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Puzzle Plots in TV Serials: The Challenges for Enigma- Driven Storytelling in Long- Running Formats

Introduction: Definitions and Concepts¹

So-called “puzzle films” have been very successful in the last three decades and have attracted considerable critical and academic attention. With the recent shift of funds, talents, and star power to the production of TV serials, the question arises how well the particular kind of narrative complexity associated with puzzle plots may thrive in long-running formats spanning entire seasons². In order to give a tentative answer to this question, I will in this article undertake a comparative analysis of three works that may be considered typical examples of puzzle plots: the feature film *Open Your Eyes* (*Abre los ojos*, 1997, Alejandro Amenábar), and the TV serials *Westworld* (2016–, HBO, Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy) and *Dark* (2017–, Netflix, Jantje Friese and Baran bo Odar). But before embarking on this analysis, some preliminary considerations about how to define narrative complexity in general and the puzzle plot in particular may be in order.

¹ I would like to thank Joseph Swann for the revision of the English text.

² I use the term “TV serial” (and not “TV series”) for shows whose stories span whole seasons.

In his introduction to *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, Warren Buckland, editor of that volume, defines the puzzle plot as follows:

“A puzzle plot is intricate in the sense that the arrangement of events is not just complex, but complicated and perplexing, the events are not simply interwoven, but entangled. [...] This volume unites them [the puzzle films] on the basis of their shared storytelling complexity. [...] [T]he majority of [...] puzzle films are distinct in that they break the boundaries of the classical, unified mimetic plot. The puzzle film is made up of non-classical characters who perform non-classical actions and events. [...] [P]uzzle films embrace non-linearity, time loops, and fragmented spatio-temporal reality. These films blur the boundaries between different levels of reality, are riddled with gaps, deception, labyrinthine structures, ambiguity, and overt coincidences. They are populated with characters who are schizophrenic, lose their memory, are unreliable narrators, or are dead (but without us – or them – realizing)” (2009, pp. 5–6).

Puzzle plots, then, display a high degree of complexity, are non-classical and potentially anti-mimetic in nature and feature particular structural devices such as time-loops, non-linearity, or unreliability. But Kiss and Willemsen argue (2017, pp. 19–20) that this definition is overly general and lacks precise characterisation. It displaces the need for clarification to the underlying questions: What is narrative complexity? What are the norms of classical storytelling? – And it does so all the more, given that the examples referred to in the volume as puzzle films appear quite diverse, ranging from the relatively conventional *Sliding Doors* (1998, Peter Howitt) to the highly experimental *Inland Empire* (2006, David Lynch). Kiss and Willemsen propose shifting the focus from structural patterns to the examination of reception processes, especially the level of cognitive effort required to construct a coherent story. I will follow this shift, paying particular attention to different kinds of narrative complexity and their relation to the puzzle plot.

From a cognitive point of view, classical narration may, generally speaking, be said to favour an easy understanding by allowing spectators to quickly orient themselves in a coherent world with clear plotlines. In contrast, with its fictional universes full of real or apparent contradictions, inconsistencies and paradoxes, and/or its multiple entangling plotlines, complex narration makes comprehension more difficult, especially in the initial phase of a work in which we expect to be enlightened by expository information. This is, however, a general statement, and it needs differentiation. I propose, therefore, to acknowledge different dimensions of complexity. First, we need to distinguish between a quantitative

and a qualitative dimension. If we are faced with a large number of important elements (main characters, plotlines, dramatic questions, etc.) which demand rapid processing of a high volume of new information, the complexity is quantitative. If, on the other hand, our understanding is hampered by contradictory, inconsistent, paradoxical or missing information, the complexity is qualitative. In the former, mental overload may be the result, in the latter, cognitive dissonance. Both stand in the way of a smooth and unobtrusive apprehension of the basic narrative coordinates, but they stand differently.

Secondly, we need to distinguish between complex stories and complex storytelling. There are four possible combinations of these two. A simple story may be told in a straightforward manner. A complex story may be told in a straightforward manner – i.e. in such a way that the telling makes understanding as easy as the complexity of the narrated events allows. A simple story may be told in a complex manner, for example by giving a nonlinear or elliptic account of what happened. And the perception of an already complex story may be further obscured by an unconventional rendering of its information.

Puzzle Plots and Narrative Complexity

Applying these definitions to the subject of this article, how can we clarify the connection between narrative complexity and the puzzle plot, especially the kind that occurs in feature films? Puzzle films, I would say, form a subgroup of the broader class of complex films. In other words, every puzzle film is complex, but not every complex film is a puzzle film. What particular features, then, do puzzle films exhibit? Here I would argue that qualitative rather than quantitative dimensions of complexity are paramount. The complex telling is more prevalent than the complex story as such. And open dramatic questions raised by narrative incongruities and triggering intensified hypothesis-building are of prime importance. Noël Carroll has argued that popular narratives may generally be regarded as grounded in a question-answer structure (1990, pp. 130–136). And in classical narration future-oriented Yes/No questions prevail: Will the boy get the girl? Will the hero defeat his enemy? Will the heroine save the world? The distinctive questions characteristic of puzzle plots, however, are more open and concern the present situation or past developments leading up to it, such as: What is going on? Why is this character acting like that? What kind of world am I dealing with? How are these occurrences connected with each other? How can I explain these happenings? How can I resolve these contradictions?

Puzzle plots are designed to confuse and disturb, to pose enigmas, and to keep spectators guessing about what is going on and how to resolve the various

conundrums. Do they present a satisfactory resolution in the end? Most puzzles are there to be resolved. There is a sense of urgency and impending denouement throughout. And we normally expect a payoff after the long phase of confusion and considerable cognitive effort invested. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the final plot twist, a particularly effective way of answering all these questions at a single stroke, is the preferred form of closure in many puzzle films. But here again, a note of clarification is called for. Although many puzzle films feature final plot twists, not every film with a final plot twist is a puzzle film. If we are led to construct a coherent world and a conclusive storyline which only in the end turn out to be a deception, as is the case in well-known films such as *Fight Club* (1999, David Fincher), *The Sixth Sense* (1999, M. Night Shyamalan), or *Shutter Island* (2010, Martin Scorsese), the phase of confusion and disorientation – an indispensable feature of the puzzle plot in my stricter conception of the term – is missing. Hence, contrary to many scholars writing on puzzle films (e.g. Buckland, 2009/2014; Klecker, 2013), I agree with Kiss and Willemsen (2017, pp. 49–56) that films which only build on false leads in order to rectify them in final plot twists are not true puzzle films³. Unreliable narration of this deceptive kind lacks the prolonged effect of perturbation constitutive of the puzzle plot.

In some cases, the enigmas are not resolved. Kiss and Willemsen propose the term “impossible puzzle films” for examples like *Donnie Darko* (2001, Richard Kelly), *Chasing Sleep* (2000, Michael Walker), or David Lynch’s “L.A. Trilogy” (*Lost Highway*, 1996; *Mulholland Drive*, 2001; *Inland Empire*, 2006). Contrary to art cinema’s modernist impetus towards a general sense of uncertainty and contingency, unresolved puzzle films still engage spectators in trying to figure out how the apparent incongruities and paradoxes may be explained rationally, and thus “do not let [them] escape from [their] natural, navigation-driven plot structuring struggle” (Kiss, 2013, p. 250).

The Appeal of Puzzle Plots

What makes puzzle plots – with or without resolution – convincing? What is their particular appeal? For one thing, the phase of disorientation had better be intriguing. Confusion, a state of mind we normally dislike in real-life contexts, may be enjoyed with respect to artworks, but only if our curiosity is aroused. A high level of suspense and forward dynamics also helps one endure a (provisional) lack of knowledge. High stakes, deadlines, and danger facing the protagonist all contribute to the urge to press on through, despite bewildering

³ For a more nuanced distinction between puzzles with surprising solutions versus apparent coherences as false leads see: Brüttsch, 2018, pp. 137–142.

circumstances. Hence most puzzle films stage a chain of events with strong immersive qualities. At the same time, because of the incoherent and contradictory elements complicating our assessment of the story, they also self-reflexively point to and problematise conventional mechanisms of narration and comprehension.

If the enigmas are resolved in a twist, the unsettling nature of the resolution, relieved by the simplicity and logical consistency of the final explanation, are paramount in achieving viewer satisfaction: they are, so to speak, the payoff for the cognitive effort invested. And even if the enigmas are not resolved, the call for clarification must still be strong enough to encourage repeated attempts at explaining the strange happenings. The fact that unresolved puzzle films such as *Donnie Darko*, *Mulholland Drive* or *Primer* (2004, Shane Carruth) have generated considerable cult followings and extensive critical and academic coverage shows that the absence of an unequivocal conclusion need not impair the success of puzzle films, at least with niche audiences ready to engage in sophisticated exegesis of complex narratives⁴.

Bewildering Self-Deceit in *Open Your Eyes*

After these general remarks about narrative complexity and puzzle plots, I will turn to a comparative analysis of *Open Your Eyes*, *Westworld*, and *Dark*. *Open Your Eyes* recounts the story of a well-off, attractive young man, César, who falls in love with Sofía, the girl who accompanies his best friend to his birthday party⁵. He spends the night with her, but the following morning his jealous ex-girlfriend Nuria is lying in wait, and she persuades him to go with her to her place for a final sexual fling. On their way there she intentionally drives into a wall. César survives the “accident”, but his face is so badly maimed that the surgeons cannot, and Sofía will not, do anything more for him. His misery is complete when, out on a club evening with his friend and Sofía, he sees them making out, and they finally leave him there alone. The following morning, however, Sofía suddenly stands before him, apologises and kisses him. Shortly afterwards, new surgical techniques restore his face to its pristine beauty and the world seems whole again. But not for long. Strange things happen. One night César finds Nuria instead of Sofía next to him in bed, and both his friend and the police confirm that the woman he thinks is Nuria is in fact his girlfriend and the woman who died in the car crash was Sofía. Yet only a little later Sofía turns up at his apartment. César embraces her blissfully and they make love, but in the

⁴ For a detailed and well-argued assessment of possible reasons for the appeal of “impossible puzzle films” see: Kiss, Willemsen, 2018, pp. 183–207.

⁵ I permit myself to reuse here a synopsis of *Open Your Eyes* written for an article in which I analyse the film from a slightly different angle (Brütsch, 2018, p. 137).

very act of doing so he realizes that the woman beneath him is Nuria. In despair, he grabs a pillow and presses it over her face until she stops breathing. Hurriedly leaving Sofía's apartment, he catches sight of his face in the mirror and realizes with horror that the disfigurement has returned. After this, César is committed to a secure psychiatric institution, where – after some initial reluctance – he confides in a psychologist.

In *Open Your Eyes*, events get out of hand early on, and César's emotional ups and downs may be compared to a ride on a roller coaster. The phase in which our curiosity as spectators is particularly aroused only sets in, however, when Sofía suddenly returns and César's face is restored. These wondrous developments happen out of the blue and raise the question how to explain Sofía's change of behaviour psychologically and the doctors' sudden progress technologically. The subsequent inexplicable happenings – notably Sofía's replacement by Nuria and the reversion of César's face to its disfigured state – add confusion to our incredulity. We are further disoriented by uncanny repetitions and strange events like César's faintly uttered wish for quiet, which mysteriously brings a crowded bar to silence.

These surprising turnarounds, identity switches, and inconsistencies raise many questions. Could it be that César is the victim of a conspiracy orchestrated by his business partners and his ex-girlfriend? Has he become delusional due to heavy medication after the accident? Are the bizarre events merely part of a dream? Or do we have to reassess our conception of the fictional world and opt for a marvellous universe not bound by the laws of reality as we know it? Even though there are clues for each of these explanations, none of them appears conclusive.

The situation is further complicated by the fact that we are given a retrospective account of the events leading up to César's confinement, his confessions to the psychologist providing the opportunity for repeated flashbacks informing us about what happened from his own restricted point-of-view. Starting off with César already locked up and wearing a mask, *Open Your Eyes* thus first establishes a detective plot, raising questions such as: Why is César being kept prisoner in a mental institution? Who did he kill and why did he do it? Why is he hiding his face? However, these questions are soon answered during the phase of disorientation, ceding centre stage to the more open puzzle questions noted above. These are resolved only towards the end of the film, when faint memories and dream images evoked during the therapy sessions solidify into recollections of a firm called Life Extension whose business, it transpires, is to offer its clients a posthumous second life in a virtual reality tailored to their wishes – a life that seamlessly continues their former existence from their own chosen point.

How convincing is the puzzle structure of *Open Your Eyes*? To first hook the audience with an ostensible detective plot (involving the protagonist as potential offender and victim) and only later to shift to the more confusing puzzle plot, proves a clever move, prompting viewers to adopt an attitude that is both compassionate and forensic. The ensuing phase of disorientation arouses our interest by teasing us with various plausible explanations. And the final resolution turns out to be surprising (it calls into play a solution not considered before), game-changing (it requires a substantial reconstruction of the timelines and levels of reality in the story), plausible within a fictional context (it is supported by pre-conceptions about cryonics and virtual reality), and illuminating (the contradictions are revealed to be products of César's interior psychological struggle)⁶.

The Dual Strategy of *Westworld*

Open Your Eyes, therefore, perfectly matches the strict conception of puzzle plot outlined above⁷. Far from being reserved to feature films, however, the term "puzzle" has, for example, been frequently used in reviews and online-comments about *Westworld* to characterise the particular appeal of this HBO-produced TV serial. This prompts the question whether *Westworld* is an exception to the rule that viewers do not want to remain for a whole season in a state of disorientation, ignorance and confusion, and if so why?

The action of *Westworld*'s first season unfolds in an amusement park which allows visitors to experience a Wild West populated by robots acting as cowboys and Indians. Despite their genuine appearance and human-like behaviour, the "hosts" are programmed to be subservient and not to harm any of the guests. Looking at the characters and plotlines, we can recognise an initial major difference from *Open Your Eyes*. *Westworld* features six main characters (Dolores, Meave, Bernard, Ford, William, and the "Man in Black") and six secondary characters (Teddy, Theresa, Elsie, Lee, Charlotte, and Logan), all of whom are distributed among three different camps (robots, guests, and park executives). Moreover, there are no less than six main plotlines: Dolores' awakening, Meave's awakening, Ford's endeavour, the quest of the "Man in Black", William's quest, and the power-struggles among park executives. Each episode involves between three to five of these plotlines, resulting in what German-language TV studies call "Zopfdramaturgie": a dramatic structure that resembles a plait or braid.

⁶ The only reservation I would make regards the all too explicit and verbose clarification provided at the moment of the twist.

⁷ Other examples for puzzle plots in feature films are: *Angel Heart* (1987, Alan Parker); *Identity* (2003, James Mangold); *The Machinist (El Maquinista)*, 2004, Brad Andersson); *Stay* (2005, Marc Forster).

Compared with the single protagonist and single main storyline of *Open Your Eyes*, *Westworld* displays a level of quantitative complexity not often found in feature films, but quite commonplace in today's TV serials. Of itself, this dispersion of narrative content (which helps to expand plot developments over a whole season) is clearly not enough to establish a puzzle structure, but it may form the basis for it⁸. However, what about qualitative complexity? In order to assess *Westworld* in this regard, we need to examine the kinds of plotlines established and the nature of the dramatic questions they raise. In the first episodes, two distinct series of incidents are staged to catch our attention: Some of the hosts playing secondary roles appear to not function correctly and have to be brought in for remedial maintenance. At the same time, the two hosts playing primary roles, Dolores and Meave, experience flashbacks to past cycles despite the fact that their memories are wiped clean after each assignment. The dramatic questions suggested by these incidents are: Why are some hosts not functioning as programmed? And more urgently: Are the hosts about to awaken? Will the human beings lose control? It is important to note that these latter questions, which run like a thread through the entire season and are responsible for generating much of its suspense, are in fact future-oriented yes/no-questions to which, moreover, we already know the answers: The hosts will awaken and the park executives will lose control. We know this, not just because the feature film of the same title – a work on which *Westworld* is loosely based – serves as an explicit pre-text, but also because the course of action ensues from a dramatic constellation we are well acquainted with from popular movies such as *Jaws* (1975, Steven Spielberg), *Jurassic Park* (1993, Steven Spielberg), or *Jurassic World* (2015, Colin Trevorrow): In a tourist zone or theme park, the safety of visitors is in danger, yet profit-oriented operators refuse to acknowledge the menace.

As well as the hosts' malfunctioning and awakening, the intrigues and conflicts among park executives take up a considerable amount of screen time. Hence, the second most important dramatic question is: Who will gain the upper hand in the park's management structure? The main antagonists in this rivalry are Ford (co-founder and creative director) and Charlotte (executive director of the board), while Bernard, Theresa, and Lee occupy intermediate positions of variable loyalty to one or the other. This dramatic question, again, is not a completely open puzzle regarding past or present states of affairs, but a focused, future-oriented suspense question with two possible outcomes. And the way this plotline unfolds is also classical, with Ford, representing the artistic side, at first

⁸ For many authors, such as Jason Mittell (2015), multiple plotlines and story arcs spanning whole seasons are sufficient grounds for a TV serial to be called complex. I would advocate a more restricted use of the concept of narrative complexity.

apparently defeated but in the end triumphant over Charlotte, who stands for reckless business interests.

How, then, do we assess *Westworld's* present state of affairs? A major claim in my introduction to this essay, and in the analysis of *Open Your Eyes*, was that puzzle plots confront viewers with situations, behaviours and conditions which are, at least initially, hard to make sense of. *Westworld*, in this respect, works simultaneously on two levels. On the one hand, it acquaints viewers with the operating principles of the park and most of the major characters and their responsibilities in an explicit, explanatory way. On the other hand, and from the first episode onwards, it introduces elements that for a long time remain mysterious, suggesting that the park's genesis and development were fraught with problems that still affect the present situation. Among the questions raised in this context are: What are Bernard's interviews with Dolores about? Whose voice does Dolores hear inside her head? Who is Wyatt and who was Arnold? What massacre took place and why? What exactly is "the maze" and where is the entrance to it? Who is the "Man in Black" and why does he act so cruelly? How are we to understand "the game" and its deeper level? And in connection with the power struggle mentioned above: What are the real interests of the park management? What is Ford up to with his "new storyline"?

Westworld's puzzle-like quality essentially relies on these intriguing elements and the open questions they raise. It is important to note, however, that the sense of ignorance and confusion they evoke is counterbalanced by the orienting forces of the exposition and the clearly focused suspense issues of the robots' awakening and their mentors' (apparent) loss of control. In this way, the puzzling elements are embedded in a classical structure facilitating audience participation over a whole season. An examination of the cliffhangers of season one – traditionally points of prime interest in TV serials – confirms the importance given to a solid, even conventional backbone: In seven out of the ten episode endings, either the awakening of the hosts or the power struggle among the park executives is in focus, and only three endings (episodes two, three and eight) are directly related to the open puzzle questions.

How, then, are the questions raised in the first episodes resolved in the course of season one? In contrast to feature films, TV serials rarely withhold answers to all the pressing questions until the very end; the risk of frustrating viewers left in ignorance for too long is too great. Partial revelations often set in much earlier, and the final resolution may take the form of a series of twists and turns spanning the last two or more episodes. In *Westworld*, the first significant disclosures come in episode six, and the cascade of major revelations

starts in the middle of episode nine and continues through the concluding one-and-a-half episodes.

A striking aspect of this extended season one finale is that its revelations are not always answers to the explicitly raised suspense or puzzle questions, but make us realise that we must revise some basic assumptions: Thus Bernard is not a human being but a host, and William and the “Man in Black” are not two individuals but one. I argued in the introduction that films based merely on false leads resulting in twist endings do not meet the requirements of a puzzle plot. In *Westworld*, however, with its array of plotlines – some of them distinctly puzzling in nature – audience deception may well add to the overall impression of complexity, especially if its resolution entails a considerable rearrangement of timelines and character relations and affects other, as yet unclarified issues.

A distinguishing mark of this resolution is the merging of plotlines. To name just a few of the conjunctions brought to light in the finale: The “maze” and the “game”, both of which deeply intrigued the Man in Black, turn out to be meant for Meave and Dolores, assisting them in attaining willpower. The awakening of these hosts is revealed to be part of Ford’s plan to prevail in the power struggle among park executives. And the danger resulting from the liberation of the robots complies, in turn, with the Man in Black’s quest to reach a place “where actions have real consequences”.

The overall question that arises from my reception-oriented line of investigation is: How convincing is the dramatic structure of *Westworld’s* first season? The combination of a classical backbone with a number of enigmas and puzzling questions appears compelling. The degree of confusion the viewer is expected to endure is well dosed and counterbalanced by a number of straightforward developments. The surprising turns and anticipated climaxes in the final stage are skilfully orchestrated. Some of the revelations are both effective and easy to understand. The weak point is the convoluted backstory about the foundation of the park and the plans to bring the hosts to consciousness, which turn out to be so complex that, in my viewing experience at least, their elucidation causes more frowns than epiphanies. The strategy of further complicating an already complex action by rendering story information in a fragmented, disordered way, is all the more problematic in season two, where Bernard’s painstaking attempt to reconstruct his actions is juxtaposed with a plotline (Meave’s search for her daughter) that is so straightforward as to be uninteresting. As I pointed out in the introduction, the complex telling of a simple story may yield more convincing puzzle effects than the further complication of already complex storylines.

Multiple Enigmas in *Dark*

Let's turn to our third and last example, *Dark* – the first Netflix-financed TV serial to be produced and shot in Germany. The action is set in the fictional town of Winden in 2019 and begins in the aftermath of a child's mysterious disappearance. When a second child disappears (in the first episode) the inhabitants are alarmed and police investigators intensify their search. Like *Open Your Eyes*, *Dark* thus starts off as a detective plot, but it, too, steers in a different direction as soon as some other incidents occur which cannot be brought in line with the laws of our reality. The second missing child, it turns out in episode two, got lost in a tunnel leading directly to the year 1986! As the number of characters travelling through time – and the time periods involved – multiply, it becomes clear that *Dark* relies heavily on supernatural causality to achieve its puzzling effects. How, then, does *Dark* complicate comprehension without compromising the viewer's fascination with these unusual happenings? And how does its strategy compare with those of *Open Your Eyes* and *Westworld*?

After all, *Dark* features even more main characters than *Westworld*. The action evolves mainly around the members of four different families, and as more and more eras come into play, no less than four generations are concerned, setting the stage for a myriad of relationships, intrigues and conflicts. Even more striking, however, is the number of enigmas that surface: more than two dozen dramatic questions are raised in the first season alone. They concern a variety of issues: the missing children (Where are they? Who kidnapped them?); unknown characters showing up (Who are they? Where do they come from? What are their plans?); the strange behaviour of established characters (What do they know?); the secret activities of the nuclear power plant executives (What are they hiding?); abnormal occurrences (Why are whole flocks of animals dying simultaneously?); and unusual places and objects (Where does the tunnel lead? What are the nursery and the clockwork for?). Most of these questions are typical of puzzle plots in the sense defined at the beginning of this essay: they are open and they address unresolved issues relating to the present situation, or past developments leading up to it⁹.

In light of such rampant complexity the question is all the more urgent: How does *Dark* keep its viewers tuned in? As in *Westworld*, the slightly privileged status of one character, Jonas, gives us a hint¹⁰. But more importantly, the enigmas are skilfully distributed over the whole season, with each episode (starting with

⁹ The cyclical nature of *Dark*'s universe progressively undermines an unequivocal timeline, but a general sense of before, now and after still prevails for a certain time.

¹⁰ In *Westworld*, Dolores stands out as more important than the other main characters.

the first) resolving at least one. However, new enigmas are raised all through season one and the total number of open questions remains only marginally manageable. Yet the cognitive effort invested is rewarded with partial solutions in each episode. Furthermore, in the course of the season, the impression grows that all these enigmas are somehow connected. And as soon as time travel and loop structures are established as part of the fictional world, we are ready to accept solutions that no longer adhere to the logics of our reality.

In addition to this careful dosage of disorienting effects, audience participation is also maintained by the intrigues and conflicts that take place among closely connected families in a small town: these per se provide enough subject matter for an entertaining TV serial. And *Dark* is positively convincing on this level, not least due to excellent performances, genuine dialogues, and a *mise-en-scène* no less adequate to the oppressive atmosphere of provincial northern Germany than it is to the profound mystery of a universe that progresses in cycles.

Unlike *Westworld*, *Dark* does not answer all its questions at the end of the first season only in order to install a new set of enigmas at the beginning of the second. To be sure, the number of questions resolved increases in the last four (of ten) episodes, but many relevant issues remain unresolved. An important change takes place, however, at the turn of the seasons. As the identities and intentions of the various time travellers are revealed, two camps fighting for supremacy emerge. And one of the most pressing questions established at this juncture is: Who will win this epic battle? Needless to say, this is not a puzzle, but a future-oriented suspense question, bringing *Dark*'s second season close to the dramatic structure of *Westworld*'s first.

Conclusion: Opportunities and Pitfalls for Puzzle Plots in TV Serials

What are the requirements and pitfalls for puzzle plots in TV serials? One feature film and two TV serials are too limited a sample to authorise any universal claims. Nevertheless, some of my findings may also hold for a larger range of oeuvres. I will, therefore, conclude with some general remarks that further research may either confirm or disprove.

Given that disorientation, confusion, and a lack of knowledge are constitutive of the puzzle effect, the biggest challenge to its viability in TV serials is the extra-long running time. Both *Westworld* and *Dark* prevent audience frustration by providing partial resolutions before the end of the season and by establishing supplementary attractions of a more classical and easy-to-grasp nature, such as future-oriented and focused suspense-questions or entertaining intrigues and

machinations involving an array of protagonists. The continual alternation between plotlines and main characters – a trademark of contemporary TV serials – facilitates such a strategy and even allows for the establishment of multiple enigmas. The challenge then shifts to meaningfully correlating the diverse elements and convincingly orchestrating the disclosure of their connections. Concerning the season's ending, two options prevail: Either the enigmas are resolved and a new set of questions are established in the following season; and in this case new reasons for mystifying the circumstances and withholding explanations have to be found. Or the riddles are only partially resolved, leaving viewers in the dark about a number of pertinent questions, in which case the partial solutions still need to justify the cognitive effort invested. Indeed, expectations of the (deferred) solutions will grow accordingly, and with them the risk of disappointment – as the case of *Lost* (2004–2010, ABC, J.J. Abrams, Damon Lindelof, Jeffrey Lieber) has graphically demonstrated. To deliberately leave a whole series of puzzling questions altogether unanswered, as unresolved puzzle films do, does not seem a viable option for the final season of a TV serial.

Embedded in a larger structure, puzzle elements can, it seems, play an important role in TV serials, as the examples of *Dark* and *Westworld's* first season testify. However, reactions to *Westworld's* second season¹¹ remind us that spectators' capacities to unravel convoluted plotlines have their limits, and the final revelation of what really happened may only satisfy if the entanglements do not appear overly construed. Accordingly, puzzle plots in TV serials will likely remain a niche phenomenon, but for shows addressing metaphysical conundrums such as the nature of our universe, human identity, or free will, a narrative mode that evades easy comprehension may well prove rewarding.

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¹¹ According to Nielsen ratings, linear audience dropped 16 percent compared to the average for the first season (cf. Wittmer, 2018), and the audience score on the review-aggregation website rottentomatoes.com dropped from 92 to 74 – though the critics' score only slightly diminished.

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Puzzle Plots in TV-Series: The Challenges for Enigma-driven Storytelling in Long-running Formats

The article conducts a comparative analysis of a feature film (*Open your Eyes*) and two TV serials (*Westworld* and *Dark*) in order to find out how well the narrative complexity characteristic of puzzle plots may work in long-running formats. Given the core constituents of the puzzle effect – disorientation, confusion, and lack of knowledge – the biggest challenge for its viability in a TV serial is the extra-long running time. Both *Westworld* and *Dark* prevent audience frustration by already providing partial resolutions before the season ends, and by establishing supplementary attractions of a more classical and easy-to-grasp nature, such as future-oriented suspense-questions, or entertaining intrigues and machinations involving the whole cast of protagonists. Even in the larger structure of the TV serial, puzzle elements may, then, play an important role. However, spectators' capacities to unravel convoluted plotlines have their limits, and the final revelation of what really happened may only satisfy if the entanglements are not overly construed. Due to these high demands, puzzle plots in TV serials will likely remain a niche phenomenon.

Keywords: puzzle plot; narrative complexity; TV serial; dramatic questions; cognitive effort; disorientation; multiple enigmas; false lead; final twist