Evil Contained: The Narrative Management of External and Internal Threats in 24, Sleeper Cell, The Following, and The Wire.¹

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Abstract
This paper analyzes the narrative strategies enabling US TV series to portray social and political issues by means of characters acting as embodiments of evil. The argument reveals that TV narratives both foreground and contain external and internal threats by means of practices ranging from the personalized embodiment of evil to its narrative dissemination. In the former case, the threat is an embodied force, consubstantial to characters endowed with forbidding powers. This essentialist concept of evil, it is argued, anchors the series in the tradition of gothic romances. Politically, it connotes a conservative agenda. Narrative dissemination, on the contrary, fits a constructionist concept of social dysfunctions compatible with realism: it assumes that negative elements are shaped by social determinants whose action must be traced through complex narrative developments.

1. Enemies Within and Without
The politics of the early twenty-first century as well as changes in the TV medium have created a media context in which TV series grant an ever more prominent place to the representation of evil. This evolution has been shaped by the war on terror following the 9/11 attacks, by an ever more overt fascination for crime in the visual media, and also by the commercial pressure exerted on the whole spectrum of TV fictions by cable-channel series subjected to censor-

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ship standards less stringent that those applying to TV networks. The present paper does not aim to analyze the historical and institutional aspects of this cultural context, however. It focuses instead on the narrative representations the latter sustains. Through analyses of the FOX Network’s 24 (Season 2, a.k.a Day 2) and The Following (Season 1), as well as HBO’s The Wire (Seasons 3-5) and SHOWTIME’s Sleeper Cell (Seasons 1 and 2), I investigate the narrative patterns allowing screenwriters to represent social, political, and ethical issues by means of protagonists whose actions and character traits evoke the presence of an underlying destructive principle. TV fictions, I argue, foreground and contain social threats by means of what might be called the embodiment and narrative dissemination of evil. In the former case, the threat is consubstantial to characters endowed with forbidding powers. Embodiment fits an essentialist concept of evil and, in terms of genre, anchors the series in the tradition of gothic romances. In the early twenty-first context, it often connotes a conservative agenda. Narrative dissemination, on the contrary, fits a constructionist concept of social dysfunctions compatible with realism: negative elements are portrayed as shaped by social determinants whose action must be traced through complex narrative developments. The TV series in the present corpus draw on these two representational techniques to various degrees. Evaluating their aesthetic and ideological import therefore requires analyzing the multiple visual and narrative devices generated by the coexistence of these two modes of representation of social threats.

Two main foci of evil stand out in the corpus defined above—external threats embodied in the figure of terrorists and internal threats in the shape of serial killers and cartel-style criminals. 24 and Sleeper Cell address the former type of menace: they focus on conspiracies arising from US foreign policy. Following the format initiated in its first season, 24 divides its Day 2 narrative into 24 episodes chronicling a day-long national crisis managed by the Los Angeles Counter-Terrorism Unit (CTU) and its rogue investigator Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland). Structured as a weave of interconnected subplots, Day 2’s fast-paced action focuses on a terror scheme carried out by the “Second Wave” jihadist group. Averting an excessively dichotomized configuration, 24 does not depict these enemies of the US as exclusively foreign-based: besides Middle Eastern jihadists, the terrorist cell includes US sympathizers, and is master-minded by American and European oil interests. “Second Wave” has
planned a nuclear strike against Los Angeles in the hope of forcing the US President to wage war in the Middle East. CTU agents locate the bomb and detonate it in the Mojave Desert. Most of the conspirators are neutralized and war is averted, yet the survivors avenge themselves by attempting to assassinate the US President. (The scene serves as cliffhanger ending for Day 2; the President’s surviving the attack is revealed only in a video game edition of the series and in Season 3). Sleeper Cell positions itself as a less sensationalistic, ostensibly more realistic counterpart to 24. Its slow-paced narrative provides abundant information about Muslim culture and the history of the Middle East. It is focalized from the point of view of Darwyn Al-Sayeed (Michael Ealy), an African American Muslim working as undercover agent for the FBI. Darwyn has infiltrated a terrorist cell in Los Angeles composed of jihadists from several countries (Saudi Arabia, the US, France and Bosnia). In Season 1, the group plans a bacteriological and a chemical attack, each of which is foiled in the nick of time. In Season 2, a new cell tries to detonate a radioactive device in LA. This plan fails too, yet one member of the group manages to carry out a conventional suicide bombing in Las Vegas.

The Wire and The Following are devoted mostly to internal threats: they deal with crime developing on US soil and anchored in the local social context. The Wire narrates the efforts of Baltimore policemen and politicians to stem drug crime in inner-city neighborhoods. The series has been widely praised for its realism, as it takes under consideration multiple issues such as poverty, race, political intrigues at municipal and state level, rivalry among police departments, tensions between inner city and suburban constituencies, as well as the role of the school system and the local press. It is also remarkable for its high standard of acting performance. In a more gothic vein, The Following narrates the havoc wrought by Joe Carroll (James Purefoy), a literature professor-turned-serial-killer who enacts in real life what Edgar Allan Poe had consigned to writing. Carroll creates a cult of emulators who seek existential salvation in death-obsessed Romanticism. The cult is the more terrifying as its membership is initially unknown: new converts, and therefore new crimes, pop up day after day. They are countered by a FBI force aided by Ryan Hardy (Kevin Bacon), a former lover of the serial murderer’s wife. The notion of internal threat is in this case psychoanalytically resonant, as Carroll’s madness find echoes in Ryan’s own death obsession. In spite of their predominantly domestic focus,
The Wire and The Following, like 24 and Sleeper Cell, partly blur the distinction between internal and external menaces. The Wire contains numerous allusions to US foreign ventures in the mid-2000s: one drug sold in Baltimore is nicknamed “WMD”; Season 5 is devoted to truthfulness in politics and the press, thereby drawing an explicit parallel with the propaganda campaign that led to the war in Iraq. Likewise, The Following may in part be read as a narrative involving characters—law-enforcement personnel with a military background—who have been exposed to various aspects of the war on terror.

In all of these fictions, evil acts as an embodied agent, manifesting itself through the agency of characters we might call charismatic villains. Yet different texts confer various degrees of narrative prominence to these nefarious figures. In The Following and 24, figures of evil are central to the very concept of the series: the former revolves entirely around Carroll; the latter could barely be imagined without Middle Eastern terrorists such as Mamud Rashhed Faheen (Anthony Azizi) and Syed Ali (Francesco Quinn) or their American allies—CTU traitor Nina Myers (Sarah Clarke), misguided liberal upper middle-class fiancée Marie Warner (Laura Harris), and oil-interests henchman Peter Kingsley (Tobin Bell). In Sleeper Cell and The Wire, on the contrary, the depiction of Saudi terrorist mastermind Faris-al-Farik (Oded Fehr) and Baltimore drug lords Avon Barksdale (Wood Harris) and Russell “Stringer” Bell (Idris Elba) may be viewed as concessions to narrative conventions the series do not fully endorse.

2. Narrative Ambiguities and the Gothic Romance
The impact of charismatic villains on the the communities they putatively inhabit is, of course, devastating. Intriguingly, this social disruption contaminates the narrative economy of the TV fictions as well: evil is not only a social but also a narrative threat. Specifically, its presence in a text generates ambiguities that seem to defeat the project of countering its destructive force. Therefore, making sense of evil’s unmanageability requires in the first place an analysis in terms of genre. Protagonists acting as living embodiment of metaphysical principles—good or evil—are figures of gothic romance. Accordingly, I derive the major part of the theoretical apparatus for the present argument from Fredric Jameson’s discussion of the romance in The Political Unconscious (1981), which relies in turn on
the genre theories of Northrop Frye and Mikhail Bakthin. As far as thematics go, Jameson’s remarks about, respectively, the nature of romance protagonists and the genre’s core thematics are of direct relevance to our corpus. With regard to the former item, Jameson argues that evil characters in romances are qualitatively different from traditional epic protagonists—from the heroes of the early *chansons de geste*, for instance (118). In the epic, good and evil are “positional” attributes: they are distributed in a stable fashion among heroes and villains (118). By comparison, romances—or, more accurately, gothic romances, which are the actual object of Jameson’s discussion—are based on a mechanism of ambivalence: evil is alternately embodied, disembodied, and re-embodied; it is the more fascinating as it can be transferred from one protagonist to the other. In a remark that potentially complicates the ideological interpretation of contemporary series, Jameson adds that the ambiguities of romance protagonists are the outcome of a social situation in which political and class opponents are forced to concede that, at some level, they share similar interests and values (118).

24 illustrates Jameson’s insight in so far as it makes evil either a viral property circulating among an increasing number of carriers or a latent undercurrent affecting presumed champions of order and virtue. The initial developments of *Day 2* ostensibly abide by the formula of the epic: good and evil seem anchored in ethically unambiguous figures; a clear line separates Jack Bauer and President David Palmer (Dennis Haysbert) from the Second-Wave jihadists. Yet new villains with increasingly unexpected profiles are introduced from one episode to the next—Faheen leads to the more sinister Ali, then to a white supremacist group, to ex-CTU agent Myers, to Marie Warner and Kingsley—as if the threat were constantly shifting from one figure to the other. This actantial fluidity is teasingly heightened by the fact that evil can be misidentified (in the guise of false suspects or decoys) or only temporarily embodied (in the shape of what we might call floating suspects). Reza Naiyeer (Phillip Rhys), Marie Warner’s British-educated fiancé, and Marie’s father Robert (John Terry), a businessman with CIA connections, barely escape torture when wrongly profiled as accomplices. David Palmer’s ex-wife Sherry (Penny Johnson Jerald) is exposed as an accomplice of the conspirators, yet eventually helps unveil the backers of the nuclear strike. Above all, following the custom of nineteenth-century popular fiction, 24 relies on ambiguity and actantial reversals. In an outra-
geous scene of *Day 2*, Bauer shoots a convict in cold blood and decapitates his corpse in order to ingratiate himself with the jihadists’ white supremacist allies. (The character thus sacrificed is a physically repellent child rapist, which gives him limited claims on viewers’ sympathies.) Similarly, in *Sleeper Cell* (*Season 2*), Darwyn meticulously avenges the murder of his girlfriend, single mother Gayle Bishop (Melissa Sagemiller), by having Faris Al-Farik’s wife Samia (Susan Pari) die in the presence of her husband: he chaperones the unsuspecting Samia from London to Farik’s jihadist camp in Yemen and orders an American missile strike targeted at a transponder hidden in her luggage.

About the overall thematic tenor of the romance, Jameson takes his cue from Frye: he argues that the genre expresses a utopian aspiration for a reconciled state of society. This blessed outcome would put an end to the ambiguities resulting from the elusive character of moral absolutes. Unavailable in the present, it is projected into the past as an object of nostalgia. It is the hero’s task to revive it (Jameson 110). Admittedly, beyond a general aspiration to the restoration of order, this nostalgic orientation seems on first inspection scarce in the present TV corpus: the latter’s focus is the contemporary world, whose policing requires the most advanced technological means. The yearning for a reconciled past is, however, noticeable in attempts to preserve areas of public life from further degenerating into social dysfunction. In *The Wire*, this aspiration informs West Baltimore residents’ desire to see their neighborhoods return to the pre-drug-crime era, or the effort of Dennis “Cutty” Wise (Chad Coleman), an ex-convict trying to set up a boxing gym that might keep neighborhood kids from the streets. The hankering after a bygone public conviviality also informs the work ethic of the detectives of the Major Crimes Unit, who preserve an environment of public dedication within a corrupt administrative apparatus.

Above all, the search for a reconciled community is the background theme of what might summarily called the narratives’ love interests—subplots concerning the private sphere of family and interpersonal relationships. Granted, except for *The Following*, whose cult/family narrative spans the entire series, it is tempting to regard incursions into the private sphere as merely parasitical. In series whose main object is public life—the work environment of middle and upper-middle-class figures such as law-enforcement personnel, judicial staff, and politicians—love interests serve as
story-telling decoys and delaying tactics. In *The Wire*, symptomatically, characters barely manage to maintain any private sphere whatsoever, so absorbed are they in police investigations and political maneuvers. Similarly, in 24, it is easy to lose patience with Jack’s lingering grief over the death of his wife (she was assassinated by Nina Myers in *Day 1*), and with the misadventures of his daughter Kim (Elisha Cuthbert). Yet these private subplots are narratively functional in so far as they focus on non-traditional family configurations—single-parent homes, divorced couples, adulterous relationships in the workplace. In *Day 2*, Kim struggles against Gary Matheson (Billy Burke), the abusive, even homicidal father of her baby-sitting charge. *The Following*, shorn of its gothic fireworks, is a narrative of domestic violence and adultery: Claire Matthews, Carroll’s wife (Natalie Zea), seeks solace in an affair with Ryan Hardy, after learning of her husband’s crimes. The love interest in *Sleeper Cell* hinges around Darwyn’s relation with the ill-fated Gayle and her son Marcus (Jake Soldera). These two characters have been fragilized by the irresponsibility of Marcus’s father, a convicted drugs trafficker and hit-and-run driver. Thus, the private sphere in all these narratives is as much in need of reconciliation as the broader world of work and politics. Yet, because of its smaller compass—its status as a micro-world—it seems more amenable than the public arena to nostalgic salvation.

Nevertheless, the series in the present corpus make the actual shape and value of romance reconciliation as ambiguous as the make-up of their protagonists. In particular, these pessimistic narratives toy with the possibility that salvation might occur only along dystopian lines, in a final victory of evil or, at the minimum, in the hegemony of the less desirable social configurations. *The Following* offers the most telling example of this grim scenario. Joe Carroll’s project of creating a brotherhood of serial killers amounts to the reconstitution of a patriarchal extended family with an inverted moral code. Symptomatically, one of Joe’s psychological priorities consists in having Claire and their son Joey (Kyle Catlett) join this substitute kinship group, by kidnapping them if need be. The same logic applies in part to the family narratives of *Sleeper Cell* and *The Wire*. Each series presents its criminal organization as a kinship or ethnic-based community competing with public authority, and indeed aiming to dislodge public good with family-based evil: the jihadists of *Sleeper Cell*, regardless of their ethnic origin, take for granted the
solidarity of the Muslim community of believers (the Uma). The latter gives them a vantage point for their critique of modern decadence. Similarly, Avon Barksdale’s drugs network creates an alternative power structure in the Baltimore slums, with its own code and loyalties.

Surprisingly, the triumph of communities of evil cannot even be read as providing an utterly negative form of narrative closure. Some degree of ideological ambiguity affects this narrative outcome. In an analysis of *The Godfather*, Jameson has argued that the ethnic family, even portrayed as a criminal group, has the capacity to embody a nostalgic vision of solidarity immune to capitalist alienation (“Reification” 33). The same possibility haunts *Sleeper Cell, The Wire*, and even *The Following*. Patriarchal bonds and traditional structures of authority are pictured as ostensibly abject, yet fascinating. Joe Carroll’s deluded followers do find a sense of fulfillment in their obedience to their leader’s program of crime and self-immolation. Faris Al-Farik is admittedly the sum of all Western fears as he gleefully plays the part of the charismatic patriarch lording it over his Saudi mansion and his Yemeni war camp. Yet he is undeniably a loving husband. In *Sleeper Cell*, ambiguity reaches its apex in the figure of Wilhelmina ("Mina") van der Hulst (Thekla Reuten). She is a Dutch Muslim convert who worked as a prostitute in Europe and welcomed Islam as the bedrock of her newly-found dignity. Her aspiration to join a community of dignified Muslim women must, however, be weighed against the fact that she is the only terrorist in *Sleeper Cell* who brings her destructive designs to completion. Eager to avenge the death of her husband in Iraq, she carries out the Las Vegas bombing. A graphic embodiment of the ambiguity described here, she martyrs herself with an ecstatic smile, finding salvation in the death of hundreds of members of a military convention.


The representation of evil according to the conventions of the romance, the previous remarks suggest, brings with itself the necessity of narrative management. Screenwriters must fashion their narratives in such a way as to channel and contain the semantic instability introduced by gothic characterization and plot twists. Narrative management of this type is a matter of contending forces. Analyzing it therefore requires a narratological model that takes into account
what Jameson, taking his cue from Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogism, calls “generic discontinuities” (144). Romances in Jameson’s account do feature elements of the supernatural, yet are not necessarily gothic throughout (144-45): they are structured by a fluid pattern of dialogization consisting in the interplay of novelistic realism and magic (148). This discursive tension, Jameson suggests, matches a stage of social development where aristocratic values, associated with charismatic authority, vie against the utilitarian ethos of “nascent capitalism” (148). Though Jameson’s historical analysis may have to be retooled for the sake of the twenty-first century context, we may retain from it that the romance elements of TV series—the disruptive impact of magic and evil—affects the discursive structures of these fictions, compromising their homogeneity. We must therefore assume, as Jameson does with respect to the “[m]agical narratives” of classic romances (103), that the containment of evil in TV series is performed through the interaction of heterogeneous generic strands featured in the texts with varying degrees of dominance.

Jameson’s dialogical reading of nineteenth-century romances may the more easily be transposed to early-twenty-first century TV fictions if we conceptualize narrative dialogization as a conflict among several modes of causality. In this perspective, the generic heterogeneity of romances consists in the interplay of distinct paradigms of agency. In the theoretical introduction to *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson borrows from Louis Althusser a typology of historical agency that distinguishes between “mechanical,” “expressive,” and “structural” causal models (25, 26, 35). The first term describes a mode of historical explanation ascribing identifiable causes to identifiable results. In *Sleeper Cell*, Mina’s choice to avenge herself of the US military by triggering the Las Vegas bombing fits in a chain of mechanical causality. The second mode of agency attributes the genesis of events to underlying principles: all changes affecting a given lifeworld are the expression of totalizing forces of metaphysical scope. Belief in evil as a political or social force embodied in figures such as Faris Al-Farik and Joe Carroll is an instance of this causal paradigm. The third model—structural causality—interprets historical change as the resultant of complex interactions in an overdetermined social field; it matches as such the differential logic of sign systems described in structuralist linguistics. In TV fictions, it informs the complex narrative sociology of a series such as *The Wire*. 
In this light, the capacity of TV series to foreground, manage, or contain evil is tied to the specific ways in which they juggle the paradigms of agency mentioned above: the various modes of agency act as competing principles within the fabric of each narrative. In practical terms, this entails that Althusser’s triad of causal paradigms offers a principle of classification for our corpus: these fictions can be ranked on a gradient stretching from expressive to structural causality, with mechanical causality as middle term. *The Following* and *24*, in this logic, draw primarily on expressive and mechanical causality, with a clear predominance of the former in Joe Carroll’s narrative and of the latter in the narrative of Jack Bauer’s exploits. By comparison, *Sleeper Cell* and *The Wire* play off the mechanical against the structural paradigm. Yet I also point out below that the narrative of arch-villain Faris Al-Farik and, to a lesser extent, the adventures of Baltimore drug lords cannot do without recourse to expressive causality: the sociologically oriented structural mode of agency proves insufficient to sustain narrative momentum and to support characterization, especially as far as the portrayal of destructive protagonists is concerned.

As a narrative component, mechanical causality acts as the major structuring principle of action sequences: it implies that individual agents are able out of their own resources to shape the development of events. Expressive causality, by comparison, prevails in passages where texts intimate that characters or actions are animated by agencies beyond themselves. Joe Carroll, Syed Ali, Nina Meyers, Marie Warner, and Faris Al-Farik are in this light no mere individuals: they are charismatic villains precisely in so far as they are the avatars of an aggregate of causal links beyond their deeds. Structural causality, for its own part, dominates narrative segments intimating that events are triggered neither by mere mechanical coincidences nor by embodied occult forces. In this case, causality is typically deferred: it is attributed to an ever larger network of determinants entangled in relations that cannot be subsumed by the sensationalistic devices of expressive causality. In *The Wire*, deferred causality is cleverly interwoven with the serial format of TV broadcasting: the introduction of new characters from one episode or season to the next betokens the addition of new horizons of social determinants. The first appearance of Councilman Thomas Carcetti (Aidan Gillen) in *Season 3*, for instance, discreetly triggers a causal sequence stretching until the end of *Season 5*: Carcetti is elected mayor of Baltimore, faces
intractable political problems in this office, and nevertheless manages to obtain the governorship of Maryland. Similarly, detective Roland (“Prez”) Pryzbylewski’s accidental shooting of a fellow officer in Season 3 seems at first a minor narrative filler, leading Pryzbylewski (Jim True Frost) to quit the police force and disappear from the scope of the narrative. Yet Prez’s new profession as a teacher in Season 4 makes it possible for the series to examine the role the educational system might play in the prevention of crime. The deployment of these wide-ranging narrative arcs allows the series to shift its scope from the limited horizon of housing projects dominated by crime gangs and their charismatic drugs lords, to administrative infighting among law enforcement services, to various levels of public administrations, then to mayoral and state politics.

4. The Narrative Resilience of Evil
The previous reflections are admittedly somewhat biased. First, they relegate mechanical causality to the status of supplier of inert narrative links (however maddeningly complex the resulting narrative chain). Secondly, they suggest that the primary generic discontinuity informing the romance-inflected series in our corpus—their dialogical matrix, as it were—is the tension between expressive and structural causality. Above all, among the latter two terms, the present approach privileges structural causality as the foundation of the more interesting fictions. The model of generic definition and narrative causality sketched out above is indeed anchored in a politically and aesthetically based negative appraisal of magic and evil. Praising *The Wire* for its recourse to structural causality makes sense primarily if we take for granted that charismatic evil must not only be managed but reasoned or narrated out of existence. In this liberal logic, belief in evil as an essential, hypostatized force is a holdover from the past. Worse still, contemporary fictions indulging in the representation of evil conceal a disingenuous strategy of social control. *The Following*, with its portrayal of wild yet carefully plotted homicidal rage, may be suspected of artificially stirring social fears and naturalizing a conservative understanding of law and order. (Symptomatically, torture is a standard tool in the FBI’s hunt for Joe Carroll, as it is in *24*’s counterterrorist tactics). On the contrary, texts that contest this metaphysics offer a clear-sighted, realistic portrayal of social agency in so far as they view destructive agents as the outcome of determinants amenable to reform.
Ironically, readers who, like the present author, endorse this left-liberal logic must contend with the fact that the core principles of dialogism and narratology frustrate the hope to see structural causality vindicated as an absolute fictional norm, driving out evil from narratives altogether. In the first place, structural causality in TV fictions enjoys no privilege of naturalness: it is as much a discursive artefact as the display of expressive agency. It seems on first inspection easier to prove that the charismatic villains of expressive causality are the offshoot of narrative craft, even of special effects. Sheer narrative action is symptomatically insufficient to manifest the threat inherent to these characters. Since the series in the present corpus cannot accommodate actual feats of magic, their villain’s charismatic power is marked by such secondary non-narrative features as eerie lighting, surges of non-diegetic music, exotic names, or incantatory diction—indeed by the construction of a romance aura.

Yet causally overdetermined fictions also rely on screenwriting techniques of their own. They resort to devices such as external focalization (leaving viewers uninformed of what is narratively at stake at given moments of the action), narrative complexity, and the low-key portrayal of major events. We have seen above that narrative arcs in *Sleeper Cell* and *The Wire* begin inconspicuously, with little indication of their status in the overall economy of the fiction. The cognitive suspense thus created is heightened by the recourse to what David Bordwell calls network narratives—crosscutting among several loosely related narrative strands (97). The joint impact of these techniques is illustrated in a scene of *The Wire*’s third season in which a police officer is severely wounded by gun shots as he tries to buy drugs during an undercover mission. This is a significant incident in *The Wire*: unlike the investigators of *The Following*, who suffer constant physical damage, police personnel in the Baltimore fiction are seldom physically threatened in spite of the ubiquity of drug crime. Whereas *The Following* would depict this event by means of graphic close-ups against a roar of background music, *The Wire* presents the scene in a quiet, enigmatic extreme long shot: we only glimpse gun flashes inside the officer’s car. Since the purpose of the policeman’s actions had thus far not been mentioned, we are left provisionally unable to interpret what we have been witnessing.

Secondly, any favorable predisposition toward one particular mode of agency must contend with the fact that the dialogical model itself precludes what we might call causal monologism—narratives
ruled entirely by one single generic discourse and causal paradigm. Readers must therefore define each work’s overall genre and ideological affiliation on the basis of its specific patterns of dialogization. Similarly, dialogism implies that the causal and genre affiliation of separate narrative incidents is not univocal. This caveat adds an interesting element of complexity to the interpretation of mechanical causality. For champions of a realist aesthetic based on structural causality, mechanical causality is a naive device tied to cheap melodrama: it generates action sequences where coincidences and material contingencies are primary determinants, undercutting further sociological reflection. Yet this negative assessment of mechanical causality ignores the fact that its value depends on the dialogized context where it intervenes—whether it manifests itself in narratives where the expressive or the structural paradigm prevails. On this view, melodramatic coincidences, defined derogatorily as incidents artificially furthering the plot, fit narrative configurations where expressive causality is strongest: such felicitous occurrences and material obstacles are perceived as the mark of overpowering forces, even in the absence of perceptible magic agency. In *The Following*—the series in our corpus most beholden to expressive causality—ostensible coincidences inevitably morph into manifestations of embodied evil. Molly (Jennifer Ferrin), one of Ryan Hardy’s past lovers, is at first presented as a secondary figure—a mere filler in the character’s background. Yet the logic of maleficient contagion at the heart of the narrative mechanics of *The Following* cannot accommodate contingent figures. Molly accordingly turns out to have been planted in Hardy’s life for a purpose. In the last episode of *Season 1*, she sneaks into Hardy’s apartment, and stabs both Hardy and Claire, generating a cliffhanger for the beginning of *Season 2*. Where structural causality prevails, on the contrary, mechanical causality is reintegrated within the sphere of a skeptically inclined realism: coincidental occurrences signify contingency itself. Coincidences in *The Wire* barely affect the drift of structural causality. In *Season 3*, investigators misread a wiretap and assume that the word “Dawg”—the name of a mastiff killed in a dog fight—refers to a human homicide victim, an element that promises a breakthrough in the investigation. Yet the mishap symptomatically triggers neither miracle nor disaster in the narrative chain: it is a pure token of the difficulties in reaching a totalizing chart of the lifeworld, even by the best rational exertions.
Similar methodological caution is in order in the assessment of narrative complexity. The previous remarks suggest an inverse correlation between the foregrounding of charismatic villains and, on the other hand, plot intricacy. The underlying forces of expressive causality should in this view be the more noticeable when embodied in a small number of protagonists involved in simple plots. On the contrary, complex plots—the loosely interrelated “network narratives” so frequent in TV series—seem cognate to structural causality. In other words, multiple and complex narratives have the capacity to dilute or disseminate good and evil. Yet here again, the present corpus is better described in terms of a gradient of formal possibilities than as a set of binary oppositions. Between the two contrasted narrative formats mentioned above, one must make provisions for plots based on what we might call the narrative refraction of expressive causality: a series may consist of a simple narrative kernel of narrative evil reiterated among a large number of protagonists, as if the same sequence of evil were reduplicating itself over and over. The metastatic reduplication of evil is the key narrative formula and the major thematic interest of The Following; it is also present in 24, where, as we saw above, the focus of evil shifts from one villain to the next.

Finally, we must take stock of the fact that the marginalization and dissemination of evil stumbles against narratological invariants. Structural narratology suggests that evil, regardless of its metaphysical underpinnings, constitutes a core component of story-telling. The classic texts on the structural analysis of narrative—Vladimir Propp’s, Algirdas Julien Greimas’s, Lévi-Strauss’s essays—concur in describing their object as the enactment of a conflict between a hero and his or her villain or opponent. There is, in this view, no narrative without evil, and no evil without containment. The philosophical and ideological value of these concepts may be left to the interpreter’s appreciation, yet the task of defining the place of evil as a functional narrative component cannot be eluded. In our corpus, the impact of this factor is paradoxically most noticeable in Sleeper Cell and The Wire—the series where charismatic evil and expressive causality are marginalized. As the action of Sleeper Cell moves toward its second season, the figure of Faris Al-Farik increasingly takes on the feature of a stereotypical charismatic villain, whose maleficent aura transcends historical determinants. Likewise, for all its sociological acumen, The Wire cannot help anchor socially de-
structive behavior in stable personalized embodiments. When the two arch villains of the initial seasons are disposed of at the end of Season 3—“Stringer” Bell is shot by gangsters and Avon returns to jail—they are replaced by a new threat—young gangster Milo Stanfield (Jamie Hector). Ironically, the residual reliance of this series on embodied evil and expressive causality is signaled from one episode to the next in its theme song. The tune by Tom Waits appears in a different interpretation in the credit sequence of the five seasons; it warns its listeners about the necessity to keep the devil “way down in the hole.”

**Works Cited**


