Universidade de Lisboa
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FROM LITERARY TO CINEMATIC METAFICTION IN *A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS*

Mestrado em Estudos Comparatistas

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements 2

Abstract 3

Resumo 4

The Infamous Introduction 7

I. A Series of Metafictional Events 11

II. The Cinematic Climax 37

III. The Narcissistic Narrator 68

The Confusing Conclusion 86

Works Cited 90

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Abstract

In this dissertation we will analyse the series of 13 children's novels called *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (1999-2006), signed by Lemony Snicket, pseudonym of author Daniel Handler. In parallel, we will examine its eponymous long-form adaptation for streaming television on the subscription streaming service Netflix (2017-2019), produced and written by Daniel Handler. It consists of 3 seasons with a total of 25 episodes, following a structure of 2 episodes per book, except for the last one, which was adapted into a single episode.

The goal of this dissertation is to study the metafictional or self-reflexive facet of both the original text and the audiovisual adaptation, in order to establish a comparative dialogue between the different literary and cinematic means used to tell the story. For this purpose, we will start by introducing the concept of Postmodernism, in order to contextualise the aesthetics of both the book series and the concept of metafiction. The latter will be introduced in the second section of this first chapter, where we analyse in more depth the metafictional aspects of the book series, namely through the use of paratextuality, intertextuality and self-referentiality. In the second chapter, divided into four sections, we will do the same for the TV show adaptation, by introducing concepts such as metafilm and meta-adaptation and by focusing on how the audiovisual medium calls attention to itself through cinematic correspondences to this literary self-reflexivity, such as the fourth-wall breaking technique and the use of filmic references. In the third and last chapter before the conclusion we develop the role of the narrator, who, presenting himself as the author of the books whilst also being a character in the universe of the narrative, stands between the heterodiegetic and the homodiegetic. We conclude by making a case for him as the main origin of the metafictional aspect of the narrative.

Keywords: Metafiction, Cinematic, *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, Lemony Snicket, Gérard Genette.

Resumo

Nesta dissertação proponho-me a analisar a série de livros infantojuvenis *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (1999-2006), composta por 13 volumes e assinada por Lemony Snicket, pseudónimo do autor Daniel Handler. Os livros inserem-se mais especificamente no subgénero denominado de "Middle Grade fiction", definição que aponta para os anos escolares do público-alvo, cuja faixa etária é de 8 a 12 anos de idade. Paralelamente a este objeto de estudo literário, estudo também a adaptação epónima feita em formato de série televisiva para o serviço de *streaming* Netflix, composto por 3 temporadas com um total de 25 episódios (2017-2019). O meu objetivo com esta dissertação é estabelecer um diálogo comparativo entre os diferentes meios literários e cinematográficos utilizados para contar a história, de forma a analisar a sua faceta metaficcional e autorreflexiva, tanto nos livros quanto na série. Esta análise transversal será relevante para compreender como a metaficção é um aspecto essencial da narrativa, tendo em conta que esta se insere numa estética pós-modernista.

O primeiro capítulo chama-se "A Series of Metafictional Events" (tradução: Uma Série de Eventos Metaficcionais) e inicia-se com a secção "The Postmodernist Problem" (tradução: O Problema Pós-Modernista) que serve o propósito de apresentar o conceito de Pós-Modernismo, com apoio na obra de Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), em paralelo com a dissertação de Michele Di Palma, "*A Series of Unfortunate Events*, or Postmodernism for Young Readers" (2020). A definição de Pós-Modernismo servirá para contextualizar tanto a série de livros quanto o conceito de metaficção. Tendo surgido durante a segunda metade do século XX, após a Segunda Guerra Mundial, a estética pós-modernista é caracterizada por uma sensação de confusão, incerteza e ansiedade. McHale faz um contraste com o Modernismo, afirmando que o Pós-Modernismo não é mera posterioridade temporal mas uma consequência do último, sendo diferenciado deste por priorizar questões ontológicas, isto é, os aspectos metafísicos do conhecimento, ao invés de questões epistemológicas relativas ao conhecimento científico e aos seus métodos. *A Series of Unfortunate Events* caracteriza-se enquanto obra pós-modernista através de características como o seu anacronismo: ao utilizar em simultâneo tecnologias de diferentes períodos, mistura elementos contemporâneos com elementos vitorianos num ponto temporal indefinido, estabelecendo uma ambiguidade e incerteza típicas de uma narrativa pós-modernista. Isto causa uma ansiedade por respostas que caracteriza também o aspecto ontológico do

pós-modernismo: numa narrativa com informação dispersa e questões nunca resolvidas, a dúvida paira no ar, dando lugar a um humor apoiado na indecidibilidade e incongruência.

Em seguida, tendo como ponto de partida esta contextualização, a segunda secção deste primeiro capítulo intitula-se "The Metafictional Events" (tradução: Os Eventos Metaficcionais) e tem como objetivo investigar os elementos metaficcionais presentes nos livros. Começo por introduzir o conceito de metaficção, através das obras *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (1984) de Patricia Waugh e *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (1980) de Linda Hutcheon. Apesar de ser uma prática bem mais antiga, começa a ter especial protagonismo no Pós-Modernismo, por permitir uma autorreflexividade e autoconsciência que quebram com as convenções narrativas, dando lugar a questionamentos mais abstratos. De seguida, analiso mais detalhadamente os aspectos metaficcionais da série de livros, como a intertextualidade – o que dará lugar ao conceito de *crosswriting,* que implica um público duplo, atravessando as fronteiras entre literatura infantil e adulta. Outro aspecto metaficcional será a autorreferencialidade da narrativa, isto é, a maneira como o texto chama a atenção para si próprio através, por exemplo, do paratexto (dedicatórias, sinopses, epígrafos) e da abordagem direta ao leitor. Ademais, será igualmente pertinente a utilização da ironia e de um humor autodepreciativo, assim como de um final ambíguo – características representativas da estética pós-modernista.

Já no segundo capítulo, "The Cinematic Climax" (tradução: O Clímax Cinematográfico), dividido em quatro secções ("The Cinematic", "The Metafilmic", "The Meta-Adaptation" e "Adapting Metafiction"), começo por justificar a utilização do termo "cinematográfico" para referir-me a um produto audiovisual em formato de série. Para o efeito, utilizo a seguinte bibliografia referente ao conceito de "quality television" (traduzido literalmente para "televisão de qualidade"): *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video* (1982) de John Ellis, *QUALITY TV - Contemporary American Television and Beyond* (2007) de McCabe e Kim Akass e "Cinematography and Television: Differences and Similarities" (2010) de Adriano Nazareth. Após estabelecer a série televisiva enquanto produto cinematográfico, apresento os conceitos de *metafilm* e meta-adaptação teorizados por Casie E. Hermansson em *Filming the Children's Book: Adapting Metafiction* (2018) e argumento que a presente adaptação audiovisual pode ser definida com apoio em ambas as noções, já que reflete sobre si própria tanto como produto cinematográfico quanto como adaptação. De seguida, passo a analisar elementos metaficcionais, como referências fílmicas e a maneira como o meio audiovisual chama a atenção para si mesmo através de correspondências cinematográficas à referida autorreflexividade literária. Neste âmbito, analisam-se as

referências ao mundo exterior à narrativa, a abordagem direta ao espectador, a utilização de elementos metafílmicos como salas de cinema, rolos de filme e projetores. Uma das técnicas mais utilizadas ao longo da série é a quebra da quarta parede, criando assim um efeito de alienação previamente teorizado por Brecht com intuitos revolucionários e que aqui é analisado em referência à obra *O Espectador Emancipado* (2008) de Jacques Rancière.

No terceiro e último capítulo, "The Narcissistic Narrator" (tradução: O Narrador Narcisista), ao analisar o papel do narrador, proponho que este é a fonte da essência autorreflexiva da obra. Para o efeito retomarei o conceito de paratexto para analisar de que forma elementos como a autoria do narrador e a forma direta de se dirigir ao leitor problematizam a relação entre a ficção e a realidade do último. Para tal apoio-me em Gérard Genette, nomeadamente no *Discurso da Narrativa - Ensaio de Método* (1972), obra na qual introduziu conceitos amplamente utilizados de análise diegética como focalizações e funções do narrador. No caso de Snicket, o narrador encontra-se entre os níveis narrativos extradiegético e intradiegético, sendo possível defini-lo tanto como heterodiegético quanto como homodiegético: apresenta-se como o escritor dos livros, Lemony Snicket – pseudónimo utilizado por Daniel Handler –, mas ao longo da história percebemos que faz também, de certa forma, parte da narrativa, não sendo assim apenas um pseudónimo do autor mas também em si próprio uma personagem. Esta sua faceta é confirmada através da utilização em diversas ocasiões do recurso estilístico da analepse e do possível encontro entre narrador e protagonistas no penúltimo livro, *The Penultimate Peril*, que será posteriormente confirmado no episódio "The Penultimate Peril: Part One" da adaptação televisiva e que irá moldar o papel do narrador. Este capítulo inclui ainda duas secções intituladas "Narrator and Narratee" e "Narrator and Protagonists".

Tendo tudo isto em conta, confere-se que narrador e protagonistas influenciam-se mutuamente, assim como narrador e leitor/espectador se sobrepõem através de uma associação metaficcional, moldando os seus respetivos papéis através de uma reestruturação das expectativas narrativas. O eixo da minha dissertação será, portanto, analisar de que forma a metaficção molda o papel do narrador na narrativa e vice-versa, numa perspetiva comparatista e intermedial. Considerando o papel primordial do narrador para o aspeto metaficcional da narrativa, pode ser concluído que este é também uma parte essencial na transcodificação do meio literário para o meio audiovisual. O autor-narrador que se dirige diretamente ao leitor desde a primeira página torna-se personagem-narrador ao quebrar a quarta parede desde o início da série, quando aparece no ecrã a olhar para a câmara e a falar diretamente para o espectador – mantendo assim a essência metaficcional da narrativa.

The Infamous Introduction

> *If you ask one question, it will lead you to another, and another. It's like peeling an onion.*
>
> - Lemony Snicket, *The End* (218)

In this dissertation we propose, quoting the epigraph above, to "peel the onion" that is Lemony Snicket's series of 13 books called *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (1999 - 2006), as well as of its eponymous long-form adaptation for streaming television, which was first exhibited on the subscription streaming service Netflix in 2017.

A Series of Unfortunate Events is a collection of books whose purported author is Lemony Snicket, at a first level a pseudonym for author Daniel Handler. It is comprised of 13 volumes with alliterated titles (except for the last one): *The Bad Beginning* (1999), *The Reptile Room* (1999), *The Wide Window* (2000), *The Miserable Mill* (2000), *The Austere Academy* (2000), *The Ersatz Elevator* (2001), *The Vile Village* (2001), *The Hostile Hospital* (2001), *The Carnivorous Carnival* (2002), *The Slippery Slope* (2003), *The Grim Grotto* (2004), *The Penultimate Peril* (2005) and *The End* (2006). The story focuses on three siblings — Violet, Klaus and Sunny Baudelaire — who receive, in the first book, the news that their parents died in a fire which completely destroyed their home. After being first put in the care of Count Olaf, who is the villain that wants to steal the family fortune, they go from one guardian to another and from one home to another throughout the series, overcoming obstacles as they try and escape their antagonist. Not finding any help from adults (who all seem oblivious to Olaf's multiple schemes), the Baudelaire siblings are forced to be self-sufficient.

In the 11th book, *The Grim Grotto*, when the Baudelaires find themselves back in the same place where their unfortunate events began in the first book, Briny Beach, there's a thorough summary of the narrative structure we can find in each volume:

> The siblings (...) felt as if some cycle were about to begin all over again—that once more they would receive terrible news, and that once more they would be taken to a new home, only to have villainy surround them once more, as had happened so many times since their last visit to Briny Beach, just as you might be wondering if the Baudelaires' miserable story will begin

> all over again for you, with my warning you that if you are looking for happy endings, you would be better off reading some other book.
>
> (Snicket 2004: 315)

This brief paragraph summarises the central narrative structure of the books: each starts with a new beginning in a different place or in the care of new guardians, followed by the sudden appearance of a disguised Count Olaf. The children try to warn the adults around them of the villain's presence but, in face of their obliviousness, they must fend for themselves when put in danger. After the climatic point of the story, in which they save themselves, Olaf's disguise is finally revealed and they are sent (or deliberately run) somewhere else.

In 2017, a long-form, television adaptation of the books was released on the American subscription streaming service Netflix, with Daniel Handler as executive producer and writer. It follows a structure of 2 episodes per book (except for the last one, adapted into a single episode) and it is divided into 3 seasons, with a total of 25 episodes. The first season is comprised of the following eight episodes: "A Bad Beginning: Part One", "A Bad Beginning: Part Two", "The Reptile Room: Part One", "The Reptile Room: Part Two", "The Wide Window: Part One", "The Wide Window: Part Two", "The Miserable Mill: Part One" and "The Miserable Mill: Part Two". The second season, released on March 30, 2018, is the longest one, consisting of ten episodes: "The Austere Academy: Part One", "The Austere Academy: Part Two", "The Ersatz Elevator: Part One", "The Ersatz Elevator: Part Two", "The Vile Village: Part One", "The Vile Village: Part Two", "The Hostile Hospital: Part One", "The Hostile Hospital: Part Two", "The Carnivorous Carnival: Part One" and "The Carnivorous Carnival: Part Two". Finally, the third and final season, released in January 1st, 2019, is the shortest one, consisting of only seven episodes: "The Slippery Slope: Part One", "The Slippery Slope: Part Two", "The Grim Grotto: Part One", "The Grim Grotto: Part Two", "The Penultimate Peril: Part One", "The Penultimate Peril: Part Two" and "The End".

The show introduces a more complete vision of Snicket's universe, since it includes several elements of his other companion books which expand the main narrative: *Lemony Snicket: The Unauthorized Autobiography* (2002), *The Beatrice Letters* (2006) and the 4-book prequel series *All The Wrong Questions* (2012-2015). The first one, as implied by its title, is a fictional autobiography of the series' author and narrator, Lemony Snicket, with an Introduction signed by Daniel Handler, who presents himself as "the official representative of Lemony Snicket in all legal, literary, and social matters" (2002b: ix). Published in parallel to

the 9th book of the series, *The Carnivorous Carnival,* it proposes to answer questions raised by the main narrative. *The Beatrice Letters*, on the other hand, was published shortly after the last instalment of the series, bringing a collection of thirteen letters (the same number of books in the series and of chapters in each book) exchanged between Lemony Snicket and Beatrice Baudelaire. Finally, the prequel series *All The Wrong Questions* consists of four books: *Who Could That Be at This Hour?* (2012), *When Did You See Her Last?* (2013), *Shouldn't You Be in School?* (2014) and *Why Is This Night Different from All Other Nights?* (2015). The narrative revolves around a teenage Lemony Snicket and his years of apprenticeship in a secret organisation, the latter being one of the main mysteries introduced by the original books.

The goal of this dissertation is to analyse the metafictional or self-reflexive facet of both the original text and the audiovisual adaptation, in order to establish a comparative dialogue between the different literary and cinematic means used to tell the story. For this purpose, the first chapter, "A Series of Metafictional Events", starts with the section "The Postmodernist Problem", in which we introduce the concept of Postmodernism through the theoretical grounds of Brian McHale's 1987 book, *Postmodernist Fiction*. In parallel, we make use of Michele Di Palma's 2020 dissertation on the subject, "*A Series of Unfortunate Events*, or Postmodernism for Young Readers". The definition of Postmodernism serves to contextualise both the book series and the concept of metafiction. The latter is introduced in the second section, which is titled "The Metafictional Events" and where we analyse in more depth the metafictional aspects of the book series, namely through its paratextuality, its literary references (intertextuality) and its self-referentiality – that is, how the text calls attention to itself. Starting by developing the concept of metafiction, through Patricia Waugh's 1984 book *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* and Linda Hutcheon's 1980 book *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox,* we proceed afterwards to analyse the metafictional elements present in the books.

In the second chapter, "The Cinematic Climax", we do the same for the TV adaptation, by analysing how the audiovisual medium calls attention to itself through cinematic correspondences to this literary self-reflexivity, such as the fourth-wall breaking technique and filmic references. This chapter is divided into four sections: "The Cinematic", "The Metafilmic", "The Meta-Adaptation" and "Adapting Metafiction". In the first one, we explain the use of the term "cinematic" when referring to a streaming television series, addressing for this purpose the concept of "quality TV". In the second section, after establishing the television series as a cinematic adaptation, we explain the concept of

metafilm, basing my arguments on Casie E. Hermansson's 2018 book *Filming the Children's Book: Adapting Metafiction*, and consequently address the concept of the fourth wall and of the alienation effect, including some bibliographical references to Brecht's theatre, such as Jacques Rancière's *The Emancipated Spectator* (2008). In the third section, Hermansson is referenced in order to introduce her concept of the "fifth wall" in the context of meta-adaptation, considering the TV series's self-reflexive nature as medium. Lastly, in the fourth section, we proceed to analyse in more depth the metafictional elements of the TV series, namely the use of filmic references and the way in which the audiovisual medium calls attention to itself through cinematic correspondences to the literary text's self-reflexivity. For this purpose, we analyse the references made to the real world, the direct address to the spectator and the use of metafilmic elements such as movie theatres, film reels and projectors.

In the third and final chapter, "The Narcissistic Narrator", we examine the role of the narrator – who, presenting himself as the author of the books whilst also being a character in the universe of the narrative, stands between the heterodiegetic and the homodiegetic. We then make a case for him as the main origin of the metafictional essence of the narrative. For this purpose, we must recall the concept of paratext analysed in the first chapter, in order to explain how the books' extradiegetic elements help to transport Snicket to an intradiegetic role, creating a blur between the reader's reality and fiction. With all of this in mind, Genette, who is mentioned in the first chapter, is crucial with the reference to his work *Narrative Discourse – An Essay in Method* (1972), which introduced widely used concepts of diegetic analysis such as focalizations and narrative levels. This chapter further includes two sections titled "Narrator and Narratee" and "Narrator and Protagonists", which focus on analysing the relationship of Snicket and reader/spectator, as well as his relationship with the Baudelaires and how both scenarios affect the narrative and/or the identity of each.

I. A Series of Metafictional Events

The Postmodernist Problem

Postmodernist fiction (...) gives us a pretext for doing unlicensed ontology in a teacup.

- Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (25)

In his 2020 dissertation "*A Series of Unfortunate Events*, or Postmodernism for Young Readers", Michele Di Palma applies theories from Brian McHale's seminal book *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987) to our present object of study. His analysis of Lemony Snicket through the eyes of McHale will be useful for contextualising the narrative as postmodernist. He states that it is "Postmodernism for Young Readers"; on the one hand, the series of 13 books signed by Lemony Snicket is, indeed, generally defined as children's literature and Di Palma goes as far as including it in the so-called Middle Grade fiction, a subgenre of children's literature focused on the ages of 8 to 12 (as opposed to Young Adult fiction, which turns to youth from 13 to 18 years old)[1]. On the other hand, the books include, in fact, many postmodernist aspects, which will be explored later on in the present chapter. However, before delving deeper into this series' specific postmodernist elements, we must firstly try to understand the concept of Postmodernism itself.

According to the understanding of Postmodernism that Di Palma takes from McHale, it consists in an aesthetic "born in a world which had just barely made it out of two World Wars and where the field of literature was fairly shell-shocked and looking for safety in new forms of experimentation" (Di Palma 5). In fact, the beginning of the postmodernist aesthetic is typically located around the 1950s (Ceserani 10), the decade right after the ending of World War II – a time of uncertainty, anxiety and confusion, giving way to an epoch-making change (Di Palma 5). Possibly owing to these origins, Postmodernism can be seen as a tool to

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1 However, this division in children's literature, according to Di Palma, "has been made purely for marketing reasons and takes into consideration the different interests and maturity of the readers but also implies a different manuscript length" as well as "different themes which can be tackled" (10).

problematize fiction, questioning our assumptions about narrative, historical knowledge, language, subjectivity and so on. A notable example of postmodernist literature is historiographic metafiction, a genre defined by Linda Hutcheon in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988) as “theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human construct” (5). In fact, Postmodernism in general is characterised by a deep scepticism about the possibility of complete comprehension and by “a weakening of our sense of historicity; a “schizophrenic” fragmentation of postmodern cultural products that shatters temporal organization into disjointed moments of intensity” (McHale 2015: 68). Di Palma also quotes Hutcheon in her dialogue with Mario J. Valdés, when she says that “the postmodern does indeed recall the past, but always with the kind of ironic double vision that acknowledges the final impossibility of indulging in nostalgia, even as it consciously evokes nostalgia’s affective power” (Di Palma 8).

Moreover, in *A Poetics of Postmodernism,* Hutcheon further argues that “postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges” (3) and which “cannot simply be used as a synonym for the contemporary" (4). Being then a very difficult phenomenon to temporally signpost, for the purpose of this dissertation, we will appropriate the periodization of Brian McHale who, in his seminal book *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), locates its beginning somewhere along the second half of the 20th century:

> Postmodernism is not post modern, whatever that might mean, but post modern*ism*; it does not come *after the present* (a solecism), but after the *modernist movement*. (...) a poetics which is the successor of, or possibly a reaction against, the poetics of early twentieth-century modernism, and not some hypothetical writing of the future.
> As for the prefix POST, here I want to emphasize the element of logical and historical *consequence* rather than sheer temporal *posteriority*. Postmodernism follows *from* modernism, in some sense, more than it follows *after* modernism."
>
> (McHale 1987: 5)

The narrative in *A Series of Unfortunate Events* is equally difficult to temporally signpost: in typical postmodernist contradictive fashion, the narrative blends contemporary and old elements in an undefined point in time. We get a sense of anachronism by the concomitant use of technologies from different time periods, such as telephones and

telegraphs[2], parallel to the book illustrations by Brett Helquist of the Baudelaires wearing Victorian looking clothing[3] (figure 1). It is not as contemporary as cell phones, but it includes an "advanced computer system" (*The Austere Academy* 9) which is supposed to protect the children by recognizing Count Olaf if he appears in Prufrock Preparatory School.

Fig. 1 - Illustration by Brett Helquist from *The Bad Beginning*

This temporal/historical warp helps to establish the ambiguity and uncertainty of a postmodernist narrative, causing a longing and anxiety for answers. According to Elvira Atvara in her 2012 dissertation "Intertextuality in *A Series of Unfortunate Events* by Lemony Snicket", "Snicket intended for the series to take place in a space that only has to do with other books" (17) – this in turn creates the ideal atmosphere for its abundant intertextuality, which will be explored in more detail in the next section. In fact, in an interview for Moment magazine, the author himself, Daniel Handler, explains that he "thought it would be interesting to devise a setting for the book that is somewhat ambiguous", since "Violet is a

2 There are 3 telephones in Mr. Poe's office in chapter 5 of *The Bad Beginning*. In *The Hostile Hospital*, the Baudelaires try to send a telegram to Mr. Poe in the Last Chance General Store, while the narrator mimics one through his writing on the first paragraph of Chapter One.

3 According to Daniel Handler himself in an episode of September 2021 of the podcast *Payne's Page One*, "Snicket's sweet spot" is located "between Victorian and noir" [my own transcription].

fairly British name; Klaus is a fairly German name; Sunny is a fairly American name, and Olaf is a fairly Scandinavian name", which according to him "creates a certain amount of confusion"[4]. Confusion is indeed a feeling generally associated with Postmodernism, since it creates more questions than it brings answers. According to Jean-François Lyotard,

> The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable.
>
> (Lyotard 82)

This denial of a "consensus", this feeling of confusion and lack of certainty is also very much present in the narrative of *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, not only through the aforementioned temporal/historical warp but also through the mysteries introduced along the narrative. The reader's curiosity is induced by their lack of knowledge about the identity of Beatrice, to whom the author dedicates each book, a mystery only solved in the last page of *The End* (and which will be developed in the following section). Other questions that emerge throughout the series involve the Baudelaire parents: did they really die in the fire that destroyed their home? What is the secret organisation to which they belonged? Moreover, why does Count Olaf have a tattoo of an eye on his ankle? Why does Lemony Snicket seem to be on the run while narrating? What is V.F.D. and what is in the mysterious sugar bowl that some characters are always trying to find? All of these key mysteries take some time to be solved, persisting from one book to another and yet another, compelling the reader to go through the series until the last volume in order to see their answers disclosed – thus establishing a permanent feeling of uncertainty in the narrative. This feeling is never completely dispelled, since most of the answers are never given in the main book series; even the companion books, *The Beatrice Letters* and *Lemony Snicket: The Unauthorized Autobiography*, which entice the curiosity of the readers with the promise of solutions, give only more clues. In the words of Di Palma,

> Postmodernist novels may also be defined as scattered in the way they give information about the characters and plot. The reader often has to piece the puzzle together in order to get a

4 Bishton, Ross. "The Jewish Secrets of Lemony Snicket." *Moment Magazine*, April 20, 2022. https://momentmag.com/jewish-secrets-lemony-snicket .

> complete overview and becomes a detective looking for hints and trying to read among the lines.
>
> (Di Palma 9)

This scattered characteristic of postmodernist narratives which entices a detective role in the reader recalls McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction,* in which he tries to establish a postmodernist taxonomy by contrasting this aesthetic with Modernism, the period which preceded it and gave it its name: "postmodernist fiction differs from modernist fiction just as a poetics dominated by ontological issues differs from one dominated by epistemological issues" (1987: xii), he states. To McHale, Modernism indulges in analysing scientific knowledge and its methods, while Postmodernism would be more interested in the metaphysical aspects of knowledge, defining therefore modernist art as "cognitive" and postmodernist art as "post-cognitive" (idem). As Di Palma puts it,

> Where modernism's *dominant* is epistemological, asking itself questions about knowledge and how we can gain it, postmodernism's *dominant* is ontological, wondering what exactly existence is, how many worlds are really out there and whether or not we exist in these worlds.
>
> (Di Palma 5)

Consequently, McHale establishes the detective story as "the epistemological genre *par excellence*" (1987: 9). He argues that it is so because the ultimate objective of a detective story is to solve a mystery, to reach a final answer that will conclude the narrative. Supported by Di Palma, we have previously stated that the scattered characteristic of postmodernist narratives entices a detective role in the reader; however, Di Palma contradicts himself in this point by stating that, in contrast with Modernism, in Postmodernism "the readers are no longer detectives, they simply find themselves overwhelmed by the vast scope of the narrative and by the questions raised" (Di Palma 6). One could argue that, in postmodernist narratives, the reader does initially feel like a detective; however, contrary to modernist narratives, wherein the mystery shall have a solution, in Postmodernism the ontological doubt prevails – thus the reader's initial detective instinct becomes frustrated and hopeless. This is what happens in the experience of reading *A Series of Unfortunate Events.*

Lemony Snicket's book series can be further identified with the Postmodernist aesthetic through the following postmodern characteristics: a challenging of the modern

linear narrative convention, an exposure of the narrative mechanisms, as well as acknowledgement of the writing process and interrupting the narration with anecdotes and ramblings. In fact, Lemony Snicket usually starts his chapters with anecdotes and digressions, such as the discussion on lexical meaning which begins Chapter Five in *The Austere Academy:* "The expression 'following suit' is a curious one, because it has nothing to do with walking behind a matching set of clothing" (Snicket 69). Moreover, a postmodern nihilist humour can be found as early as in the book titles (such as *The Miserable Mill*) or the paratext (such as the back cover blurbs in which the reader is discouraged to read the book) – elements which will be further elaborated in the following section.

In *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (1980), Linda Hutcheon corroborates McHale's idea by saying that "the 'post' of 'Postmodernism' would therefore suggest not 'after', so much as an extension of Modernism and a reaction to it" (2). She also says that "in the criticism of the seventies, the term 'Postmodernism' began to appear to refer to contemporary self-conscious texts" (idem): "a kind of fiction which began to run rampant in the 1960s. 'Metafiction', as it has now been named, is fiction about fiction-that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity" (1). It is true, however, that this kind of fiction has been around for much longer than Postmodernism, even prior to Modernism, when it became especially prominent. As Douwe W. Fokkema states in his *Literary History, Modernism, and Postmodernism* (1983):

> Concerning the relation between text and code, the modernist convention resorts to the metalinguistic commentary, that is, discusses the codes used in the text itself or in other occasions. (...) this type of self-reflexivity also occurs before the modernist period. However, it is in that modernist code that it acquires a considerable importance (...)[5]
>
> (Fokkema 32)

In *Postmodernist Fiction,* McHale mentions Fokkema and his modernist code, whose "semantic aspects are organised around issues of epistemological doubt and metalingual self-reflection" (1987: 8). However, although becoming especially prominent in Modernism, it is during Postmodernism that these self-conscious texts acquire a formal definition and recognition. Neumann and Nünning define it as "a hallmark of postmodernism", stating that "the conceptualization of forms and functions of metafiction evolved from the mid-1970s to

5 My own translation.

the mid-1980s, precisely when scholars were attempting to define postmodernism as an epoch and ethos" (206). Moreover, Lyotard argues that "Postmodernism cannot be dissociated from metanarration (although some Postmodern main works do not present metanarrative devices), because it is in the metanarrative structures that we can organise knowledge and find the inherent meanings in our subjective experience as individuals" (Di Palma 7). In fact, although distinguishable, the terms *metanarration* and *metafiction* "are related and often used interchangeably" since they are both "umbrella terms designating self-reflexive utterances, i.e. comments referring to the discourse rather than to the story" (Neumann and Nünning 204).

Since metafiction is fiction that reflects on itself, it indulges what McHale described as ontological issues and thus takes the reader to a point where they are forced to reflect upon themselves and on their own subjective reception of fiction. In *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, the reader is led to reflect upon the act of reading from the beginning, being directly addressed by the narrator from the very first page – as it will be further developed in the following section.

The Metafictional Events

> *The book you are holding in your two hands right now—assuming that you are, in fact, holding this book, and that you have only two hands—is one of two books in the world that will show you the difference between the word "nervous" and the word "anxious." The other book, of course, is the dictionary, and if I were you I would read that book instead.*
>
> \- Snicket, *The Ersatz Elevator* (1)

In her book *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (1984), Patricia Waugh states that "although the term 'metafiction' might be new, the practice is as old (if not older) than the novel itself" since it reflects on its own identity and structure (5). Waugh encourages the study of metafiction because of "the insights it offers into both the representational nature of all fiction and the literary history of the novel as genre" (idem). Still, she differentiates between metalingual nineteenth-century fiction — mentioning

Fielding, Trollope and George Eliot, “who often ‘break the frame’ of their novels” (32) — and postmodernist metafiction:

> Although the intrusive commentary of nineteenth-century fiction may at times be metalingual (referring to fictional codes themselves), it functions mainly to aid the readerly concretization of the world of the book by forming a bridge between the historical and the fictional worlds. It suggests that the one is merely a continuation of the other, and it is thus not metafictional.
>
> (Waugh 32)

The frame-breaking done by these authors is a metafictional device which comes from a concept of narrative frames – that is, a set of literary conventions:

> Modernism and post-modernism begin with the view that both the historical world and works of art are organized and perceived through such structures or ‘frames’. Both recognize further that the distinction between ‘framed’ and ‘unframed’ cannot in the end be made. Everything is framed, whether in life or in novels. (...) Contemporary metafiction, in particular, foregrounds ‘framing’ as a problem, examining frame procedures in the construction of the real world and of novels. (...) Contemporary metafiction draws attention to the fact that life, as well as novels, is constructed through frames, and that it is finally impossible to know where one frame ends and another begins.
>
> (Waugh 28-29)

Metafictional narratives question and defy those frames, by using what Waugh calls “metafictional framing devices” such as “stories within stories”, “characters reading about their own fictional lives”, “self-consuming worlds or mutually contradictory situations”, “Chinese-box structures which contest the reality of each individual ‘box’ through a nesting of narrators” and “fictions of infinity” (30-31). Some of these framing devices are, in fact, used in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*: in *The Hostile Hospital*, the narrator starts chapter 10 by introducing an unrelated story before continuing with the main one: “At this point in the dreadful story I am writing, I must interrupt for a moment and describe something that happened to a good friend of mine named Mr. Sirin” (Snicket 2001c: 169). In the previous book, *The Vile Village*, the main characters read about themselves in the newspaper: "the children paused to look at The Daily Punctilio, which still lay on the ground. Their own faces stared back at them, below the headline “BAUDELAIRE ORPHANS AT LARGE!”’ (Snicket 2001b: 253-254). Moreover, Waugh uses the concept “fictions of infinity”, referred to by

David Winters in the Introduction of his book *Infinite Fictions: Essays on Literature and Theory* (2015):

> When I last spoke with (Gordon) Lish, he described fiction as a 'bounded infinity' – an object which seems circumscribed on all sides, but which contains a limitless internal world. (…) I've described my experience of reading as an immersion in a peculiar kind of fictional space. Above all, what fascinates me about that space is the idea that it might be infinite; that the world opened up by a book might exceed that outside it.
>
> (Winters 2-3)

Snicket's literary universe is a fiction of infinity in the sense that it implies the existence of parallel narratives and induces questionings which are never resolved, so it transcends the physical limits of the books through what Winters calls in the quotation above a "limitless internal world" – an idea further explored by the expanded view of the narrative introduced in the TV show, with elements taken not only from the main text, but also from the companion books.

Waugh further states that "metafiction draws attention to the process of recontextualization that occurs when language is used aesthetically – when language is (...) used 'playfully'" (36)[6]. In *A Series of Unfortunate Events,* wordplay becomes a didactic element through digressions in the narrative in which the narrator explains to the reader some words and expressions he uses, drawing attention to its linguistic aspect: "they were of two minds, a phrase which here means 'they felt two different ways at the same time.'" (*The Bad Beginning* 133). Another instance of wordplay is the continuous use of the three-letter acronym "V.F.D.", one of the biggest mysteries that follows the reader throughout the narrative. It first appears at the end of *The Austere Academy,* when a friend of the Baudelaires screams the acronym to them as he is being kidnapped. Starting from *The Ersatz Elevator*, then, the siblings try to discover what it stands for, stumbling upon many red herrings on the way, such as: "Very Fancy Doilies" in the aforementioned book; "Village of Fowl Devotees" in the following volume, *The Vile Village,* and "Volunteers Fighting Disease" in *The Hostile Hospital*. Later, in *The Carnivorous Carnival*, it is used for "Vineyard's Famous Donkeys", "Valley of Four Drafts" and "Voice Fakery Disguises", but the most important meaning of V.F.D. is only disclosed in the 10th book, *The Slippery Slope.* After many more red herrings

6 Again in *Payne's Page One*, Handler himself states that he's "more interested in how the language is moving around than (...) in the kind of subject matter necessarily".

(“Volunteer Feline Detectives”, “Very Fascinating Drama”, “Very Fun Day”, “Vinegar–Flavored Doughnuts”, “Violent Frozen Dragonflies”, “Voracious Fierce Dragon”, “Vain Fat Dictator”, “Verdant Flammable Device”, “Vertical Flame Diversion”, “Vernacularly Fastened Door”, “Verbal Fridge Dialogue” and “Very Fresh Dill”) the Baudelaires and the reader finally discover the most important words that the acronym stands for: Volunteer Fire Department. This importance comes from the fact that this is a secret organization whose members are many of the adult characters in the narrative, including the deceased Baudelaire parents, Lemony Snicket himself and the main villain, Count Olaf – all who have tattoos of the V.F.D. insignia (fig. 2) on their ankles. Although the main meaning of V.F.D. is discovered in this 10th book, the following ones still use a varied disambiguation for the acronym as a way of communication between members of the organisation, such as “Volunteer Factual Dispatches” in *The Grim Grotto,* “Very Flammable Detergent” in *The Penultimate Peril* and “Very Flavorless Diet” in *The End.* This playful use of words in the books, as stated by Waugh, “draws attention to the process of recontextualization” (36) of language. McHale argues that there is a deep scepticism to Postmodernism when it comes to language: “in particular, about the capacity of language to reflect or represent reality. Instead, from the poststructuralist point of view language should be seen as *constructing* reality, or rather constructing *a* reality” (2015: 49). The variety of definitions of V.F.D. almost never represents the reality of the organisation that the protagonists are trying to understand; it instead controls the attention of the reader, thus moulding their perception of reality in the narrative.

Fig. 2 – Insignia of V.F.D. in the books.

Waugh further states that “metafictional novels often begin with an explicit discussion of the arbitrary nature of beginnings, of boundaries (...)” (29). In fact, the first book of *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, *The Bad Beginning* starts with the following paragraph:

> If you are interested in stories with happy endings, you would be better off reading some other book. In this book, not only is there no happy ending, there is no happy beginning and very few happy things in the middle. This is because not very many happy things happened in the lives of the three Baudelaire youngsters. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire were intelligent children, and they were charming, and resourceful, and had pleasant facial features, but they were extremely unlucky, and most everything that happened to them was rife with misfortune, misery, and despair. I’m sorry to tell you this, but that is how the story goes.
>
> (Snicket 1999a: 1)

This first page establishes the whole tone of the series. From the start, the reader understands that the “unfortunate” in the title isn’t an overstatement: the characters are indeed unfortunate, as are the events in their lives that are going to be narrated. The book also already starts by establishing itself as a metafictional novel in many ways: firstly, it begins by directly addressing the reader (“If *you* are interested (...)” [italics mine]), allowing him to become drawn into the narrative process. In the first line, the narrator challenges the so-called willing suspension of disbelief – a concept in which one actively ignores the unreality of fiction in order to avoid critical thinking. By addressing the reader directly, the narrator challenges this concept, making the first one aware of his present engagement with a work of fiction. Secondly, it self-consciously defines itself as a work of fiction (“In *this* book” [italics mine]), drawing attention to its own literary condition and consequently not letting the reader forget the active part of reading that they are doing: “*you* would be better off *reading* some other book” [italics mine]. Thereafter, it also lays bare its own structure, by telling promptly “how the story goes”: it discusses its own boundaries, the way Waugh warned of metafictional novels – “not only is there no happy *ending*, there is no happy *beginning* and very few happy things in the *middle*” [italics mine].

Furthermore, the fact that it begins by pointing to the narrative’s unpleasant ending is of special relevance since it reverses the optimistic expectations of children’s literature, which “falls into categories other than the literary, namely, the popular and the pedagogical”

(389), according to Karen Coats in "Conventions of Children's Literature: Then and Now" (2001):

> (…) the conventions of children's literature change with the changing conception of children and what they need and want. Speaking schematically if not rigidly historically, the child as smaller version of the adult gave way to the ideally hedonistic child of the Romantics. (…) Today, for instance, despite all our postmodern pretensions, there is still a tendency to idealize childhood (…)
>
> (Coats 391)

In fact, in her book *A Infância é um Território Desconhecido*[7] (2009), Helena Vasconcelos says that the idea of childhood as purity and kindness was developed in the 19th century (23), with the "discovery of childhood" — since there were no distinctions between children and adults in the Middle Ages (28). Modern conventions such as the prohibition of child labour and slavery and the writing of laws which protect children are all twisted in *A Series of Unfortunate Events,* a pertinent example being the plot of the fourth book, *The Miserable Mill*, in which the Baudelaire children are forced to do unpaid heavy work in the Lucky Smells Lumbermill in order to have shelter there. Here the lack of the order that was instituted by Victorian society creates a different kind of narrative, one that subverts the conventions of children's literature, filled with characteristics which are prominent in postmodernist literature, such as irony and dark humour. Like some of the characters mentioned by Vasconcelos, such as Nabokov's Lolita or McEwan's Briony, while the Baudelaires are "still children or pre-teens, they have, mandatorily, under the tyrannic will of their creators, to lose their 'purity' and 'innocence'. They are pawns in the harsh world of the grown-ups, subject to the tragic forces of life, to the erotic drive and to death" (Vasconcelos 311).

In Postmodernism children's literature becomes, therefore, more pessimistic, expressing real-life issues and *A Series of Unfortunate Events* is no different by dealing with death and mourning from the beginning:

> But the two younger Baudelaires did not feel like characters in a fairy tale. The unfortunate events in their lives had not begun with "Once upon a time," but with the terrible fire that had destroyed their home, and as Olaf's associates led them to a square metal door at the end of

7 Title which could be translated to "Childhood is an Unknown Territory".

> the hallway, Klaus and Sunny feared that their lives would not end like a fairy tale either. The label on the door read "Operating Theater," and as the hookhanded man opened it with one curved glove, the two children could not imagine that their story would end with "happily ever after."
>
> (Snicket 2001c: 186-187)

In this passage the narrator contrasts this pessimistic essence of the narrative with fairy tale conventions, establishing an ironic tone. One strategy for breaking children's narrative's conventions is, in fact, irony – a prominent metafictional technique.[8] Umberto Eco states, in the Postscript of *Il nome della rosa* (1983), that "the post-modern answer to the modern consists on recognizing that the past, since it cannot be destructed, because its destruction would bring silence, must be revisited: with irony, in a non-innocent way"[9] (401). In fact, in the previous quotation, Snicket revisits the past of children's literature by using fairy tale conventions such as "Once upon a time" and "happily ever after" in an ironic way. According to Armelle Parey in "Who's Afraid of Happy Endings? Reflections on a Few Contemporary Novels", "happy endings are generally associated with nineteenth-century novels, fairy tales, romances and a sunny belief in progress and order", a belief which has been "eroded throughout the twentieth-century" (188). She further mentions the expression "happily ever after", which implies a permanent situation of happiness that is not possible in a contemporary mindset (190) – thus its contrasting role in Snicket's gloomy narration.

McHale gives irony an ontological fundament, defining it as a reaction to "the perceived disparity between man's finite mind and the unfathomably vast, ungraspably complex universe" (1987: 29):

> How is the mind to defend itself against such oppressive infinitude? By turning the tables on the universe, reducing it by a kind of conceptual jiu-jitsu to a finite plaything subject to the whims of infinite mind; in other words, through irony.
>
> (McHale 1987: 29-30)

Throughout Snicket's series, there are recurring warnings from the narrator, filled with his witty, ironic self-deprecating humour. It is the first thing that the narrator says on the first page of *The Bad Beginning*: "If you are interested in stories with happy endings, you

8 Again in the podcast *Payge's Page One*, Handler says he's usually asked at what age should people start reading Lemony Snicket, to which he responds "it's at the arrival of irony" [my own transcription].

9 My own translation.

would be better off reading some other book" (1). This warning is repeated many times throughout the books – with variations, such as “if you are looking for happy endings” in *The Grim Grotto* (315) –, reinforcing the unpleasantness of the narrative to the reader, who is urged to give up on his reading over and over again. However (and perhaps purposefully), by attempting to dissuade the reader from reading the book, the narrator ironically incites even more his attention and interest: through this unconventional approach, the reader becomes curious to discover the reasons behind the narrator’s caution. The sole act of reading these books against the narrator’s warnings becomes an act of rebellion, a childlike drive to disobey authority. Even most of the titles of the books contain this self-deprecating warning: not only this is a series of “unfortunate” events, but its beginning is “bad”, the mill is “miserable”, the academy “austere”, the village “vile”, the hospital “hostile” and the grotto “grim”. The book titles are not mere alliterations but their adjectives attribute a feeling of a lingering doom and unpleasantness throughout the series. This rhetorical process brings us back to Snicket's strong use of irony: by using discouraging language, the narrator achieves the opposite – he encourages the reader to go on, which has been his intention from the beginning. In fact, I. A. Richards defines irony as “the bringing in of the opposite, the complementary impulses” (quoted in Barnet, Berman and Burto 64). Moreover, through these alliterations he creates paradoxes: a hospital, for example, being a place of healing, is not supposed to be “hostile”. Here, the literary devices of irony and paradox have the same purpose: by being inconsistent with their original meanings, both create contradictions which intrigue the reader, thus compelling him to read further. In *A Dictionary of Literary, Dramatic, and Cinematic Terms* (1971) by Barnet, Berman and Burto, the paradox is defined as "a statement or situation that seems - but need not be - self-contradictory" (79). On the other hand, irony is categorised as verbal irony – based on ironic treatment, that is, a conscious contrast between what is said and what is meant – or as dramatic irony – based on ironic content, that is, a contrast between what is said or meant and the facts of the situation at hand, usually unknown to the speaker. The one mostly used by Snicket in his narration is verbal irony, defined by the authors in the following manner:

> In **verbal irony** there is a contrast between what is stated and what is more or less wryly suggested. As Robert Frost puts it, “In irony, the tone indicated contradicts the words.” (…) What is stated ironically need not be the reverse of what is suggested; irony may, for example, state somewhat less than it suggests, as in this understatement: “Men have died from time to

> time." Verbal irony that is crude and heavy-handed rather than clever is commonly called **sarcasm**.
>
> (Barnet, Berman and Burto 63)

The authors further state that "irony is synonymous with one meaning of wit" because "'wit' sometimes refers to the presence of material within a literary work that apparently contradicts other parts of the work and thus supposedly induces a balance" (64).

Some of the so-mentioned witty, ironic references Snicket uses to approach fiction to reality are from the literary world: the protagonists themselves get their surname from Charles Baudelaire, as Handler himself confirms in his interview for Moment magazine: "I am fond of the poet Charles Baudelaire whose most famous work is *The Flowers of Evil*", he says, "a cycle of poems that discusses dreadful circumstances and finds beauty in them". By using the name of the master of the Decadent aesthetic and *spleen* (a term used by the poet to describe a mood of melancholy and dissatisfaction with the tragedy of modern life), Snicket sets the tone of misfortune from the very first page. Even Briny Beach itself comes from a poem by Lewis Carroll called "The Walrus and the Carpenter", from his book *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871): "A pleasant walk, a pleasant talk,/Along the briny beach:/We cannot do with more than four,/To give a hand to each" (74). This poem is later quoted in *The Grim Grotto* and a physical copy of it is found by the protagonists on *The Penultimate Peril*. The references to Carroll are even more relevant because of the stylistic influences his work has on Snicket's writing: both use wordplay, eccentric characters, and humour extensively.

Another important character is Mr. Poe, the banker in charge of the Baudelaire fortune, who in Briny Beach informs the children of the tragedy of their parents' death: a direct reference to Edgar Allan Poe. This allusion to a writer whose work is mostly turned to the macabre reinforces the gothic atmosphere of this temporally ambiguous narrative. It is the character who alludes to Edgar Allan Poe who brings the Baudelaires the terrible news of a tragedy. The sons of Mr. Poe also recall this reference, being named "Edgar" (the writer's first name) and "Albert" (which starts with the initial of the writer's second name, Allan). In the first episode of the Netflix adaptation, "The Bad Beginning: Part One", there is even an allusion to the author's poem "The Raven", when Mr. Poe's sons argue: "It's a raven!", "It's a crow!". Moreover, the 7th book, *The Vile Village*, could itself be considered an homage to Edgar Allan Poe: not only is the whole village completely populated by crows, but the place where they go to rest, near the Baudelaire's guardian's house and very relevant for the

narrative, is a tree called the Nevermore Tree — alluding to Poe's poem "The Raven", in which a crow repeats the word "nevermore" many times. In another instance of this continuous allusion and homage to the poet, Count Olaf disguises himself as a detective named Dupin — an explicit reference to Poe's detective character C. Auguste Dupin, from his widely influential 1841 short story "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (considered the beginning of the detective story genre), reappearing in "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" (1842) and in "The Purloined Letter" (1844). All of these allusions to a writer who focuses on the Gothic and the macabre help to emphasise the narrative's misfortune, warned of many times by the narrator.

Furthermore, one of the most relevant instances of literary references in a work so abundant in intertextuality is Beatrice, Snicket's dead beloved. One of the many mysteries the series introduces, Beatrice firstly appears as the recipient of Snicket's dedications, which open every single one of the books. Dedications are an important part of a literary work since it is a part of its paratext. Comprised of titles, dedications, inscriptions, epigraphs, prefaces, intertitles, notes and epitexts, the concept of paratextuality was theorised by Gérard Genette in his book *Paratexts: thresholds of interpretation* (1997):

> A literary work consists, entirely or essentially, of a text (...) But this text is rarely presented in an unadorned state, unreinforced and unaccompanied by a certain number of verbal or other productions, such as an author's name, a title, a preface, illustrations (...) they surround it and extend it, precisely in order to present it, in the usual sense of this verb but also in the strongest sense: to make present, to ensure the text's presence in the world, its "reception" and consumption in the form (...) of a book. These accompanying productions, which vary in extent and appearance, constitute what I have called elsewhere the work's paratext (...)
>
> (Genette 1997: 1)

As we can confer above, Lemony Snicket's name itself is an instance of the paratext, connecting the world of the narrative to the reader's world — much more so through the metafictional role this specific author plays (which will be developed further in the last chapter). Further instances of paratext in the books are Snicket's letters to his editor at the end of every book (serving as a brief synopsis of the following book's plot) and the "Dear Reader" blurbs at the back covers, summarising the book in question and reinforcing the narrator's warnings against reading it by directly addressing the reader. One cannot help but wonder, then, if the paratext in Postmodernism is not itself another instance of text. The

Beatrice dedications, for example, also help to consolidate this presence of the text in the world, since historically dedications are "more factual than textual, unless the name of the dedicatee is mentioned in the text itself" (Genette 1997: 118). In this case, since Snicket is a presence in the text itself, the reader assumes that the dedicatee also belongs in the world of the narrative. However, her identity is only uncovered on the last page of the last book, confirming this assumption: Beatrice was indeed a character in the text. The dedications then read like a parallel story through the series, until we find out it is actually part of the same narrative: just like Snicket himself is a character in the narrative, so has she been one all along — Beatrice Baudelaire, the protagonists' mother.

Genette further states that "(...) the dedication (...) is the proclamation (sincere or not) of a relationship (of one kind or another) between the author and some person, group, or entity" (1997: 135). In fact, Snicket's dedications to Beatrice proclaim his relationship to her, mimicking the relationship between Dante Alighieri with his beloved Beatrice Portinari, a young girl who, just like Snicket's Beatrice, died precociously and became his literary muse, being the subject of his autobiographical *Vita Nova* (1294) and even appearing as a guiding spirit in his *Divine Comedy* (1472). Beatrice Baudelaire's role throughout the narrative is subtly also of the guiding spirit kind: her influence on her children is notable in many crucial moments of the narrative, such as in Klaus' decoding of the words which unlock the Vernacularly Fastened Door in *The Slippery Slope*, by remembering a quotation of Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1878), a book which their mother used to read them.

Another prominent allusion throughout the whole series is Herman Melville. In *The Wide Window* there is the emerging risk of "Hurricane Herman", alluding to the first name of the writer of *Moby Dick* (1851), novel which is also referenced many times: in the 2017 adaptation, the taxi driver who takes the Baudelaires to Aunt Josephine's house in episode "The Wide Window: Part One" is called Ishmael, the name of Melville's novel's protagonist. This reference previously happens in the original text: in Snicket's last book, *The End*, the main antagonist is called Ishmael, who is always repeating the phrase "Call me Ish", alluding to the first line in *Moby Dick*, "Call me Ishmael" (1). Furthermore, other characters from *Moby Dick* are likewise referenced: Jonah Mapple is another patient in *The Hostile Hospital*, while *The Miserable Mill*'s Ahab Memorial Hospital recalls Captain Ahab. *The Grim Grotto*'s submarine is called Queequeg (another *Moby Dick* character) and in this same book there is a direct reference to Melville through a portrait of him on the submarine uniforms.

Further intertextual references worth mentioning are those made to modernist English writer Virginia Woolf — in *The Reptile Room* there is a "Virginian Wolfsnake" and in *The*

Hostile Hospital there is a patient called Clarissa Daloway, recalling her novel *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). J. D. Salinger is also alluded to in *The Ersatz Elevator* through the names of the Baudelaire's new guardians: Jerome (Salinger's first given name) and Esmé Squalor, referring to his short story "For Esmé - With Love and Squalor" (1950). A very obvious reference is made to George Orwell with *The Miserable Mill*'s character Dr. Georgina Orwell and her hypnosis plot which recalls that of his dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), in which the state controls the citizens' lives and minds. The guardian in *The Reptile Room* is called Dr. Montgomery Montgomery, an allusion to Canadian author of children's book *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), Lucy Maud Montgomery, as well as the guardian in *The Wide Window*, Aunt Josephine Anwhistle, a possible reference to Anne's guardian Aunt Josephine Barry (interestingly enough, Anne is an orphan as well as the Baudelaires). In the sphere of postmodern literature, the series alludes a lot to Russian-American writer Vladimir Nabokov, also known by his pen name Vladimir Sirin: in *The Hostile Hospital* Snicket mentions his friend Mr. Sirin and one of the patients is called Synthia Vane, referencing Nabokov's short story "The Vane Sisters" (1958). The amount of literary referencing in the book series is too extensive to be fully listed in this dissertation; however, we covered some of the main examples in order to demonstrate that the metafictional implication of all this intertextuality is, ultimately, bringing the text's reality closer to the reader's reality. As Di Palma affirms,

> And so, often with irony, does Lemony Snicket use references to build his own version of reality. (…) the works of the past he refers to (…) come from the world of the reader seemingly to furtherly cloud the line dividing fiction and reality.
>
> (Di Palma 22)

On the other hand, all of these literary allusions might turn out to pass unnoticed to the purported audience of the book series, since it was first published by Scholastic Inc., which defines itself as "the world's largest publisher and distributor of children's books".[10] Elvira Atvara defines this strong use of intertextual references as an instance of "crosswriting" – term coined by U.C. Knoeflmacher in 1993 (47) and which means "authors who address both children and adults in the same text" (Beckett 216). Di Palma states that *A Series Of Unfortunate Events* "does indeed belong to the Middle-Grade genre yet offers a different point of view, a parodic one to be precise" (12). He further states that "presenting such adult themes in a children's series makes it a crossover between genres" (idem): not

10 As stated in https://www.scholastic.com/aboutscholastic.

only between the subgenres of Middle-Grade and Young Adult fiction, but also crossing the boundary between children's literature and adult fiction. C.S. Lewis himself once stated that a "children's story which is enjoyed only by children is a bad children's story" (quoted in Beckett 87). Atvara further states that "according to Kristeva, a text can be analysed in terms of two axes: 'a horizontal axis connecting the author and reader of a text, and a vertical axis, which connects the text to other texts'" (9). She adds:

> While child readers experience the linear reading, the adult readers experience vertical reading that is 'simultaneously centrifugal and centripetal' (ibid.:175). (...) not all the allusions aim at children audience (...) the novel gathers dual readership and provides for the dual socialization of knowledge as well as poses the series as an example of crosswriting while transgressing the boundaries of one genre.
>
> (Atvara 48-49)

In this sense, the dual address of the narrative implies that the subjective experience of reading depends on the reader's previous literary codes. In "From the Editors: "Cross-Writing" and the Reconceptualizing of Children's Literary Studies" (1997), U. C. Knoepflmacher and Mitzi Myers state that:

> (...) it might be argued that any text that activates a traffic between phases of life we persist in regarding as opposites demands, yet seldom receives, readings that should reflect a similar critical elasticity. Whether addressing adult or child audiences, or both, such fluid texts often rely on settings that dissolve the binaries and contraries that our culture has rigidified and fixed.
>
> (Knoepflmacher & Myers viii)

Indeed, mature literary allusions in *A Series of Unfortunate Events* have an arguably simple writing style, accessible to all ages – this reflects an elasticity in the narrative which dissolves the fixed contraries between adult and children's literature. Furthermore, the scattered world of literary allusions throughout the book series seems to come together in the last book, which holds a much bigger number of allusions than any of the previous ones. Being the last one in the series, *The End* is also the one in which the characters are older (Violet, Klaus and Sunny start in *The Bad Beginning* with 14 years old, 12 years old and a few months old, finishing the series with 16, 14 and 2 years old, respectively) – this is, intentionally or not, reflected on the amount of crosswriting in the narrative, which, although

found at many points throughout the series, is much more abundant in this last book. Some character names come from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611) (Mrs. Miranda Caliban, Alonso, Ferdinand and Ariel), others from Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoé* (1719) (Friday and Robinson) and Jack London's *The Sea-Wolf* (1904) (Brewster, Weyden and Larsen), as well as from *Moby Dick,* as previously referenced (the main antagonist, who is called Ishmael). The narrative of the last book in *A Series of Unfortunate Events* is likewise located in a much more confined space than any of the other ones: the Baudelaires are stuck on an island. This limited space condenses the biggest number of literary allusions in the series, being almost a literary inventory – much like the Arboretum in the narrative, a hidden place in the island where the shipwrecked objects are stocked, serving the purpose of a library of objects.

Another instance of literary self-reflexivity in the original text is a plot device found in the last volume, *The End*, consisting of a secret commonplace book found by the Baudelaires on the hidden part of the island, the Arboretum. By reading it, they discover that this book was written and kept by every character who has superseded as leader of the island: it has entries written by members of V.F.D. such as Ishmael (who was, at the time of the narrative, the leader of the island) and Beatrice and Bertrand Baudelaire, the protagonists' mother and father – it will also have, years later, entries written by the protagonists themselves. In the climax of the narrative, this book will also be crucial to help the siblings find the solution to their predicament. The literary self-reflexivity of this plot device amounts not only to the existence a book within a book (since other books had already been part of the narrative before), but also to the book having the same title as that of Lemony Snicket's book series:

> (…) the Baudelaire orphans wondered about their own unfortunate history, and that of their parents and all the other castaways who had washed up on the shores of the island, adding chapter upon chapter to *A Series of Unfortunate Events*.
>
> (Snicket 2006a: 232-233)

The commonplace book found by the Baudelaires in the Arboretum is titled *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (fig. 3) – a title only disclosed by the narrator at the end of the chapter, adding to the suspenseful effect that happens when the reader recognises these words. By connecting the title of the book within the narrative with the title of the book series which enclose the latter, the reader is forced to reflect upon the fictional aspect of what they are

reading, bringing him back to his own reality. This connection between two different narrative levels – the first level of the Baudelaires' story and the second one of the narrative enclosed in the commonplace book – is a technique known as metalepsis, defined as

> (...) an existential crossing of the boundaries between the extradiegetic and diegetic levels of a narrative or the(intra)diegetic and metadiegetic levels; or, in short, as the move (...) from any hierarchically ordered level into one above or below (also possibly skipping intermediate levels).
>
> (Fludernik 383)

Chris Baldick (2001) further states that narrative metalepsis is "sometimes called frame-breaking" (recalling Waugh's theories) since it is "a breaking of the boundaries that separate distinct 'levels' of a narrative" (153). This usually happens between what he calls "embedded tale" and its "frame story" (idem) – the latter being defined as "a story in which another story is enclosed or embedded as a 'tale within the tale'" (101). McHale also talks about metalepsis, mentioning Genette when the latter refers to it as "the violation of narrative levels" (McHale 1987: 120). Not only does the commonplace book found by the Baudelaires include information about the island where they are and people that they know, its own title is already a reference to the main narrative level.

Fig. 3 – Illustration by Brett Helquist from *The End*

Moreover, just as Snicket begins the first lines of the first book of the series by mentioning the ending, he also alludes back to the beginning within the last book, *The End:*

> "The end" is a phrase which refers to the completion of a story, or the final moment of some accomplishment, such as a secret errand, or a great deal of research, and indeed this thirteenth volume marks the completion of my investigation into the Baudelaire case, which required much research, a great many secret errands, and the accomplishments of a number of my comrades, from a trolley driver to a botanical hybridization expert, with many, many typewriter repairpeople in between. **But it cannot be said that *The End* contains the end of the Baudelaires' story, any more than *The Bad Beginning* contained its beginning.**
>
> (Snicket 2006a: 255; bold mine)

This last phrase demonstrates that, by exposing its own boundaries, the novels carry out the metafictional frame-breaking discussed by Waugh, against the conventional literary concepts of beginning and ending. According to Frank Kermode in *The Sense of an Ending* (2000),

> (...) in 'making sense' of the world we still feel a need, harder than ever to satisfy because of an accumulated scepticism, to experience that concordance of beginning, middle, and end which is the essence of our explanatory fictions, and especially when they belong to cultural traditions which treat historical time as primarily rectilinear rather than cyclic.
>
> (Kermode 35-36)

Snicket denies this concordance of beginning and ending because, in his own words, "the world is always *in medias res* — a Latin phrase which means 'in the midst of things' or 'in the middle of a narrative'" (Snicket 2006a: 289). In this quotation, Snicket ironically uses a term of literary theory in order to describe the world – thus having the narrative self-reflect on itself as an instance of literature. The beginning of the Baudelaire story begins much earlier than the first lines of the first book, as its ending is not limited by the last page of the last book – implying a much more cyclical concept of time than our cultural convention of a rectilinear historical time, as stated by Kermode. In order to make this manifest, the last book does not end in the thirteen chapter as it happens with all the other books in the series. After chapter 13, the expected ending, we turn the page to find an illustration of the narrator sailing away (fig. 4), followed by a page with the usual biographies of the illustrator and the author and a last note to the editor:

> To My Kind Editor:

The end of THE END can be found at the end of THE END.

With all due respect,

Lemony Snicket

(Snicket 2006a: 329)

This presupposed ending, although having all the same elements of the back matter present in all the other books (biographies and note to the editor), is followed by a blank page and the usual front matter of Snicket books: the title page ("Chapter Fourteen"), the copyright page and a dedication to Beatrice. *Chapter Fourteen* starts with an illustration of the Baudelaire boat sailing away (fig. 5).

Fig.s 4 and 5 – Illustrations by Brett Helquist from *The End*

This second ending will be much more philosophical than the one from Chapter Thirteen. Here, a phenomenon first mentioned in *The Grim Grotto* as "The Great Unknown" is resumed: a question mark-shaped object or creature that roams the seas when the Baudelaires are aboard the *Queequeg* submarine. In the books, its nature remains a secret and

neither the characters nor the readers get to know if it is a living creature or a man-made object. Symbolically, “The Great Unknown” is a good summing up of the postmodernist ontological questioning theorised by Brian McHale. Appearing for the first time in *The Grim Grotto* to express the mysterious immensity of the sea, here at the end it follows the Baudelaires when they are sailing away from the island to reinforce the postmodernist sense of uncertainty, ambiguity and impossibility of mystery-solving. As Snicket writes in *The End*, “One cannot spend forever sitting and solving the mysteries of one’s history, and no matter how much one reads, the whole story can never be told. But it was enough.” (322-323). The narrator/investigator has tracked down the Baudelaires only so far as their lives on the island; their future is unknown, a characteristic inherent to the concept of future itself. “The Great Unknown” is possibly the series’ most philosophical aspect.[11] It is with this great ontological question that the book series ends: after chapter 14, we turn the page to find an illustration of a question mark shadow on the surface of the sea, the symbolic visual representation of The Great Unknown (fig. 6).

Fig. 6 – Illustration by Brett Helquist from *The End*

In the TV show adaptation – which will be further developed in the following chapter –, the mysterious aspect of The Great Unknown is diminished. In “The Grim Grotto: Part

11 Again in the podcast *Payne’s Page One*, Daniel Handler says there are a lot of digressions in his Snicket books, a kind of “larger philosophical musing” [my own transcription].

One", the audiovisual representation of The Great Unknown is more concrete: its sound is presented as a screech, while through a window of the submarine the spectator can see scales and an eye – which will insinuate a zoomorphic identity of the phenomenon, approaching it to the more concrete interpretation of a sea monster. Moreover, and in a contradictory fashion, in "The Grim Grotto: Part Two", a character refers to The Great Unknown by saying "I heard that it's a metaphor for death" – thus recalling a more abstract and philosophical interpretation of the phenomenon, which in the books is only implied.

The original use of The Great Unknown in the ending of the last book, however, is more vague and does not give away such concrete answers. It constitutes a postmodernist ending which doesn't conform to the closed, happy endings of Victorian children's literature based on the "sunny belief in progress and order" previously quoted from Parey, which has been "eroded throughout the twentieth-century" (188). The postmodernist conclusion is, rather, an ambiguous one. In the words of McHale:

> Conventionally, one distinguishes between endings that are *closed*, as in Victorian novels with their compulsory tying-up of loose ends in death and marriage, and those that are *open*, as in many modernist novels. But what are we to say about texts that seem both open and closed, somehow poised between the two, because they are either *multiple* or *circular*?
>
> (McHale 1987: 109)

As Waugh states, "Metafictional novels (...) often end with a choice of endings. Or they may end with a sign of the impossibility of endings" (29), just as Snicket proposes that "it cannot be said that *The End* contains the end of the Baudelaires' story, any more than *The Bad Beginning* contained its beginning" (Snicket 2006a: 287) since the material object that is the book does not confine the limits of the whole story, which according to him "is always in *media res*" (2006a: 289). The final book of the series also gives the reader a double ending. Reiterating the ontological question above mentioned, the first ending (of chapter 13) reads: "It is not the whole story, of course, but it is enough. Under the circumstances, it is the best for which you can hope" (324). Meanwhile, the second ending (of chapter 14) reads:

> Perhaps it is better not to know precisely what was meant by this word, as some things are better left in the great unknown. There are some words, of course, that are better left unsaid—but not, I believe, the word uttered by my niece, a word which here means that the story is over.
>
> *Beatrice*.

(Snicket, 2006a: *Chapter Fourteen*, 12-13)

The narrative ends with the word that has been appearing since the beginning of the series, in the dedication of each book. This final metafictional gesture brings light to one of the mysteries that pervade the whole series: who is Lemony Snicket's constant dedicatee? Snicket's niece, who the Baudelaires raise after her mother, Kit Snicket, dies on the island, utters her own name: "Beatrice". Since the readers know that she was named by the Baudelaires after their own mother, the baby's utterance unveils this mystery of the dedicatee by putting the pieces together: the reader finally realises that, if the baby was named after the Baudelaires' mother, who was called Beatrice, then the Beatrice in the dedications was the protagonists' mother all along. As Snicket himself says earlier in the paragraph, by connecting the narrative of two different timelines "the infant was standing on a spot in someone else's story, during a moment of her own" (*Chapter Fourteen* 12). We called the word "Beatrice" a final metafictional gesture because its effect is that of associating an element of the paratext with the world inside the narrative. The author's dedications being directed at a character from the story blurs the lines between the physical world of the reader and the narrative, between reality and fiction.

In the following chapter, we will analyse how the TV show adaptation translates this crucial use of the paratext to an audiovisual medium and how it expands some of the postmodernist hints given by the narrative. In short, we shall try to understand how the TV show adapts the literary self-reflexivity through cinematic correspondences, thus adapting not only the narrative, but also its metafictional essence.

II. The Cinematic Climax

The screen is a mask whose function is no less to hide reality than it is to reveal it.

- André Bazin, *Jean Renoir* (87)

The Cinematic

In *A Dictionary of Literary, Dramatic, and Cinematic Terms*, Barnet, Berman and Burto explain the concept of “plot” by stating that "the rising action begins with an exposition (...), and rises through a complication (...) to a high point or crisis or climax (a moment at which tension is high, and which is a decisive turning point)” (86). This chapter is called The Cinematic Climax because, after the exposition of The Infamous Introduction and the complications of The Postmodernist Problem and of The Metafictional Events, this dissertation has now reached a decisive turning point: we move from the literary realm to a different mediatic territory, the cinematic.

Some hints have been given of the way in which the 2017 streaming TV show adaptation tries to emphasise some of the literary intertextual references of the books. We have mentioned Mr. Poe’s sons, who debate whether “It’s a raven” or “It’s a crow” in the first episode of the first season (“The Bad Beginning: Part One”), recalling Edgar Allan Poe’s poem “The Raven” and reinforcing the book’s literary reference; we have also mentioned the foreshadowing done to Herman Melville’s importance later in the narrative through a taxi driver called Ishmael in episode “The Wide Window: Part One” (the fifth of season one). Literary intertextuality is, as we have previously seen, one of the main metafictional devices of the book series: the text calls attention to itself by alluding to other real-world texts and by exposing some of its own literary devices. The TV show adaptation brings the metafictional essence of the narrative to the screen by doing the same through a different media, with cinematic correspondences to the narrative’s literary self-reflexivity. Through audiovisual references, this cinematic adaptation calls attention to its own media.

Firstly, we must explain the use of the word *cinematic* to refer to a streaming television show. Although the latter implies a different media (television and not cinema), the range of possibilities is much similar in both. Through a combination of literature, music, photography and other media, televisive and filmic productions explore fiction in quite an analogous way. However, there are some elemental mediatic differences. In his book *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video* (1982), John Ellis contrasts broadcast TV with cinema by stating that "sound tends to anchor meaning on TV, where the image tends to anchor it with cinema", since the first relies "upon sound as the major carrier of information and the major means of ensuring continuity of attention", while "the image must show whatever is before the camera with the minimum of fuss and conscious technique. The image is to be kept in its place" (129-130):

> Contrasting with cinema's profusion (and sometimes excess) of detail, broadcast TV's image is stripped-down, lacking in detail. (...) So background and context tend to be sketched rather than brought forward and subject to a certain fetishism of details that often occurs in cinema, especially art cinema.
>
> (Ellis 130)

In the postface to the 1992 edition of this book, however, Ellis predicts that "the television commodity is about to come of age" (270):

> This careful combination of very familiar televisual elements is then cemented by the vaguely cinematic feel that comes with a high budget and leisurely cutting style. This last element has long been used to pick out 'TV with cultural value' from 'the rest' (...) snob TV.
>
> (Ellis 276)

Here, Ellis foresees what would come to be called "quality TV". In 2007, Janet McCabe and Kim Akass publish the book *QUALITY TV - Contemporary American Television and Beyond,* with a Preface written by Robert J. Thompson, where he states:

> The precise definition of 'quality TV' was elusive right from the start, though we knew it when we saw it. These shows were generic mongrels, often scrambling and recombining traditional TV formulas in unexpected ways; they had literary and cinematic ambitions beyond what we had seen before, and they employed complex and sophisticated serialised narratives and inter-series 'mythologies'.

(Thompson xix)

This definition of the concept of "quality TV" is underpinned in Robin Nelson's essay from the same book, "Quality TV Drama - Estimations and Influences Through Time and Space", where he states that "production values in television have improved significantly" through digital technologies with "a higher resolution, more stable image and surround sound for television" (43) together with a higher funding:

> The result is a better quality of visual imagery, enhanced by the capacity for sharper editing and digital treatment in post-production. (...) In addition to a cinematic look, the final television product can be enhanced with special effects by digital treatment. (...) digital technologies have undoubtedly blurred the boundary between film and television in terms of both production processes and technical quality of product. Thus the former denigration of television in the face of cinema has itself been revalued (...) At the reception end, large, widescreen digital monitors are available to carry the cinematic image into the domestic space. (...) But commentators today (Caldwell 1995; Lury 2005) broadly agree that the improved imagery has fostered an aesthetic dimension in television that approximates the visual aesthetics of cinema.
>
> (Nelson 43)

These arguments are also supported by Adriano Nazareth in his essay "Cinematography and Television: Differences and Similarities" (2010), where he argues that "with the advent of high definition, the frame is replaced by a similar scale to that of the cinema", while "the use of LCD and plasma screens brings the television screen even closer to the cinema screen" (36). It is with these arguments in mind that we thus make a case of the streaming television show *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (2017-2019) as an instance of the so-called quality TV. Having been created for a streaming service, the show is cinematic in nature due to its production value. It benefits from high funding, the evolution of digital technologies, and the same cinematic techniques one could use in a film made for the movie theatres and thus, as a medium, it will be treated as such.

The Metafilmic

Casie E. Hermansson, in *Filming the Children's Book: Adapting Metafiction* (2019) separates metafiction adaptations in three different groups: firstly, merely adapting the narrative; secondly, adapting the metafictional aspect through the "metafilm", which she

defines as a “self reflexive film that in one way or another breaks the 'fourth' wall that maintains the mimetic illusion of the film's reality and reveals it as a filmic construct" (5). Thirdly, she introduces what Eckart Voigts–Virchow coined as “meta-adaptation”, which I will develop afterwards. As an example of the second level, “metafilm”, Hermansson talks about the 2004 Nickelodeon film adaptation of the first three *A Series of Unfortunate Events* books: *Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events*, directed by Brad Silberling. According to her, metafilm adapts metafiction through medium-specific equivalents, such as a sudden freeze frame in order to adapt to film the abrupt ending of chapter 2 of *The Reptile Room*, in which Sunny is supposedly attacked by a snake (followed by a lengthy apology for the interruption at the beginning of the next chapter). She states:

> Metafilm is film (and other filmic media, such as television) that makes the viewer aware that they are viewing a filmic medium. Watching metafilm is therefore as double as reading metafiction: viewers are simultaneously aware of both story and discourse.
>
> (Hermansson 124)

At the metafilmic level, the TV show adaptation attempts to engage in a cinematic adaptation of literary techniques. In order to understand this, we must firstly analyse a particular moment in the original text: at the end of chapter 3 of *The Penultimate Peril*, each one of the siblings goes a different way while working at the Hotel Denouement. The sequential pace of the narrative is then interrupted by the narrator, who introduces, between chapter 3 and chapter 4, a one-page chapter called “NOT A CHAPTER”, in order to address the reader directly and give him some guidance on his own reading:

> As I’m sure you’ve noticed, most of the history of the Baudelaire orphans is organized sequentially, a word which here means “so that the events in the lives of Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire are related in the order in which they occurred.” In the case of the next three chapters, however, the story is organized simultaneously, which means that you do not have to read the chapters in the order in which they appear. (…) But because all of them occur at the very same time, you need not read the chapters in the sequence four-five-six, but can read them in any order you choose.
>
> (Snicket 2005: 75)

This textual segment introduces the following three chapters, all which start with the same sentence: “When the elevator reached” (77, 99 and 123) the roof (in the case of Violet

in chapter 4), the sixth story (in the case of Klaus in chapter 5) or the third story (in the case of Sunny in chapter 6). The ending of each of these chapters is also analogous: the penultimate paragraph is the same in all of them, describing the loud clock of the hotel whose "bells clang throughout the entire building, making an immense, deep noise that sounds like a certain word being uttered once for each hour" (96, 199, and 146). Each of the Baudelaires "felt as if the clock were scolding (them) for (their) efforts at solving the mysteries of the Hotel Denouement" and "all the (eldest/middle/youngest) Baudelaire could think was that everything was wrong, wrong, wrong" (97-98, 120-121, 146-147). These repetitive phrasings serve to remind the reader that the events narrated in these three chapters are happening simultaneously within the narrative time. The use of the clock in each one of these chapters to temporally locate the action serves the same function: "at this particular moment, it was three o'clock, and everyone in the hotel could hear the booming ring of the enormous bells of the clock, uttering the word three times in succession: *Wrong! Wrong! Wrong!*" (96-97, 119-120, 146).

Following these simultaneous chapters, the narrator introduces another one-page segment called "ALSO NOT A CHAPTER", with only the following written:

> At this point, the history of the Baudelaire orphans reverts to its sequential format, and if you are interested in finishing the story, you should read the chapters in the order in which they appear, although I dearly hope you are not interested in finishing the story, any more than the story is interested in finishing you.
>
> (Snicket 2005: 149)

The narrator directly addresses the reader once more in order to inform them of the narrative framing device being used, so as to guide the reading. Since the reader is accustomed to a narration in a sequential format throughout the book series, the narrator assumes the reader's estrangement to a simultaneous format and so he frames this part of the narrative with two one-page chapters, which according to him are not real chapters and don't count to the overall chapter number (since every book in the series has 13 chapters, a number used purposefully due to its auguring connotation). In a metaliterary level, however, these textual segments are, in essence, chapters as well: they include a title, an illustration and the text, in the style of every other chapter, as well as contribute to the number of pages in the book.

In the TV show, this narrative simultaneity is translated from the literary medium to the audiovisual medium through a split screen technique, in which the screen is divided into three simultaneous images, each with one of the Baudelaire siblings leaving the elevator (fig. 7). This cinematic technique is also metafictional since it breaks the illusion of the screen frame as a seamless image which mimics the view of the human eye – as André Bazin puts it in *Jean Renoir* (1973), "the concept of the reality of a shot on a single plane, the idea of each shot as nothing more than a unit of place and action" (89) – bringing the attention of the spectator to the fact that he is watching an audiovisual piece of fiction. Through this cinematic adaptation of a literary technique, metafiction is brought to screen through medium-specific equivalents, thus creating a metafilmic level.

Fig. 7 – Stills from the episode "The Penultimate Peril: Part One" (00:15:34)

Another one of the most prominent cinematic correspondences to the narrative's literary self-reflexivity, namely the reversal of its willing suspension of disbelief – a concept referenced in the previous chapter – is "fourth wall" breaks. The "fourth wall" is a theatrical concept which presupposes the existence of an invisible wall between audience and actors. Thus, "breaking the fourth wall" would be suspending this contract of disbelief by directly addressing the spectator or pointing out its own condition as media. Over the decades, this concept has been broadly applied to other types of media, namely that of cinema — and, mostly so in the last decades, of television. Linda Hutcheon, in *A Theory of Adaptation* (2014), goes one step further by quoting LeGrice, who distinguishes between a *suspension* of disbelief in theatre and a *suppression* of disbelief in cinematic media:

> "In theatre, the conflict of the hard, undeniable presence of actors together with the conventional artifice of scenery and stage required a suspension of disbelief. On the other hand, narrative cinema, with its flow of action, naturalistic acting, and photographic realism, increasingly involved not so much a suspension as a suppression of disbelief" (LeGrice 2002: 230)
>
> (Hutcheon 2014: 129)

This suppression of disbelief is defined by Anne C. Stichter as "ego identification": "the process by which an audience member vicariously follows a particular character through the plot" (2016: 2). She further differentiates between the immersive, Aristotelian theatre and Brecht's theatre, "famous for encouraging or even demanding that his audiences think during his plays" (4). She elaborates:

> A factor that greatly affects the effectiveness of ego identification is aesthetic distance, the psychological 'distance' the audience has from the piece (…) In over-distance, the features of the performance reveal its fallacy and break the illusion, causing the audience members to disengage from the story and characters. (…) Brecht employed techniques such as direct audience address to create the alienation effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*), making the audience aware of the spectacle of theatre so that they would not become caught up in identification with the characters and would instead be compelled to think about the piece.
>
> (Stichter 4)

Works of fiction which break the fourth wall create this psychological "over-distance" mentioned by Stichter, disengaging the audience from the illusion and consequently reducing the effectiveness of ego identification. In *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, the narrator frequently addresses the audience directly – both the reader in the books and the spectator in the adaptation, as it will be developed further in this chapter. In this way, the suspension or suppression of disbelief is reversed, disengaging the audience from the illusion of fiction and reminding them of their role as either reader or spectator – thus creating what Brecht theorised as a precondition to the alienation effect. In order to further contextualise the latter, Jacques Rancière' *The Emancipated Spectator* (2008) will be helpful:

> (...) the spectator must be roused from the stupefaction of spectators enthralled by appearances and won over by the empathy that makes them identify with the characters on the

> stage. He will be shown a strange, unusual spectacle, a mystery whose meaning he must seek out. He will thus be compelled to exchange the position of passive spectator for that of scientific investigator or experimenter, who observe phenomena and searches for their causes.
> (Rancière 11)

This passage recalls the investigative role of the reader which was presented in the previous chapter. This role had been established as a consequence of the narrative's postmodern aspect of ontological doubt; however, it seems that it does not come solely from this: it is also created by the narrative's self-reflexive nature, which reverses the suspension or suppression of disbelief. That happens because, by addressing the audience directly, the narrator creates the alienation effect which will disrupt the passive role of the reader and of the spectator. Both will, in consequence, become active investigators of the narrative. Rancière further states that this kind of theatrical performances intends to "teach their spectators ways of ceasing to be spectators and becoming agents of a collective practice. According to the Brechtian paradigm, theatrical mediation makes them conscious of the social situation (...) and ignites in them the desire of acting to transform it" (15-16). Rancière also connects Brecht's alienation effect with class struggle:

> (...) the clash, on the same surface, of heterogeneous elements, if not even conflicting (…) served to manifest, in an age dominated by the prosaism of bourgeois everyday life, the repressed reality of desire and dreams. Marxism seized on the same procedure to render tangible (...) the violence of the class domination hidden beneath the appearances of quotidian vulgarity and democratic peace. This was the principle of Brecht's alienation effect.
> (Rancière 42)

However, Rancière also states that "we no longer live in the time when playwrights wanted to explain to their audience the truth of social relations and the ways of fighting against capitalist domination" (20), as it was the case with Brecht. The contemporary use of the fourth wall break, mainly in audiovisual productions, has become commonplace, deprived of the original political undertones, becoming a mere cinematic technique. Being appropriated in a TV show distributed by a streaming service (whose main purpose is to gain subscriptions), it might even seem hypocritical considering Brecht's original anti-capitalist intent; however, one must also take into account that these narrative and cinematic choices are usually made by the screenwriters or directors, not necessarily by the distribution company. Rancière states that "even if the playwright or director does not know what she

wants the spectator to do, she at least knows one thing: she knows that she must *do one thing* - overcome the gulf separating activity from passivity" (11-12). Thus, one might say that Brecht's fourth wall breaking technique has become neutral; it has ceased to be a ground-breaking emancipatory act for the public, becoming merely a recognizable narrative technique.

One of the main techniques that *A Series of Unfortunate Events* uses in order to transport the book's metafictional essence to screen is, in fact, the fourth wall break. In the conventions of naturalistic performance, actors avoid directly looking at the camera, thus creating a fourth wall between them and the spectator and "suppressing" their disbelief. This distance is temporarily suspended when the actors look directly at the screen, creating the so-called fourth wall break, the most obvious instance of reversing the willing suppression of disbelief in this media. The Netflix adaptation starts right away by doing so, through the character of Lemony Snicket: the narrator is presented looking and speaking directly to the spectator (just in the first episode of the first season, he does so seven times). In typical Snicket style, he warns the viewer not to watch it — adapting to the new media the book's warning to the reader:

> It is my solemn duty to bring to light the sorry history of the Baudelaire children as it happened so many years ago. But you in the **audience** have no such obligation, and I would advise all our **viewers** to turn away immediately and **watch** something more pleasant instead.
>
> (Handler, "The Bad Beginning: Part One"[12]; bold mine)

The words in bold are evidence of this intermediatic adaptation of metafictional devices: instead of *reader*, the narrator refers to *audience* and *viewers*; instead of "*read*", he urges us to *watch* something else. This use of audiovisual language in an audiovisual production calls attention to its own mediatic characteristics, constantly breaking the fourth wall. In the beginning of the first episode, we see Snicket in an underground tunnel (which will later be included in the narrative), but he also narrates in locations where the action is taking place, next to the characters but dislocated from the time of the narrative (fig.s 8 and 9), which accentuates the fictional aspect of the story.

12 My own transcription from 00:01:50 - 00:02:05.

Fig.s 8 and 9 – Stills from the episode “The Bad Beginning: Part One” (00:22:05 / 00:03:13)

In the second episode of the first season, “The Bad Beginning: Part Two”, Count Olaf — a character who introduces himself as an actor — says "I think live theatre is a much more powerful medium than, say, streaming television”, alluding to the medium that the spectator is watching him on. His own profession, although a narrative trait taken from the book, becomes a metafictional device in the TV show, which explores the acting profession of Count Olaf through a very dramatised characterization, including musical performances which sometimes break the fourth wall. In the first episode, he and his troupe perform a number called “It’s The Count”, which he sings at parts to the Baudelaire children and at others looking directly at the camera, breaking the fourth wall. Right at the beginning of the third episode, “The Reptile Room: Part One”, Mr. Poe says to the Baudelaires "It's a brand new episode in your lives” and in “The Wide Window: Part Two", Aunt Josephine says "Let's

all close our eyes as if we're watching some on-screen entertainment that's too scary for people our age!". On “The Miserable Mill: Part Two", Count Olaf asks the Baudelaires "Haven't you learnt anything this year? This week? This season?" and Mr. Poe states "It's the end of the season, uh, semester...", while driving them off to Prufrock Preparatory School at the end of the last episode of this first season.

The second season continues this self-referential fourth wall breaking practice: "Are you in the mountains? We're not due there until the end of the season", Jacquelyn asks someone on the phone in the first episode, "The Austere Academy: Part One" — which also serves as foreshadowing, since the last episode of this second season, "The Carnivorous Carnival: Part Two", will indeed end in the mountains. In "The Austere Academy: Part Two", Count Olaf tells the Baudelaires: "If you had the skills to stop me, we wouldn't be having this batch of episodes in your new lives"; while on "The Ersatz Elevator: Part One", Mr. Poe says "my wife and I prefer to curl up on the sofa and watch a few episodes of streaming television", rather than reading books. Furthermore, in "The Vile Village: Part One", Jacques Snicket calls attention to what the spectator is watching by saying “little racy for a family show” and on "The Hostile Hospital: Part One" Count Olaf breaks the fourth wall once more by looking directly into the camera after saying “I hate boring television".

Lastly, on the show’s third and final season, Count Olaf states “I don't care about some late-series backstory” ("The Slippery Slope: Part Two") and our narrator, Lemony Snicket, addresses the spectator again by saying “If you've seen the last episode” ("The Grim Grotto: Part Two"). In the final episode of the show, “The End”, when Ishmael asks the Baudelaires how they came to be shipwrecked with Count Olaf, Violet answers “it’s a long story”, followed by Klaus saying “extremely long” and then Sunny uttering “three seasons” – the main characters themselves acknowledging the fictional status of their narrative. The metafictional implications of these fourth wall breaks include calling the attention of the spectator to the audiovisual media they are watching at the moment and making them aware of their own status as spectators – thus characterising the TV show as metafilmic.

Moreover, according to Hermansson, the 2017 adaptation goes even further by discussing the intermedial rivalry between cinema and television, as we can see when the character of Count Olaf criticises the traditional filmgoing experience onscreen. "I prefer long-form television to the movies. It's so much more convenient to consume entertainment from the comfort of your own home", he states in “The Reptile Room: Part One”, while looking directly into the camera, and thus pointing to the context in which the spectator presumably finds themselves, watching him from the comfort of their own home. The use of

the term “entertainment” — a general designation broadly used recently for artistic endeavours in cinema and television — as something to be “consumed”, almost stripping it of its status as art and defining it as a capitalistic product, in a thoughtless, automatic way is also relevant for the metafictional implication of breaking the fourth wall. The supposedly mindless *entertainment* that the spectators are *consuming* looks back at them, making them, in reality, more mindful of what they are watching, thus bringing attention to the medium itself and to the present act of watching. Olaf uses an expression commonly used in contemporary media, "to consume entertainment”, which implies a mindless and automatic way of engaging with fiction. However, it creates a contradiction by him looking directly at the camera thus breaking the fourth wall, making the spectator become aware and, to an extent, critical of what they are seeing – following the Brechtian theatrical concept previously explained by Stichter. This recalls the previously developed irony of having a subscription streaming service appropriating a device of anti-capitalist struggle. It utilises the Brechtian device of breaking the fourth wall by having the character look directly at the spectator, creating the alienation effect which entices the latter to emancipate himself through an active role, while at the same time ironically mocking itself by self-defining as “entertainment” to be passively consumed. The consequences of this disengagement from the politics of the technique are a point we will briefly take up again in the conclusion of this dissertation.

The Meta-Adaptation

In her aforementioned book, Hermansson makes a distinction between metafilm and meta-adaptation:

> (...) while ‘metafilm’ is a problematic medium-specific correlative to ‘metafiction’ in an adaptation, instead ‘meta-adaptation’ is a transcendent one. In lieu of setting one medium or another in the reflexive lens of the adaptation, instead the self-reflexivity of the work focuses on its nature as an adaptation. Just as metafiction (or metafilm) lifts the curtain on the otherwise-hidden processes of artistic production, so meta-adaptations lift the curtain on the otherwise-hidden processes of adaptation — in these cases, from one medium to another. I term this ‘breaking the “fifth” wall.’
>
> (Hermansson 8)

Hermansson introduces a new category in the Brechtian concept of breaking the fourth wall, a central part of the alienation effect: she introduces the “fifth” wall, defined as

the “hidden processes of adaptation”. Breaking this fifth wall, then, will disrupt the passive role of the audience in yet another level: the spectator becomes aware not only of the fictional devices of the audiovisual medium that they are watching, but also of the transmedial devices that defines it as adaptation. Besides being an instance of metafilm, the TV adaptation of *A Series of Unfortunate Events* can also be analysed at this level of meta-adaptation, since it also breaks the “fifth” wall:

> While the 'fourth' wall is that between the reader or viewer and the performance of the work, the 'fifth' wall is that of adaptation processes and the transmedial relationships they describe. Just as the majority of works preserve the fourth wall, and do not breach the illusion of the work's mimetic realism, so the majority of adaptations preserve the 'fifth' wall which protects the transmedial processes of the adaptation from view.
>
> (Hermansson 154)

These transmedial processes, in this context, refer to the transposition of a literary narrative to a serialised audiovisual medium. Breaking this “fifth” wall therefore intensifies the effect already achieved by breaking the fourth wall. Hermansson further argues that the 2017 TV show uses adaptation and the media themselves as a theme, not limiting itself to the metafilmic gestures of the 2004 movie, by employing “additional strategies focusing on much more heightened reflexivity and explicitly performing meta-adaptation" (155). An example of this happens in the last episode of the TV show, to which some context of the original text must first be given. In the last book, *The End*, the Baudelaires find themselves poisoned, and an antidote is written down in a book. They realise, desperately, that they don’t have time to read an entire book and thus start to skim it:

> (...) as the poison of the Medusoid Mycelium advanced further and further, the siblings had to skim, scanning each page for the words “horseradish” or “wasabi.” As you know if you’ve ever skimmed a book, you end up getting a strange view of the story, with just glimpses here and there of what is going on, and some authors insert confusing sentences in the middle of a book just to confuse anyone who might be skimming. **Three very short men were carrying a large, flat piece of wood, painted to look like a living room**. As the Baudelaire orphans searched for the secret they hoped they would find, they caught glimpses of other secrets their parents had kept (...)
>
> (Snicket 2006a: 274-275; bold mine)

In the corresponding episode of the TV show, “The End” (episode 7 of season 3), this metaliterary instance is translated into a metafilmic one: skimming books becomes a counterpart to fast-forwarding television. “Skimming a book is not the same as reading it, for the same reason that fast-forwarding through a piece of televised entertainment is not the same as watching it”, says the narrator while laying on his motel bed and holding a TV remote on his hand to fast-forward a black-and-white movie that is on the television in front of him. The phrase in bold in the above transcribed quotation is a metanarrative gesture, consisting of an arbitrary and confusing sentence in the middle of the narrator’s explanation, right after informing the reader of this practice. In the TV episode, the narrator stops his fast-forwarding of the television twice in order to demonstrate this: “It's a good thing I am not a centipede!”, says the character within the television of the motel room – which becomes a metafilmic instance. This scene also intercalates another scene where the Baudelaires skim the book, thus contrasting the literary medium to the audiovisual medium at the level of meta-adaptation, in a gesture of what Hermansson calls “breaking the fifth-wall” (154).

Adapting Metafiction

We have seen that the TV show transports not only the narrative of the books to the screen but also some of its metafictional characteristics, through cinematic correspondences to the literary self-reflexivity. By adopting metafictional devices such as breaking the fourth wall and, at the same time, reflecting on itself as adaptation and thus also breaking the “fifth wall”, it is simultaneously an instance of metafilm and of meta-adaptation.

To understand this process of adapting metafiction we must revisit the paratext analysed in chapter two, namely the books’ “Dear Reader” blurbs on the back covers, which summarise the plot of each volume. In the TV adaptation, they find their equivalent in the theme song, called “Look Away” and performed by the actor who plays Count Olaf, Neil Patrick Harris. Written by composer Nick Urata and featuring lyrics by Daniel Handler himself, it is an adaptation to film media of the narrator's warnings against reading the book, using the verb "look" as a visual equivalent:

Look away, look away
This show will wreck your evening , your whole life, and your day
Every single episode is nothing but dismay,
So look away (...)
There's nothing but horror and inconvenience on the way

Ask any stable person, "Should I watch?" and they will say:
Look away.

(Handler, "The Bad Beginning: Part One"[13])

By transforming the verb "read" into the verb "look", there is a prevalence given to the image going beyond the literary format. In contrast to the latter, in the audiovisual format the image is of major importance, since the spectator can *see* the narrative. Hutcheon distinguishes between "the three major ways we engage with stories (telling, showing and interacting with them)" (2014: xiv). Telling would be the mode of engagement in literature, whilst showing would be that of "performance media" (2014: 40) — such as theatre, opera, film and television. Adaptation from print to the latter implies "a transcoding into a different set of conventions" (2014: 33):

> In the move from telling to showing, a performance adaptation must dramatize: description, narration, and repressed thoughts must be transcoded into speech, actions, sounds, and visual images. (…) In the process of dramatization there is inevitably a certain amount of re-accentuation and refocusing on themes, characters, and plot. (…) When theorists talk of adaptation from print to performance media, this emphasis is usually on the visual, on the move from imagination to actual ocular perception.
>
> (Hutcheon 2014: 40)

Hutcheon further states that in this transcoding we move "from the imagination to the realm of direct perception—with its mix of both detail and broad focus" (2014: 23) in which "a visual and aural world is physically shown (...) created from verbal and notational signs on the page" (2014: 39). The narrative turns from being imagined to being seen, and by adapting the text, the TV show equally adapts its metafictional essence: from reflecting on itself as a written text, it starts reflecting on itself as an audiovisual medium — with all its visual and aural implications. In the aforementioned theme song, this transcoding becomes explicit: the self-reflexive lyrics call attention to the present audiovisual medium by inciting the spectator to "look away", whilst the books' blurbs incite the reader to *read* something else.

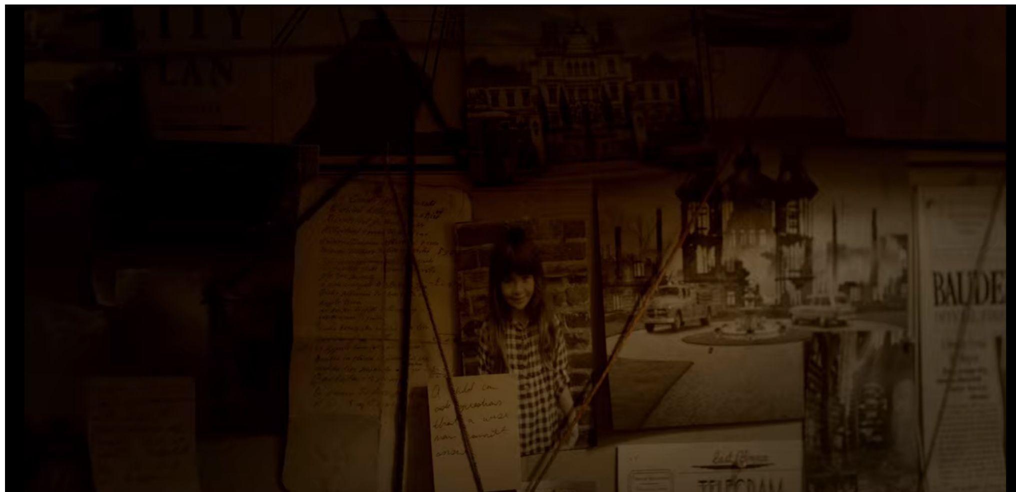
Moreover, the theme song not only warns the spectator against watching the show, it also adapts the aforementioned "Dear Reader" back cover blurbs by summarising the episode we are about to watch: though the chorus transcripted above remains the same in every

13 My own transcription from 00:00:11 - 00:00:58.

episode, the middle verses of the lyrics are always changing according to which book is being adapted, showing the viewer some of the unfortunate scenes to come, as if a "sneak peek" of the actual episode:

> *Three children lose their home and go to live with someone awful,*
> *He tries to steal their fortune with a plot that's not quite lawful.*
> *It's hard to fathom how the orphans manage to live through it,*
> *Or how a decent person, like yourself, would even want to view it.*
>
> (Handler, "The Bad Beginning: Part One"[14])

While the theme song is playing, on the screen of these opening credits there is a murder board (fig.s 10 and 11) with many items relating to the Baudelaires and to Count Olaf, giving the sense that there is a mystery to be solved and enticing the spectator to gather clues along the episodes. Moreover, another paratextual device of the books which is transported to the screen is the Beatrice dedications, which open every episode written on a black screen as if it was being typed on a typewriter, with melancholic music playing in the background.



14 My own transcription from 00:00:31 - 00:00:45

Fig.s 10 and 11 – Stills from the episode “The Bad Beginning: Part One” (00:00:19 / 00:01:10)

A direct correspondence to the book’s use of literary intertextuality can be found in the cinematic references that are featured in the streaming adaptation. In episode 7 of season 2, “The Hostile Hospital: Part One”, the spectator can find allusions to films such as Stanley Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) and *The Shining* (1980): in a homage to a scene from the first one, we see Count Olaf smashing light bulbs with a cane; in a reference to a scene from the latter, the white-faced twins from Olaf’s troupe stand at the end of a corridor saying “Come and play with us” (a direct quotation from the film). Moreover, the twins each hold a red balloon, referencing yet another horror film: the 2017 adaptation of Stephen King’s book *It* (1986), directed by Andy Muschietti. Taking into account that *The Shining* is also an adaptation of Stephen King’s 1997 eponymous novel, these filmic references also act as literary allusions, creating thus a dialogue between the literary and the cinematic media. This scene from “The Hostile Hospital: Part One” also evokes horror cinema in terms of technique: after saying “It’s showtime. (...) Tonight’s production of *Let’s Scare Babs to Death* is about to begin”, Count Olaf commands his troupe as if he were a director, saying “Thunder, go!” for them to start producing sound effects and “Lightning, go!” for them to turn the lights on and off repeatedly, so as to emulate the visual effect of lightning bolts. This imitation of conventions from film set productions is another metafilmic moment, recalling the specificities of the audiovisual format to the spectator. Besides dim lighting and thunder sound effects, other cinematic techniques of this scene help create a horror film environment: suspenseful music, a light bulb failure, jumpscares and the use of dutch angles – a shooting technique, strongly associated with German expressionism, which mimics the movement of

tilting one's head to the left or right side, creating a sense of uneasiness and intensifying the anxiety of the spectator (Bowen and Thompson 59).

Further filmic references include episode 9 of season 2, in which one of the performers (referred to as “freaks”) at the Caligari Carnival shouts "One of us! One of us!", in reference to the 1932 horror film *Freaks* directed by Tod Browning and which, just like the narrative of *The Carnivorous Carnival*, revolves around a circus. In episode 3 of season 1, “The Reptile Room: Part One”, Olaf says "Terrible ending. The villagers should have been eaten, like in Citizen Kane”, referring to the 1941 movie by Orson Welles. In “The Slippery Slope: Part Two”, episode 2 of season 3, Sunny says “Rosebud!” while going down the frozen waterfall, another reference to the key line in *Citizen Kane*. Sunny’s speech also goes through a cinematic translation: in the books, “except when she used the few actual words in her vocabulary, like ‘bottle,’ ‘mommy,’ and ‘bite,’ most people had trouble understanding what it was that Sunny was saying” (Snicket 1999a: 2), so her unintelligible shrieks are usually followed by an explanation of the narrator about what she meant: “For instance, this morning she was saying ‘Gack!’ over and over, which probably meant, ‘Look at that mysterious figure emerging from the fog!’” (idem). In the TV show, so as to not have the narrator intrude all the time, the audiovisual solution to this translation was to render Sunny’s speech in subtitles (fig. 12). In this way, the spectator becomes reader once more; instead of the paradigm shift from telling to showing which traditionally happens in adaptation from a written to an audiovisual source (Hutcheon 2014: 23), words are transported to screen in the form of words. In this particular instance and at first glance, the mode of engagement does not change: it moves from telling to telling, from the literary text to text on the screen. However, this still happens within the context of a cross-media adaptation, in which the major mode of engagement moves from telling to showing — the spectator *sees* the character and *reads* what they want to communicate.

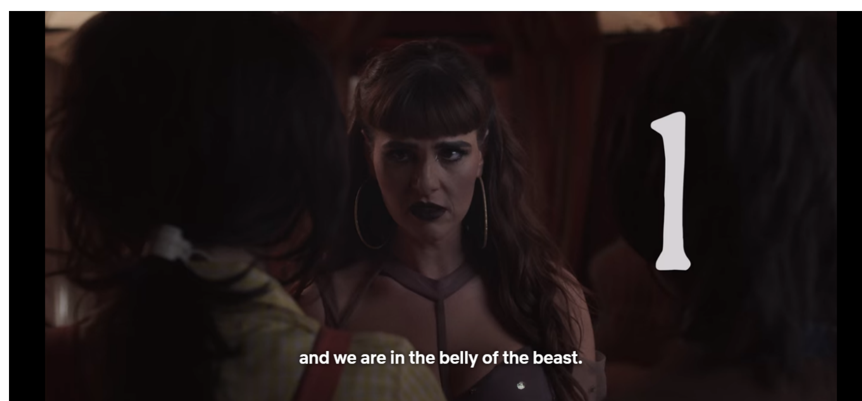
Fig. 12 – Sunny in “The Bad Beginning: Part One” (00:06:25)

In the same way that the original text relies on literary intertextuality for its narrative structure, the TV show adaptation achieves that through filmic references but also by hinting at the external world. A prominent example happens in the first episode of the second season, "The Austere Academy: Part One", resuming the scene in which they left off in the last episode of the first season: the Baudelaires are sitting on a bench in Prufrock Preparatory School, waiting for their appointment with the Vice Principal. Violet says “I feel like I’ve been sitting on this bench for months”, to which Klaus adds “We’ve been waiting for so long, Sunny’s starting to look less like a baby and more like a toddler”. These remarks depend on the spectator’s knowledge of the series production process, since there is a months-long period between the shooting of seasons. Consequently, the actors grow up in the meantime, particularly the actress who plays Sunny, Presley Smith, who was eight months old when the first season started production, and by the beginning of the second season was almost two years old. Consequently, these remarks justify the physical differences that the spectator might notice in the youngest actor, while at the same time creating a hyperbole about the narrative time: the character only feels like he’s been sitting on the bench for months, but in the mental image of the spectator who has followed the TV show in real time, he has actually been. This reference to the world outside the narrative and to the spectator’s concept of time breaks the fourth wall, inducing the viewer to look back at their own reality, which in turn reminds them of the fictional nature of what they are watching.

Another hint at the external world happens in episode 9 of the second season: “Why does she live out here in the hinterlands instead of having her own show in the city?”, Esmé asks, to which Olaf responds “I tried that for nine years and look where it got me”. This answer hints at another TV show starring Neil Patrick Harris, the actor who plays Olaf: set in

the city of New York, *How I Met Your Mother* had nine seasons, which aired from 2005 to 2014. A spectator with pop culture knowledge will recognise this hint, thus further connecting the fictional world of the narrative with other real-world audiovisual objects.

Further adaptations of the metafictional aspects of the literary text are worthy of analysis. For instance, in *The Carnivorous Carnival,* the narrator starts the first chapter by discussing the expression "in the belly of the beast" and anticipating the book's narrative by warning the reader that this expression will be used three times: "Three times over the course of this story, characters will be inside some terrible place with little chance of escaping safely, and for that reason I would put this book down and escape safely yourself" (Snicket 2002a: 2). One of the many instances of directly addressing the reader in order to try to dissuade him from reading the books, this element of the narrative is transported to the screen (episode 10 of season 2, "The Carnivorous Carnival: Part Two") not only through an initial monologue of the narrator but also through pointing out said times with a freeze frame, in which a number (1, 2 or 3) appears over it (fig.s 13 to 15). The narrator's foreshadowing, a mere pointing out, becomes a visual element in the mediatic translation from the literary to the cinematic – therefore maintaining the metafictional essence of the narrative by directly addressing the spectator.



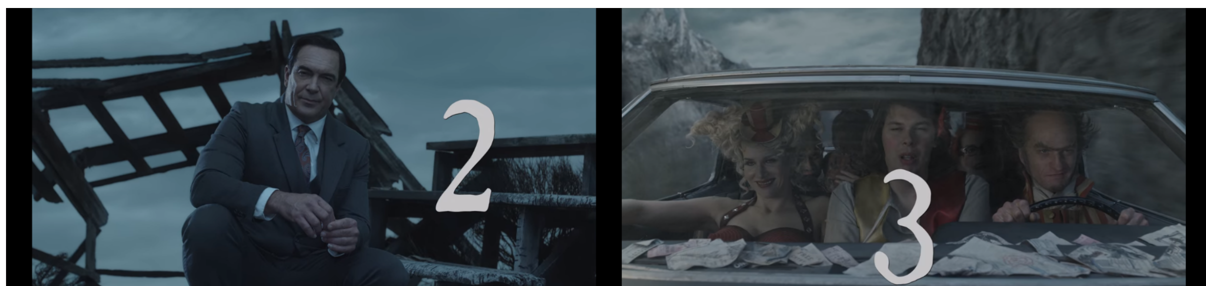


Fig.s 13, 14 and 15 – Stills from the episode "The Carnivorous Carnival: Part Two" (00:02:47 / 00:31:11 / 00:40:35)

Another aspect which the TV adaptation appropriated in a metafilmic way is the ending of *The Carnivorous Carnival*: the narrative ends with Klaus and Violet stuck in a caravan which is rolling back down a mountain. The narrator keeps the reader in suspense and the latter can only find out the outcome of the situation by reading the next book. In the episode "The Carnivorous Carnival: Part Two" this ending is rendered in a self-reflexive way:

> Sometimes a story ends before it's over, with unanswered questions, unresolved plots, lingering suspense (...) It can be frustrating to live in suspense, not knowing what's around the next curve in the road. You may feel as if you are on the edge of a cliff, not knowing if you will fall, how sharp the rocks are at the bottom, or if you will have time to scream. But life is like that... It's a cliff-hanger.
>
> (Handler, "The Carnivorous Carnival: Part Two"[15])

In this instance of metanarration, the narrator explains to the spectator the meaning of "cliff-hanger", a plot device previously existent in fiction without a particular nomenclature. As stated by Luke Terlaak Poot, "cliffhangers are remarkably adaptable devices, amenable to translation from one medium to another" (51). The term started being used in the early 1930s (Poot 51), namely in *Variety* magazine, to designate radio and film serials whose instalments ended in suspenseful ways — sometimes with someone actually hanging from a cliff — in order to entice the interest of the audience to come back for the next episode. This scene from *A Series of Unfortunate Events* goes further from this metanarrative gesture of explaining a plot device; it is likewise a metafilmic gesture, by having the narrator stand at the edge of a cliff while saying the last three phrases of the quotation transcribed above. The episode ends with a literal "cliff-hanger", its effect even further intensified by the fact that this episode is the last one of the second season.

Furthermore, some of the visual devices used in the adaptation already existed in the narrative of the original text, although to a smaller degree, and were appropriated by the audiovisual medium to a much extended degree which allowed them to be self-referential. A major example is the spyglass (fig.s 16 and 17): first introduced in the 10th book, *The Slippery Slope*, it is only briefly mentioned as something that "looked like a periscope, or perhaps a spyglass" (151), in the midst of a few objects that survived a fire on the V.F.D. headquarters. Such a fleeting item in the original text, it is revived in the 2004 film adaptation

15 My own transcription from 00:37:55 - 00:38:58.

(whose original screenplay had the input of Daniel Handler), where it becomes an important object for the plot. In the 2017 TV show, this element comes back in full force, being found by the Baudelaires when they visit their destroyed home as early as the first episode of the first season ("The Bad Beginning: Part One"). It is also one of the items which appear in the opening credits of every episode, hinting at its relevance in the narrative. Throughout the show, we also see that every member of the V.F.D. possesses a spyglass, becoming an element of recognition between them. However, the role of the object is more complex than that:

> The Netflix adaptation takes the spyglass element from the 2004 movie and gives it the purpose of decoding secret messages and having V.F.D. members recognize each other. With the right combinations the spyglasses are also shown to be able to produce light but also, shockingly heat. Therefore, it is hinted that the Fire-Starting side of the Schism uses spyglasses to set houses on fire.
>
> (Di Palma 61)

The introduction of the spyglass in these audiovisual adaptations is meaningful (beyond its narrative implication of possibly being the origin of the fire which destroyed the Baudelaire home): being an ocular device, it works better in the cinematic medium than it would in the literary one. The object itself is engraved with the same eye symbol that pervades the narrative (such as in the tattoos of V.F.D. members or in buildings) and which forms the letters "VFD" (fig. 18). Like Hermansson states, "the novels' mysterious use of eyes and spyglasses as symbols of a secret society similarly takes on a scopic reflexivity in screen adaptation" (167) – their presence in the *mise en scène* reflects back on the spectator's own role of *seeing*.

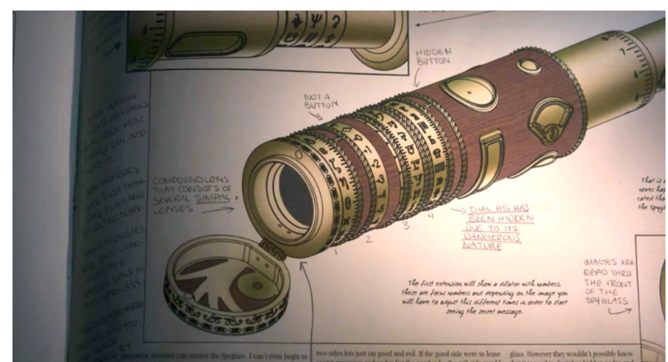


Fig.s 16 and 17 – Depictions of the spyglass in the TV show. ("The Bad Beginning: Part One", 00:10:57 / "The Austere Academy: Part Two", 00:33:55)

Fig. 18 – Insignia of V.F.D. in the TV show adaptation

Another instance of the use of the spyglass happens in the beginning of episode 6 of season 3, "The Penultimate Peril: Part Two", which starts with the use of analepsis: the spectator sees a moment in the past when Lemony, his sister Kit, Count Olaf and Esmé were at the opera watching Beatrice sing in a performance of *La Forza del Destino.* This is a plot point only briefly mentioned by Kit Snicket in the 12th book, *The Penultimate Peril*: "I remember that evening well, (...) It was a performance of *La Forza del Destino.* (...) During intermission I followed them to the snack bar and slipped them a box of poison darts before Ésme Squalor could catch me." (8-9). Later in the same chapter the narrator also recalls this occurrence: "(...) just as I wondered, on that fateful evening long ago, as I hurried out of the opera house before a certain woman could spot me" (18). In the adaptation, this is further developed, giving the spectator answers that the book never gives: how Esmé's sugar bowl was stolen, why Count Olaf and Esmé became villains (and consequently how the schism in V.F.D. began), and how Lemony Snicket started being on the lam. Besides answering questions implied in the book, the addition of this plot point in the audiovisual adaptation is relevant since Snicket watches Beatrice performing through the use of a spyglass (mimicking the tradition of binoculars historically used in the opera). This demonstrates why the spyglass is a relevant element to be expanded in the audiovisual adaptations: it allows for an optic

self-reflexivity, inducing the spectator to reflect upon his own role of *seeing*, which is being reflected by the character's act of seeing through the spyglass. In another moment of analepsis later in the same episode, we also see Olaf playing with his spyglass and accidentally reflecting a spotlight with it, which consequently burns a curtain – this serves to hint at another feature of the spyglass, that of fire-starting (which will later be appropriated by one side of the V.F.D schism).

Another example of the continuing visual self-referentiality that we have been encountering happens in episode three of the first season, "The Reptile Room: Part One". The Baudelaire's new guardian, Uncle Monty, asks them if they like going to the movies, following with "Well, we are going to go a lot. To some very important and very special films." Later in the narrative they do indeed go to the Murnau Cinema — a reference to the German expressionist film director F.W. Murnau —, a two-page plotline only briefly narrated in the original book. The extension of this plotline in the TV adaptation is relevant, since it allows for the use of self-referential metafilmic devices, such as turning the characters into spectators like us (as seen in fig. 19):

Fig. 19 – Still from episode "The Reptile Room: Part One" (00:33:07)

A lot of reflection is done upon the moviegoing experience: "Seventh row, right of center, that is the best place", says Uncle Monty when they arrive at the film theatre. He also defends that "There's more to a movie than just a movie"; and indeed, the one they watch, "Zombies in the Snow" by Gustav Sebald, plays a much more active part in this narrative than the usual film: cinema here is a more direct way of communication, a form of code creation and of decodification. Although the movie is in English, it has English subtitles,

which prompts Klaus to question Uncle Monty about it, who in turn answers cryptically: “All the best movies have subtitles”. The real reason, however, is that the movie is made by VFD to pass along a secret message to its members through what is called the Sebald Code, a cypher created by director Gustav Sebald. In order to decode it, Uncle Monty uses his Spyglass to look at the screen whenever a VFD logo appears. We then see the movie through the Spyglass, which filters the subtitles and alters the word order to reveal a secret message (fig. 20):

Fig. 20 – Still from episode “The Reptile Room: Part One” (00:34:19)

This use of a film as secret code within the narrative is relevant: since all language forms are by themselves codes of communication, using this self-referential *topos* in a TV show of this nature amounts to more than the code itself. The cinematic media reflects on its own ability to communicate meaning. This brings us back to Hutcheon’s modes of engagement:

> Telling requires of its audience conceptual work; showing calls on its perceptual decoding abilities. (...) our imaginations are preempted as we perceive and then give meaning to a world of images, sounds, and words seen and heard on the stage or screen.
>
> (Hutcheon 2014: 130)

This perceptual decoding ability incited by the medium’s showing mode is reflected on the scene mentioned above: when Monty uses the Spyglass to decode a hidden message in the subtitles of the film, the spectator only understands what is happening because, by

perceiving this sequence of images, sounds and words, their imagination inflicts meaning upon it. In the same way, Monty inflicts meaning upon what he, in turn, is seeing on the screen — making of this moment especially self-reflexive.

In the following scene of the same episode there is further cinematic self-reflection: the spectator sees the projection room (fig. 21), where the projectionist (who was also the ticket seller) manipulates the film, cutting to an earlier scene so Monty can read the coded subtitles again. This *topos* of decoding reflects the spectator's own role of decoding what is perceived on screen, being thus a major instance of the show's medium-specific self-reflection: its metafilmic aspect.

Fig. 21 – Still from episode "The Reptile Room: Part One" (00:38:20)

References to cinema are further used as a metafilmic device in the second season, where the literary self-reflexivity of the original book is brought to screen through cinematic-specific correspondences (such as papers becoming film reels), particularly in the 7th and 9th episodes, "The Hostile Hospital: Part One" and "The Carnivorous Carnival: Part One".

In the 8th novel of the series, *The Hostile Hospital*, the Baudelaires take refuge in the Heimlich Hospital, where they volunteer to work in the Library of Records. Here, they find out about a file called "the Snicket file", which they later find but it is incomplete:

> "'All thirteen pages of the Snicket file,'" he read, "'have been removed from the Library of Records for the official investigation.' (...) He dropped the file on the floor and then sat down beside it in despair. "There's nothing here."

> “Yes there is”! Violet said. “Look!”
> The Baudelaires looked at the file where Klaus had dropped it on the ground. There, behind the note, was a single sheet of paper. “It’s page thirteen,” Violet said, looking at a number typed in a corner of the paper. (...)
> Page thirteen of the Baudelaire file was not a crowded sheet of paper—there was just one photograph stapled into place, below one sentence of type.
>
> (Snicket 2001c: 106-107)

In the streaming TV adaptation, however, the Snicket file becomes a film reel: “It looks like a film.”, Violet points out; “Yes, a lot of our files are films. We have projectors along the south wall for anyone who wants to view them”, responds Hal, the record keeper. Later, they project the film reel onto a wall (fig.s 22 and 23). Once again, the characters become the spectators and we watch them as they watch a video of Jacques Snicket — another self-reflexive moment when the protagonists try to decode a situation through a cinematic language, the same way that we, the spectators, are doing by watching them.

Fig.s 22 and 23 – Stills from the episode "The Hostile Hospital: Part One" (00:37:13 / 00:37:25)

Later in the 9th book, *The Carnivorous Carnival,* the Baudelaires discover that Madame Lulu's magic trick is fake by unravelling "newspaper articles, magazines, letters, files, photographs–all sorts of documents" (Snicket 2002a: 137) from under her crystal ball table. This archival library, which Snicket defines as "a fancy term for a collection of files and documents rather than books" (idem) is where she gets all the information she then passes on in her fortune-telling — reinforcing the status of VFD members as researchers, since the secret organisation gives a lot of importance to reading. This is only one of the multiple instances of literary self-reflexivity in the books, in which the concept of bookishness is very present, specially through the constant use of libraries as key places in the narrative: Justice Strauss' private library in the *The Bad Beginning*; Monty's scientific library in *The Reptile Room*; Aunt Josephine's grammatical library in *The Wide Window*;

Lucky Smells' understocked library in *The Miserable Mill*; Prufrock's academic library in *The Austere Academy*; the Squalor library of fashion catalogues in *The Ersatz Elevator;* Hector's secret forbidden library in *The Vile Village*; the Library of Records in *The Hostile Hospital*; the destroyed V.F.D. Headquarters library in *The Slippery Slope*; the mycological library in *The Grim Grotto*; the catalogued Hotel Dewey Denouement's underwater library in *The Penultimate Peril* and, in *The End*, the Arboretum takes its place. Every one of these libraries is an important part of their respective narratives, since some of the books they hold end up acting as key plot points to overcome an obstacle. "In every library, there is a single book to answer the question that burns like a fire in the mind", says librarian Dashiell Qwerty to a teenage Lemony Snicket in the first book of the prequel series, *Who Could That Be at This Hour?* (Snicket 2012: 75-76) – a quotation later used in the TV show adaptation of the main series by another librarian, Olivia Caliban, in episode one of the second season, "The Austere Academy: Part One". This appropriation of an element from a companion book in the TV show not only references the extended universe of Snicket, it also helps to emphasise the significant role of both libraries and librarians in the narrative – the latter being self-reflexive and intertextual in its essence.

The same way libraries and bookshiness are so important for the narrative of the books, the streaming television adaptation transports this self-reflexivity to the screen through filmic devices such as movie theatres (as seen above in "The Reptile Room: Part One") and projectors (fig. 22). In "The Carnivorous Carnival: Part One", Madame Lulu's archival library becomes a film stock; under the crystal ball the Baudelaires now find not papers, but a projector (fig. 24) and film reels (fig. 25) hidden inside a cabinet which prompts Violet to say "it's like a secret library":

> - I've heard of illusions using the projector and a prismatic lens. If the crystal ball is the lens...
> - That means the projector is underneath.
> - Exactly. The images come through the crystal ball to look like spirits. Madame Lulu's using science and technology to make people believe it's magic.
>
> (Handler, "The Carnivorous Carnival: Part One"[16])

16 My own transcription from 00:37:36 - 00:37:50.

Fig.s 24 and 25 – Stills from the episode “The Carnivorous Carnival: Part One” (00:38:30 / 00:39:31)

In one of these film reels projected on the crystal ball, we see Lemony Snicket (fig. 26). The narrator appears in a film within the TV show, talking directly at the camera as he usually does while narrating the main narrative. However, in this episode he becomes inserted into the narrative by being acknowledged by the protagonists. The Baudelaires, being unfamiliar with their own narrator, ask each other who that is, while noticing that “he looks like Jacques”, whom the spectator knows to be his brother. This unfamiliarity of the characters contrasts with the familiarity of the spectator, who, unlike the protagonists, has created an acquaintance with the narrator.

Fig. 26 – Still from episode “The Carnivorous Carnival: Part One” (00:40:49)

In the beginning of the same episode, Snicket appears for the first time as a character in the narrative, through the use of analepsis, creating an estrangement between spectator and the figure of the narrator. For a few seconds, the spectator must break his immersion in order to adjust his idea of Snicket from the first-person narrator he had been for three seasons, to an alienated character in a flashback. This is a reversed process of fourth wall breaking, since it breaks the immersion not by having the character look directly at the screen but by having him do the opposite, act naturally within the narrative. Since the spectator is so used to seeing this specific character talking directly to him whenever he appears, this sudden change in tone and behaviour creates the alienation effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*) previously introduced through Stichter’s article.

It is two episodes later, however, on “The Penultimate Peril: Part One”, the moment when Lemony Snicket stops being a narrator altogether and becomes a character not only in analepses but in the same timeline of the main narrative level. His sister, Kit Snicket, after leaving the Baudelaires at the Hotel Denouement, finds him and gives him a ride. The episode ends with a meaningful encounter: arriving at the Hotel in his taxi, Lemony Snicket finds the Baudelaires – narrator and protagonists meet in person for the first (and only) time. The next episode (“The Penultimate Peril: Part Two”) resumes this scene by having Lemony offer to drive the Baudelaires away from the chaotic situation they found themselves in at the Hotel Denouement. The implications of having the narrator directly talk to his protagonists and offer to change their narrative by driving them away from their problems will be further developed in the next chapter, where most of the metafictional techniques drawn up until now will be found to lead to the same root: the narrator.

III. The Narcissistic Narrator

I think that first person makes it a little easier to be compelling.

- Daniel Handler[17]

Sometimes, when you are reading a book you are enjoying very much, you begin thinking so hard about the characters and the story that you might forget all about the author, even if he is in grave danger and would very much appreciate your help.

- Snicket, *Lemony Snicket: The Unauthorized Autobiography* (6)

As we have seen, Lemony Snicket is firstly presented as the author of the series through the books' paratext: his name is present on the book covers, as well as on the blurbs at the back covers; while on the back matter, we have his letters to his "Kind Editor" and his biographical notes. Followed by the latter, in the back matter of each book there are also the biographical notes of the real-life illustrator, Brett Helquist. Considering that "Lemony Snicket" is not only the narrator but Daniel Handler's pseudonym, this combination of both fictional (Snicket's) and real-world (Helquist's) biographies in the paratext consolidates the metafictional aspect of the text, blurring the lines between the reader's reality and fiction.

This choice of paratext emphasises the relevance of "Lemony Snicket" as much more than a pseudonym, which will recall Genette's narrative levels, introduced in *Narrative Discourse – An Essay in Method* (1980) — a work described by John Pier as "perhaps the most perennial treatise of the early years of narratology and whose influence is among the most pervasive" (8). Genette's narrative levels consist of three terms which "designate, not individuals, but relative situations and functions" since they refer to "narrating instances" (Genette 1980: 229) – thus, a narrator can relate to more than one term, according to the context: extradiegetic, "a (literary) act carried out at a first level" (228), that is, outside the narrative; intradiegetic, when the events narrated are inside the first narrative; and metadiegetic, a narrative in the second degree or at a lower diegetic level – that is, inside another narrative which is contained within the first one, "not only in the sense that the first frames it with a preamble and a conclusion (...), but also in the sense that the narrator of the

17 From his interview on the podcast *Payne's Page One* [my own transcription].

second narrative is already a character in the first one" (idem). Lemony Snicket, as authorial voice in the body of the text itself, is extradiegetic — as justified in an example given by Genette about Abbé Prévost's M. de Renoncourt in *Mémoires d'un homme de qualité* (1728): "although fictive, he addresses the actual public" (Genette 1980: 229). Because of its postmodern facet, the extradiegetic dimension transcends the strictly narrative, going further to the literary plane with the paratextual element of "Lemony Snicket" as author in the book cover.

On the other hand, Snicket as a narrator within the text is intradiegetic because of his existence inside the world of the narrative — which could be compared to that of the implied author. The latter is a concept introduced in 1961 by Wayne C. Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Shen 80) and it refers to the author evoked by the narrative, "a reader-generated construct" which "many users treat (...) as a term for an entity positioned between the real author and the fictive narrator in the communication structure of narrative works" (Schmid 161). However, Snicket goes beyond the status of implied author since he is simultaneously a real author (as his name's presence on the book cover and on further paratext intends to imply) and a fictive narrator (and consequently, character) in the narrative. Genette further exemplifies the concept of intradiegetic narrator with Prévost and Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719):

> M. de Renoncourt is not a "character" in a narrative taken charge of by the Abbe Prevost; he is the fictive author of *Mémoires*, whose real author, of course, is Prevost, just as Robinson Crusoe is the fictive author of the novel by Defoe that bears his name; subsequently, each of them (the Marquis and Crusoe) becomes a character in his own narrative. Neither Provost nor Defoe enters the space of our inquiry, which, let us recall, bears on the narrating instance, not on the literary instance. M. de Renoncourt and Crusoe are author-narrators, and as such they are at the same narrative level as their public—that is, as you and me.
>
> (Genette 1980: 229)

In this quotation, Genette defines M. de Renoncourt as a "fictive author" and Lemony Snicket not only fits this characterization, as well as takes a step further by being the name that appears in the physical cover of the book. In this last point, he is more closely related to Robinson Crusoe, whose name also appears in the book cover and who upon its publication was introduced as author. Genette defends that these "author-narrators" are "at the same narrative level as their public", and Snicket goes even further through metafictional devices

which approximate the reader to him, such as directly addressing the latter – a device which will be explored further in this chapter.

Furthermore, in an intradiegetic level, as a narrator, Snicket can be defined as both homodiegetic and heterodiegetic, two other concepts introduced by Genette, in this case relating to the narrative "person" and its relationship to the story (Genette 1980: 244-245). While the previous categories are defined by "the relation of the narrating act to the narrated events (extradiegetic vs. intradiegetic)", the homodiegetic vs. heterodiegetic categories imply "the presence or absence of the narrator in the narrated world" (Pier 8). As a heterodiegetic narrator, Snicket is not present in the story but is omniscient, knowing everything about the narrative – a matter of what Genette terms focalization, a selection or restriction of information that can be defined as zero, internal or external. A narrative with an omniscient narrator, "where the narrator knows more than the character, or more exactly says more than any of the characters knows" is characterised by "*zero focalization*" (Genette 1980: 189). This type of narration is a common choice in postmodern fiction; as stated by McHale, "the postmodernist author arrogates to himself the powers that gods have always claimed: omnipotence, omniscience" (McHale 1987: 210). On the other hand, as a homodiegetic narrator, he is also a character in the story he is telling. He begins by presenting himself in a heterodiegetic way, but along the narrative the reader slowly realises he is, in fact, homodiegetic, insofar as his existence within the universe of the narrative goes. As Pier puts it:

> Genette works out the five possible functional relations of identity and non-identity between author, narrator and character that come into play in narratives. Identity between the three characterizes autobiography, just as non-identity between them marks heterodiegetic fiction. On the other hand, identity of narrator and character but non-identity of either with the author signals homodiegetic fiction. Overall, the non-identity of author and narrator defines fictional narrative and their identity, going so far as to assimilate the narrator into the author, is characteristic of factual narrative.
>
> (Pier 13-14)

In *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, these characteristics are all intermixed, since in the paratext, Snicket is the author, while in the narrative he is not only narrator but subtly also a character. The narrative is not autobiographical, but the narrator can be either heterodiegetic

or homodiegetic. Moreover, there is an identity between the author and the narrator, but it is not necessarily a "factual narrative", since the author is fictive.

In order to clarify Snicket's role in the narrative, it will be useful to employ Genette's paradigm. The latter affirms that "in every narrative we define the narrator's status both by its narrative level (extra- or intradiegetic) and by its relationship to the story (hetero- or homodiegetic)" (248). Within homodiegetic narrators, Genette includes "two varieties: one where the narrator is the hero of his narrative (...) and one where he plays only a secondary role, which almost always turns out to be a role as observer and witness" (245); the first one he calls autodiegetic. In order to exemplify this, it is useful to recall the previously mentioned 4-book prequel *All the Wrong Questions* (2012-2015), written by Snicket about his own teenage years and thus being of an autodiegetic nature. The following table (fig. 27) serves the purpose of clarifying the distinction between these concepts by applying it to Lemony Snicket in different contexts:

<table>
<tr><th>Level:
Relationship:</th><th>Extradiegetic</th><th>Intradiegetic</th></tr>
<tr><td>Heterodiegetic</td><td>Lemony Snicket (author of A Series of Unfortunate Events)</td><td rowspan="2">Lemony Snicket (narrator of A Series of Unfortunate Events)</td></tr>
<tr><td>Homodiegetic</td><td>Lemony Snicket (author of All the Wrong Questions)</td></tr>
<tr><td>Autodiegetic</td><td>-</td><td>Lemony Snicket (narrator of All The Wrong Questions)</td></tr>
</table>

Fig. 27 – Snicket's diegetic levels, following Genette.

On the table depicted above, modelled on Genette's own table which exemplifies these terms (248), a connection is made between narrative level and narrative relationship, creating a paradigm for each specific case. Genette further uses these paradigms to "represent the four basic types of narrator's status" (idem): firstly, extradiegetic-heterodiegetic; secondly, extradiegetic-homodiegetic; thirdly, intradiegetic-heterodiegetic; and lastly, intradiegetic-homodiegetic. In *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, Lemony Snicket as author can be defined as extradiegetic-heterodiegetic (first paradigm), presenting himself at first level as disconnected from the narrative. As narrator, however, he can be both intradiegetic-heterodiegetic (third paradigm) and intradiegetic-homodiegetic (fourth paradigm), depending on the part of the narrative we analyse. At some points, he is an

omniscient narrator with zero focalization while, at others, he hints at his status in the narrative as character, becoming thus homodiegetic. In this last level, he may have an external or an internal focalization, depending on his focal position – objective, towards the Baudelaires, or subjective, when writing in the first person. Considering this last instance, one could argue that he may also become autodiegetic in particular moments in *A Series of Unfortunate Events;* however, since these moments are sporadic, for the sake of comparison in the context of this table (fig. 27) we will only take into account the main narrative instances contained in each series. In *A Series of Unfortunate Events* what predominates is the shift from heterodiegetic to homodiegetic narrator, in which "the "I" of the narrator (…) supplanted as if inadvertently the "he" of the hero" (Genette 1980: 250). On the other hand, in the prequel *All the Wrong Questions*, Lemony Snicket the author is, in turn, extradiegetic-homodiegetic (second paradigm) because the reader knows beforehand that he is a part of the narrative. As a narrator, however, he becomes intradiegetic-homodiegetic with an autodiegetic variant, since inside the narrative he writes in the first person about his own experience, being the protagonist of these prequels.

In *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, the omniscient aspect of Snicket as a heterodiegetic narrator comes from another facet of his, that of investigator/researcher: "Even for an author like myself, who has dedicated his entire life to investigating the mysteries that surround the Baudelaire case, there is still much I have been unable to discover", he says in *The Slippery Slope* (332-333). He knows almost everything about the story of the Baudelaires not because he takes part in it – since his own story is a parallel one and they only converge in one brief moment – but because he spends years investigating their lives. His role then resembles that of a detective (which is later alluded to in the prequel mentioned above) or even an academic researcher[18]: "this thirteenth volume marks the completion of my investigation into the Baudelaire case, which required much research", he says in *The End* (287). These remarks, although serving to explain his heterodiegetic omniscience, are paradoxically some of the autodiegetic moments which imply his homodiegetic status. This recalls Genette's distinction between "the too-remote "objectivity" of heterodiegetic narrative, which kept the narrator's discourse set apart from the "action" (and thus from the hero's experience)" and "the "subjectivity" of autodiegetic narrative, too personal and seemingly too confined to

18 The organisation he takes part in, V.F.D., is actually defined as "a public library. Anyone could join us and have access to all of the information we'd acquired. Volunteers all over the globe were reading each other's research, learning of each other's observations, and borrowing each other's books. For a while it seemed as if we might keep the whole world safe, secure, and smart." (Snicket 2005: 179).

encompass without improbability a narrative content widely overflowing that experience" (251) – contrary aspects which sometimes must coexist. He further states, when analysing Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-1927):

> (...) he needs both an "omniscient" narrator capable of dominating a moral experience which is now objectivized and an autodiegetic narrator capable of personally taking up, authenticating, and illuminating by his own commentary the spiritual experience which gives all the rest its ultimate meaning and which, for its part, remains the hero's privilege.
>
> (Genette 1980: 252)

This happens similarly with Snicket. His homodiegetic aspect appears primarily in the self-referential narrative sections throughout the series, where the main narrative of the Baudelaires is paused at times and Snicket writes about himself or his life: "The morning I am writing this chapter, I am wondering if the future will hold something that will enable me to saw through these handcuffs and crawl out of the double-locked window" (Snicket 2001a: 91). These autodiegetic moments hint towards his status as a character in the universe of the narrative, going beyond the literary instance of his authorial voice in the paratext, which we examined in the first chapter. In these autodiegetic moments, however, the author-narrator found in the paratext moves "from impersonally omniscient third person to personally provisional first person" (Hutcheon 1990: 138). His presupposed "zero" focalization becomes then a mixture of internal and external focalizations: on the one hand, internal because his autodiegetic moments imply his status as character in the narrative; on the other hand, external because his focal position towards the protagonists is objective. He is the investigator of the Baudelaires, but also a member of VFD, the organisation which surrounds every event that happens in the children's lives and to which their parents also belonged. Finally, in the last page of the last book, the reader understands his connection to the Baudelaires: the "Beatrice" in the dedications is their deceased mother, whom Snicket knew and was in love with – as it is confirmed by his dedications to her, such as the one from *The Reptile Room:* "For Beatrice—My love for you shall live forever. You, however, did not". By reflecting upon the diegetic structure of the books and connecting the paratext with the narrative, Snicket can thus be considered a secondary character in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*.

This active role imposed on the reader of reflecting upon the diegetic structure is a metafictional technique present in many other aspects of the books. Patricia Waugh writes

about postmodernist literature in terms that resonate with *A Series of Unfortunate Events*: "The 'Dear Reader' is no longer quite so passive and becomes in effect an acknowledged fully active player in a new conception of literature as a collective creation rather than a monologic and authoritative version of history" (Waugh 43). A direct example of this are the "Dear Reader" epigraphs at the back cover of every book, which serve to summarise each plot and warn the reader against reading the book:

> Dear Reader,
> (…) In this short book alone, the three youngsters encounter a greedy and repulsive villain, itchy clothing, a disastrous fire, a plot to steal their fortune, and cold porridge for breakfast.
> It is my sad duty to write down these unpleasant tales, but there is nothing stopping you from putting this book down at once and reading something happy, if you prefer that sort of thing.
> With all due respect,
> Lemony Snicket
>
> (Snicket 1999a)

Uri Margolin also mentions this address, describing it as "part of the rhetorical strategy employed by the narrator": "the famous 'Dear reader,' consisting of questions and admonitions and providing the speaking voice with immediacy, projecting an ongoing communicative exchange (telling) in addition to what is being narrated (told)" (357). In fact, it makes sense that this address is included in the paratextuality, which John Pier refers to as "the 'intermediate zone' lying between texts and the surrounding social discourse" (12), since it implies a dialogue between narrator and reader. These paratextual elements – the "Dear Reader" blurbs in the back covers, where he appeals to the reader not to read the book; the dedications to Beatrice and the letters to the editor – also help to establish Lemony Snicket as a character in the narrative. Pier further states that "introduction of the author into a narrative is as much a matter of paratextuality as it is of narratology" (14) and, in fact, the use of extradiegetic material consequently reconducts Snicket to an intradiegetic position, through metafictional devices which help blur the lines between fiction and reality. This paratext can be thus defined as an intradiegetic paratext, since it links the real world of the reader with the fictive world of the narrative, by containing a direct address of the author-narrator to the reader. This point recalls our earlier supposition that the paratext, in a postmodern metafictional context where the diegetic lines are blurred, could go so far as to become an instance of the text itself.

On the other hand, in the television show, Snicket is also frequently self-referential and his status as a character is more obvious than in the books from the start, since the spectator can see him – unlike in the *A Series of Unfortunate Events* book series, where the photographs or illustrations which appear in his biographies are always blurry or seen from the back (fig.s 28, 29 and 30). On the TV show, his function as character acquires more prominence due to the audiovisual medium: he has a concrete bodily presence on the screen. His face is shown constantly and, in that sense, that mysterious aspect of the book's author disappears. His duality as author-narrator in the books is replaced by a duality of character-narrator in the audiovisual adaptation, since he is not introduced as author of the TV show, as opposed to his main status as author of the books. In the adaptation, the first immediate perception the spectator has of him is as a character on-screen, only understanding a few seconds afterwards that he is likewise the narrator of the story. This brings us back to issues of narrative voice:

> (…) a theoretical issue for which the stage was set by Genette but whose ramifications were to be explored in other research contexts is voice. Finding grammatical person a questionable criterion by which to classify narrators and thus adopting the opposition homodiegetic/heterodiegetic, which allows for degrees of narrator presence in the story, he identified a space for borderline, mixed and ambiguous narrators (*Revisited* 104).
>
> (Pier 9)

The cases of Snicket in the books and in the TV show fall into this space of borderline narrators: between author-narrator and character-narrator. Heidi Bayoumy, in her 2019 article about the narrator in the 2004 film adaptation of the book series states that "the narrator is foregrounded as the central figure in the film, even more important than the characters themselves as he is the one who controls the action" (62). In the TV show adaptation, this becomes even more emphasized, since Snicket is the first character seen by the spectator. However, as narrator he still "has the power to fast-forward/rewind, add/delete the events that he desires" (idem) and so "the events that the viewers are about to witness are told from his own perspective and (…) the cinematic techniques: camera angles, light, types of shots are all employed to convey this point of view" (Bayoumy 50).

As seen in the analysis of the previous chapter, the narrator in the TV adaptation appears for the first time looking directly at the camera and talking to the spectator, breaking the aforementioned convention of the fourth wall. After occupying the role of narrator for the

entirety of the first season and most episodes of the second one, his immersion in the narrative as a character (in a different timeline than that in which he is also narrator) happens through the analepsis first presented in episode 9 of season 2, “The Carnivorous Carnival: Part One” and afterwards in episode 6 of season 3, "The Penultimate Peril: Part Two". Most of these analepses are not introduced in the TV adaptation from the main book series, but from the companion books, *Lemony Snicket: An Unauthorized Autobiography* and *The Beatrice Letters*[19], in which the reader gets a glimpse of Snicket’s background and of the many unanswered questions concerning VFD and Beatrice. The introduction of these parallel elements in the TV adaptation expands the Snicket universe presented in the main book series. An example is the last analepsis in episode 6 of season 3, "The Penultimate Peril: Part Two", which consists of an encounter between Lemony Snicket and Beatrice Baudelaire after the incident at the opera: the first declares his love for the latter by using an adapted excerpt from a quotation which can be found in *The Beatrice Letters.* However, an exception in this use of the companion books to create analepses is the masked ball in the episode “The Carnivorous Carnival: Part One”, which is alluded to in the book *The Austere Academy* (from *A.S.O.U.E.*), hinting at the status of the narrator as existing in the same diegetic universe as the Baudelaires:

> I once attended one of the famed masked balls hosted by the duchess of Winnipeg, and it was one of the most exciting and dangerous evenings of my life. (…) I slipped out to the veranda and gave her the message I’d been trying to give her for fifteen long and lonely years. “Beatrice”, I cried, just as the scorpions spotted me, “Count Olaf is” (sic)
>
> (Snicket 2000c: 168)

The narrator stops this retrospective abruptly, in his typical suspenseful style. The aforementioned omniscient aspect of the postmodern narrator comes to mind: Snicket is “playing God with his fictional world” (McHale 1987: 210) by purposefully leaving his phrase unfinished and thus denying information to the reader, frustrating their expectations. However, the purpose of this autodiegetic moment is not to disclose what Count Olaf is, but

19 Collection of letters from a young Lemony Snicket to the first Beatrice Baudelaire and from Beatrice Baudelaire II to Lemony Snicket. It was published between the last two books, hinting at the narrative’s ending.

to show the reader that Snicket knew of Count Olaf in the past, and this connection of the narrator with a recurring character implies the first's direct involvement with the narrative – contrasting with the initial idea of him as a heterodiegetic narrator. In the analepsis which adapts this passage and which starts in episode 9 of season 2, we see this masked ball at the V.F.D. Headquarters, with the subtitles "The Past - A phrase which here means, *Before the Baudelaire children were born*." Many familiar faces appear – such as the narrator himself, his brother Jacques, Larry the Waiter, Uncle Monty, Jacquelyn, Dr. Georgina Orwell, Gustav Sebald, Aunt Josephine – confirming their membership in the Volunteer Fire Department. Just as Snicket describes in the above-mentioned quotation, in this analepsis we see the character-narrator slipping out to the veranda and screaming "Beatrice! Count Olaf is"; and in the same fashion as the book narration, which abruptly stops, the scene cuts immediately to another scene in the present timeline and the spectator never discovers what "Count Olaf is". The same purpose as the one in the book is achieved: the spectator, who has been until now familiar with Lemony Snicket as a narrator directly addressing them, sees this convention altered by seeing the narrator in an analepsis, appearing for the first time as a character in the narrative which he narrates, thus creating an estrangement between him and the spectator. Suddenly, the spectator has to break their immersion in order to adjust their idea of Snicket: in this scene, he is not the first-person narrator he had been for three seasons, appearing only as an alienated character in a flashback.

However, it is on episode 5 of season 3, "The Penultimate Peril: Part One", in which Snicket gains the status of character in the main narrative level by getting a ride from his sister who had just left the Baudelaires at the hotel, and then driving there and encountering the protagonists. The following hints are given throughout the book series of Snicket being part of the narrative: in *The Vile Village*, a new character called Jacques Snicket is introduced: "'His full name,' Duncan said, flipping through his notebook, 'is Jacques Snicket' / 'That sounds familiar,' Violet said. / 'I'm not surprised,' Duncan said. 'Jacques Snicket is the brother of a man who—'(sic)" (Snicket 2001b: 222). Duncan is interrupted when he is about to say who Jacques Snicket's brother is, a suspense created by the narrator in order to leave open the implication that it is himself. With the previous knowledge of the author's last name, the reader recognizes "Snicket" when Duncan says Jacques' full name, making an instant connection with Lemony – and thus inserting him within the universe of the narrative. In the following book, his status as a character becomes even clearer when he admits to have stolen a sugar bowl from a recurring character, Esmé Squalor (who first appeared in *The Ersatz Elevator*):

> This is not a tale of Lemony Snicket. It is useless to tell the Snicket story, because it happened so very long ago, (…) But if this were a book about me, instead of about the three children who would soon run into someone they had hoped never to see again, I might pause for a moment and tell you about something I did many years ago that still troubles me. It was a necessary thing to do, but it was not a nice thing, and even now (…) when I will suddenly remember this thing I did, and think to myself, *Was it really necessary? Was it absolutely necessary to steal that sugar bowl from Esmé Squalor?*
>
> (Snicket 2001c: 89-91)

Further in the chapter, the protagonists find on the "Snicket file" a photograph of Jacques with the Baudelaire parents and "a man who was turned away from the camera, so the children could not see his face, only one of his hands, which was clutching a notebook and pen, as if the obscured man were a writer of some sort" (Snicket 2001c: 108), hinting at the author of the series. In fact, as previously mentioned, in the photographs present in the author biographies, Lemony Snicket (portrayed by Daniel Handler) is always in a mysterious position (as exemplified in fig.s 28, 29 and 30), usually "turned away from the camera" and we can never fully discern his features. In this way, the reader creates a connection between an extradiegetic artifice (photographs in the paratext) and an intradiegetic element (the photograph mentioned within the narrative), introducing Snicket as part of the narrative.

Fig.s 28, 29 and 30: Lemony Snicket portraits by Meredith Heuer (taken from the author biographies in *The Slippery Slope*, *The End* and *The Penultimate Peril*, respectively)

Narrator and Narratee

We have broadly discussed the narrator and, although this chapter mostly concerns that function, one must also consider the narratee, another crucial part in the narrating instance. As Bayoumy puts it in her aforementioned article, by quoting Fludernik:

> The narrator's presence in any work entails the existence of a narratee/audience defined by Fludernik as "the intrafictional addressee of the narrator's discourse. S/he may also be a fictional character: the narrator tells the story to a friend, for instance, in other words to someone who belongs, just as the narrator does, to the fictional world" (23).
>
> (Bayoumy 50)

In fact, for Gerald Prince, the narratee exists in the same diegetic level as the narrator and so it does not necessarily merge with the reader in the same way that the narrator does not necessarily merge with the author:

> (…) just as narrators are distinguished from real or implied authors, narratees should be distinguished from real, implied, or other kinds of readers. The narratee is the audience (of one or more than one) that the narrator in a given narrative addresses. Like the enunciatee (or inscribed addressee of the textual I) in any text, the narratee is different from the real reader (the flesh-and-blood person actually reading the text) and the implied reader (…)
>
> (Prince 404)

These same terms were previously employed by Genette and later by Seymour Chatman (1978), upon proposing a diagram for what he called the "narrative-communication situation", formulated in the following manner: "Real author → [Implied author → (Narrator) → (Narratee) → Implied reader] → Real reader" (Chatman 151). This diagram implies the existence of the narrator and of the narratee in the same diegetic level, as well as of an implied author at the same diegetic level as the implied reader. The latter is the one to whom the implied author is directing himself to, in the same way that the narratee is the imagined receiver of the narrator's discourse. Since Snicket purportedly addresses the real reader of his books, the narratee in this case can be described as an "extradiegetic narratee, who merges with the implied reader and with whom each real reader can identify" (Genette 1980: 260). It is this extradiegetic narratee which concerns us, both regarding the books and the audiovisual

adaptation, taking into account that the narrator of the latter also addresses the spectator directly.

It is important to bring up this extradiegetic narratee in order to analyse the impact that they have on the narrator and vice-versa. Both in the literary and in the audiovisual media, there is a lot of confusion about the identity of the narrator, namely through the aforementioned shift from the heterodiegetic to the homodiegetic. This shift causes the alienation effect which we analysed in the previous chapter, and thus affects the narratee, who has to go through the process of restructuring their predefined ideas about the narrator, as well as their expectations towards the narrative. In the books, this happens through devices such as the paratext – the Beatrice dedications, the Dear Reader blurbs and the author biographies – which blurs the lines between fiction and the reader's reality, leading the latter to create a connection between extradiegetic artifices and intradiegetic elements. The "Dear Reader" address, as we have seen, is further defined by Waugh as a postmodern technique to change the reader's passive status. Additionally, the narrator's autodiegetic moments are another device which impose on the reader the active role of reflecting upon the diegetic structure, since they draw the first into the universe of the narrative.

In the television adaptation, on the other hand, the passage from heterodiegetic to homodiegetic narrator is connected with occasions in which the viewer is directly addressed, as we saw previously. For the entirety of season 1 and most of season 2, Snicket addresses the spectator directly and thus the latter is accustomed to this metafictional approach. This is disrupted in episode 9 of the second season, in which the spectator sees Snicket as a character immersed in the narrative for the first time – thus having to adjust their predefined ideas about the narrator, creating an estrangement between narrator and narratee. This shift of the narrative voice affects the narratee, forcing them to break their immersion in order to adjust their idea of Snicket to new narrative parameters.

This readjustment done by the narratee will, consequently, also affect the narrator, whose identity depends on the way that the narratee sees him and interprets his narration. Nonetheless, the narratee will be more involved in the investigative process in the books, since in the literary text the identity of the author-narrator is much more implied and not so straightforward as it is in the audiovisual medium, in which the spectator can see the character-narrator in his various diegetic instances. These differences will also be of relevance in the relationship between Lemony Snicket and his protagonists, as we shall see next.

Narrator and Protagonists

In the 12th book, *The Penultimate Peril*, the encounter mentioned in the previous chapter between narrator and protagonists at the Hotel Denouement – explicitly shown on the TV adaptation, since the spectator is familiar with the actor who plays Snicket – happens more subtly in the text, since the reader can never be sure that this person was actually Snicket. The taxi driver is never named, his identity only hinted at, creating a suspicion which is never confirmed nor denied:

> (…) the children felt a shadow over them, and looked up to see a tall, skinny figure standing over them. (…)
>
> "Do you three need a taxi?" (…)
>
> The siblings looked at one another, and then squinted up at the man. The children thought perhaps his voice was familiar, but it might just have been his unfathomable tone (…)
>
> "We're not sure," Violet said, after a moment.
>
> "You're not sure?" (…) Maybe you would do better things if you traveled at this very moment."
>
> "We haven't any money," Klaus said.
>
> "You needn't worry about money," the man said, "not if you're who I think you are." He leaned in toward the Baudelaires. "Are you?" he asked. "Are you who I think you are?"
>
> (Snicket 2005: 245-251)

Firstly, the use of a literary term as the name of the hotel in the penultimate book is a metadiegetic moment, since "denouement" is the part of a narrative between the falling action and the resolution of a plot. In fact, Snicket starts Chapter Eight by analysing this term in a directly metadiegetic gesture:

> "Denouement" comes from the French, who use the word to describe the act of untying a knot, and it refers to the unraveling of a confusing or mysterious story, such as the lives of the Baudelaire orphans (…) The denouement is the moment when all of the knots of a story are untied, and all the threads are unraveled, and everything is laid out clearly for the world to see. But the denouement should not be confused with the end of a story. (...) usually the denouement of a story is not the last event in the heroes' lives, or the last trouble that befalls them. It is often the second-to-last event, or the penultimate peril. As the Baudelaire orphans

> followed the mysterious man out of the hotel and through the cloud of steam to the edge of the reflective pond, the denouement of their story was fast approaching, but the end of their story still waited for them (…)
>
> (Snicket 2005: 175-177)

Barnet, Berman and Burto state that “the falling action goes through a reversal (...), and then into a catastrophe, also called a dénouement (unknotting) or resolution. (...) The dénouement frequently involves what Aristotle called anagnorisis (recognition, disclosure, discovery)" (86). In fact, in the *Poetics* (c. 335 BC), Aristotle establishes anagnorisis as a theatrical convention and states that recognition, “as the name denotes, is a change from ignorance to knowledge” (Aristotle 28). The denouement then is a critical moment – just like *The Penultimate Peril*, the last book before the end of the series. It is also the moment in the narrative of the series in which most of the characters reappear, since the hotel guests are characters from the other books. The two main reappearing characters are Jerome Squalor (from *The Ersatz Elevator*) and Justice Strauss (from *The Bad Beginning*), who further act as elements of anagnorisis: throughout this 12th book, there is a lot of mystery about a person with the initials J.S. who is supposed to arrive at the hotel. The Baudelaires spend most of the narrative trying to disclose whose initials those are, until in Chapter Eight a taxi arrives bringing Jerome Squalor and Justice Strauss (who had in the meantime become volunteers and were helping with research on the Baudelaire case). The reappearance of these characters in this 12th and penultimate instalment of the book series is then significant: with Hotel Dénouement as its setting, hinting from the beginning at its narrative implications, it is a moment of Aristotelian recognition. Through this anagnorisis contained in the denouement of the story, the narrative prepares itself for its conclusion in the final instalment of the series, *The End*.

Another crucial point to the study of the narrator is that the taxi driver who brings these two characters to the hotel is no other than Lemony Snicket – the narrator himself brings the sources of anagnorisis to the narrative. This interdiegesis has a decisive role, since he physically intervenes in the narrative, as a character more than as a narrator at this particular point. Furthermore, it could be argued that locating the only encounter between narrator and protagonists at a hotel called “Denouement” shows how much of a defining moment this is for the narrative. In this encounter, after bringing Jerome Squalor and Justice Strauss to the hotel, Snicket offers to take the Baudelaires away from their troubles. In this brief intrusion on his own narrative, the narrator also induces an existential questioning in the

protagonists about their own identity. When he asks them "Are you who I think you are?", they are not able to answer, while wondering about how to properly define themselves after everything they had to do in order to escape their unfortunate events. This is a moment of almost reaching anagnorisis, in the sense that the reader wants the characters to recognize the narrator and vice versa but this recognition is never fully achieved – what could therefore be defined as a postmodernist reversal of this narrative convention from Aristotelian tragedy. In the classical theatrical convention, the moment of anagnorisis is crucial and it tends "to establish either friendship or animosity, between the persons destined to happiness or misery" (Aristotle 28). In this moment in the narrative, however, Snicket and the Baudelaires do not recognise each other, their ignorance endures and neither friendship nor animosity is established between them.

However, in this moment, the narrator ceases once again to be a passive, heterodiegetic figure and becomes a homodiegetic narrator, this time by participating in and attempting to change the course of the narrative. Although the taxi driver is never named, further hints about his identity as the narrator are given:

> (…) they had no way of knowing if they were sad or relieved to see *him* go, and even after months of research, and many sleepless nights (…) *I* have no way of knowing if the Baudelaires should have been sad or relieved to see *him* go either. *I* do know who the man was, and *I* do know where *he* went afterward (…) but *I* have no way of knowing if it would have been better for the orphans, any more than *I* know if it would have been better for *me* had I decided to continue *my* life's work rather than researching the Baudelaires' story (...)
>
> (Snicket 2005: 250-252; italics mine)

By intercalating third person pronouns with first person pronouns and confessing his knowledge of the man's identity, Snicket creates an ambiguous amalgam of voices, making it hard to differentiate between them. This recalls Genette's idea of coexistence between heterodiegetic and autodiegetic narrators in the same narrative. As stated by Margolin, "such narratives are thus simultaneously first- and third-person discourses, transcending this basic narratological divide" (23). In the TV show, however, the identity of this man becomes explicit through his bodily presence: the actor who plays Lemony Snicket in every episode, Patrick Warburton, is the one to appear in his taxi and ask the Baudelaires if they need a ride in "The Penultimate Peril: Part Two". He also explicitly presents himself, unlike in the books: "My name is Lemony Snicket", he tells the children. The metafictional implications of

having the narrator intrude on the protagonists' story bring us back to Genette: there is a restructuring of the narrative person (heterodiegetic to homodiegetic) which forces the spectator to reflect upon the structure of the narration and alter their predefined expectations.

Not only does Snicket attempt to change the course of the characters' narrative, but in the adaptation it becomes explicit that this encounter between protagonists and narrator also changed the course of the latter's personal narrative. The episode "The Penultimate Peril: Part Two" starts with Snicket still as narrator introducing the scene in which he will appear as character: "The past (…) can change you, the way these next two minutes would change my own life… forever". Later, at the end of the episode, after the Baudelaires have fled a burning Hotel Denouement in a sailboat, Snicket comes back in his taxi and asks Justice Strauss about their whereabouts. She answers "They're gone. I've travelled everywhere they've been, I've investigated everything they've been through, and now it's all gone up in flames. The only thing left of *The Complete History of Injustice* is this photograph", a photograph of the siblings which is shown to the spectator through a close-up and which Snicket asks if he can keep. This scene is not present in the original text of the book (we are not even informed if Justice Strauss survives the fire of the hotel), but its inclusion in the TV show is relevant in order to close a cycle, demonstrating that it is in this moment that Snicket starts investigating the lives of the Baudelaires. In the following scene, we see him with his typewriter in the motel room which has been a recurring location of the narrator through the series. Attached to a wall next to him is the picture of the Baudelaires that Justice Strauss gave him. This is the same wall where the spectator sees the murder board in the opening credits of every episode. However, in this scene, the murder board is not yet filled with items relating to the Baudelaires and Count Olaf as it is in the opening credits – showing the spectator that this is the beginning of the investigation, and it all started with that one photograph, after Snicket met the protagonists at the Hotel Denouement. Therefore, these scenes show the spectator how the encounter between narrator and protagonists changed the course of the former's narrative: it was after this encounter that Snicket decided to research their lives and became, thus, a narrator.

This restructuring of the narrative person from heterodiegetic to homodiegetic is hence much more emphasised in the TV show adaptation than in the original literary text (although also present, in a more subtle way). This audiovisual adaptation thus reinforces the metafictional essence of the narrative, by forcing the spectator to reflect upon the structure of the narration, altering their predefined expectations such as that of the fourth-wall breaking technique. This latter is reversed in the TV show, since it starts as the narrating convention

and its collapse is, in this case, what creates the alienation effect. Moreover, all of this happens because and through the role of the narrator who is, in short, the catalyst of the narrative's metafictional essence – by intruding frequently in the narration in order to address the reader directly, make comments, digress on other topics, morally judge the characters and their decisions or even expose his own writing mechanisms.

The Confusing Conclusion

(...) this swirling narrative that, in order to exist in its own truth, undoubtedly needs, more than any other narrative does, to escape the closure of "final message" and narrative completion.

- Genette (1980: 261)

Sometimes a chapter might end, but that doesn't mean that the story is over. And some stories go on, even after the storyteller has stopped telling them.

- "The End" (Netflix, 2019)

After "infamously" introducing Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, analysing the Postmodernist problem, venturing into a series of metafictional events, reaching a cinematic climax and finally, meeting our narcissistic narrator, we reach the (possibly confusing) conclusion.

We have started this dissertation by introducing the concept of Postmodernism, an aesthetic born from Modernism and from a world filled with anxiety after two World Wars. Consequently, it is characterised by a sense of anachronism, confusion and uncertainty and permeated by a nihilistic humour. According to McHale, it differs from Modernism in the sense that the latter revolves around epistemological issues, while Postmodernism revolves around ontological issues, being thus more concerned with the metaphysical aspects of knowledge rather than with scientific knowledge and its methods. We have thus contextualised *A Series of Unfortunate Events* as a narrative with postmodernist traits, which can be found in the way that it intertwines temporal references, blending contemporary and Victorian elements in an undefined point in time; its load of unanswered and unanswerable questions, which take the reader into the role of a detective; and its postmodern metanarrative style, where modern linear narrative conventions are challenged and the narrator rambles on digressions and anecdotes.

From its postmodernist aspect, we have introduced the concept of metafiction – a self-reflexive technique which, while existing previously to Postmodernism, flourishes in its ontological grounds. We followed Waugh on her concept of frame-breaking and from there we moved to scrutinise the metafictional elements of *A Series of Unfortunate Events* in its

literary form, including the role of the paratexts and its forms of intertextuality. In what concerns the paratextuality, the dedications to a fictional character, the direct address to the reader in the back cover blurbs and the use of the fictional narrator as author of the literary object, all dim the distinction between fiction and the world of the reader. Intertextuality, on the other hand, occurs chiefly through literary allusions, which bring the text to the field of crosswriting, since most of these allusions aim at a more mature audience, thus crossing the boundaries between what is perceived as literature for children and for adults. Moreover, the ambiguous ending of the narrative with the ontological issue of “The Great Unknown" reaffirms its relation to the postmodernist aesthetic.

In the second chapter, we have examined how metafiction is transcoded from the literary medium into a cinematic one, by exploring the nuances of Netflix’s 2017 TV show adaptation of Snicket’s book series – which not only adapts but goes even further to “translate” the books’ metafictional essence to screen. Starting by justifying the use of the term “cinematic” in relation to a TV show, we have identified Netflix’ *A Series of Unfortunate Events* as an example of the so-called concept of quality television. Through Hermansson’s *Filming the Children's Book: Adapting Metafiction*, we then introduced the concepts of metafilm and of meta-adaptation, analysing the aspects of the TV adaptation which allowed it to be characterised as both – since it reflects on itself both as a cinematic product and as an adaptation. We then proceeded to analyse its metafictional elements, such as filmic references and the way in which the audiovisual medium calls attention to itself through cinematic correspondences to literature’s self-referentiality. The latter includes references to the external world, directly addressing the spectator, as well as the use of metafilmic elements such as movie theatres, film reels and projectors. Moreover, one of the main techniques used throughout the series is the fourth-wall breaking, which creates an alienation effect previously theorised by Brecht with a revolutionary intent and which we here analysed through Rancière’s *The Emancipated Spectator*. On this note, the observations made upon the irony of having a subscription streaming service appropriating a device of anti-capitalist backgrounds could be useful for further investigation upon the general contemporary state of audiovisual media. The neutralisation and almost vulgarisation of the fourth-wall breaking technique implies that it has ceased to be a ground-breaking emancipatory act for the public, becoming merely a recognizable narrative technique. In consequence, recent works of audiovisual media have a very ambiguous purpose in the current socio-economic landscape, namely through the popularisation and proliferation of streaming services. This ambiguity is manifested by a display of self-awareness that is,

nonetheless, subsumed in the transformation of media objects into products of entertainment which are supposed to be consumed.

Lastly, we focused on the narcissistic narrator, Lemony Snicket himself, as the main source of this metafictional essence. By recalling the role of the paratext, we have seen how the narrator's authorship and his direct address to the reader in the back cover blurbs create a fine line between fiction and the reader's reality. We delved into Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse – An Essay in Method* in order to introduce widely used concepts in diegetic analysis such as focalizations and narrative levels. We have established that Snicket has an ambiguous status as both heterodiegetic and homodiegetic narrator, since he is introduced as the author of the books but we eventually realise that he is also in some way a part of the narrative, thus becoming more than a pseudonym for the author, Daniel Handler, but also a character in the story. This aspect is confirmed through the use of analepsis and the possible encounter between protagonists and narrator — which is only hinted at in the book *The Penultimate Peril* and becomes explicit in the episode "The Penultimate Peril: Part One" of the TV adaptation. Before delving deeper into this relationship between narrator and his main characters, we have explored the concept of narratee in order to also analyse the latter's relationship with the narrator.

We have finally concluded that narrator and characters influence each other's narratives, as well as narrator and narratee (be it the reader or the spectator) influence each other through a metafictional association, shaping their respective roles through a restructuring of the latter's narrative expectations. The axis of this dissertation has thus become the way that metafiction shapes the role of the narrator and vice-versa, in a cross-medium perspective. Considering the primordial role of the narrator in the metafictional aspect of the narrative, it can be concluded that he is also an essential part in transcoding the narrative from the literary to the audiovisual medium. The author-narrator, who addresses the reader directly from the very first page, becomes character-narrator, breaking the fourth wall from the very first episode by appearing on the screen while looking at and addressing the spectator directly – thus maintaining the metafictional essence of the narrative in a different media. This duality between literary author-narrator and audiovisual character-narrator could even be a particularly interesting suggestion for further development in the future, through a more intermediality-focused study of adaptation.

Other topics for further research would be to analyse the role of the paratext in a postmodern metafictional context, following our previous supposition that in this case it could go so far as to become an instance of the text itself. The dedications, the "Dear Reader"

blurbs in the back cover, and the letters to his editor are paratextual elements included in the diegetic universe that thus become part of the reading experience. It may also be worthwhile to study Lemony Snicket as an unreliable narrator, a type of narrator which is very prominent in postmodernist fiction, considering its ontological interests, as pointed out by McHale. It would be interesting to further observe how his unreliability can affect both the narrating instance and the narratee, in a comparative perspective with other postmodern works of literature.

In the style of postmodernist fiction, the books of *A Series of Unfortunate Events* do not present us with many definitive conclusions. With an ambiguous ending, a complex author-narrator figure and many open-ended questions, the series refuses to give the reader a complete overview of the diegetic universe, preferring to preserve their ontological doubt. The television adaptation, on the other hand, tries to go beyond that by implementing elements from Snicket's companion books and concretizing some of the questions in the text. In any case, the main essence of the narrative, which has been the focal axis of this dissertation, pervades in both media: its metafictional devices, which are ultimately conducted by the blurred lines between heterodiegetic and homodiegetic narrator.

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