners, or their desire to have one. Typically, the villain's lover is invested with the attributes of salvation and redemption, as a promise of a life of the opposite sign to the current evil course of action, with expectations of ultimate personal achievement and away from the plots of the series (1x07, 2x10, 3x11, 3x12, 4x04, 4x05, 4x07, 4x08, 4x09, 4x11, 5x01). Many of those who find happiness as a couple in this textual world leave it, never to return. Others, like Parker or Lieutenant Lee, remain trapped in it under the sign of unhappiness and loneliness, which increasingly takes on the characteristics of existential incompleteness<sup>5</sup>. Episode 4x04

<sup>4</sup> The split between Wilson Fisk/Kingpin and Vanessa Fisk presents a similar situation. His wife leaves him because she is tired of the mobster's double life, and reproaches him with some very telling words when he says he loves her: "All you really love is the Kingpin, the Kingpin of Crime" (2x12).

<sup>5</sup> Consolidated marriages are an exception in the series: the Connors and the Robertsons.

is particularly illuminating on this point. Mariah Crawford has drunk the same serum as Kraven, and now they are both "truly kindred spirits", as she puts it. In the episode's resolution, Kraven formulates a necessity: "We will go where we can be free", suggesting that such freedom is not possible in the world of New York. The interlocutors of these two lovers leaving to live happily together are Spider-Man and Black Cat, whose situation is analogous to that of the departing couple. However, unlike Black Cat, the superhero despises the choice of the Doctor and Kraven. There is a growing sense that Spider-Man is mentally trapped in a tragic figure of existence.

Mary Jane's reappearance (4x08) is ambivalent, as it ends Parker's loneliness to the point where he reveals his true identity to the young woman (4x09), they become engaged (4x10) and Mary Jane notices positive changes in her fiancé (4x11). At the same time, Parker does not give up his place as Spider-Man in New York society. His marriage to the young woman (5x01), far from being the future of happiness and freedom for Crawford and Kraven, is followed by the most ambitious five-episode short cycle of the entire series, "Six Forgotten Warriors". Unsurprisingly, just after these episodes, the Mary Jane Parker married is discovered to be a clone, who eventually volatilises (5x08), sealing the lonely sense of her personal world and suggesting the show's enclosure within the textual world. Consequently, this fake Mary Jane could not have the same redemptive effect on Parker as all the happy couples that form in this possible world.

All of this would be incomplete without mentioning the last five episodes of the series, the "Secret Wars" and "Spider Wars" cycles, which function on the one hand as a synthesis of the textual world unfolded in the previous sixty episodes, and on the other hand as a farewell and promise of happiness for the protagonist. The meaning of these last five episodes is well summed up in the words of Madame Web: "But suppose I told you I know where Mary Jane is? And you will only find her if you do as I command" (5x08). If this young man manages to pass the final test that Madame Web has been preparing him for since the third season, he will be able to leave the world of the series in search of the real Mary Jane, possibly with the intention of fulfilling the salvation plan associated with this type of union.

In 5x13, Stan Lee asks Spider-Man, "After saving all of reality, where do you go from here?" To which Parker replies, "To find Mary Jane, my Mary Jane. I've been told she's still alive! I can't wait to see her!". But that's no guarantee that the character won't remain frozen in the series' procedural model, in which Spider-Man's claim to happiness is a future with Mary Jane—which is never realised. Madame Web's final words, however, seem to add a dramatic twist to the *Spider-Man* format: "We are going to find the real Mary Jane Watson! It has been a long, hard journey. And I think you are finally entitled to some happiness". Mary Jane, the main subject of the subplot, will now become the main plot, which would necessarily transform the series from a procedural format to one with greater continuity, perhaps a serial, something that does not happen as the series ends, a fact that, far from leaving the question of the format's possible future open, eloquently closes it.

#### 4. Conclusions

The results obtained by achieving OBJ 1 and 2, in dialogue with the parameters of the four major formats of live-action fiction (see Table 1), indicate that *Spider-Man* is a largely procedural TV series in its first season, which mutates into a serial in its second, and returns to the procedural scheme from the third season onwards. At this point, a tension begins to emerge between the serialised narrative tendency that Peter Parker/Spider-Man is trying to develop, on the one hand, and the impositions of the procedural format on his textual world, on the other. The achievement of OBJ 3 shows that the interests of Spider-Man's procedural social world, which dominates the main plot and has a larger number of scenes and scenarios, are imposed on his personal pretensions, which are more eager for serial development and are relegated to the subplot, which is developed in a smaller number of locations and scenes. At the end of each episode or dramatic cycle, the previous world is restored, with each reality that has been removed put back in its place or in a similar place—hence, for example, the eminent significance of the kidnappings. While the climax of this main plot is usually positive, the denouement of the subplot, if there is one, is usually negative.

This clash between formats and narrative does not prevent the possible world of *Spider-Man* from having parameters that could be said to be typical of its format as a series—whether we speak in the nomenclature of Creeber or that of Gómez Martínez and García García—that are more or less regular in all the episodes: between 23 and 25 scenes, usually lasting between 10 seconds and two and a half

minutes, approximately; about 8 scenarios, of which 3 are regular and 5 are exclusive; a main plot, self-contained or of short cycle, structured in three or two acts or parts, in which Spider-Man usually faces some threat that endangers relevant aspects of New York City; a one to three part subplot that focuses on personal aspects of Peter Parker's civilian identity and provides many of the elements of plot continuity within each season; nine characters, including the protagonist, antagonist and supporting characters. In addition, there are narrative regularities that are largely repeated in each episode: battles with the villains, kidnappings, flashbacks that clarify the meaning of the present action, voice-overs, and so on.

In this way, the series reveals a critique of its own format, probably the result of the tensions between Fox and Marvel. The procedural TV series speaks of a world that tends to be self-preserving in its structure and dynamics, as exemplified in the first season. The procedural world of the series contradicts and even competes with the aspirations of the protagonist. The dynamism of the social world, in which Spider-Man is a means of preserving the previous order, often overrides and frustrates the growth dynamic of Peter Parker's personal world. The fact that the series ends with Madame Web initiating the search for Mary Jane, thus including Peter Parker's personal world as the central dramatic subject of a future main plot, confirms the idea of moving from the closed procedural world to the open world of serial progression. This seems to be confirmed by Peter Parker/Spider-Man's words to his creator Stan Lee at the end of the last episode of the series: "Well, Stan, we all have to grow up some time, I suppose, even us characters of fiction" (5x13).

*Spider-Man* largely responds to the parameters of the procedural series, with the peculiarities and mutations described above. It could be asked whether other animated series also respond to this format, to other known formats or to others that have not yet been standardised. Similarly, the question remains open as to how the characteristics of the specific formats of these series articulate different images of our everyday world, highlighting different practical issues of poetic, ethical, aesthetic and political relevance.

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