# Across the narrow screen: televisual world-building in *Game of Thrones*

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One of the key factors behind the critical and commercial success of *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011–19) has been the ability of show runners David Benioff and D. B. Weiss to popularize the alternative secondary fantasy world in which the show's narrative takes place. Adapted from George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Fire and Ice* novels, *Game of Thrones* sits alongside other franchises such as *Star Wars* (1977– ) and the *Marvel Cinematic Universe* (2008– ) that address their fans through a range of ancillary platforms, including books, websites, video games and mobile apps.[1] At the same time, *Game of Thrones*' status as a serial television drama makes it unique amongst transmedia franchises, breaking the precedent set by other successful examples such as *Conan the Barbarian* (1982–85, 2011), *Harry Potter* (2001–11), *The Lord of the Rings* (1978, 2001–03), *The Chronicles of Narnia* (2005–10) and *The Hobbit* (2012–14). Instead of relying on the latest cinematic instalment, *Game of Thrones* tells it story through the long-form serial format, the conclusion of which is eagerly anticipated by fans as the culmination of a decade-long narrative set in an alternative world of high fantasy.

The mode of serialized, long-form narration that *Game of Thrones* exemplifies, termed by Jason Mittell as 'narrative complexity' and by Michael Newman as the 'prime-time serial, or PTS',[2] has its origins in the open-ended storytelling practices of the soap opera.[3] Yet since their adaptation by HBO as the standard bearer for notions of quality television, weekly serial dramas continue to be a popular media format amongst audiences, despite the availability of alternative distribution models set by streaming services like *Netflix*. As with previous seasons,

1 For further discussion of the role such paratexts serve in guiding audiences' expectations of the show, see Ben Tyrer, 'The reality of fantasy: VFX as fantasmatic supplement in Game of Thrones (2011– )', in *Fantasy/Animation: Connections Between Media, Mediums and Genres* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), pp. 91–106.

2 Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2015), p. 4; Michael Z. Newman 'From beats to arcs: towards a poetics of television narration', *The Velvet Light Trap*, no. 58 (2006), p. 16

3 For further discussion of the origins of serial narration on television, see the chapter on serial melodrama, in Mittell, *Complex TV*, pp. 233–60.

4   For examples of discussions of 'Thrones Talk', see Cameron K. McEwan, '9 Things only people who HATE Game of Thrones will understand', *Metro*, 9 May 2017, <http://metro.co.uk/2016/05/09/9-things-only-people-who-hate-game-of-thrones-will-understand-5822951>; Maia Silber, 'Don't Watch *Game of Thrones*? Mondays at the office can get pretty annoying', *Chicago Tribune*, 6 August 2017, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/tv/ct-game-of-thrones-workplace-20170806-story.html> both accessed 3 April 2021.

5   This is a title is bestowed upon *Game of Thrones* by numerous media outlets based on predictions on the show's global viewing figures. See, for example, Daniel D'Addario, '*Game of Thrones*: how they make the world's most popular show', *Time*, <http://time.com/game-of-thrones-2017> accessed 3 April 2021.

6   See Edward Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film* (London: Routledge, 1992); Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).

7   V. F. Perkins, 'Where is the world? The horizon of events in movie fiction', in John Gibbs and Douglas Pye (eds), *Style and Meaning: Studies in the Detailed Analysis of Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), pp. 16–31.

8   See V. F. Perkins, *Film as Film: Understanding and Judging Movies* (Cambridge, MA: De Capo Press, 1972).

9   This approach to film analysis has allowed countless scholars the opportunity to explore the topic of world-creation as a means of considering the detailed ways in which film functions as an art form, folding the study of fictional worlds into a broader practice of scholarly film criticism. The breadth and depth of this scholarly pursuit was displayed in the conference, 'Film as Film Today: On the Criticism and Theory of V. F.

each episode of the final series of *Game of Thrones* aired in 2019 was offered to audiences on a week-by-week basis, a practice that contributed to the cultural phenomenon of 'thrones talk', as workplaces, coffee shops and other public spaces were awash with people discussing the latest events and speculating on what might happen next week.[4] This enthusiasm for talking about *Game of Thrones* built steadily over nearly a decade's worth of programming, the gaps between seasons providing opportunities to catch up with the show's back catalogue or to revisit Martin's fictional landscape in anticipation of the new season through DVD purchases or streaming services like *HBO Go*. The show's serialized nature is therefore a significant element of the show's identity, mediating the relationship between fans and the fictional landscape and creating expectations, which proved particularly difficult to manage as the narrative reached its conclusion, around how the epic drama would unfold.

The fact that *Game of Thrones* became the world's most popular television show,[5] coupled with the cultural interest that still surrounds Martin's fictional universe, raises questions about the place that serial television drama currently occupies within scholarly accounts of world-building. Initially part of the implicit vocabulary utilized in theoretical or philosophical approaches to cinema by individuals such as Edward Branigan and Stanley Cavell,[6] studies of cinematic world-building came to prominence thanks to the influence of V. F. Perkins's essay 'Where is the world?'.[7] Part of Perkins's career-long project to give attention to the study of *film as film*, 'Where is the world?' provided a compelling account of the film world as the culmination of the nuances of film style.[8] This approach has inspired countless academics to continue the study of world-building as part of a broader attempt to speak to the aesthetic horizons of film style.[9] Published only one year after Perkins's essay, Henry Jenkins's equally influential notion of the alternative world as a convergence of different media outlets 'that cannot be fully explored or exhausted within a single work or medium'[10] has influenced individuals such as Matthew Freeman, Colin Harvey and Mark J. P. Wolf in their production of comprehensive studies of the paradigms of transmedia world-building.[11] World-building on-screen has therefore largely been studied from a methodology based on film studies or media studies, with television studies thus far offering little advancement on the ideas contained within either field other than simply to apply their insights to specific examples.

This lack of attention to the stylistic conventions of television's popular mode of serial narration means that scholars currently lack a theory of how worlds are constructed through televisual storytelling practices. Current theories of world-building can explain how *Game of Thrones* is similar to film franchises or how it functions as a transmedia franchise; they cannot, however, explain what differentiates *Game of Thrones* from other franchises due to it being an example of serial television. This obfuscation of televisual style within theories of world-

Perkins', Warwick University,
September 2018, <https://
warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/film/
movie/film_as_film_today_v_f_
perkins_symposium_cfp.pdf>
accessed 3 April 2021.

10  Henry Jenkins, *Convergence
Culture: Where Old and New
Media Collide* (New York, NY:
New York University Press, 2006),
p. 112.

11  See Matthew Freeman,
*Historicising Transmedia
Storytelling: Early Twentieth-
Century Transmedia Worlds* (New
York, NY: Routledge, 2017); Colin
Harvey, *Fantastic Transmedia:
Narrative, Play and Memory
Across Science-Fiction*
(Basingstoke: Palgrave
Macmillan, 2015); Mark J. P.
Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds:
The Theory and History of
Subcreation* (New York, NY:
Routledge, 2012).

12  Jason Mittell, 'The ends of serial
criticism', in Frank Kelleter (ed.),
*Media of Serial Narrative*
(Columbus, OH: Ohio State
University, 2017), p. 170.

13  For definitions of 'high fantasy' –
as opposed to just 'fantasy' – see
Brian Stableford, *The A to Z of
Fantasy Literature* (London:
Scarecrow Press), p. 198;
Kenneth J. Zahorski and Robert
H. Boyer, 'The secondary worlds
of high fantasy', in Roger C.
Schlobin (ed.), T*he Aesthetics of
Fantasy Literature and Art* (Notre
Dame, IN: University of Notre
Dame Press, 1982), p. 57.

14  Such practical considerations
surrounding the cost of producing
fantasy fiction are a key factor in
the production of authentically
realized alternative worlds, as
highlighted in David Butler,
*Fantasy Cinema: Impossible
Worlds on Screen* (London:
Wallflower, 2009), p. 79.

15  A concise history of which is
provided in David Lavery, '*Lost*
and long-form television
narrative', in Pat Harrigan and
Noah Wardrip-Fruin (eds), *Third
Person: Authoring and Exploring
Vast Narratives* (Cambridge, MA:
MIT Press, 2017), pp. 313–22.

16  Catherine Johnson combines the
subcategories of fantasy, science

building risks undermining the central question posed by theorists and analysts of style across both film and television studies, who remain concerned with the perhaps unanswerable question, to paraphrase Mittell, of *what* (and, perhaps more importantly, *how*) words like film and television mean in a post-streaming age where such labels seem to operate across multiple and converging platforms.[12]

Using the exceptional and yet typical status of *Game of Thrones* as a television serial drama, I examine how the programme builds its fictional world through the narrative and stylistic strategies previously identified within theories of the serial style of television drama. The purpose of this analysis is to offer the first comprehensive account of world-building devoted to televisual style and, in discussing how worlds are built on small screens, to add to existing theories of world-building developed in relation to the cinema or wider transmedia phenomena. I want to speak to the special role that televisual ideas and practices still play within an increasingly convergent media landscape, and in doing so to highlight the artistic achievement of *Game of Thrones* as a unique example of how to build a boundless world across countless hours of screen time and years of audience participation.

The success of *Game of Thrones* represents a watershed moment in the history of high fantasy on television, a genre previously limited to sporadic, mid-budget cable series aired through syndication, such as *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995–2001).[13] The reasons behind the historic lack of high-fantasy narratives on US television are partly down to a series of practicalities relating to the contrasting economics of the film and television industries. As film has traditionally enjoyed a larger production budget than television, high fantasy has seemingly been more amenable to cinematic adaptation given the heavy investment in set design, costuming and special effects required to create convincing alternative worlds on-screen.[14] Beyond the simple issue of costing, however, the kind of storytelling demanded by fantasy fiction worked against the often episodic nature of television drama that prevailed prior to the shift towards seriality in prime-time programming in the early 1990s.[15] *Game of Thrones* is arguably the first example of 'telefantasy' to achieve mainstream popularity by telling a story serially, as opposed to episodically, forgoing the precedent set by productions such as *The Twilight Zone* (CBS, 1959–64) and *Star Trek* (NBC, 1966–69).[16] Its success was made possible by HBO's efforts to eradicate these dual barriers to high fantasy being adapted to television, popularizing the serial storytelling process and investing in the costly production process needed to adapt Martin's world to the small screen.

Despite this change in the commercial climate, initial reactions to HBO's decision to adapt Martin's fantasy novels were characterized by familiar anxieties over the capacity of television to produce high-fantasy fiction. Responding to HBO's initial announcement in 2010,

fiction and horror within her definition of 'telefantasy'. Although other examples exist that might dispute the claim that *Game of Thrones* is the first fantasy serial (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* [WBS/UPN, 1997–2003], for example), Johnson's analysis of such series demonstrate that even these contain episodic elements to their storytelling that mark them as distinct to the complex narration seen in *Game of Thrones*. See Catherine Johnson, *Telefantasy* (London: Palgrave, 2005).

17 Darren Franich, '"Game of Thrones" and "The Pillars of Earth": ancient-epic is back, baby!', *Entertainment Weekly*, 4 March 2010, <https://ew.com/article/2010/03/04/game-of-thrones-and-the-pillars-of-the-earth-ancient-epic-tv-is-back-baby> accessed 3 April 2021.

18 Jason J. Hughes, 'HBO picks up *Game of Thrones* whilst *Legend of the Seeker* is canceled', *Cinemablend*, <https://www.cinemablend.com/television/HBO-Picks-Up-Game-Thrones-Legend-Seeker-Canceled-23308.html>; Gina Bellafante, 'A fantasy world of strange feuding kingdoms', *The New York Times*, 14 April 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/15/arts/television/game-of-thrones-begins-sunday-on-hbo-review.html> both accessed 3 April 2021.

19 Examples from such interviews are cited by C. Lee Harrington in 'The ars moriendi of US serial television: towards a good textual death', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 16, no. 6 (2013), pp. 579–95.

20 Noël Carroll, 'TV and film: a philosophical perspective', in *Engaging the Moving Image* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 265–80; Sarah Cardwell, 'Television amongst friends: medium, art, media', *Critical Studies in Television*, vol. 9, no. 3 (2014), pp. 6–21.

21 Gary K. Wolfe provides a useful historical account of the term wonder as a classifier for fantasy fiction in *Critical Terms of Science Fiction and Fantasy: A Glossary and Guide to*

*Entertainment Weekly* voiced concern at the prospect, citing the fact that the two genres on which *Game of Thrones* seemed to be drawing – the historical epic and high fantasy – were 'inextricably linked to the cinema'.[17] Articles appearing in *CinemaBlend* and *The New York Times* were written with a similar tone of surprise at HBO's decision to stray from its proven track record in producing socio-realist drama, apprehensive over whether a television production company was capable of making a fantasy show that did not look cheap and tacky.[18] At the same time, Martin and the show runners Benioff and Weiss conducted numerous interviews in which they took pains to explain their rationale for adapting *A Song of Fire and Ice* as a television serial, citing the length of the original novels and the complexity of Martin's fictional world as key reasons for necessitating such a seemingly radical step.[19] The medium-essentialism presented within such commentaries – constructing a binary opposition between film and television – has been challenged both by the success *Game of Thrones* has enjoyed amongst audiences and by arguments from theorists such as Sarah Cardwell and Noël Carroll, who have each highlighted the inherently mixed nature of television and cinema since their creation.[20] Yet such a mind-set remained engrained within popular discussions of fantasy as a storytelling mode and as a world-building practice, during and even after the release of *Game of Thrones*.

This same implicit hierarchy that promotes cinema as the primary means by which fantasy worlds can be effectively built on-screen also emerges within critical discussions of the genre. Drawing from a heritage of literary theories of fantasy that examine the rhetorical strategies used by writers to create an aesthetic experience often labelled as wonder,[21] as well as the Hollywood industry's own promotional efforts made since the 1950s to advertise fantasy fiction under the guise of the 'wonder film', studies of screen fantasy have focused primarily on the role of special effects as the primary method by which the alternative world is presented.[22] In arguably the most comprehensive theory of world-building produced to date in relation to fantasy cinema, James Walters draws from Perkins's stylistic approach to the alternative world to consider a number of techniques present in films, like *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939), that achieve a 'resonance between worlds' through the incorporation of visual spectacle into classic Hollywood storytelling techniques.[23] In a similar vein, Tom Brown's analysis of spectacle within the classical Hollywood historical epic argues for the prominence of a world-building device he refers to as 'the spectacular vista', a technique he also identifies within Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* (2001–03).[24] In each of these cases it is not that television's omission represents some sort of statement about its artistic worth or cultural ranking compared to cinema. Rather it is omitted for perfectly sound methodological considerations, which nevertheless contribute to a broader sense amongst academic discussions of world-building that television lacks either sufficient difference in its techniques of

*Scholarship* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986), p. 140. A more recent iteration of such a theory is found in Farah Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), p. 9.

22 Butler's history of fantasy focuses largely on the deployment of different special effects in separate eras, linking fantasy cinema to a broader trajectory of Hollywood to display wonder on-screen. See Butler, *Fantasy Cinema*, pp. 34–36. John Grant similarly argues that history of special effects has been 'centre stage' in the production of fantasy cinema in his entry on 'Cinema', in John Clute and John Grant (eds), *The Encyclopaedia of Fantasy* (London: Orbit, 1999), p. 196.

23 James Walters, *Alternative Worlds in Hollywood Cinema: Resonance Between Realms* (Bristol: Intellect, 2008), p. 36.

24 Tom Brown, 'Spectacle/gender/ history: the case of *Gone with the Wind*', *Screen*, vol. 49, no. 2 (2008), p. 161.

25 Charlotte Brunsdon, 'Problems with quality', *Screen*, vol. 31, no. 1 (1990), p. 63.

26 Charles Singletary Jr, 'VFX professional Thomas Hullin interview', *Shack News*, 9 November 2018, <https://www. shacknews.com/article/108433/ vfx-professional-thomas-hullin-interview-building-the-game-of-thrones-world-digitally> accessed 3 April 2021.

27 John Teti and Gus Spelman, 'The cinematic choices that made Game of Thrones' bastard battle so exhilarating', *AV Club*, 22 June 2016, <https://tv.avclub.com/the-cinematic-choices-that-made-game-of-thrones-bastar-17981 63602> accessed 3 April 2013.

28 Dan Hassler-Forest, 'Game of Thrones: quality television and the cultural logic of gentrification', *TV/Series*, vol. 6 (2014), p. 165. Deborah L. Jaramillo argues that such a tendency to view 'good' television as 'cinematic' speaks far less to some innate qualities that separate film and television than it does to the persistent

storytelling or a sufficiently successful example of world-building on television to warrant an extended discussion.

Excluding television from scholarly discussions of fantasy world-building on-screen therefore has the unwitting effect of contributing to a long-standing industry rhetoric, perpetuated by Hollywood, of cinema's supposedly superior capacity for visual expression, reinforcing a commonly shared value system amongst audiences that praises cinema's aesthetics whilst downgrading television for its so-called 'anti-aesthetics'.[25] This rhetoric has been enforced most sharply when it comes to the promotion of fantasy cinema, something which feeds into both popular and critical discussions of *Game of Thrones*. Behind-the-scenes featurettes on the show frequently champion the efforts of companies like Rodeo FX, 'the team responsible for many of the most breath-taking vistas in *Game of Thrones*'.[26] Fan discussions hosted by websites like the *AV Club* make frequent references to the show's 'cinematic choices' in storytelling that are responsible for a lot of its more memorable scenes.[27] When academic Dan Hassler-Forest writes that *Game of Thrones* successfully contributes to HBO's brand of quality television through the way it 'combines the cinematic visual spectacle of pseudo-medieval high fantasy with the tonal register of adult-orientated quality TV', he is commenting on the way the show possesses an identity entrenched within the expectations of television drama, while also finding noteworthy moments of fantasy that seem to belong to the realm of the cinematic.[28]

In the context of *Game of Thrones*, the attention given to certain components of the show that seem the most 'cinematic' privileges the attention of both audiences and scholars alike towards aspects of the show's craft of world-building that are exceptional rather than routine. Stand-out moments of visual spectacle or one-off episodes that are constructed in a self-consciously different way to more standard entries (usually the extended battle episodes such as 'Blackwater' [season 2, episode 9], 'The Watchers on the Wall' [season 4, episode 9] or 'Battle of the Bastards' [season 6, episode 9]) are offered as explanations as to why *Game of Thrones* has proved such a popular universe to explore amongst audiences, whilst other techniques that originate from the show's function as a serial drama are left unexplored.

As just one example of the important world-building techniques that are otherwise ignored when more traditionally 'cinematic' techniques are privileged, it is worth considering the important role that the title sequence plays in mediating the audience's encounter with the fictional world at the beginning of every episode. A distinguishing feature of the quality television series,[29] the title sequence has been theorized as a distinctly televisual convention both at the level of industrial practice and as a spectatorial event,[30] as well as a device that reveals the changing nature of a long-form serial drama's identity throughout its show-run.[31] In *Game of Thrones* the title sequence functions less to reveal the tensions that arise when a series sets out its narrative agenda in a long-

value judgement of film being better than television. See Deborah L. Jaramillo, 'Rescuing television from "the cinematic": the perils of dismissing television style', in Jason Jacobs and Steven Peacock (eds), *Television Aesthetics and Style* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 67–76.

29  See Kathrin Fahlenbrach and Barbara Flueckiger, 'Immersive entryways into televisual worlds: affective and aesthetic functions of title sequences in quality series', *Projections: The Journal for Movies and Mind*, vol. 11, no. 2 (2017), <http://www.berghahnjournals.com/view/journals/projections/8/1/proj080106.xml> accessed 3 April 2021.

30  Monika Bednarek, 'The television title sequence: a visual analysis of *Flight of the Conchords*', in Emilia Djonov and Sumin Zhao (eds), *Critical Multimodal Studies of Popular Discourse* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), pp. 36–54; Georg Stanitzek 'Reading the title sequence', *Cinema Journal*, vol. 48, no. 4 (2009), pp. 44–58.

31  See Jason Jacobs, 'Issues of judgement and value in television studies', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 4, no. 4 (2001), pp. 427–47; David Kociemba, '"Actually, it explains a *lot*": reading the opening title sequences of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*', *Slayage*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2006), <http://www.whedonstudies.tv/uploads/2/6/2/8/26288593/kociemba_slayage_6.2.pdf> accessed 3 April 2021.

form format, but more as a key moment of world-building reliant upon an audience anticipating the repetitive yet changeable structures embedded within television serial drama.

Beginning with the show's signature theme and accompanied by sounds of fire and clashing swords, the title sequence seems particularly self-conscious in its desire to evoke a feeling of entering a world on-screen (figure 1). The graphics lead the spectator around a literal map of the continents of Westeros and Essos in which the narrative takes place. The sequence is striking for the visual metaphor it evokes: as different locations climb mechanically up and out of the map, the world of the show seems literally to be constructed on-screen. Yet beyond the neatness of this visual motif for this analysis of world-building, the sequence is also important for the way it rewards viewers who watch it at the beginning of each episode. Altering the specifics of the map each week, the title sequence is used not just to announce the beginning of an episode, but to repeatedly showcase the broader shifts in the narrative trajectory of the serial. Winterfell, a key location within the storyline, displays different sigils above its territory depending on which noble household is currently in occupancy – originally Stark, then Greyjoy, then Bolton, then Stark again – while the visual representation of the castle itself changes when, for example, it is burned by Theon Greyjoy in season 2. Audiences are thus slowly conditioned to both repeat the viewing experience each week as they watch ostensibly the same title sequence, yet also to look for differences in that viewing experience that speak to changes in the wider world of *Game of Thrones*. The sense of a world on-screen is therefore achieved through a gradual interpretative activity undertaken by audience members during and across their multiple encounters with the show.

Drawing attention to the important function of the title sequence demonstrates just how much of *Game of Thrones*' efforts to build a world on-screen rely on techniques hitherto unexamined as part of the discourse of fantasy world-creation. It also reveals the contribution a



Fig. 1. Images from the title sequence of *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011–19).

32 See Peter Hunt, 'Landscape and journeys, metaphors and maps: the distinctive feature of English fantasy', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 12, no. 1 (1987), pp. 11–14; Deirdre F. Baker, 'What we found on our journey through fantasy land', *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 37, no. 3 (2006), pp. 237–51; Stefan Ekman, *Here Be Dragons: Exploring Fantasy Maps and Settings* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2013).

33 Sébastien Caquard defines the cinemap as a 'cinematic expression of animated maps', exploring the ways in which cinema traditionally presents maps in a way that stylistically embellishes their cartographic details through the use of zooming, panning or other expressive camera techniques that animate a particular feature of the map onscreen in a singular moment. See Sébastien Caquard, 'Foreshadowing contemporary digital cartography: a historical review of cinematic maps in films', *The Cartographic Journal*, vol. 46, no. 1 (2009), p. 54.

34 Sean O'Sullivan, 'Reconnoitering the rim: thoughts on Deadwood and third seasons', in Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin (eds), *Third Person: Authoring and Exploring Vast Narratives* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), p. 323.

35 Mittell, *Complex TV*, pp. 222–23.

36 By topography, I refer to a set of distinct features related to the process of mapping, including geographical details of distance, terrain and location that helps to place two spaces in a logical dialogue with one another (for example, Edinburgh is north of St Ives, which explains why the weather there is often colder). By topology, I refer to the way such individual parts are interrelated as part of a meaningful system of wholes (it will rain in both Edinburgh and Cornwall when there are dark clouds in the sky).

fantasy serial television series can make to broader notions of transmedia storytelling. Maps hold a particular importance in the experience of fantasy fiction, noted by many scholars as key to providing readers with a gateway to the alternative world prior to the start of the story.[32] Cinema's conventional method of narration makes it difficult to emulate the kind of gradual processes of meaning-making required from studying a map within the pages of a book, and instead often provide images of maps as stylistic embellishments rather than key components of their world-building.[33] The title sequence of *Game of Thrones*, however, offers a different kind of world-building. Neither replicating literary devices nor drawing from devices developed with theories of film style, the show serializes the way in which we encounter the world's map within individual episodes, and relies on the cumulative impact of those episodes to build a broader, more complex picture of a world. The sequence presents a map on-screen that, like all charts and graphs, needs to be studied over multiple sessions in order to be fully understood.

It is not that these elements of world-building are unapparent to those watching *Game of Thrones*; if anything, they are difficult to articulate precisely because they are so apparent that they almost seem unworthy of discussion. Previous studies of serial narration have often felt it necessary to evoke the terminology of world-building in their studies as part of a more direct focus on the mechanics and poetics of narration and character. Sean O'Sullivan recognizes the importance of the 'particular world of a narrative' within his discussion of serial narration,[34] whilst Mittell similarly describes how television dramas 'spread characters across an expanding storyworld'.[35] Yet although both O'Sullivan and Mittell display a certain reverence towards the notion of the alternative world in their work, the kinds of questions they ask focus not on how the world comes into being as an entity in and of itself, but how that world, once comprehended, is then used for as a tool for narration and characterization. Something as simple as a title sequence demonstrates just how much of the cumulative effect, or indeed pleasure, of serial dramas emerges from an encounter with the worlds shown rather than simply through the stories told. As viewers sit down to watch an episode of *Game of Thrones*, it is the excitement and enthusiasm for re-entering the fictional world on a habitual, repeated basis, a world displayed through serial narration strategies, that accounts in many ways for the show's continued grip on popular culture almost a decade after its first episode. The title sequence represents the tacit promise offered by the show's creators of things to come.

Watching serialized, long-form television drama is comparable to the ways in which human beings come to understand the world that surrounds them. Through a sequence of individual encounters, humans are able to contextualize specific places and spaces against a set of topological and topographical relationships that are established gradually during the process of being in the world.[36] Within television drama, a similarly gradual process of world-building is enacted through the

37 Ellen Seiter, 'Semiotics, structuralism and television', in Robert Allen (ed.), *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled: Television and Contemporary Criticism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press. 1992), p. 47.

38 David Marc, *Demographic Vistas: Television in American Culture* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), p. 12.

39 Mittell, *Complex TV*, p. 164.

40 Elliot Logan, 'The ending of *Mad Men*'s fifth season: cinema, serial television and moments of performance', *Critical Studies in Television*, vol. 9, no. 3 (2014), p. 44.

41 These are echoes in these two terms of Mittell's concepts of centrifugal and centripetal complexity (*Complex TV*, pp. 222–23). Indeed, the way in which Mittell describes both qualities in relation to the status of characters within a fictional world can be seen as a precursor to the enquiry into televisual serial world-building I embark upon here. Mittell's terms are ultimately invested in the way the alternative world is used for narrative, as well as being deployed as tools for evaluative criticism as a way of acknowledging how different television serials utilize their potential for complex narration.

42 Karen Lury, 'A response to John Corner', *Screen*, vol. 48, no. 3 (2007), p. 373.

43 See the sections on 'Completeness' and 'World Gestalten', in Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds*, pp. 38–43, 51–60.

viewer's ability to comprehend what Ellen Seiter refers to as a series of 'syntagmatic chains'.[37] These chains expand beyond individual episodes and seasons, giving meaning to a series by allowing viewers to spot the connecting patterns and structures. This then allows individual events taking place to be contextualized against what David Marc calls a 'broader cosmology'.[38] This appeal to a wider structure demarcates the serial drama as a unique mode of storytelling, requiring that audiences invest a large amount of attention in what Mittell describes as 'the gaps between shows'.[39] As Elliot Logan argues, 'what *distinguishes* serial television from cinema: the capacity of these series to work upon histories built-up by moving pictures of people over long periods of time'.[40] The serialized world is constantly sculpted and shaped through a gradual process achieved through the effort of multiple hours of storytelling.

Given how much emphasis previous theories of fantasy world-building place on the importance of stand-out moments of visual spectacle rather than approaching world-building as a gradual series of strategies that culminate in an overall structure, they can only be partially successful in describing the more gradual process of world-building in the television serial. I therefore suggest an alternative vocabulary is needed that speaks more directly to this dynamic of patterning and generalization within a paradigmatic structure. In particular, I wish to introduce two key terms within the forthcoming analysis of world-building dynamics present in *Game of Thrones*: *narrative divergence* and *narrative convergence*.[41] I consider narrative divergence to be a vital strategy through which the serial drama presents a world's topography to its viewers, allowing an understanding of the world's differences, regions and sites of action to emerge over a number of episodes and series. Narrative convergence, in contrast, becomes key to accenting and emphasizing a world's topology, a strategy that seems particularly rooted within the characteristics of the televisual serial drama. As Karen Lury describes, the 'distinctiveness of television's aesthetic is that it is topological, so that the complexities and relations between the different kinds of space and time in the encounter between viewer and television text cannot be separated from one another'.[42] Television's depiction of space is at all times influenced by the sheer amount of personal time individuals have invested in their viewing, allowing the emergence of common rules and conventions that influence how any particular moment on-screen appears, as each individual moment is shaped by the weight of context that surrounds it. In terms of world-building, television's topological means of communication facilitates a process Wolf describes as 'world gestalten', allowing audience members to fill in the gaps that will exist within any imaginary world through an understanding of its governing dynamics and principles.[43] Narrative divergence and convergence are the two major strategies in *Game of Thrones* that allow audiences to undertake this

process of psychological mapping, creating a coherent vision of a world that unfolds gradually over the show's lengthy running time.

Narrative divergence emerges as a key strategy within serial world-building due to the set of virtues and challenges that emerge when telling stories through this narrative mode. Utilizing what Jacobs and Peacock refer to as television's 'expansive structure',[44] a concept that itself has precedent in Raymond Williams's notion of televisual 'flow',[45] one of the most profound differences between the way *Game of Thrones* builds its world on-screen when compared to examples of high fantasy cinema is the length of time it takes, allowing new locations to emerge only as a seemingly organic consequence of the narrative action. Yet the added luxury of time provided within serial storytelling does not mean that the makers of *Game of Thrones* have a licence to mystify or confuse viewers. Unlike the narrative patterns of soap opera, upon which this television serial is partially based, serial dramas rely on the audience building their comprehension of the narrative through their knowledge of the show's beginning and in anticipation of its end. The opening episodes function as a crucial testing ground for establishing such expectations, working quickly to communicate the narrative possibilities contained within a particular fictional universe that allows audiences not necessarily to understand what will happen, but to predict what *might* happen.[46] As O'Sullivan outlines,

> we want, as viewers, to enter a world suffused with the possible so that we can guess, or be mystified by, what a certain character might do, what direction the plot might take, or simply what the tease of another instalment might contain.[47]

It is by revealing the show's narrative possibilities that *Game of Thrones* must start to build its secondary world, providing the audience with a schema that not only highlights the complex narrative potential contained within a world, but the complexity of the world itself.

Narrative divergence becomes a key technique for allowing the makers of *Game of Thrones* to combine their desire to present the narrative potential of its fictional world with the mutual desire to build the viewer's understanding of the space in which that narrative will take place. In the show's first episode, the vast majority of characters are introduced in a single setting, that of the city of Winterfell. Apart from a few fleeting shots of the nation's capital, King's Landing, as well as the introduction of a parallel storyline involving Daenerys Targaryen journeying within the continent of Essos, most of the first episode details the events surrounding the arrival of the royal household – including King Robert Baratheon and his entourage, consisting largely of the noble Lannister family – at the home of the Warden of the North, Eddard Stark. The single location serves as the primary point of focus in which details about a world's rich history are relayed through dialogue between characters. This process provides the means whereby audiences might start to participate in the process of world-creation, allowing them to

44 Jacobs and Peacock, 'Introduction', in *Television Aesthetics and Style*, p. 6.

45 Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003).

46 Mittell explores the techniques involved in establishing such narrative potentials in *Complex TV*, pp. 55–56.

47 O'Sullivan, 'Reconnoitering the rim', p. 323.

anticipate new realms yet to appear on-screen and channelling their lack of understanding of the world away from a sense of defeated frustration and into the desire to keep watching.

As the narrative progresses, the splitting of this linear narrative involving Eddard and the King into multiple strands that follow different characters not only creates greater narrative complexity, but also a divergence of perspectives through which audiences are able to see various locations within the fictional world. In season 1, the King's entourage journey south to King's Landing, taking Eddard and his two daughters Sansa and Arya with them. Catelyn and Robb Stark visit The Eyrie, Riverrun and The Twins, homes of the noble households that lie between the Stark home of Winterfell and the south of Westeros whilst Jon Snow, the bastard son of Eddard Stark, is sent to the most northerly post in Westoros to take up his position as a member of the Night's Watch. Throughout seasons 2, 3 and 4, Theon Greyjoy is sent by Robb Stark to the Iron Islands, Jon Snow is sent beyond the wall to the unknown world that lies beyond, whilst Arya is taken across the Riverlands while posing as a peasant boy. Echoing the structure of Martin's novels, the narrative becomes increasingly complex, branching off into multiple character threads spread across disparate realms.

Narrative divergence is therefore not only the primary means by which the show's plot starts to increase in complexity, but becomes the determining rationale for how and when further details of the world's topography are presented. An illustrative example of this kind of dynamic can be seen with the introduction of Daenerys Targaryen during the show's pilot episode. Daenerys is introduced into the narrative via an abrupt edit during a brief exchange between Eddard Stark and King Robert Baratheon. At the allusion to her character, the action jumps from the primary location of Winterfell to a shot of Daenerys standing with her back to camera, looking out on a hot, sunny landscape. Her surroundings reflect a completely different architectural style from the Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian influences seen in the set design at Winterfell, drawing instead from North Africa and the Mediterranean. The framing choices, using mainly wide and mid-shots, allow for a suitable focus to be brought on the respective locations in both settings, thus emphasizing the difference in climate between the two scenes. Audiences are invited to make the reasonably simple assumption that Daenerys is very far away from the events just witnessed, contributing to a developing understanding of the distances and regions of this fictional world. At the same time, the contrast between her location and Winterfell informs the viewer about her narrative possibilities as a character. Because these two sets of characters are so far apart, at least one of them must necessarily perform a great deal of action within the narrative to close that gap as the plot progresses. The narrative becomes more complex as the audience's understanding of the world becomes more divergent, and the world's topography is illuminated through the complex plot strands that provide

an entryway into the different locations contained with Martin's various fictional continents.

Further sequences similar to this introduction of Daenerys occur throughout *Game of Thrones*, requiring audiences to place a developing understanding of this world's topography in dialogue with an understanding of character. The attempts at world-building complement the complex narrative arc that emphasizes the vastness of both the fictional world and the narrative system. When, for example, Robert Baratheon gives the order for Daenerys to be assassinated (season 1, episode 5), the attempt does not take place until two episodes later. This gap between cause and effect within the narration gives a sense of the distance travelled between King's Landing and the Dothraki capital of Vaes Dothrak, where Daenerys resides. This distancing technique occurs again when Ser Barristan Selmy is removed from the King's Guard by the newly appointed King Joffrey, in season 1, episode 8, and decides to flee to Essos, arriving in season 3, episode 2; and also when Jamie Lannister sets sail to Dorne (season 5, episode 2) to return the Lannister princess Myrcella to King's Landing, arriving two episodes later. Utilizing the greater amount of time afforded to its narration, *Game of Thrones* allows such journeys between different locations in the fictional world to take their time off-screen, whether this be a relatively simple journey along the Kingsroad from Winterfell to King's Landing (which expands across episodes 2 and 3 of season 1), or a more complex voyage such as the one undertaken by Tyrion to meet Daenerys in season 5, travelling through the cities of Pentos (episode 1), Volantis (episode 3), Valyria (episode 5) and Meereen (episode 7). The show's narrative highlights the distances between locations, stretching the action beyond individual episodes to prolong the sense of distance travelled.

Narrative divergence therefore relies on a set of stylistic traits that are very different from those set out within previous theories of world-building on-screen. Perkins's famous exploration of the filmic world amounts largely to an examination of mise-en-scene. As he argues, 'the extended world is continually manifested in the ways in which things leave and enter the frame', and his discussion of the role film style plays in articulating the presence of a world focuses on the function of performance and framing, alongside the gestures of camera movement.[48] This focus on mise-en-scene is replicated in the analyses of Walters and Brown, both of whom concentrate on stylistic elements contained within individual shots rather than the ways in which patterns of editing might mediate world-building across scenes.[49] Divergence, however, is not a technique that can be located solely through the characteristics of an individual frame. Instead it relies upon the viewer making connections between (at least) two sites of action contained in separate frames, so that the world is understood as part of the storytelling practices of serial television. Unlike previous world-building strategies identified within film analysis, divergent world-building in *Game of Thrones* results in

48 Perkins, 'Where is the world?', pp. 24–25, p. 31. Throughout his analysis, Perkins makes only reference to the role editing patterns might play in world-building, and even this comes in the form of a dismissal. In his discussion of *All I Desire* (Douglas Sirk, 1953) that a particular moment of world-building, Perkins argues that the the sense of a world communicated 'is not punched up by the editing' but through the use of framing and gesture (ibid., p. 32).

49 Walters does discuss the function of continuity editing within his analysis of *The Wizard of Oz*, arguing that such devices are crucial in establishing a feeling of objective space within a realm supposedly emerging from Dorothy's psyche. Nevertheless, his analysis of the film is primarily dominated by considerations of the use of colour and framing, giving particular attention to sequences like the opening shot of the film that evoke deep spaces through the use of a single shot. See Walters, *Alternative Worlds in Hollywood Cinema*, pp. 56–66.

editing taking a key role as a device used to emphasize distance and difference between locations.

Such editing strategies operate throughout the show, making use of a series of concurrent visual motifs or graphic matches to bring together two disparate parts of the fictional world into tacit dialogue with one another. Whether this be a cut between two characters in different parts of the world climaxing during sex (season 2, episode 2), an edit that allows two characters to look at one another in the mirror in different locations (season 3, episode 2), or a rather visceral graphic match between Jorah Mormont's oozing flesh to a pie lid being broken (season 7, episode 2), such moments bring two individual narrative sites of action into brief dialogue to emphasize the difference between the two locations, and therefore the relationship between the narrative threads and the topographic system in which they operate. Season 2, episode 1 is a particularly good example of how the series' combination of a narrative and presentational logic underpins its display of the fictional world, utilizing the visual motif of a comet travelling through the sky as a way of relating disparate narrative threads. The comet is seen first by Bran Stark in Winterfell, framed by the treetops of a forest, then witnessed by Daenerys in a clear blue sky, before the camera moves down to reveal the barren cliffs and sand dunes of a vast desert, and finally glimpsed by Stannis at night on his fortress island of Dragonstone. Each shot emphasizes the contrast in location and climate among each character's habitat. Such moments resonate with Perkins's insistence that, due to the presence of a fictional world within a narrative, 'we are placed to observe, not share' the viewpoints of characters.[50] Yet, whilst these comments are made in relation to the nuances of framing, here it is the distance between characters evoked by the editing patterns, and the graphical differences between the different shots of the comet, that allow a feeling of observing rather than sharing perspectives. Whilst an individual character's perception of a world is constrained to a single plot arc in *Game of Thrones*, the audience is permitted to diverge from a single point of view as the story jumps around the diverse landscapes of its world.

These divergent strategies culminate in scenes such as the aftermath of the death of Eddard Stark at the beginning of season 1, episode 10, where the audience's attachment to a character forged through the duration of serial narration functions to highlight the diversity of a world's topography through a series of edits that invite shot-by-shot comparisons. As the defining moment of season 1, the execution of the first season's main protagonist occurs at the climax of episode 9, before picking up on the immediate aftermath in the following episode. Beginning this episode with a close-up shot of the bloodied sword that has been used to decapitate Eddard, the sequence quickly cuts to Arya's shocked face in amongst the crowd. Instead of vivifying the location on-screen through the use of mise-en-scene, the scene creates a shared perspective between Arya and the audience through a series of editing patterns (tight close-ups

**50** Perkins, 'Where is the world?', p. 24.

Figs 2–7. Close-ups and edits designed to disorient the viewer, from *Game of Thrones* (season 1, episode 10).

framed around different bodies within the crowd) that are designed to disorientate the viewer from the action. Like Arya, the viewer struggles to understand what has happened. Yoren drags her into a secluded corridor, cutting her hair with his sword before shouting 'North boy. We're going north!' At this dialogue cue, the action cuts to Bran at Winterfell, and to another tightly framed shot of two characters in a darkened doorway surrounded by sandstone. Moving from this tight frame to a wide shot, the Arabic-influenced architecture of King's Landing is replaced by the Northern castle framed by grey clouds, mud and grasslands (figures 2–7). In this instance the action proceeds to *go north* as instructed, separating our perspective from that of a single character through a matched edit, so that we are no longer seeing a world just through Arya's eyes and from her location but rather following the direction given in the dialogue, observing the vastness of the fictional world.

This continues throughout the sequence as the action shifts from a wide-shot of Bran, learning about the death of his father from an arriving messenger, to another close-up of Catelyn Stark, walking determinedly away from her troops to grieve alone with her son. In each of these

scenes, characters from the same family, who are dispersed geographically by the narrative, are presented one-by-one, with the editing patterns emphasizing the diverging climates of the southern warmth of King's Landing, the colder, barren north of Winterfell and the verdant mid-lands of the battlefield, Establishing a complex narrative trajectory offers viewers multiple points of access to this alternative world, and emphasizes the contrast and distance within the topographical relationships of the various realms of Westeros and Essos. The sequence relies at this point on an assumed knowledge in the viewer of the different diverging locations in Westeros and how they relate to each other, yet it simultaneously helps to build that very relationship and understanding.

This means that, alongside the elements of world-building often cited as evidence of its supposedly cinematic identity, *Game of Thrones* draws from a stylistic register that is equally reminiscent of those techniques identified in early theories of television style as quintessential to the medium's approach to storytelling. Divergent strategies of world-building ironically rely on the same frequent use of mid-range and close-up shots that scholars like Jane Feuer and Hardy Cook have argued are a consequence of television's greater reliance on studio and tighter shooting schedules. Such conditions give less time for those on set to experiment with expressive camera movements or stylistic framing devices, and award a greater role to post-production in shaping the story.[51] This does not suggest that there is anything inherently televisual in *Game of Thrones*' world-building, just as there is nothing inherently cinematic in it either. However, by performing an analysis of one strategy of world-building – narrative divergence – that seems dependent on the gradual nature of serial storytelling, one can see a plethora of devices in every episode of *Game of Thrones* that highlight not how little it has in common with previous examples of television drama, but how much.

Equally important to divergent strategies of world-building in *Game of Thrones* is the alternative underpinning logic of convergence. These overlapping strategies are born partly out of the process of adapting Martin's novels. Engaging with typical narration strategies associated with the multi-book fantasy series, the reader of *A Song of Fire and Ice* is constantly pulled between a desire for greater narrative complexity and tension (achieved through the divergence of characters) and a desire for reconciliation and stasis (achieved through the convergence of characters into singular, solvable plotlines).[52] Adapted as a television serial, *Game of Thrones* maintains this balancing act between greater narrative complexity and reconciliation, requiring audiences to engage with its events by foreshadowing what Newman refers to as narrative 'closure'.[53] As demonstrated in the negative reception of the latter seasons of the serial drama *Lost* (ABC, 2004–10),[54] audiences are likely to lose patience with a story if they are not given assurances that they are being led

51  See Jane Feuer, 'Melodrama, serial form and television today', *Screen*, vol. 25, no. 1 (1984), pp. 4–17; Hardy M. Cook, 'Two Lears for television: an exploration of televisual strategies', *Literature/ Film Quarterly*, vol. 14, no. 4 (1986), pp. 179–86. A usual summary of such arguments is also provided in Brett Mills, 'What does it mean to call television "cinematic"', in Jacobs and Peacock (eds), *Television Style and Aesthetics*, pp. 62–63.

52  For further discussion of the storytelling convention of the fantasy series, see Kari Maund, 'Reading the fantasy series', in Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp.147–53.

53  Newman, 'From beats to arcs', p. 20.

54  See Sean O'Sullivan, 'The idea of an end to a thing', *In Media Res*, 26 April 2012, <http:// mediacommons.org/imr/2012/04/ 20/idea-end-thing> accessed 3 April 2021.

through a narrative system that has an essential harmony and unity. Without such reassurance, the feeling that the serial storylines add up to a single unified structure is threatened, as audiences are unable to gain satisfaction by looking back over the moments of a season to see how they might have anticipated the narrative trajectory or made educated guesses about where it might go.

Obeying these conventions of serial narration, *Game of Thrones* provides a sense of the show's wider structure and momentum largely through moments of narrative convergence. In early seasons, such moments amount to little more than key scenes that provide the audience with hints or teasers regarding the potential narrative trajectory. These include sequences such as the meeting between Catelyn Stark and Tyrion Lannister in season 1 that begins the open hostility between the Starks and the Lannisters, the coming together of Tywin Lannister and Arya Stark in season 2, or Brienne of Tarth's meetings with both Arya and Sansa Stark in seasons 4 and 5. In later seasons, however, the convergence of characters pulls the narrative together in a way that seems to fulfil the tacit promise made to audiences that all these complex storylines are indeed leading towards some form of resolution. The reunification of Sansa and Jon in season 6, followed by Sansa, Arya and Bran in season 7, allows the Stark family to occupy the same fictional space for the first time since season 1, and thus the characters begin again to share a set of narrative goals and motivations. Similarly the meeting of Jon Snow and Daenerys brings together two plot lines that have been kept entirely separate for the previous six seasons, the alliance between the two characters signalling a coming together of different plot threads and screen space. In season 7, characters previously encountered only in Essos, such as the Dothraki, are brought into Westeros as part of the ongoing war, and Essos ceases to be a lived-in space as the narrative focuses on a more geographically finite range of action. The complexity of the story that once necessitated a divergence of characters across a vast fictional landscape is simplified, as is the number of places in which the narrative takes place.

Signalling a change in direction of the storyline through the convergence of multiple narrative strands, such moments function as a 'narrative special effect'.[55] Related to Mittell's wider theories of viewer comprehension, narrative convergence works as part of serial narration's ability to stage events that intensify the dramatic potential of a series through their challenge to patterns established within the show's structure. In more formulaic moments within serial drama, the viewer is able to predict the likely future events based on habitual, assumptive based reasoning (because X has happened five times, for instance, it is likely to continue to happen). In moments of character convergence, audience members must instead engage in a more self-conscious process of deductive reasoning to predict the next events in the narrative (because X has happened, either Y or Z is now likely to occur), increasing their interest in the immediate events on-screen as result.[56] Such moments are

**55** Mittell, *Complex TV*, p. 41.

**56** Ibid., pp. 169–70.

57   See, for example, Tom Gunning,
     'An aesthetic of astonishment:
     early film and the (in)credulous
     spectator', *Art and Text*, vol. 34
     (1981); Miriam Bratu Hansen,
     'The mass production of the
     senses: classical cinema as
     vernacular modernism',
     *Modernism/Modernity*, vol. 6, no.
     2 (1999), <https://muse.jhu.edu/
     article/23266> accessed 3 April
     2021.

58   Laura Mulvey, 'Visual pleasure
     and narrative cinema', in *Visual
     and Other Pleasures*
     (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986),
     p. 19.

59   Logan, 'The ending of *Mad Men*'s
     fifth season', p. 44.

60   Sean O'Sullivan, 'The inevitable,
     the surprise and the aesthetics of
     televisual form', in Kelleter (ed.),
     *Media of Serial Narrative*, p. 224.

61   Newman, 'From beats to arcs',
     p. 19.

not spectacular in a manner that relates to theories of film spectacle framed either from a historical or theoretical vantage point;[57] there is no inherent quality of 'looked-at-ness' which makes such scenes more pleasurable to watch, regardless of their narrative context.[58] Instead they rely on what Logan refers to as serial narration's ability to produce a 'sedimentation of the past [that] puts pressure on the present',[59] infusing a moment on-screen with a profound sense of meaning and consequence that is informed directly by the hours of screen time that precede it.

Convergence therefore serves an alternative function to the serial world-building within *Game of Thrones*. Unlike divergence, its purpose is not to reveal details of a world's complex topography of interrelated lands and regions. Instead, moments of convergence highlight a relationship between a particular narrative action and its wider topological consequences. In his analysis of the aesthetics of serial television storytelling, O'Sullivan argues that both surprise and suspense within the serial drama depend on both time and knowledge of the storyworld.[60] Suspense functions to cement the viewer's feeling of comprehension of the narrative world by relying on the viewer's ability to anticipate the ramifications of the narrative events on the fictional landscape. Surprise, however, functions to disavow or contradict such an understanding, making the viewer less confident that they know the true nature of the fictional world they are experiencing. Narrative convergence's primary function as a world-building device is therefore to reveal a world's topology, conveying information to an audience about how the fictional landscape of *Game of Thrones* is united by a common set of rules and practices.

Convergence, therefore, does not occur as a first instance during these moments; the bringing together of characters for increased dramatic effect instead represents the cumulative impact of a plethora of perhaps less significant moments on-screen that are nevertheless designed to evoke the world's wider structures and customs. This could take the form of the display of legal rituals such as the practice of trial by combat, religious rituals such as the many wedding ceremonies seen across the different seasons that repeat the same vows ('I am hers and she is mine') or the numerous slogans and catchphrases repeated by characters across different plot threads ('Winter is coming', 'Valar morghulis/All men must die', 'What is dead will never die', 'A Lannister always pays his debts'). Such little details take advantage of what Newman argues to be the often 'repetitive' nature of serial storytelling,[61] building an audience's awareness of the conventions and standards of the storyworld through its capacity to repeat itself. As the viewer cues into these moments of repetition, so too are they able to access extra layers of meaning that emerge as a consequence of the serial nature of the storytelling. Repeated utterances assist the show's attempts at characterization, whether in the form of the various epithets given to Daenerys throughout her slow march to Westeros ('Khaleesi', 'Mother of Dragons', 'Breaker of Chains', and so on) or the now parodic catchphrase associated with one

of the show's key protagonists, 'You know nothing Jon Snow!' Convergence, underpinned here by repetition, is therefore crucial in demonstrating a set of the governing rules, customs and principles that unite the otherwise diverse and separate realms in Westeros, Essos and beyond as part of one world, whilst at the same time giving the impression of storytellers in control of a narrative that will yield meaningful results.

Like the repetitive nature of the title sequence, these moments function to cement what Mittell describes as seriality's 'ritualistic pattern of engagement'.[62] Whilst divergence places multiple plot strands in a topographic dialogue with one another through juxtaposing editing patterns, narrative convergence relies on the impact individual scenes have as part of a series' wider structure. Individual moments are able to resonate beyond their immediate narrative context to gesture to the world they serve to denote, employing a stylistic register that might seem reminiscent of world-building strategies previously identified in relation to cinema. Influenced by Perkins, cinematic theories of world-building often utilize the concept of the fictional world as an interpretative strategy that aims to speak to film's identity as an art form beyond its ability to communicate narrative information.[63] Cinematic moments such as the famous crane shot during the siege of Atlanta in *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939), or the moment in *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (Peter Jackson, 2001) where the group travels past The Gates of Argonath, achieve a sense of world-building by allowing the visual spectacle of a singular, vast image to temporarily dominate the wider attempts at storytelling. Convergence in serial world-building, however, relies far more on the context in which the image appears. Locating itself in narrative beats, each moment of convergence in *Game of Thrones* is designed to communicate a different kind of vastness from the epic imagery on which cinema draws. It is the richness of what might happen in Martin's fictional landscape, rather than simply how it looks, that gives it this boundless quality. Convergence punctuates, highlights and extends the narrative possibilities to produce exciting material for an audience by building a world on-screen through its relationship with narrative, rather than in transcendence of it.

The narratological function of convergence as a world-building strategy can be seen in the way that moments on-screen evoke a sense of drama through a relationship between the characters and their world's topological structure. When Daenerys addresses Tyrion for the first time in her throne room within Meereen, in season 5, episode 9, the sequence represents a coming together of two narrative arcs that have been told separately over hours of storytelling. At the start of the scene, a moment occurs that displays what Daniel Yacavone might describe as the 'excess' of the image, displaying a feeling of a world that exists beyond its function within the narrative.[64] The two characters stand still and look at one another, accompanied by diegetic sounds of the wind blowing and birds chirping outside, while the stylistic embellishments of skewed

**62** Mittell, *Complex TV*, p. 28.

**63** Daniel Yacavone refers to this in his account of world-building as the aspects of the cinematic register that lie beyond its 'logico-fictional' appeal, in *Film Worlds: A Philosophical Aesthetics of Cinema* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2015), pp. 4–7.

**64** Ibid., p. 88.

camera angles and expressive lighting techniques give the scene a distinct atmosphere even before the exchange of dialogue. Such techniques nevertheless contain a profound narrative purpose, increasing the suspense by delaying the inevitable narrative consequence of a meeting between two key characters. The sense of a world is amplified through such moments of tension, the audience invited to bring their knowledge of what these two characters mean in terms of the story's overall structure, and to speculate on what the consequences of their meeting might be. The moment is not beyond its narrative; rather it is through the narrative that the scene resonates beyond its immediate context, the consequence of two characters converging catalyses the audience to reflect upon the wider topological consequences of the story.

The experiential possibilities of this form of world-building can be witnessed in perhaps the most infamous moment in the show's popular lore, the 'Red Wedding' (season 3, episode 9). The Red Wedding is often described in both popular and critical analyses of *Game of Thrones* as a key turning point in the show, the impact of which established the tonal and narrative expectations for the events to follow. If Ned Stark's execution served to illustrate to audiences that no character was safe within this narrative system, then the Red Wedding pushed this one step further to show that even the narrative system itself is unstable and subject to the whims and vices of this deadly game of power. The impact of the Red Wedding emerges out of the topology of serial narration, altering the course of events to the extent that the stakes surrounding the drama shift from a battle between the noble Starks and villainous Lannisters to a less clearly defined struggle for power.

The sequence itself is all the more suspenseful and shocking because of the way it plays with audience expectations of narrative reconciliation – expectations that arise partly out of the way the episode is internally structured. At the start of the episode Robb Stark outlines his plan to take the Lannister home of Casterly Rock, a conquest that might indeed tip the war in favour of the Starks. The plan hinges on Robb's ability to successfully atone for his broken promise to Walder Frey, the Lord of the Twins. Robb's alliance with Walder was based upon the former's promised betrothal to one of the latter's daughters, which was then broken by Robb's marriage to Talisa Maegyr, whom he met in season 2; Robb and Talisa now return to the Twins for the marriage of one of Walder's daughters to Robb's uncle, Edmure Tully, in an apparent gesture of reconciliation on both sides. Reuniting Robb and Walder after approximately two seasons apart, in which the latter character has not appeared on-screen, charges the scenes with an acute dramatic significance. In line with previous seasons, the audience is primed to assume that the convergence of characters will lead to a narrative event of significance.

Established in season 1 with the death of Ned Stark, the penultimate episode of each season typically features a climactic event achieved through a convergence of narrative focus, a feature replicated in season 2

with the battle of Blackwater (episode 9). The Red Wedding is framed as a similar kind of event, representing approximately one third of the episode's total running time and functioning as its anchoring focus, marginalizing the other storylines. This dynamic is further intensified through the way in which other storylines seem to allude towards a convergence of different characters, particularly within a plot strand involving Arya and the Hound who arrive at the Riverlands close to where the wedding takes place. The Red Wedding is elevated to the primary site of narrative focus, a dynamic that alters the usual balance established within the show, in which the narrative weight is shared reasonably equally across the different storylines: this suggests an underlying sense of narrative consequence even before the events take place.

Both throughout the episode and the wider structure of the series, the audience is cued to anticipate a convergence of narrative perspectives and a convergence of narrative action. Prolonging the suspense, the scenes of the wedding itself contain many elements that provide access to a world beyond the narrative taking place. They present certain customs and cultural practices that would unite the various realms of this fictional landscape, including discussions of the bedding ceremony and the traditional folk music used within this world. Yet such details are communicated through a visual register typical of serial television drama that 'prioritise[s] emotional movement and climax'.[65] Utilizing an increasingly atmospheric soundscape, the scene shifts to Catelyn's perspective, reflecting her growing anxiety and concern as she begins to notice certain incongruous actions, including the guards locking doors shut, and the change in melody played by the wedding band, named in the show's credits as 'The Rains of Castamere'. As well as allowing for greater texture and depth to the sense of a world on-screen, attentive viewers will be aware that the music hints at the narrative significance of what is about to occur. The melody was first whistled by Tyrion on multiple occasions in season 2, episode 1, before being sung by the Lannister armies in episode 9, and its full significance is finally spelled out in the episode directly preceding that of the Red Wedding, when Cersei describes the destruction of House Reyne of Castamere by her father, Tywin. Its usage in the Red Wedding serves to underscore the foreshadowing of events and is aligned with the show's wider topological structure. The true and murderous intentions of Walder Frey are then revealed as the sequence proceeds. Numerous mid-range and close-up shots are used to highlight the violence, suffering and emotional distress of each character, showing Robb, Catelyn and Talisa's executions by knife and crossbow. The scene thus represents both a literal and a metaphorical act of violence. The murder of key characters takes place swiftly, but the murder of narrative possibility contained within the sequence lingers in the seasons that follow.

The distinction I suggest between serial world-building techniques of convergence in television and the kind of aesthetic consideration of

65 Sarah Cardwell, 'Television aesthetics', *Critical Studies in Television*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2006), p. 183.

world-creation offered within film theory may seem to resonate with historical attempts made by theorists of both film and television to prise the two mediums apart. Debates over what makes television distinct from cinema at the level of style have raged for nearly half a century; their origins may be traced back to theorists such as Horace Newcomb and Herbert Zettl, who defined television as a popular art form based on the qualities of intimacy and domesticity, qualities that were often set against the visual expansiveness of the cinematic screen.[66] The kind of medium-specific essentialism reflected in these early theories of televisual aesthetics has been problematized by the collapse in technological distinction across the media industries, as well as the equal collapse of the cultural dynamics of high/film culture and low/television culture due to the rise of quality television drama. I do not wish to support this distinction between film and television by highlighting the difference between convergent world-building strategies as presented in *Game of Thrones* and the kind of affective dimension of cinema highlighted in film theory. I merely intend to highlight the uniqueness of convergence as a serial and televisual world-building strategy that aims to combine affective components of the image with the more cognitive process of inferring narrative information, and inevitably this reveals how much of what is effective about *Game of Thrones*' strategies of world-creation emerge from its identity as a serial television drama.

In this account of serial world-building, my ambition has been to produce a cohesive explanation for how *Game of Thrones* allows audiences to assemble an imagined picture of its vast fictional landscape through its function as a serial television drama series. I have pinpointed the aspects of its world-building that emerge from narrative and stylistic strategies previously identified within earlier scholarship, introducing the concepts of divergence and convergence that represent the two key strategies of serial world-building within the series. I use these two terms to highlight a set of storytelling strategies that have remained unexplored in popular and critical discussion of *Game of Thrones*' efforts at world-building that privilege the use of visual spectacle. The focus on these so-called cinematic techniques of world-building has suggested that the world of *Game of Thrones* has become popular due to a collapse in stylistic distinction between film and television drama. I instead suggest that divergent and convergent techniques prevalent throughout the HBO series demonstrate just how much of the show's world-creation has in common with a stylistic address and narrative mode previously theorized in scholarly articulations of television serial drama.

My analysis of serial world-building has, at times, echoed long-standing debates over the ontological or cultural status of 'television versus cinema' that might seem outdated or old-fashioned within the current climate of media convergence. My discussion of divergent world-creation, for example, restaged debates that contrast cinema's supposed

medium of mise-en-scene with television's craft of editing, whilst my analysis of convergence considered how film has been seen as an art form through its levels of meaning beyond narrative communication, yet television has often been disregarded as such precisely because of its emphasis on communication and repetition. I have not restaged these debates here to advocate their return, or to suggest that there is some unique ontological basis for the distinction between film and television. Whilst scholars conceive of notions of both a 'post-cinematic' and 'post-televisual' world where once-fixed boundaries between platforms are collapsed into a more collaborative and synergistic understanding of how media is consumed,[67] the popularity of a serial drama like *Game of Thrones* seems to supports Joke Hermes's claim that 'in everyday life relatively old-fashioned notions of the media rule'.[68] In the age of digital distribution, television's usefulness as a category originates in its ability to refer to a set of conventional patterns of construction and consumption. Considering the loose areas of consensus within scholarly examinations of televisual form and style is essential if a descriptive category like television is to be studied meaningfully.

Worlds are built through an array of different media devices. They draw on textual strategies, modes of positioning, styles and aesthetics that contemporary popular culture is, for now at least, still able to categorize according to a loose taxonomy of labels for media forms. As long as television continues to maintain its relevance for producers and audiences as a media category, I hope this analysis will prove useful to future analyses to the other serial worlds it has produced, whether by looking back to historic franchises such as *Doctor Who* (BBC, 1963–89, 2005–) or *Star Trek*, or by analysing the worlds constructed by contemporary series like *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010–) or *Westworld* (HBO, 2016–). There is far more to say about how worlds are built through serial drama than that which possible within a single article or case study. The ideas presented here should therefore be seen as the start of a process to articulate the place of serial television in popular culture's fascination with fictional worlds rather than its exhaustive conclusion.

67  See Steven Shaviro, 'Post-cinematic affect: on Grace Jones, *Boarding Gate* and *Southland Tales*', *Film-Philosophy*, vol. 14, no. 1 (2010), pp. 64–94; Marc Leverette, Brian L. Ott and Cara Louise Buckley, 'Introduction', in *It's Not TV: HBO in the Post-Television Era* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008), pp. 1–10.

68  Joke Hermes, 'Critical versus everyday perspectives on television', in Marijke de Valck and Jan Teurlings (eds), *After the Break: Television Theory Today* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004), p. 46.