

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING MINISTRY OF CULTURE, SPORTS AND TOURISM  
**HANOI UNIVERSITY OF THEATRE AND CINEMA**

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**DO THANH HAI**

**THE ART OF NARRATION  
IN TELEVISION DRAMA SERIES**

**Summary of Art Doctoral Dissertation**

Major: Theory and History of Cinema and Television

Code: 9 21 02 31

**HANOI – 2026**

The dissertation was researched and completed at:  
**Hanoi University of Theatre and Cinema**

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**Reviewer 1:**

**Reviewer 2:**

**Reviewer 3:**

The dissertation is defended before the University-level Evaluation Council, Hanoi University of Theatre and Cinema

Time: ... hour ... date ... month ... year 2026

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## INTRODUCTION

### 1. Rationale for Topic Selection

Film is a product of cinematic art. There are two main film genres: non-fiction film, known as documentary film, and fiction film, known as feature film. Each of these film genres has different sub-types.

In cinema, the narrative elements consist of plot, character, point of view, setting, and theme. Among these, plot and characters play a vital role in formulating the content of the narrative.

Feature films screened in theaters typically have a duration ranging from 90 minutes to 180 minutes (though some films are longer), and are referred to as cinematic feature films. Feature films broadcast on television or digital platforms, characterized by a long duration and divided into multiple smaller parts (episodes), are called television drama series. Inherently, both utilize cinematic language to tell stories, reflecting reality through fiction, but audiences receive them differently. One is experienced in a theater, the other at home. Due to their extended length and episodic division, television drama series employ narration techniques, plot utilization, and character development differently from cinematic feature films.

Emerging in the early 1990s, Vietnamese television drama series of that era adopted the narration approach of cinematic feature films while being broadcast on television.

The PhD candidate selected the topic *The Art of Narration in Television Drama Series* to research and write this dissertation.

Within the scope of this research and dissertation, the phrase "television drama series" encompasses the various other types of television drama series being studied and discussed in the topic.

### 2. Research Objectives

- To apply cinematic narration theory, along with other related theories, to the study of narration in television drama series.
- To identify lessons for the creation and production of domestic television drama series, meeting audience demands.

### 3. Object of Research

- Several common narration methods in television drama series: Complex, distributed narration featuring multiple plots and multiple characters.
- Plot types and plot devices used in television drama narration.
- The construction of characters, character groups, and character conflicts/contradictions in television drama narration.
- Examining how elements present in a film—such as plot, characters, conflicts

and other narrative components—create audience engagement.

#### **4. Scope of Research**

- Plot (concept, the application of complex plot types, and plot devices in television drama narration); (2) Characters (concept, the utilization of characters, character groups, and their actions, contradictions, and conflicts); (3) Narration methods in television drama series involving multiple plots and characters, alongside the interrelations of these elements; (4) Investigating, analyzing, and elucidating the elements that connect with the viewing audience.

- Analyzing several foreign and Vietnamese television drama series to clarify and substantiate the research issues. These include series such as *Breaking Bad* (USA) with its five-act linear narration; *Unforgotten* (UK) with its distributed narration; *The Untamed* (China) with its in media res approach and framed narrative; *The Secrets of the Golden Triangle* (Vietnam) featuring parallel narration; and *Quynh the Doll* (Vietnam) utilizing a bifurcated phase narrative structure.

#### **5. Research Questions and Hypotheses**

##### 5.1. Research Questions

- Question 1: How have plot and character in cinematic narration been utilized to construct the narrative content and tell stories in television drama series?

- Question 2: Through what complex narration mechanisms, involving specific uses of plot and character, do television drama series create and sustain engagement with the audience?

##### 5.2. Research Hypotheses

Both cinematic feature films and television drama series employ cinematic language for narration. The application and innovation of complex cinematic narration principles, particularly in developing multi-strand plots and multiple characters, are key to creating television works with appeal and depth, thereby enhancing effective audience connection.

To produce a television drama series that fully meets the principles of complex cinematic narration and engages audiences, filmmakers must thoroughly understand and apply theoretical concepts of cinematic narration, plot, character, and audience connection in the creation and production of this genre.

#### **6. Research Tasks**

- Systematizing theoretical issues relevant to the research, such as plot and character within cinematic narrative theory and television drama

narration theory, Reception theory in film, Character engagement theory, and other related theories... From this, establishing a theoretical foundation for the research topic.

- Based on theoretical frameworks, analyzing the narration methods in several representative television drama series.

- Elucidating the mechanisms through which television drama series forge connections with the audience via plot and characters.

## **7. Research Methods**

7.1. Utilizing Cinematic-television narration theory, along with other related interdisciplinary theories such as Reception theory in film, and Cognitive theory from experience...

7.2. Methods of analysis, synthesis, and comparison between cinematic film narration and multi-episode television series narration; as well as between literary characters and cinematic characters, to evaluate and demonstrate the process of utilizing plots to construct stories and characters in television drama narration.

7.3. Specific research operations such as searching, referencing, document reading, film viewing, film analysis, synthesis, and generalization...

## **8. Novelty of the Research**

(1) Pointing out a theoretical research direction for cinematic-television narration, which has not yet been comprehensively studied in Vietnam. This is a necessary study, and no similar research works currently exist in our country.

(2) Researching the application of complex cinematic narration theory to television drama narration, focusing on two crucial elements: plot and character, as well as employing Cognitive theory from experience and Character engagement theory to explore methods of forging audience connections. An approach based on the presented theories to analyze several foreign television drama series featuring various complex narration methods...

(3) Analyzing the art of narration and audience connection methods in two Vietnamese television series, *The Secrets of the Golden Triangle* and *Quynh the Doll*, which fulfill both the complex narration requirements of television dramas and the need for audience engagement...

(4) Approaching the principles of delivering television drama series to audiences via television broadcast and digital platforms in Vietnam, thereby meeting the specific requirements of the television press agencies in our country.

## 9. Scientific Significance and Contributions of the Research

9.1. Scientific Significance: Analyzing and clarifying theoretical issues regarding complex narration in television drama series, thereby establishing a theoretical basis for narration in this film genre.

9.2. Practical Contributions: Serving as a reference document for narration in television drama series, applicable to the creation, teaching, studying, and production of this film type.

## 10. Dissertation Arrangement

Besides the introduction, literature review, conclusion, references, and related published articles, the dissertation content is Arrangement into three chapters:

**Chapter 1: Theoretical Foundation of the Topic** - The content of this chapter is to build a theoretical foundation for the research.

**Chapter 2: Plot, Character, and Complex Narration in Television Drama Series** - This chapter clarifies complex narration methods in television drama series.

**Chapter 3: Connecting Television Drama Series with the Audience** - Analyzing elements that connect television drama series with the viewing audience.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1. Literature on Literary Narrative Theory

According to authors Susanna Onega and J.A. García Landa in *Narratology: An Introduction*, Aristotle's *Poetics* has a narrative nature that can be applied to all genres utilizing a plot.

*The Nature of Narrative: Revised and Expanded* is a collaborative study presenting the developmental history of literary narrative theory...

Author H. Porter Abbott, in *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, answers the question: What is narrative? How does it function and shape life?

*A Companion to Narrative Theory* covers aspects of narrative theory, from its historical development to cinematic narration...

In Vietnam, literary narrative is an area of interest among authors such as Tran Dinh Su, Phuong Luu, Le Nguyen Can, Dang Anh Dao, La Nguyen, Dao Tuan Anh, Cao Kim Lan, etc. Several books on literary narratology by these authors have been published. Such as *Narratology - Theory and Application*, *Literary Theory*, *The Implied Author in the Rhetoric of Fiction*, *The Magic of Narrative: Narratology and Interpretations of Modern Vietnamese Literature...*

## 2. Literature on Narration in Cinema and Television

In *"What Novels Can Do That Films Can't (And Vice Versa)"* by Seymour Chatman, narration is an organizational text based on words, while film relies on speech combined with actors' movements... Regarding cinematic narration, Chatman introduces the concepts of "story" and "discourse" in *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, and *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film*. In *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, Christian Metz discusses the approach to cinema as an impression of objective reality.

Author David Bordwell, with books like *Poetics of Cinema*, proposes the concept of "three-dimensional space in cinematic narration"; His book *Narration in the Fiction Film* introduces the narration principles of this film genre, based on the narrative structure concepts of syuzhet, fabula, and audience inference. In *Narration in the New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Technique*, according to Kristin Thompson, the narration approach of New Hollywood, despite significant contextual changes, retains its classical structure; she proposes theories on film narration involving multiple plot-lines, multiple characters, and multiple goals. Her book *Narration in Film and Television* discusses distributed narration with interwoven plot lines.

The book *Puzzle Films: Complex Narration in Contemporary Cinema* proposes the concept of puzzle narratives.

*Plot Twist in Television Serial Narrative* introduces the concept of the plot twist...

In *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Narration*, Jason Mittell introduces the concept of complex narration in television dramas.

R.W. Richards in *Cinematic Television: Serial Drama Goes to the Movies* compares narration in cinema and television drama, proposing the concept of television's cinematic nature, also known as cinematic television.

In Vietnam, there is no existing research on narration in cinematic television. A few documents providing theoretical overviews have been translated...

## 3. Literature on Plot and Character in Cinematic Narration and Complex Television

Narration *The Handbook of Narrative Analysis* defines the concept of plot. There are varying interpretations of plot. In *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure, and Frames*, if the plot is considered the "soul" of the story, it must have a non-arbitrary beginning and closure...

According to David Bordwell, the plot "juggles the order of events in the story (fabula), providing images of past memories or future imaginations; it can

manipulate story duration, expanding or condensing the timeframe of events."

In the work *Plot Twist in Television Serial Narrative*, Héctor J. Pérez researches the plot twist used commonly in complex narration in cinema and television. Components of a plot twist in a TV series include: (1) Building audience trust over a long period and designing multiple plots to lay the groundwork for a surprise or a shocking turning point; (2) A multi-plot structure that inherently creates a surprising event; (3) Cognitive adaptation, evaluation, and multi-strand plotting.

According to Kristin Thompson, the intersecting of plot lines across episodes often extends over a seasonal level or a sub-seasonal level.

In *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Narration*, Jason Mittell argues that complex narration provides a foundation for more focused plot progression, allowing character relationships to unfold from the plot.

In *Characters and Their Plots*, Patrick Colm Hogan states, "The relationship between plots and characters is highly complex. Plot lines are tied to character lines...".

Fotis Jannidis, in *Character: A Handbook of Narratology*, defines character as: "represented by words, or simulated in the story world, which can be human or human-like. Characters are used to identify participants in the story, created by media, as opposed to 'real people'..."

Author Jens Eder, in *Characters in Fictional Worlds: Understanding Imaginary Beings in Literature, Film, and Other Media*, presents theories on characters, exploring the differences between characters and real people; characterization and representation; character and plot;

In *Reading People, Reading Plots: Character, Progression, and the Interpretation of Narrative*, James Phelan argues that character is inseparable from plot and is constructed through: (1) the mimetic, showing real human traits; (2) the synthetic, inventing traits with fictional colors; (3) the thematic, conveying a meaningful message, dividing characters into "static" and "dynamic" types.

Richard Clark, in *Tzvetan Todorov's 'Structural Analysis of Narrative'*, details film plots using the Equilibrium-Disequilibrium theory, where the fictional story space "moves through 5 steps: (1) A state of equilibrium; (2) A disruption of the equilibrium; (3) A recognition of the disruption; (4) An attempt to repair the disruption; (5) A reinstatement of a new equilibrium."

Christopher Booker in *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories* introduces the meta-plot concept with stages: (1) Anticipation; (2) Dream; (3) Frustration; (4) Nightmare; (5) Resolution... The 7 plot types are: (1)

Overcoming the Monster; (2) Rags to Riches; (3) The Quest; (4) Voyage and Return; (5) Comedy; (6) Tragedy; (7) Rebirth.

#### **4. Literature on Cognitive Theory from Experience and Creating Audience Connection**

In researching *Understanding Characters*, Jens Eder not only analyzes characters using a 'character clock' with four dimensions but also posits that an important function of a film character is communication and audience connection.

Willem G. Weststeijn summarizes studies on Cognitive theory of character experience in *Towards a cognitive theory of character*, explaining why certain characters impact and impress audiences.

According to Willem, Seymour Chatman proposed an open theory of character, dividing a story into three components: (1) Plot, (2) Character; (3) Setting. Meanwhile, formalist and structuralist critics link character solely to plot. They also rely on personal traits to construct the image and external characteristics of characters, such as appearance, behavior, and gestures related to inner feelings...

Author Murray Smith discusses connecting characters with receivers in *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema*. He analyzes characters, their role in audience experience, and explores techniques used to draw audiences closer to characters.

D. J. Tobón, in *Empathy and sympathy: Two contemporary models of character engagement*, clarifies the concepts of identification, empathy, and sympathy with characters to establish a basis for discussing character-audience connection. According to Cognitive theory of experience, audience connection with a work stems from the character's emotion and the audience's emotional response. Identification occurs when audiences imagine themselves in the character's situation, playing a crucial role in eliciting their emotional responses.

According to Alberto N. Garcia in his study on emotions in contemporary television dramas, the essence of emotion involves cognition, culture, and physiological development/changes... Television dramas have a different narration style than feature films due to time factors. Because of narrative time extension, audience emotion and familiarity with characters are quite stable... engaging audience emotions, even for antagonistic characters...

The dissertation will: (1) Point out the theoretical research direction for cinematic-television narration, which currently lacks comprehensive study in Vietnam; (2) Research the application of complex cinematic narration theory into both foreign and Vietnamese television drama series; and (3)

Define the principles of delivering television dramas to audiences via television broadcast and digital platforms in Vietnam.

## **CONTENT**

### **Chapter 1: THEORETICAL FOUNDATION OF THE TOPIC**

#### **1.1. Cinematic - Television Narration**

##### 1.1.1. Definition of Cinematic - Television Narration

According to Ismail S. Talib, narration is "telling what and how, in the transition between two states." David Bordwell proposes a three-dimensional space in cinematic narration: (a) Story world; (b) Plot; (c) Narration; defining it as: "Film narration is the process whereby the film's syuzhet and style interact in the course of cueing and channeling the spectator's construction of the fabula."

##### 1.1.2. The Difference Between Narrative and Cinematic-Television Narration

According to George Bluestone, there is a fundamental difference between perceiving imaginary images (literature) and visible images (cinema). Literature tells using words, possessing a sign nature that indirectly affects readers. Cinema shows using images, possessing an iconic nature that directly affects audiences.

#### **1.2. Plot and Character in Cinematic - Television Narration**

##### 1.2.1. Concept of Plot: E. M. Forster

"A story is a narrative of events arranged in their time sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality." Karin Kukkonen defines "...plot provides the arrangement of events and character actions in the story...", formed by: (1) A fixed, holistic structure; (2) A progressive structure; (3) Authorial design.

##### 1.2.2. Main Types of Plot: There are three main plot types

(1) Aristotle's Three-Act structure; (2) Freytag's Pyramid; (3) The Fichtean Curve.

##### 1.2.3. Plot Devices

(1) Aristotle's classical plot devices; (2) Unforeseen situation (Deus Ex Machina); (3) Starting in the middle of the story (In media res); (4) Plot Voucher; (5) Cliffhanger; (6) MacGuffin; (7) Red Herring; (8) Unreliable Narrator; (9) Plot Twist.

##### 1.2.4. Plot Development

Plot development is deploying the narrative structure, usually developed

along a cause-and-effect chain, from the initial situation to the conclusion.

#### 1.2.5. Concept of Character

Jens Eder: "Characters are conceived as representations of human beings, ranging from intelligent animals, singing plants, animated machines, gods, aliens...". They have 4 traits: (1) artifacts; (2) fictional beings; (3) symbols, and (4) signs.

#### 1.2.6. Relationship Between Character and Plot

Character and plot have an organic, tightly linked relationship. In the journey of the cause-and-effect chain, within space and time, character actions propel the story forward.

### 1.3. Complex Narration in Television Drama Series

#### 1.3.1. Overview of Classical and Contemporary Cinematic Narration

According to film theorists, the narrative structure of classical Hollywood cinema is Aristotle's three acts. New Hollywood, however, usually follows a four-act narrative structure: (1) Setup; (2) Complicating action; (3) Development; (4) Climax and epilogue.

#### 1.3.2. Characteristics of Complex Narration in Television Drama Series

##### 1.3.2.1. *Multiple Plots*

Author Stevan asserts that multiple plotlines occurring simultaneously is one of the core elements creating complex narration in television drama series.

##### 1.3.2.2. *Multiple Characters*

Complex narration in television series employs multiple main characters for multi-strand plots... Characters undergo characterization by the audience in two ways: (1) top-down characterization; (2) bottom-up characterization.

##### 1.3.2.3. *Narration Deployment in Television Drama Series*

There are two ways to deploy narration in TV dramas. First type: Plot-Driven Narratives, where characters react and participate in the story; Second type: Character-Driven Narratives, where character actions create development.

### 1.4. Cognitive Theory from Experience and Character Connection

#### 1.4.1. Cognitive Theory from Experience

Based on Cognitive Theory, David Bordwell argues: "The audience's comprehension of the film is the fundamental target principle of narration."

The plot can manipulate audience hypotheses and inferences by: (1) Using delays, postponing the creation of the whole story; (2) Creating gaps for audience hypotheses and inferences; (3) Using information repetition to reinforce audience assumptions, inferences, and hypotheses...

According to Pérez López and Héctor J., the emotion of surprise is aroused by turns in plot twists, leading to positive evaluations from the audience.

## 1.4.2. Theory of Character Engagement:

### 1.4.2.1. *Character Identification*

Character identification is the imagination of projecting oneself into the character's circumstances and position.

### 1.4.2.2. *Murray Smith's Audience Engagement Theory*

The ways cinematic and television feature films attract, maintain audience attention, and connect with them.

### 1.4.2.3. *Empathy and Sympathy*

Empathy is feeling someone's pain, while sympathy is feeling pity for someone.

### 1.4.2.4. *Sympathy for Anti-Hero Characters*

Audiences sympathize with the actions of villainous/anti-hero characters.

### 1.4.2.5. *Audience Emotional Responses*

Victor Aertsen summarizes seven types of emotions that generate audience sympathy for characters: (1) Approval: sympathy formed from moral approval of characters showing partiality; (2) Admiration: connecting with characters displaying righteous moral behavior; (3) Compassion: sympathy expressed through pity; (4) Attraction: characters with an appealing appearance; (5) Familiarity: audiences tend to favor what is familiar to them; (6) Resonance: harmony in evaluating and establishing connections with characters; (7) Intimacy: witnessing private, evocative moments of a character...

## 1.5. Analytical Framework

The Analytical Framework includes the following criteria:

(1) Plot criteria: plot types; plot devices; plot deployment methods; plot linkages and the complexity of these links.

(2) Character criteria: Character types, the relationship between character and plot; mechanisms for creating character-audience connection.

(3) Narrative structure criteria: Complex narration methods in television drama series.

## Chapter Partial Conclusion

Narration in television drama series utilizes complex methods, multiple plots, and multiple characters. The plot arranges events in a cause-and-effect sequence to present the story. Characters are agents who, driven by internal and external conflicts, perform actions that push the story forward.

Intertwined main and sub-plots propel the development toward the story's

conclusion. Multiple main and supporting characters, with diverse conflicts, occur along a cause-and-effect chain.

To maintain comprehension of the film, complex TV drama narration uses techniques like creating delays, gaps, or repetitions, utilizing mental schemas and cognitive frameworks in the audience, manipulating their inferences and hypotheses. The levels of connection with a character are recognition (identification), alignment, and loyalty.

## **Chapter 2: PLOT, CHARACTER AND COMPLEX NARRATION IN TELEVISION DRAMA SERIES**

### **2.1. Narration with Multiple Twisted Storylines and Character-Driven Plot in *Breaking Bad***

#### 2.1.1. Narration Method and Film Structure

*Breaking Bad* has a five-act storyline structure spanning 5 seasons, with subplots running parallel and interwoven...

#### 2.1.2. Plot Deployment and Plot Devices:

##### 2.1.2.1. Utilization of Todorov's Plot Deployment

Plots are deployed from a state of equilibrium to disequilibrium, then restoring a new equilibrium, before falling into another new equilibrium different from the past... The character faces: making illegal money and avoiding capture.

##### 2.1.2.2. Plot Devices Used in the Film

(1) "Starting in the middle of the story"; (2) "Unforeseen situation"; (3) "Reversal of fortune"; (4) "Cliffhanger"; (5) "Twists".

#### 2.1.3. Characters and Character Conflicts in the Film

Ranging from inner conflicts to murdering for self-defense, then Walter killing to assert power... He is also an anti-hero character.

Characters in the film are filled with internal conflicts, obsessions, as well as external conflicts with society and the people around them.

### **2.2. Distributed Narration with Plot-Driven Storylines in *Unforgotten***

#### 2.2.1. Narration Method with Distributed Structure in the Film

The series tells independent stories by solving individual cases, featuring a linear main storyline interwoven with distributed and circular narration.

#### 2.2.2. Utilization of Fichtean Curve Plot

The film narrates cases involving multiple characters and depicts various distinct destinies.

#### 2.2.3. Plot Deployment and Plot Devices in the Film

From the story of discovered remains to the investigations, utilizing plot-driven

narration and devices such as "cliffhangers"; "red herrings"; and "twists"...

#### 2.2.4. Characters and Character Conflicts

Characters exhibit intense, profound conflicts with outsiders and themselves...

### **2.3. Complex Narration from the Middle, Interweaving Past - Present in The Untamed**

#### 2.3.1. Narration Method and Film Structure

*The Untamed* utilizes "The Hero's Journey" narration approach, having to overcome numerous obstacles, complete a mission or achieve a goal, and return home in a transformed state.

#### 2.3.2. Plot Types Used in Narration

The film employs an "in media res" approach and a framed narrative (story within a story). The organic link between the two stories is the multidimensional relationships of the main and supporting characters...

#### 2.3.3. Plot Deployment and Plot Devices Used in the Film

*The Untamed* harmoniously intertwines main and sub-plots, with the main storyline driven by the plot, featuring a fast-paced framed narrative style. The film uses a series of plot devices, such as "In media res"; "Flashback"; "Unforeseen situation"; MacGuffin...

#### 2.3.4. Characters and Character Conflicts

There are multiple pairs of characters vying for influence, intertwining to create harmonious and vivid connections in a vortex of power struggles and complex emotional relationships...

### **2.4. Complex Narration in Vietnamese Television Drama Series**

#### 2.4.1. Narration in *The Secrets of the Golden Triangle*

Narration in "The Secrets of the Golden Triangle" features: (1) Non-linear narration with a Fichtean Curve plot; (2) Use of plot devices; (3) Division of characters into protagonist and antagonist classes, with continuous responsive situations, events, and actions.

##### 2.4.1.1. Linear Structure with Fichtean Curve Plot

*The Secrets of the Golden Triangle* features a plot built on the Fichtean Curve model, where the rising action with a series of conflicts extends near the end of the film (up to episode 35), and the climax only appears in the final three episodes (from episode 36 to 38). Action gradually decreases, culminating in the successful resolution of the case. With this plot type, characters are typically thrust immediately into daunting situations.

##### 2.4.1.2. Utilizing Plot Devices to Create Intrigue and Suspense

The film utilizes plot devices to captivate audiences, such as: "Unforeseen

situations"; "Red herrings" - a distraction device to "deceive" the audience...; "Cliffhangers"; "Plot vouchers"; "Plot twists"...

#### 2.4.1.3. *Division of Multiple Characters into Protagonists and Antagonists and Continuous Responsive Situations, Events and Actions*

The film *The Secrets of the Golden Triangle* has many characters, divided into two opposing poles. The protagonist line: the anti-narcotics police force; and the antagonist line: drug traffickers and corrupt police officers. Characters are frequently placed in situations like being hunted, fleeing, attempting to fulfill a mission, or simply uncovering a hidden secret. A series of events are pushed forward, keeping the audience in suspense, constantly reasoning and predicting. By the end of the film, knots are untied, leaving the audience pleasantly surprised.

#### 2.4.2. Narration in *Quynh the Doll*

*Quynh the Doll* is narrated through a flexible, compelling complex narration approach with the following traits: (1) Linear narration with multiple interwoven plots and characters; (2) Plot devices are used rationally, featuring numerous "twists"; (3) Continuously escalating character conflicts to climaxes, creating narrative tension.

##### 2.4.2.1. *Linear Structure with Multiple Plots and Multiple Characters*

Three plots about three girls in a prostitution den interweave across episodes, painting a comprehensive picture of the fates of girls who fell into the "mud" and their individual choices leading to different endings. Subplots complement the main plot's development, creating character conflicts. Transformations in the three girls' lives intertwine through plot lines, harmoniously blending to create an authentic, vivid, comprehensible, and engaging story.

##### 2.4.2.2. *Rational Use of Plot Devices with Multiple "Twists"*

Plot lines follow a three-act cause-and-effect approach, attractive due to effective use of plot devices, especially "Plot twists"; "Dead ends"; "Flashbacks"; "Unforeseen situations".

##### 2.4.1.3. *Character Conflicts are Continuously Escalated, Creating Tension*

Adhering to Todorov's five steps: equilibrium - disequilibrium - recognition of disequilibrium - repairing disequilibrium - new equilibrium...

The narrative is plot-driven, so these knots occur continuously, pushing situations to a climax and further developing the story, arousing curiosity and excitement for the audience. Additionally, the film constantly creates and resolves knots to evoke curiosity and surprise.

## Chapter Partial Conclusion

To evaluate the role of plot and character in complex television drama narration, the PhD candidate analyzed serialized films such as *Breaking Bad* - long-running TV series (five seasons); *Unforgotten* (5 seasons); and multi-episode series like *The Untamed*, *The Secrets of the Golden Triangle*, and *Quynh the Doll*.

All films feature multiple main and sub-plots interwoven and competing to weave an overall story picture. "Breaking Bad" has a character-driven storyline; *Unforgotten*, *The Untamed*, and *The Secrets of the Golden Triangle* follow plot-driven storylines; *Quynh the Doll* leans toward a storyline driven by both plot and character.

Complex narration in multi-episode TV dramas is prominently characterized by multiple plots and multiple characters. Characters act as agents propelling plot development, relying on contradictions and conflicts to create knots, resolve them, and push the story forward.

## Chapter 3: CONNECTING WITH THE AUDIENCE IN TELEVISION DRAMA SERIES NARRATION

Complex narration features interwoven multiple plots following linear causality within defined time-space, with flexible, surprising events and "twists", along with numerous characters divided into action lines that push the story to climaxes, captivating the audience.

### 3.1. Audience Connection in Complex Narration with Interwoven Multiple Plots

#### 3.1.1. Audience Connection via Plot and "Twists" in "Breaking Bad"

To win audience affection, the director demonstrated novelty and breakthroughs in narration right from season 1, episode 1. The plot is comprehensible and arouses curiosity. Poverty and death trigger the main character's purpose and motivation.

Throughout 5 seasons, alongside the main plot and storyline regarding Walter White's transformation, audiences are introduced to numerous subplots featuring secondary storylines subtly present throughout. Despite tracking multiple plotlines simultaneously, they can still understand the film and are "captivated" due to the filmmakers' psychological manipulation.

While watching, audiences are constantly in a state of tension and excitement.

Shocking "twists" generate the film's appeal. The creators manipulated audience judgments, hypotheses, and inferences in a challenging "cat-and-

mouse" game.

Situations seemingly reaching a dead-end, nearly exposed, between the person in the "light" (Walter) and the person groping in the "dark" (Hank) make the narrative resemble a chase between antagonistic characters, affecting audience emotions and minds, serving as glue connecting them to the story...

### 3.1.2. Connection by Creating Gaps for Audience Hypotheses and Inferences in *Unforgotten*

Using a narrative approach with multiple simultaneously developing plots, creating gaps in audience hypotheses and inferences alongside surprising endings, *Unforgotten* successfully connects them to the film.

*Unforgotten* is a crime investigation film, beginning with an unidentified corpse and a mystery of why it is there. However, upon watching, audiences quickly activate the "schema" of the crime genre, following pre-existing mental maps and hypotheses when raising questions typical of this film type. Thanks to inferences based on familiar schemas and patterns, they understand the narration method.

The director employs numerous deceptive techniques, manipulating audience psychology, inferences, and hypotheses, skillfully leading them from one suspicion to another to uncover the truth and unmask the culprit, creating a vivid and engaging guessing game, provoking excitement for audiences to participate in this thorny puzzle until every dark corner is revealed, audience expectations are met, and their psychology is relieved.

### 3.1.3. Overt - Covert Narration with Delays to Connect Audiences in *The Untamed*

*The Untamed* has a perplexing opening for audiences, as the filmmakers retained the original work's sequence upon adaptation, meaning the film's plot begins "in media res," when the main character Wei Wuxian is reincarnated, returning in the body of Mo Xuanyu, the second son of the Mo clan. Just reincarnated, Wei Wuxian immediately encounters old acquaintances from 16 years ago, the time he was driven to death at Nightless City: Lan Wangji, his childhood friend; Wen Ning, the Ghost General who terrifies thousands but pledges loyalty solely to him; Jiang Cheng, leader of the Jiang sect, the clan that raised him, who hates him for bringing disaster to his family; Jin Ling, son of Jiang Yanli, Jiang Cheng's sister.

The first delay technique is the mystery embedded within the main plot itself. The second delay technique used in the narration is utilizing covert plot lines hidden beneath the overt plot. This is also a way to manipulate the audience's mind, creating sudden shocks and releasing their emotions. With

this method of creating overt and covert delays via a story-within-a-story plot, *The Untamed* became a massively successful film.

### **3.2. Connection of Film Characters with the Audience**

#### **3.2.1. Connecting Audiences with Impressive and Profound**

Characters: Chapter 1 introduced three levels of audience engagement with characters: (1) First level, character recognition (or identification). (2) Second level, alignment; (3) Third level, expressing allegiance.

Across 5 seasons of *Breaking Bad*, featuring dozens of main and supporting characters, ensuring audience connection with characters is undeniably a crucial element behind the film's success.

In *Unforgotten*, the main plot characters, two investigating detectives Cassie Stuart and Sunny Khan, become companions journeying with the audience through four seasons. Audiences witness the difficulties in investigating complex, decades-old murders. From recognizing the characters, audiences forge frameworks of alignment with them, empathizing with their actions, emotions, and thoughts; passing moral judgments, and formulating natural emotional responses—whether sympathy, affection, hatred, indifference, or anger... The audience's structure of sympathy serves as the glue bonding them to the characters.

*The Untamed* possesses the least complex structure, yet the emotions the characters bring to the audience are deeply profound and impressive, perfectly and delicately reflecting sincere, simple affections that audiences constantly seek. Audiences are moved by the genuine relationship between the two main characters. They admire the courage and loyalty of the characters.

#### **3.2.2. Creating Audience Connection via Anti-Hero Characters**

The appearance of anti-heroes in television drama series offers audiences authentic and exhilarating experiences, helping them understand themselves and those around them. Audiences are drawn to anti-heroes because these characters reveal what is hidden inside every person.

### **3.3. Audience Connection in *The Secrets of the Golden Triangle* and *Quynh the Doll***

A distinct trait among Vietnamese audiences is their fondness for films reflecting societal life and people in a way they can see themselves in. Vietnamese people typically show compassion and sympathy for the disadvantaged in society, and despise bullies abusing the weak... This psychology helps them understand the story and attach to characters, creating diverse emotional responses based on mechanisms of character recognition, alignment, and allegiance.

### 3.3.1. Audience Connection via Open-Ended Narration in *The Secrets of the Golden Triangle*

#### 3.3.1.1. *Creating Connection by Maintaining Speculations and Hypotheses*

By openly presenting story content, whether audience speculations and hypotheses for proposed situations match the characters' problem-solving methods serves as the film's way to connect with them. When suspicions are confirmed, becoming established facts within the film, and the formed speculations prove correct (and would be acted upon if they were characters), audiences feel satisfied. If otherwise, they feel surprised or shocked.

#### 3.3.1.2. *Creating Delays, Narrative Tension, and Maintaining Attention*

To generate appeal, the film's creators crafted delays and narrative tension, maintaining audience attention.

The clear division of character lines helps audiences identify the storyline, as well as character motives and action purposes. Despite changes in rhythm and character actions, they easily align themselves with characters, grasping the actions, thoughts, and emotions of each individual.

#### 3.3.1.3. *Audience Connection with Tragic Hero Characters*

The film also constructs characters conforming to the tragic hero archetype, like Ba and Nathavon, drawing audience sympathy and understanding.

#### 3.3.1.4. *Eliciting Multiple Types of Audience Emotional Responses*

The film elicits multiple emotional responses from the audience throughout its broadcast. Audiences admire and respect the anti-narcotics police characters...

### 3.3.2. Audience Connection via Specific Narration Techniques in the TV Drama *Quynh the Doll*

#### 3.3.2.1. *Complex Narration with Multiple Plots and Multiple Characters*

As introduced in Chapter 2, *Quynh the Doll* features an accessible plot, using a linear narrative style with two interconnected story arcs. The film's main plot forms Quynh's storyline, while subplots constitute the secondary storylines for Lan, My, and other characters.

The plots follow a linear, parallel path that is clear and easy to understand. The creators use techniques like delays, gaps, and repetition to manipulate audience inferences and hypotheses, sparking interest and curiosity, alongside surprising "twists." \

#### 3.3.2.2. *Techniques of "Repetition", "Redundancy", and "Victimizing Characters" Used in Narration to Connect with the Audience*

The filmmaker used situational repetition to make subsequent situations

harsher than previous ones, keeping the audience constantly anxious for the characters. The redundancy of "misfortunes never come singly" situations frustrated many viewers, leading them to believe the filmmakers were unfair and "cruel" to this character.

### 3.3.2.3. Audience Connection via Murray Smith's Engagement Theory

*Quynh the Doll* is a successful film in connecting with audiences through levels of recognition, alignment, and allegiance with characters. When aligned with a character, audiences themselves feel pity, sympathy, and understanding. The film's characters leave profound impressions on them, eliciting clear feelings of love and hate.

### 3.3.2.4. Audience Sympathy for Anti-Hero Characters

The character Canh in the film is an anti-hero archetype as well as a tragic hero. The creators utilize techniques to foster audience "allegiance" towards Canh.

The character Lan is also built as a tragic hero. These two characters forge a structure of enduring, profound sympathy, leaving a mark on the audience. Characters in the film also bring audiences various emotional states. Admiring Quynh when witnessing her unyielding will. Touched by Lan's sincere heart towards her family... Although Canh, Lan... possess morally inappropriate aspects, audiences accept, sympathize, and feel pity for them...

### 3.3.3. Some Shortcomings in the Narration of *The Secrets of the Golden Triangle* and *Quynh the Doll*

With comprehensible plot content; rational use of techniques creating delays and gaps against audience inferences and hypotheses, arousing curiosity and surprise, maintaining attention, meeting their expectations of the film... Alongside this, the creators employed repetition, emphasizing film themes, clearly constructing character lines, and establishing levels of recognition, alignment, and allegiance with multiple characters smoothly and delicately, successfully forming a sympathetic structure with the characters.

Despite successes, shortcomings remain in the aforementioned films. (1) Narration can be lengthy, cumbersome, with many unconvincing details; (2) Character development and acting fall short of expectations; (3) Exaggeration and superficiality in content expression.

## 3.4. For Vietnamese Television Drama Series to Better Connect with Audiences and Fulfill Their Functions

The development of Vietnamese television drama series over time represents a massive stride across all facets of creation and production, as well as methods of delivering films to viewers.

Numerous television series have emerged featuring multiple plots, multiple main characters, complex narration, reflecting various social issues in our country, and bearing strong cultural hallmarks of the Vietnamese nation. These films have gradually satisfied audience demands while successfully fulfilling their political missions.

In our country, journalism is an essential informational medium for social life; serving as the mouthpiece of Party agencies, state agencies, socio-political organizations, socio-political-professional organizations, social organizations, socio-professional organizations; and acting as a forum for the people. All television stations throughout the country, from central to local levels, function as press agencies. According to Vietnam's 2016 Press Law, for a journalistic or quasi-journalistic work to enter life, it must fulfill the functions and duties of the press. Therefore, journalistic works produced by television stations in Vietnam, wanting to be broadcast (disseminated) on TV or digital platforms, must satisfy the requirements of the Press Law, including television drama series. According to the Vietnam Cinema Law, 2022, Vietnamese television drama works must naturally comply with the law's regulations.

Vietnamese television drama series, produced by our television stations (including VTV), are artistic works bearing journalistic nature, hence they must meet the requirements of the Cinema Law. Meaning, a Vietnamese television drama, besides being an art product, must possess the qualities of a journalistic product. For Vietnamese television drama series to be licensed for broadcast and widely disseminated to viewers, they must hold good ideological value and humanity, meeting the demands of propaganda and conveying positive messages to the audience.

### **Chapter Partial Conclusion**

Creators of television drama series have utilized various narration techniques like creating gaps, delays, and repetition to manipulate audience hypotheses and inferences, arousing curiosity, causing surprise, and meeting audience expectations.

Though the films feature diverse ranges of main and supporting characters, audiences clearly recognize the traits, personalities, and styles of each; not only easily distinguishing each character's role within the story but also finding tight spatial-temporal connections, empathizing with the characters, and demonstrating their allegiance...

Anti-hero characters are acknowledged, sympathized with, and even beloved by the audience.

The emotional responses characters bring to audiences are impressive, through the destinies of characters and messages conveyed by the films, while simultaneously offering them the sincere, simple sentiments they constantly seek...

Alongside advantages, Vietnamese television dramas still have weaknesses, such as meandering, redundancies, and omissions; details are sometimes exaggerated, sometimes perfunctory and offensive; acting remains stiff.

Creators of Vietnamese television dramas must focus on embedding positive messages, propagandizing national cultural elements or the beauty in Vietnamese behavior, alongside Party and State policies. Absolutely strictly adhering to the Press Law and the Vietnam Cinema Law.

## CONCLUSION

Based on fundamental narration theories such as cinematic-television narration theory, plot and character theory, cognitive theory of experience, and character-audience connection theory—acting as bases for arguments in the study—it can be seen that contemporary television drama series have achieved significant success in generating strong appeal among audiences, forging tight connections between viewers, characters, and the work.

The primary successes of this film genre rely on the following narration strengths. Narration in television dramas utilizes complex (distributed) narratives, flexibly employing multiple storylines with intertwining main and secondary plots. Plots are deployed in various ways, such as flexible linearity with competing strands (*Breaking Bad*), multiple distributed strands (*Unforgotten*); in media res (*The Untamed*); parallel linearity (*The Secrets of the Golden Triangle*); spatio-temporal bifurcated linearity (*Quynh the Doll*). This narration style boasts highly diverse plot deployments.

Complex narration in television dramas flexibly and effectively utilizes diverse plot devices such as Aristotle's classical devices, unforeseen situations (Deus Ex Machina), plot vouchers, cliffhangers, red herrings, unreliable narrators, plot twists... to stimulate surprise, curiosity, and suspense, shocking the audience with highly dramatic scenes.

Complex television narration possesses multiple intertwined protagonists and supporting characters with various types of conflicts driving plot development: characters struggling with themselves (internal conflict) and competing with each other, and with obstacles, to reach the ultimate goal (external conflict). Characters are agents driving plot development, relying on contradictions and conflicts to form knots, and resolving them to push the

story forward.

The deployment of character conflict throughout five seasons of *Breaking Bad* follows Todorov's schema: equilibrium - disequilibrium - regaining equilibrium - a highly dramatic new equilibrium reaching a climax in the final season with the main character's death. *Unforgotten* primarily exhibits the internal conflicts of suspects as old murder cases are reopened. *The Untamed* showcases the conflict between good and evil across pairs of characters revolving around five powerful clans fighting for power and profit. *The Secrets of the Golden Triangle* depicts the conflict between parallel righteous and villainous character lines within the grueling battle against transnational drug traffickers by Vietnamese police. *Quynh the Doll* reflects the inner agony and torment of prostitutes seeking redemption and their thorny path.

A vital element in connecting audiences with a TV drama is the comprehension of the film. Through techniques like creating delays, gaps, or repetition, complex TV drama narration successfully stimulates mental schemas, cognitive frameworks, and patterns within the audience's mind to manipulate their inferences and hypotheses, arousing curiosity, eliciting surprise, and fulfilling viewer expectations.

Complex TV drama narration connects viewers via three levels: recognition, alignment, and allegiance, forming a structure of sympathy that prompts diverse emotional responses.

Contemporary television dramas prominently feature numerous unique anti-hero characters with strong appeal, generating empathy, compassion, and maintaining audience allegiance alongside diverse emotional responses.

Vietnamese television dramas have made strong strides alongside the global television drama development trend. However, some narration weaknesses remain. It is hoped that in the near future, domestic television series will improve quality in both content and form, delivering great stories to audiences.

It can be affirmed that the above conclusions are drawn from utilizing the proposed "Plot - Character - Narrative Structure Analytical Framework". The conclusions demonstrate that this theoretical framework acts as a "red thread" throughout, connecting theories in Chapter 1, analyzing complex narration methods (types) in TV dramas in Chapter 2, and serving as the basis for audience connection with the films and characters. It has made the application of theory and analysis in case studies more consistent and clearer.

The research results have contributed to: (1) Systematizing and validating complex narration theory within the Vietnamese television context; (2) Analyzing

the cognitive-emotional connection mechanism of the audience—an aspect sparsely addressed in domestic research; (3) Providing grounded, practical evaluations for Vietnamese filmmakers.

Based on these findings, future research could investigate the impact of complex television narration forms on the discussion behaviors and content creation of fandom communities on social media in Vietnam.

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