

Climate Change as a Narrative Device to Resolve the Plot

The TV series *The Affair* as a Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary TV series have become *narratively complex* in the realm, among others, of time management and genre hybridization. As part of this transformation, serialized narratives have increasingly accommodated social and cultural themes. One worldwide modern concern is the ecological emergency, which has led both to the emergence of a dedicated narrative genre known as cli-fi and to the insertion of climate change impacts in the background of the narrative of several audiovisual products, independently of their genre. One remarkable TV series in which the environmental crisis is encountered is the American TV drama *The Affair* (Showtime, 2014-2019), created by Sarah Treem and Hagai Levi and starring Dominic West and Ruth Wilson, playing respectively Noah Solloway and Alison Bailey. After having followed the marital and extramarital relationships of the two protagonists, the last season of the TV series, season 5, branches the storytelling by introducing a new timeline located in an unclear future after 2053 along with the well-established contemporary one. The bifurcation of the narration represents the quintessential expedient to introduce the topic of climate change into the TV series, paving its way in the former timeline and effectively displaying it in the following one. By means of a qualitative content analysis of the 11 episodes of season 5 of *The Affair*, the aim of this contribution is twofold: first, to identify and shed light on climate change phenomena and effects introduced in the product and, second, to investigate the purposes of their employment in the storytelling. Findings have shown, on the one

hand, that the ecological crisis is represented by means of extreme weather phenomena, insufficient resources and extinction and, on the other hand, that it is used to resolve the main affective and sentimental storylines, becoming a narrative device to achieve the *Gran Finale* of the TV series and to collaterally raise awareness on the issue in a large audience. Future research is required to illustrate whether *The Affair's* effectively succeeded in stimulating reflections on this global concern among the audience.

KEYWORDS

TV series; complex TV; narrative devices; cli-fi; climate change.

Representation and Implications of Climate Change in Complex Television

Complex TV Serial Narratives: Plot Closure and Genre Mixing

Since 1990s, TV series have undergone several and diversified changes which have culminated into more sophisticated and elaborated storytelling forms. Jason Mittell labels this new model as *narrative complexity* and defines it as:

a redefinition of episodic forms under the influence of serial narration – not necessarily a complete merger of episodic and serial forms but a shifting balance. Rejecting the need for plot closure within every episode that typifies conventional episodic form, narrative complexity foregrounds ongoing stories across a range of genres (Mittell 2006: 32).

In this perspective, Complex TV positions itself as a narrational mode, as conceived by Bordwell (1985). Two key concepts that emerge from its definition need to be further enlightened: the rejection of a plot episodic closure and the extension of the stories across diversified genres.

As far as the rejection of episodic closure is concerned, this phenomenon is part of a wider and multi-faceted treatment of time in Complex TV series which involves different streams: *story time*, *discourse time* and *narration* or *screen time* (Mittell 2015: 26-30). *Story time* focuses on how time passes within the story-world, which follows real-world linear temporal conventions. *Discourse time* is the temporal structure within a storytelling: it skips non-useful moments for the narration and makes a wide use of strategies that alter the *story time*, such as flashbacks and flashforwards. While a non-linear chronology is not exclusive to this narrational mode, in Complex TV these devices “[...] become more acceptable narrative norms rather than exceptional outliers” (Mittell 2015: 48). *Narration* or *screen time*

consists, instead, of the temporal framework used to narrate and receive the story. In literary works, it is variable, given that it is the time adopted to read the book, while for audiovisual products it is more controlled, because the product lasts the same amount of time for all the spectators (Mittell 2015: 26). Considering *screen time*, a main focal point that serial screenwriters face is the arrangement of the story into the episodic format. Serial format is not only an inherent characteristic of serial narratives, but also a constraint: the large capacity of *screen time* that TV series are provided with inevitably affects also the *discourse time* through “filling strategies”¹. It is precisely in this manipulation of *screen time* that lies the new approach to plot closure in complex serial narratives. With regard to storytelling, while conventional TV series hinge on self-contained episodes, complex ones have in fact reversed this conviction, privileging an ongoing narration by thwarting a definitive closure within specific episodes (Allrath et al. 2005: 3). This transformation has also made Complex TV series approach TV serials, whose “story and discourse do not come to a conclusion during an episode” (Kozloff 1992: 91), leading to a process that has been called “the serialization of TV series” (Innocenti and Pescatore 2008: 18-22).

Complex narratives not only invite a reconsideration of the temporal dynamics of both discourse and screen time, but also prompt a reevaluation of narrative genres. As Mittell (2015: 233) observes, “complex television is a site of tremendous genre mixing, where conventions and assumptions from a range of programming categories come together, interweaving, merging, and evolving”. While traditional narrative genres still serve as templates for many new TV series, the innovation brought by Complex TV involves the creation of audiovisual serial works that deliberately defy the conventions of any single genre, resulting in “out-of-standard TV series” (Penati 2016: 50).

Genre hybridization manifests both in the creation of entirely new genres and in the reinterpretation of established ones. Existing genres persist, yet borrowing some elements from other genres or tones, styles and modes. Long before the theorization of Complex TV, Newcomb (1974: 254) claimed that the only genre that effectively exploited *screen time* was

¹ Bandirali and Terrone (2017: 7-10) have identified two main filling strategies used to confront the TV series’ vast amount of time: the flash strategy and the strand strategy. While the flash strategy involves the systematic use of flashbacks or ‘flashbesides’, respectively to provide insights into characters’ pasts, or to explore counterfactual scenarios, the strand strategy introduces new narrative threads or storylines to the main plot.

the day-time soap opera. Beside their extended horizontal narration, soap operas are defined also by their prototypical melodramatic mode (Mittell 2015: 233, Nelson 2000: 111), which, following its clichéd and reductive sense, is regarded as “emotion-laden, coincident-driven, and made of loudly orchestrated narratives that endlessly prolong their second acts” (Williams 2012: 533).

Considering therefore the alterations in time that contemporary TV series are facing, the rethinking of genres is inevitably pushing prime time dramas to get closer to TV serials like soap operas in terms also of melodramatic mode yet preserving a substantial autonomy and a reputation of more legitimate and culturally valued forms of storytelling.

Emergence and Imagery of Cli-Fi in Audiovisual Media

The implications of the newly elaborated storytelling structure are not limited to time management and genre hybridization: “contemporary narrative serialized TV texts have made a claim to belong [...] to the category of aesthetic objects (that is, high-brow forms central to the culture they originate from)” (Wojtyna 2018: 167). In other words, contemporary TV series are “an active cultural practice that [...] both reproduce and produce social systems and hierarchies” (Mittell 2003: 37). The cultural, social and artistic maturity that serialized narratives have reached has brought them to contemplate our contemporaneity. One of the most prominent manifestations of these ambitions resides in the creation of utopian or dystopian fictional worlds in which modern preoccupations rest (Wojtyna 2018: 168-178). Disaster narratives have become so popular because of the pleasure that the audience derives from their consumption, stemming from their ability to blend escapism, sensory stimulation, familiar narrative structures, and a nuanced handling of humor and anxiety (Sontag 1965).

This terrain proves to be productive to accommodate one of the most severe concerns of the present times, i.e., climate change, and for a dedicated type of production, i.e., climate fiction or *cli-fi*, a term first coined by climate activist Daniel Bloom in 2007². While cli-fi has been largely pursued in written narratives, with some remarkable novels such as *Oryx and Crake* (2003) by Margaret Atwood, *The Ministry for the Future* (2020) by

² See Bloom (2013) for more details about the coinage, the reception and the first usages of the term *cli-fi*.

Kim Stanley Robinson and *The Water Knife* (2015) by Paolo Bacigalupi, it has been less explored in audiovisual media, both as a genre and as an object of academic research. Notable exceptions include the studies conducted by Kaplan (2015) on “climate trauma” in films and by Svoboda (2016) on 60 fictional films that dwelled on the environmental crisis. The latter study, in particular, has identified, among other things, that (I) cli-fi films are attributed to a wide array of narrative genres, such as disaster, drama, dystopic, apocalyptic, thriller and so on (Svoboda 2016: 56) and that (II) climate audiovisual fiction revolves around six impacts: flooding/sea-level-rise, extreme weather events, into/in an ice age, melting poles, famine/drought, preclima(c)tic stress disorders and antagonist³ (Svoboda 2016: 44).

If cli-fi films have received little attention from academia, TV series of the same genre have received even less, with Murphy (2014: 43-46) focusing on *The Fire Next Time* (CBS, 1993), *Category 6: Day of Destruction* (CBS, 2004) and *Category 7: End of the World* (CBS, 2005) and Leyda (2018) exploring *Occupied* (TV2, 2015-). Yet, other – and more recent – cli-fi TV series have been produced, warranting keen academic attention, such as *The Rain* (Netflix, 2018-2020), *Years and Years* (BBC One/HBO, 2019), *Five Days at Memorial* (AppleTV+, 2022) and *Extrapolation* (AppleTV+, 2023).

Beyond the identification of the cli-fi narratives and the themes that they encompass, it is worthwhile to shed light on the purposes they entail. In particular, one key aspect to acknowledge is that scientists are usually consulted in the creation of such products in order to display a representation which is as faithful as possible: Michael Monitor, who has contributed to the creation of *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), the most investigated cli-fi audiovisual production by researchers, claims that this film has raised more awareness than any other action undertaken by a researcher (Kirby 2011: 179-83). Albeit the habitual involvement of scientists, the primary goal of cli-fi is certainly not societal and it has been demonstrated that the ecological matter is usually overpowered by personal storylines (Murphy 2014: 47). However, several audience studies have been conducted to assess the impact of collateral societal and ecological preoccupations in audiovisual fiction: in particular, two works conducted on *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) (Leiserowitz 2004, Lowe et al. 2006) showed that audiences have

³ By “antagonist”, Svoboda intends “a figure who wills the destruction shown or threatened, or who willfully obstructs efforts to address the threat” (Svoboda 2016: 44).

developed a greater concern and a higher willingness to act after having watched the film.

Cli-fi productions hinge on storylines in which the ecological crisis is at their core. Nevertheless, there exist also audiovisual narratives in which climate change is placed somehow in the background of the main plotlines or is inserted only later throughout the progression of the storytelling. In these very unique cases, it is of high value for scholars in both Media Studies and Social Sciences to dive into the on-screen depiction of climate change phenomena and effects, along with their exploitation for narrative purposes and their impacts on audiences. This contribution intends precisely to address these goals through a case study on a TV serial narrative with such characteristics: *The Affair* (Showtime, 2014-2019).

The Affair: A Complex TV Series from its Inception

The Affair is a TV series created by Sarah Treem and Hagai Levi. It aired on the US premium television channel *Showtime* from 2014 to 2019 for a total number of 5 seasons and 53 episodes.

The TV series belongs to the drama genre and, more specifically, is a melodrama (Maggitti 2022: 17). Melodrama is a narrative mode rather than a genre: it is “an approach to emotion, storytelling and morality that cuts across numerous genres and media forms” (Mittell 2015: 233). The melodramatic mode, however, is widely considered as a core component not only of soap operas: the progressive establishment of Complex TV has made proliferate prime time serials with melodramatic elements and they represent the modernization and adaptation of soap operas to the novel TV and audience’s needs⁴ (Michlin 2011: 2-3, Mittell 2015: 233-60).

These transformations are particularly relevant when recalling the two key components of Complex TV mentioned above: the hindering of a plot episodic closure, typical of the TV serial genre of soap opera, and the evolving concepts of narrational genres and modes. *The Affair*’s structure pivots precisely around these features: the plot is centered on the life of Noah Solloway (Dominic West) who is married to Helen Butler (Maura Tierney).

⁴ For the analysis of a contemporary TV series, *Gomorra* (Sky Atlantic, 2014-2021), through the lens of the melodramatic approach, see Bernardelli (2017).

In the very first episode, the couple and their four children reach a diner in their hometown, Montauk (New York), where the waitress is Alison Bailey (Ruth Wilson), a woman married to Cole Lochart (Joshua Jackson). Almost immediately, Noah and Alison commence an extramarital relationship – which gives the title to the TV series – and they will be followed along their confession to their respective spouse and as they start to date.

The Affair's complexity in time and genre nonetheless is not limited to its approaching soap operas through the thwarting of episodic closure and the melodramatic mode. From the very beginning, “melodrama will be colored by hints of crime” (Maggitti 2022: 19), given that both characters are suspects of a murder. This is relevant not merely for the introduction of an additional genre, but also because of the narrative strategy used to reconstruct the events around the crime: the *Rashomon effect*. This effect derives its name from the film in which it was first employed, which was directed by Akira Kurasawa and distributed in 1950, and consists in presenting different – and contradictory – character's interpretations of the same event, usually a crime, to the audience, thus encompassing a multi-perspectival discourse of the story. In this specific case study, the deployment of the *discourse time* is accomplished not only by displaying twice the same events, in which the change of viewpoint is signaled by an intertitle reporting either the name of Noah or the one of Alison, but also via their voiced-over version of the story extracted from their police interviews, which make the two protagonists become intradiegetic narrators⁵.

From season 2, the narration is further expanded in order to embrace two other viewpoints of the storyline, the ones of Helen and Cole, leading to the solution of the mystery around the murder at the end of the season. However, showrunners continue to exploit the *Rashomon effect* throughout the storytelling of the whole TV series to follow also other characters' plotlines and, more interestingly for this research, to introduce a second timeline in season 5 situated in an unspecified future-time after 2053. This is achieved by closely following the character of Joanie Lockhart, Alison and Cole's daughter, and represents for showrunners a chance to further elevate the *complexity* of this TV series in three key aspects: first, in terms of storytelling, through the bifurcation of the diegesis; second, with regard to time

⁵ See Espi Forcen et al. (2020) for an in-depth analysis of the *Rashomon effect* in *The Affair*.

manipulation, by inserting a flashforward storyline after having distended the contemporary narrative line through the *Rashomon effect*, and third, to engage in the depiction of a future setting, where the impacts of climate change become visible.

Aims, Data and Methodology

The aim of this paper is twofold: (I) to identify and investigate how climate change phenomena and effects are introduced in a drama TV series like *The Affair* along the auditory and visual channels⁶, and (II) to shed light into their employment in the storytelling.

Given that the first four seasons are all set in a contemporary timeline and do not present any reference to climate change, the analysis is carried out on the 11 episodes of the last season of the TV series, i.e., season 5.

The research will be conducted by means of a Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA), “[...] a method for systematically describing the meaning of qualitative material. It is done by classifying material as instances of the categories of a coding frame” (Schreier 2012: 1). This method particularly suits the aim of this contribution in comparison to other qualitative methods given that the main goal is descriptive rather than analytical and no assumptions are made about the object under investigation before the analysis, contrarily to discourse analysis for instance (Schreier 2012: 37-57).

Among the existing approaches to QCA, I decided to rely on Conventional Content Analysis (CCA), which is adopted with “[...] a study design whose aim is to describe a phenomenon” (Hsieh and Shannon 2005: 1279) and that enables “[...] categories and names for categories to flow from data” (Hsieh and Shannon 2005: 1279). Other identified approaches to QCA, that are Directed and Summative, presuppose some sort of prior definition of the categories or the keywords based on the theory or on the literature review (Hsieh and Shannon 2005: 1286), which would not account for the emergence of the climate change specificities of a drama TV series like *The Affair* with respect to the ones comprised in cli-fi productions.

In consistence with previous works that have investigated TV serial narratives through content analyses, the units on which the research is under-

⁶ Chatman (1999: 321) designates the auditory and visual channels as the “two information tracks” that are essential for any narratological examination of audiovisual media.

Episode	Timeline	Segment Timespan	Description of the Segment	Climate Change Phenomenon or Effect	Storytelling Purpose
S05: E01	Future	29:58-30:42	Joanie collects strawberries from a house vertical vegetable garden, then checks the oxygen level in the living room (zone 1) from an IT device: the oxygen levels have reached 22.5%, which is judged optimal. Now, the bedrooms (zone 2) can be oxygenated.	Insufficient resources	To set the narration in place and time.

FIGURE 1
Application of the coding frame to one segment.

taken are the audiovisual segments of the TV series, defined as “a specific portion of the audiovisual product that is characterized both by space–time–action continuity and invariance in the thematic–narrative elements” (Rocchi and Pescatore 2022: 3). Upon identifying segments associated with climate change, the coding process was documented in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and subsequently scrutinized based on the following categories that represent the coding frame (see Fig.1 for its application to one segment):

1. Number of the episode (S5: E01-E11).
2. Timeline (i.e., contemporary or future);
3. Segment timespan (onset and offset);
4. Description of the segment;
5. Climate change phenomenon or effect;
6. Storytelling purpose.

Results

In order to address the two aims of this contribution, namely detecting the impacts of the ecological crisis presented in this serial narrative and observing their aims within the diegesis, results will be grouped with regard to timeline (contemporary and future) and illustrated according to the climate change phenomena and effects detected, that are: wildfires, floodings and hurricanes, coastal erosion, insufficient resources and extinction.

Contemporary Timeline

Climate change plays a crucial role in the future timeline, yet its impact is already woven into the contemporary one, notably explored in two episodes, S5: E09-E10, and through the focus on one phenomenon: wildfires.

Wildfires

Wildfires are first introduced in episode S5: E09 in very short segments, all lasting less than one minute: audience gets to know that wildfires are spreading out through images of patrols, traffic congestion, smoke and facial masks and through the sounds of sirens wailing and helicopters whirring in distance. The fire propagation is causing a voluntary evacuation of Los Angeles' inhabitants, yielding a gridlocked city.

In the following episode, S5: E10, both radio and TV news are extensively exploited to update characters – and accordingly spectators – about the increased spread of wildfires and the consequent state of evacuation of nearby people, which additionally becomes mandatory throughout the episode. In particular, by means of news, the audience becomes acquainted that the fires have originated in Mulholland Drive, a street in Los Angeles, and they have expanded to the east at least up to 405 St. Hewitt Street, in the city center, and are spreading towards the west due to a strong wind, in the wide stretch between Westwood, Topanga Canyon and Ventura County (see Fig. 2). Wildfires of similar dimensions cannot be considered disconnected from the other climate change phenomena that are introduced in these same episodes although in the future timeline: through this extreme weather phenomenon, showrunners seize the tacit purpose of preparing the transition to the future timeline in time but – more specifically – in space, displaying landscapes that have started to be affected as a consequence of the extreme climatic conditions⁷. This implicit objective is additionally testified by the insertion of these elements in two episodes that approach the series' finale, S05: E11.

Additionally, wildfires are pivotal in the narrative development of the contemporary timeline and of Helen's storyline. The evacuation caused by wildfires becomes mandatory for people living in the areas highlighted in Fig.2 and this forces Helen and Noah, the original – and at this time of

⁷ See Jones et al. (2020) for a literature review that discusses the escalation in both intensity and frequency of wildfires due to climate change.

seconds later, her husband on the phone discloses to her that a game was canceled due to a novel flooding of the park. As soon as she arrives and by seeing inundated streets with holes and fish in the puddles, Joanie figures out that floodings have hit Montauk as well.

In Joanie's first night out in Montauk, a bartender explains to her that there has been another hurricane – implying that several had hit the place before – yet this last one has highly affected the grid management of the hamlet, which is now turned on only in the daytime. The bartender wishes that Montauk could afford wind turbines to produce electricity. These specific extreme weather conditions serve the dual purpose of anchoring the storytelling temporally, signaling the future, and geographically, depicting an area devastated by the environmental crisis.

Coastal Erosion

Heavy precipitations have caused the erosion of the whole Long Island coastline. Among all the extreme weather phenomena displayed in the entire TV series, coastal erosion occupies the largest narrative space and, at the same time, is the most explored scientifically. This in-depth consideration is explained because Joanie works as a coastal engineer and the shoreline erosion is particularly severe in Montauk.

From the combination of the scenes at the seaside where she studies the movement of trackable grains of sand, i.e., nano-sensors, to predict the speed of the coastal erosion and those in which she exposes her findings through a recorder, we ascertain several findings: first, the sediment is washing west, towards New York City, nine times faster than 10 years before; second, that this event is attributed to a rise in storms in terms of both their number and intensity and, third, that according to her previsions, Montauk is going to be inhabitable in five years and be drown in 10 or 20 years⁸.

Joanie's job represents therefore a chance to offer spectators precise details about this ecological crisis phenomenon and, narratively, a strategy for a job trip to Montauk, her mother's village, where she investigates about Alison's past experiences and discovers that she had not abandoned her as she would think. Climate change becomes therefore a device to let her reconcile with the memory of her mother.

⁸ For in-depth research on the erosion of sandy coastlines that offers also projections for the future, see Vousdoukas et al. (2020).

Insufficient Resources

A further focus of attention explored in *The Affair* revolves around the effects that the environmental crisis is having on the essential resources for human beings, which are becoming insufficient. Specifically, three resources are tackled in the narrative: gas, food and oxygen.

The former two elements are little explored. Considering gas, we only gain understanding that the planet has almost run out of it and few cars are still fueled on gas. As for food, one character eats crickets, and entomophagy is acknowledged as a sustainable diet within the scientific community⁹. Joanie nonetheless grows a house vegetable garden, in which she collects vivid red strawberries. This garden is fundamental to providing the third – and more indispensable – resource: oxygen. Joanie and her husband have an IT device that allows them to oxygenate zones of their house. 22.5% is judged as a sufficient oxygen level in the air, hence when this level is attained, another zone can be oxygenated. When the oxygen levels drop in one zone, a strong alarm is heard all over the house and a human being needs to intervene to restore order. The shortage of oxygen is further stressed by few dialogues on overpopulation, comparing babies to carbon bombs with regard to footprints and putting forward the idea that having babies should be viewed as a criminal act.

The emphasis on deficient stocks is embedded into the narrative as a means for the audience to recognize that the ecological crisis has been such a longstanding concern that it has already highly affected human lives. More specifically, this climate change effect serves to position the storytelling in space and time, projecting it into the future.

Extinction

Based on the increase in quantity and severeness of extreme weather phenomena, coupled with a diminishing pool of resources, mass extinction is no longer regarded as a distant possibility. In the TV series' narrative, this climate change effect provides an opportunity to seek solutions while also displaying a heightened concern that culminates into conflicts.

As for the former, fungi are illustrated as a hope for the ecosystem, given that they facilitate the emergence of new and improved life forms once the prior ones have perished. The tolerance and adaptation of these organisms

⁹ See Ordoñez-Araque and Egas-Montenegro (2021).

to extreme environments are largely explored in academia (e.g., Coleine et al. 2022), which has proved the paramount role that they could detain for survival in the future.

Besides a search for solutions, *The Affair* displays also eco-anxiety. In a scene in Joanie's house, the alarm for the oxygen level goes off, triggering an argument between her and her husband: while he is more optimistic, Joanie has become extremely pessimistic after her trip to Montauk. In particular, she starts to question the usefulness of the tools they are using to survive, that are, the oxygenation system and the house vegetable garden, on the account that the external environment is becoming inhabitable.

This fight, beyond putting forward an example of eco-anxiety, has a strong narrative purpose: the main narrative arc of the flashforward hinges on Joanie reckoning that she has issues in sentimental relationships, which had likely been inherited from her mother. Hence, in this specific case, climate change turns into an instrument to make Joanie have an argument with her husband and exemplify her trauma.

Discussion and Conclusions

In Mittell (2006)'s terms, *The Affair* represents the quintessential Complex TV series: it has extensively stretched the boundaries as regards serial genres, narrative lines and *discourse* and *screen time* management. In this multifold expansion of the diegesis, the introduction of climate change has resulted particularly prolific, privileging the exploration of five phenomena and effects, namely wildfires, floodings and hurricanes, coastal erosion, insufficient resources and extinction. These categories are partially consistent with the ones identified by Svoboda (2016: 44) for 60 cli-fi films, overlapping with some and leaving aside others (i.e., into/in an ice age, melting poles and antagonist), which highlights the singularity of *The Affair* with respect to other audiovisual products centered around the environmental crisis.

In an interview to Fleming (2019), *The Affair*'s showrunner Sarah Treem has revealed that she had consulted environmental futurists and climate change scientists to create the TV series. This consultation is made evident by the strong adherence to reality that was portrayed for every phenomenon and impact detected, as demonstrated. In the same interview, Treem has provided more insights into the part that the environmental crisis plays in this TV drama and an excerpt is reported in what follows:

I knew that Montauk had to be ravaged by climate change. That seems like it is coming and the more research we did, the more we realized that these coastal communities are just not going to survive. That's something that seemed like an apt metaphor for the show which is that nothing lasts forever. Not in relationships and not in nature. Also, in the same way you can't abuse a relationship and expect it to stand, you can't abuse your planet and expect it to stand. Everything has consequences. The more we got into that, with the climate metaphor, the more excited we got. (Fleming 2019)

Therefore, climate change is not inserted into the narrative only because of a future setting that showrunners have decided to introduce, rather a whole comparison with the nature of relationships lies behind. As shown, the introduction of the phenomena analyzed are not limited to space and time contextualize the plot, yet they are crucial to unravel the main narrative arcs. In particular, (I) in the contemporary timeline, they are responsible for the reunion of Helen and Noah and (II) in the future timeline, they lead to Joanie's reconciliation with her trauma in relationships and the memory of her mother.

Climate change is therefore utilized for narrative purposes as a device to resolve the plot and, consequently, to pave the way for the *Gran Finale* (Martina 2013: 382) of the TV series. However, the introduction of the environmental crisis into the storytelling might also have a collateral aim, that is to raise awareness in the audience about the future of the Earth. While setting the flashforward after 2053 is primarily due to narrative reasons, 2050 is widely considered by scientists a "threshold year" for the planet:

Our analysis suggests that up to 2050, the challenges from climate change are "manageable," in the sense that possible investments in land and water productivity enhancements may partly, or even substantially, mitigate the negative effects from climate change. But the challenges of dealing with the effects between 2050 and 2080 are likely to be much greater, and possibly unmanageable. Starting the process of slowing emissions growth today is critical to avoiding a calamitous post-2050 future. (Nelson et al. 2010: 86).

Displaying the impact of climate change on Earth after 2050 could therefore have repercussions on audiences, who may feel to be still in time to take action. However, the confirmation that this objective is only secondary to the urge of achieving closure corroborates that "TV form has found its

own way of addressing an ambitious critical agenda without forsaking its entertainment value” (Wojtyna 2018: 178-9).

This contribution has also briefly revealed that a limited body of works has addressed audience perceptions pertaining to cli-fi films, with some positive findings emerging. Further research should unfold whether a TV drama like *The Affair* in which climate change has not been introduced from its inception and in which the topic is even more overwhelmed by characters’ personal narratives than cli-fi audiovisual products possesses a similar capacity to raise reflections on the ecological crisis among the spectators.

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- Category 7: End of the World* (CBS, 2005)
- Extrapolation* (AppleTV+, 2023)
- Five Days at Memorial* (AppleTV+, 2022)
- Gomorra* (Sky Atlantic, 2014-2021)
- Occupied* (TV2, 2015-)
- The Affair* (Showtime, 2014-2019)
- The Day After Tomorrow* (2004)
- The Fire Next Time* (CBS, 1993)
- The Rain* (Netflix, 2018-2020)
- Years and Years* (BBC One/HBO, 2019)

CLIMATE CHANGE AS A NARRATIVE DEVICE TO RESOLVE THE PLOT. THE TV SERIES THE AFFAIR AS A CASE STUDY



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