

**Toward a metafictional aesthetic in the Netflix television series, *You*: ambiguity, genre and spectatorship.**

by

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

**Master of Arts (English)**

in the

**Department of English**

at the

**University of Pretoria**

**Faculty of Humanities**

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November 2022

## **Declaration**

I hereby declare that

**Toward a metafictional aesthetic in the Netflix television series, *You*: ambiguity, genre and spectatorship**

is my own work and that all sources used have been acknowledged by means of complete references

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## Abstract

My research study provides a critical analysis of the Netflix series *You* (2018) and seeks to provide an answer as to why the show and its protagonist engenders paradoxical interpretations that alternate between two diametrically opposed genres, namely: romance and thriller. I approach this consideration of the series' dualism by first placing Joe Goldberg in the context of the anti-hero tradition. By outlining Tom Pollard's explanation of the decline of modernist heroes, who embody the Weberian ideal of 'great men' to increasingly postmodern heroes, who embody moral ambiguity, corruption and defeat (Pollard, 2000), I indicate the necessity of analysing Joe in terms of the postmodern ethos. After establishing Joe as a postmodern hero, I move beyond the characteristics of the protagonist to consider the narrative and the *way* in which the narrative is represented. By analysing the formal elements of cinematic narration implemented in the series' audio-visual display, I expose the series' subversive treatment of genre as a crucial factor that feeds the existent paradox of describing or interpreting the series as both thriller and romance, and Joe as both hero and villain. I propose that the series' conflation of genre engenders an awareness of form, specifically that of the romance formula. I therefore suggest that the series be treated as, what Linda Hutcheon terms, a 'narcissistic text' (Hutcheon, 1980). By combining Hutcheon's theory regarding the narcissistic text (Hutcheon, 1980) and David Bordwell's work on cinematic narration's inferential model (Bordwell, 2008), I illustrate how the viewers' understanding of both the narrative and Joe is ultimately manipulated. My work on the series' conflation of genre coupled with an understanding of the series' narcissistic narrative identity supports my argument that the paradoxical interpretations found in both journalists' and fans' deliberation about the series result from the contestation between thriller and romance constituents within the cinematic narration, as well as the deliberate manipulation of the viewers' inference through the awareness of form, that is the [awareness](#) of the romance formula. My research study concludes that the answer to the question regarding the conflicting dualism surrounding the series' narrative and protagonist stems from a complicated amalgamation between three crucial components: the postmodern hero, the subversion of genre and narcissistic tendencies. In addition, my analysis of the series' subversive and narcissistic treatment of genre exposes a meta-dimension functioning in the series *You* that ultimately places the onus of interpretation on the viewers.

Key words: *You*, postmodern hero, anti-hero, genre, cinematic narration, narcissistic tendencies, metafiction, inferential model, viewers, romance formula.

## Introduction

The series *You*, based on Caroline Kepnes's thriller novel *You* published in 2014, centres on the life of a seemingly simple bookstore manager Joe Goldberg. As in the novel, the series is guided by Joe's narration and the viewer is quickly drawn into a narrative that, at first, seems to unfold along the lines of Hollywood's generic 'boy meets girl' romances. However, this initial expectation of the classic 'boy meets girl' romance soon morphs into something more akin to the thriller genre as Joe's idealized and consequently warped perspective of love soon leads to various nightmarish escapades. The show has garnered a massive viewership of over 40 million viewers after its debut on Netflix in 2018 (Yahr, 2019). According to Dade Hayes (2020), season two garnered an even bigger viewership of 54 million viewers. Penn Badgley, who plays Joe Goldberg, was nominated for *Best Villain MTV Movie and TV Awards* (2019) and the series' second season won ReFrame's category for *Top 100 Popular Television* (IMDb, 2019). The show continued to rank high on online sources' 'must watch' categories as Nielsen TV ratings disclosed that *You* ranked among the top ten most-watched series from December 2019 to December 2020 (Clark, 2021). The third season premiered in October 2021 and was met with a largely positive response from online columnists commending the series' upkeep in thrills and suspense. The fourth season is scheduled for release on February 10, 2023, with viewers already anticipating Joe's new obsession (Hepburn, 2022).

The major plot line that runs throughout the series is Joe's seemingly unavoidable idealisation of love and his consequent obsession with particular women whom he encounters. In season one Joe obsesses over Guinevere Beck, in season two Joe obsesses over Love Quinn, and in season three we see Joe obsessing over his neighbour Natalie Engler. Throughout all three seasons Joe's toxic infatuation invites increasingly transgressive behaviour as he stalks, kidnaps and murders in an attempt to actualise these relationships. This pattern that recurs throughout each season reveals the coupled unfolding of the romance and thriller genres. This dynamic that underpins the overarching narrative of *You* is particularly important as I identify it as one of the crucial components to understanding Joe and the viewer's perception of him. While I do make a few references to the subsequent seasons, my analysis of the series is largely focused on season one. For I believe it is important to pay particular attention to how the first season successfully establishes this unique type of representation at work in *You*. I therefore made the deliberate choice to omit the second and third seasons for the mere scope permitted in this research project; I also intentionally narrowed my focus in order to fully analyse the

nuanced structure of representation functioning in season one, as opposed to providing a more generalised approach to all three seasons' representation taken as a whole. Having said that, I do believe that the paradigm I identify in season one is discernible in the overall series; however, there are slight differences that would need to be considered.

Since the series' release in 2018, there has been a continued controversy surrounding journalists' and fans' perception of Joe and the overall narrative. The recurring debate seems to revolve around Joe's ability, as an anti-hero, to function in both roles of hero and villain. As a result, there are paradoxical interpretations of Joe that alternate between descriptions of the 'perfect boyfriend' (Nicholson, 2020), to a 'psychopath' (Donaghy, 2019). With this controversy in mind, my research study aims to unravel the possible factors, especially in terms of representation, that contribute to this phenomenon. My research study therefore provides a critical analysis of Joe in the Netflix series *You* (2018) and seeks to propose a new model of analysis through which to gauge our understanding of Joe as a protagonist that forms part of the anti-hero tradition. For the anti-hero tradition in contemporary American television is only recently gaining momentum (Parunov, 2017: 107) and with this growing proliferation comes the consequent evolution of the anti-hero. As a result, it becomes increasingly important to continually analyse anti-heroes, like Joe, who make it to the top of the ranks – movies and TV shows rated as most popular by review-aggregation websites like IMDb, Rotten Tomatoes, Metacritic, Screenrant etc. It is of critical significance to note what liminal beings (operating on the dividing line between hero and villain) are awarded with the critic's prescriptive 'what to watch' and coveted acclaim of being 'binge-worthy', since these particular protagonists are an ever-changing breed.

To date, there has been academic work published on the series. The article 'Stalking and Other Forms of Dating Violence: Lessons Learned from *You* in Relation to Cyber Safety' (2020) by Ritesh Chugh and Marika Guggisberg identifies examples of erotic stalking, dating violence, and cyber safety awareness in *You*'s narrative and uses these examples as an educational tool with which to address the importance of raising awareness regarding online safety and security. Carlisle Lynch considers fans' representation of Joe through memes, exploring how social media platforms like Twitter and TikTok allow fans to 'skew the audience's perception of a serial killer' (Lynch, 2020:3). In 'The Forgotten Victims of Sexual Violence in Film, Television and New Media' (2022), Alexandria Petit-Thorne discusses the #MeToo narrative in the series' second season and analyses how it affects Delilah Alves, Joe's neighbour and

landlord, as a character to be either continuously abused or saved by white characters. Jake Pitre, in the publication ‘He is a Murderer’ (2022), compares Joe to other contemporary television serial killers like Dr. Hannibal Lecter and discusses American culture in an attempt to unpack some of the themes at work in *You*. Pitre places the series *You* in a post 9/11 context and addresses how Joe’s ‘digital voyeur tactics’ feed into ‘anxieties many Americans feel about the country’s status as a surveillance state,’ (Pitre, 2022: Pitre, 2022: 91). In addition, Pitre also considers Joe in line with what he refers to as the ‘serial killer genre’ (Pitre, 2022: 93) and questions *You*’s fandom by referencing the intention of the creators and the fans’ possible misinterpretation through moral disengagement. In terms of the scholarly research around *You*, I hope to add to the consideration of the series by focusing on the intersections between Joe as protagonist, cinematic narration, meta-fiction and spectatorship as I believe this specific paradigm is underexplored in the existing literature. There is a plethora of work published on the type of protagonist that Joe exemplifies, namely the anti-hero. In literature, for example, Colin Wilson discusses the ‘outsider’ and identifies several characters from fiction, such as Antoine Roquentin from Jean-Paul Sartre’s existential novel *Nausea* (1938), as individuals who feel to some extent ostracized or excluded from society and explores the affect that this type of dislocation has on the human psyche. (Bradbury & McFarlane, 1978) In a similar vein, David Simmons, in *The Anti-Hero in the American Novel* (2008), discusses the anti-heroic figure in literature by analysing ‘outlaw’ protagonists from prominent texts that formed part of the counterculture during the 1960s. The anti-hero, in Simmons’ words, is ‘an ever-evolving form’ (Simmons, 2008:ix); unlike the traditional hero, the figure of the anti-hero can never be fixed to an ultimate exegesis, since the anti-hero operates within the liminal space between good and evil.

It is important to note that the aforementioned publications pertain to literary works. Although these publications on the anti-hero are helpful in terms of understanding the history of this particular figure in literature, my research will be predominantly focus on the anti-hero figure in a different medium – television. In terms of the anti-hero figure in television, there is an abundance of noteworthy work on villainous protagonists from popular television series such

as Dexter Morgan (*Dexter*, 2006)<sup>1</sup>, Walter White (*Breaking Bad*, 2008)<sup>2</sup>, and Jimmy McGill (*Better Call Saul*, 2015).<sup>3</sup> It is significant to note that in publications pertaining to the anti-hero, in both literature and film, there is an identifiable theme of the anti-hero representing the antithesis of a particular social norm. For example, in a publication titled *Theorising the Popular* (2017), Pavao Parunov considers the protagonist Walter White from the series *Breaking Bad* (2008) in the role of anti-hero and attempts to explain the anti-hero in relation to gender discourse, particularly that of mythic masculinity. At the heart of Parunov's study lies the concept of the anti-hero as a figure who exists to question and oppose 'established normative frameworks' (Parunov, 2017:107). In another study by Tom Pollard titled 'Postmodern Cinema and the Death of the Hero' (2000), one can find the same thematization of anti-thesis through Pollard's explanation of the anti-hero, or rather postmodern hero, as a figure that essentially critiques social institutions. Pollard describes the postmodern heroes as 'social misfits, outcasts, grifters, and losers, characters who usually end up blocked if not destroyed by the powerful forces arrayed against them.' (Pollard, 2000:42) The article 'The (Anti-)Hero with a Thousand Faces: Reconstructing Villainy in The Sopranos, Breaking Bad, and Better Call Saul' (2021), by Siobhan Lyons, also explains and analyses the anti-hero as a morally ambiguous character who challenges the 'hypocrisies of formally legitimate institutions' (Lyons, 2021:226). Margaret Tally shares the same approach when discussing the rise of anti-heroines in *The Rise of the Anti-Heroine in TV's Third Golden Age* (2016), designating the anti-heroine as a protagonist who is more complex and morally flawed, therefore subverting 'traditionally acceptable feminine behaviour' (Tally, 2016:22). Magrethe Bruun Vaage discusses the increasing popularity of the anti-hero in American drama television series in *The Antihero in American Television* (2016). Vaage pays particular attention to the issue of morality and questions the 'moral psychology of fiction' as well as our own morality in relation to 'bad' main characters. Vaage argues that the antiheroes simultaneously 'deactivate rational, deliberate moral evaluation' while stimulating 'reactivation of deliberate, moral evaluation' (Vaage, 2016: preface).

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<sup>1</sup> *The New American Hero: Dexter, Serial Killer of the Masses* by Ashley M. Donnelly (2012)

<sup>2</sup> *Storytelling in the Media Convergence Age: Exploring Screen Narratives* by Jason Mittell (2015)

<sup>3</sup> *The (Anti-)Hero with a Thousand Faces: Reconstructing Villainy in The Sopranos, Breaking Bad, and Better Call Saul* by Siobhan Lyons (2021)

It is evident that the bulk of the discussions around the anti-hero figure tend toward a socio-historical focus, which places great emphasis on the characterisation of this protagonist alongside social issues that the particular anti-hero in question either stands to oppose directly or criticise in an oblique manner. My research, unlike the aforementioned publications, will not be focused on what the anti-hero stands to oppose in terms of a socio-political context, nor on the matter of ethics and morality. In short, my research's focus is not one that pertains to discussing the anti-hero in terms of marking some anti-thesis in relation to social issues. Drawing from the disciplines of postmodern literary theory and film studies, I aim to combine concepts of metafiction and cinematic inference in order to produce a new model for analysing television narrative that opens up a different way of understanding the contemporary anti / postmodern hero. This new model or aesthetic that I aim to identify and explain through the scope of this research project will shift the focus away from morality towards representation. Although I incorporate and support Pollard's perspective of the postmodern hero, my research will deviate from his work in a markedly different approach by way of focusing on stylistic and narrative elements of cinematic narration and representation, as opposed to solely discussing the postmodern hero complex through a socio-political lens.

Having said that, my analysis of *You* will incorporate both of Pollard's articles as I intend to show that the type of anti-hero we have represented in the series *You* is what Pollard refers to in both articles as the 'postmodern-hero' (Pollard, 2000:40). In 'Postmodern Cinema and the Death of the Hero' (2000), Pollard provides a detailed timeline of the anti-hero starting from the 1940s to the late 1990s. He tracks the trajectory of the anti-heroic figure in American cinema and notes a crucial difference between the modernist hero and the rise of the postmodern hero. Similar to Simmons, Pollard's article is focused on both the history and the characterisation of the anti-heroic figure. However, for the purpose of my own research, Pollard's work is more significant as he considers the anti-hero, or more specifically the postmodern hero, in relation to cinema. My research takes a significant cue from Pollard's distinction between the modernist hero and the postmodern hero, for my analysis of the series *You* will lend additional support to the necessity of distinguishing the anti-hero as postmodern hero by validating the criteria that Pollard outlines for the postmodern hero in the series *You*.

As I mentioned above, my investigation of the postmodern hero and cinematic narration stems from the controversy of opinions and heated online debates concerning Joe's ability, as an anti-hero, to function in both roles of hero and villain. The result is a confusing paradox where

reviewers simultaneously describe Joe as a chivalric hero and psychotic, murderous stalker; likewise, the narrative is explained with conflicting references to both the thriller and romance genres. My research therefore begins with a discussion regarding the anti-hero as I explain how this particular protagonist allows for such dichotomy. By identifying Joe as one such protagonist, I tie the anti-hero tradition into the postmodern context by using Pollard's work on the postmodern hero and consequently establish Joe as a postmodern hero and the narrative as evincing postmodern concerns. This line of discussion progresses into the consideration of cinematic narration for I argue that the audio-visual representation of both the narrative and Joe serves as an equally important component to ascertaining the reasons behind the series' paradoxical exegesis. With my analysis of *You*'s cinematic narration, I intend to demonstrate the consequent effects on the viewer's understanding, and shaping, of both the postmodern hero and the narrative. The focus that my research brings to the question of cinematic narration and representation will help to demonstrate that the postmodern hero is not only defined by characterisation and plot, but that the postmodern hero is significantly shaped by the representational vehicle that is cinematic narration.

This particular approach that my research brings to the discussion of the postmodern hero, analysed in terms of cinematic narration, will be principally informed by David Bordwell's theory of cinematic narration as an inferential model. In Bordwell's publication titled 'Poetics of Cinema' (2008), he proposes that we consider the poetics of film narrative as a mentalistic process; that '[we] ought to assume that a film cues spectators to execute operations, and one central goal of these operations is to comprehend the story' (Bordwell, 2008:118). If we consider cinematic narration as a model of inferential narration, meaning that the viewer processes representation (narration) through a model of cued conjecture, then we have to ask how these cued inferences lead or guide our understanding of the postmodern hero. Identifying Joe as a postmodern hero is the first step towards identifying the type of aesthetic functioning in *You*, however, my analysis of the representation and its effect on spectatorship is what truly constitutes a new model of analysis through which to read *You*. For the overarching purpose of this research study is to determine the type of representation at work in *You* in order to illustrate how the series' inferential model cues the viewer to 'comprehend the story', and by extent, how the viewer is cued to comprehend Joe. This focus on representation, as opposed to the question of morality, is what I argue provides a new way of understanding the controversy surrounding the series *You* and by extent Joe.

My analysis of the series' narrative identity (cinematic narration) will lead into a deliberation of meta-fiction as I argue that the type of representation in *You* is one that demonstrates self-awareness of form. Linda Hutcheon provides a detailed study of meta-fiction in *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (1980), investigating in particular the relationship between meta-fiction and the novel as mimetic genre. However, as Hutcheon states in her introduction, the phenomenon of meta-fiction far surpasses literature and exceeds postmodernism itself. Meta-fiction involves all forms of representation, for representation itself is an 'illusion'; thus, it calls into question its own artifice (Hutcheon, 1980:17).

In order to demonstrate the form of cinematic narration I have identified in *You*, I will borrow Hutcheon's vocabulary of meta-fiction to identify *You* as a 'narcissistic narrative' – fiction that 'includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/ or linguistic identity' (Hutcheon, 1980:1). It is perhaps important to point out that self-reflexivity, or awareness of form, is not necessarily a new advent in culture. However, in the context cinematic narration and the postmodern hero in film, self-reflexivity as a narrative structure is developing in new and noteworthy ways. Using Hutcheon's comprehensive work on meta-fiction alongside Bordwell's theory of the inferential model, I intend to demonstrate how the series understood as a 'narcissistic text' actively manipulates the viewer's understanding of the narrative and Joe through the use of self-reflexive tendencies operating in the inferential model. My analysis will therefore include an in-depth discussion of *You*'s cinematic narration to determine how the cinematic narrator – a system of audio-visual devices – interacts with meta-fiction on various levels and in varying degrees.

By exposing the relationship between the series' narcissistic tendencies and the inferential model, my research will show how representation consequently facilitates the paradoxical interpretations that oscillate between those categories of thriller and romance, villain and hero. My findings, related to this crucial correlation between representation and metafiction, will reveal a type of 'reimagining' of the postmodern hero, that I will argue, is most conspicuous in the very form of *You*'s cinematic narration; that is in the representation of the postmodern hero. Therefore, the overarching goal of this research project is to explicate the functioning of the hybridity of genre and meta-fiction in *You*, and to further designate these components as the series' 'creative response' that fuels the contrariety of journalists' and fans' interpretations of both Joe and the narrative. In short, I aim to demonstrate the controversiality surrounding *You* as a direct consequence of representation that marks the reimagining of Hollywood conventions

as well as the significance attributed to an increasingly active spectatorship.

## Chapters Outline

In the first chapter of this research project, I present the conflicting interpretations that exist in published reviews as well as fans' comments about the series *You*. My focus of this chapter is aimed at exploring the possible constituents that lead to such paradoxical descriptions and starts with the identification of Joe as a protagonist who forms part of the anti-hero tradition. After establishing Joe as an anti-hero, I incorporate and adopt Pollard's vocabulary of the postmodern hero as I argue that this term evinces the postmodern ethos that underpins new television and the anti-hero complex.

I provide Pollard's outline of the crucial differences to note between the modernist and postmodern hero in order to clearly demonstrate the characteristics of the postmodern hero and what exactly they stand to oppose or subvert in terms of their predecessor – the modern hero. A discussion of the distinction to be made between the modern and postmodern hero is necessary as the postmodern hero gradually came to replace the modernist hero: the morally upstanding, modern heroes with happy endings transformed into increasingly flawed, postmodern heroes seen in films like *Taxi Driver* (1976), *The Grifters* (1991) and *Thelma & Louise* (1991). After distinguishing the modern hero from the postmodern hero, I will discuss characterisation as well as thematic trends in the postmodern hero's narrative and identify these constituents in the series *You* and confirm that Joe, understood as a postmodern hero, stands to function as one of the crucial components that feed the reviewers' and viewers' dichotomous interpretations of Joe as either/ both hero or/ and villain.

In addition to identifying the postmodern hero's characterisation and themes in *You*, I also explore what Carl Boggs and Pollard refers to as postmodern cinema's 'creative response' (Boggs & Pollard, 2001:165) in terms of the series' unique cinematic narration. The second half of chapter one is therefore dedicated to explaining the series' 'creative response' as a subversion of cinematic formulas through the conflation of the thriller and romance genres. This analysis will start with a definition of genre and move on to a detailed examination of both the romance and thriller genres at work in *You*. By taking a closer look at the series' conflation of genre, I will begin to articulate the ways in which the contemporary postmodern hero functions in terms of an increasingly self-reflexive narration. With this foundation, I propose

that *You* should be treated as a narcissistic text. Chapter one concludes that the series' conflation of genre leads to a preoccupation with form, or process, that ultimately manipulates the viewer's expectation of genre and the type of protagonist associated therewith; this phenomenon is an effect of the postmodern ethos wound into the postmodern hero's narrative and functions as the second component that engenders the difficulty in ascribing the narrative to either the thriller or romance genres respectively.

The aim of the second chapter is to determine how self-reflexive tendencies operate in the cinematic narration of *You* and to confirm this self-awareness of form as the final, and perhaps most potent, contributing component that underpins the conflicting interpretations of the series. To start this line of analysis, I put forth Bordwell's considerations of filmic narration and Hutcheon's research on meta-fiction as the two central concepts with which to approach the self-reflexive tendencies in *You*. The second chapter is thus largely focused on examining the interplay between meta-fiction and cinematic narration of the Netflix series *You*.

Because the focus of this chapter is largely based on analysing cinematic narration, I first establish the key differences between cinematic narration and literary narration, and how the former should be treated or considered in terms of critical analysis. I provide a detailed discussion of Bordwell's theory of filmic narration as a model of inference (a system of audio-visual components) that consequently cue the viewer to infer meaning from the given representation of the narrative. When describing cinematic narration as a model of inference, I (like Bordwell) posit narrative and stylistic elements as the filmic narrative parameters by which to mark and analyse the internalisation of the romance formula. Here, I start to present Hutcheon's theory of narcissistic texts to explain how it pertains to the narration of *You*. In order to argue for the workings of self-reflexive tendencies within the series' cinematic narration, I analyse specific narrative components within the inferential model to demonstrate when and how the narration elicits a deliberate focus on the romance formula. In addition to examining the inferential model's manipulation of the romance formula, I also identify *mise en abyme*<sup>4</sup> as another noteworthy instance of meta-fiction embedded within the series' cinematic narration.

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<sup>4</sup> French novelist André Gide inaugurated the literary use of the heraldic term *mise en abyme* that refers to the self-reflexive technique whereby an image contains a copy of itself. ([Snow, 2016: 21](#))

The second chapter concludes with my findings that the series *You* functions as a narcissistic text that ties into the postmodern hero's narrative. I end my consideration of the inferential model and meta-fiction by arguing that the self-awareness of form and process allows for a new avenue of thought in the postmodern hero's trajectory in film/ television. That is the series *You*, that exercises narcissistic tendencies in terms of cinematic narration, deepens the already dichotomous complex of this protagonist by shifting the focus on a fissured characterisation of flawed characters to a representation that further mimics and exploits the conflict of generic/ formulaic categorisation.

## Chapter 1: Murderous Romantic – The Issue of Interpretation

Much of the controversy surrounding the Netflix hit series *You*, stems from the fact that Joe, the series' protagonist, is at once the hero and the villain of the narrative. In the following chapter, I will analyse this very dynamic through the series' internalisation of two opposing genres namely the romance and thriller. I believe this congruent development of the romance and thriller is intentional as Sera Gamble, one of the series' producers, acknowledged their deliberate attempt to include both genres: 'We felt it had to be a love story and a horror movie in every single scene' (Deadline Hollywood, 2019). Although the conflation of genre was a deliberate choice made by the producers, they offer little to no explanation as to how this form of representation is made to function in the series and how it ultimately problematizes the viewers' understanding of Joe and the overall narrative. They refer to this stylistic choice in a fairly oblique manner noting that it was an 'interesting experiment' (Deadline Hollywood, 2019) without describing its significant influence on Joe as a postmodern hero, representation and spectatorship. This chapter is, therefore, in part a response to Gamble's comment about the conflation of genre as I seek to dismantle the effect of this on the aforementioned components respectively: in terms of representation and the postmodern hero, I aim to demonstrate how the postmodern hero's ambiguity is taken up and represented by the contesting genres; in terms of spectatorship, my analysis will help demonstrate that the viewers' interpretation of Joe and the overall narrative is significantly influenced by representation itself as the romance and thriller genres work to realign their perception and expectation of genre. The predominant focus of this chapter is to identify the conflation of genre as one of the contributing factors that fuel the controversy surrounding *You*, as well as to put forward a metafictional aesthetic through which to understand the postmodern hero as I hope to reveal that the conflation of genre necessitates a focus on representation as opposed to the narrative itself.

The polarity in the narrative that producers Sera Gamble and Greg Berlanti refer to (Deadline Hollywood, 2019) is manifest in published reviews of the series as well as the fans' exceedingly positive perspective of Joe. While fans demonstrate their infatuation with, and veneration of Joe, critics are finding fault with *You*'s fandom and reprove the profusion of tweets and memes romanticizing a serial killer. For example, in the article 'Penn Badgley: Please stop asking me to stalk you' (2019) Tiffany Kelly, a culture editor at Daily Dot, draws the conclusion that Joe is a 'murderer as well as a manipulative creep,' while pointing out that 'fans of the show think

otherwise' (Kelly, 2019). By referring to several tweets, which advocate Joe's behaviour, Kelly indicates that these responses are 'troubling to read' (Kelly, 2019). The actor Penn Badgley, who plays Joe, responded to some of the tweets in a similarly cynical manner by pointing out that Joe is a murderer, rejecting some fans' claims of wanting Joe to kidnap or stalk them. Whether or not these comments/ tweets are earnest or meant in jest, the fact remains – as the columnists rightly observed – the viewers demonstrate a largely supportive and sympathetic sentiment toward Joe.

As a result, there seems to be a disconnect between the reviewers' understanding of the series as thriller and Joe as a murderer, and the viewers' understanding of the series as romance and Joe as the perfect boyfriend. The discrepancy is also evident in reviewers' description of the series as some reviews clearly delineate Joe as a morally corrupt murderer/ stalker while others shy away from such villainous portraits by referring to Joe in a less disdainful manner. For example, Rebecca Nicholson labels the series as a 'tasteless stalker thriller' and describes Joe as having 'murderous desires' (Nicholson, 2021). Likewise, the *IndianExpress* casts Joe as an obvious villain by defining him as a 'sly murderous stalker' (IndianExpress, 2021). Whereas other reviewers like Judy Berman describes the series as a 'romantic-thriller'; and the language Berman uses in the article draws more heavily on the romance genre. Unlike Nicholson, Berman describes Joe as a 'hopeless romantic' who would go to any length in the quest for his 'happily-ever-after' (Berman, 2019). Considering the polarity that is clearly evident in reviewers' descriptions of the series as well as fans' opinion of Joe as the perfect boyfriend, as opposed to a stalker/ murderer, I am lead to question the uncertainty that underscores it all: what is it about the series *You* that causes this conflict of interpretation?

In this chapter, I approach this disconnect pertaining to interpreting Joe as either hero or villain, or understanding the narrative as either romance or thriller, by first identifying two converging issues: the series' protagonist is an anti-hero, who I will specifically refer to as a postmodern hero; the dichotomy that the postmodern hero creates, operating an ambiguous line between hero and villain, is further complicated by the series' implementation of two conflicting genres, that being the thriller and romance genres. I will attempt to demonstrate how these issues converge by beginning at the problematic intersection between hero and villain – the postmodern hero. In order for me to substantiate the classification of Joe as a postmodern hero, I will draw on Pollard's distinction between the modern and postmodern hero; the former representing the archetypical hero, the 'Weberian hero' or 'great men' (Pollard, 2000:42), and

the latter representing a particular kind of anti-hero, which marks the postmodern abandonment of those ideals. According to Pollard the distinction between the modern and postmodern heroes is vital as they are two types of protagonists distinct in their motivations, morality and resolve. Ultimately, the distinction lies in the cultural milieu of modernity and postmodernity, which shape the protagonists' characterization. It is therefore erroneous to group these two protagonists under the same banner as they stem from different ideological contexts. This first section of the chapter will therefore be focused on the history of heroes in film and Pollard's subsequent classification of a new type of anti-hero that started to emerge on screen near the end of the 20th century, namely, postmodern heroes.

This discussion will provide some context around the decline of morally clear-cut protagonists who are triumphant against the challenges they face and explain the gradual transition into morally ambiguous and defeated protagonists who Pollard identifies as postmodern heroes. For me to identify Joe as a postmodern hero, it is important to first provide insight into the history behind this particular figure in film as it will help to better identify themes and characteristics within the series *You* that are closely associated with those in previous postmodern heroes' narratives. In addition, this line of analysis will begin to provide some substance as to why reviewers describe Joe as both a 'sly murderous stalker' (Indian Express, 2021) and a 'hopeless romantic' (Berman, 2019) as the ambiguity of the postmodern hero allows for this contradiction. It is for this reason that I specifically delineate Joe as a postmodern hero, as opposed to an anti-hero, as the term signifies specific themes and characteristics that I argue are not only discernible but prominent in *You*.

The second section of this chapter will address the issue of genre, as I believe it is the series' treatment of genre that further, and perhaps more significantly, complicates the delineation between hero and villain. For this dichotomy, which the postmodern hero represents, is further underpinned by two Hollywood conventions of genre, namely the thriller and romance genres. I will demonstrate how *You* offers a unique amalgamation of both the thriller and romance genres that further dilutes the delineation between the hero and villain protagonists, as the romance formula evokes the hero and the thriller by contrast evokes the villain. The second half of this chapter therefore aims to uncover the deeper structures of genre embedded in the both the series' narrative and representation that consequently problematizes the viewers' understanding of Joe as either hero or villain, and the narrative as either romance or thriller. With this analysis of the romance and thriller dynamic, I aim to demonstrate that the viewers'

understanding of Joe is not only shaped by his characterization but by the representation that works to realign Joe with different genres (romance/thriller) and by extent different protagonists (hero/villain).

### **From ‘Great Men’ to Flawed Men: Differentiating the Modern and Postmodern heroes**

By reading online reviews about the series *You* it is evident that Joe presents a paradox as he is often described in contradictory terms: on the one hand reviewers identify Joe as ‘a hopeless romantic’ (Berman, 2019), the ‘perfect boyfriend’ (Nicholson, 2020), and a ‘charming, handsome and diffident bookseller’ (Kaufman, 2021); on the other hand, Joe is typified as the so-called ‘perfect boyfriend’s’ exact opposite, namely: a ‘psychopathic ... murderous stalker’ (Lanigan, 2019), ‘an absolute monster’ (Kaufman, 2021), a ‘class-A nutjob’ (Baldwin, 2018). This particular type of protagonist, who is at once the ‘perfect boyfriend’ and the ‘murderous stalker’, is symptomatic of the anti-hero figure. Protagonists who demonstrate both heroic and villainous attributes have a long history in both literature and film. In literature, we can trace the anti-hero back to antiquity, in Greek tragedies like *Medea* (431 BC) where the female protagonist negates the valorous deeds of traditional ancient heroes like Heracles, Perseus or Osiris. More recently, in 1960s American Literature, we find the anti-hero reflecting the ‘counterculture’ movement in fictions like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1962), and *Cool Hand Luke* (1966) that explored the stories of individuals who, as Simmons explains in *The Anti-Hero in the American Novel: From Joseph Heller to Kurt Vonnegut* (2008), ‘opposed ... the ideological mores of the establishment’ (Simmons, 2008: xi).

In terms of television, Lyons explains that the new golden age of television, starting from the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, has collapsed ‘the conventional line between hero and villain’, consequently moving away from the formulaic ‘morally upstanding’ (Lyons, 2021:226) protagonists from late 20<sup>th</sup> century television to focus on ‘[...] characters embroiled in criminal activity and often morally reprehensible behaviour that extend to murder and abuse’ (Lyons, 2021:227). These protagonists who Lyons specifically refers to as anti-heroes problematize any clear categorization of good and evil. Lyons, much like Simmons, points to a fissured society when analysing *The Sopranos* (1999), *Breaking Bad* (2008) and *Better Call Saul* (2015) and explains that the anti-heroes in these narratives consequently mirror a corrupt and flawed governance:

But rather than painting these flawed characters as villains, these television shows emphasize the anti-hero complex of such characters, as well as the greater influence of a society marred by judicial, governmental, and penal corruption. These anti-heroes are often made so by the more villainous system that governs society, a system that penalizes certain felons while protecting other, more white-collar criminals (Lyons, 2021:227).

In the series *You*, we find this contempt of society through Joe's intense critique of social media platforms and the facade it enables people to carefully curate. Joe, exercising the anti-hero complex, is at once acutely aware of the problematic issues it engenders while simultaneously exploiting it for his own personal advantage. For example, in season 1 episode 5 'Living with the Enemy', Joe realises that although Beck's friend Annika's social media is aimed at promoting body positivity, her efforts to accept her curves are, as Joe puts it, 'clearly a rebellion against being, "Peach's fat friend from prep school"' (S1, E05). Joe sees an old picture of Annika and Peach and notices that Peach had a nose job. He purposefully encourages Annika to post the picture knowing full well that she will do so out of her thinly veiled resentment toward her so-called best friend. This simple example illustrates Joe acting on the already corrupt society by simply drawing out Annika's resentment, using her body positivity platform, which Joe recognizes as a charade, to undermine Peach.

By identifying Joe as one of these 'flawed characters' one can begin to understand why both reviewers and fans describe Joe in contradictory/ paradoxical terms, for the protagonist functions as an extension of their morally corrupt society and merely acts upon the dissolute climate that the larger political and social structures catalyse. Although it is helpful to understand Joe as an anti-hero, the term itself is exceptionally broad as it does not place the protagonists in any particular context aside from characters who, as the prefix 'anti' indicates, are subversive. As a result, the term anti-hero becomes quite flexible as critics use it to address different concepts. Lyons, for example, uses the term in specific relation to corrupt governance, equating the recent rise of the anti-hero to 9/11 and the disillusionment followed by the American government's involvement in the Iraq War (Lyons, 2021: 226). While other critics like Donnelly equate the anti-hero to characters who simply 'challenge our notions of right and wrong', noting that the anti-hero reflects Americans' fascination with the 'radical outsider' (Donnelly, 2012:16). Seeing as the term anti-hero is so widely used in distinct contexts, I would like to replace this seemingly heterogenous term with the term postmodern hero as I feel it more clearly delineates the type of protagonist that Joe embodies.

Pollard explains how the anti-hero ties into the postmodern context by marking the gradual degradation of the modernist hero who, according to Pollard, embodies the Weberian ideal. In reference to the German sociologist, Max Weber, Pollard typifies the charismatic leader, or Weberian hero, as: ‘ ... [A] figure that stands apart, endowed with the vital quality of charisma and in some cases even with superhuman powers. This hero seems akin to ... gifted individuals who exercise great personal or intellectual influence over others’ (Pollard, 2000:42). For Pollard, the modern narrative heroes exemplify the ideal of ‘great men’ and function as protagonists who never fail to defeat impossible odds and vanquish their enemies. However, these ‘great men’ who were born from the modernist ethos were gradually replaced on screen by a new type of protagonist, a protagonist who was equally shaped by the cultural milieu that came to displace modernism, that is postmodernism:

Today’s audiences increasingly encounter a very different category of heroes featured in films and television unknown in Morell’s era, yet the images projected by these media, as well as by fiction, poetry, and drama, reveal a flawed, doomed category of protagonists that I call “postmodern heroes” (Pollard, 2000:40).

Boggs and Pollard argue that cinema reflects ideological discourses of the time. For Pollard, the postmodern hero is a product of postmodern ethos and stems from its antecedent modernism. Pollard describes the modernist heroes as ‘self-reliant’ and ‘determined’, as protagonists who ‘achieve dramatic victories against overwhelming odds ...’ (Pollard, 2000:42). According to Boggs and Pollard, the modernist hero’s triumph over impossible odds is symbolic of modernity’s ‘... optimistic, forward-looking, rationalizing ethos ... [.]’ (Boggs & Pollard, 2001:161). Modern heroes like Alan Ladd in *The Proud Rebel* (1958) or Gary Cooper in *High Noon* (1952) embody the ‘heroic ideal’. Their unwavering will, steely resolution, near god-like feats and ‘coherent values’ (Boggs & Pollard, 2001:162) reflect the modernist zeitgeist. Postmodern heroes, on the other hand, are symptomatic of what both Boggs and Pollard describe as the postmodern shift:

Established ideological discourses, going back to the early phases of capitalist development, upheld an optimistic, transformative view of history inspired by visionary ideals and protagonists, while the backlash against modernity moved through a less certain, more ambiguous, increasingly dystopic understanding of historical process; the supposedly positive

consequences of modernity were thrown into question. Such sentiments came to permeate much of political and intellectual life in the US, and ultimately its cultural life as well (Boggs & Pollard, 2001:163).

Toward the 1960s modernist heroes grew less realistic in an increasingly fissured society. The gradual deterioration of modern ideals ushered in a new kind of hero who better reflected the angst of American counterculture. Pollard marks this gradual transition as having its origin with the appearance of thriller and noir heroes from the 1940s. Pollard describes the thriller heroes as passive individuals who do not act but are rather acted upon (Pollard, 2000:43). As a result, these protagonists (anti-heroes) find themselves in a world outside their control and so exhibit indecisiveness and passivity, a clear foil to the modern hero. Suddenly the modern hero who could, with their unwavering will, overcome nearly anything became subverted into protagonists who succumb to inevitable failure. For example, the noir hero, Charles Foster Kane, from *Citizen Kane* (1941) illustrates this sentiment of failure with an opening scene that depicts the protagonist's own death even before the narrative begins. The noir heroes are an extension of the thriller heroes in as far as the noir films are, as Pollard describes, an 'offshoot' of the thriller genre (Pollard, 2000:43).

Both these anti-heroes are doomed protagonists who are unable to overcome their challenges. However, Pollard makes the distinction that noir heroes are even more defeated than their thriller counterparts as they possess even less power over their particular challenges. This trend of pessimism, starting from the early 1940s, continues and intensifies in neo-noir films of the 1970s. Pollard cites *Chinatown* (1974), *Easy Rider* (1969) and *Taxi Driver* (1976) as films that exemplify the postmodern hero. The aforementioned films explore narratives reflecting a chaotic world that engenders grotesque and violent deeds, eventually culminating in what Pollard deems a thematic trend in postmodern cinema as 'the death of heroes' (Pollard, 2000:42).

Replacing the term anti-hero with postmodern hero, therefore, addresses the significant shift between these two historical periods: the term highlights the replacement of modernism's forward-thinking, optimistic view of society embodied in triumphant protagonists with a more realistic, complex view of society embodied in increasingly flawed protagonists, who more aptly reflect and critique contemporary social life. While I am aware of the fact that the society represented in *You* is not the same as that of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the series still offers a complex

view of society that essentially critiques certain social mores of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. By foregrounding a protagonist who does not embody the Weberian ideal of ‘great men’, and instead embodies ‘an intricate combination of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ features’ (Pollard, 2000:48), Joe serves to reflect and expose some of the social issues we face today. This ‘intricate combination’, which underpins the shift from modern to postmodern heroes, I argue is discernible in reviewers’ and fans’ descriptions of Joe as they often describe him in contradictory terms that in effect highlight his ‘good’ and evil features’ (Pollard, 2000:48).

### **Following and Being Followed: Identifying the Postmodern Ethos in *YOU***

Now that I have outlined the classification of the postmodern hero, and the differentiation to be made between modern and postmodern heroes, I can begin to demonstrate why Joe is most usefully viewed in terms of the postmodern hero. To successfully identify the postmodern ethos in *You*, I need to explain how the narrative Joe functions in is one mired by a sense of urban crisis and disillusionment. In an interview with Build Series (2018), Penn Badgley, who plays Joe, was questioned about Joe’s obsessive behaviour regarding his romantic relationships and responded that, ‘a lot of our pop-culture sets these sort of cultural standards and definitions of what love and relationships should be but the reality is that if you follow that logic too closely you may be disturbingly mirroring some of Joe’s behaviour’ (Build Series, 2018). In their article, ‘Stalking and Other Forms of Dating Violence: Lessons Learned from *You* in Relation to Cyber Safety’ (2020), Chugh and Guggisberg examine how Joe’s behaviour exhibits a phenomenon called cyberstalking which they define as ‘trawling through social media websites looking for personal information, tracking conversations and location, eavesdropping, video surveillance, phone calling, and GPS tracking’ (Chugh & Guggisberg, 2020:2).

Chugh and Guggisberg note that scrolling through someone’s relationship status, posts or location tags is non-threatening and does not constitute stalking in the legal sense, however, it still constitutes ‘obsessive relational pursuit behaviour’ (Chugh & Guggisberg, 2020:3). Kasey Chaulk and Tim Jones’ study of o-ORI (Online Obsessive Relational Intrusion) found that social media platforms like Facebook encourage obsessive relational intrusive behaviours among users (Chaulk & Jones, 2011). Shay Mitchell, who plays the role of Peach, in part defends Joe’s pursuit of Beck explaining that, at the start of the series, Joe adopts behaviour that is not uncommon for people on online platforms:

There's so many people now that are going online and falling in love with people that they've never met before and creating this idea of who this person is, you know? So, it's not like I can really blame Joe's character, I mean, at the beginning. You have to kind of give him credit because you're like yeah, I do know a lot of people that have an obsession with somebody they've never met before (Build Series, 2018).

In the same Build Series interview, Caroline Kepnes, the author of the novel *You*, was asked about the inspiration behind the novel. Kepnes responded in a similar vein as Badgley and Mitchell's response, citing social media culture and the invasive behaviour it invites:

I had come back to LA and suddenly everyone was following everyone and being followed and I always thought of that as such a negative thing and it's still strange to me that we still so giddily follow people. So, Joe was born in my imagination out of thinking about what that means for us (Kepnes, 2018).

I argue that the series' thematic exploration of cyberstalking engages a voyeuristic gaze that clearly ties into Boggs and Pollard's consideration of Postmodern cinema as a reflection of media culture and consumerism. Joe's behaviour starts off with seemingly benign behaviour like 'profile browsing', an activity that most social media users engage in, when he first enters Beck's name into his laptop. However, the behaviour intensifies and quickly lapses into stalking when Joe learns her address and spies on her from across the street. As the series progresses, it exposes the dangers of voyeuristic pleasure as Joe's initial benign 'profile browsing' escalates into an obsessive pursuit that results in violence and homicide. It is evident then that the series addresses dominant themes of popular consciousness like media culture and mass consumerism that consequently establishes certain 'standards and definitions' (Build Series, 2018), as Badgley rightly pointed out, that gradually shape the user/ consumer's, understanding of love and relationships. The series, therefore, illustrates a less optimistic view of social media and instead exposes the dark realities that exist in this culture of, to borrow Kepnes' words, 'following everyone and being followed' (Build Series, 2018).

The narrative of cyber stalking, women's exposure to the 'male gaze', which is aided by online platforms that facilitate a level of voyeurism through 'obsessive rational pursuit behaviour', is essentially a narrative of fear and pessimism aimed at the social institutions of media culture and mass consumerism. Joe, being the protagonist who symbolizes the pinnacle of this

phenomenon, is therefore similar to the postmodern heroes described by Pollard. Joe is therefore not unlike Travis Bickle, in *Taxi Driver* (1976). On the outset the two storylines seem to have little in common. Joe pursues a romantic relationship and goes to extreme and violent lengths to achieve it, while Bickle experiences an existential crisis working as a taxi driver in New York City. Looking at the narrative events alone, one would be hard-pressed to find similarities. However, closer examination of the underlying themes, and role of the ambiguous protagonists, operating as both hero and villain, exposes a vital link in terms of the postmodern context.

Joe, like Bickle, fails to embrace the society in which he finds himself. In his narration we hear Joe's blatant cynicism toward social media as he continually refers to it as deceptive, illusory and at odds with reality: 'Your online life isn't real; it's a collage. You paste this Beck up. This together, lovable, cute, bendy little creature. If anything the fact that you didn't share me with your followers only confirms we really connected' (S1, episode 1 *Pilot*). We see a similar type of cynicism with Bickle whose occupation exposes him to the city's abject poverty and crime. As Bickle drives around New York city he witnesses violent crimes, prostitution and drug abuse, gradually causing him to detest the urban decay in which he finds himself: 'All the animals come out at night ... sick, venal' (*Taxi Driver*, 1976).

Joe and Bickle are 'social outcasts' and their inability to endure the unfairness that they witness forces them into action. Joe's hostile world is that of deceit and a lack of heroic ideals like chivalry; whereas Bickle's is one of corruption, crime and a loss of morality strongly emphasized through child prostitution. Pollard equates postmodern heroes to the philosopher Thomas Hobbes' (1588-1679) prediction of humanity existing in the state of nature (before the existence of societies). (Pollard, 2000:42) According to Hobbes, humanity in the state of nature would exist in a sordid state of treachery and degradation, as a result the human condition would be 'poor, nasty, solitary and brutish'. (Big-Alabo, 2019:49) Both these protagonists suffer Hobbes' description of the human condition as one that is mired by fragmentation and chaos. Bickle and Joe try to navigate this pessimistic condition by obsessing over individuals through whom they attempt to actualise their own ideals. Bickle obsesses over a child prostitute named Iris and tries to save her from drug abuse and prostitution. Joe envisions himself the perfect boyfriend, the knight-errant of the chivalric love story, and makes it his mission to save Beck, who like Iris, did not ask to be saved. In this particular similarity between Joe and Bickle, there lies a crucial contradiction that is idiosyncratic of the postmodern hero. Although Joe

envisions himself the perfect boyfriend who will save Beck from ‘monsters’ like Benji and Peach, he himself maintains criminal behaviours like stalking, kidnapping and murder that perpetuate the unfairness and deceit he witnesses and critiques in his own society. This conflict of morality is also evident in Bickle as his attempt at rescuing Iris ends in carnage of multiple murders, leaving the viewers uncertain of the righteousness of his vigilantism when Bickle imitates even shooting himself.

Both Bickle and Joe’s obsessions are evidently rooted in disillusionment and consequent delusion, a reflection of postmodern concerns: insecurity, fear, ambiguity, pessimism – all symptomatic of ‘urban crisis’ and ‘collapse of universal ideologies’ (Boggs & Pollard, 2001:165). It is evident then that Joe’s narrative is similar to that of the postmodern heroes set out in Pollard’s example. It is a narrative that does not reflect that of the modern heroes as Joe’s journey does not follow the ‘positive, visionary, transformative side of Enlightenment ideology’; instead his journey, which pivots on this schematic of stalking and violence (consequently aided and necessitated through media culture), conforms to that of the postmodern hero as it ‘follows the path of [modernity’s] crisis and disillusion’ (Boggs & Pollard, 2001:165).

### **Hopeless Romantic or Psycho Stalker? The Conflation of Genre**

My reference to postmodern cinema’s disillusion is also applicable to television as Siobhan Lyons cites the same phenomenon giving rise to ‘new television’. Lyons explains that the ‘conventional line between hero and villain has collapsed’ (Lyons, 2021: 226) due to the sentiment of disillusion with contemporary society which is ‘marred by judicial, governmental and penal corruption’ (Lyons, 2021: 227). In addition to my analysis of the series’ alignment with postmodern cinema’s disillusion with and cynical treatment of social institutions, the narrative structures in *You* also work to subvert traditional Hollywood codes. The subversion of cinematic formulas, according to Boggs and Pollard, is a dominant motif in postmodern cinema. This subversive quality that Boggs and Pollard identify in postmodern cinema, is also discernible in contemporary television series as Lyons explains that the development of new television, starting from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, ushered in the rise of ‘in-depth, genre-defying shows’ (Lyons 2021: 227). As a result of the deterioration of cultural modernism, postmodern cinema is not only a condition of pessimism ‘attuned to indeterminate change and turbulence’ (Boggs & Pollard, 2001:164). The crisis of modernity allows postmodern cinema to function

as a ‘creative response to the essentially coherent, rationalized workings of a developed corporate order’ (Boggs & Pollard, 2001:165). According to Boggs and Pollard, postmodern cinema is relentless in its search for ‘new epistemological and aesthetic paradigms’ that inevitably develops ‘new ways of seeing the world’ (Boggs & Pollard, 2001: 165). Although Boggs and Pollard are specifically referencing postmodern cinema, I argue that the ‘creative response’ they identify is similarly true of new television as both these categories involve the subversion of formulaic narratives. In other words, viewers can expect equally experimental and subversive structures in new television series like *You* that breaks away from established styles, formulas or distinctions in narrative and representation.

The postmodern hero, shaped by the postmodern ethos, offers not only a critique of social institutions but also experimentation of established narrative and stylistic structures. The pessimism that we find in the postmodern hero’s narrative is often a critical tool that necessitates postmodernity’s ‘deep critical spirit’ (Boggs & Pollard, 2001:167). Boggs and Pollard describe this effect as the ‘creative response’ that consequently re-forges long-revered and hallow conventions in cinema (Boggs & Pollard, 2001:167). In the following section of this chapter I aim to apply Bogg’s and Pollard’s consideration of the ‘creative response’ to *You* through analysing the series’ unique combination and consequent subversion of two Hollywood formulas, namely the romance and thriller genres. For I believe this conflation of genre functions as a ‘creative response’ that engenders a metafictional aesthetic through which to read Joe.

I have previously stated that the controversy surrounding the series *You* stems from the fact that Joe functions as a postmodern hero. I propose that these dichotomous terms, in which Joe is described, are therefore a product of these complex’ protagonists (Pollard, 2000:48) who demonstrate the capacity for both good and evil. I submit this particular capacity of the postmodern hero as one of the contributing factors related to the conflicting descriptors of Joe as protagonist. However, in addition to this, I contend that the postmodern hero’s already ambiguous delineation between hero and villain is further complicated by the series’ conflation of the thriller and romance genres. I argue that the controversy is in part a response to the issue of representation itself as it is not only the moral ambiguity, in other words Joe’s characterization, that complicates the viewers’ understanding of Joe. The remainder of this chapter will, therefore, explicate the nuances of the conflation of genre as ‘creative response’ by foregrounding my argument that the contesting genres of romance and thriller plays an

equally significant role in influencing the viewers' expectation/ understanding of Joe, that consequently shifts the focus on morality to representation.

### **Romance and Thriller: Romance's Moral Fantasy and the Thriller's Transformation from 'Known' to 'Unknown'**

Before I demonstrate exactly how *You* combines and subverts the thriller and romance genres, it is important to understand what genre means in terms of film and how it affects the viewers' expectation of narrative. Christine Gledhill in *The Cinema Book* (1985) explains that in addition to the recognition of Film Studies as an academic discipline, came the consequent study of genres in popular cinema in the late 1960s (Neale, 1999: 8). Genre is a difficult concept to define exactly because of its widespread use in criticism of American cinema. In film, the descriptor 'genre' attempts to classify a set of identifiable characteristics inherent in both the structure and content of a film.

Theorists like Tom Ryall and Andrew Tudor make the case that genre is not only a set of features to be identified across a range of films (Neale, 1999: 14). They argue that genre is more complex than mere classification and that it involves, what Tudor specifically refers to as, "a common cultural consensus" (Neale, 1999: 15). This means that, according to Tudor, genres are not just made up of patterns in film, but that it is also informed by spectatorship. In other words, the audience's recognition of genre plays a vital role in establishing exactly what constitutes a genre. For that recognition, the act of intuitively classifying and therefore expecting certain events to occur in the narrative, is underpinned by a specific cultural convention:

[T]he crucial factors that distinguish a genre are not only characteristics inherent in the films themselves; they also depend on the particular culture with which we are operating. And unless there is a world consensus on the subject (which is an empirical question), there is no basis for assuming that a western will be received in the same way in every culture. The way in which the genre term is applied can quite conceivably vary from case to case. Genre notions—except in the case of arbitrary definition—are not critics' classifications made for special purposes; they are sets of cultural conventions. Genre is what we collectively believe it to be (Tudor, 1974: 135-8).

To discuss any one particular genre is difficult for not only is the classificatory nature of the term itself debated; there is also the ensuing argument of what exactly constitutes the genre in question. If the identification of genre in film is not as clear-cut as its classificatory function might suggest, then it would be reasonable to assume that the combination of genres is an even more complex endeavour. Various film and television review aggregators like Rotten Tomatoes, IMDb and Metacritic predominantly classify the series *You* under the thriller genre, and most of the sub-categorizations include: psychological thriller, crime TV and drama. However, the series contrastingly aligns, in part, with the romance genre, although it is not primarily classified as such. Upon closer inspection, one will find that most columnists' reviews include at least some oblique, if not patent, reference to the romance constituents within the series. Although the series is clearly classified as a thriller, critics as well as the show's producers, Sera Gamble and Greg Berlanti, are more inclined to describe the amorphous nature of the series, acknowledging that the series contains two contesting genres – suspense thriller and romance (Deadline Hollywood, 2019).

In *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* (1977) John G. Cawelti describes the romance formula as following, primarily, 'the development of a love relationship, usually between a man and a woman,' (Cawelti, 1977: 41). In season one, we follow the development of Joe and Beck's relationship; in season two, we move to a new relationship with a woman whose name hypostatizes the romance motif: Love. Both seasons clearly follow the development of a 'love relationship'. In addition to the fundamental development of a love relationship, is the intrinsic fantasy of 'the all-sufficiency of love' (Cawelti, 1977: 42). Throughout season one, Joe iterates actions and ideas embedded in this very fantasy. An example of this fantasy can be seen when Joe attempts to salvage his relationship with Beck. After a long break-up, Joe comes to the realization that he needs Beck back in his life: 'The right thing is to be with who you should be with, even if it's messy. You make it work because you know you belong together and I know we belong together,' (S1, E8).

The declaration of unwavering love, of a relationship destined to be and to succeed, echoes the fantasy of 'the all-sufficiency of love,' (Cawelti, 1977:42). Both Joe and Beck return to each other, willingly, because both believe their lives to be insufficient without the other. Furthermore, Cawelti explains that the 'moral fantasy of the romance is that of love triumphant and permanent, overcoming all obstacles and difficulties' (Cawelti, 1977: 41-2). This notion, or 'moral fantasy', is what drives Joe through the entire narrative. Joe truly believes that his

actions are based on the premise of ‘love triumphant’. In other words, he believes his actions are justified and necessary for the triumph of true love. We hear this conviction when Love confronts Joe about his true identity. Love asks him why he lied about his name and Joe thinks to himself: ‘So I could walk through fire for you. So I could slay dragons to stay near you,’ (S2, E2).

I argue that the function of the romance formula and by extent the moral fantasy works to realign the viewers’ perception of Joe. By considering the aforementioned quote, I discern an evocation of the heroic ideal associated with the modern hero. To ‘walk through fire’, or to ‘slay dragons’ are near impossible feats. However, overcoming impossible odds is the modern hero’s forte and Joe’s reference to this quality works to reinforce the romance formula. The viewers hear the same heroic incentive in Joe and Beck’s relationship when he notes at the end of episode one, season one: ‘What you really need is someone to save you. I can help, Beck. Let me help you’ (S1, E1).

References that evoke heroic ideals allow Joe to evade the aspect of deceit, a quality that will cast him as a less heroic protagonist, that is the postmodern hero. Instead, the romance formula reinforced by references to the moral fantasy positions Joe, at least in part, as the modern hero. In other words, the precedence of the romance formula prompts the viewers to see Joe not as the deceitful social outcast that is reminiscent of the postmodern hero, but as a version of the modern hero who overcomes impossible odds in the name of love triumphant. Through the lens of the romance genre, the viewers like Joe might come to understand his actions as less villainous. For the viewers, I argue, are prompted to measure Joe’s actions and character by the standard of the moral fantasy, which is constantly reinforced through references to the romance formula.

In season one’s episode ‘Living with the Enemy’, we see a clear demonstration of this very phenomenon. Joe attempts to kill Beck’s best friend Peach Salinger while she jogs along a deserted road. Throughout the season Peach has been manipulative in her attempt to keep Beck to herself. Peach secretly harbours romantic feelings toward Beck and repeatedly tries to undermine Joe and Beck’s relationship. Her continuous interference results in a challenge that Joe deems threatening. According to Joe, Peach is a ‘flesh-hungry harpy’ that would ‘ruin’ Beck’s life (S1, E5). Joe, acting in accordance with the romance formula, sets out to overcome this obstacle and takes the decisive action of killing Peach. As he runs away from the scene of the crime, we hear Joe’s narrative voice-over: ‘It’s brave what I do for you. It’s not easy. It’s

hard. Sometimes it makes me sick. I'm brave. How many guys are willing to do anything for the person they love? Honestly, Beck. You're lucky to have me,' (S1, E5).

In Joe's reasoning, we recognise the semblance to the postmodern hero's counterpart: the modern hero. In this moment, Joe is not passive or apathetic, which are hallmark qualities of the postmodern hero. On the contrary, the romance formula that functions in the diegesis<sup>5</sup> allows Joe, at least to some extent, to enact the role of modern hero. Joe shares the modern hero's resolute will and it is clear that like the modern hero he lives by a set of values. In Joe's case it is the code of chivalry that he aims to fulfil, a set of values that fits into the schematic of romance and aids him in his quest for the ultimate goal of 'love triumphant'.

After proving the presence of the moral fantasy (a characteristic feature of the romance genre) in the narrative, I am left to wonder why the series is predominantly classified as a thriller when there is evidence to support the classification of the romance genre. Sera Gamble, in an interview at The Contenders Emmys 2019 panel, acknowledged their deliberate attempt to include both genres in the overall narrative structure: 'We felt it had to be a love story and a horror movie in every single scene,' (Deadline, 2019). At first, Gamble's comment proves frustrating as I am again confronted with the knowledge that the series incorporates aspects from both genres. However, Gamble's consideration of the narrative structure reveals in part the answer to this conundrum. By combining two diametrically opposed genres, one creates a subversive structure that consequently problematises any definitive categorisation such as labelling the narrative as either thriller or romance. This insight demonstrates why the series is classified as a thriller while simultaneously being referred to and described in terms that denote the romance genre. To fully understand this subversive structure, I will have to look at how both genres function in the narrative respectively and determine their convergence and consequent subversion of one another. In doing so, I aim to demonstrate the hybridity of genre that *You* creates as one which ultimately challenges established genres and its narrative and protagonist.

In order to properly delineate the romance genre from the thriller genre, it is necessary to define the features associated with the thriller genre. According to Steve Neale, the suspense thriller has received 'little attention' (Neale, 1999: 75). Neale claims that although there is published work on the thriller as genre, the discussion lacks a rigorous approach, focusing instead on 'an

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<sup>5</sup> The use of the term diegesis here refers to the character narration provided by Joe.

array of generically disparate films’ (Neale, 1999). Neale identifies Charles Derry’s book *The Suspense Thriller: Films in the Shadow of Alfred Hitchcock* (1988), as a noteworthy exception (Neale, 1999: 75). Derry attempts to provide a vocabulary for films that otherwise seem unrelated in the broader classification of genre. Derry posits the suspense thriller as a useful generic classification (Derry, 1988: 4). The suspense thriller, according to Derry, is defined as: ‘a crime work which presents a generally murderous antagonism in which the protagonist becomes either an innocent victim or a nonprofessional criminal within a structure that is significantly unmediated by a traditional figure of detection,’ (Neale, 1999:62).

Unlike the romance genre, which centres on the development of a love relationship, the thriller, irrespective of its sub-type, is centred on the twinned premise of thrills and suspense. Derry points out that thrillers place their protagonists in ‘deadly’ and, therefore, ‘thrilling’ situations (Neale, 1999: 76). The result is the transformation of familiarity into unfamiliarity, turning what is ‘known’ into the ‘unknown’ (Neale, 1999: 76). I argue that the transformation of ‘known’ to ‘unknown’ that Derry identifies as a distinctive feature of the suspense thriller is evident in the series *You*. I identify this transformation in that critical moment when the romance formula is breached in season one’s finale.

In order to identify the thriller's transformation from ‘known’ to ‘unknown’ and the consequent breach of the romance formula, it is important to first understand the conflation of these two genres. In the first season of *You*, Joe’s relationship with Beck starts off on a sensational high that we can ascribe to the romance formula. The love relationship develops and Beck gradually falls in love with Joe. Whenever they are together the romance formula takes precedence and the viewers experience the ‘love story’ that Gamble referred to (Deadline Hollywood, 2019).

Unlike Beck, who only sees the ‘perfect boyfriend’, the viewers see Joe in his entirety and witnesses his nefarious activities: stalking, cyber-stalking, breaking and entering, stealing and eventually murder. Although these crimes are abominable, it is important to note that they function alongside the romance formula. As previously discussed, the romance formula prompts the viewers to perceive Joe as the modern hero. The thriller, however, creates the opposite affect and realigns him with the postmodern hero. As the viewers watch Joe kill Benji and Peach, as they witness him spying on Beck and reading her texts, they cannot deny the fact that these activities are illegal and disturbing in the context of the romance formula. What the viewers are left with is a complicated maze between the thriller and romance genres. Joe’s

criminal activities clearly destabilise the romance formula for the protagonist of the romance formula is not the non-professional criminal from the thriller genre. However, the opposite is also true; in other words, just as the thriller works to undermine the romance formula, so too does the romance formula undermine the thriller. It is clear then that these two formulas are locked in constant contest.

Having said that, I argue that the romance formula maintains the upper hand, even if by a fraction, as Joe's actions are not motivated by the sole need for violence. Joe's narration continually reminds the viewers of the moral fantasy which he desperately tries to uphold, albeit in a clearly disturbed way. As a result, I argue that the viewers are inclined to suppress the thriller in favour of Joe's overt declaration of the moral fantasy<sup>6</sup>. Despite the thriller's destabilizing effect, what remains 'known' to the viewers is Joe's resolute conviction of the moral fantasy and by extent the romance formula. As long as Joe is able to separate the love relationship from his criminal deeds the romance formula perseveres. Joe, however, fails to do this when Beck comes to realise the full extent of his actions. The result is the transformation from 'known' to 'unknown' triggering the precedence of the thriller genre. This transformation is actualised when the moral fantasy is breached.

The object that signifies the transformation from 'known' to 'unknown', in specifically Joe and Beck's relationship, is the cage. In the episode *Maybe* (S1, E3), Beck is introduced to the cage when she says she knows nothing about Joe. Joe responds by saying that if she wants to know him, he will show her exactly who he is (S1, E3). Joe then proceeds by taking her downstairs to the bookstore's basement and shows her the cage, which holds early first editions and collectibles. Once inside Joe says: 'This, this right here, is the most important place in the world to me. [...] You want to know who I am? This is it,' (S1, E3). The cage is significant to Joe because he regards it as both a safe haven and a symbol of protection. In season one's first episode (*Pilot*), Joe describes the cage to Paco and explains that 'the most valuable things in life are usually the most helpless. So they need people like us to protect them,' (S1, E1). Joe therefore draws a comparison between his need to protect others and the function of the cage. When Joe reveals this part of his life to Beck, and by extent this part of himself, it results in an

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<sup>6</sup> I will explain this phenomenon in the next chapter by analysing stylistic and narrative elements that work to further manipulate the viewers' understanding of both the narrative and Joe as protagonist.

intimate gesture that serves to strengthen the development of their love relationship. The cage, in this sense, illustrates the romance formula.

In the second last episode of the first season, Beck discovers the hidden compartment in Joe's bathroom ceiling. A hidden box, containing damning evidence of Joe's nefarious actions, reveals a part of Joe that Beck, up to this point in the narrative, has been completely unaware of: the non-professional criminal protagonist from the thriller genre. With this traumatic discovery, Joe – in Beck's eyes – turns into a 'freak' (S1, E10). After Beck makes the discovery, Joe locks her in the cage resulting in the transformation of 'known' to 'unknown'. The cage, which at first functioned within the romance formula now functions within the thriller formula. Joe is no longer the 'perfect boyfriend' who Beck believed him to be and the cage no longer stands to mark the safe space designed to protect 'the most valuable things in life,' (S1, E1). Instead, the cage and Joe have morphed from the romance motif of protection to the thriller motif of danger.

Although the viewers have been aware of Joe's criminal actions from the beginning, they too face the transition from 'known' to 'unknown'. For up to this point in the narrative, the thriller has been functioning in the shadow of the moral fantasy. Joe constantly reminds the viewers that his criminal actions are justified by his love for Beck. In the final episode this conviction is reiterated by Joe as he thinks of a way to explain to Beck why he killed Benji and Peach: 'Evidence is all I need to prove to you that I'm not some sicko. I'm your protector. You'll see,' (S1, E10). The viewers are led, and has been led throughout the season, to believe in the moral fantasy as Joe constantly reiterates it in justification of his actions. Beck's discovery and consequent entrapment brings the thriller genre to the forefront. The viewers are suddenly left to face the 'unknown' as this transgression of the love relationship does not fit into the romance formula. The words 'sicko' and 'protector' clearly demonstrate the two genres that have been functioning throughout the first season and the viewers come to understand that Joe is fighting not to be perceived in terms of the thriller genre as a 'sicko' but as the 'protector' from the romance formula. The two genres are brought together in a final balancing act as Joe desperately tries to convince Beck, and by extent the viewers, of his role as 'protector'.

The viewers' perception of Joe as 'protector' is easier when the thriller functions in a subsidiary role to that of the romance formula. In other words, it is easier for the viewers to perceive Joe as the 'protector' when Beck too sees him in that role. The emphasis is then placed on the

development of the love relationship and the thriller remains constrained by the moral fantasy. However, once Joe locks Beck in the cage the love relationship and the moral fantasy are clearly threatened as evidenced by Beck's description of Joe as a 'murderer' and a 'freak' (S1, E10). In an attempt to console Beck, Joe tries to evoke the moral fantasy and says, 'Beck, I love you. And loving someone means you'll do anything for them,' (S1, E10). Season one's finale exposes the two genres in a spectacular juxtaposition that oscillates between Beck and Joe's perspective. This movement between the romance and thriller genres is heightened in the final moments of the last episode and forms part of the transformation from 'known' to 'unknown'. The result is the viewers' increasing uncertainty of Joe and the validity of his conviction in the moral fantasy.

The transformation from 'known' to 'unknown' reaches its climax when the moral fantasy is breached. While Beck is locked up in the cage the narrative can still unfold according to either genre. The exposure of both genres hangs in the balance until Beck makes the fatal decision to try and escape. Beck's inability to accept Joe's actions and the consequent failure of the moral fantasy of love triumphant leads to the precedence of the thriller. Joe, in a final attempt to regain control of the situation, transgresses the romance formula by killing Beck. The thriller ultimately overpowers the romance formula as Joe's promise of protecting Beck, of helping her 'get the life [she] deserve[s]' (S1, E10) turns to naught. Joe's conviction in the moral fantasy, his perception of himself as 'protector', the romance formula that the viewers grew to expect – and was coaxed by Joe's constant reiteration thereof to believe in – dissipates into the 'unknown'.

Throughout the majority of the first season there is a clear counterbalance between the thriller and romance genres. Joe's criminal deeds threaten the validity of the love relationship and the association of Joe as 'protector', while the justification of these deeds through the evocation of the moral fantasy in turn suppresses Joe's criminality and again work to emphasize the association of Joe as 'protector'. It is, therefore, fair to say that before the transformation of 'known' to 'unknown' the narrative seems to successfully compartmentalize the thriller from the romance genre.

However, once the transformation of 'known' to 'unknown' manifests itself in Beck's death, the counterbalance dissipates, leaving the viewers with a striking and troubling incongruity. Not only are the viewers unable to associate Joe with the hero from the romance genre, but

they are also unable to brand Joe as the grotesque villain from the thriller genre; Joe is somewhere in-between these two extremes, defeated and unable to overcome the obstacle he faces. For it is important to note that the moments leading up to the transformation are marked by utter delusion and desperation on Joe's behalf, as he is unable to accept the collapse of the love relationship and by extent the failure of the moral fantasy. This struggle is powerfully demonstrated in a simple utterance of defeat, when Joe confronts Beck admitting: 'I didn't want it to be like this, Beck,' (S1, E10).

The breach of the moral fantasy lays bare Joe's character defects: he is too weak and perhaps deluded by his persistent belief in the moral fantasy to acknowledge the failure of the love relationship. I therefore argue that what the transformation of 'known' to 'unknown' ultimately reveals is not Joe as grotesque villain, instead it unveils an integral quality of the postmodern hero as an embodiment of 'the utter hopelessness and precariousness of the human condition' (Pollard, 2000:48). I would like to clarify that this prevailing sense of hopelessness, revealed through the breach of the moral fantasy, is my interpretation of the thriller's transformation from 'known' to 'unknown' in *You*. I cannot definitively state whether or not all viewers perceive this particular condition in *You*; however, when I consider fans' positive response toward Joe, I presume that their sympathy toward him is in part an acknowledgement of this interpretation.

I would like to point out that the series' transformation from 'known' to 'unknown' raises some of the issues inherent in the romance formula. The conflation of genre takes the romance formula to its extreme as we see Joe escalating from stalking to killing in order to actualise the moral fantasy. When placed in the schematic of the thriller genre, the features of love triumphant become increasingly problematic. The transformation in season one's finale ultimately acts as a mode of interrogation that questions the formulaic constituents associated with the romance formula. For example, the narrative in *You* starts to highlight the romance formula's role of 'protector', a pivotal feature in any romance, as well as the seemingly unchecked authority it bestows on this designated figure of chivalry to overcome any and all obstacles in the name of love. *You*'s hybrid dynamic of thriller and romance therefore works to dismantle the romance genre by having the thriller constituents expose its most intrinsic features, and destabilising it by letting it play out to its clearly catastrophic end, signalled by Beck's death.

Having said that, it is still unclear whether all viewers will recognise this commentary on the possible toxicity of the romance formula as the online debate clearly reflects a divided audience. I believe that this division is in part due to the conflicting genres at work in *You*. For as Anna Michelson explains in ‘The politics of happily-ever-after: romance genre fiction as aesthetic public sphere’ (2021), the romance formula’s highly formulaic structure is exactly what appeals to its audience (Michelson, 2021: 185). The moral fantasy is expected to be fulfilled and anything less than the symptomatic HAE (Happily Ever After) is not considered a romance (Michelson, 2021: 184). I argue that the viewers who seem to cling to the notion of Joe as hero are in fact clinging to their initial expectation of the romance formula. As Michelson explains, the defining feature of a romance story is one of optimism and hope (Michelson, 2021:184), which of course runs contrary to the thriller’s characteristic feel of pessimism and disillusion. This understanding of the romance genre might help to provide some insight as to why the transformation from ‘known’ to ‘unknown’, from romance to thriller, is rendered insignificant to those viewers’ who continue to hold to their expectation of the romance as opposed to the thriller. The narrative certainly continues to feed this hope by introducing new women like Love Quinn (season two) and Natalie Engler (season three) who systematically replace the object of Joe’s desire, by extent resurrecting the romance formula. It is therefore important for me to mention that the hybridity of genre in *You* allows for a commentary on the issues inherent in genres, particularly that of the romance genre. Beyond that, it opens a new matter that I do not think the producers anticipated, that being some viewers’ positive response to, and expectation of the romance genre as opposed to the thriller.

### **A Narcissistic ‘Rorschach Test’: Manipulating the Expectation of Genre**

Up to this point in my analysis, I have identified two of the contributing factors that, I argue, are directly responsible for the dichotomous interpretations and descriptions of the series, and Joe. The first contributing factor involves the series’ perceptible use of the postmodern hero complex and ethos: Joe, like his predecessors, struggles to integrate into society, he considers himself apart from the modern-day social institutions and voices his critique of the façade and corruption that he witnesses in it. Throughout this internal struggle, Joe demonstrates the capacity for both good and evil. This quality, which is emblematic of the postmodern hero, pivots around Joe’s attempt to revive archaic ideals of love and his consequent delusion that leads to the collapse of the love relationship. This dynamic, which is organised in his

characterisation, explains why reviewers and fans are able to describe Joe as both a ‘hopeless romantic’ and a ‘psycho’.

The second contributing factor involves my interpretation of the series’ ‘creative response’ (Boggs & Pollard, 2001:165). According to Boggs and Pollard, the ‘creative response’ provides a ‘new epistemological and aesthetic paradigm’ (Boggs & Pollard, 2001: 165). I argue that this ‘new aesthetic paradigm’ is discernible in the series’ conflated treatment of the thriller and romance genres. This particular aesthetic creates a subversive structure that leaves viewers caught between two possible interpretations: the new aesthetic of romance/ thriller, which is organised in terms of the moral fantasy schematic and the transformation from ‘known’ to ‘unknown’, allows the viewers to interpret the overall narrative as either romance or thriller, and by extent to associate Joe with either the modern hero or non-professional criminal. When the moral fantasy is evoked in an attempt to justify the triumph of the love relationship, Joe is closer to that of the modern hero: resolute, determined, led by a clear set of values that elicits the chivalric code. With the incorporation of the romance genre, one can understand why some reviewers and most fans describe Joe as the ‘perfect boyfriend’. However, when the thriller constituents are brought to the forefront through Joe’s criminal activities, the disillusion and consequent delusion, underscored by the postmodern hero complex, starts to reveal itself. The counterbalance of the thriller genre in turn explains why the series is categorised as a thriller and why Joe is contrastingly described as a ‘psycho’ or ‘murderous stalker’. It is clear then that the aesthetic paradigm functioning in *You*, created by the conflation of genres, contributes to the dichotomous interpretations of Joe and the narrative.

It is important to note a crucial difference between these two factors. The first, which relates to the identification of Joe as a postmodern hero, is solely focused on the characterization and narrative events associated with the postmodern hero and the postmodern hero’s narrative themes. This focus concerns itself with the story told. This factor, therefore, necessitates the consideration of the type of character as well as the type of narrative events at work in *You*. The second, which relates to what I have identified as the series’ ‘creative response’, necessitates a different line of questioning. Instead of asking what character and narrative events are present in the series, the second factor asks *how* the narrative events are represented. In other words, the second contributing factor starts to unearth the inner workings of the narrative events and question how they are made to function. This excavation of sorts is demonstrated by my analysis of the internal schematics embedded in the narrative events, like

the romance genre's moral fantasy and the thriller's transformation from 'known' to 'unknown'. The second contributing factor therefore moves beyond mere characterization and narrative events to consider internal processes, or internal narrative structures, that consequently inform the viewers' interpretation. I argue that it is this second contributing factor of the series' 'creative response' that underpins the metafictional aesthetic in *You*, as it moves beyond the story told to experiment with the internal processes of representation, placing an intriguing focus on how the narrative is represented and in turn interpreted.

In an interview with *Deadline Hollywood*, the series' developer and director, Greg Berlanti, comments on the focus on representation by describing *You* as a 'Rorschach test' (2019). In the interview, Berlanti touches on the conflation of genre and describes the series as being perceivable as either a thriller or romance (*Deadline Hollywood*, 2019). In the same interview Badgley agrees with Berlanti's comment and adds that the viewers are failing the 'Rorschach test' because they root for the fulfilment of the romance formula despite the constituents of the thriller genre (*Deadline Hollywood*, 2019). On *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* (2020), Colbert made a similar observation regarding the viewers' overwhelmingly positive response to Joe:

You are now in this runaway smash called *You* and people are obsessed with this show. It's a phenomenon. You play a sociopathic killer named Joe. People love Joe. Do you have anything to say to the people who want to date Joe despite the minor flaw of murdering people? (*The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, 2020)

In his interview with Stephen Colbert, Badgley contradicts his earlier statement about the viewers failing the 'Rorschach test' by explaining that the viewers' perspective is influenced by 'a device' that is intentionally 'provocative': 'It's not entirely fair to put that on the viewer because we're purposefully trying to create a device that is meant to be provocative, hopefully thought provoking and not just titillating. It's not a clinical portrait of a serial killer, you know?' (*The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, 2020)

I believe the 'device', which Badgley refers, to is cinematic narration. This device, which Badgley describes as 'provocative', therefore pertains to cinematic narration's incorporation of both narrative and stylistic elements that make the narrative events, the story, intelligible. It is also important to remember that the narrative and stylistic elements are made to function

alongside the romance/ thriller schematic. I therefore argue that what Badgley and Berlanti are in fact referring to is the series' conflation of genre as they both point to the consequent influence on the viewers' understanding of Joe. For this reason, I contend that the 'device' Badgley refers to is the inferential model's conflation of genre, for Badgley rightly points out that the 'device' (referencing representation) allows for something 'provocative', as Joe is not represented through a 'clinical portrait of a serial killer' (The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, 2020). Berlanti illustrates the same idea when equating the series' representation of Joe to a 'Rorschach test' (Deadline Hollywood, 2019). It is important to note that neither of these comments concern Joe's morality, instead they point toward the issue of representation and how it enables conflicting interpretations.

The conflation of two contrasting genres, thriller and romance, in one narrative, will clearly have an effect on the viewers' understanding of the story. For as Neale explains in *Genre and Hollywood* (1999), genre consist of 'specific systems of expectation and hypothesis which spectators bring with them to the cinema and which interact with films themselves during the course of the viewing process,' (Neale, 1999: 27). In other words, the viewers have an almost innate understanding of genre that is tied up in deeper cultural underpinnings that in turn sets up an expectation of the formula to be fulfilled. Cawelti marks the same concept of expectation around literary formulas: 'These popular story patterns are embodiments of archetypal story forms in terms of specific cultural materials. ... Thus formulas are ways in which specific cultural themes and stereotypes become embodied in more universal archetypes,' (Cawelti, 1977:6). Cawelti's understanding of genre as not only a pattern of identifiable characteristics but as a cultural consensus, a near universal expectation of formula (Cawelti, 1977:6), is what Gamble refers to indirectly when asked about the possibility of romanticizing Joe:

All of us who grew up on those great love stories, those romantic comedies – we're kind of hardwired to root for the love story. So, if you just present a 'meet-cute', as it were, in a bookstore, you're gonna want them to be together ... even if you see them do what Joe is doing in the trailer (Build Series, 2018).

Gamble's comment does illustrate the viewers' recognition of genre, which according to her statement, is easily reactive to something as simple as a 'meet-cute'. By recognizing the 'meet-cute' as a narrative element from the romantic comedies, the viewers expect the fulfilment of that narrative structure. According to Gamble, this innate desire to 'root for' the fulfilment of

that genre is so compelling that the viewers want the characters to end up together – as per the romance convention – even when they are faced with a criminal protagonist like Joe. This expectation ties into Michelson’s description of romance as a highly formulaic construct causing the readers, or in this case the viewers, to anticipate its fulfilment. However, this expectation and perhaps even desire for the fulfilment of the romance genre in *You* is not as straightforward as Gamble’s comment. I agree with Gamble that the viewers do recognize the ‘meet-cute’ in the bookstore, and might, therefore, expect the narrative to unfold according to the romance genre; however, where I digress from Gamble is that this expectation is actively influenced, and I argue, exploited by the series’ metafictional aesthetic which demonstrates an active awareness of the internal processes of representation.

I am therefore more inclined to agree with Berlanti’s previous comment regarding the viewing of *You* as a ‘Rorschach test’. For what the viewers truly encounter is an aesthetic that places a heightened focus on *how* the story is told as opposed to the story told. I propose that the inkblot, the narrative, is an oscillating amalgamation of both thriller and romance, as I have previously demonstrated this phenomenon with the counterbalance between the romance and thriller constituents embedded in the narrative events. The result of this particular conflation is subversive as the distinction between the two becomes increasingly difficult to discern. Hence the viewers can understand the narrative as either thriller or romance, as Gamble herself noted: ‘I think we felt that it had to be both a love story and a bit of a horror movie in every single scene. You can read it as a sweet story and then you can read it as terrifying. [...] It was an interesting experiment,’ (Deadline Hollywood, 2019).

It is important that I point out that this very conflation of genre offers a new way of viewing the postmodern hero in terms of representation. For the difficulty it creates in distinguishing the representation of the narrative as either romance or thriller has a corresponding effect on the viewers’ ability to identify Joe as either hero or villain: the internal narrative structure of the moral fantasy aligns Joe with the romantic hero; while the narrative structure of the suspense thriller contrastingly aligns Joe with the criminal protagonist. I therefore argue that the postmodern hero’s capacity for both good and evil is further developed, even thematized, in the conflation of the thriller and romance genres. This adds an additional layer of ambiguity to the postmodern hero that calls on the viewers’ engagement with conflicting formulas, forcing them to consider how the character is represented as opposed to how the character acts – a concern linked to morality.

With this understanding of the series' conflation of genre, I agree that the inkblot, the representation, is as Badgley rightly pointed out 'provocative' as it actively patterns itself across two contesting Hollywood conventions that complicates the viewers' recognition of genre and the 'specific cultural themes and stereotypes' (Cawelti, 1977:6) embedded in them. It is therefore not entirely accurate to say that the viewers simply root for the fulfilment of the romance formula by seeing a recognizable convention like the 'meet-cute' scene alone. As we have seen, Joe continually elicits cultural themes associated with the romance genre as he iterates variations of the moral fantasy. In so doing, the representation, or narration, becomes intrigued with its own storytelling processes. In other words, *You* manipulates its storytelling processes by including narcissistic tendencies that actively re-shapes the narrative through the romance formula, consequently eliciting the viewers' expectation/ interpretation of the romance formula instead of the thriller.

It should, therefore, be recognized that the series *You*, draws deliberate attention to the romance formula and by doing so, the 'Rorschach test', that is the series' representation of the narrative, causes the viewers' interpretation of the romance genre. As a result, is not simply that the viewers see the narrative as a romance because of recognizable narrative elements like the 'meet-cute' alone; there is rather an explicit focus, a heightened awareness of the love story that penetrates into both the stylistic elements and narrative elements, consequently manipulating the viewers' expectation and understanding of the narrative. In this chapter, I have discussed how the conflation of genre operates within the series and explained how the conflation causes the exposure of formula. I have, however, only explained this in terms of the series' narrative elements. It is pertinent that we also consider the stylistic elements as this makes up an equally significant part of cinematic narration. In the next chapter, I will focus on the self-reflexivity operating in the stylistic elements and show how this classifies as narcissistic tendencies that affectively engage the series' metafictional aesthetic.

## Chapter 2: No Average Joe – Narcissistic Narration in the Netflix hit-series *You*

In the previous chapter, I have established that Joe fulfils the criteria of the postmodern hero and I have demonstrated postmodern cinema/ television's 'creative response' in terms of the series' unique conflation of the romance and thriller genres. In addition, I have explained how these two contributing factors exert a direct influence over the conflicting interpretations/ descriptions shared by reviewers and fans of both the series' narrative and Joe as protagonist. In the following chapter, I will identify the final and perhaps most complex contributing factor that involves the self-awareness of form. This final component finds its origin in the series' 'creative response' as I have previously explained the conflation of genre necessitates a focus on internal narrative processes by subverting and by extent exposing each genre's formulaic constituents: the moral fantasy of the romance genre and the thriller's transformation from 'known' to 'unknown'. In this chapter I will consider various internal stylistic and narrative structures at work in the series *You*, in an attempt to explain exactly how the narrative demonstrates an awareness of its own internal processes; and how the presence of these self-reflexive processes further manipulate and even comment on the viewers' understanding of the narrative and Joe.

It is incredibly difficult to define what narrative is as many scholars are divided in their debates over what exactly constitutes a narrative. However, it is necessary to provide at least an elementary definition of narrative as I will attempt to demonstrate the workings of a metafictional narrative in *You*. In order to work towards identifying the presence of this meta-dimension, and by extent offer a new model of interpretation of the postmodern hero, I will start with the consideration of representation, that is narration, in film. My previous analysis of the conflation of genre already determined the genesis of the series' awareness of formula. However, I have yet to demonstrate the extent of this awareness in terms of cinematic narration. The overarching objective of this chapter is, therefore, to uncover the use of narcissistic tendencies within the cinematic narration of the series *You*.

According to H. Porter Abbott, in *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (2002), narrative is 'the representation of an event or a series of events,' (Abbott, 2002:13). In terms of narrative, the word 'event' can be equated to the word 'action'. In fact, Bordwell, a Professor of Film Studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, provides a description of narrative in film as

‘action-centered’ and explains how ‘action-centered’ theorists consider narrative principally based on ‘event-driven activity’ (Bordwell, 2008:112). In addition to events, Bordwell argues that the minimal narrative form requires ‘continuity of agents and some casual connection’ (Bordwell, 2008:111). In other words, a narrative constitutes the continuity of characters (agents) and causality that creates a sequence between events. Although the above description of narrative seems to establish a distinct set of criteria, it is important to note that narrative is interdisciplinary and therefore has the ability to take on different forms.

When analysing cinematic narration, it is important to acknowledge this fact that narrative alters from medium to medium. That is to say that the narrative we find in literature is not necessarily the same when it comes to film. This is what Bordwell refers to when he talks about narrative as a ‘transmedium activity’ (Bordwell, 2008:109). The novel, for example, only allows access through words which immediately restricts the narrative and the reader’s interpretation thereof to what is said/ or written. That is to say, we only understand Joe and his actions through his own words (first person narration) in the novel *You*. The television series, on the other hand, opens the narrative up to visual and auditory levels of representation. Bordwell explains this phenomenon by stating that: ‘Different media activates distinct domains of storytelling,’ (Bordwell, 2008:110).

In film narrative, Bordwell outlines the story world, plot structure, and narration, as three integral three dimensions with which to approach the overall form of a film. Bordwell describes the story world as the ‘agents, circumstances and surroundings’ that constitute the story’s diegetic elements, while the plot structure involves the arrangement of these narrative parts (Bordwell, 2008:113). The final component, narration, is where we find film’s ‘distinct domains of storytelling’ (Bordwell, 2008:110). Bordwell places particular focus on narration as it functions as the viewers’ central and constant point of access into the narrative. According to Bordwell, cinematic narration ‘burrows’ down into both the plot structure and story world as it governs the trajectory through the narrative (Bordwell, 2008:120). Cinematic narration, therefore, operates as an invisible force that saturates every level of representation in film or television: sound, visuals, scenes, lighting, even objects in the story world. Suddenly the narrative can now be shaped through visuals like soft hues to suggest romance instead of stark shadows that might instil a sense of danger. In the same way sound too can be used to suggest a myriad of emotions. According to Bordwell, everything that the viewers see and hear is inextricably bound to cinematic narration. Whereas narration in literature is bound to the text,

the very language used to convey the story. As a result, the narrative we have in the television series *You* is not only restricted to words alone. Instead, we come to understand narrative through multiple devices that make up cinematic narration. Joe is no longer a character to be understood through his words or actions alone, but through his *representation* in television.

Bordwell proposes that cinematic narration, which influences both the story world and plot structure, functions as an inferential model of narration (Bordwell, 2008:117). The inferential model, according to Bordwell, ‘cues spectators to execute operations, and one central goal of these operations is to comprehend the story’ (Bordwell, 2008:117). The story world, plot structure and narration exact a mentalistic framework in which the viewers perceptually process the given representation and elaborate on it by making certain inferences. Bordwell offers this simple example to explain the inferential model at work in cinematic narration:

If you and I see a driver swigging out of a bottle and swerving his car along the road, we'll probably both suspect that he's under the influence. The conclusion isn't guaranteed: The bottle might contain iced tea, and he might be avoiding roadkill we can't see. But our inference about DUI [driving under the influence] is more plausible. Films rely centrally on just such garden-variety inferences; it's one of the ways in which narratives trade on real-world knowledge (Bordwell, 2008:117).

Following Bordwell's theory of film narrative, I am led to three principles: first, the story can be shaped and therefore narrated on multiple levels (sound, light, objects); second, the character(s) can be understood not only through their actions but through their *representation* on multiple levels; third, cinematic narration involves the viewers in a mentalistic framework that cues them to make certain inferences that ultimately influence their comprehension of the overall narrative. These three concepts are critical in my analysis of the postmodern hero as I argue that Joe is not only shaped through narrative events but through the inferential model's *representation*.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Joe functions in a narrative that conflates the thriller and romance genres. In this chapter, I will further elaborate on the series' internalization of the romance formula through an in-depth consideration of cinematic narration. Working with Bordwell's theory of narrative film, I will pay particular attention to two parameters operating in the inferential model of narration: narrative and stylistic elements. With this approach, I will

demonstrate how the inferential model, which constitutes cinematic narration, ultimately produces a heightened awareness of representation by identifying self-reflexive tendencies that I consider through Hutcheon's theory of narcissistic texts. By combining these two theories, I will explain how the self-reflexive tendencies operating in the inferential model actively manipulate the viewers' understanding of both Joe as protagonist and the overall narrative. By demonstrating how the narrative and stylistic elements congruently influence the viewers' understanding of Joe and the series' overall narrative, I will posit this particular dynamic, of the series' inferential model, as the final contributing factor that underpins the dichotomous descriptions and interpretations of Joe and the narrative.

### **Hello, you: Identifying the narrative identity in *YOU***

As I previously explained, in addition to problematising the categorisation and interpretation of the series as either romance or thriller, the series' conflation of the thriller and romance genres leads me to consider a self-awareness of form. For the active incorporation of thriller and romance constituents breeds an inward focus that places emphasis on the series' own storytelling processes. I therefore argue that this self-awareness of form constitutes the series *You* as a meta-textual narrative. To demonstrate how the series functions as a meta-textual narrative, I will draw on Hutcheon's theory of meta-fiction as explicated in her publication *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (1980). In this publication, Hutcheon considers the narrative text alongside the descriptor 'narcissistic'<sup>7</sup> to demonstrate the self-reflexive tendencies of the novel as mimetic genre. Hutcheon equates the 1980's novel to Narcissus in Greek mythology, explaining that the novel has grown intensely aware of its own 'storytelling processes' and 'linguistic structures' (Hutcheon, 1980: Preface).

I argue that the narrative in *You* demonstrates a similar awareness by drawing attention to its own storytelling processes, containing, as Hutcheon describes the meta-textual narrative, within itself a reflection of its own narrative identity. It is, however, important to point out that Hutcheon works with narrative in literature, specifically the mode of fiction in the 1960s, whereas I will be working with narrative in contemporary television. Before I continue to

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<sup>7</sup> Hutcheon does not ascribe any negative connotation to the descriptor 'narcissistic'. The term is solely used to describe the self-reflexive nature of meta-fictional narrative texts and is not intended as a commentary on the author. (Hutcheon, 1980: 1)

analyse the series through reference to Hutcheon's theory, I would like to point out that I am aware of the difference between these two mediums (literature/ television) as well as the distinct historical periods in which they exist; however, I will demonstrate that Hutcheon's theory remains useful and my application of her ideas to the visual narrative will reveal the meta-fictional tendencies at work in *You*. For Hutcheon herself refrains from labelling meta-fiction in terms of a particular historical designation by arguing that meta-fiction is a broad phenomenon that takes on many different forms spanning across different literary movements: present in the Romantic, modernist, neo-baroque, and postmodernist periods.

Sharing Hutcheon's consideration of metafiction as a technical entity that can take on many forms, and intersect varying disciplines, I will combine Bordwell's theory of the inferential model with Hutcheon's work to address the operation of meta-fiction in the medium of television. For I cannot apply Hutcheon's theory in a meaningful way to the series without Bordwell's insight into cinematic narration. For this reason, I will combine these two distinct theories to expose the intricate operation of narcissistic tendencies that I read through Hutcheon's consideration of meta-fiction in the particular construct of cinematic narration's inferential model as explained by Bordwell's poetics of film narrative. In order to understand how narcissistic tendencies operate in the series' narration, it is necessary to explain cinematic narration and the inferential model in greater detail, as this represents the series' narrative and in turn informs the viewers' interpretation of the narrative and Joe.

The deliberation on narration in film is in essence a deliberation on representation. In other words, upon contemplation of the series' narration one is forced to ask: how, in this particular artistic medium, does narration operate and how do viewers perceive it? Seymour Chatman describes the cinematic narrator as 'the composite of a large and complex variety of communicating devices,' (Bordwell, 2008: 166). As an audio-visual display, cinematic narration is a nuanced organism that bleeds into every constituent of representation, for example: stylistic techniques, sequentiality of scenes, objects in the story world, lighting, music, openings and endings. Bordwell describes cinematic narration in a similar vein and explicates narration in film as a 'presentational vehicle' (Bordwell, 2008: 141).

In addition to understanding cinematic narration as a 'complex' system that operates through an audio-visual display, Bordwell explains that viewers are engaged in certain cognitive activities to comprehend the unfolding narrative. In *Film Art* (2008) Bordwell and Kristin

Thompson argue that film, like any other artwork, utilizes certain cues to elicit cognitive reactions from the person experiencing it (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008: 55). A poem, for example, creates cues through rhythm, rhyme or repetition. A literary device like repetition is perhaps easily discernible, however, it becomes significant in this process of perception whereby the reader is able to recognize this stylistic element and unify it with the underlying meaning of the poem. Film too, relies on this activity of perception and demands the viewers' involvement in order for the narrative to develop. Without the viewers processing these cues perceptually the narrative cannot develop, as it is the viewers' involvement with the narrative that ultimately unifies and by extent makes meaning out of the cues. Bordwell terms this process of perception, which is reliant on cues embedded in cinematic narration, the 'inferential model':

I propose that we conceive the poetics of film narrative within a framework that's mentalistic. That is, we ought to assume that a film cues spectators to execute operations, and one central goal of these operations is to comprehend the story. So I propose an inferential model of narration. [...] I suggest that given a representation, the spectator processes it perceptually and elaborates it on the bases of schemas she or he has to hand (Bordwell, 2008:117).

If cues help the viewers to engage with the narrative, it is reasonable to assume that they are not random in their positioning throughout the narrative. According to Bordwell and Thompson, these cues are patterned along two fundamental parameters, namely: narrative and stylistic elements (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008:55). The narrative elements pertain to the story whereas the stylistic elements pertain to filmic techniques like 'the way the camera moves, the patterns of colour in the frame, the use of music, and other devices,' (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008: 55). Along the parameter of narrative elements, viewers come to understand a narrative by identifying events, 'linking them by cause and effect, time and space,' (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008: 76). Narrative thus constitutes causal and temporal relations among events (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008: 75). We know, for example, that Joe had a relationship with Candace before he met Beck. We know this because in season one, episode one Joe refers to this past relationship when he says: 'I was in love once but she broke my heart, Beck. She really did a number on me,' (S1,E1). In the episode *The Last Nice Guy in New York* (S1, E2), an old acquaintance, Maddie Johnson, recognizes Joe at a party and asks him about the same girl whom he had mentioned in the previous episode (S1, E1). These two events are cued as related narrative elements in that they both refer to Joe's past; both of these events exist as a

result or cause of Joe and Candace's failed relationship. The viewers thus comprehend the story/ narrative by linking certain events through causality and time.

In the previous chapter I focused on narrative events in order to explain the series' conflation of genre. I determined Joe's criminal deeds as narrative elements that collectively constitute the thriller genre: Joe murdering Benji, Peach and eventually Beck are narrative events that cause the realization of the thriller genre within the narrative. Contrastingly, there are identifiable narrative events that constitute the romance formula: the development of the love relationship, overcoming obstacles in the name of love triumphant and the evocation of the moral fantasy as justification for Joe's actions. The viewers therefore come to elicit meaning from the narrative elements positioned within the *fabula*<sup>8</sup>. For example, Benji's death cues a sense of villainy resulting in an inference on behalf of the viewers that aligns the narrative with that of the thriller convention. However, as I previously explained with the conflation of genre, the viewers also see Joe caring for Beck, protecting her from people like Benji who quite simply uses Beck for his own enjoyment and impacts her life negatively; consequently realigning the inference with that of the romance formula. Thus, the viewers perceive, as Gamble pointed out, both a horror and love story (Deadline Hollywood, 2019).

It is evident then that the narrative elements play a crucial role in the viewers' understanding of Joe and the narrative as a whole. However, the viewers' inference and understanding of the series' narrative is also informed by stylistic elements. This means that in addition to understanding narrative in film through narrative elements that relate to causality and time in the *fabula*, the viewers also understand narrative through cues functioning along the parameter of stylistic elements.

Unlike narrative elements that are usually made explicit in terms of temporality or causality, which are directly linked to the *plot*, stylistic elements operate on a more implicit level of inference. Stylistic elements might be taken for granted by the viewers seeing as they are cued to imply certain feelings, ideas or moods instead of overt narrative events that constitute the developing plot. The viewers' uptake of these cues is a near automatic response. Viewers

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<sup>8</sup> Throughout this chapter, I will address two narrative components, termed by Russian formalists, the *fabula* and *syuzhet* (Bordwell, 2008:123). The *fabula* is the story, the actual events of the plot, and the *syuzhet* is the process whereby the story is arranged. (Bordwell, 2008:123)

might, therefore, be less discerning when it comes to visceral cues that prompt an emotional response as opposed to the intellectual activity of mentally stitching together narrative elements that are more concrete in the framework of the *fabula*.

Nevertheless, I argue that the viewers' response to stylistic and narrative cues is the key to understanding why, in Colbert's words, the 'people', that is the viewers, 'love Joe' (The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, 2020). For as Bordwell points out, the viewers attribute meaning and unity to the overall narrative by these 'two organizing principles – a narrative one and stylistic one' (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008:55). I therefore argue that these elements operating within the inferential model (cinematic narration) play a significant role in the internalization of the romance formula. By examining the series' overall narration, I intend to demonstrate how the stylistic and narrative elements operate as narcissistic, meta-fictional tendencies that ultimately manipulate the viewers' perception/ inference of Joe and consequent expectation of the romance formula.

### **The Opening Scene: The Initial Benchmark of the Romance Formula**

In the series' first episode (*Pilot*), we have a clear demonstration of the significance of stylistic devices. In the series' opening scene, the narrative elements that constitute the *fabula* are explicit: Beck walks into a bookstore, Joe sees her, observes her for a while and they meet for the first time. However, the stylistic elements that constitute the filmic techniques tell a different story. The stylistic elements in the opening scene lay the foundation for the internalization of the romance formula. I aim to demonstrate that this initial and crucial internalization engenders a self-awareness of form, a self-awareness of the storytelling process that gradually and actively re-aligns the viewers' understanding of the *fabula* with that of the romance formula.

The first scene opens with an aerial view of New York. The sky is warm pink and gold on the outer edges. The city, a maze of grey skyscrapers and intersecting roads, does not seem a cold, corporate landscape. Instead, the soft glow of the sky casts the city in a dreamlike state, which is only accentuated with soft ambient music. The next scene shows Mooney's Bookstore (where Joe works) on a busy street. The outer edges of the frame are blurred and the soft music continues. Next, we are inside the bookstore and the doorbell rings. The sound of the doorbell is, in itself, significant. The doorbell's tone is not a harsh tang. It is soft, almost musical, and

the gentle jingle coalesces into the hazy, rose-coloured aesthetic of the setting. As the sound reverberates into distant echoes, Beck enters the bookstore.

Frederico Fellini, the notable Italian filmmaker who directed several films including *La Dolce Vita* (1960), described light as an important narrative tool: ‘Light is everything. It expresses ideology, emotion, colour, depth, style. It can efface, narrate, describe. With the right lighting, the ugliest face, the most idiotic expression can radiate with beauty or intelligence,’ (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008:126). In an interview with *Vulture*, the series’ first director, Lee Toland Krieger noted the deliberate choice of applying an ‘amber glow’ to Joe’s world (Rosenfield, 2019), explaining that the amber light does not correspond with a thriller. The roseate skyline we see from the very first scene of New York City and again in the glowing bookstore with the melodic doorbell establishes the predominant style that functions throughout most of the first season. Through the series’ stylistic implementation of an ‘amber glow’ the viewers find him or herself in a narrative that, in Krieger’s words, ‘doesn’t feel like a thriller,’ (Rosenfield, 2019).

Krieger’s stylistic choice demonstrates the importance of light in terms of establishing a cue that implicitly evokes a romantic warmth. The effect of this stylistic device illustrates an instance of what Hutcheon terms covert meta-fiction. Covert meta-fiction, according to Hutcheon, is the internalization of the text’s narrative identity (Hutcheon, 1980: 7). The stylistic element of light internalizes the romance genre, an element of the series’ narrative identity, by positioning cues along the stylistic parameter that implicitly thematize the romance motif. The viewers are therefore not explicitly made aware of the romance formula operating in the narrative. Instead, the inferential model internalizes the romance motif through stylistic devices like light that cues a certain atmosphere or mood that the viewers implicitly associate with something akin to the romance formula. As Rosenfield explains in her interview with Krieger, from the very first scene the viewers are lead to approach the narrative with an implicit feeling that is reminiscent of ‘a great New York love story’ (Rosenfield, 2019). From season one’s opening scene, the inferential model establishes, a narcissistic interest in the storytelling process as it actively, albeit covertly, implies a particular type of formula, the romance formula, that consequently manipulates the viewers’ expectation of genre and the narrative to come.

Covert meta-fiction that operates in the stylistic elements is frequently if not consistently employed as the viewers see the narrative through Joe’s perspective. Krieger explains the

decision-making process behind their stylistic choices as an attempt to synthesize the narrative with that of Joe's perspective, saying: 'You're in Joe's head,' (Rosenfield, 2019). In other words, the stylistic elements operate to demonstrate Joe's romanticized worldview.

To illustrate the link between Joe's romanticized perspective and the stylistic elements, I will consider how the treatment of light turns the common event of visiting a bookstore into a grandiose affair. In the first episode, Beck is not shown as simply walking into the bookstore. Her movements are slowed down to a tempo that matches the echoing, dreamlike world, which she seems to literally step inside of. As she moves through the bookstore the light follows her every turn, illuminating parts of her body as Joe observes her from afar. The radiant light, coupled with slow-motion shots, transforms the simple, every-day act of walking into something otherworldly. Beck, steeped in an angelic glow, seems to be gliding rather than walking. This radiance that almost ensconces Beck cues an intense focus on her. The light essentially marks her as a beacon and cues the viewers to pick up Joe's perspective, which is steeped in a clear idealization of Beck's beauty.

This particular link between the stylistic element of light and Joe's perspective is implicit, as the viewers are not explicitly made aware of the correlation between the stylistic device of light and Joe's romanticized worldview. Nevertheless, it works in tandem with Joe's perspective and ultimately aligns the viewers' point of view with that of Joe's point of view. For example, as Beck walks through the bookstore, Joe follows her movements and notes in his voice-over narration: 'You're not the standard insecure nymph hunting for Faulkner you'll never finish. Too sun-kissed for Steven King,' (S1, E1). As he says, 'sun-kissed' Beck turns and the light from a window suddenly swells and spills over her shoulder in an over-exposed glare. The light expands, almost blindingly, and a whooshing sound emphasizes the intensity of the sudden flare. The interplay between the use of light and Joe's narration cues an intimate link between Joe's perspective and the stylistic devices. It is clear that the viewers are not receiving the events from some omnipotent, unidentified, impersonal point of view. If this was the case then we might have just seen a girl walking into a bookstore: no otherworldly echoes, no 'luscious slow-motion shots' (Rosenfield, 2019), no ethereal light.

From the very start of the series the viewers perceive the *fabula*, the narrative events, through Joe's perspective. This is significant as the particular stylistic devices used in the opening scenes, like the soft ambient sounds, angelic light and Joe's voice-over narration work to

establish Joe's perspective with that of the viewers' perspective. In other words, Joe's narration, which is underpinned by his perspective, functions as the viewers' initial access into the story world. In addition to the stylistic devices cueing inferences associated with the romance formula, it is also important to consider the *syuzhet*'s<sup>9</sup> arrangement of the narrative. I argue that the chronological placement of the narrative events further solidifies the viewers' expectation of the romance formula. Bordwell equates this power of the *syuzhet* with psychologists' theory of the primacy effect:

The order of events governs how we understand them, and the first item has greater saliency. Likewise, a film's opening will set a benchmark against which we measure what happens later. The characters we first encounter, the point at which we enter the story action, and other elements will shape our inferences (Bordwell, 2008:127).

I argue therefore that the narrative event of Joe meeting Beck, functioning as the series' opening, coupled with stylistic elements that evoke a love story as opposed to a thriller, successfully establishes the 'benchmark' of the romance formula in terms of the viewers' inference. Within this dynamic of the *syuzhet*'s placement of Joe and Beck's romantic meet-cute as the first point at which the viewers enter the story action, and the patterning of stylistic devices that cue inferences more closely related to the romance formula lies a meta-fictional conceit: the narration, the inferential model, is concerned with a particular storytelling mode that evokes the romance motif instead of the thriller. The inference of the romance formula is not yet problematic, for at this point in the *fabula* Joe has committed no crime and the suspense constituent of the thriller genre has not yet come into play. In season one's meet-cute, Joe simply notes Beck's presence; although the intensity of his observations might be indicative of the obsessive behaviour to follow. However, as the series progresses the narcissistic internalization of the romance motif becomes increasingly apparent as it actively undermines thriller constituents by deliberately foregrounding the romance formula.

As stated above, the viewers' inference of the romance formula in the first season's opening scenes is not yet problematic as there are no thriller elements to upset this expectation. However, this changes once the thriller element of suspense creeps into the narrative. After having met Beck in the bookstore, Joe's obsession escalates and his behaviour grows increasingly nefarious: first, he finds her online profiles, then he moves on to locate her address,

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<sup>9</sup> The *syuzhet* refers to the process whereby the story or *fabula* is arranged (Bordwell, 2008:123).

and finally familiarizes himself with her day-to-day routine. Joe is shown following Beck from the start of her day. He walks outside the yoga studio where Beck teaches an early morning class, then follows her onto campus where he continues to track her around the campus grounds. Finally, Joe sits at a bar with his back to Beck's table, eavesdropping on her conversation with her friends.

In these few scenes the viewers should already recognize some semblance of the thriller genre. Joe is demonstrating questionable behaviour that befits a criminal protagonist from the thriller genre as he attempts to ingratiate himself in Beck's life. However, the opening scenes have established an expectation of the romance formula that renders the viewers' perception of the thriller constituents somewhat impaired. That is to say the viewers having been introduced to something that 'feels like a great New York love story' (Rosenfield, 2019), which the stylistic devices deliberately evoke, continue to perceive it as such. It is therefore plausible that some viewers might overlook the thriller genre, which functions in the *fabula* from as early as the first episode, because the narcissistic internalization of the romance motif in the inferential model mirrors a specific storytelling process that emphasizes the romance formula consequently subduing the thriller constituents. By taking a closer look at the scenes where Joe first starts to follow Beck, and examining the filmic techniques, one will find stylistic elements that again manipulate the viewers' inference of the romance formula by maintaining the narcissistic internalization of the romance motif.

In the scenes depicting Joe stalking Beck, the camera quickly moves between Joe, Beck and the different locations they travel to. The fast-paced panning shots indicate Beck's busy schedule, however, it also almost helps Joe to disappear as he is only shown briefly with less of a focal point placed on him. The stylistic devices do not foreground Joe as an ominous figure lurking within the shadows. Instead, he is out in daylight, easily blending into the crowd with nothing but a simple baseball cap that marks an attempt to obscure his identity. Besides that, one signifier of deceit that might cue an inference of suspicion, Joe is relatively cavalier about his actions and therefore the viewers are not cued by any stylistic element to recognize any immediate threat. In addition to this, the stylistic devices used in these scenes include a romantic, upbeat song that starts to play from the moment Joe starts to follow Beck. As the viewers watch Joe stalk Beck, they hear the loving lyrics of Ritchie Valens's song *We Belong Together* (1959).

In these particular scenes, the stylistic elements demonstrate covert meta-fiction as it internalizes the romance motif through the auditory element of *We Belong Together* (1959). The cheery, and significantly romantic, 50's rock song combined with Joe's own optimism and nonchalant trailing work to cast Joe as a protagonist that is suggestive of a romantic comedy, instead of the social misfit and non-professional criminal protagonist whose actions are clearly parallel to that of Joe's. It is clear then that the stylistic devices work in opposition with the thriller constituents in the *fabula*. It is not unheard of for films or series to layer a musical trope over a scene that runs contrary with the actions on screen. For example, the 1970s film *A Clockwork Orange* (1972) depicts a grotesquely violent rape scene with the cheerful song *Singin' in the Rain* (1952). Although the song *We Belong Together* (1959) layered over Joe's stalking signals a similarly ironic twist, it does not mean that this irony is overtly obvious for all viewers. For unlike Alex's explicit rape scene in *A Clockwork Orange* (1972), Joe's crime at this point of the narrative is nowhere near as monstrous.

The stylistic devices (Joe out in daylight, his preppy and often humorous narration coupled with the cheerful song) work congruently to internalize the romance formula as opposed to the thriller. Therefore, it does not work to create a deeply ironic scene meant to explicitly expose pure malevolence. For this reason, the irony in these scenes depicting Joe stalking Beck around town, is much more subtle as it operates under the guise of the romance formula.

I therefore argue that the stylistic devices are cued to prompt an inference of Joe's actions as less threatening and concerning by positioning the viewers' interpretation of the narrative events, such as stalking, as a romantic endeavour. In this scene Joe's motive is to get closer to Beck, to get to know her, a motive, however misaligned, that remains tied up in the moral fantasy of the romance genre. It is therefore reasonable to argue that the much more subtle irony exhibited in the conflation of Joe's stalking and Valens's song might escape some viewers whose expectation of the narrative picks up the development of the romance formula as opposed to the thriller.

When the stylistic devices work in opposition to the thriller constituents in the *fabula* the narcissistic focus on manipulating the inferential model becomes progressively apparent. For example, one can already discern the manipulation of the *fabula* exposed within the aforementioned scenes where the viewers see Joe stalking Beck. Most viewers would know that stalking is a form of harassment and might therefore feel somewhat uncomfortable

watching him display this kind of behaviour. However, the stylistic elements work to redirect the viewers' possible objection by instead cueing stylistic elements that represent the activity as a cheery, romantic pursuit. Instead of representing this particular narrative event in the *fabula* as an off-putting and disconcerting deed, which would align with society's attitude toward stalking, the implementation of stylistic devices, which include the romantic lyrics of *We Belong Together* (1959) layered over the visual representation of Joe out in daylight, calmly following Beck about the city, successfully restructures a criminal act in the guise of romantic endeavour.

I argue that when considering the inferential model's focus on the romance formula one can begin to discern the narcissistic tendencies at work in the series' cinematic narration. The *syuzhet*'s arrangement of the meet-cute in the opening scene before the thriller constituents that are only represented later results in the saliency of the romance formula. For the viewers' first encounter of the narrative, Joe meeting Beck, shaped and established their expectation of the romance formula. As I pointed out earlier, this initial expectation is not yet problematic; that is until the viewers are presented with the thriller constituents. Once the narrative starts to present the thriller constituents, for example Joe stalking Beck, the expectation of the romance formula becomes somewhat strained as the narrative unfolds across two distinct genres that establish two conflicting expectations. The viewers are therefore forced to measure the thriller constituents against the established benchmark of the romance formula. It is exactly this cognitive comparison, brought on by the operation of both the romance and thriller formulas, that exposes the narcissistic tendencies within the inferential model. For as I have demonstrated in the short scene where Joe stalks Beck, the stylistic devices deliberately emphasize the inference of the romance formula as opposed to the thriller. It is worth pointing out that this exposure is only possible when the internalization of the romance formula works in tandem with the thriller constituents. It is exactly because the internalization of the romance formula tries to undermine the thriller constituents in the *fabula* that the narcissistic tendency of manipulating the process (the story told) exposes itself.

In the aforementioned interview with the series' director Lee Toland Krieger, Kat Rosenfield notes how the stylistic choices causes the audience to fall in love with a sociopath:

Everything about *You*, from the sunset-colored palette to the dolly camerawork to the soft focus at the edges of the frame, tells you that you're watching a romance. So by the time you see Joe

in one of his most transgressive moments — playing a peeping (and, er, masturbating) tom on a stoop with a view into Beck’s bedroom window — it’s already too late (Rosenfield, 2019).

Rosenfield’s closing remark, ‘it’s already too late’, inadvertently illustrates the power the *syuzhet* exercises over the *fabula*. The opening scene, having set a precedent for the romance formula, guides the viewers’ expectation thereof. In addition to this initial inception, the narration continues to internalize the romance formula through the stylistic devices as I have demonstrated with the scenes where Joe starts stalking Beck. The cinematic narration (the inferential model) therefore affects the *fabula* to such a degree that the viewers are led to interpret the romance formula instead of the thriller. The consequence of the narcissistic internalization is manifested in Rosenfield’s remark as the viewers are rendered half blind to the thriller constituents, meaning when they see Joe in his ‘most transgressive moments’ (Rosenfield, 2019) the inference is not that of the thriller as it has already been and continues to be actively and narcissistically re-aligned with that of the romance formula.

The inferential model, therefore, exposes its manipulation of the *fabula* in as far as it tries to evoke the romance motif instead of the thriller. However, as I have already demonstrated, the thriller elements in the first episode are not yet glaringly blatant. This means that the exposure of the internalization of the romance formula as a manipulative tool is not yet as obvious for the viewers to discern. Having said that, as the narrative progresses the thriller constituents become more pronounced, and as a result the narcissistic tendencies that actively attempt to reinforce the romance formula exposes the manipulation of the *fabula* to the viewers.

A particular instance that demonstrates the narcissistic tendencies in the inferential model, where the manipulative interconnectivity between the *romance formula* and Joe’s perspective is exposed, can be found in the episode *Amour Fou* (S1, E6). In this episode, Joe follows Beck and Peach on their girls’ trip to Peach’s summerhouse in Greenwich Connecticut. Throughout the episode, Joe thinks about the predicament between Peach, Beck and himself. After a failed attempt to kill Peach, Joe tries to figure out Peach’s intentions and his observations inadvertently expose parts of his own behaviour. Joe notes that Peach is ‘obsessed’ with Beck (S1, E6). He also remarks that Peach wants Beck all to herself and that she ‘[is] busy making [Beck] all hers, forever,’ (S1, E6). Later in the episode Joe tells Beck that Peach is ‘manipulating’ her and exposes Peach’s secret when he discloses that Peach is in love with Beck.

Joe and Peach share an obsession with Beck and they both exercise this obsession through some form of manipulation. Joe, for example, stalks Beck in order to keep track of her life, whereas Peach manipulates their friendship to keep Beck close to her. It is therefore ironic that Joe should describe Peach as manipulative and obsessive as he demonstrates the same behaviour. The overarching equivalence is that Joe, like Peach, wants Beck all to himself, as is evidenced by his attempt to murder those he deems threatening to their relationship, for example Benji and Peach. Joe's remarks about Peach inadvertently emphasize the parallelism that exists between the two of them. However, the viewers might not yet realize the similarity between the two as Joe actively differentiates himself from Peach through language that makes specific reference to the romance formula.

Throughout the episode Joe uses language that specifically evokes the romance motif. At the start of the episode Joe watches Beck answer to Peach's beck and call and says, 'Oh, my shackled Cinderella, if Peach gets her way you'll be making organic concussion tonic until your beauty fades,' (S1, E6). The entire sentence alludes to the archaic fairy-tale structure whereby the princess is impeded by the villain and consequently kept from her saviour. With this line Joe tries to differentiate himself from Peach through use of the romance formula. Later on in the episode, when Joe finally reaches Peach's summer house, he observes his surroundings and says: 'This place is a castle. Complete with wicked witch and damsel in distress. Guess that makes me your knight. For you, Beck, yes,' (S1, E6). Again, it is evident that Joe tries to separate himself from Peach through language that references the fairy-tale structure, which is a close relative to the romance formula in that it focuses on 'the reconciliation of a romantic pair' (Lee, 2008: 52). The internalization of the romance formula exposes itself through Joe's attempt to cast Peach in the role of villain. The exposure of the romance formula in this sense, which is through Joe's direct references to constituents of the fairy-tale structure, manipulates viewers' perception of the *fabula* in terms of the romance formula. It is therefore reasonable to assume that some viewers might still be unperceptive to the similarities between Peach and Joe as he actively casts Peach as the 'wicked witch' of the narrative and himself as the 'knight' (S1, E6).

Although there are parallels between Joe and Peach, they are obscured by Joe's evocation of the romance formula. However, the parallelism between the two is explicitly demonstrated in a specific scene that visually illustrates this love triangle. In this scene, Joe is shown hiding in a room, silently watching Beck who is in another room across the hall. She slowly gets

undressed and Joe muses over the life he wishes to give her. His musings are interrupted when Peach, who is unaware of his presence, steps into the hall. She brings Beck a drink before leaving her to bathe. The viewers see Peach walking back down the hall when suddenly she stops. Peach turns around, quietly. She moves against the wall and pokes her head around the corner, watching Beck as she lies in the bath. In one frame we see Beck lying in the bath, Peach staring at her from behind the first doorframe and in the distance, we see a second doorframe, behind Peach, from where Joe peers at Peach peering at Beck. Joe is clearly troubled by Peach's behaviour and the viewers hear the disgust in his voice-over narration: 'Look at that! How dare she invade your privacy like that? It's perverse! ... Now, how long is she going to stand there staring at you?' (S1, E6).

If the viewers were unaware of the parallelism between Joe and Peach, this scene forces them to recognize Peach and Joe's shared behaviour. The visual depiction of Joe watching Peach watch Beck illustrates a mirror effect whereby Peach's 'perverse' behaviour reflects that of Joe's. By recognizing this parallelism, the viewers are forced to reflect on the romance formula, or more specifically on Joe's evocation of the romance formula. In other words, if some viewers have remained impartial to the thriller constituents, up to this point in the narrative, this scene offers them an opportunity of retrospection, allowing them to ask how the narration has led them to associate Joe with the 'knight', or the hero, as opposed to a criminal protagonist from the thriller genre. By following this consideration, these viewers might come to recognise Joe's evocation of the romance formula as a manipulative narrative tool that worked to align their inference of him as the romantic hero.

The parallelism between Joe and Peach, which exposes the manipulation of the romance formula, leaves the viewers with two options pertaining their understanding of the narrative. Either they acknowledge the manipulation of the *fabula* through Joe's romanticized worldview and come to understand him as the real threat in comparison to Peach, giving precedence to the thriller constituents; or the viewers might decide to continue with their initial expectation of the romance formula knowing that if they do not, they will have to acknowledge that their interpretation have been manipulated into shaping Joe as the hero of the narrative. I am not particularly interested in the choice the viewers make, as this is speculative conjecture especially when taking into account the great variety that constitutes viewership. What I am interested in is that either way the inferential model's momentary exposure of the romance formula allows the viewers to reflect on their interpretation of the narrative up to this point.

The episode *Amour Fou* (S1, E6), and this particular scene that illustrates the love triangle, essentially engenders a moment of self-reflexivity whereby the viewers acknowledge their own agency in shaping the narrative as either thriller or romance; that is to see Joe as either the criminal protagonist from the thriller genre or the triumphant hero from the romance genre.

### **Bluebeard's Castle: Narcissistic Internalization of the Romance Formula through *mise en abyme***

Up to this point, I have demonstrated the series' narcissistic tendencies by analysing the inferential model's treatment/ representation of the two conflicting genres, thriller and romance, unfolding across the narrative events. In my analysis I have determined that there is an active focus on the romance formula whereby the inferential model implements stylistic cues that deliberately elicit the viewers' expectation of the romance genre as opposed to the thriller. However, I have yet to demonstrate how the narrative elements contribute to this metafictional paradigm.

To be able to further discuss the self-awareness of form in *You*, it must be pointed out that the narcissistic text, which demonstrates varying forms of self-reflexiveness, is process-oriented because it comments on its own mode(s) of storytelling. In the series *You*, there is a focus on process, or storytelling, rather than the story told. By that I mean that the story is not solely focused on progression in narrative, the unfolding of events leading to a conclusion. Instead, the narrative has moments wherein it reflects its own process. The process (the mode of storytelling) in *You*, is intensely intertwined with an acute awareness of the romance formula, which we have seen in terms of the series conflation of genre and the inferential model's internalization of the romance formula. It is therefore clear that *You*'s narrative identity is a narcissistic identity that predominantly reflects the romance formula, which in turn reveals a focus on process, or storytelling. The narrative becomes mimetic of itself as it often reflects a dominant motif, the romance formula, which functions in the primary diegesis.

These self-reflexive moments operating within the series' narrative elements can be illustrated through the French term *mise en abyme*. This concept, developed in French poetics from the coinage by André Gide, has varying definitions at present as critics differ in their approach to the 'abyss', which the term *mise en abyme* – 'placed into the abyss' – refers to. However, the diverse approaches to the concept's function in art are fundamentally rooted in considerations

of ‘mirroring’ and ‘reflection’ (Hawthorne, 1998). According to Brian McHale there are three determining criteria that constitute the *mise en abyme*:

[F]irst it is a nested or embedded representation, occupying a narrative level inferior to that of the primary, diegetic narrative world; secondly, this nested representation resembles ... something at the level of the primary, diegetic world; and thirdly, this “something” that it resembles must constitute some salient and continuous aspect of the primary world, salient and continuous enough that we are willing to say the nested representation reproduces or duplicates the primary representation as a whole (McHale, 1987:124-5).

By considering *mise en abyme* in *You*, I will identify narrative copies – reflections – that exist within the series’ *fabula* and explain how they comment, narcissistically, on the series’ narrative process.

To identify the use of *mise en abyme* in *You*, I will consider McHale’s three criteria alongside two specific examples of nested representation in the series. The first example is Joe’s description of *Don Quixote* in the Pilot episode from season 1. In relation to the overall narrative, this moment seems fleeting and fairly insignificant as it does not progress any major plot developments. However, in a discussion of process-oriented narratives and *mise en abyme*, it takes on an element of critical distinction.

The very fact that this moment, where Joe briefly describes the book to Paco, may well be forgotten or overlooked by some viewers, substantiates McHale’s first criterion which states that the nested representation operates on an inferior level to the primary narrative. On the first level, we have the diegetic narrative world of *You*, wherein we understand the action-centred events and salient style of the primary text – the series. The first level is considered the primary narrative. Within this level exists the ‘nested representation’ that is subordinate or ‘inferior’ to the primary narrative (McHale, 1987:124). In this episode, Joe shows Paco the cage, pulls out an edition of *Don Quixote* (1605/1615) and shortly explains what the book is about:

Joe: Quixote. It’s about a guy who believes in chivalry, so he decides to be an old-school knight.

Paco: What’s chivalry?

Joe: It’s treating people with respect. Especially women. Like men should (S1, E1).

This reference to the chivalric code does not necessarily develop the primary narrative, however, it does act as a copy thereof as Joe's description of Alonso Quixano as 'a guy who believes in chivalry' (S1, E1) is a nested representation, or reflection, of his own character in the primary narrative – for he, like Alonso, believes in knightly chivalry and is caught in his own imaginings of romance. Alonso and Joe attempt to live by the code of chivalric romances, which they have both read about in fictive works, and desperately try to assume the role of heroic protagonist. However, both their perceptions and actions are rooted in delusion. Therefore, this brief exchange between Joe and Paco creates a mirroring affect that reflects 'something' at the primary level of *You*.

This 'something', which the nested representation is said to mirror at the primary level, is Joe's continued attempt to fulfil the romance formula. Joe and Paco's discussion of *Don Quixote* and knightly chivalry brings to mind the chivalric code, which is closely associated with the heroic romance narratives from the Medieval Ages. Throughout the series, Joe either explicitly refers to elements from the romance formula or implicitly evokes it by following its narrative paradigms. From as early as the first episode he casts Beck in the role of 'damsel in distress' who, by virtue of the role, needs to be saved: 'What you really need is someone to save you. I can help, Beck. Let me help you,' (S1, E1). Alonso, too, casts his neighbour Aldonza Lorenzo, a peasant girl, in the exalted role of Dulcinea del Toboso, simply because, according to Alonso's understanding, the chivalric romance requires it. The nested text of *Don Quixote* in *You* mirrors Joe's continued attempt, at the primary narrative level, to assume the role of knight-errant, the heroic protagonist, just like Alonso decided to become, as Joe himself explained, 'an old-school knight' (S1, E1). Joe's description of Quixote as 'a guy who believes in chivalry' (S1, E1) mirrors the heroic romance narratives that Joe has internalized and continually attempts to actualise in the pursuit of his own romantic relationships at the primary narrative level. Thus, the nested text works to expose the storytelling mode at the primary level of *You*.

There are less significant references made to the romance formula, which occur throughout the series, that can in themselves be understood as 'copies', as they mirror narrative and cultural constituents of the romance formula that help to intensify the romance motif at the primary level. However, they are only partly mimetic, as they do not offer a more complete reflection

of the primary narrative; a copy that reflects the finer nuances of the primary narrative like the nested text of *Don Quixote*.

For example, in season 1 episode four (*The Captain*), Beck tells Joe the truth about her dad after attending a literary festival honouring the literary work of Charles Dickens. Beck explains how her dad's volatile history with drug addiction resulted in him abandoning their family when she was still a child. Beck says that she will not 'subject' Joe to spending time with her dysfunctional family at dinner. (S1, E4) However, Joe insists on attending and evokes Victorian ideals to justify his commitment:

Joe: I'd be on board, but that would be so un-Victorian of me. The virtuous maiden is supposed to be rescued by the dashing, sometimes broody, altogether charming hero.

Beck: And who is that? Is that meant to be you? (S1, E4)

This reference is only partly mimetic as it mirrors the archetype from the romance formula and by extent some cultural underpinnings of the Victorian era. Joe's referential language brings to mind the cultural sentiment of idealized femininity in the chaste heroine: both descriptors 'virtuous' and 'maiden' places Beck in the archaic, Western ideal of womanhood and Victorian morality that, it is important to note, scarcely aligns with her actions in the primary narrative; while the premise of 'saving' this type of stock character evokes the counterpart of male supremacy embodied in the Victorian hero. The suggestion then of Beck as the 'virtuous maiden' and Joe as the 'brooding' yet 'altogether charming hero' reveals Joe's misaligned perception of the primary narrative. Up to this point in the narrative, Beck is more accurately having casual sexual encounters with strangers and Joe is repeatedly lying to Beck and murdering those whom he perceives as a threat. The reference can therefore be understood as a copy as it works to emphasize the romance formula, resultantly reflecting Joe's idealization of their relationship at the primary diegetic level. However, it does not reflect Joe's idealization of romance as misguided and inappropriate; an important narrative nuance that is more fully reflected by the nested text of *Don Quixote*.

Another nested text, which more fully reflects the process at the primary narrative, can be found in the last episode of season one titled *Bluebeard's Castle* (S1, E10). The copy, which occurs

at the end of the first season, acts like a rear-view mirror for the viewers with which to review season one's narrative. Beck's retrospection reflects and as a result exposes, more fully, the storytelling mode of the series. Her incorporation of fairy-tale and *Bluebeard* fully reflects the two contesting genres (thriller and romance) that operate at the primary narrative level.

In *Bluebeard's Castle* (S1, E10), Beck discovers who Joe really is when she finds the hidden box in his bathroom's ceiling. Her discovery results in Joe locking her up in the cage. From there, she starts to reflect with the question: 'How the hell did you end up here?' (S1, E10). By narrating her writing aloud, Beck explains what led to her current situation and exposes the conflation between the two genres that operate on the primary narrative level of *You* – thriller and romance.

Throughout this short narration, Beck focuses on fairy-tale and explains how her belief in this literary form allowed her to succumb to Joe's charm. Beck explains that she kept on believing in fairy-tale and 'Prince Charming' because she 'needed to be saved,' (S1, E10). Her confession aligns with Joe's conclusion from the first episode: 'What you really need is someone to save you. I can help, Beck. Let me help you,' (S1, E1). Her belief in the 'love story' is, therefore, realized when she meets Joe. For Beck, their story felt like a fairy-tale and therefore 'too good to be true' (S1, E10). She identified him as her saviour, the heroic protagonist from the fairytales that were in her 'deep as poison' and realized too late that her 'Prince Charming' was truly Bluebeard. Beck's focus on fairy-tale, I believe, is significant, for it constitutes the amalgamation between thriller and romance, as old folk tales, the historic source of fairy-tale, were often steeped in both violent and romantic endeavours. This seemingly conflicting combination is powerfully illustrated in the opening lines of Beck's narration:

'You used to wrap yourself in fairy tales like a blanket, but it was the cold you loved. Sharp shivers as you uncovered the corpses of Bluebeard's wives, sweeter goosebumps as Prince Charming slid one glass slipper over your little toes, a perfect fit,' (S1, E10).

*Mise en abyme*, in Beck's narration, is further emphasized when she draws strong parallels between the French fairy-tale *Bluebeard* and Joe (the primary narrative). The fairy-tale mirrors Joe's actions as he, like Bluebeard, has a pattern of killing the women he loves. Furthermore, both Bluebeard and Joe have hidden compartments where they stow away the evidence of their crimes: Bluebeard has a room, kept under lock, that contains the corpses of his previous wives;

Joe has the hidden compartment in his bathroom ceiling where he hides a box with various items linking him to various crimes. There is also some similarity between Bluebeard's last wife and Beck, as both women's curiosity led them to uncover the literal hidden truth. The similarity between the two stories is made explicit when Beck describes Joe's cage as Bluebeard's castle: 'Now in his castle you understand Prince Charming and Bluebeard are the same man,' (S1, E10). The strong parallels between Beck's 'love story' and the tale of *Bluebeard* acts as a copy of the series' primary narrative and consequently exposes the contesting genres that are at work in the diegetic narrative.

The nested fairy tale of *Bluebeard* consequently mirrors the series' own storytelling process. The conflation between Prince Charming and Bluebeard mirrors the series' salient narrative feature of casting Joe as both the heroic protagonist and the villainous Bluebeard. Beck's retrospective writing offers viewers a self-reflexive commentary on the storytelling process embedded in the primary narrative. Like the parallelism between Joe and Peach in *Amour Fou* (S1, E6) allows the viewers to recognize the inferential model's internalization of the romance formula, by extent revealing the viewers' involvement in interpreting the narrative as romance and Joe as the romantic hero; the series' finale again prompts the viewers to reconsider their own approach to the overall narrative through the nested text of *Bluebeard*.

Just like Beck is left to re-examine her beliefs in the fairy-tale form, the viewers are led to reassess their own expectation of the romance formula. For like Beck discovers, the fairy-tales were in her 'deep as poison' (S1, E10). I argue that this description references the viewers' near instinctual expectation of formula that Tudor describes as genre's set of 'cultural conventions' informed by spectatorship (Tudor, 1974: 135-8). In other words, there is some semblance between Beck's belief in the fairy-tale and the viewers' belief or continued expectation of the romance genre. If the viewers, like Beck, come to finally understand the significance of this expectation they will realise their shared responsibility in interpreting Joe as the romantic hero as opposed to the thriller's criminal protagonist.

### **The Title and the Narcissistic Text's Paradoxical Condition**

I propose that the viewers' expectation the 'love story' should be analysed alongside the series' title. For I argue that the title itself can be considered as yet another metafictional conceit that retrospectively culminates the manipulative narcissistic tendencies and its consequent effect on

the viewers. Let us then consider the title from the perspective of potential first-time viewers, viewers who have no prior knowledge about the series. The title is the first signifier of the narrative to come and therefore operates as the first point of narration. Considering the title as the first point of narration, we consequently ask how the title functions in conjunction with the story/ the narrative. In other words, we begin to ask how the title relates to the narrative, if it sets up any precursory expectation and if so, what initial expectation does it establish?

As the signifier of the narrative, the pronoun ‘you’ does not necessarily relay any information about the story to those viewers who know nothing about the series. It stands alone with no delimiting words to suggest whom it might be directed at. Its non-specificity leaves little room for speculation and offers the viewers no real foothold into the possible narrative. In that sense, the pronoun ‘you’ is ambiguous. This ambiguity frustrates the viewers’ insight into what the possible narrative might involve. A title that offers no clear position from which to estimate the narrative leaves the viewers to actively look for its intended subject. Therefore, the viewers interact with the narrative by actively trying to identify who the title is directed at.

Once the viewers watch the series, they might assume that the title is directed at Guinevere Beck. It is a valid assumption since Joe’s first words echo a reference to the title: ‘Well, hello there. Who are *you*?’ (S1, E1). The lingering question is a prelude to Joe’s keen observations that slowly demystifies Beck. From the moment Joe sees Beck his inner monologue morphs into something of a conversation that continues throughout the season. For example, in episode 5 *Living with the Enemy*, Joe runs away after attempting to kill Beck’s best friend, Peach. While he runs he thinks to himself:

She was going to ruin you. But you’re safe now, thanks to me. I just want you to live your best life. It’s brave what I do for you. It’s not easy. It’s hard. Sometimes it makes me sick. I’m brave. How many guys are willing to do anything for the person they love, honestly, Beck? You’re lucky to have me (S1, E5).

This one-sided dialogue is filled with the pronoun ‘you’ as Joe’s narration predominantly addresses Beck, reinforcing the association between Beck and the title. It is, therefore, understandable that the viewers identify Beck as the title’s intended subject. Based on the narrative elements, the story told, it is clear that the title *You* is directed at the object of Joe’s obsession. However, as the first season comes to an end so does Joe and Beck’s relationship.

With the start of the second season, the ambiguity of the title recurs, as the title, once again, has no clear addressee. In the first episode of the second season, Joe seems to have turned a new page as the title *A Fresh Start* itself suggests. With the reoccurrence of his ex-girlfriend Candace, and Beck's horrific death, Joe simply wants to disappear and live a life without love. However, when Joe sees Love Quinn in the grocery store at Anavrin we encounter a scene that is homologous with the first season's opening in the bookstore. Soft ambient music starts to play when Joe sees Love. The music is similar to the music we hear when Joe sees Beck for the first time in the bookstore. The background noise in the store is dulled into a barely audible echo and we are reminded of the dreamlike echoes that flooded the bookstore in season one's first episode. Joe begins to observe Love, like he observed Beck, and utters, or rather thinks, an almost identical phrase: 'Hello, you,' (S2, E1). Evidenced on the pronounced parallelism between the two scenes, it is reasonable for the viewers to assume that Joe will resume his old ways and fixate on Love, like he did with Beck. As a result, the ambiguity surrounding the title dissolves for a new target, or addressee has been identified.

When analysing the title with the narrative elements it is evident that the subject keeps changing: at first, we think the title refers to Beck, then it addresses Love and at the end of the second season, Joe notices his neighbour and says: 'This is just the beginning, because this is where I had to be, exactly, where I had to be to meet you. There you were with your books and your sunshine, so close but worlds away. I will figure out a way, a way to get to you,' (S2, E10). Considered alongside the series' narrative alone, the title *You* functions as an empty, non-descriptive descriptor that offers an inescapable cycle of replaceable subjects: Candace, Beck, Love, even the viewers. Joe selects a stranger, any 'you' is therefore susceptible. Once the relationship falls apart, the process is repeated, as is evidenced by the parallelism between the first episode of both season one and two as well as the final episode of season two, which hints at Joe's future endeavours. Candace, Beck, Love and whoever else might fall victim to Joe's obsession, will inevitably be replaced leaving Joe to start again, from the beginning, as demonstrated by that non-specific title *You*.

It is reasonable then to conclude that the title falls short of ascribing, wholly, to a particular character in the narrative. In light of this realization, the title, in relation to specific characters in the narrative, seems somewhat vacuous. However, treating the series *You* as a narcissistic text means that we have to not only consider the narrative but the narrative process at work in the series. Since the title is not exclusively indicative of the narrative alone, we must start to

consider the title in relation to its narrative identity – its narration. By putting the title in dialogue with the series’ narration, we move beyond the question of *who* the title refers to and instead ask *what* internal narrative structures the title might be suggestive of.

The title, I believe, can be considered as a self-reflexive descriptor of the series’ own narrative structures as the word ‘you’ marks significant moments in the series’ narration, or inferential model, where Joe first observes the woman whom he will fixate on. As a result, the phrases including this emphasis on and reference to the title *You* – ‘Who are you?’ from the opening scene of season one (S1, E1); ‘Hello, you.’ from the opening scene in season two (S2, E1); and ‘[...] a way to get to you’ (S2, E2) from the closing scene of season two –all stand to mark significant moments, not only in the narrative events, but in the inferential model. The use of the word ‘you’ in these particular scenes indicate a pattern in Joe’s behaviour; however, it also signifies a significant pattern in the series’ inferential model. For as Joe identifies a new individual to obsess over, the inferential model consequently repeats its internalization of the romance formula by representing Joe’s obsession through stylistic and narrative elements that elicit the romance formula. Therefore, the title *You* can be understood as a self-reflexive descriptor of the series’ narration as it signifies an important narrative paradigm that operates within the inferential model; that being the internalisation of the romance formula and the resultant narcissistic tendencies that explicate a focus on process and representation through the predominant romance motif.

However, the title *You*, also demonstrates an outward focus by virtue of the second person pronoun itself. By this, I mean that the title turns its focus outward, beyond the text, and implicates the viewers directly. According to Hutcheon, the narcissistic text demands the reader to participate and engage as ‘co-creator’ in the fictive work (Hutcheon, 1980: 7); in terms of cinematic narration, the viewers would cognitively engage with the inferential model by inferring, essentially co-creating, meaning from the presented narrative and stylistic cues. I argue then that the series’ title demonstrates this very outward focus. The title, understood as directly addressing the viewers, points to the viewers’ own agency in the meaning making process. In other words, the title considered as direct address exposes the viewers’ involvement with the inferential model and their ‘co-creation’ of the narrative. For as Bordwell explains in *The Poetics of Cinema*, the viewers play an integral part in ascribing meaning to the narrative presented; meaning that the viewers play a key role by being able to infer meaning from the narrative and stylistic cues in order to make the narrative comprehensible.

Treating the title then as a signifier of a narcissistic text and by considering it in terms of the narrative process, instead of the series' narrative events alone, we come to find a paradoxical condition, a two-fold function operating in the title: first, it is a self-reflexive descriptor of the series' own narrative identity; second, it reveals the viewers' participation as co-creators in the fictional world of the series. Hutcheon identifies this phenomenon as the paradoxical condition of the narcissistic text: 'The text's own paradox is that it is both narcissistically self-reflexive and yet focused outward, oriented toward the reader,' (Hutcheon, 1980:7).

The title's paradoxical condition, which is a phenomenon of the narcissistic text, interestingly ties into the nested text of *Bluebeard*. For Beck uses this text as a way to understand her current predicament, and consequently notes the narrative paradigms of the thriller and romance that operate within the fairytale. This inward focus on the text allows Beck to further illustrate this conflation in Joe. In addition to this internal focus, whereby Beck considers the conflicting formulas of romance and thriller; of Prince Charming and the grotesque villain, the consideration of the text, of *Bluebeard* embodying both these forms, allows an outward focus whereby Beck considers her own perception and her own agency in consequently shaping their relationship in terms of the fairytale's romance constituents. In doing so, Beck realizes that she has blinded herself to perceiving the other half of the fairytale – the thriller constituents. Beck suggests this crucial understanding when she concludes:

'Now in his castle you understand Prince Charming and *Bluebeard* are the same man. And you don't get a happy end unless you love both of him. Didn't you want this, to be loved? Didn't you want him to crown you? Didn't you ask for this?' (S1,E10).

The nested text of *Bluebeard* therefore demonstrates the same paradoxical concept within the title. For the title, with its focus paradoxically turned inward on the series' narrative structures; and outward on the viewers' involvement with perceiving it, allows the viewers to reconsider both the narrative structure and the choices they made by inferring certain meanings from it. Beck asking, 'Didn't you ask for this?' in turn reveals an outward focus aimed at the viewers' engagement with the inferential model by cognitively engaging with the presented cues, choosing to shape the narrative in terms of their expectation of the romance formula. The self-reflexivity of *Bluebeard*'s text, mirroring the primary narrative of *You*, therefore forces the

viewers to acknowledge their shared responsibility and agency in ascribing meaning to the narrative.

I therefore propose that the title is to the viewers what the fairy-tale of *Bluebeard* is to Beck: the title, like the nested text, offers a retrospective clarification by way of the narcissistic text's paradoxical condition. First it exposes the repetition of the narrative process' internalization of the romance formula. The title *You* reëcurring in those significant moments when Joe first observes the new target of his affection, creates a moment of self-reflexivity where the narration marks the internalization of the romance formula; the consequent conflation of genre and the inferential model's active re-shaping of the *fabula* through the lens of the romance motif. Second, the title as direct address suggests an outward focus: that 'you', the viewers, have been misled, much like Beck, to participate in this manipulation of the *fabula* by choosing to infer the romance formula and possibly suppressing the thriller constituents as a result of this overarching inference. Thus, the title considered in terms of process and representation, instead of the narrative events alone, works to reflect the narcissistic tendencies in the series' narration and culminates in a significant metafictional conceit that ultimately exposes the series' narrative identity as one that is principally focused on process and the viewers' participation therewith.

By identifying *You* as a narcissistic text it becomes clear why fans are rooting for Joe and why reviewers are perhaps precipitous in their critique of this response. As I have mentioned before, the argument that fans are simply rooting for Joe to succeed (Build Series, 2018) because they recognize constituents of the romance formula is not completely accurate. For if one were to follow this logic, one could argue that the opposite effect should hold true as well. In other words, it should be just as easy for the viewers to perceive Joe as the criminal based on recognizable constituents of the thriller like the premise of suspense built on criminal behaviour present within the series' narrative events: stalking, kidnapping and murder. I therefore suggest that this answer, or line of reasoning, is missing a crucial detail; that being the inferential model's internalization of the romance formula. Based on my analysis of the series' narrative and narration, I submit a different approach: the viewers do not simply root for Joe to succeed because they recognize the constituents of the romance formula; instead, the viewers are led to root for Joe's success because they are cognitively engaged with stylistic and narrative cues that actively elicit the romance formula, suppressing the thriller as a result.

The *mise en abyme* (nested texts) in *You* supports this argument as it offers a self-reflexive commentary on the inferential model's reshaping of the thriller into the romance. I therefore offer the nested texts as evidence that verifies this effect as its self-reflexive commentary of the inferential model's conflation of the romance and thriller genres reveal the attempt at re-shaping the narrative in terms of the romance formula. *Don Quixote* and *Bluebeard* both mirror the conflation of the romance and thriller genres, however, *Bluebeard* specifically illustrates, in a retrospective fashion, how the viewers' expectation of romance formula has been drawn out, narcissistically, and applied to a narrative that does not follow the romance formula alone, unfolding instead across two diametrically opposed genres.

In addition, the title understood as a direct address, exposes this manipulation by pointing to the viewers' cognitive involvement with the inferential model. This focus on process or storytelling and the viewers' engagement therewith ultimately reveals the highly narcissistic and consequently manipulative narration that has guided the viewers' expectation of the romance formula. I therefore argue that fans' positive response toward Joe is not simply a response informed by a set of formulaic features or a naïve romanticization of Joe; it is a response primarily tied up in a complex representational vehicle that exploits the viewers' 'common cultural consensus' (Neale, 1999: 15) of the romance genre, which is actively influenced by a narcissistic manipulation of its strongest narrative arc that is the development of the love relationship coupled with the moral fantasy of love triumphant.

The paradoxical condition that I argue constitutes the series' narrative identity, revealing it as a true narcissistic text, forms part of the metafictional aesthetic through which to view the postmodern hero. When we consider the self-reflexive tendencies operating in the series *You* we recognize, as with the conflation of genre, a heightened focus on representation and spectatorship, shifting the understanding of the postmodern hero through mere characterization to representation itself; as *You*, understood as a narcissistic text, in effect demands the viewers to recognize their own agency in shaping the overall meaning of the narrative through their engagement with the inferential model. The added narcissistic paradigm, which prompts a focus on the *way* in which the story is told and its corresponding effect on the viewers, introduces a metadimension that surpasses the consideration of the postmodern hero's characterisation and/ or morality, which is a question based on the narrative events, the story. By identifying the metafictional aesthetic in *You* I hope to offer a new model of analysis through which to read the postmodern hero; a reading that is significantly informed by the

consideration of storytelling itself, that is a consideration of the inferential model, and its crucial influence on the viewers who hold an equal share in ascribing meaning to the overall narrative and by extent the postmodern hero.

In this chapter, I have demonstrated the series' preoccupation with process by analysing the inferential model's strategic use of stylistic devices that evince the romance formula as opposed to the thriller; I illustrated that the parallelism between Joe and Peach is largely masked by the inferential model's active attempt at representing Joe as the heroic 'knight' and Peach as the 'wicked' villain; I identified the nested texts of *Don Quixote* and *Bluebeard* as copies that mirror and expose the functioning of romance formula on the series' primary narrative level which attempts to reshape the overarching narrative in terms of the heroic romance narrative instead of the villainous criminal narrative of the thriller. Taken together, these separate instances of self-reflexivity shift the focus from the postmodern hero's actions, which constitute the story, to a focus on the postmodern hero's representation, which constitute storytelling or process.

I therefore argue that my identification of *You* as a narcissistic text, which contains self-reflexive tendencies that foreground storytelling as opposed to the story, illustrates that narration and its engagement with the viewers' cognitive inference, functions as a pivotal device that informs the viewers' understanding of the postmodern hero. That is to say, the shift from the story/ narrative itself to storytelling/ narration offers noteworthy insight into the contemporary antihero through older literary practices like 20<sup>th</sup> century postmodern thought (Pollard) and Hutcheon's consideration of the narcissistic text. It is perhaps interesting to consider how this present shift in focus connects to older literary texts and why these theories are still of significance today. Although I do not provide an answer to these questions, it is perhaps important to consider these connections as it might reveal a broader phenomenon related to metafiction and the postmodern hero. Having considered the relationship between the postmodern hero, metafiction and representation, I submit that Joe is not only a product of certain morals demonstrated through his behaviour in the narrative events; Joe is equally a product of the inferential model's representation informed by generic Hollywood conventions and formulas which the viewers are made to recognise, self-reflexively, consequently manipulating and exposing their interpretation of Joe as either hero, villain or both.

## Conclusion

I started this research paper with a consideration of the anti-hero tradition and noted the growing proliferation of these ambiguous protagonists from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present. Donnelly notes this increasing popularity of the anti-hero when considering the success of Showtime's series *Dexter* (2006). In an attempt at uncovering the reason behind the series' success, Donnelly points to critics' consideration of *Dexter* as forming part of 'the loveable rogue theme that is simply *en vogue*' (Donnelly, 2012:16). Similarly, Lyons (2021) and Tally (2016) note the same prevalence of morally ambiguous protagonists rising in popularity in the past two decades and ascribe this shift to the golden age of television that marks a significant collapse between the conventional lines that delineate the hero from the villain. Using Pollard's description of the postmodern hero as a guide into this vast topic of anti-heroism, I was able to better situate this particular figure in a contextual relationship with the postmodern shift, starting from as early as the 1940s with noir and thriller films foregrounding increasingly troubled and ultimately defeated protagonists.

Today's continued popularity of these ambiguous protagonists demand continual scrutiny as their unconventionality, which seems to be the cornerstone of the golden age of television, breeds experimental structures that influence the type of protagonist and their morality, the narrative in which they function as well as spectatorship, that is the viewers' engagement with these elements. Boggs and Pollard equate this experimental and consequently subversive quality to postmodernism's 'deep critical spirit' (Boggs & Pollard, 2001:167). Although Boggs and Pollard discuss this experimental and subversive quality in terms of postmodern cinema at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Lyons identifies the same 'genre-defying' (Lyons, 2021:227) quality in more recent television series like *The Wire* (2002-2008), *Better Call Saul* (2015-2022) and *House of Cards* (2013-2018), to name a few. While Lyons does not describe these shows as products of postmodernity like Boggs and Pollard, the concepts of 'greater moral ambiguity', 'scrutiny around ... legitimate [social] institutions' and the 'complexities of the human condition' illustrated by 'compromised protagonists' all share some semblance of postmodernism's 'deep critical spirit' emphasized by Boggs and Pollard (Lyons, 2021:226). I therefore submit that these concepts, spanning from postmodern cinema of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century to contemporary television series, generate 'new aesthetic paradigms' that consequently allow for 'new ways of seeing the world' (Boggs & Pollard, 2001: 165). It is exactly these new aesthetic paradigms, forged at least to some extent from postmodernism's 'deep critical spirit'

(Boggs & Pollard, 2001:165), that necessitates critical inquiry as they offer new forms, subversive and experimental, breaking away from established formulas or conventional tropes in Hollywood narratives.

It is this increasing popularity of anti-heroism coupled with the consideration of unconventionality and experimentation, which is in effect sustained by these morally ambiguous protagonists, that sparked my interest in the hit-series *You*. For the series' success quickly provoked an interesting debate in the online community involving the interpretation of the series' protagonist, Joe, as a hopeless romantic as opposed to a murderous villain. Beyond the question of whether or not Joe is more heroic than villainous, reviewers' descriptions of Joe seem itself contradictory as it pivots from 'nice guy' (Nussbaum, 2018), 'perfect protagonist' (Lawler, 2019), 'the kind of guy girls dream of finding' (Miller, 2018) to 'explicitly the villain' (Nussbaum, 2018), 'sadistic antihero' (Lawler, 2019) and the 'not-great-guy' (Miller, 2018).

Within these contradictory descriptions of Joe, I recognized the ambiguity attributed to the anti-hero tradition as well as the subversive structures that these complex protagonists give rise to. In an attempt to identify the reason(s) behind this controversy, I set out to analyse Joe as a protagonist, the narrative in which he functions and the viewers' engagement with this narrative through the mode of representation. By examining the series along these parameters, my analysis revealed three integral components that I argue contribute to the paradox that manifests itself in both fans' online commentary and columnists' reviews of the series.

The first contributing component that I identified in my research study was this sense of ambiguity clearly present in critic's dichotomous descriptions of Joe. Pollard emphasises ambiguity as a hallmark of the postmodern hero complex, explaining that these protagonists are 'complex individuals with an intricate combination of "good" and "evil" features' (Pollard, 2000:48), consequently casting them in a role that neither fully subscribes to that of hero or villain. The moral ambiguity, underpinned by the postmodern hero's characterization, provides some insight as to why these contradicting descriptions of Joe exist. If we consider the series' narrative events alone, we will find a striking imbalance in Joe's characterization that frustrates our attempt to understand and by extent classify him as either 'good' or 'bad'.

On the one hand, the narrative events reveal that Joe does not fully subscribe to the ‘heroic ideal’ epitomized by the modern hero. For Joe falls desperately short of morally sound and virtuous behaviour when we see him continually invading people’s privacy, lying, kidnapping unsuspecting victims and consequently murdering those who pose a threat to his relationships. On the other hand, the narrative events indicate that Joe is not completely void of any moral compass. In fact, Joe frequently evokes a set of chivalric values when he justifies his attempt to ‘save’ Beck from manipulative characters like Peach and Benji who disregard Beck’s true worth and use her for their own selfish needs. For example, the narrative events clearly illustrate that Benji is only interested in casual sexual encounters with Beck and Peach deliberately bars Beck from actualizing any meaningful success as a writer as evidenced by her continued attempts to distract or discourage Beck from writing. In comparison with these characters, Joe seems to hold the upper hand in as far as he truly sees Beck’s worth both as an individual and as an aspiring writer. In addition to Joe’s protective nature concerning his love interests, he also goes out of his way to shelter children like Paco, in season one, and Ellie, in season two, from potential abusers. This second-half of Joe’s characterization that involves an unwavering determination and a set of chivalric values that he relies on to justify his actions realigns him somewhat with the modern hero. Joe’s intricate characterization, which patterns across two extremes, ‘good’ and ‘evil’, complicates definitive labels such as hero or villain as he subscribes to both, in turn subverting each classification. The ambiguity of the postmodern hero, therefore, does help to provide crucial insight as to why reviewers and fans describe Joe in such contradicting terms.

Although the morally ambiguous nature of the postmodern hero helps to explain why reviewers are able to describe Joe as both ‘charming’ and ‘psychotic’, the issue of morality alone does not fully demonstrate the complexities behind this phenomenon. As I previously explained in chapter one, this controversy surrounding the series *You* is not solely a product of Joe’s moral ambiguity. As part of postmodern cinema’s ‘deep critical spirit’ (Boggs & Pollard, 2001:165), which I referred to previously as being discernible in contemporary television as evidenced by Lyons’ description of the anti-heroes’ ‘genre-defying’ (Lyons, 2021: 227) narratives, the series *You* also contains a subversive structure that conflates and so challenges two established Hollywood formulas namely: the thriller and romance genres. This means that the dichotomous interpretation of Joe is further influenced by a subversive narrative structure that amalgamates two conflicting formulas. I therefore submit the series’ unique conflation of genre as the second

contributing factor that problematizes reviewers' and fans' interpretation of Joe as either hero or villain.

It is therefore important to consider how the narrative in *You* patterns across two diametrically opposed formulas as this conflation further complicates the viewers' perception of Joe. In chapter one, I paid particular attention to this paradoxical dynamic by highlighting what Cawelti describes as the romance formula's development of the 'love relationship' (Cawelti, 1977: 41) and Derry's consideration of the thriller's transformation from 'known' to 'unknown' (Neale, 1999: 76). Again, we seem to find an ambiguous delineation between two extremes, this time, a frustrating counterbalance between the romance and thriller formulas. On the one hand, the series *You* follows the development of a love relationship. When considering season one it is impossible to overlook the clear precedence of Joe and Beck's relationship, solidified in the very first scenes of episode one when Joe utters that famous line which has since been 'memeified'<sup>10</sup>: 'Well, hello there. Who are you?' (S1, E1). The *syuzhet's* placement of this meet-cute, positioned before the thriller constituents, establishes a primacy of the romance formula in the viewers' mind. As season one's narrative develops so too does the love relationship between Joe and Beck as they quickly move from mere acquaintances to enamored lovers. In addition to the development of the love relationship, we also find continued references to the romance formula's most crucial fantasy of love triumphant (Cawelti, 1977:41-42). Joe continually evokes the romance formula's moral fantasy through references that elicit the importance of love triumphant. When Joe says, 'How many guys are willing to do anything for the person they love?' (S1, E5); 'The right thing is to be with who you should be with,' (S1, E8); 'I know we belong together'(S1, E8); 'Everything I have done, I have done for you' (S1, E10), he is essentially reiterating the most crucial aspect of the romance formula which is that no matter what obstacles the couple faces their love will remain 'permanent' and will 'overcome' any and all difficulties (Cawelti, 1977: 41-2).

While the series evidently unfolds according to the romance formula's established conventions, the series simultaneously involves contradicting constituents of the thriller formula. For in Joe's attempt at actualizing the triumph of love, we see him going to devastating and disturbing lengths to achieve it. We soon start to recognize Joe's criminality when he decides to stalk

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<sup>10</sup> The term 'memeified' refers to the phenomenon of turning a particular subject into a popular meme on the internet.

Beck, invade her privacy by gaining access to her online accounts and eventually kill Benji and Peach all in the name of the romance formula's moral fantasy. These criminal and eventually murderous deeds are clear constituents of the thriller formula as they work to build suspense and thrilling scenarios, effectively establishing the twinned premise of all thrillers (Neale, 1999: 76). The series' narrative also contains the significant transformation from 'known' to 'unknown' when Joe transgresses the moral fantasy by killing Beck. This crucial event consequently subverts the romance formula, that has maintained its prevalence throughout most of season one, by rendering the moral fantasy null and void.

When we consider the constituents of these two formulas it is evident that they both call for different types of protagonists. The moral fantasy of the romance formula evokes the conventional hero, a hero of the same calibre as the modern hero. For the couple to succeed the narrative needs a hero who is able and willing to overcome any obstacles that threaten their love's triumph. The thriller again calls for quite a different protagonist. According to Derry, the thriller's protagonist 'becomes either an innocent victim or a nonprofessional criminal within a structure that is significantly unmediated by a traditional figure of detection,' (Neale, 1999:62). Joe subscribes to the latter as he gradually morphs into a nonprofessional criminal by slowly escalating his voyeuristic activities (which for the most part goes undetected) from stalking, to stealing, to kidnapping, and eventually murder. By comparing these two types of protagonists it is evident that they are antithetical as one seeks the moral triumph of love while the other inflicts unethical danger and harm. I therefore argue that the series' conflated treatment of the thriller and romance genres further perpetuates the sense of ambiguity already established by the postmodern hero's characterization.

By analysing the series' experimental treatment of genre, I ascertained that the postmodern hero's ambiguous composite of good and evil is internalised and thematised in the conflation of genre: the romance formula's moral fantasy evokes the hero (good) while the thriller's premise of suspense underscored by criminality evokes the villain (evil). This dynamic that is implemented within the series' narrative events is unique in that it subverts the viewers' expectation of genre, for just as the viewers grow to expect the fulfilment of the romance formula the thriller destabilises this expectation when Joe's criminal actions gradually intensify. However, this conflation of genre also represents, almost hypostasises, the postmodern hero's ambiguity in terms of the subversive structure it engenders. In other words, the conflation of genre, and its subversion of the viewers' expectation, comes to signify

something beyond the narrative itself, that is the underlining difficulty in delineating the postmodern hero as either fundamentally good or fundamentally evil. It is exactly this result that augments the contradictory descriptions of Joe for the romance and thriller genres allow for two different interpretations of Joe, the romantic hero, or the nonprofessional criminal. Of course, the fact that these two interpretations function in a narrative that amalgamates both these possibilities makes it increasingly difficult to establish exactly which of these protagonists Joe embodies most. This effect, I believe, is what the producer Berlanti refers to as the show functioning as a type of ‘Rorschach test’ (Deadline Hollywood, 2019). For the conflation of genre allows Joe to operate in two distinct narratives (romance and thriller) and as two distinct protagonists (hero and villain). Seeing as the series *You* does not provide a clear-cut narrative that unfolds according to one distinct formula, and a protagonist who does not fully subscribe to the archetypes of hero and villain, the onus of interpretation is largely left to the viewers. It is therefore up to the viewers to navigate this oscillating inkblot and to definitively interpret both the narrative as either romance or thriller, and Joe as either hero or villain.

In summation, the conflation of genre brings the representation of two contradicting narratives (romance and thriller) to the forefront. I propose that this additional dynamic of ambiguity, functioning through the contradicting genres of romance and thriller, starts to move the focus from Joe’s characterisation to his representation. For once we start to concern ourselves with the romance and thriller genres, we are systematically focusing on what parts of the story are characteristic of the romance or thriller formulas, how these parts are made to function alongside each other and how they work to influence the viewers’ understanding of Joe. In other words, instead of asking how Joe’s morality, which is bound to narrative events, aligns him with either the hero or villain complex, we begin to ask how the romance and thriller formulas which are superimposed on the narrative ultimately shape our expectation or understanding of Joe. This focus on representation exercises a proportionate focus on spectatorship. For representation, the inferential model, relies on the viewers’ cognitive engagement in order to ascribe meaning to the overall narrative. Therefore, the conflation of genres’ resultant focus on representation siphons an equally important focus on the viewers’ involvement or engagement therewith.

I argue that this shift from Joe’s characterisation to his representation, and the corresponding focus on spectatorship, is taken up and further developed by the narcissistic tendencies

operating within the inferential model. These narcissistic tendencies constitute the final contributing component that not only deepens the paradoxical descriptions but that draws deliberate attention to this very issue. As I explained in chapter two of this research study, the inferential model patterns stylistic and narrative cues to help viewers engage with and comprehend the overall narrative. In the series *You*, the inferential model, having to represent Joe's capacity for good and evil, manipulates the narrative by actively reshaping it in terms of the romance formula, further problematising the viewers' interpretation of Joe by emphasising qualities associated with the modern hero.

This consideration, of the narcissistic tendencies inevitably exposing the inferential model's manipulation of the fabula by evincing a heightened focus on the romance formula's process, starts to reveal and comment on the viewers' agency in choosing to infer one type of story (the romance) over another (the thriller). I explained this outward focus through the nested text of *Bluebeard* that Beck references in an attempt to navigate the situation she finds herself in. In addition to foregrounding the conflation of genre, Beck's reference to *Bluebeard* prompts the viewers to share in her retrospective realisation and acknowledge their own agency in expecting either the fulfilment of the romance or thriller formula. This outward focus that the nested text of *Bluebeard* creates, addressing the responsibility of the viewers as co-creators of the narrative, I argue is hinted at when Beck notes her own complicity in choosing to believe in the fairy-tale and Prince Charming, holding herself accountable when asking: 'Didn't you ask for this?'

This question, I believe, demonstrates a metafictional conceit that reaches beyond the narrative and directly involves the viewers' engagement with the narrative up to this point. For although the inferential model narcissistically cued the inference of the romance formula throughout the majority of season one, Beck's retrospective realisation of Joe's true character in the season finale, through the nested text of *Bluebeard*, exposes the viewers' role in inferring meaning from the provided representation. That is to say, while the inferential model manipulates the inference of the romance formula the viewers are equally implicit in the meaning-making process by choosing to expect the fulfilment of the romance formula and by extent for Joe to fulfil the role of hero. As a result, the viewers' possible predilection for the romance genre, combined and enticed with the inferential model's manipulation of the *fabula* through the romance formula, is revealed to play a significant role in guiding the viewers' understanding of Joe and the overall narrative.

Therefore, the metafictional tendencies at work in *You* help to further complicate and deepen the paradoxical descriptions of Joe as some viewers might associate Joe with the hero from the romance formula, due to the inferential model's active reshaping of the narrative as romance as well as their own predilection for the romance formula; while other viewers might be more cognizant of the thriller, despite the manipulation of the fabula, or perhaps due to the overt manipulation of the fabula, and therefore choose to interpret and describe Joe along the lines of villain as opposed to hero. Whichever interpretation is made, based on either the manipulation of the fabula, the viewers' preference for genre, or a combination of the two, the fact remains that there is a clear focus not only on process but on the viewers' cognitive engagement with the inferential model's active conflation of genre operating in the series' stylistic and narrative representation. I therefore submit the narcissistic tendencies as the final contributing factor that directly influence the controversy surrounding the Netflix series *You*.

The overarching question of this research paper is why people are so divided in their opinions, descriptions and interpretations of the Netflix series *You* and Joe. I propose that the narcissistic tendencies, taken together with the conflation of genre and the ambiguity of the postmodern hero is what ultimately provides an answer to this very controversy. For I argue that the debate involving the interpretation of Joe as hero or villain is in fact a response to, or a result of, a complex mechanism of interconnected components that I have identified and discussed in the scope of this research project.

Out of the three components that feed this controversy, the first component which constitutes the postmodern hero's characterisation is easily identifiable as this contributing component is not an unfamiliar concept. In this research study, I have drawn heavily on articles that provide in-depth considerations of the postmodern hero's characterisation and moral ambiguity, proving that this way of analysing these ambiguous and unconventional protagonists is quite dominant and prolific in the scholarly research around the anti-hero tradition. By gauging the controversy surrounding Joe, I found that Pollard's explanation of moral ambiguity in the postmodern hero, published over a decade ago, remains relevant as the concepts of 'disillusionment', 'pessimism' and 'social critique', which Pollard outlines in reference to the postmodern shift and the postmodern hero's consequent moral ambiguity, persists in contemporary anti-heroes' narratives like *You*. The significance of this approach is still vitally important as the theory of moral ambiguity provides an insightful explanation as to why Joe is

able to embody both ‘good’ and ‘evil’ qualities. Applying this theory of morality allowed me to successfully demonstrate that Joe does share in this ambiguous capacity as he functions as the hero when trying to win the affection of his love interest and as the villain when his ‘chivalry’ transgresses into criminality. Understanding the postmodern hero’s moral ambiguity therefore provides one answer as to why reviewers and fans are able to describe Joe as both a ‘hopeless romantic’ and a ‘murderous stalker’.

Reading the anti or postmodern hero through the lens of morality remains the prevalent approach to understanding these unconventional protagonists as evidenced by the research of Pollard, Lyons and Donnelly. However, the metafictional aesthetic, which I propose offers a new way of gauging the complexity or ambiguity of the postmodern hero, is one that is largely and more significantly linked to representation as opposed to the character’s morality. It is therefore important for me to point out that the reading or interpretation of morality involves the analysis of characterisation and narrative events, while the reading or interpretation of representation, which is what constitutes the metadimension in *You*, involves the analysis of the inferential model and spectatorship. This new model of analysis therefore forces us away from understanding the postmodern hero through their characterisation alone and instead leads us to an understanding of the inferential model’s narrative and stylistic representation of the postmodern hero.

The metafictional aesthetic that I identified, in an attempt to better understand the reasons behind the contradictory descriptions of Joe, involves the second and third components that I have outlined and analysed in this research study: the conflation of genre and the self-reflexive tendencies in the inferential model. For both these components are indicative of the analytical shift from morality and the story itself to representation and the *way* in which the story is told. The metafictional aesthetic therefore starts to reveal itself through the series’ unique conflation of the romance and thriller genres. Within this counterbalance we find the focus on process or representation as Joe is able to fulfil two separate roles from two different types of stories: the internalisation of the romance formula’s ‘moral fantasy’ realigns Joe with the hero; on the other hand, the narrative is simultaneously shaped along the lines of the thriller consequently realigning Joe with the villain or non-professional criminal. This conflation of genre is in essence a conflation of two distinct storytelling modes. For while the romance formula develops according to the overarching fantasy of ‘love triumphant’, the thriller inevitably

results in the transformation from ‘known to unknown’ as evidenced by Joe ultimately killing his love interest – Beck.

The new aesthetic’s focus on process reveals how the consideration of the postmodern hero through characterisation and morality becomes a consideration of the postmodern hero through cinematic narration or representation. For when we analyse the series’ conflation of the romance and thriller genres, we find that it allows for a new way of reading the postmodern hero that surpasses the question of morality. We start to consider how the intrinsic narrative features of the romance and thriller formulas influence our expectation or understanding of Joe. While the moral ambiguity complicates the delineation between hero and villain, the ambiguous conflation of genre intensifies this issue by drawing out the viewers’ expectation of genre, that is the viewers’ expectation of a specific type of story. Instead of trying to understand Joe through his actions, which constitute his morality, the understanding and consideration of Joe starts to involve the contesting genres represented in the inferential model. As we are caught in this cognitive comparison between Joe in each respective genre, we consequently try to discern the extent to which he is shown fulfilling the role of either the romance formula’s hero or the thriller’s villain.

I argue that this affect manifests itself in reviewers’ and fans’ dichotomous descriptions of the series as some are more inclined to emphasise the romance constituents, drawing on language that evokes the qualities associated with this genre, when they describe Joe as a ‘hopeless romantic’ (Berman, 2019), or ‘the perfect protagonist’ (Lawler, 2019); while others set out to invalidate the romance constituents by stressing the thriller describing Joe as a ‘sly murderous stalker’ (IndianExpress, 2021). The issue of morality itself is not the sole component that drives this dichotomy. The series’ conflation of genre plays an equally significant role in deepening this divide as viewers come to understand Joe through their own expectation of the represented formulas. This explains why some reviewers [refrain](#) from calling Joe an outright ‘murderer’, choosing to illustrate the prevalence of the romance formula when describing his quest for that ‘happily-ever-after’ (Berman, 2019), while others show a clear disdain for the romance formula emphasising the thriller instead by labelling and restricting Joe as a ‘sociopath’ (Nicholson, 2020) or ‘psychotic stalker’ (Hatimy, 2019). By reading Joe and the series through the metafictional aesthetic that shifts the focus from morality to representation, these recurring paradoxical descriptions can be understood as not only an estimate of Joe’s morality but an attempt to label and therefore categorise him according to their understanding and expectation

of genre. In other words, the controversy surrounding Joe is not only a product of the issue of morality, it is equally a product of representation, specifically the representation of the romance and thriller genres as they work to problematise the viewers' definitive categorisation of Joe. While the conflation of genre reveals the importance of the postmodern hero's representation, the metafictional tendencies ultimately reveal the crucial relationship between the inferential model and the viewers. These two components that I have identified and discussed at length in this research project work in tandem and influence one another greatly as the inferential model (representation) depends on the viewers' inference to ascribe meaning to the overall narrative. The correlation then between the conflation of genre and the metafictional tendencies is that they both evince a focus on process. The difference between these components is that while the conflation of genre creates a subversive structure that offers two possible stories, with two different types of protagonists (hero/villain) and different narrative arcs (moral fantasy/transformation from known to unknown), the metafictional tendencies work to manipulate and expose the conflation of genre by actively emphasising the romance formula. The overarching result, from both these components, is a heightened awareness of process or storytelling as it is storytelling itself that influences the viewer's inference of the narrative and Joe.

It is the viewers' engagement with the congruent development of two opposing genres, two opposing stories combined with self-reflexive tendencies that reinforce the romance formula in the viewers' perception of the narrative that engenders the paradoxical descriptions of *You*. The conflation of genre's focus on process combined and increased with the self-reflexive tendencies' awareness of process instils the narrative, the inferential model and the viewers' inference thereof with the primacy of storytelling as opposed to the story itself. I believe this affect, the relationship between these components, is culminated and powerfully exposed in the nested text of *Bluebeard*, for when Beck equates Joe to Bluebeard, revealing the conflation of the thriller and romance genres, as well as the manipulation of the romance formula when she admits that she wanted desperately to believe in the fairy-tale consequently blinding herself to the whole story (the thriller constituents), she effectively reveals the viewers' involvement with choosing to infer either the romance or the thriller genre – that is choosing to understand Joe as either hero or villain.

I therefore conclude that the metafictional aesthetic's focus on process does not necessarily provide an answer as to whether or not Joe is more hero than villain, instead it validates this dichotomy as well as its inevitability in the series' experimental and subversive structure. For

just as the postmodern hero is shaped by the issue of morality, the metadimension helps to demonstrate that Joe is equally shaped by the conflation of genre, which represents Joe as subscribing to both the hero and villain archetypes; while the metafictional tendencies, essentially addressing the viewers' involvement with the inferential model, reveals that Joe is also significantly shaped, to an extent, by the viewers' own approach to these formulas embedded in narrative and stylistic cues. For Tudor points out in reference to genre, as viewers we bring with us certain expectations of these conventional formulas, like the romance and thriller, that we impose on the narrative in order to ascribe meaning to it. As a result, genre is informed by 'sets of cultural conventions', exactly what constitutes a specific genre therefore '[varies] from case to case' as it depends on particular cultures as opposed to features inherent in the narrative itself (Tudor, 1974: 139). Bordwell also references this dynamic resulting from the viewers' agency when discussing the inferential model, explaining that our inferences are subjective as they stem from a myriad of 'real world knowledge' spanning from our own personal experiences to larger cultural structures that underpin our prejudices (Bordwell, 2008:117). These influences exist outside of the narrative and yet we rely on it either knowingly or unknowingly allowing it to shape the narratives we encounter.

I argue that what this heightened awareness on process/ representation, as opposed to morality, truly reveals is that the onus of meaning-making is placed on the viewers' engagement with the inferential model. This subtle yet significant shift in focus allows for a different type of narrative, one that reimagines the postmodern hero's hallmark ambiguity; consequently calling for a new model of analysis that transposes the issue of morality to an issue of spectatorship, forcing us to reconsider our own engagement with representation and storytelling as opposed to the story itself. I therefore submit that the controversy surrounding *You* should not only be thought of as a product of the issue of morality, instead these paradoxical interpretations constitute a reaction to representation and the role of spectatorship, as the series' awareness of representation forces its viewers into an increasingly active role by forcing them to acknowledge and examine representation and their shared responsibility in the meaning-making process.

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## **Filmography:**

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Citizen Kane. 1941. Directed by: Orson Welles, produced by Orson Welles. Distributed by  
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Easy Rider. 1969. Directed by: Dennis Hopper, produced by Peter Fonda. Distributed by  
Columbia Pictures. United States.

High Noon. 1952. Directed by: Fred Zinnemann, produced by Stanley Kramer. Distributed by  
United Artists. United States.

Taxi Driver. 1976. Directed by: Martin Scorsese, produced by Michael Phillips and Julia  
Phillips, distributed by Columbia Pictures. United States

The Grifters. 1990. Directed by: Stephen Frears, produced by Martin Scorsese. Distributed by  
Miramax Films. United States.

Thelma & Louise. 1991. Directed by: Ridley Scott, produced by Ridley Scott and Mimi Polk  
Gitlin. Distributed by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. United States.

The Proud Rebel. 1958. Directed by: Michael Curtiz, produced by Samuel John Goldwyn Jr.  
Distributed by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures. United  
States.

