Here We Go Round In Circles:
The Definition of Circular Narrative
as a New Narrative Typology

by

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I offer a new and specific definition of circular narrative. My research reveals it as a narrative form that distorts temporality and causality in such a way that at its ending the narrative circles back to its starting point. This provides the reader with an entirely different perspective on how events fit together. I identify the narrative conventions that shape circular narrative as an *in media res* beginning, structural coincidences, and a denouement that provides new context when it revisits the beginning. I also show how circular narrative is a structural umbrella for multiple subsets, particularly in relation to twenty-first century science fiction and fantasy novels, television series, and films. I describe and define these subsets as the simple time-loop, the infinite loop, the spiralling circular narrative, and concentric circular narratives. I examine these structures across standalone works and multi-volume/multi-episodic narratives as well as multimedia works, thereby revealing the variety of cross-disciplinary applications that circular narrative has in literature and film. The active role of the reader and viewer is also shown to be an integral part of understanding and recognising circular narrative typology: this role involves searching for plot connections, identifying moments of anagnorisis where structural coincidences pull narrative threads together, and reflecting upon the text after reading/viewing through teleological retrospect. I thus approach circular narrative from a structural narratology standpoint and a reader/viewer response standpoint, to show how this form is a product of textual construction and reader recognition. Finally, I suggest ways in which the study of circular narrative opens up the analysis of other genres and other forms of visual narrative such as the graphic novel or the video game.

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In loving memory of Lizzie: 2006—2022.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to define circular narrative as a new narrative typology that adheres to a set of standardised narrative conventions. To define circular narrative and the conventions that guide its form, I shall turn to the field of narratology. Prince defines narratology as the study of 'the nature, form, and function of narrative (regardless of medium of representation)… more particularly, it examines what all and only narratives have in common…as well as what enables them to be different from one another.'[1] It is a field that studies the mechanics of how narratives work according to various models whether in novels, films, graphic novels, and more. However, as narrative techniques used by authors have evolved along with the advance of technology, narratology, as a field of study, has fallen behind the times in terms of categorising the innovative narrative typologies that writers have been experimenting with over the last century. Narratology 'has been slow to fully conceptualize these innovations and integrate them into existing theoretical models,' long classifying narratives according to only three major structural categories: linear, nonlinear, and unnatural.[2] Linear and nonlinear narrative have acted as one end of a narratological binary, while unnatural narrative has served as the other end of the binary and a 'catch all' category for any plot structure that favours the avant-garde. Neither accounts for narrative structures that have yet to be defined, categorised, and typified in accordance with the ways authors continually push the

[1] Gerald Prince, 'Narratology', *Dictionary of Narratology* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989) p. 65.

[2] Brian Richardson, *Unnatural Narrative: Theory, History and Practice* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2015), p. xiii. Linear narratives develop according to a chronological sequential ordering of events without any temporal disruptions. The linear plot 'begin[s] at the beginning ('once upon a time') and proceed[s] in an orderly fashion through a middle of greater or lesser length to an end,' see further 'Narrative Structure: Simple and Complex Stories,' *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory,* ed. by David Herman, Manfred Jahn and Marie-Laure Ryan (Oxford: Routledge, 2005), p. 367. Nonlinear narratives largely follow a chronological trajectory but with the inclusion of temporal disruptions such as flashbacks and flashforwards that are used to fill in plot information that the reader will need to better understand the story, see further Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative,* 3rd edn (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), pp. 80-81. Unnatural narratives do not follow linear trajectories and favour the avant-garde. Unnatural narratives do not usually follow established rules of plot structure and are experimental in form, see further *A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative,* ed. by Jan Alber, Henrik Skov Nielsen and Brian Richardson (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013), p. 3 and 9.

boundaries of plot construction. In this thesis, I will define and provide a structural framework for circular narrative as one such narrative structure while using textual and audio-visual materials that illustrate these principles in practice. While narratologist Brian Richardson first formally identified circular narrative as a new narrative form worth further research, I will be revising his very limited definition which lumps circular narrative in with the recursive narrative which, as I will demonstrate, is a wholly different narrative form. Richardson defines circular narrative as a narrative in which 'the last sentence of which is also the work's first sentence,' and he elaborates further, writing that 'its circular chronology partially mimes but ultimately transforms the linear chronology of every day existence; it always returns to and departs from its point of origin.'[3] Part of the problems with Richardson's attempts to define circular narrative is that he attributes circular narrative to the *fabula* level of storytelling and strips it down to a plot that begins and ends either with the same sentence (for example, *Finnegan's Wake* [1939]*)* or the same moment (as in *The Garden of Forking Paths* [1941]*).*[4] In this thesis, I will apply the circular narrative to the *syuzhet* level of storytelling instead and provide a structural framework that explains the elements required to create circular narrative syuzhets.[5] Lastly, I examine how these narrative elements function according to certain rules and conventions that defy the avant-garde or unnatural classifications.

[3] Brian Richardson, *A Poetics of Plot for the Twenty-First Century: Theorizing Unruly Narratives* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2019), p. 11 and pp. 104-05.
[4] See further James Joyce, *Finnegan's Wake* (New York City: Penguin Classics, 1999). See further Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Garden of Forking Paths', in *Collected Fictions,* trans. by Andrew Hurley (New York City: Penguin Books, 1999), pp. 119-28.
[5] Fabula refers to the chronological sequencing of events in a plot. Readers often will attempt to create a linear fabula in their mind when presented with a nonlinear or nonchronological syuzhet as a way to reconcile sequential ordering of events. See further Meir Sternberg, *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978) p. 8.; David Herman, James Phelan, Peter J. Rabinowitz, et al, *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts & Critical Debate* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2012)p. 57; and Genevieve Lively, *Narratology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 109-134, p. 116. Syuzhet refers to the order in which events of a plot are presented to the reader. In circular narrative, syuzhet so distorts time and the relationship between cause and effect that a fabula is usually not able to be constructed. (See further, Sternberg p. 8; Herman [et.al], p. 71; and Lively, p. 116).

I.1. The Earliest Known Example of Circular Narrative

The *New Oxford American Dictionary* defines *circular* as 'having the form of a circle: starting and finishing at the same place.'[6] As its name suggests and my research will show, circular narrative is a narrative typology that circles back on itself through an *in media res* beginning that is repeated and revisited at the end of the narrative's syuzhet.[7] When the beginning is repeated at the end, the events in between provide the reader with a whole new understanding of how these events connect to create the circle's completion. Though circular narrative has only recently been critically, briefly, and problematically discussed by Richardson, the form has existed since at least the seventh century. One of the earliest known circular narratives is Heliodorus' ancient Greek epic *Aethiopica* [in circulation since Seventh Century A.D.] which paved the way for modern circular narratives.[8] *Aethiopica* is different from many ancient epics in that it originated as a written piece of prose rather than an oral narrative.[9] It is considered by Pinheiro to be 'the most remarkable representative of the novel genre in classical antiquity' while Heliodorus has been called 'the forerunner of the modern novelists.'[10] Because *Aethiopica* was developed as a written work and not an oral work, the use of repetition does not have to be confined to reminding audiences of past events. Instead, it can

[6] 'Circular', *New Oxford American Dictionary,* 3rd edn. (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2010).
[7] The phrase *in media res* refers to beginning a plot in the middle of ongoing events or throwing the reader into the midst of an action. This type of beginning puts the reader in a disadvantaged position of having to 'catch up' with the narrative in order to understand what is going on: 'The term *in media res* logically denotes no more than a certain deformation of the chronological sequence.' Meir Sternberg, *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction,* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 40. Because a common theme of circular narrative is temporal distortion, *in media res* beginnings provide immediate temporal distortion that is fundamental to the development of circular narratives.
[8] Heliodorus, *Aethiopica,* (NP: Rusalka Books, 2020).
[9] See further Clinton Walker Keyes, 'The Structure of Heliodorus' *Aethiopica', Studies in Philology,* 19 (1922) *ProQuest,* 42-51 [accessed 04 October 2021] p. 49; Jonas Grethlein, 'Social Minds and Narrative Time: Collective Experience in Thucydides and Heliodorus', *Narrative,* 23.2 (2015), 123-39, p. 124; and David F. Elmer, 'The Epic Cycle and the Ancient Novel', in *The Greek Epic Cycle and Its Ancient Reception: A Companion,* ed. by Marco Fantuzzi and Christos Tsagalis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) pp. 596-603, pp. 596-97.
[10] Marila P. Futre Pinheiro, 'Heliodorus, the *Ethiopian Story',* in *A Companion to the Ancient Novel* (New York City: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), p. 116; Ibid.

be used to circle back to an earlier plot event—in this case, the *in media res* beginning—and provide an entirely new context upon the second visitation.

What Heliodorus did narratively with *Aethiopica* may be considered far ahead of its time. The narrative choices Heliodorus made subvert linear and nonlinear narrativity using anachronistic jumps to fill in missing information that is necessary to understand later plot points.[11] Heliodorus strategically withholds information to increase reader curiosity and attention as 'the plot is revealed…only at crucial moments, when it is absolutely necessary to provide these details. Reality is not presented directly, but in separate parts, like a shattered mirror.'[12] While Pinheiro uses the imagery of a shattered mirror to illustrate the separate parts that make up a unified whole in the manner of a gestalt, this imagery describes Heliodorus's technique inaccurately. It implies structural randomness rather than strategic structural coincidences which *heal* the missing gaps through anagnorisis rather than *patching* them together through anachronistic jumps.[13]

While *Aethiopica* contains a circular narrative, it is not, as a whole, circular. The circular narrative is contained within and limited to the first five books of the epic which then switches to a linear structure from Book VI to its conclusion in Book X. In the opening sequence, the reader is thrown into the midst of a situation unaware of the players yet fully aware of an element of danger. Heliodorus builds narrative intrigue by focusing on the mysterious circumstances surrounding the pirates' discovery of the wounded lovers Theagenes and Chariclea. As new characters share and learn about different pieces of the lovers' story, an extensive backstory is provided to the reader about the two protagonists. Book II draws the

[11] Genette defines the term 'anachrony' as 'all forms of discordance between the two temporal orders of story and narrative,' typically referring to flashbacks or flashforwards. Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method,* trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 40.
[12] Ibid, p. 120.
[13] See further, Hilary P. Dannenberg, 'The Coincidence Plot,' *Coincidence and Counterfactuality: Plotting Time and Space in Narrative Fiction* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), pp. 89-108. Anagnorisis is defined by Aristotle as 'recognition…a change from ignorance to knowledge.' See further Aristotle, *Poetics,* trans. by Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin Books, 1996), p. 18; Dannenberg, p. 2.

reader's attention from the peculiar elements of the opening sequence by introducing a new character, Calasiris. He narrates a lengthy flashback sequence that is largely uninterrupted throughout Books II, III, and IV. Within his flashbacks are embedded flashbacks that go even further back into the history of the protagonists.[14] In Book V, the narrative circle comes together as the reader is re-presented with the mysterious opening scene that possesses new context because of Calasiris' flashback. The reader recognises how the narrative has come full circle as the opening sequence repeats itself before the narrative progresses from Book VI to its end, changing to a linear structure. Despite *Aethiopica's* illustration of a circular narrative at the micro-narrative level, narratology has paid limited attention to this form and has continued to adhere to the binary of linear/nonlinear narratives contrasted against unnatural narratives.[15] This prevents identification and critical discussion of new narrative forms.

I.2. The Shortcomings of Existing Narrative Typologies.

Jan Alber and Brian Richardson are the current leading voices on the phenomenon of unnatural narrative, yet they have competing definitions as to what unnatural narrative encompasses. Their conflicting definitions prevent what I typify as circular narrative from being grouped into the unnatural narrative classification because it adheres to too many structural conventions for their tastes. Alber favours a broad definition of unnatural narrative: 'The unnatural (or impossible)… is measured against the foil of the "natural" (real-world)

[14] An *embedded narrative* is defined as 'a narrative within a narrative.' Gerald Prince, *Dictionary of Narratology,* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), p. 25. An embedded flashback is therefore a flashback embedded within a flashback.

[15] Micro-narrative refers to a part of the greater macro-narrative that is the narrative as a whole. *Aethiopica's* circularity exists only within the first five books of the epic; therefore, circularity works at the micro-narrative level because the entire narrative does not adhere to the circular narrative structuration. See further Ken Ireland, *The Sequential Dynamics of Narrative: Energies at the Margins of Fiction* (London: Associated University Press, 2001), p. 53, and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics,* 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 16.

cognitive frames and scripts that have to do with natural laws.'[16] For Alber, any narrative that goes against real-world laws, including impossible phenomena common to science-fiction and fantasy, can be characterised as unnatural. Richardson's definition is more selective. He defines unnatural narrative as 'one that contains significant antimimetic events, characters, settings or frames.'[17] What he calls 'non-mimetic narrative' is excluded from his qualification of unnatural narratives because they 'employ a consistent, parallel storyworld and follow established conventions, or in some cases, merely add supernatural components to its otherwise mimetic depiction of the actual world.'[18] Many of the elements that he mentions in this passage would qualify as unnatural narratives according to Alber's definition. Richardson is therefore much more selective in his definition of unnatural narrative by allowing for impossible scenarios that still fit within conventional narrative forms. In such genres as science fiction and fantasy, readers expect to encounter elements that are physically impossible in the real-world, yet the reader also expects the narrative to develop in predictable ways.[19]

Richardson reserves the unnatural narrative categorisation for antimimetic narratives which 'violate rather than…extend conventions of mimesis.'[20] Antimimetic narratives 'ignore, repudiate, transform, or violate existing literary conventions' and are thus avant garde.[21] For these reasons, I prefer Richardson's definition of unnatural narrative to Alber's because it allows a spectrum of potential nonmimetic narrative forms to exist between the mimetic and

[16] Jan Alber, *Unnatural Narrative: Impossible Worlds in Fiction and Drama* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), p. 3.
[17] Brian Richardson, *Unnatural Narrative: Theory, History, and Practice* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2015), p.3. Richardson explains that '*mimetic* narratives are those works of fiction that model themselves on or substantially resemble nonfictional works' (p. 3.). Mimetic narratives traditionally follow linear structure where fabula and syuzhet mirror each other. 'Nonmimetic (nonrealist) work, such as a fairy tale…follows established conventions' (p.4). 'Antimimetic texts thus go beyond nonmimetic texts as they violate rather than simply extend conventions of mimesis.' (p.4-5). Antimimetic texts subvert structure whereas nonmimetic texts explore nonrealism while still adhering to structural narrative rules of some type such as nonlinear, nonchronological, or circular narratives. Antimimetic texts more closely resemble unnatural narratives while nonmimetic texts offer a middle ground between mimesis and antimimesis.
[18] Ibid, p. 4.
[19] For example, *The Hero's Journey,* the bildungsroman, or the portal-quest fantasy, and so on.
[20] Richardson, *Unnatural Narrative: Theory, History, and Practice*, pp. 4-5.
[21] Ibid, p. 17.

antimimetic poles. Using Richardson's definition of unnatural narrative, I argue that circular narrative falls into the nonmimetic realm because it operates according to a framework of structural conventions, the major structural convention being that it begins and ends at the same temporal point. As a result, the events that transpire in the middle help the reader fill in missing plot pieces and approach the re-visitation of the opening temporal sequence with greater context and understanding.

In this thesis, I will establish a more accurate and complete definition of circular narrative than the one currently provided by Richardson. His definition of and writings on the subject are brief, incomplete, and even problematic when contrasted with what I have observed. He defines circular narrative in a way that is, as I will demonstrate, more consistent with the definition of recursive narrative. Richardson's existing definition of circular narrative blurs the line between what I define as circular narrative and the established definition of *recursive narrative* which focuses on repetition. While recursion can sometimes give the illusion of circularity, it remains a separate narrative structure. Before I precisely define the circular narrative criteria that I have detected, I will explain the nuances that distinguish circular narrative from recursive narrative.

I.3. The Differences Between Recursion, Ring Structure, and Circular Narrative

When I first began discussing the idea of circular narrative at conferences, respondents would immediately bring up the film *Groundhog Day* [1993].[22] While *Groundhog Day* repeats the same cycle of events multiple times, it is a repetitive or recursive narrative, which functions differently from circular narrative. Even though narratologists such as Richardson attribute recursive characteristics to circular narrative, I disagree with their overlapping ideas and terminology. I will show that recursive narrative and circular narrative are two different

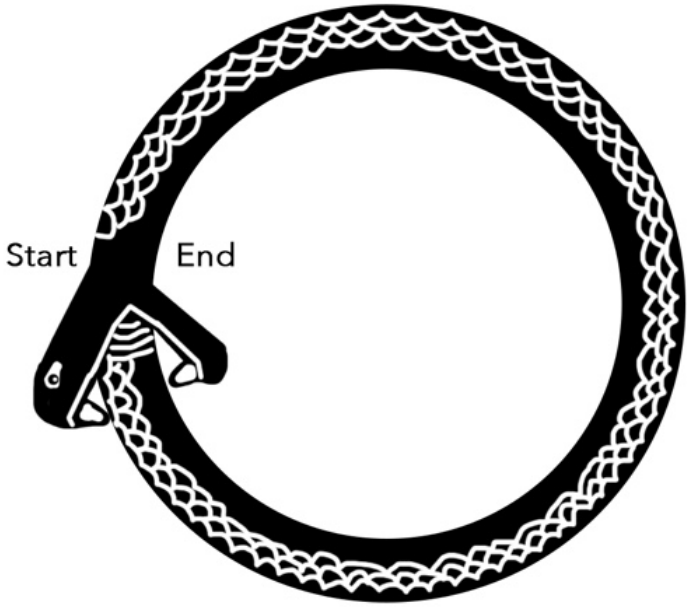
[22] *Groundhog Day,* dir. by Harold Ramis (Columbia Pictures, 1993).

structures. Their differences must be understood in order to recognise circular narrative as its own autonomous structure.

Part of the confusion between recursive narrative and circular narrative stems from Richardson's own definition of circular narrative which states that 'a narrative can circle back on itself, as the last sentence becomes the first sentence, and thus continues for eternity…such a fabula is infinite.'[23] I dispute Richardson's definition because he focuses on the fabula rather than the syuzhet. Lively offers a different definition which also blends aspects of recursion with circularity in claiming that the fabula 'possesses a basic linear chronological structuring (mirroring that found in day-to-day or "ordinary time") that is radically different to the artificial patterning of time produced by the treatment of that same story material in a narrative plot (*syuzhet).*'[24] Lively's definition, unlike Richardson's, places syuzhet importance above fabula; but like Richardson, Lively confuses recursion and circularity in her assessment of the syuzhet's role. While Richardson dwells on an infinite fabula that repeats, Lively focuses on the repetitive nature of the syuzhet. Both of these definitions are consistent with what I understand to be recursive narrative rather than circular narrative. Recursion is based on repetition and the entire crux of Richardson's definition of circular narrative surrounds 'the ancient symbol of Ouroboros which shows a serpent biting its own tail.'[25]

[23] Brian Richardson, 'Unnatural Stories and Sequences', in *A Poetics of Unnatural Narratives* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2013), p. 21.
[24] Genevieve Lively, 'Russian Formalism', in *Narratology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 116.
[25] Brian Richardson, *A Poetics of Plot for the Twenty-First Century: Theorizing Unruly Narratives* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2019), p. 4.

Ouroboros Illustration



[26]

Richardson's Ouroboros imagery ironically illustrates my own point more so than his. A snake is a linear creature that exists in a straight line from head to tail or beginning to end. If its head were to eat its tail, even though the shape would appear circular, the directional trajectory would be linear and recursive. *Groundhog Day* illustrates this point further through the repetition of one day that is presented linearly with each iteration. There are no unusual anachronisms that disrupt the linear repetition of the same cycle. However, each recursive cycle of the same day's events evolves as the character tries new tactics to break the cycle. There is a clear link between cause and effect in recursive narratives that is lacking in circular narratives.

Another term that is sometimes aligned with circular narrative is 'ring structure.' Ring structure is a misnomer because it is not a structure at all. Instead, it is a narrative framing device. A narrative frame is defined by Prince as 'a narrative in which another narrative is embedded; a narrative functioning as a frame for another narrative by providing a setting for

[26] Illustration 1, the Ouroboros, created by Stephanie Katz.

it.'[27] Frame theory states that a narrative frame surrounds the primary narrative and 'may do other work in the story or the conversation, but whatever else they do, they define the limits of narrative.'[28] A narrative frame is not the primary narrative but rather surrounds the primary narrative with an aesthetic frame that 'although unrelated to the main story, contains a moral message [and]…likens it to the aesthetic effect of the frame surrounding a painting.'[29] While a frame is not necessarily thought of as part of the painting itself, it puts limits around that painting to accentuate the art inside. Contrary to what the last definition states, a narrative frame usually *is* related to the main story.[30] Oftentimes, frame narratives are told by a protagonist that is reflecting upon an earlier part of their life and can freely comment on that lived experience from what has been learned.[31] A framed narrative can also embed a story within a story as in the case of *The Princess Bride* [1973] where the father reads an enclosed fairy-tale to his sick son.[32]

Even though Douglas classifies her ring structure as a structure, she contradicts herself stating, 'A ring is a framing device. The linking up of starting point and end creates an envelope that contains everything between the opening phrases and conclusion.'[33] A framing device is aesthetic, having little to no consequence on plot, and should not be confused with a narrative structure. Douglas writes that 'the minimum criterion for a ring composition is for the ending to join up with the beginning.'[34] While this is closer to my desired definition of circular narrative, it is still an oversimplification. It simply positions the primary narrative as a

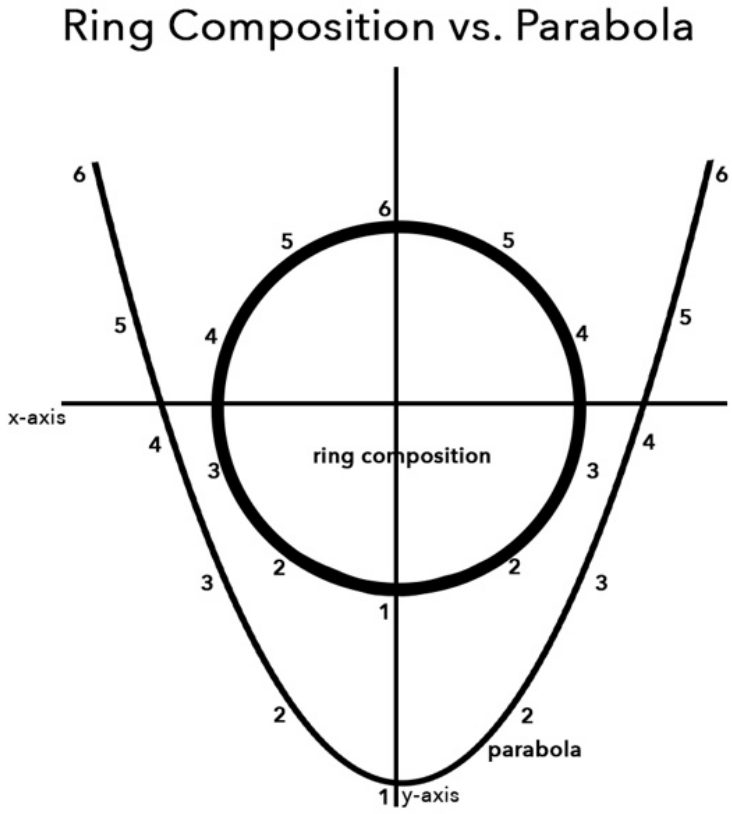
[27] Prince, 'Frame Narrative', p. 33.
[28] 'Frame Theory,' *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (London: Routledge, 2008) p. 185.
[29] 'Framed Narrative', *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (London: Routledge, 2008) p. 186.
[30] Examples include, Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient* (New York City: Vintage International, 1992)*;* Margaret Atwood, *Oryx & Crake* (New York City: Anchor Books, 2003)*;* Daphne DuMaurier, *Rebecca* (New York City: William Morrow, 1938)*;* William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (New York City: Simon & Schuster, 2012) [originally published 1603]*;* Nicholas Sparks, *The Notebook* (New York City: Grand Central Publishing, 1996)*,* and so on.
[31] Throughout this paper, I shall use the more inclusive singular pronouns they/them rather than the gendered binary pronouns he/him and she/her.
[32] William Goldman, *The Princess Bride* (New York City: Harcourt, 2007).
[33] Mary Douglas, *Thinking in Circles: An Essay on Ring Composition (*New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), p.1
[34] Ibid.

flashback in relation to the spatiotemporal setting of the ring frame and provides a means for the protagonist to remember events from their past while providing reflective commentary as the reader experiences these events for the first time. If one were to use Douglas's definition for ring structure, *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* [1950] would be considered a ring structure because it starts and ends in the same place.[35] However, in *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe,* time moves at a different speed in the secondary world than in the primary world.[36] When the Pevensie children leave the real world through the wardrobe portal to enter Narnia, they find time moves much faster there. Though the opening scene of the book is returned to at the end, not only is there is a lack of *in media res* at the beginning, but time has been untensed to a degree due to the temporal relativity between the two worlds.[37] Therefore, this use of ring structure is not the same as a circular return to the opening scene because time has continued to pass linearly. Instead, it is an aesthetic framework that brackets the adventure through a parallel departure from and return to the status-quo. Many narratives have the aesthetic illusion of circularity due to these parallel framing devices that 'bookend' a narrative.

Ring structure can be further complicated when it does not form a closed ring but instead forms a parabola. Here, I use the word *parabola* from its mathematical definition rather than in the combination of a geometric term with a Biblical which Attebery and Hollinger commonly use within the realm of science fiction and fantasy literature.[38] The definition of *parabola* which I use defines it as 'a symmetrical open plane curve formed by the intersection

[35] C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* (New York City: MacMillan, 1988).
[36] Wolf writes that a '"secondary world" refers to a world's relationship with our own world, the "primary world"' (p.14) There is usually some type of gateway that a human must travel through in order to move from the real world to the fictional world. See further, Mark J. P. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (New York City: Routledge, 2012),
[37] Untensed time refers to the subversion of a linear understanding of time. Instead of time flowing sequentially from past to present to future, untensed time explores the existence of time all at once. This makes it more complicated for a reader to follow along, especially as the reader attempts to mentally construct a linear fabula during the reading process.
[38] Attebery and Hollinger write, 'The term *parabola* has often been borrowed from geometry to designate a narrative trajectory or story arc…a parabolic orbit is one that, though it may at its sunward end be mistaken for an ellipse, opens out at the other end to infinity.' Brian Attebery and Veronica Hollinger, *Parabolas of Science Fiction,* ed. by Brian Attebery and Veronica Hollinger (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2013), p. viii.

of a cone with a plane parallel to its side.'[39] I apply this definition to narratology to illustrate a narrative, like David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* [2004], which does not form a circular narrative, but instead follows six narratives that loosely connect to each other in an inverse relationship.



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Using *Cloud Atlas* as an example to explain this parabola illustration, I plot the six distinct stories about the six main characters across the six different periods of time that exist within the novel in a 6,5,4,3,2,1,2,3,4,5,6 pattern. It could be assumed that the start and end point could reunite in a circle because they pertain to the same number in the sequential ordering, but this is not what happens. However, the relationship between the six narratives cannot be classified as parallel framing either. A parabola is the most useful mathematical illustration because of the embedded relationship between the narratives, tying them together in an arc-

[39] 'Parabola,' *New Oxford American Dictionary,* 3rd edition (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2010)
[40] Illustration 2, Ring Composition vs. Parabola, created by Stephanie Katz.

like shape. While each of the six narratives are connected to each other, the connection is quite loose from a narrative standpoint. Each embedded narrative makes brief reference to one character or one event in the narrative that precedes it, but each embedded narrative could stand alone as a short story without compromising the integrity of the plot events. Additionally, the six stories continue linearly when revisited in the 6,5,4,3,2,1,2,3,4,5,6 arc. When each embedded narrative is revisited, it continues on in a way that, if the narrative were not divided into two halves, the six tales could be presented in such a way that the novel becomes an anthology. While the reading experience would change, the nature of the narrative pieces would not. In both *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* and *Cloud Atlas,* a fabula can easily be mapped during the reading experience because time progresses in a sufficiently linear manner. Circularity is different in that time is significantly distorted and untensed so that the reader has difficulty discerning the relationship between cause and effect and between past, present, and future. Because of the degree of temporal distortion and even cause-effect distortion, circular narrative functions at a deeper level structurally rather than aesthetically.

I.4 The Importance of Temporal Distortion in Circular Narrative

Time is an instrumental theme in circular narratives, especially those analysed in this thesis. There is a natural marriage between time and narrative given that, as Attebery writes, 'Narrative is language's way of exploring time; it enables us to give shape and meaning to time in somewhat the same way architecture orders space.'[41] One key theme in circular narrative is the theme of temporal distortion where 'a writer can make use of every violation of continuous flow of narrative time,' thus pushing the boundaries of how characters and readers look at time and at causal relationships.[42] Cause and effect follow a natural past/present relationship with

[41] Brian Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 53.
[42] Ibid. p. 55.

cause preceding effect. However, in circular narratives, the linear understanding of time and causality is cast aside in favour of an eternalist view of time that exists all at once and can be manipulated to run backwards or circle back on itself.

For much of history, time has been viewed in a linear progression of past/present/future based on the Augustinian concept that 'there is only present, since the other two do not exist… the past no longer has an existence, and the future doesn't have one yet.'[43] Augustine believed that the past fades into the realm of non-tangible memory and the future remains a realm of non-existent, undeveloped potential. The linear 'arrow of time' was believed to only move in one direction with the past growing as the future shrinks until it is eventually used up.[44] As the physical sciences evolved over the centuries, a new concept of viewing time emerged known as eternalism. Eternalism is defined as 'the view of time which recognizes a simultaneous existence of all times: past, present, and future.'[45] According to eternalism, time exists in all states simultaneously, and it is a person's subjective perception that determines past, present, and future rather than a universal linear arrow of time. The novels and films that I examine in this thesis are all consistent with an eternalist view of time contrary to an Augustinian view of time.

The genres of science-fiction and fantasy respond to the temporally distorted aspect of circular narrative because of their exploration of impossible temporalities and storyworlds. They provide an ideal narrative space to test the limits of the reader's imagination. These genres have a particular affinity with circular narrative: 'the fantasist has the option of disrupting time at the level of story. Time itself may be described as jumping, pausing, repeating, or looping

[43] Alon Halperin, *The Network of Time: Understanding Time & Reality through Philosophy, History and Physics* (Tel Aviv: eBook Pro Publishing, 2020), p. 28.
[44] Ibid, pp. 28-29.
[45] Ibid, p. 29.

back on itself as a result of magical operations.'[46] Malgrem writes briefly on this type of narrative, calling it the 'time loop':

> There is a form of time-travel story which intrinsically violates reason, science, and common sense, and which therefore qualifies as science fantasy. I refer here to the 'time-loop' story, in which an actant journeys via a time machine into his own past, meets up with himself at an earlier point in time, and supplies that former self with assistance based on future technologies or future events, thus solving the main conflict of the story.[47]

The time-loop story can be thought of as the simplest form of circular narrative, though it is only one specific form of a circular narrative. The time-loop is the simplest version because its sole purpose is to re-present the *in media res* beginning with enough new information that frames the event differently for the reader when they encounter it for the second time. Natasha Pulley's novel, *The Kingdoms* [2021], is an example of a simple time-loop circular narrative and is discussed in more detail in chapter one.[48]

Throughout this thesis, I will explore other sub-models of circular narratives such as the infinite loop narrative, spiralling circular narrative, and concentric circular narratives that become more complex as time becomes more untensed within the narrative. In some of the more complex sub-models of circular narrative, time becomes so untensed that it can become difficult to establish where the fabula starts and ends. The reader can become caught up in an intellectual game of trying to discern whether the proverbial chicken or egg came first. By adapting an eternalist temporal mode in fictional narratives, the relationship between cause and effect can be subverted because 'narratives are based on cause-and-effect relationships that are applied to sequences of events.'[49] Carroll writes, 'If you want to tell a story that powerfully

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[46] Ibid, p. 55.

[47] Science fantasy is a hybrid genre that includes elements of both science-fiction and fantasy, usually using science to legitimize elements of the fantastic (Brian Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992]). Malgrem, Carl, *Worlds Apart: Narratology of Science Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 149.

[48] Natasha Pulley, *The Kingdoms* (New York City: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021).

[49] Monika Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology* (New York City: Routledge, 2009), p. 2.

evokes the feeling of being in an alien environment, you have to reverse the direction of time.'[50] Carroll describes the backwards or untensed depiction of time as a jarring experience for readers who have been trained by an Augustinian view of linear time in narrative.

While authors have begun experimenting with untensed time, backwards time, and circular time in narrative, readers are still limited by the physical presentation of most books that forces them to read sequentially from first page to last while simultaneously trying to make cognitive connections that bring Augustinian order to an eternalist plot.[51] Ricoeur notes that 'the time of a novel may break away from real time… but it cannot help but be configured in terms of new norms of temporal organization that are still perceived as temporal by the reader.'[52] In circular narrative, repetition becomes crucial in reminding the reader of an event presented early in the sequence that has gained new significance upon repetition. The reader cannot help but attempt to construct a linear fabula during the reading experience where a traditional causal relationship is preserved; however, in circular narrative, this is not always a possibility as 'new norms of temporal organisation' challenge the reader's understanding of time and causality. Circular narrative novels explore eternalist depictions of time, yet readers are still limited to an Augustinian experience of time when they read. A paradox is created because, in a reader's mind, the concept of temporal eternalism can exist, but in a reader's subjective reality, the events will still be processed from beginning to middle to end, from past to present to future. The reader must therefore take on an active role in reading circular narrative, looking for plot connections with the understanding that they may never achieve a fabula that provides narrative closure. The role of the reader, therefore, is unusually important in the study of circular narrative because an active reader is required to recognise the

[50] Sean Carroll, *From Eternity to Here: The Quest for the Ultimate Theory of Time* (New York City: Dutton, 2016), p. 26.
[51] Alex Landragin's *The Crossings* is an unusual case in that the novel offers two different reading experiences based on whether one reads the novel cover-to-cover or follows a secondary sequence that asks the reader to start in the middle of the book's pagination and jump to different sections out of sequence.
[52] See Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative Vol 2* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 25.

construction of circular narrative by agreeing to challenge their own understanding of narrative time.

I.5. The Importance of the Reader in Circular Narrative

The importance of the reader is often overlooked in narrative studies which can get overly myopic with its focus on the text. However, without an actively engaged reader, circular narrative would go unnoticed and unappreciated. A reader of circular narrative is like a reader of the popular children's picture book series *Where's Waldo?* [1987].[53] The active engagement of finding Waldo is what stimulates the reader and creates a fulfilling reading experience. Similarly, a passive reader of circular narrative work will miss key structural connections and fail to recognise how the denouement fulfils the gaps created by an *in media res* beginning to close the narrative circle. With regard to circular narrative where 'beginning and end in some sense coincide, giving a quasi-circular closure to the event… it is the experiencer, whether in protention, retention, or direct experience, who makes the connection between beginning and end, and experiences it as separated by the intervening "departure."'[54] This quote places importance on the reader's ability to recognise circular narrative, specifically how beginning and end merge and are reframed by the events of the narrative middle. I am therefore concerned with how an active reader tries to mentally construct the fabula plot points during the reading experience to recognise the circular structure that is strategically crafted by the text. Therefore, I shall use elements of reader response theory to develop my 'active reader' model by showing how existing descriptions of theoretical readers are inadequate in recognising plot construction for my narratological purposes.

[53] Martin Handford, *Where's Waldo? Deluxe Edition* (Sommerville: Candlewick Press, 2012).
[54] David Carr, *Time, Narrative and History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 47.

Throughout the history of literary studies, the process of reading, when used in connection with narrative studies, has been looked down upon as 'a low form of activity.'[55] Reader response has often been applied to finding meaning within a text, examining the aesthetic merit of a text, exploring semiotic or linguistic aspects of a text, and so on. However, studying a reader's response to plot structure, especially in non-linear texts, helps to recognise how a text is crafted for a specific effect or response. The field of psychonarratology has attempted to bridge the gap between the reader and the plot: 'what readers do with the text is crucial for an understanding of narratives and how they function,' but there is still a long way to go.[56] Much of psychonarratology's focus is on empirical research that crosses over into the realm of phenomenology and focuses on the reader as an individual rather than as a theoretical construct. However, Wolfgang Iser, one of the most authoritative voices in reader-response theory realises that the convergence of text and reader 'can never be precisely pinpointed…as it is not to be identified either with the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader.'[57] What, then, is a narratologist supposed to do in attempting to understand how a reader processes plot construction? My proposed answer is to examine the classifications existing and identify their shortfalls in order to create a more efficient choice that best fits my research method.

I am interested in the classifications of 'real' readers that exist outside of a text as opposed to mock readers, implied readers, or narratees that exist within a text. While the term 'real reader' may seem a straightforward reference to real-life human readers, it is more complex than this. According to Iser, 'The real reader is invoked mainly in studies of the history of responses, i.e., when attention is focused on the way in which a literary work has been

[55] Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 4.
[56] Marisa Bortolussi and Peter Dixon, *Psychonarratology: Foundations for the Emprical Study of Literary Response* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 35.
[57] Wolfgang Iser, 'The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach', in *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), p. 50.

received by a specific reading public.'[58] The definition of a 'real' reader is attributed to the reading public as a collective unit; however, it is restricted by a set of historical responses and 'documented reactions' that are limited to empirical observations. Iser offers the 'contemporary' reader as a more modern and less rigid alternative, but this category too poses its own difficulties. The contemporary reader is defined as one 'upon whom all possible actualizations of the text may be projected.'[59] While the real reader is limited by fixed historical and empirical observations that are buried deeply in the realm of cognitive sciences, the 'contemporary' reader bears the burden of attempting to allow for all possible interpretations that a real reader may bring to a text. This includes but is not limited to any number of demographic variables and interpretations unique to each individual reader. In attempt to do this, the term becomes bogged down in its own inclusiveness.

In direct opposition to the 'contemporary' reader is the 'ideal' reader 'who understands the text perfectly and approves of its every nuance.'[60] Because of the ideal reader's level of comprehension perfection, Iser explains that this type of reader is 'a structural impossibility' and 'a purely fictional being.'[61] Aside from the obvious fact that no real reader can live up to the impossible standard of the ideal reader, the ideal reader fails to account for individual biases, backgrounds, and experiences that a reader brings to the text. For these reasons, an ideal reader can be useful for exploring response to narrative plot because it is completely exclusionary of reader individuality. However, an ideal reader is not the most efficient theoretical form of a real reader with regard to circular narrative because of the presumption of an omniscient relationship between the reader and the text. Because the ideal reader is perfect in every aspect of understanding and knowledge of the text, the concept runs contrary to

[58] Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), p. 28.
[59] Ibid, p. 27.
[60] Jane P. Tompkins, 'An Introduction to Reader-Response Criticism', in *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press,1980), p. xii.
[61] Iser, *Act of Reading,* p. 28 and p. 29.

circular narrative. Part of the experience of reading circular narrative involves the process of trial and error in connecting structural coincidences as the reader creates hypotheses to fill in plot gaps.

In response to Iser's ideal reader, Fish offers the classification of an 'informed' reader who 'must not only possess the necessary competence, but must also observe his own reactions during the process of actualization, in order to control them.'[62] This classification attempts to soften the unrealistic and exclusive aspects of the ideal reader by proposing a reader with a high degree of competence who can also be consciously self-aware of their own engagement with a text while reading. While the informed reader model could potentially be useful due to its self-aware and self-reflexive nature, it focuses more on how the reader reflects on the process of reading during the reading process than on how the reader engages actively with the narrative structure of the plot.

As is evident from this discussion, no existing model of the reader provides an accurate representation of the reader as an individual or as a collective whole. Therefore, it becomes necessary to select elements from existing models in order to achieve the most efficient working model to apply to structural comprehension of fictional narratives. As I am interested in a very limited function of reader-response which is focused solely on narrative structure, the reader's individual experience is a factor I must exclude despite recognising its importance in critical theory. I will therefore forego the existing categories of readers due to their respective shortcomings and instead classify the type of reader that fits the criteria of my research as the 'active' reader.

I define the active reader of circular narrative as having qualities of Fish's informed reader: narrative competence and self-awareness of their engagement with a text during the reading experience. However, the active reader goes even further to also possess working

[62] Ibid, p. 31.

memory recall. Forster explains that 'unless we remember we cannot understand,' which is especially true of circular narrative where memory is required for both the moment of reader anagnorisis and teleological retrospect.[63] The active reader acts like a detective in a text, able to recognise how structural coincidences create the narrative circle through repetition at the denouement and is thus a theoretical construct that I shall use in reference to a reader external to the text. I am using this construct specifically to illustrate reader recognition of circular narrative. Therefore, my purpose in including the role of the reader is specifically to explain how a reader of this type of narrative must actively connect the structural coincidences. This enables them to fill in plot gaps as guided by the text, to use knowledge stored in their working short term memory to recall information that is re-presented via repetition as the text circles back on itself, and to reflect back on the text as a whole in order to recognise the circular narrative structure.

An active reader's behaviour may be further considered in relation to Dannenberg's term 'liminal plotting' which refers to the 'mental constructions which the reader makes regarding the narrative future during suspenseful sequences…because they are only half-formed… in the reader's mind.'[64] While liminal plotting is an active mental undertaking during the reading process that attempts to predict future outcomes of the text, memory must also be engaged as a reader simultaneously reflects back on what has been read to make plot connections. Forster astutely observes that 'part of the mind must be left behind…while the other part goes marching on,' linking past, present, and future engagement with a text simultaneously during reading.[65] When a plot throws the reader into a series of ongoing event

[63] E.M Forster, 'Story and Plot', in *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure, and Frames* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002), p.72. Anagnorisis is a term coined by Aristotle meaning a turn from ignorance to knowledge through recognition. See also Aristotle, *Poetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), pp. 18-19. Teleological retrospect is a term coined by Mark Currie which means to look back upon something with newfound knowledge or understanding. See also Mark Currie, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 33.
[64] Hilary P. Dannenberg, 'A Poetics of Coincidence in Narrative Fiction', *Poetics Today,* 25.3 (2004), p. 413.
[65] Forster, p. 72.

with little context or exposition, the gaps invite readers to actively attempt to fill them and 'compare how they fill in the gaps to the way that the text itself eventually fills or does not fill in the same gaps.'[66] According to Suleiman, 'the act of reading is… essentially a sense-making activity.'[67] While there are a number of ways a narrative can make sense (for example, at the story level, at the meaning-making level, at the cultural level, and so on), I am interested in how the act of reading makes sense of plot construction from a narratological standpoint.

What differentiates my study from other reader-response and narratological studies is that, in examining the relationship between the two theories, I am interested in how the reader is guided to certain cognitive outcomes because as Tompkins writes, 'the reader's activity is only a fulfilment of what is already implicit in the structure of the work.'[68] The author plants and manipulates structural coincidences throughout a text to guide the reader in drawing the correct conclusions and connections at strategic times. According to McDonald, key information is withheld to prolong the effect of the plot gap so the reader forgets that certain events are 'coincidental as [they] look from one episode across thousands of words to another scene in which the results of the coincidence are given.'[69] In these instances, memory plays an important role to store information that the text will guide the reader to recall at a later point in the plot:

> Memory processes and memory representations play a critical role in most aspects of narrative understanding…These mental processes give rise to representations, which are the products of understanding that are stored in long-term memory…Moment-by-moment narrative processing invokes working memory. Working memory is defined as a memory system that enables people to temporarily store and manipulate information…Because a whole scenario becomes accessible in memory, readers can understand references to other aspects of the whole without the author having to expend extra effort.[70]

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[66] Robert Dale Parker, 'Reader Response,' in *How to Interpret Literature: Critical Theory for Literary and Cultural Studies,* 3rd edn. (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 334.
[67] Susan R. Suleiman, 'Introduction: Varieties of Audience-Oriented Criticism', in *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 22.
[68] Tompkins, p. xv.
[69] Walter R. McDonald, 'Coincidence in the Novel: A Necessary Technique', in *College English,* 29.5, (1968), p. 376.
[70] 'Memory,' *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory,* (London: Routledge, 2008) p. 299.

During the reading process, an active reader will utilise short-term working memory and memory resonance leading up to the moment of anagnorisis. Working memory is classified as one type of short-term memory that 'enables us to maintain a small number of thoughts in conscious awareness.'[71] It operates at a subconscious level, taking in new plot details and events in the narrative. It categorises them according to the reader's hypothesised assumption of importance and recalls them throughout the reading process. It then determines the accuracy of the many micro-hypotheses created as the reader tries to piece together plot events into a cohesive whole. Working memory is thus a temporary storage system that 'provides mental flexibility needed for traveling backward or forward in time' because it does not keep past information at the forefront of one's memory.[72] The mind is constantly being challenged with new information and having to decide what details are worth focusing on and which details are negligible to understanding plot.

Working memory makes information available when the active reader is called upon to engage in the process of memory resonance that Bortolussi and Dixon describe as 'allow[ing] the reader to retrieve information that had been encountered earlier in the text.'[73] According to Baddely, Eysenck and Anderson, memory resonance works when a reader actively seeks 'a particular fact, idea, or experience, often called a *target memory.'*[74] Without an idea of what they are searching for, the reader will be unable to retrieve the correct information necessary to comprehend how an author is connecting the gaps within the plot structure. As a result, an active reader must be intelligent enough to store information in their working memory and pick up on guiding cues through structural coincidences in the text. How a reader evaluates plot information will determine whether they successfully comprehend the moment of anagnorisis

[71] John Seamon, *Memory & Movies: What Films Can Teach Us About Memory* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2015), p.4.
[72] Ibid, p. 10.
[73] Bortolussi and Dixon, p. 18.
[74] Alan Baddely, Michael W. Eysenck, and Michael C. Anderson, *Memory* (London: Routledge, 2020), p. 240.

in the text. Readers naturally pay more attention to information that pertains to the primary protagonist, is causal in nature, and/or is repeated multiple times. The working memory determines that information of this nature which has 'organizational function' can be shuffled mentally and 'ordered into a causal sequence through the story,' making it not only easier to retrieve later on but also to mentally recognise the circular narrative shape.[75]

I have made a case for combining reader response, memory studies, and narrative studies to lay the groundwork for analysing circular narrative as a new narrative typology that requires both a specific plot construction and active reader to recognise the plot shape. In doing this, I have detected a current gap in the narratological knowledge base not only between nonlinear and unnatural narratives, but even more specifically between recursion and the 'ring structure' misnomer. In my introduction, I have established that there is room for the exploration of circular narrative as a narrative typology worthy of rigorous examination. I have identified one of its earliest uses in Heliodorus' *Aethiopica,* showing that there is a long yet ignored history of the typology, and I have detected contemporary uses of this narrative structure in works that showcase commonalities of genre, structure, and a specific role of the reader. In my reading of these circular narrative texts and watching of the films and television episodes that exhibit this structure through audiovisual storytelling means, I have worked to define a framework of criteria and conventions that make a strong argument for circular narrative's classification as nonmimetic rather than unnatural. In the chapters to follow, I shall detail these criteria and conventions and explore the various submodels that circular narrative can assume.

[75] Tom Trabasso and Paul van den Broek, 'Causal Thinking and the Representing of Narrative Events', in *Journal of Memory and Language,* 24 (1985), p. 613.

I.6. Methodology

This study originated out of the observation of a number of literary and audiovisual texts that featured similar narrative structures which did not fit within existing typologies. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season* was the first text that brought circular narrative to my attention, and I began actively looking for other novels which worked in the same way. In reading these texts, I noticed a number of overarching structural similarities that also featured nuanced differences that I shall detail in the chapters to come. I realised that this narrative structure threw the reader into the midst of ongoing situations only to circle back to those events towards the end after broadening the reader's understanding of those events. When revisiting the opening situations, the reader is able to draw upon an entirely different context created by the journey they have been on during the reading experience and, upon further reflection the reader will consider plot structure more closely. After concluding the reading experience, the reader will notice how the narrative's structure strategically and intentionally crafted the reader's reinterpretation of the re-presented event culminating in a moment of realisation where the seemingly unrelated plot threads merge together in unity.

In addition to my search for literary works that featured a similar plot structure I also looked across other media and found further examples in film and television. I also began to search for any existing critical writings on the subject. Richardson and Douglas provided the closest writings, but I found their writings limiting and misdirected based on my own personal observations of commonalities in these new materials. I chose to limit my selection of primary works to post-2000 texts believing that technological advances were behind the new type of narrative crafting, not least as a result of film editing techniques which pushed the boundaries of how audiences perceived narrative and how authors could stretch the boundaries of the written word. However, the discovery of *Aethiopica* caused me to re-evaluate my own

hypothesis as I recognised an early version of circular narrative which exhibited the same structural commonalities as contemporary texts.

Though there was a limited selection of texts exhibiting circular narrative when I began my research, more and more circular narrative works are being produced, convincing me that I have observed a structure on the cusp of popularity in literature and film/television and making my research even more timely for understanding the form. Over the course of this thesis, I shall not only explain the common structural criteria which I observed from the texts included in this study, but I shall also examine the role of the reader and viewer that plays an equally important role. Though I did not initially anticipate that the reader/viewer would have a substantial role in a narrative structural study, the texts guided me to recognise that unless a reader understands the structural shape of a circular narrative, they will fail to understand the specific effect the text is intended to have upon the consumer. Hence, I came to apply structural narratology principles and reader/viewer response theory to a selection of texts and films that all share the same circular narrative criteria but also explore diversity of circular subsets within the overarching typology. The subsequent chapters will examine the circular narrative typology which I have identified and explained several of its subsets.

I.7. Preview of Chapters

Over the course of this thesis, I will provide a working framework of criteria for structuring and recognising circular narrative. Chapter One will explore the three tools of narrative construction (*in media res* beginning, structural coincidences, denouement) and the two criteria that the reader is responsible for observing (anagnorisis, teleological retrospect). The *in media res* beginning throws the reader into the midst of a situation that creates large gaps in the plot's fabula. Structural coincidences are used to craft a non-sequential narrative and help the reader actively piece together the plot so that they may fill in the plot gaps created

by the *in media res* beginning. The denouement must provide answers to the questions raised in the beginning as the reader recognises the re-presentation of those events when the narrative temporally circles back to the opening event. By shifting the role of anagnorisis to the reader, the responsibility of recognition is placed on the reader consuming the narrative, broadening the definition of anagnorisis beyond its usual application to intra-narrative recognition at the character level. After the reader has reached the moment of anagnorisis, the active reader will reflect back on the narrative through teleological retrospect, to see how structural coincidences connect and to shape the circular narrative.

Chapter Two will explore the 'infinite loop' model of circular narrative in Neal Stephenson and Nicole Galland's *The Rise and Fall of D.O.D.O.* [2017].[76] *DODO* provides an example of the differences between recursive narrative and circular narrative and shows that they can coexist in the same work while serving two distinct narrative functions. In *DODO,* the recursive cycles primarily exist at the micro-narrative level; the overarching macro-narrative creates a circle that disrupts causal relationship, establishing a paradoxical cycle where certain events must be repeated in perpetuity in order for the plot sequencing to remain stable.[77]

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[76] I shall refer to this book as *DODO* hereafter. Neil Stephenson and Nicole Galland, *The Rise and Fall of D.O.D.O.: A Novel* (New York City: William Morrow, 2017).

[77] Gerald Prince uses the term 'embedded narrative' to describe what I shall call the micronarrative. Prince writes that an embedded narrative is 'a narrative within a narrative.' Because certain novels like DODO and films like *Inception* rely on the concept of narratives within narratives, I find it more straightforward to describe these as micro-narratives that help structure the integrity of the larger macro-narrative (Prince, p. 25). As in the case of the micro-narrative, I use the term macro-narrative rather than Prince's 'Primary Narrative' because micro-narratives help construct the structure of the circular macro-narrative and are therefore more structurally integral than being merely embedded. Prince defines the Primary Narrative as 'A narrative…which introduces one (or more than one) other narrating instance and is not itself introduced by any' (Prince, p. 77), but this is not always the case. With DODO and *The Fifth Season*, the primary narratives introduce themselves and rely on the micro-narratives to construct and protect the integrity of the micronarrative. Therefore, I shall use the terms 'micro-' and 'macro-narrative' to keep straight the multiple micro-narratives that act as structural coincidences to the macro-narrative. Instead, I shall use the term 'subplot' or 'secondary narrative' to apply to embedded narratives in a non-structural sense. Prince defines a subplot as 'a unified set of actions coincident with but subordinate to the (main) plot' (Prince, p. 83). whereas he defines secondary narrative as 'a narrative embedded within another narrative and, more particularly, within the primary narrative' (Prince, p. 50). This adjustment of terminology will help to avoid confusion when dealing with the building blocks of narrative at the structural level versus at the story level.

Chapter Three will introduce another form of circular narrative that I term 'spiralling circular narrative.' N.K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season* [2015] and Alex Lagrandin's *Crossings* [2019] feature three distinct storylines that alternate across the syuzhet.[78] The plot threads not only converge and merge into one another, but they also temporally circle back to their starting point through carefully plotted structural coincidences. In spiralling circular narrative, anachronisms make more complex usage of flashbacks and flashforwards by further untensing time for the reader. Because flashbacks and flashforwards rely on a linear narrative to provide the 'present' context for these temporal jumps to be made, I rely on the term anachronisms.

Chapter Four examines circular narrative in serialised narratives. Circular narrative is distinctive in its ability to extend beyond more than one narrative volume. In addition to exploring how circular narrative applies to multi-volume narratives, this chapter will introduce how circular narrative can be used in visual storytelling media like film and television. I move from the use of reader response to the use of viewer response to accommodate how multisensory storytelling modes activate different parts of the viewer's memory. The use of audiovisual stimuli, especially when such stimuli are repeated, form deeper impressions in the mind of the viewer that are more easily recalled when the viewer is re-presented with the same information later on in the viewing process. Because the viewer has more senses to engage, the recall is more immediate than in literary texts. I explore the differences between the reader and the viewer with regard to the serialised circular narratives in Jemisin's *Broken Earth Trilogy* [2015-2017] and *Doctor Who* Series Six [2011] respectively.[79]

Chapter Five considers circular narratives in the standalone films of Christopher Nolan. Unlike most auteur-directors who have a distinct visual style, Nolan's work is chiefly identified

[78]N.K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season* (New York City: Orbit, 2015); and Alex Landragin, *Crossings: A Novel* (New York City: St. Martin's Publishing Group, 2019).
[79] N.K. Jemisin, *The Broken Earth,* 3 vols (New York City: Orbit, 2015-2017).

through his narrative craftsmanship of puzzle films.[80] Puzzle films use temporal distortion and paradoxes to subvert causality and, in the cases of *Inception* [2010], *Interstellar* [2014], and *Tenet* [2020], create circular narratives. Nolan's use of puzzle films and temporal paradoxes to create circular narrative is aided by editing techniques that make flashbacks and flashforwards more easily recognisable and immediately accessible to viewers. Active viewership plays an important role in understanding the narrative structure of these films just as active readership plays a crucial role in recognising circular narratives in literary texts.

By the end of this thesis, I aim to have established how circular narratives are structured in texts, recognised by readers, and applied in several different sub-models that increase in narrative complexity with each chapter. My discussion of circular narrative will illuminate it as a new narrative typology and will contribute new findings and critical discussion to structural narratology and inspire discovery of other new typologies.

[80] Puzzle films build on Aristotle's concept of 'complex plots.' Buckland defines the puzzle film as being 'intricate in the sense that the arrangement of events is not just complex, but complicated and perplexing; the events are not simply interwoven, but *entangled*…interweaving the complex, multiple plotlines back into a single, unified classical plot,' Warren Buckland, 'Introduction: Puzzle Plots,' *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema,* ed. by Warren Buckland (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 3.

CHAPTER ONE

Criteria for Circular Narrative at the Structural Level and the Level of the Reader

In this chapter I will establish the framework that governs circular narrative and which will be used throughout the rest of this thesis. I have identified five criteria which are fundamental to the construction of circular narrative texts as well as the recognition of circular narrative by the active reader. Three of them exist at the narrative level: an *in media res* beginning, structural coincidences, and a denouement that functions to reunite the end with the beginning. The remaining two criteria exist at the level of the reader and aid in guiding the reader to recognise the circular narrative structure: anagnorisis and teleological retrospect. Circular narrative is unique as a narrative structure because it not only depends on text construction but also on reader recognition. This chapter will examine both the narrative construction of circular narrative and the role of the reader in recognising circular narrative using Natasha Pulley's novel *The Kingdoms.*[1] This novel utilises the most simplistic subset of circular narrative that I call the time-loop. The time-loop reunites the syuzhet beginning with the syuzhet ending to form a closed temporal circle. I shall define and discuss the five criteria of circular narrative step by step in relation to analysing the time-loop in *The Kingdoms* so that each piece of the structural framework is firmly established before moving forward into the subsequent chapters of this thesis.

[1] Natasha Pulley, *The Kingdoms* (New York City: Bloomsbury, 2021), see also Appendix 1 for plot summary and list of primary characters.

1.1. *In Media Res:* Beginning in the Middle

Traditionally, a beginning 'can be thought of as a capacity to commence something new.'[2] Perhaps the most famous type of beginning is the iconic 'once upon a time,' which establishes the place and time, introduces the protagonist, and eases the reader into the storyworld. However, there is another type of beginning which does not allow a reader to dip a toe gently into the waters of a new storyworld, and instead throws them into the deep end. An *in media res* beginning immediately disrupts chronology and mimesis by rejecting creation *ex nihilo* and throwing the reader into the middle of ongoing events.[3] In cases such as these, the beginning does not coincide with the origin of a plot. This separates the narrative trajectory of fabula and syuzhet by foregoing a natural story origin. From an authorial standpoint, an *in media res* beginning creates gaps in the fabula that must be filled in by the reader during the reading process. It lends itself to the creation of circular narrative because, as Sternberg points out, 'the opening of a gap… and the explicit filling in of a temporary gap necessarily involve a deformation of the chronological order of presentation,' and circular narrative heavily relies on chronological distortion and the untensing of time.[4] An *in media res* beginning goes a long way to accomplishing both. The reader must quickly process the events that they are thrown into in an attempt to 'catch up from behind' and look for information that will help fill in the plot gaps that immediately arise. The author 'rushes his audience into the middle of things… as though they were already well known,' and in doing this creates a need for an active reader who must actively look for how the missing information will be supplied.[5] Sternberg explains

[2] Niels Buch Leander, 'To Begin with the Beginning: Birth, Origin, and Narrative Inception', in *Narrative Beginnings: Theories and Practices* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), p. 16. Leander identifies two functions of beginnings: 'let me call them "a start" and "an origin"' (Ibid.).
[3] From the Latin meaning 'out of nothing.' Very few narratives build storyworlds *ex nihilo;* however, many narratives ease the reader into the world of the story rather than throwing them into the midst of ongoing events which force the reader to 'play catch-up' in order to understand the narrative events.
[4] Meir Sternberg, *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction,* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 51.
[5] Ibid, p. 36.

the gaps withhold this information 'to draw at will the reader's attention to its absence,' only to 'divulge it at an opportune moment.'[6]

The reader searches for clues surrounding the beginning which are purposefully withheld until the end. Said explains that 'the beginning…is the first step in the intentional production of meaning,' and this is particularly significant to my model of circular narrative because the beginning has a doubly important role: initially in its role as the start of the syuzhet and later as the denouement when it is revisited.[7] According to Sternberg, the *in media res* beginning provides 'large-scale chronological dislocation,' which I have observed is necessary for the creation of circular narrative.[8] The dislocation includes plots in which time is wholly relative to each character, complicated by the ability to travel across time and dimensions, and subverted by temporal paradoxes that challenge causality. It adheres to an eternalist perspective of time existing all at once, thereby erasing linear boundaries of past, present, and future.

The principle of chronological distortion is evident in the opening paragraph of *The Kingdoms*: 'Most people have trouble recalling their first memory, because they have to stretch for it, like trying to touch their toes; but Joe didn't. This was because it was a memory formed a week after his forty-third birthday.'[9] In this passage, the contradiction is established in the relationship between an individual and their first memory. The struggle of an individual to recall their first memory due to an ever-increasing time distance from it is undermined. The contradiction challenges the temporal understanding of memory and prompts the reader to ask why Joe is experiencing his first memory as a grown man. It can be inferred that something has compromised his long-term memory, but the reader is not given any explanation. All that is provided is Joe's first memory of stepping off a train, implying that his memory loss occurred

[6] Ibid, p. 51.
[7] Edward W Said, *Beginnings: Introduction and Method,* (New York City: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 5.
[8] Sternberg, p. 53.
[9] Pulley, p. 3.

during the train ride. This *in media res* beginning leads the reader to actively engage with the novel and look for clues surrounding how Joe lost his memory; it thus provides the opportunity for the author to revisit this moment after the missing pieces have been filled in by structural coincidences. While *in media res* beginnings help create temporal distortion, structural coincidences map the plot's development and help the reader fill in the information gaps that were opened by being thrown into the middle of a narrative already in progress. The relationship of gap creation and gap closure brings about the need for structural coincidences to bridge the cause/effect relationship between the two. The structural coincidences will eventually direct the plot back to its beginning to complete the narrative circle.

1.2. Structural Coincidences

Structural coincidences strategically reveal the information that answers plot gaps raised by the *in media res* beginning. Sternberg explains that within narratives 'different gaps or systems of gaps may…vary in several important respects: some can, for instance be filled in almost automatically, while others require conscious and laborious consideration.'[10] Structural coincidences apply to the latter, requiring 'laborious consideration.' They must be carefully crafted over the course of the entire narrative. Little critical writing currently exists about structural coincidences outside of their role in linear novels; however, Hilary Dannenberg has established a framework for structural coincidences in the postmodern literary era using the term *analogical coincidences.* Analogical coincidences 'link multiple temporal levels in the narrative,' and in doing so, 'transfer the act of recognition within the coincidence plot from a process depicted on the actantial level within the narrative world to a perceptional act on the part of the reader.'[11] While such coincidences were first applied to nineteenth-century novels,

[10] Sternberg, p. 50.
[11] Hilary P Dannenberg, 'A Poetics of Coincidence in Narrative Fiction', *Poetics Today,* 25. 3. (2004), p. 407 and p. 408.

Dannenberg recognised the importance of updating the role of such coincidences to apply to plot events in postmodern novels. Her work makes narrative coincidences applicable to contemporary writings like the circular narrative novels. While Dannenberg uses the term analogical coincidences, I prefer to use the term structural coincidences as the all-encompassing term for any type of narrative coincidence that an author has strategically woven into a plot, including analogical coincidences.[12] I will build upon this concept to show how structural coincidences are central to my framework for understanding how circular narratives are crafted.

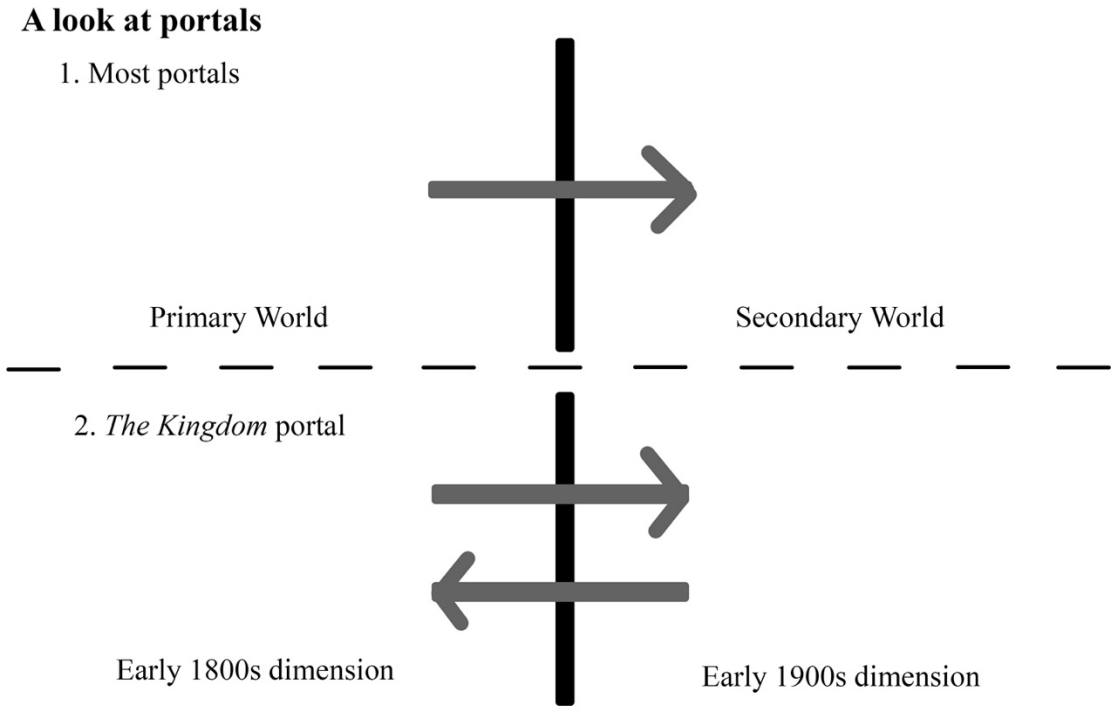
'Structural coincidences' is an oxymoronic term because the very nature of a coincidence is that it occurs by chance. If a narrative is structured, the chance-aspect appears to have been removed, yet structural coincidences manage to combine these competing roles. An author carefully designs narrative events to provide a reader with the illusion that certain coincidences are occurring throughout a novel. However, these moments are anything but coincidental. Structural coincidences are 'radically manipulated by the author' to manipulate narrative time and space so that certain plot points planted early on in the syuzhet come to fruition later on.[13] To achieve this McDonald states that 'a writer must prepare gradually for… structural coincidences' throughout all stages of the planning and writing processes.[14]

Ireland explains that narrative coincidences have the ability to 'operate at a *part-text* or *micro-sequential* level, between successive sentences, paragraphs or chapters, as well as at a *whole-text* or *macrosequential* level, accounting for broad movements of a work.'[15] This classification of micro- and macro-structural coincidences allows for subdivision according to

[12] See Walter R. McDonald, 'Coincidences in the Novel: A Necessary Technique', *College English,* 29.5 (1968), 372-82 & 387-88, p. 376; Ken Ireland, *The Sequential Dynamics of Narrative: Energies at the Margins of Fiction* (London: Associated University Press, 2001) p. 53.
[13] Dannenberg, p. 400.
[14] Walter R. McDonald, 'Coincidences in the Novel: A Necessary Technique', *College English,* 29.5 (1968), p. 376.
[15] Ken Ireland, *The Sequential Dynamics of Narrative: Energies at the Margins of Fiction* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 2001), p. 53.

the size of their contribution to narrative while also establishing that the narrative coincidences play a special structural role regardless of their size.

The Kingdoms utilises temporal distortions as structural coincidences as several competing temporalities fight for dominance at different temporal points between the 1790s and 1910s. These temporalities exist all at once in an eternalist depiction of time, and characters are able to go back and forth between temporal dimensions through a fantasy portal. Despite this, I hesitate to classify *The Kingdoms* as a portal fantasy for several reasons. Most portal fantasies are accompanied by a quest-style narrative which this novel does not have. Additionally, Mendlesohn states that in portal-quest fantasies, 'the fantastic is *on the other side* and does not "leak." Although individuals may cross both ways, the magic does not.'[16] *The Kingdoms* deviates from Mendlesohn's definition in that there is no magic 'system,' and the fantastic *does* leak, allowing travellers on both sides of the temporal portal to cross at will.



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[16] Farah Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), p. xix.
[17] Illustration 3, A Look at Portals, created by Stephanie Katz.

Whereas most portal fantasies only allow people from the primary world to cross into the secondary world, the portal in *The Kingdoms* allows people to cross in both directions creating confusion and disruption in both temporal dimensions. This is especially evident when people from the future travel into the past with a knowledge of advanced technologies which the people from the past wish to utilise earlier than they should be able to. The two-way portal also opens up a discussion of the Grandfather Paradox, a term given to the situation arising when characters from the future travel back to the past and are met with situations that could result in their death.[18]

More complications arise with the addition of an amnesia-response to crossing the portal, at least initially. Unfortunately, the rules of portal crossing in *The Kingdoms* are inconsistent: some characters, like Joe, experience amnesia while other characters, like Kite, do not. Because the reader primarily follows Joe's storyline, his character's amnesia justifies a great deal of exposition that sets the reader up to clearly recognise when Kite's and Joe's own identities are later revealed. The use of amnesia is an example of what I call an overt structural coincidence because it draws the reader's attention to itself as something worth noticing and remembering. Joe's amnesia is the first thing the reader is introduced to in *The Kingdoms.* The *in media res* beginning created through Joe's amnesia causes the reader to wonder what event or circumstances happened in the 'moments before' to trigger this. To answer this question, Pulley structures the syuzhet so that structural coincidences build methodically to lead the reader back to that exact moments and complete a narrative circle by answering this question.

[18] 'The paradox is as follows: a man chooses to go back in time and murder his grandfather. The grandfather's murder means preventing the possibility of the murderer being born, growing up and going back in time to murder his grandfather. So, the grandfather doesn't get murdered, and he keeps the family line going, which leads to his grandson being born and to the moment his grandson going back in time in order to murder his grandfather… and so on and so forth. An infinite loop which cannot be solved.' Alon Halperin, *The Network of Time: Understanding Time & Reality through Philosophy, History and Physics* (Tel Aviv: eBook Pro Publishing, 2020) pp. 109-110.

There may be many structural coincidences that an author crafts into a narrative to lead the reader back to the *in media res* beginning with a whole new outlook on the situation based on what has transpired in the interim. While it is impossible to discuss every structural coincidence in each circular narrative novel, I will focus on the ones that are the most structurally important. In *The Kingdoms,* one of the major structural coincidences happens before Joe gets off the train in Londres. The man who touches Joe's arm and looks after him for the first few pages of the novel is Kite, even though he remains nameless and goes unrecognised by Joe at their first meeting. The reader is told through exposition that this man is important and should be remembered. Unlike the amnesia, which is an overt coincidence because it draws attention to itself, the mysterious man is what I call a covert coincidence because his significance will not be revealed until much later in the syuzhet. Covert coincidences are more subtly woven into a narrative without calling attention to themselves. Their significance slowly builds through subsequent repetitive mentions during the narrative.

Another structural coincidence is the letter from the mysterious *M* asking Joe to come home if he remembers. Joe's recognition of the Scottish lighthouse on the postcard is significant because Joe has, up until this point, shown complete memory loss. The temporal distortion that untenses the syuzhet begins when Joe arrives at the newly built lighthouse to find it in ruins. On the boat ride to the lighthouse, a final structural coincidence of great importance is established through the temporal portal that exists between two pillars in the middle of the sea. The seeds of coincidence planted regarding M, the lighthouse and the portal start to converge as Kite explains to Joe that the lighthouse was built on the wrong side of the portal, which leads Joe to speculate that the mysterious postcard he received from M might also have been sent from the wrong side of the portal. A moment of anagnorisis occurs when the structural coincidences converge: 'Convergence involves the intersection of narrative paths and the interconnection of characters within the narrative world, closing and unifying it…by the type

of ending that provides a clear "sense of an ending."'[19] When there are multiple temporalities, as there commonly are in circular narratives, structural coincidences converge in a way that links all of the temporalities together so the reader can mentally connect what happens. Because this process of recognising how structural coincidences converge is so complex, it occurs in several stages that form the moment of 'anagnorisis.' While Dannenberg explains that 'the moment of *recognition* [is] the point at which the coinciding characters discover each other's identity,' I apply anagnorisis to the reader's ability to recognise how structural coincidences coincide and reframe an earlier plot point due to the revelation of new plot information.[20]

1.3. Anagnorisis, Repetition, and Filling the Gaps in the Text

Anagnorisis is a complicated term with respect to the reader. Despite coming from the Greek word *anagnôstês* which means 'reader,' anagnorisis has been a term restricted to characters within a text.[21] It was used first as a means of showing recognition between characters who were related, particularly in tragedies and epics; however, according to Cave, 'a period follows when poetics hardly condescended to notice technical aspects of plot… No one much was officially prepared to recognize recognition in the nineteenth century.'[22] For much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the use of anagnorisis was expanded beyond character recognition to include recognition of places, plot events, and objects by characters within a narrative, but the application still had not evolved to include examining how readers recognise the moments of connection in literary plots.

Northrop Frye was the first contemporary theorist to expand the definition and application of anagnorisis to the reader by recognising the reader's role as an active participant

[19] Dannenberg, p. 2.
[20] Ibid, p. 39.
[21] Terrence Cave, *Recognition: A Study in Poetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 260.
[22] Cave, p. 7.

in the activity of reading: 'When a reader of a novel asks, "How is this story going to turn out?" he is asking a question about the plot, specifically about that crucial aspect of the plot which Aristotle calls discovery or *anagnorisis.*'[23] Cave analyses Frye's assertion, adding that 'Anagnorisis is not only a structural feature… It is also a focus for reflections on the way fictions as such are constituted, the way in which they play with and on the reader.'[24] Cave suggests that Frye's definition 'assigns anagnorisis to "us," the readers or spectators: we recognize the unifying shape of the whole design' of the narrative structure.[25] To observe the unifying shape of a narrative, the reader must use anagnorisis to discover, recognise, and remember. The element of memory turns anagnorisis into a 'psychologically complex mechanism of recognition… anagnorisis "by means of memory."'[26] Especially with regard to circular narrative where one must discover, recognise, and reminisce, using memory and anagnorisis in simultaneous conjunction, the act of reading then becomes a 'sense-making activity, consisting of the complementary activities of selection and organization, anticipation and retrospection… formulation and modification of expectations' which allows the reader to see how the narrative threads of the circle come together.[27] I am concerned with how the reader processes plot information to understand how circular narrative is shaped through a definitive 'Aha!' moment of revelation. Frye writes that 'What is recognized is seldom anything new… it is something which has been there all along, and which, by its reappearance or manifestation, brings the end into line with the beginning.'[28] On this basis, I will apply anagnorisis as the act

[23] Frye, p. 52.
[24] Cave, p. 46.
[25] Ibid, p. 194.
[26] Piero Boitani, *Anagnorisis: Scenes and Themes of Recognition in Western Literature* (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2021), p. 42.
[27] Susan R Suleiman, 'Introduction: Varieties of Audience-Oriented Criticism', in *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 22-23.
[28] Frye, Northrop. 'Historical Criticism: Theory of Modes.' *Anatomy Of Criticism: Four Essays.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 25.

of recognition which fills in the plot gaps from information that has already been stored in the reader's working memory.

In circular narrative where one must discover, recognise, and reminisce, using memory and anagnorisis in simultaneous conjunction, the act of reading becomes a 'sense-making activity, consisting of the complementary activities of selection and organization, anticipation and retrospection… formulation and modification of expectations' which allows the reader to see how the narrative threads of the circle come together.[29] The first stage of reader anagnorisis is a result of memory resonance where the recall of information in the text is retrieved and processed by the reader to fill in a specific plot gap: Suleiman states that 'retrieval is a progression from one or more cues to a target memory via associative connections linking them together, through a process of spreading activation.'[30] As the reader actively stores, retrieves, and looks for links among plot information they 'continually… attempt to construct a larger pattern of simultaneous significance of what we have so far read.'[31] Seamon explains that 'our memory is more *reconstructive* than *reproductive* in nature,' so the active reader will constantly be searching for information to fill in plot gaps and construct a mental plot model.[32] The text helps guide the reader through the narrative as certain information is withheld and revealed at strategic increments throughout the plot.

In *The Kingdoms,* there are plot revelations that should trigger reader anagnorisis so the reader recognises the circular narrative structure. The first moment includes the revelation that the letters Joe has been reading from Madeleine are in a different handwriting than the postcard he received early in the narrative asking him to come home. Joe was originally sent a postcard signed by M, which he assumed to be from Madeleine. When Joe finally compares the postcard

[29] Susan R Suleiman. 'Introduction: Varieties of Audience-Oriented Criticism.' *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 22-23.
[30] Ibid, p. 242.
[31] Northrop Frye, *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology* (San Diego: Harvest/HBJ Book Publishers, 1963), p. 25.
[32] Seamon, p. 8.

to the letter, he notices the handwriting samples are different.[33] He recognises that the postcard signed 'M' matches Kite's handwriting and therefore the M who signed the postcard is not Madeleine but Missouri Kite.

The second moment of recognition for Joe occurs when he finally remembers the unnamed man he met on the train platform at the beginning of the syuzhet. At first, Joe believes he is hallucinating until the man turns around and he realises it is Kite.[34] This moment has double importance for the reader because in addition to revealing the identity of the man, the reader has come to understand Missouri Kite's romantic relationship with a man named Jem Castlereagh through a series of interwoven flashbacks ranging from 1797-1807. The surprise revelation comes when the reader discovers that Joe's true identity is Jem Castlereagh. However, in the revelation of Joe's identity as Jem, the reader is given a degree of omniscience that is still hidden from Joe. Joe never has a true moment of self-recognition. In one chapter he is Joe and in the next, he is Jem. Joe is Jem for a very short period of time before he once again forgets his identity as the narrative circles back to its starting point on the train.

As Jem boards a train with Missouri Kite to return from Scotland to London, the amnesia comes in stages. Jem forgets where they are traveling from and why they are traveling at all. Once Kite reminds him, Jem is able to recall the information, but the closer they get to London, the more the amnesia begins to take effect, fully claiming Jem's memories.

> Kite saw it go from him this time. He stopped still on the platform and stared at the people going past, his eyes sliding over Kite as much as they did anyone else. He jumped when Kite touched his arm. He didn't recognise him. 'I'm sorry, this is—but could you tell me where we are?' Jem said. He sounded different. It was a French accent. When Kite told him, he shook his head…. Everything that made him Jem was different.[35]
>
> Feeling like he was sinking, Kite asked his name. There was a long pause before the wrong one arrived. Joe.[36]

[33] Pulley, p. 352.
[34] Pulley, pp. 372-73.
[35] Ibid, p. 413.
[36] Ibid, p. 414.

At this point in the narrative, the reader has the information that was lacking at the syuzhet opening when they were first introduced to amnesiac Joe and the unnamed man on the train. In the second reading of this scene, the reader now knows who Joe really is, who the unnamed man really is, what their relationship has been, and how Jem lost all of his memories to begin with. The reader can now reflect on the opening passage with an entirely new context given the events that have transpired between syuzhet opening and the revisiting of the same temporal event at the syuzhet end. Even though the fabula timeline has spanned nearly 150 years across two different temporal dimensions, the structural coincidences work together to guide the reader to the moment of anagnorisis where the questions raised by the *in media res* beginning now have answers.

Working backwards from the first moment of anagnorisis regarding the revelation of M's identity, it is evident that the text deliberately misleads the reader to form an incorrect hypothesis. The character of Madeleine is an intentional distraction to delay the reader's ability to recognise M as Missouri. The first mention of Madeleine as the first thing Joe remembers after his own first name asks the reader to store that name in their working memory with the anticipation that Madeleine's identity in relation to Joe will be revealed. Frequent repetition is used to ensure that the reader becomes preoccupied with the discovery of Madeleine. The reader is further manipulated as Joe is introduced to his wife, who is not called Madeleine.[37] Withholding Madeleine's identity reinforces her implied importance to the reader.

Madeleine's relevance grows as the text leads the reader to believe that she wrote the postcard to Joe ninety-three years ago. The temporal discrepancy between their timelines raises more questions for which the reader must seek answers. Once the temporal portal is introduced into the narrative, it appears to be a plausible answer to explaining the century between when Madeleine wrote the postcard and when Joe received it. Meanwhile, because the reader has

[37] Ibid, p. 18.

been searching for Madeleine, they are likely to miss the smaller structural coincidence that reveals Missouri Kite's given name in a Wanted Dead or Alive advertisement.[38] Though Missouri Kite's given name is shared early in the text, he is continually referenced by his surname to deliberately misdirect the reader into associating M with Madeleine rather than Missouri.

Madeleine is still the focus as Joe challenges Kite about withholding information about her.[39] Even though it has been established that Joe married Alice, he has discovered information that suggests he could have also been married to Madeleine in the alternate universe. Kite tries to appease Joe's desire for information regarding Madeleine by providing him with a series of letters written by Madeleine. The content of these letters is shared with the reader culminating in Joe's recognition that Madeleine's handwriting is different from the postcard from M.[40] By this point, the reader has been presented with an entire sub-plot built around the character of Madeleine meaning that, even though Kite has begun to be referenced more gradually by his given name, the reader has still fixated on Madeleine. When Joe pieces together that M is Missouri Kite, the reader recognises that they have had this information for some time but have been led to misinterpret the structural coincidences.

The reader also realises that Joe has misremembered his own identity throughout the entire text; if M is Missouri then Joe is really Jem Castlereagh. The reader recognises the extent of Jem and Missouri's relationship history understanding that the red-haired stranger who helped Joe off the train at the beginning of the novel is Missouri. What the reader still does not know is what happened in the moments before Joe became an amnesiac on the train, this moment is revealed to the reader through anagnorisis. While the first presentation of this scene is from Joe's point of view, the second presentation changes to Missouri's point of view. The

[38] Ibid, p. 115.
[39] Ibid, p. 139 and pp. 192-94.
[40] Ibid, pp. 351-52.

reader witnesses the re-presentation of this scene from Kite's point of view this time. Kite watches Jem slip away from him as the amnesia takes over. The reader is confronted with the repetition of Jem's first line of dialogue: 'I'm sorry, this is—but could you tell me where we are?'[41] With this repetition, the context has changed in the interim. The reader now realises the extent of Jem and Missouri's romantic relationship which makes Missouri's witnessing of Jem's amnesia have tragic significance as Jem introduces himself to Missouri as Joe. The reader also now understands why this 'stranger' was so protective of Joe in the first iteration of the amnesia scene. Initially the reader believes Joe's account that this act was a random act of kindness from a stranger but upon revisitation of the event, the reader understands from Kite's viewpoint that it was an act prompted by heartbreak and responsibility from Joe's romantic partner whom Joe no longer recognises. The repetition of this scene follows the revelation of the two protagonists' identities, showing the reader how all the structural coincidences come together to fill the plot gaps even regarding the plot misdirection meant to delay anagnorisis.

The reader now has the information to explain the circumstances surrounding the *in media res* beginning and sees how the various flashbacks and temporal distortions have allowed the plot to circle back on itself. However, the cognitive role of the reader does not stop here. Anagnorisis is only the first step in a reader's recognition of circular narrative. The reader's role continues after encountering the denouement. The denouement in circular narrative has a more complex role than simply ending the narrative text. While most endings tie up loose plot ends and leave the reader with a sense of finality, in circular narrative the denouement often does not provide finality to the plot. Instead, because of the untensing of time and the subversion of causality, the denouement will build on the moment of anagnorisis to answer

[41] Ibid, p. 413.

questions raised from the *in media res* beginning while leaving the reader with a whole new set of questions to ponder after completing the reading experience.

1.4. Denouement & Teleological Retrospect: Looking Back to Recognise

1.4.1. Denouement

While many people use the words 'ending' and 'denouement' as synonyms, there is a difference between the two terms.[42] Aristotle defines an ending as 'the natural result of something else but from which nothing else follows,' yet when a narrative circles back to its *in media res* beginning and distorts the temporal relationship between cause and effect, an ending becomes merely a demarcation resulting from a lack of further pages to turn in the reading process.[43] Instead, I use the word denouement to refer to narrative closure that fills in the missing informational pieces raised at the beginning. Denouement speaks to narrative closure and encourages a deeper level of meaning-making than a mere story end. Endings speak to a note of finality that is often withheld in non-linear narratives and especially in circular narratives. Denouement, on the other hand, as Marianna Torgovnick writes, 'designates the process by which a novel reaches an adequate and appropriate conclusion, or, at least, what the author hopes or believes is an appropriate conclusion.'[44]

From a structural standpoint, the denouement is placed after the structural coincidences culminate in a moment of reader anagnorisis for the reader. The denouement shows the reader how 'the end writes the beginning and shapes the middle,' which becomes especially relevant in circular narrative because of the temporal point shared by beginning end.[45] Poe writes that, 'it is only with the *denouement* constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air

[42] There is 'a widespread tendency to conflate [closure] with *ending,*' Eyal Segal 'Closure in Detective Fiction', *Poetics Today,* 31.2 (2010), p. 155.
[43] Aristotle, *Poetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 31.
[44] Marianna Torgovnick, *Closure in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. 5-6.
[45] Richardson, *Unnatural Narratology,* p. 62.

of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points tend to the development of the intention.'[46] When an *in media res* beginning raises questions that can only be answered by circling back to the event later on, the denouement will always be in view of the reader. The denouement gains a special degree of significance in that it must not only provide closure but also attempt an explanation of causation which, in circular narrative, is not always possible. The denouement does, however, build on the structural coincidences plotted intentionally in the text to lead the reader to a moment of anagnorisis that will show how the multiple temporal plotlines converge. Rabinowitz writes that a reader will 'expect that the ending will somehow be prefigured in the beginning,' which is especially true of how a reader of circular narrative will actively search for how the *in media res* beginning will be explained at the close.[47]

Not all circular narratives have conclusive denouements. Some denouements only raise more questions after answering the first round of questions posed by the *in media res* beginning. The lack of conclusion in circular narrative challenges the roles of beginning and end as well as the relationship between cause and effect. If one attempts to divorce beginning from ending during fabula reconstruction but is unable to successfully do so, then the degree of circular narrative established is seamless. Therefore, the reader's expectation of closure can be withheld indefinitely, leading to 'narrative "openness" result[ing] from significant gaps relating to the represented world that remain open—or at least not definitely closed—even at the end of a text.'[48] Though Segal's quote is originally applied to closure in the detective series, it has further application in other genres since this is not a phenomenon exclusive to the detective fiction genre. While it may prove frustrating for a reader seeking traditional closure,

[46] Edgar Allen Poe, 'The Philosophy of Composition', in *Edgar Allen Poe: Selected Poems, Tales, and Essays* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2016), pp. 224-25.
[47] Peter Rabinowitz, 'Reading Beginnings and Endings', in *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure, and Frames* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002), p. 305.
[48] Segal, p. 162.

the lack of a conclusive denouement can aid in shaping a more intensely structured circular narrative. Not all circular narratives achieve this degree of seamless circularity, of course. In fact, many do not. Most, like *The Kingdoms,* provide a simple connection of the beginning with the end at the denouement while keeping the relationship between cause and effect intact. In *The Kingdoms,* the novel circles back exactly to the moment of its *in media res* beginning. The almost exact repetition aids the reader in remembering that they have already encountered the scene before. What raised many questions on first encounter now provides answers to those questions. While the reader did not know what caused Joe's amnesia on first presentation or who the kind stranger was who helped him, when the moment re-presents itself, the reader now witnesses how Joe lost his memory from Kite's point of view and that Kite is the 'stranger' who aided Joe. Because of what has transpired in between the two iterations of this scene, the reader has much greater context and sees the narrative closure created as the circle completes itself.

Because the *in media res* beginning creates so many questions at the onset of the reading experience, the reader anticipates, rightly or wrongly, that a denouement that will answer these questions satisfactorily. The denouement remains at the forefront of the reader's mind as they actively search for pieces to the puzzle while simultaneously anticipating what the finished picture will look like. A denouement has double significance because it is only once a narrative reaches this moment that the reader can reflect on the narrative structure and whether the structural coincidences culminated in a satisfying and conclusive manner. The denouement, then, is not an end, but a jumping off point for further reflection and discussion of the effectiveness of the circular narrative structure. At the end of the reading process, it is natural for a reader to 'try to tie it up in some way.'[49] The reader will do this with circular narratives by returning to the beginning and, as Reising points out, when a reader returns to the beginning

[49] Rabinowitz, p. 304.

of a work they have just finished, it 'indirectly reveal[s] shadow narratives that have been lying latent within the dominant thematics of the works from which they emerge.'[50] While Reising speaks on a thematic level, the same can be the case at the narrative level. Rather than revealing shadow narratives, however, retroactive reflection on the narrative will draw more attention to the convergence of structural coincidences and, specifically, how they converge to achieve the denouement's level of openness or closedness.

1.4.2. Teleological Retrospect

Circular narrative endings are rarely neat and, for that reason, prompt the reader to critically reflect back on a text after reading has been completed in order to re-evaluate how all the plot pieces fit together. Richardson writes that a traditional novel ending is 'generally expected to wrap up the plot, reveal all the mysteries, provide some sort of poetic justice, and resolve the major problems that generated the story in the first place.'[51] However, Rabinowitz writes that when an ending is 'not always so neat…the reader is often expected to reinterpret the work so that the ending in fact serves as an appropriate conclusion.'[52] The active reader should feel an intuitive prompting to reflect back on the text as a whole and look for all the structural coincidences that merged previously divergent plot elements in the moment of anagnorisis. Postdictability is described by Bae, Cheong, and Vella as 'making sense of the story as a whole in retrospect,'[53] yet I take issue with this term because, in another article by Bae and Young, they elaborate on the definition of postdictability, writing that it 'characterizes a story structure in which every part makes sense for the reader as a whole so that she can

[50] Russel Reising, *Loose Ends: Closure and Crises in the American Social Text* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 12.
[51] Richardson, p. 26.
[52] Rabinowitz, p. 304.
[53] Byung-Chull Bae, Yun-Gyung Cheong, and Daniel Vella 'Modelling Foreshadowing in Narrative Comprehension for Sentimental Readers' in *Interactive Storytelling—6th International Conference,* ed. by Hartmut Koenitz, et. al, (Erfurt: SpringerLink, 2013), pp. 1-12, (p. 7).

construct 'a coherent macrostructure' with no conflict in retrospect.'[54] This definition of postdictability sets up an impossible standard much like that of the ideal reader discussed earlier in this chapter. I prefer the term teleological retrospect which Currie defines as 'a looking back from an end-point to look back on an event is to give it a significance it did not possess at the time of its occurrence.'[55] With circular narratives, not every part of the plot will make sufficient sense for a reader to perceive no conflicts at all when looking back on it. Therefore, I am choosing to use the term teleological retrospect because it allows for 'imperfect' plots that do not resolve every last detail while still illuminating the circular plot structure. It also emphasises the requirement for the reader to look back and carefully analyse structural coincidences to create deeper cognitive understanding and appreciation of the narrative's construction. Especially with circular narrative plots that subvert causal relationships, many times there will still be unresolved questions regarding plot origin for the reader to ponder; however, the narrative denouement still provides enough of a coherent macrostructure for the reader to look back in retrospect and see how the narrative's circular pattern operates.

While reader anagnorisis uses repetition to recall past information combined with new context to recognise how structural coincidences fit together, teleological retrospect goes a step further: it looks back to the beginning of the narrative with the new information that has transpired and enables a better view of the connections across the text as a whole. In engaging teleological retrospect, a text can 'instruct us in the kinds of significance acquired by an event when it is looked back upon.'[56] When looking back in retrospect, certain events can gain greater significance while others that were thought important on first reading are proven to be

[54] Byung-Chull Bae and R. Michael Young, 'A Use of Flashback and Foreshadowing for Surprise Arousal in Narrative Using a Plan-Based Approach', in *Interactive Storytelling—6th International Conference,* ed. by Hartmut Koenitz, et. al, (Erfurt: SpringerLink, 2013), pp. 156-167, (p. 158).
[55] Mark Currie, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 33.
[56] Ibid, p. 33.

less so. Not only can event significance in the plot change, but 'inter-relationships between past, present, and future, actually causes the text to reveal its potential multiplicity of connections.'[57] With subsequent readings, teleological retrospect changes and becomes stronger as the reader's observations into plot connections and structural elements becomes more fine-tuned. The reader goes into the text with a wholistic working memory of the text formed from the first reading, and things that were missed on first reading gain new significance. While a first reading is a sequence of trial and error performed by an active reader up until the moment of anagnorisis, teleological retrospect leads the reader to stronger structural interpretations of narrative connections.

When the reader looks back on *The Kingdoms* post-reading, they will see how the text as a whole completes a narrative circle as the opening scene at the train station synchronises with a re-presentation of that same scene near the end of the syuzhet. In retrospect, the reader realises that the anonymous man who helps Joe at the train station from the beginning is Kite. When Kite is explaining that he had ridden the whole way on the train in the same car as Joe, there is a line that, upon first reading, proves curious, but when looking back or engaging in a second reading of the text takes on a new significance: 'He looked like he was stopping himself leaning forward and taking Joe's hands.'[58] What could initially be written off as an act of pity is now viewed as an act of restrained intimacy. When Joe meets Kite for the second time at the lighthouse in Scotland, the reader realises that Kite blatantly lies to Joe about the postcard from M. In retrospect, the reader understands that, while Kite did write the card to Joe in an attempt to trigger Joe's memory, Kite felt guilty afterward and tried to get Joe to go back to his new life in present-day Londres.

[57] Iser, 'The Reading Process,' p. 54.
[58] Pulley, pp. 6-7.

Additionally, in reflecting on the minor character of Kite's sister, Mrs. Agatha Castlereagh, the reader realises she is also Jem's wife in addition to his post-amnesiac wife, Alice. Mrs. Castlereagh provides much of the initial exposition to both Joe and the reader after Joe joins Kite on his ship, but in retrospect, the reader recognises that this is once again due to Agatha's prior relationship with Joe. When Mrs. Castlereagh challenges Kite, 'Missouri, we need to know if he can remember,' the reader sees this is not purely out of a desire to test the limits of Joe's memory, but to challenge if he will remember who Agatha and Missouri really are.[59] It further explains why Mrs. Castlereagh tells Joe that Kite killed her husband.[60] She is not speaking of a literal murder but of the murder of Jem-now-Joe who has forgotten he was once Jem and married to Agatha Castlereagh. In hindsight, these clues create anagnorisis for the reader concerning structural coincidences in the relationships between characters and identities of characters.

Another detail that becomes more relevant is the 'death' of Fred. Upon first reading, his death seems cold-hearted and conspiratorial as if Kite has sinister reasons for keeping crucial information from Joe. I use quotation marks around the word 'death' because it is debatable whether Fred's death was truly an accident of being washed overboard, or if Kite, in his rage, pushed Fred overboard knowing he could not swim. Before his death, Fred had a moment of character anagnorisis, recognising Jem and attempting to expose the fact that Kite had been lying to Joe about everything.[61] In hindsight, the reader is able to connect all of these pieces and further understand why Fred's death could have been a result of murder because of Kite's sociopathic tendencies revealed in later flashbacks. In retrospect, the flashbacks to earlier scenes in Kite's, Jem's, and Agatha's lives are strategic to explaining some of Kite's coldblooded and erratic actions, including killing Fred and his own sister. While Joe looks at

[59] Ibid, p. 136.
[60] Ibid, p. 150.
[61] Ibid, p. 203-07.

these moments in horror, the reader, in hindsight, understands that Agatha moulded Kite into a cold-hearted killer in their need to survive as young adults.[62] It also shows how instrumental Jem was into humanising Kite through their friendship and eventual romantic relationship and how Agatha and Jem's marriage was used as a screen so that Jem and Kite could be together. Because of the way Jem helped Kite to regain some of his humanity after Agatha's cruel training, teleological retrospect further explains why Kite looked after Joe on the train, wrote the postcard as M, and lived with guilt at having lured Jem back to him rather than letting him live his new life as Joe Tournier in Londres.

Where readers will continue to have questions, however, is concerning the re-presentation of the scene on the train in which Jem, having only recently regained knowledge of his identity, falls into his amnesiac state and reverts back to Joe. Due to the temporal distortion caused by the portal and the introduction of the Grandfather Paradox, the reader can never be sure if the repeated scene on the train is really a repetition.[63] One could interpret it as the narrative having circled back on itself to show the moments before the opening scene when Joe arrives on the platform in Londres with no memory, but it could also be interpreted as déjà vu.[64] Unlike actual repetition, déjà vu is the mental deception of feeling like one has lived an experience before but has not. The reader is initially prompted to believe the former and see the narrative neatly circle back on itself through the way Agatha comes back into the narrative. When Agatha recognises the extent of Joe's amnesia, it prompts her to accuse Kite of murdering Joe's former self, Jem. However, upon further retrospective speculation, the Grandfather Paradox and temporal portal themes referenced throughout the narrative could challenge the causal relationship of the repeated scene in several ways.

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[62] Ibid, p. 209-17.

[63] The Grandfather Paradox is introduced in the scene with the turtles (Pulley, pp. 124-25) and Joe's wondering whether his daughter, Lily, will still exist with each crossing he makes through the portal (Pulley, p.316 and p. 322).

[64] Déjà vu is defined as 'a feeling of having already experienced the present situation.' *New Oxford American Dictionary,* 3rd edn, (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2010).

The first way in which the temporal portal challenges the simple circularity is by allowing the reader to consider that the time-travel in the novel is really trans-dimensional travel where alternate universes occur: at the beginning, London is called Londres as a counterfactual historical world where France has conquered England.[65] After the re-presentation of the train scene, London is referenced by its correct historical name and is part of England. The second way is in the way that Joe's daughter Lily no longer exists, as he feared would happen. Instead, she has been replaced by twin children belonging to Joe's brother who, in both potential universes, has died. While Joe married Alice in the Londres version, in the London version, Alice and Joe's brother Toby were married, but they both died leaving their children in the care of Joe. It is therefore up to the reader to interpret how the repeated train scene factors into a fabula construction through teleological retrospect. The reader must come to a point where they realise that, regardless of the amount of retrospective analysis, a firm answer as to the causal relationship of events in the circular narrative can never truly be achieved.

1.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have established a framework for circular narrative that shows how it adheres to a series of structural conventions. The three narrative criteria I have identified—*in media res* beginning, structural coincidences, and denouement—shape the circular narrative and thus ground it in narratological structuralism that prevents this form from being grouped with unnatural narrative. These narrative criteria behave in a consistent manner across circular narrative texts, such as *The Kingdoms* and the texts to be examined in following chapters. In

[65] A counterfactual is defined as 'a nonfactual or false *antecedent*…done by *mentally mutating* of "undoing" a real-world event in the past to produce an *outcome* or *consequent* contrary to reality… A counterfactual therefore involves a clear contrastive relationship between a real event belonging to a factual world and a hypothetical one that counters this fact' (Dannenberg, p. 111).

addition to the structural criteria for shaping circular narrative, this chapter shows how the reader's role is important in recognising circular narrative structure. Unless a reader plays an active role and picks up on the structural coincidences that are built into a circular narrative text, the reader will not see how the denouement revisits and reframes the *in media res* beginning. The reader plays a dual role in observing how structural coincidences converge in a moment of anagnorisis and then further reflecting on how the structural coincidences fit together to form the circular narrative shape using teleological retrospect post-reading. To aid the reader, the text carefully structures coincidences of overt and covert nature to guide the reader's focus while they are searching for answers to the plot gaps raised by the *in media res* beginning. Circular narrative is thus unique as a narrative structure because it relies on an actively engaged reader almost as much as it relies on strategic narrative crafting within the text. In the next chapter, I will provide further definition of circular narrative by looking at a more complex subset of circular narrative I have termed the 'infinite loop.'

CHAPTER TWO:

Recursion, Circularity, and The Infinite Loop in *The Rise and Fall of D.O.D.O.*

The Rise and Fall of D.O.D.O. (henceforth to be referred to as *DODO*) by Neil Stephenson and Nicole Galland exhibits a subform of circular narrative that I call the *infinite loop*.[1] The infinite loop, from a narratological standpoint, uses recursion, time travel, and mixed verb tenses to untense time. It creates a circular narrative that must keep repeating in order to preserve the sequential ordering of events presented in the syuzhet. Recursion is used within the infinite loop circular narrative, but recursion retains its own set of structural criteria that are different from circularity. Recursion is therefore its own narrative type, yet it is not mutually exclusive from circular narratives as *DODO* will illustrate. The infinite loop is more complex than the time-loop examined in Chapter One. Because of the untensing of time in this novel, the terms past/present/future lose their temporal distinctions as time is presented as existing all at once. In addition to an untensed presentation of time, this novel also experiments with mixed verb tenses as a way to keep the reader in a sense of flux regarding narrative time. *DODO* combines recursive micro-narratives through embedded DEDEs that are contained within a larger, overarching circular macro-narrative. A DEDE is an acronym for Direct Engagement for Diachronic Effect and is intended to be pronounced 'deed' due to the fact that time travellers are performing specific deeds while on a DEDE.[2] The recursive micro-narratives contribute to the overarching infinite loop form of circular narrative in this novel. I will examine the different roles of recursion and circularity as well as their ability to coexist cohesively within the same work through my analysis of *DODO.*

[1] Neil Stephenson and Nicole Galland, *The Rise and Fall of D.O.D.O.* (New York City: William Morrow, 2017), p. 571. When referring to the title of the novel, I shall use *DODO* in italics; when referring to DODO as the fictional organization within the novel, no italics will be used. For a plot summary and reference to key characters, see Appendix 2.
[2] Ibid. p. 571 and p. 173.

2.1. Time and Tense

DODO uses an eternalist presentation of time in which time becomes wholly relative depending on the placement of DOers, an acronym for Diachronic Operatives or time travelers.[3] The novel does not view the existence of time as a linear arrow or as a singular dimension. Instead, it views time as an infinite number of temporal Strands all existing at once, consistent with what physicists believe: 'there is not one single time; there is a vast multitude of them…the single quantity 'time' melts into a spiderweb of times…it's a network of events affecting each other.'[4] The interconnectedness of these temporal Strands works to not only untense time for the characters and the reader but to subvert causality. Carroll writes that we 'distinguish past from future through the relationship between cause and effect. Namely, the causes come first (earlier in time) and then come the effects.'[5] When the DODO DOers travel through time, they attempt to change the past to bring about desired outcomes in the future; however, after multiple missions across multi-dimensional temporalities, temporal ordering becomes so distorted that the traditional causal relationship is subverted. This subversion is what creates the infinite loop style of circular narrative because one can no longer determine a linear ordering of the fabula. Therefore, a 'chicken and egg' phenomenon is created as a reader reflects upon the narrative looking for clues as to a definitive fabula start and end that is impossible to achieve. The infinite loop is brought about by the circular reasoning that the reader will engage in with each subsequent reading, and the fact that certain events must continue to be repeated to preserve the integrity of the integration of so many timelines in the narrative.

[3] Stephenson and Galland, p. 571.
[4] Strands are defined text as 'parallel universe[s]' (Ibid, p. 752); Carlo Rovelli, *The Order of Time* (New York City: Riverhead Books, 2018) p. 16. In *DODO,* Strands are capitalised as a proper noun.
[5] Sean Carroll, *From Eternity to Here: The Quest for the Ultimate Theory of Time* (New York City: Dutton, 2016) p. 41.

DODO makes use of a dossier-style compilation of documents presented by multiple narrators. This style of narrative presentation also helps to untense the syuzhet because 'the inclusion of documents, especially letters, within the narrative, can subtly dislocate forward movement by directing attention back to past actions which impinge on present situations.'[6] The multiple document types in *DODO* dislocate linear temporality by jumping around in time and also acting as completing analepses that fill in pieces of information that other narrators do not focus on.[7] For example, the primary narrative is Melisande's *Diachronicle* diary entries. While written in 1851 London, the *Diachronicle* predominantly focuses on the events of DODO in the twenty-first century. Details that are not focused upon in Melisande's *Diachronicle* are filled in through the completing analepsis of a simultaneous account by Rebecca East Oda. In Rebecca's diary entries, written in the twenty-first century, an alternative viewpoint of certain events are presented to provide a more complete record. Other secondary narratives include the letters of Grainne, as well as various transcripts, debriefings, chat streams, and poems by other minor characters; these other secondary narratives occur in historical DTAPs that serve as 'flashbacks.'[8]

The multiple narrators and types of narrations further help to untense time for the reader through flashbacks and flashforwards. Whereas flashbacks and flashforwards typically interrupt a singular linear timeline, *DODO* uses an eternalist depiction of time and infinite dimensions which are more complicated. Instead of referring to temporal jumps as flashbacks and flashforwards, I will use the term anachronisms. Because of the lack of linear temporal movement, the terms 'flashforwards' and 'flashbacks' have no relativity to the forward narrative trajectory. For example, when Melisande is writing the *Diachronicle* from 1851

[6] Ken Ireland, *The Sequential Dynamics of Narrative: Energies at the Margins of Fiction* (London: Associated University Press, 2001) p. 119.
[7] Completing analepses are defined by Genette as 'the retrospective sections that fill in, after the event, an earlier gap in the narrative' (p. 57).
[8] I use quotation marks here because the eternalist presentation of time used in this novel renders terms like *flashback* arbitrary and relative to specific characters.

London, she is writing from her historical past. Her 'home time' is the twenty-first century.[9] When she inhabits 1851 London, that becomes her new present because she can only experience one temporal and spatial present at a time. Humans can only experience time according to an Augustinian depiction of time: 'We experience reality in a continuous, sequential manner from one present moment to the next' regardless of where one finds themselves in the grand presentation of time.[10] Therefore, Melisande writes the *Diachronicle* as a history of *her* personal past experiences even though those experiences exist 150 years in the future of the world:

> My name is Melisande Stokes and this is my story. I am writing in July 1851 (Common Era, or—let's face it—Anno Domini)…But I am not a native of this place or time. In fact, I am quite ~~fucking~~ desperate to get out of here.[11]

Not only does Melisande establish where she currently is in relation to where she used to be, but she also uses a mix of different verb tenses to further untense time. Melisande uses present tense verbs (is, am) to introduce herself in her current present-day. No sooner does she establish this present, she then contradicts herself with the revelation that she is not from *when* she currently is. In explicitly stating that she is not a native of 1851 London, Melisande is indirectly implying that she has time travelled to her current spatiotemporal location from another time and place:

> But you already knew that. Because when I'm done writing this thing—which for reasons that will soon become clear, I'm calling the Diachronicle—I am going to take it to the very discreet private offices of the Fugger bank…to seal it in a vault, not to be opened for more than one hundred and sixty years.[12]

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[9] I use the phrase *home-time* to refer to the time that a certain character is native to. For example, Melisande is native to the twenty-first century, so that is her home-time. Grainne's home-time is in 1600s London. However, even though Melisande meets Erszebet in 1850s London, Erszebet's actual home-time is 1830s Hungary because she makes several references wanting to dance upon the graves of her dead enemies (p. 105, p. 126, and p. 135).

[10] Alon Halperin, *The Network of Time: Understanding Time & Reality through Philosophy, History and Physics* (Tel Aviv: eBook Pro Publishing, 2020) p. 31.

[11] Stephenson and Galland, p.3.

[12] Ibid.

Verb tense complicates the way Melisande refers to things past and future. Melisande's usage of past tense ('knew') creates a paradox when examined within the context of the rest of the passage because one cannot inhabit two temporalities simultaneously. She is talking to someone from the future in the past tense, despite the fact that the temporal future is her present home-time. Because Melisande has been temporally moved from her home-time to the historical past while maintaining knowledge of people and information from those future times, she possesses an unusual degree of foreknowledge. She relates steps that will be taken, but have not yet been taken, to seal her written record in a bank vault where it will not be discovered for over a century. Due to Melisande's distorted temporality as a transplant to the past writing to someone in the future who has knowledge of all that has transpired, Melisande does not date her Diachronicle entries as one would typically date a diary according to day/month/year. Her decision to date the entries in relation to the birth of DODO further untenses time for the reader as she numbers the days and years beginning with Day 33, Year 0 in which '*I meet Tristan Lyons and immediately agree to get into more trouble than I could possibly realize at the time.*'[13] Even the choice to begin her *Diachronicle* entries on Day 33 instead of Day 0 distorts the beginning of her time with DODO as one wonders what happened in those first thirty-three days that are not recorded.

Melisande writes of DODO in the past-tense since these events happened in her past and she is remembering them after the fact: 'I met Tristan Lyons,' 'I was a lecturer,' and so on; however, she uses present tense when referring to being stuck in 1851 London.[14] When Melisande refers to historical DEDEs embedded within the past remembrances of her time at DODO which she is chronicling from her new present time of 1851, understanding of time becomes even further complicated. On Melisande's first DEDE to 1640 Massachusetts, she

[13] Ibid, p. 5.
[14] Ibid.

continues to use past-tense verbs—'I began to collect my wits. Massachusetts Bay Colony. August 1640… Yes, it was coming into focus now.'—but she interrupts this embedded narration of the DEDE with 'what was to happen next' before she was Sent to this DTAP (Destination Time and Place).[15] She catches the confusion of her own temporal distortion by further writing, 'Which meant reviewing what had happened previously—in the distant future, I mean.'[16] Melisande realises that she is complicating time by writing about the twenty-first century in the past tense and then using the past tense again to refer to the 1640 DEDE which is both in the historical past *and* in her personal past. In attempt to clarify for the reader, Melisande situates the twenty-first century 'reviewing' as being in the distant future compared to where she temporally resides in her present 'now.' When she writes from 1851 London, she resorts to the present tense: 'the eclipse is now just twenty-three days away,' 'As I have recently and painfully learned,' 'I am getting far ahead of myself,' and 'I wonder if perhaps Grainne, in Year 5, did not use an ODEC to go back in time to the same ODEC two years earlier…and then return to the present day—I mean to say, what was the present day before I was marooned in 1851.'[17] These comments show that Melisande considers 1851 to now be her present time at this point even though it is not her native home-time. In her *Diachronicle* recollections, she attempts to provide some degree of linearity despite the fact that nothing about DODO as an organization is linear. This causes her to comment on the need to slow down in her presentation of events to the reader.

More anachronisms are introduced after Melisande is contacted by the character of Erszebet in the twenty-first century. Melisande writes:

> I usually forgot about Facebook. I check in about once a month. I logged in now, to see that my account had three 'friend requests.'… one was a woman named Erszebet Karpathy whose picture appeared to be a state-issued ID of an octogenarian drag

[15] Ibid, p. 154, p. 163, and p. 571.
[16] Ibid, p. 163.
[17] Ibid, p. 163, p. 217, p. 485, p. 487, and p. 576. ODEC stands for Ontic Decoherence Cavity, so named for its parallels to the box used in Schrodinger's cat experiment. It is also the machine the DOers use to be Sent and Homed through time and across dimensions (Ibid, p. 752).

> queen… There was a message posted on [my page] from Erszebet Karpathy, dated three days earlier. 'I am still waiting! Let me know when you are ready to begin.' Odd… Then another post from Erszebet Karpathy, this one from nearly a month earlier: 'Melisande, is it time yet? You said April or May of this year.' That was unnerving. Who was Erszebet Karpathy?... The next morning… there was a new message from the Karpathy chick: 'Melisande. I see that you have been active on Facebook within the past 12 hours, so I KNOW you are receiving these messages… I sent her a private message: 'Who are you and what do you want?'… 'That you will help me do magic once again. As you promised.'[18]

The reference to Facebook—a twenty-first century technological reference—reinforces Melisande's home-time. If she were native to 1851, she would never have heard of Facebook. However, this passage establishes a prominent moment of narrative rupture. According to Bakhtin, rupture is 'where these laws are *suddenly* violated and events take an unexpected and unforeseen turn.'[19] The *DODO* quote implies that the narrative laws of storytelling are interrupted. Without a point of rupture in which the unexpected disrupts the narrative storyworld's status quo, there would be no story. In *DODO*, the temporal discrepancy between Melisande's home-time in the twenty-first century and her present-time in 1851 London provides one *in media res* point of rupture to which a reader will actively look for answers. The introduction of Erszebet provides a second point of rupture that will be circled back to in order to explain the prior relationship between Melisande and Erszebet *and* how Melisande became stuck in 1851 London.

The reader is presented with a new character in Erszebet who begins telling Melisande things which they discussed in the past of which Melisande has no recollection. The passage implies a prior relationship between the two characters given that Erszebet expresses she is *still waiting* on Melisande to deliver on a promise made earlier that has not yet come to pass. The point of rupture is made more prominent when Erszebet reveals her knowledge of magic and her desire to do magic *again,* implying that she could, at one point in time, perform magic.

[18] Ibid, pp. 73-75.
[19] M.M. Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 152.

Based on what is known about magic ending in 1851, the reader can infer that Erszebet has somehow survived from the days when magic was still usable and, during that time, Melisande made her a promise that would come to pass in the twenty-first century. Otherwise Erszebet possesses knowledge she could not possess unless she encountered a time traveller. The only spatiotemporality where the two characters could possibly have intersected was in 1850s England; however, Melisande's journey to the past is both still in her personal future *and* yet-to-come in the reader's consumption of the narrative. Melisande deliberately withholds the piece of this puzzle that will complete the narrative circle until much later in the syuzhet.

The point of rupture delves even deeper when Erszebet, Melisande, and Tristan meet face-to-face for the 'first time' according to the narrative fabula timeline:

> 'You're taking me to the ODEC—this instant.' Tristan took her skinny arm in his large hand and stood over her… 'Ma'am,' he asked very softly, 'where did you hear that term?' 'From *her*,' she said impatiently poking me in the shoulder. 'I have never met this woman,' I said to Tristan, recoiling from her, and then to her: 'I have never met you.' 'Not yet, but you will,' she retorted impatiently.[20]

> 'I would be dead right now except for her. I have stayed alive all these years because she commanded it.' 'Ma'am, I've never *met* you—' I protested again. 'Don't you call me ma'am, you hussy! You're older than I am.' She checked herself, with obvious effort. 'That is, you *were.* When we met. I have now been old for longer than most people have been alive.'[21]

The verb tenses and information contained within these passages reveal a great deal of anachrony within a short textual span. In the first passage, Erszebet not only reveals prior knowledge of the ODEC, but she insists that she has met Melisande despite Melisande's protests to the contrary. Erszebet's response, 'Not yet, but you will,' does more than establish prior relationship: It establishes a one-sided prior relationship where one character has experienced something the other has yet to encounter. In the second passage, Erszebet raises the issue of temporal paradox when she explains that Melisande was older than Erszebet when

[20] Stephenson and Galland, p. 102.
[21] Ibid, pp. 103-04.

they first met, contradicting the fact that Erszebet is an octogenarian while Melisande is only in her mid-30s. The second passage will prompt an active reader to begin questioning causality through the chicken-and-egg paradox.[22] If Erszebet had met Melisande in Erszebet's past, which is also the historical past, how could Melisande not remember it? One answer is that Melisande has not experienced it yet; however, when Melisande finally meets Erszebet in 1851, Erszebet has no idea who Melisande is. The only reason Melisande recognises Erszebet is because she has met Erszebet in her personal-past. If Erszebet had not informed Melisande of their prior relationship and set up Melisande, and the reader, to look for their eventual first meeting, Melisande would not have known to search for Erszebet. If the reader is paying attention, they will notice the temporal discrepancies presented in relation to verb tenses used by Melisande and Erszebet throughout the narrative and anticipate that a connection will be made later on to fill in the missing pieces, thus hinting at a circular narrative structure. However, before revealing the structural coincidences that lead to the two moments of anagnorisis which complete the narrative circle, I will illustrate how the recursive micro-narratives work individually and in conjunction with the text as a whole to shape the narrative.

2.2. Recursion on a Micro-Narrative Scale

I have identified four key elements that separate recursive narratives from circular narratives: 1) repetition of events, 2) the use of memory recall on behalf of both protagonist and reader, 3) a lack of reader anagnorisis, and 4) the lack of an *in media res* beginning. Repetition delays the temporal momentum of a narrative by retelling the same series of events multiple times with slight variations. The repetitious cycles function as an experiment for the character to try to find the series of correct actions that will set them free from reliving the

[22] The chicken and egg paradox, aka causality dilemma, considers the question of which came first, the chicken or the egg? See further Rupert Taylor, 'The Causality Dilemma (AKA the Chicken and Egg Question)' < https://owlcation.com/humanities/The-Causality-Dilemma> [accessed 27 August 2022].

same temporal loop. During this repetitive cycle, the protagonist is able to remember everything that occurred from past cycles and use that information to guide their choices in the cycles to come. As a result, the protagonist is able to know what is going to happen before it happens because of their awareness of the repetitive cycle. The reader also carries the same awareness and is easily able to recognise when the protagonist tries something different. This recursive phenomenon prevents reader anagnorisis because each temporal cycle become predictable. The last way in which recursion differs from circularity is in its lack of an *in media res* beginning. Recursive narratives tend to ease the reader into the storyworld without placing the reader in a disadvantaged position where they begin with more questions than answers. Because recursive narratives depend on repetition with slight deviations, the reader is more easily able to follow along and detect changes between causality in each cycle.

DODO uses recursive micro-narratives which are embedded in a circular macro-narrative. The recursive micro-narratives in *DODO* are presented through the DEDEs which function as repetitive cycles to historical DTAPs. Characters must not only return to the DTAPs multiple times on multiple stands in order to achieve certain outcomes in the twenty-first century, but they must also continuously repeat these DEDEs in perpetuity across a potentially infinite number of Strands in order to preserve the structure of the overarching circular narrative. Carroll defines the multiverse as 'a collection of different regions of space, all of which evolve in similar ways to the universe we observe,' but *DODO*'s use of a multiverse pushes this definition to include different regions of space and time that evolve in ways which can be drastically different from the others.[23] For example, in the first DEDE to 1640 Massachusetts, Melisande pays for the *Bay Psalm Book* on one Strand, while in another Strand she steals it; in one Strand she buries it at the site of the future-East-Oda house, yet in the next the site of their future home has been replaced by the foundation for a new factory. The failure

[23] Carroll, p. 331.

of the DEDE to achieve its desired outcome after the first attempt is what introduces the concept of a multi-verse and multiple Strands: 'So Melisande went back on just one Strand, and that one Strand did not change things to your liking. Maybe she will go back on another Strand, and then another, and when enough Strands have been shifted a little by this, then maybe it will help here and now.'[24] Erszebet teaches Melisande and Tristan that in order for the DEDE to be successful in the twenty-first century, the DOer must compound the futuristic reach of their past actions by repeating them across multiple dimensions. As a result, the DEDE to 1640s Massachusetts is recorded six separate times in *DODO,* though it is implied that the DEDE was repeated more than twelve times.[25]

The necessity for multiple repetitions of a DEDE creates the recursive cycle as these micro-narratives are repeated in the same sequential order with only minor changes being made each time. With each new repetition, the DOer not only travels back to the DTAP with prior knowledge of what has happened on the DEDE, but they also carry the future knowledge from their home-time making information the only thing that can travel through time.[26] The prior knowledge of recursive cycles makes the DOer and the reader aware that a DEDE can occur across multiple Strands that are non-sequential in their presentation. For example, when Melisande first arrives in 1641 Massachusetts, she is aware of an arrow flying past her and burying into a nearby tree trunk. Goody Fitch tells Melisande, 'That arrow would hit you another time' yet Melisande does not realise that Goody Fitch is warning her that the arrow will hit her because it already has hit her on another strand.[27] The second time that Melisande goes on the DEDE, 'the arrow struck me before I fell out of its way…and found myself remembering what Goody Fitch had said the first time…She knew I arrived here more than

[24] Ibid, p. 195.
[25] Ibid, p. 337.
[26] It is established on the first DEDE cycle that clothes, accessories, weapons, and any physical item other than the human him-/herself can travel back in time. This is why Melisande must bury the Bay Psalm Book rather than simply taking it with her back to the twenty-first century.
[27] Ibid, p. 154.

once.'[28] Melisande remembers the ordering of the DEDE cycles in an inverted order compared to how Goody Fitch experiences them. This further explains why, when Melisande introduces herself to Goody's daughter on the first cycle of the DEDE, the daughter already knows who Melisande is: '"I know," said the girl. "You already told me." I grimaced in confusion, having no memory of such a thing.'[29]

The novel has already established by this point that Melisande met Erszebet in the past despite having no recollection of it; so it does not initially strike the reader as odd for another character to have prior knowledge of meeting Melisande which Melisande does not yet possess. However, when the second DEDE explains 'now the daughter's comment when I'd given her my name—"You'd already told me"—made sense,' the reader understands that there is a discrepancy in the presentation of DEDEs to the reader because time exists all at once across dimensions.[30] What Melisande experienced in one sequential order was experienced in a different sequential order by Goody Fitch. The same phenomenon occurs when Tristan first meets Grainne in the 1601 London DTAP. Grainne records in her letter that Tristan 'looked familiar, yet I knew of a certainty I'd never clapped eyes on him before…this told me that what was occurring here and now was sure to be repeating itself on other Strands.'[31]

There are a number of DEDEs discussed throughout *DODO*—1640s Massachusetts, 1601 London, 1203 Constantinople, 1562 Antwerp, 1045 Normandy, 1232 Paris—but the three that contribute to the overarching infinite loop circular narrative are the Massachusetts, London, and Constantinople DTAPs. The first two of these DEDEs serve recursive purposes to uncreate the factory that would in turn uncreate the East-Oda house if Melisande and Tristan did not interfere. The novel strategically uses the term 'uncreate' rather than 'to get rid of'

[28] Ibid, p. 199.
[29] Ibid, p. 190.
[30] Ibid, p. 200.
[31] Ibid, p. 224.

because 'such problems…go back to an even earlier time and prevent the conflict by slightly (and multiple times) altering something prior to the event in question.'[32] This presents a slight twist on the Grandfather Paradox discussed in the last chapter because, instead of going back in time to murder one's ancestor, the characters are going back in time to uncreate certain things.[33] It also illustrates the integration of time and dimension by showing a traditional causal relationship even though that relationship will eventually be subverted. Before it is subverted, it is understood that Tristan will have to go back to 1601 London to convince the financiers of the factory in 1641 not to invest in said factory so that Melisande can bury the Bay Psalm Book on the East-Oda property in 1641 to be found 400 years later. Even though the East-Oda house stands in the primary Strand, Erszebet explains that once Melisande discovers the factory being built on the same spot, 'things are tending toward the factory being there.'[34] Strands influence other Strands and, when the DOers begin to interfere with one Strand, it shifts the importance of certain events such as the trending of the factory to replace the East-Oda house. This phenomenon creates the need for further recursive cycles to steer the outcomes of the Strands in the direction the characters desire. It also creates the need for new DEDEs in other DTAPs. When Tristan goes to 1601 London to sway the investor of the Massachusetts factory to invest his funds elsewhere, he is recorded as having experienced his DEDE at least a dozen times which means that Melisande has had to keep living her recursive DEDE as many times to see if Tristan's actions have uncreated the factory.[35] While these recursive micro-narratives have their own self-contained function within the narrative, one can see how they affect each other. In the overarching narrative, Diachronic Shear is what makes the DEDEs of greater importance

[32] Ibid, p. 210.
[33] See Chapter One, p. 69.
[34] Pulley, p. 210.
[35] Ibid, p. 279.

because it provides yet another point of rupture that the narrative must resolve at the macro-level.

Diachronic Shear is introduced in the 1601 DEDE and experienced a second time in the 1203 Constantinople DEDE. Diachronic Shear is described by Grainne as 'the very fabric of the world…misbehaving' as a result of too much interference on one Strand at one time.[36] In another passage, Frank Oda explains the physics of Diachronic Shear using a Jell-O analogy:

> If you have ever observed the properties of Jell-O… you'll know that it is flexible and deformable, up to a point… if you overdo it, the material will rupture… unlike the Jell-O dessert on your plate, the space-time continuum cannot simply fall apart. It is self-healing. The cracks must be sealed immediately. If you are far away from the crack, then you are safe—it's like being far away from an earthquake. But if you are unlucky enough to be right along the crack boundary, then you are in for a bad time. The universe needs to decide whether you are going to go on existing or not.[37]

Diachronic Shear overwhelms a temporality with changes to the point where it erases everything across all Strands, permanently uncreating whatever is caught up within the radius of the Shear. In the 1601 London, DTAP, Diachronic Shear uncreates the Tearsheet Brewery and ensures that the factory built in 1641 Massachusetts never materialises, thereby finally securing the success of that DEDE. Diachronic Shear's narrative significance multiplies when it is repeated in 1203 Constantinople. The second time that Diachronic Shear occurs, it illustrates what happens when a historical person takes twenty-first century knowledge back to her home-time in an attempt to warn people of the historical catastrophe to come.[38]

Time is greatly untensed in the 1203 Constantinople DTAP in several ways. The first way is in the arrival of a historical witch, Rachel bat Avraham, to the twenty-first century. By bringing a historical person 'forward' in time, the portal-like fantasy aspects of *DODO* are subverted by elements of the intrusion fantasy similarly to the two-way portal in *The Kingdoms.* Mendlesohn writes that intrusion fantasy 'is the bringer of chaos' and that it 'takes us out of

[36] Ibid, p. 327.
[37] Ibid, pp. 358-59.
[38] A historical person is a witch brought from her historical home-time to the twenty-first century.

safety without taking us from our place. It is recursive… It has as its base the assumption that normality is organized.'[39] In *DODO*, the introduction of intrusion-like fantasy elements helps to create narrative chaos and further untense time. Instead of only having twenty-first century characters bringing their future knowledge to historical DTAPs, historical characters now bring their historical knowledge to the present-day where they have access to internet. This allows the historicals to learn things about themselves and their home-times that they would never have known otherwise. In the case of Rachel bat Avraham, she has an exchange with Melisande where she admits to looking at Wikipedia:

> MS: What have you been reading?
> RBA: The future of Constantinople.
> MS: You mean, the history?
> RBA: (laughs) To you, yes. But to me it is the future. I was reading about the Fourth Crusade.
> MS: To you, that would be only a few weeks in the future.
> RBA: You know about it?
> MS: Yes, as you know we have been quite interested in that DTAP and so I have read many historical accounts.
> RBA: Then perhaps you can tell me what happens to the Jews of Pera…Are they going to slaughter my family? I must go back. And warn them before the trouble starts!...
> MS: You chose to leave them, Rachel. You cannot leap back and forth between DTAPs.[40]

The relativity of time is exhibited in this conversation as both characters view their respective home-times as the 'present' time. When Rachel is reading about the Fourth Crusade in Constantinople, it is in her future despite the fact that it has happened in the historical past. From Melisande's point of view, the Fourth Crusade has happened and always has happened in the past. Armed with the foreknowledge of what happens to her home-time, Rachel wishes to warn her family and stop the attack which would cause Diachronic Shear and have devastating temporal effects.

[39] Farah Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008) p. xxi and p. xxii.
[40] Stephenson and Galland, pp. 474-75.

However, once something is learned, it cannot be unlearned since knowledge is the only thing that can travel with someone through time. By going back to her home-time, Rachel creates Diachronic Shear in 1203 Constantinople, bringing chaos to that time and the twenty-first century simultaneously. The Diachronic Shear disrupts 'what was *supposed* to happen next' based on Tristan's prior knowledge of his recursive DEDE cycles to 1203 Constantinople.[41] The 1203 DEDE is important to the macro-narrative for two reasons: it establishes the ability of historicals to move forward through time and thus sets the stage for Grainne and Magnus to do so, and it uses a secondary instance of Diachronic Shear to untense time, eliminate another locale across all Strands of time, and alert the reader of the potential ramifications of Grainne's access to twenty-first century databases. Grainne becomes the only main character who crosses over from a recursive micro-narrative into the overarching macro-narrative as a structural coincidence. She contributes to the moment of anagnorisis which closes the infinite loop when Melisande realises how she first meets Erszebet. In addition to Grainne's role as structural coincidence, there is a secondary covert structural coincidence in relation to the Fugger family that converges in a roundabout way with certain aspects of Grainne's storyline in order to ensure Melisande's meeting of Erszebet. Before exploring Grainne's role of as a structural coincidence, however, I wish to discuss the Fuggers. Their role aids Grainne in order to close the narrative circle.

2.3. Circularity on a Macro-Narrative Scale

In this section, I shall discuss how the recursive micro-narrative DEDEs contribute to the overarching circular narrative through two structural coincidences. The Fuggers and Grainne play a role in the 1601 London DEDE that is repeated multiple times, and they both move beyond the recursive cycle to play roles in the larger primary narrative. Both parties have

[41] Ibid, p. 525.

vested interest in controlling time; however, the Fuggers seek to preserve the timeline while Grainne seeks to change it for personal gain. While each party thinks they are using the other, their conflicting objectives actually work together to distort causality. As Grainne disrupts the timeline, the Fuggers fix it. Their opposing actions and temporal tampering create a circular narrative as a result of the points of rupture and repair caused by Melisande and Erszebet. Their distorted meeting points create two fixed points that will forever defy causality as is illustrated by the chicken-and-egg paradox. One of these meeting points will cause the rupture, while the second meeting repairs the rupture; yet both rely on each other to continuously preserve the cycle of events. The infinite loop occurs because Melisande and Erszebet's respective meetings must repeatedly happen according to the sequential ordering that each first experienced. However, if Grainne and the Fuggers had not begun tampering with time according to their conflicting interests, there would be no chicken-and-egg paradox. Therefore, both parties must cross from the 1601 London DTAP to enter the wider temporal world in order to orchestrate the points of rupture and repair that create the circular narrative and ensure its infinite repetition.

2.3.1. The Fuggers as Structural Coincidence

The Fugger family serves as a covert structural coincidence because their significance compounds with each mention throughout the entirety of the narrative. The reader does not fully appreciate their role until the denouement when they engage in teleological retrospect to see that the Fuggers have been manipulating DODO, magic, witches, the protagonists, and everything to do with time travel across Strands. Reference to the Fugger family is introduced immediately when Melisande writes that she is going to lock her Diachronicle in a safe deposit box at the Fugger Bank since 'The Fuggers, above all people in this world, understand the

dangers of Diachronic Shear.'[42] The mention of the Fuggers (and Diachronic Shear) is so casual as to ask the reader to breeze over it in their reading as they look for answers to the bigger mystery surrounding Melisande's entrapment in 1851; however, the Fuggers will become a repeatedly mentioned family that the reader slowly begins to detect as having greater importance than on first reference.

The first mention of the Fuggers and Fugger Bank in Melisande's 1851 preamble is followed up with a second reference to the family in the 'present-day' Massachusetts timeline when Melisande observes their logo on boxes stored at DODO HQ: 'Many of the boxes were stencilled with a logo I did not recognize at the time, but which I now know to be a modernized, streamlined version of the brand used since time immemorial by the banking family known as the Fuggers.'[43] The Fuggers begin to transition from covert to overt structural coincidence when Erszebet references them:

> 'Ask the Fuckers.' '*What!?'* Tristan and I exclaimed in unison…. She was taken aback by our reaction. 'The Fuckers,' she said. 'You know, *The Fuckers.'* Tristan and I looked at each other as if to verify we'd both heard it. Erszebet laughed in a way that suggested she wasn't really all that amused. 'You people have such dirty minds. It is a perfectly normal German name. Maybe you spell it F-U-G-G-E-R just to be polite.'[44]

If the reader had not recognised the earlier two mentions of the Fuggers, the use of vulgar comedy in this passage makes sure that they will take notice and remember for future references. This passage, in addition to making a play on the Fugger name with the 'Fucker' spelling, prepares the reader when references to the Fuckers are made by other characters. For instance, Grainne alerts Grace O'Malley to an investment opportunity stating, 'If it's good enough for a Fugger, it's good enough for a Fucker.'[45] This is a humorous pun in reference to Grainne's role as a prostitute, but it also refers to the role that Athanasius Fugger plays in the

[42] Ibid, p. 3.
[43] Ibid, p. 28.
[44] Ibid, p. 128.
[45] Ibid, p. 231.

1601 London DTAP: 'He was acting as some kind of financial advisor to Sir Edward Greylock, which probably meant he was still active in the banking business.'[46] Grainne once again ties Fugger with Fucker when she explains that Athanasius Fugger 'Himself pronounces it 'Fucker,' in the German style, but it's "Fugger" they spell it when abroad in England.'[47] The use of the Fucker spelling is used again by Erszebet as a means to once again cue the reader to observe the connection between the two spellings. Following the first instance of Diachronic Shear in 1601 London, Tristan relays to Erszebet that he left Grainne in the watch of Athanasius Fugger which prompts a strong response from Erszebet: 'You left her in the hands of a *Fucker!?* '[48]

The next connection of the Fucker/Fugger spelling occurs when the twenty-first century Fugger representative, Frederick Fugger, first meets Tristan and Melisande at the auction for the *Bay Psalm Book*. Frederick is first introduced by his given name only. When he spends $14 million to buy the *Bay Psalm Book* without hesitancy, the reader understands there is a great deal of wealth available to Frederick that has only, thus far, been attributed to the Fugger family. The novel also points the reader's attention to Frederick's asymmetrical eyes, a feature that is first referenced in Grainne's letter in 1601 about Athanasius Fugger where she describes Athanasius as 'wearing a tall hat with a broad brim pulled rakishly down over one eye.'[49] This is followed up on another Strand as Grainne notices 'The pupil of the left eye—the one he prefers to hide behind his hat—is larger than the other. Stuck open, as it were.'[50] These covert structural coincidences build to the larger significance of the Fuggers when Melisande notices Frederick's asymmetrical eyes: 'His left pupil was dilated to the point where the blue iris could scarcely be seen, but the right pupil was constricted, as you'd expect when outdoors in broad

[46] Ibid, p. 290.
[47] Ibid, p. 280; References to the Fugger's role as a prominent banking family are made on p. 3, p. 128, p. 279, pp. 288-92, p. 431, pp. 483-85, p, 506, p. 685, p. 688, p. 715, and pp. 731-34.
[48] Ibid, p. 333.
[49] Ibid, p. 262.
[50] Ibid, p. 329.

daylight.'[51] While the reader still has not been given Frederic's surname, the clues as to his identity begin to compound. Confirmation of Frederick's identity is subtly revealed when Tristan remarks, 'There goes one strange fucker.'[52] Even though 'fucker' is not capitalised here as in earlier references, because of Erszebet and Grainne's interchangeable references between Fugger/Fucker, the reader recognises that Frederick is indeed a Fugger. The revelation of Frederick's identity as part of the Fugger family is a small moment of reader anagnorisis that will become more important as the role of the Fuggers becomes more prominent later on.

The role of the Fuggers as guardians of the temporal Strands also builds slowly and deliberately as a covert coincidence throughout the narrative. On the first page of the narrative, Melisande references how the Fuggers 'above all people in this world, understand the dangers of Diachronic Shear.'[53] Though the reader does not yet know what Diachronic Shear is, this is something that they will reflect upon in retrospect after it occurs. In reflecting upon Diachronic Shear, the reader should ask how and why the Fuggers, above all people, would know about this rare temporal phenomenon. Before Frederick makes his appearance in the twenty-first century, the Fuggers are primarily regarded as a historical banking family despite Erszebet's warning that 'They are not all dead.'[54] Though it is not unusual for a family name to carry on for hundreds of years, what sets the Fuggers apart is that they show up wherever significant alterations to timelines are made. Melisande begins to piece together the greater importance of the Fugger family when she detects too many coincidences linking the Fuggers with DODO. However, she does not realise that the Fuggers are still in existence until she and Tristan meet Frederick.

[51] Ibid, p. 346.
[52] Ibid, p. 347.
[53] Ibid, p. 3.
[54] Ibid, p. 129.

Since the name 'Athanasius' means 'immortal' and Erszebet and Grainne describe the eyes of their respective Fuggers as having the same asymmetrical features, it begs the question of whether they are dealing with the same Fugger the whole time.[55] The role of the Fuggers as keepers of the temporal Strands is introduced when Athanasius Fugger intervenes on Tristan's behalf to save him from death by an irate swordsman in his 1601 London DEDE.[56] This is followed up on subsequent Strands as Graine records that 'The German watches all, but does less, as his services are no longer needed.'[57] After ensuring that Tristan will not get into the same conflict on other Strands and has learned from his initial mistake, Athanasius keeps a close eye but does not have to actively intervene until Diachronic Shear occurs. Tristan relays to Erszebet that 'It almost felt like Athanasius Fugger came to the Tearsheet to clean up my mess,' since it was Athanasius who helped protect Grainne after the event and see that Tristan found another witch to Home him.[58] Homing refers to the process of sending a DOer back to their home-time in the twenty-first century. It is used in opposition to Sending which is done by Erszebet in the twenty-first century to send a DOer to a specific DTAP.

At this point Erszebet confirms Melisande's suspicion of the uncanny link between DODO's diachronic operations and the Fuggers saying, 'They all know… All of the Fuckers. They always have. How do you think I have survived all these years without my own means? The Fuckers knew that I was temporally indentured and saw to it that I remained alive and functional.'[59] Grainne echoes what Erszebet says from her own point-of-view as she begins to piece together what Tristan and DODO are doing: 'I'm sure the Fuggers are involved in all of

[55] Athanasius." *Behind the Name*, edited by Mike Campbell, www.behindthename.com/name/athanasius. [accessed 5 June 2022]; Immortality is a subtle theme throughout DODO as Grainne spreads rumours about herself being an immortal witch, as Erszebet has semi-immortality through the spell that prolonged her life, and in the meaning behind Athanasius's given name.
[56] Stephenson and Galland, p. 280.
[57] Ibid, p. 262.
[58] Ibid, p. 332 and p. 751.
[59] Ibid, p. 333.

this somehow, they always are.'[60] Even Grainne, four-hundred years prior to the twenty-first century, is aware that the Fuggers are closely tied to any diachronic activity. This explains why they actively seek to take care of Grainne after the Diachronic Shear.

The role of the Fuggers becomes more pronounced as their presence in the novel increases in both direct appearance and indirect reference. Erszebet informs Melisande that there is 'a Fugger branch office…probably nearby.'[61] DODO uses this building to house their offices. In addition to housing DODO, the Fugger family is closely tied to DODO advisor Dr Cornelius Rudge: 'It became increasingly obvious that Dr. Cornelius Rudge, who'd been in on the project form the beginning, had deep connections to the Fuggers, and was basically serving as their man on the inside.'[62] Though the readers are learning that the Fuggers have a vested interest in DODO and diachronic operations, the purpose of the Fugger's interference is deliberately shrouded in misdirection due to Grainne. Grainne tells Melisande that she has 'recruited the Fuggers' to learn of 'an immortal red-haired Irish witch named Grainne who is an ally of the family, in any generation.'[63] However, the Fuggers are neither on Grainne's side nor DODO's side, nor even Melisande and Tristan's side. As true capitalists, they follow money across time and dimensions and influence things to make them more money.[64] When Grainne and DODO no longer act in the Fuggers' favour, they throw their support behind Tristan and Melisande to provide the resources needed to bring Melisande back from 1851 London by ensuring she is Sent to 1851 London where she will meet Erszebet in the first place.

[60] Ibid, p. 431.
[61] Ibid, p. 291.
[62] Ibid, p. 483.
[63] Ibid, p. 630.
[64] Ibid, pp. 733-34.

2.3.2. Grainne as Structural Coincidence

Witches have a special relationship with the Fuggers as witches are the only ones who can perform the acts of Sending and Homing through time and across dimensions. In each of the post-medieval DTAPs, all the witches that DOers encounter are aware of the Fugger banking family and their reputation as being friends to witches in times of trouble. Grainne takes advantage of the Fuggers' role as friends to witches and attempts to use her special status as a 'super-witch' to manipulate the Fuggers for her own purposes. This is how her narrative role as a structural coincidence eventually converges with that of the Fuggers. As Grainne is the only singular character who crosses over from the recursive micro-narrative to the circular macro-narrative, she plays an instrumental role in bringing the divergent threads of the Fuggers, the various recursive DEDEs, and the completion of the circular narrative together.

During the *in media res* beginning, Melisande does not explain how she was sent to 1851 London or who sent her, but rather she leaves this for the reader to discover through Grainne. Grainne fills in the rupture created by Melisande's withholding of this key information and gives the reader false trails to follow suggesting incorrect conclusions which will only be corrected at the moment of anagnorisis. The misdirection distracts the reader from solving the puzzle too soon, builds additional drama and conflict within the narrative, and aids in the untensing of causality as questions arise as to what point in the narrative Grainne actually began meddling with time. For this, as with Melisande and Erszebet's meeting order, there is no definitive answer. The very lack of definitive narrative closure in the fabula not only contributes to the circular reasoning but also to the circular narrative structure because there will never be a wholly conclusive denouement. The subversion of causality will always create an opening for speculation regarding sequential ordering surrounding Melisande and Erszebet's original meeting.

While Grainne is not introduced until Part Two of the narrative, there is a very subtle hint that Erszebet trained with Grainne earlier in the narrative. It is easy to miss this clue until subsequent readings because Grainne's status as a super-witch is not yet discussed until after Tristan meets Grainne.[65] When Erszebet discusses some of her lengthy lifespan with Tristan and Melisande, she mentions she went to Switzerland 'to train with a powerful witch who was making sure younger witches still learned certain spells and charms that had fallen out of use as the world perceived we were losing our power and relied on us for fewer things.'[66] Once one is familiar with Grainne's story, one can deduce that this witch is Grainne because she is described as 'powerful' and determined that certain magical spells would be remembered by future generations. Grainne is obsessed with the idea of not only preserving magic, but uncreating the technology that led to its extinction. It makes sense that she would have a vested interest in preserving the knowledge of magic in young witches. The use of the word 'charm' also hints to Grainne's reliance on charm and seduction as a means of amplifying her magic's effectiveness on men given her history as a prostitute. While the novel never confirms Grainne going to Switzerland, it does build a strong case that this is within the realm of possibility given Grainne's drive and willingness to do whatever is necessary to bring magic back.

Grainne's position as a super-witch builds in significance through repetition and leads to her larger role as a structural coincidence in the circular narrative. It is first mentioned in a report by Rebecca East Oda where the skills of Grainne and Erszebet are compared to establish that Grainne is a '"super-witch" with a degree of magical power that places her head and shoulders above other witches.'[67] Subsequent references forego use of the term 'super-witch' and instead focus on two specific magical skills that Grainne possess which many of the other

[65] Ibid, pp. 223-52.
[66] Ibid, p. 114.
[67] Ibid, p. 379.

witches lack: Wending and mind-control. Grainne first uses the term 'to Wend' as a means of crafting one of the recursive iterations of Tristan's DEDE. In her letter she writes:

> In order for me to string this together into a proper tale, I've had to Wend my way to all of the snaithe—the Strands—in which he has appeared to carry out the same set of deeds. As you and I understand, Your Grace, they all happened at once, as choristers in the church nave sing the same tune at the same time; but I cannot write many stories down in such a manner and so I'll related them one after the other, like beads on a rosary.[68]

Here, Grainne explains her ability to not only travel across Strands but remember and use the information from multiple Strands to get a broader view of 'the big picture.' She uses the choral metaphor to hint at an eternalist understanding of time, but she also realises that humans can only experience and write about time linearly as in the rosary bead metaphor that is consistent with an Augustinian depiction of time. The mind-control also builds subtly, first through hints by Grainne in her letters, then via observation and discussion by DODO members as a means to use Grainne's super-witch skills. During Tristan's first DEDE, Grainne writes, 'Trustingly dependent I'll make him, then, when he particularly in need of my assistance, I'll demand cooperation. I've done it often enough.'[69] Though this passage may seem innocuous, as a reader engages in teleological retrospect, they will realise that Grainne is intentionally manipulating Tristan for her own gains. Though it could easily be written off to her role as a spy for Grace O'Malley, in hindsight, the reader knows that Grainne uses magic as a means of mind-control and, as this passage implies, has done it multiple times.

A second reference is made on Tristan's second DEDE as Grainne writes, 'I have not yet begun to pry him for important information, as I believe the longer I let him get accustomed to my cooperation, the easier it will be to twist him round my finger when its time. So I will continue to knit myself into his affections.'[70] In this passage, as in the previous one, there are

[68] Ibid, p. 260.
[69] Ibid, p. 239.
[70] Ibid, p. 261.

many signs that point to Grainne using seduction to bend Tristan to her will. In retrospect, as the reader realises the extent of Grainne's ability to use mind-control, they will understand that she is able to perform this unrestrictedly on Tristan in 1601 where magic is still strong. The wording she uses 'to knit' herself into his affections also suggests that she is working on a much deeper level than mere flirtation. To knit bears an implication of two things becoming tied into one. While Grainne is not as successful in doing this with Tristan, she becomes very successful in knitting herself into the affections of Roger Blevins where the use of mind-control becomes more overt. When Grainne alerts Grace O'Malley about her intentions with Blevins, she once again uses flirtatious terms rather than explicitly stating that she will be using magic to control another person's mind: 'I may ingratiate myself with this Blevins—and yourself knows well enough how easily I may ingratiate myself when it's ingratiating that is called for.'[71] Instead of 'knitting,' Grainne uses the word 'ingratiate' which implies the same act but in a more aggressive form. By this point, the reader understands that Grainne is not talking about sexually ingratiating herself but is referring to her ability to perform 'psy-ops.' Psy-ops is an abbreviation for Psychological Operations which DODO operators use as a more professional version of the phrase 'mind-control.'[72]

What is curious is that when Grainne details her first attempt to perform psy-ops on Blevins after coming Forward to the twenty-first century, she thinks she is unsuccessful because magic is extinct: 'I begin to cast a spell to soften him to me…and at once, I realize, with a dreadful feeling in my guts, that it will not work.'[73] Grainne uses present tense words 'realize' and 'will' to imply that she comes to these conclusions before evidence supports it. She has been told that magic does not work post-1851; however, Blevins's actions begin to reflect her desires shortly thereafter: 'Ever so stern he was in the beginning, with his talk of

[71] Ibid, p. 535.
[72] Ibid, p. 752.
[73] Ibid, p. 550.

protocols, but now doesn't he change his tune and become the friend and protector of Grainne.'[74] There are two possible reasons as to this change: the first is that Grainne uses the ODEC to go back in time and perform psy-ops on Blevins at this moment so that he becomes 'ingratiated' by her on another Strand, or the second hypothesis is that Grainne's distinction as a super-witch somehow allows her to perform a degree of magic through the power of suggestion. There is no confirmation of either theory given that the novel does not explain how Grainne performs mind-control. The effects are merely observed second-hand through the core members of DODO once she begins using it in earnest on Blevins. The results cause changes in the organisation such as removing the core members from positions of influence, excluding them from communications, causing Blevins to censure reasonable ideas and act in such manners that hurt DODO but profit Grainne, and increasing Grainne's responsibilities and autonomy to act within the organisation.

Grainne is first caught performing rogue DEDEs at the Halloween party where Melisande writes, 'I shall never know if the Halloween party was, from the start, a monstrous distraction by Grainne…I wonder if Grainne, in Year 5, did not use an ODEC to go back in time to the same ODEC two years earlier, slip out and work her wiles on Blevins… and then return to the present day.'[75] This would support the theory of how Grainne was able to get Blevins to soften at their first meeting after Grainne suspected her magical mind-control powers would not work on him. Grainne's unauthorized or off-the-books 'black-operation' DEDEs are first recorded in a chat stream between Macy Stoll and Blevins where Macy records 'Grainne has made brief, unauthorized visits to unknown DTAPs on half a dozen occasions in addition to the lengthy absence spanning 31 October—3 November,' after the Halloween party where she was first left unattended in an ODEC after feigning drunkenness.[76] This opens the door for

[74] Ibid, p. 552.
[75] Ibid, p. 576.
[76] Ibid, p. 593.

Grainne's interference to have many potential starting dates. Though one would think that Tristan would have to always meet Grainne first in 1601 London before she can come Forward to the twenty-first century and have access to the DODO ODECs, the novel has shown that causality is continuously distorted as in the circle of Melisande and Erszebet's meeting. With the ability to time travel as a result of magic still existing in 1601 London, it is possible that Grainne could come to the future of her own desire and meet Blevins before Blevins kicks Tristan out of his office on the day when Tristan first meets Melisande.[77] If Grainne knows that Constantine Rudge has been involved since Day 1 of DODO, it is possible that Grainne also has been involved because of Rudge's close relationship with the Fuggers and Grainne's close relationship with the Fuggers. It is through Grainne's unauthorised black-ops that this misdirection is integrated into the narrative, making the reader believe that Grainne is powerful enough to bend the Fuggers to her will when, in actuality, the opposite is true.

Grainne uses her relationship with Athanasius Fugger in 1601 London to begin ingratiating herself into the Fugger dealings across multiple generations:

> I have arrived at an understanding with Athanasius Fugger, the man in our time with the sharp yellow beard. And in the future, I have made the friendliest of connections with one Constantine Rudge, who is an important member of the Fuggers' high councils, and who has been in on DODO from its very beginnings. And in other times and places as well, as Erszebet finds opportunities to Send me, I have sought out other Fuggers. In short, haven't I predisposed the whole clan to be of assistance to me—or to 'any comely Irish witch named Grainne,' as it is likely to be their descendants that I deal with. They have been told now that an immortal witch has pledged herself to aid the family.[78]

Grainne plants the rumour that she is immortal without realising that Athanasius Fugger may, himself, be immortal. While she has befriended Fuggers spanning 600 years of human history so that she may 'start at the end and unweave backwards through time' the technology that renders magic extinct, she misleads the reader to believe that she will undoubtedly have success

[77] Ibid, p. 7.
[78] Ibid, pp. 585-86.

due to her powers of mind-control.[79] Even Melisande realises the close relationship Grainne has with the Fuggers, believing that Grainne is keeping the Fuggers abreast of DODO goings on:[80]

> 'The Fuggers know—all of them—that there's an immortal red-haired Irish witch named Grainne who is an ally of the family, in any generation, and the family knows this and keeps it close to themselves… So I was not surprised, when I did my Internet research, to be confirmed in my belief that there would be a Fugger already here, opening a bank and prepared to make ungodly profits… It's delighted he'll be by our presence, and he'll help us, no questions asked.'[81]

Grainne again capitalises on her rumour of immortality as a means to ensure the Fugger family will help her without question. She believes she is in 1850 San Francisco to recruit the Fugger in that DTAP and to maroon Melisande to 1851 London; however, the Fuggers indirectly orchestrate Melisande's departure to 1851 London knowing that she will meet Erszebet who will become her saving grace. The convergence of these narrative effects regarding the Fuggers and Grainne begin to complete the circle started by Melisande and Erszebet.

2.3.3. How Grainne and the Fuggers Form the Infinite Loop

As the narrative circle is completed, the line between cause and effect becomes more blurred. After Grainne sends Melisande to the nineteenth century, the reader understands how Melisande became marooned there, answering one of the questions initially raised from the *in media res* beginning. However, with the answer comes a question of sequential ordering:

> 'What happened to Me? What is Grainne doing? Explain yourself!'
> She looked cowed—or at least, as close to cowed as Erszebet Karpathy could ever look. '[Grainne] wants to take over DODO and use it for her purposes,' she said in a strangely small voice. 'From San Francisco, she has already Sent Mel somewhere else, someplace Mel will not be able to come back from.'
> 'Where? When?'
> She avoided his gaze. 'We agreed not to tell each other what we were doing.'…
> Erszebet's face had flushed such a bright shade of red that she was almost unrecognizable. I'd never known until this moment that she was capable of being

[79] Ibid, p. 586.
[80] Ibid, p. 485.
[81] Ibid, pp. 630-31.

> embarrassed. 'I know, of course.' She looked at Tristan. 'And, if you think about it, so do you. You have always known where Mel would end up.'
> Tristan turned and looked at her, his anger suddenly replaced by that look that said, *Of course. I get it.* 'London,' he said, '1851.'[82]

The significance of this passage is three-fold. First, Erszebet reinforces the fact that Grainne believes she is in control of DODO and the Fuggers. Second, it informs Tristan and Mortimer of how Melisande became marooned in 1851 London. Third, it reveals a key mistake that Grainne makes by sending Melisande to 1851 London where she will meet Erszebet. When Erszebet tells Tristan that he already knows where Grainne sent Melisande, she is referring to what he learned from Erszebet regarding her first meeting Melisande back in 1851. Causality is distorted here because if Melisande had not met Erszebet first in 1851, Erszebet would never have known to contact Melisande in the twenty-first century; however, if Erszebet had not told Melisande about their first meeting when the reader first witnesses their meeting, Melisande would not have known to look for Erszebet in 1851 London. From Melisande's point of view, it is only once she is Sent back in time that she understands how she first meets Erszebet:

> And then I realized with a shock, that *this* was that moment. This was the moment she had referred to when first we'd met: the moment that I convinced her to stay alive into the twenty-first century. Since she had indeed preserved herself, I already knew that I would be successful.[83]

Melisande has her moment of anagnorisis only because of prior knowledge bestowed upon her by Erszebet. However, because Melisande knows from past experience that her plea to Erszebet would be successful, she approaches Erszebet with foreknowledge based on the assumption that the cycle of events will continue to repeat itself. At this meeting, Melisande imparts the information that Erszebet will need to know in the twenty-first century to prove to Melisande that they have already met:

> I took my journal and a pencil, and wrote down *ODEC, Facebook,* the approximate date we were to connect in the future, *Tristan Lyons,* and *Fuggers (Bank).* Then remembering that she had impressed Tristan with her understanding of the ODEC's

[82] Ibid, p. 639.
[83] Ibid, p. 676.

> mechanics, I scribbled what fractured engineering babble I could remember from five years earlier.[84]

This is a third instance where Melisande could not have known what information to give Erszebet if Erszebet had not informed Melisande of the information Melisande already gave her. This is where the infinite loop comes into play: An infinitely repetitive cycle of sequential ordering is necessitated in order to preserve the events of the narrative. The reader will never be able to know which event is the cause and which event is a result because, as with the chicken and the egg, one cannot exist without the other already being in existence.

Causality is subverted a final time through the safety deposit box that Melisande places her *Diachronicle* in at the Fugger Bank. Without having prior knowledge that the Fuggers are involved with Diachronic travel and DODO, Melisande would not have known to leave her *Diachronicle* in their possession. However, when Melisande goes to reserve a safety deposit box, she learns she already has one: 'After requesting a safety deposit box here at the private offices of the Fugger Bank on Threadneedle Street, and giving the agent my name, I was informed I already owned a box. Amazed, I asked it to be brought to me, and saw that it contained a sealed envelope. Addressed to me. In Mortimer's gangly penmanship.'[85] The note explains that, knowing Melisande would be marooned in 1851 London, Mortimer went to 1848 London to leave a note for her with information that they were trying to Home her.[86] After Melisande is Homed she asks:

> 'How did you Send Mortimer back to tell me to come here?'
> 'We haven't yet,' said Tristan. 'Julie's going to Send him when they get here.'[87]

In this couplet of dialogue, Melisande once again holds information from past experience that has not yet happened in the grand temporal scheme of operations. She is feeling the effects of

[84] Ibid, pp. 682-83.
[85] Ibid, p. 715.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid, p. 725.

something Mortimer has not yet done. Without an eternalist understanding of time, none of this would be possible; and even with an eternalist understanding of time, a temporal paradox is employed due to the endless conflict between cause and effect that creates a mix of circularity and recursion. Circularity and recursion, which have been mutually exclusive up until this point, now coincide as the circular narrative becomes recursive through the necessitation of an infinite loop. In order to preserve the narrative structure of the novel, the events of both the circular narrative and its embedded recursive DEDEs must keep occurring in the same order across an infinite number of Strands or else the structure falls apart.

Part of what helps preserve the integrity of sequential ordering is the revelation of the Fuggers' as the temporal keepers, not Grainne. A seed is planted much earlier in the narrative where Melisande asks, 'What if our research about the witch Grainne had been wrong?'[88] It is such a casual remark in a *Diachronicle* entry, after the first letter entry from Grainne, that the reader has no cause to suspect Grainne of anything on first reading. Using teleological retrospect, they see the seeds of mind control that Grainne hints at in her first entry that makes this line in Melisande's *Diachronicle* have more gravity. By the time that the reader learns to suspect Grainne, Grainne has established a reputation of being immortal: 'Within eighteen months, every DTAP we'd targeted had a Known Compliant Witch who knew Grainne, or a witch who knew a witch who knew a witch who knew Grainne.'[89] The DODO protagonists do not know the extent of Grainne's mind control and intra-organisational interference; they only know that she is capable of these things, has an extensive network of compliant witches, and has ingratiated herself into the Fugger family in every generation. In the last section of the novel, there is a great deal of undoing the misdirection that has been woven to make the reader believe that Grainne has more control than she really has. Within a very short span of the novel,

[88] Ibid, p. 252.
[89] Ibid, p. 486.

the Fuggers come back into play in several important ways that will prompt the reader to re-examine their role retrospectively and in subsequent reads.

The first instance of the Fuggers' role as temporal overseers is in their protection of Erszebet after she becomes a victim of the long-life spell. Melisande first informs Erszebet, 'When we meet, more than a century from now, you have been staying somewhere for many years where all your needs are taken care of, so somehow you must stumble across money…Perhaps you… take up with the Fuggers—remember that name.'[90] As Melisande explicitly tells Erszebet to remember the Fugger name, so the novel is instructing the reader to remember the Fugger name. Though it has been used many times up until this point in the novel, this is the first time that there is explicit mention to remember them, as if preparing the reader for the revelation behind the Fuggers that is soon to come. The second instance comes with the disappearance of an ATTO, an acronym for Ambient Temperature Tactical ODEC, or a portable ODEC.[91] Grainne is initially blamed for hijacking an ATTO for her black-ops, but Mortimer discovers that the Fuggers have not only stolen the ATTO, but have also been cornering the market on all materials needed to build an ATTO, preventing DODO from being able to purchase them.[92] Tristan follows this up with the following report:

> No idea why the Fuggers stole the ATTO from DODO, or why they are getting it not just out of the country but specifically to France, which happens to have old secret laws governing the use of magic for diachronic operations. If all this seems even beyond the scope of the Fuggers, remember—DODO's own Dr. Cornelius Rudge is a Fugger agent… meaning the Fuggers know whatever DODO knows. And always have.'[93]

This quote reveals the Fuggers have been closely involved in DODO since its inception through Dr Rudge and have since turned on their own organisation by stealing the ATTO and ensuring DODO cannot receive any more materials to build or operate them. Lastly they moved their

[90] Ibid, p. 681.
[91] Ibid, p. 751.
[92] Ibid, pp. 687-88.
[93] Ibid, p. 704.

ATTO to a country that has secret magical laws which only the Fuggers would be aware of in a world that has been without magic for over 150 years. In addition to stealing an ATTO so Melisande could be Homed from 1851 London, the Fuggers took care of Erszebet to ensure she would be alive and well in the twenty-first century to go work for DODO.[94] The Fuggers similarly looked after Melisande in 1851 to ensure Grainne would send her to the exact time and place where Melisande would meet Erszebet, find Mortimer's letter and have the instructions to be Homed to the stolen ATTO in the twenty-first century. Before Grainne sends Melisande to 1851 London, she and Melisande have a discussion with the 1850 San Francisco Fugger. The dialogue they have can be read entirely differently after the reader learns how the Fuggers have worked to ensure Melisande is rescued from 1851 London:

> Mr. Fugger raised his handsome leather briefcase. 'I've got it all arranged here,' he said…. The gentleman turned to [Melisande]. 'Miss Grainne said you'd be wanting to return home as soon as possible.'[95]

Upon first reading, the reader is guided to believe that Grainne is manipulating the Fuggers in 1850 San Francisco. However, when they use teleological retrospect, the fact that the Fugger tells Melisande that he has things all arranged implies that he is fully aware of and in control of the situation. The way the Fugger words his sentence is curious. It could be interpreted as him acknowledging that Grainne wants to get rid of Melisande so she can continue her business without interference, but on reflection, it can be read to mean that the Fugger knew Melisande would be desperate to return to her home-time after Grainne marooned her. When read this way, it is another subtle way of the Fugger telling Melisande that the Fuggers are aware of the misdeed about to happen and are going to help set it straight. After Melisande is home and Frederick Fugger visits, he confirms that the Fuggers have thrown their protection and support

[94] Ibid, p. 709.
[95] Ibid, p. 634.

behind the now-rogue DODO agents to stop Grainne. In changing sides, the Fuggers show that they have never been fooled by Grainne's attempt to get into their good graces:

> 'Let's cut to the chase: it's the Fuggers,' Tristan said. 'They made sure we could build an ODEC in the basement here. They've obviously made a decision that it's better to have us around as a counterbalance to Grainne than to cede total control of history to her and her minions. And so we are protected, somehow.'[96]

The Fuggers have been in control of DODO, its operatives, and its operations from the beginning when Melisande first noticed their logo on the boxes of historical documents she was asked to translate. They were active at the scenes of Diachronic Shear, they were kept abreast of everything going on in DODO by Dr Cornelius Rudge and indirectly by Grainne thinking she was manipulating them. In reality, she was telling them everything they needed to know to help rescue Melisande, protect Erszebet so she could meet Melisande, and stop Grainne from her plans to eradicate technology and bring back magic. Therefore, Grainne, as the only crossover from the recursive to the circular acts as a structural coincidence that merges with the Fuggers' role as structural coincidence to complete the narrative circle through the Sending of Melisande to meet Erszebet in 1851.

By revealing how Melisande was marooned in 1851, the narrative circles back to the *in media res* opening to provide the reader with all the information surrounding Melisande ending up in a past DTAP. Similarly, by revealing how Melisande meets Erszebet, the novel circles back to the point of rupture created when Erszebet first reaches out to Melisande with information she could not have otherwise had unless she had met Melisande, even though Melisande had not yet lived it. The subversion of causality not only helps the novel complete the circular narrative structure, but it also raises an unanswerable question about causality that creates the infinite loop sub-category of circular narrative. Because one can never definitively answer the cause-effect relationship between Melisande and Erszebet's meeting order, there is

[96] Ibid, p. 742.

a need for the narrative to continue repeating itself in the exact same sequential order in which it is presented to the reader. Therefore, the infinite loop merges recursion and circularity, showing that they are not mutually exclusive, but even when they work together they still retain their separate structural classifications

2.4. Conclusion

While I have described the differences between recursion and circularity through the micro-narrative DEDEs and the macro-narrative of *The Rise and Fall of D.O.D.O.,* this novel shows that the two forms can work together to create the infinite loop. As a complex sub-set of circular narrative, it relies on a degree of recursion to preserve the integrity of the sequential ordering of events when causality is subverted. In *DODO*, the DEDEs are exclusively recursive because of the way they have natural starting and endpoints that do not throw the reader into the midst of an ongoing event. The reader is able to follow along with the protagonist and learn the cycle of events that is then repeated in the same linear order with slight variations.

The circular narrative throws the reader *in media res* into the midst of ongoing events and heavily relies on structural coincidences such as the character of Grainne moving from a contained recursive DEDE into the twenty-first century. Her character becomes the subject of material intended to divert reader attention away from the Fuggers, the other structural coincidence of substance. This plot twists leads to the moment of anagnorisis where the reader understands how the *in media res* moment of rupture surrounding the out-of-order-meeting between Erszebet and Melisande brings about a denouement that closes the narrative circle. However, with the closing of this circle new questions are raised concerning causal ordering. Because of the inverted causal relationship primarily surrounding the questions of which came first—Erszebet meeting Melisande, or Melisande meeting Erszebet—it becomes necessary for plot events to continue occurring in the exact same order to preserve the integrity of the

narrative's circular structure. Without the repetition of the circular narrative, the circle would disintegrate. Therefore, recursion helps create the infinite aspect of the infinite loop, transforming it into a more complex version of the simple time-loop. Whereas *The Kingdoms* reached a natural end after a single closure of the narrative circle, the subversion of causality in *DODO* prompts a need for a continued self-perpetuating cycle for both the overarching circular narrative to continue as well as the embedded micro-narrative recursive DEDEs. Therefore, the infinite loop circular narrative blends circularity and recursion as recursion gives the infinite loop circular narrative its structural stability. Recursion and circular narrative both retain their separate functions but work together in a very specific way to preserve the infinite loop through repetition.

CHAPTER THREE:

The Spiralling Circular Narrative

This chapter will define and analyse spiralling circular narrative, a third sub-set under the overarching circular narrative category. Spiralling circular narrative offers another diverse application for circular narrative beyond the time-loop discussed in Chapter One and the infinite loop discussed in Chapter Two. It is the most complex form of circular narrative because it uses three or more seemingly unrelated, or divergent storylines, and merges them into a centralised point through a mix of alternating and braided narrative techniques. Unlike the existing alternating and braided narrative forms, which are predominantly linear in nature, spiralling circular narrative relies on the untensing of time—as all circular narratives do—to merge structural coincidences together into a unified point that also circles back to its *in media res* beginning. The untensing of time builds the centripetal spiral as the divergent plotlines converge through multiple moments of anagnorisis throughout the narrative.

In this chapter, I shall demonstrate the narrative mechanics of two spiralling circular narratives: N.K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season* and Alex Landragin's *Crossings: A Novel.*[1] Of particular significance to this sub-set are its evolution from the alternating and braided narrative forms, its multiple points of anagnorisis, the use of second-person narration, and the inclusion of narrator as character and reader as narratee.

[1]N.K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season* (New York City: Orbit, 2015). See summary and list of key characters in Appendix 3; *Crossings* is an unusual novel because it is designed by its author to be read two different ways. In the preface of the novel, the author explains that the book can be read cover-to-cover as any traditional novel is read *or* it can be read according to a special sequence known as The Baroness Sequence. The Baroness sequence presents the three stories as an integrated novel, begins on page 150 of the paperback edition and, at the end of each chapter, has a footnote that directs the reader to the next section. The reader, therefore, flips back and forth among the three micro-narratives ('The Education of a Monster,' 'City of Ghosts,' and 'Tales of the Albatross') that comprise the novel. The sequence integrates the three micro-narratives into a singular spiralling circular narrative. Alex Landragin, *Crossings: A Novel* (New York City: St. Martin's Publishing Group, 2019). See summary and list of key characters in Appendix 4.

Both novels feature multiple plotlines that function to increase the size and scope of the storyworld as well as to produce deeper narrative meaning. A multi-plot narrative is defined as follows:

> A narrative that follows the parallel destinies of a large cast of characters, cutting a slice in the history of the storyworld in breadth as well as length. New plot lines are initiated when intersecting destinies create new plans of action, which interact in various ways with the previously established plot lines. This interaction makes it very difficult to isolate discrete strands of plot in the entangled network of relations represented by the narrative as a whole.[2]

This definition presupposes that multiple plotlines make it difficult to isolate individual plotlines from each other, yet in linear narratives or narratives that utilise a degree of nonlinearity, it is easy for a reader to keep multiple plotlines separate in their mind while establishing a mental fabula. Such multi-plot narratives rely on what Prince calls 'the concurrent rendering through intercutting and interweaving of two or more sets of situations and events occurring simultaneously.'[3] However, with spiralling circular narrative, three or more divergent plotlines exist at different temporal points that converge over the course of the narrative into a singular temporal point. These temporalities, which a reader initially assumes to be simultaneous, are shown to revolve around a central protagonist at different temporal points in that protagonist's life. As a result, themes of identity become prominent as the protagonists experiment with multiple identities in a process of self-discovery.

Additionally, both novels share the choice to employ second-person narration. Second-person narration sets up the reader to assume the identity of the protagonist as avatar where both are at the mercy of the narrator to explain how the divergent plotlines connect. The use of second-person narration, particularly in Jemisin's *The Fifth Season,* overtly addresses the reader through the character of Essun and directs the reader to pay particularly close attention to certain passages. While *Crossings* does not use this narrative device to the extent that Jemisin

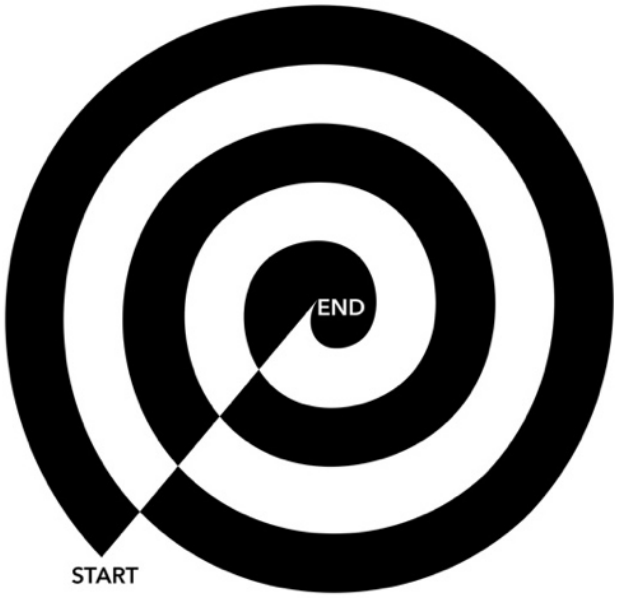
[2] 'Multi-plot Narrative', *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 324.
[3] Gerald Prince, 'Simultaneism', *Dictionary of Narratology* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1989), p. 87.

does, it does use aspects of second-person narration to speak directly to the reader. The following discussion will breakdown the ways in which spiralling circular narrative operates, demonstrate the demands it makes on the reader, and compare and contrast the way it functions in *The Fifth Season* and *Crossings.*

3.1. The Mechanics of the Spiralling Circular Narrative

Spiralling circular narrative uses elements of existing alternating narrative and braided narrative forms to achieve something new. I have modelled my definition of this form on the concept of centripetal force, a phenomenon defined within the study of physics as 'a force that acts on a body moving in a circular path [that] is directed toward the centre around which the body is moving.'[4] Spiralling circular narrative mimics the centripetal force that keeps an object revolving around a fixed point much in the same way a tetherball spins in a circle around the pole to which it is tied. With each revolution around the object at the centre, the revolving object's orbit gets closer and closer to the fixed point until it has no more room to move. In the illustration below, it is evident that the black and white strands alternate in a spiralling pattern towards the fixed point at the centre of the illustration.

[4] 'Centripetal Force', *New Oxford American Dictionary* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2010).



[5]

While this figure shows only two strands that alternate equally, spiralling circular narratives use at least three separate micro-narratives which involves an element of narrative braiding. I shall first discuss alternating narrative which is defined by Kafelenos as follows:

> In an alternating pattern, a segment of one sequence is followed by a segment of a second sequence, which is followed by another segment of the first sequence, and then another segment of the second sequence, and so on. A pattern of alternating sequences is often used to tell two characters' stories occurring at different times; two characters' stories occurring at the same time; or one character's experiences as an adult interspersed with that character's experiences as a child.[6]

Alternating narrative is most often used to follow more than one character on adventures that are happening simultaneously across a storyworld. In science-fiction and fantasy, alternating between storylines helps to provide scope to a storyworld by allowing the reader to visit more places within that world. One example of an alternating narrative is Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* which, from *The Two Towers* onwards alternates between the journey taken by the Frodo Baggins and Samwise Gamgee and the journey taken by Aragorn, Gimli, and Legolas.[7] Other secondary narratives such as the kidnapping of Pippin and Merry, or the taking of Pippin to

[5] Illustration 4, The Simple Spiral, created by Stephanie Katz.
[6] Emma Kafalenos, *Narrative Causalities* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006), p. 22.
[7] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings,* 3 vols (New York City: William Morrow, 1988).

Minas Tirith by Gandalf, are alternated within the rotation on a micro-narrative level before being re-joined through the arrival of Aragorn and party. A more contemporary example of an alternating narrative series is Sarah J. Maas's *Throne of Glass* [2012-2018] which jumps across nearly a dozen concurrent plotlines within her seven-book series to show events happening across the narrative world.[8] Maas frequently cuts between her various characters in a tightly alternating pattern which challenges the reader to hold multiple plotlines in their working memory.

Braided narrative is more complex than alternating narrative as braids 'interlace three or more strands to form a length' that end in a unified point. A braided narrative uses three or more seemingly distinct plotlines that converge into one.[9] While there is alternation of the plot threads in a braided narrative, in spiralling circular narrative the alternating pattern is not represented equally among the three strands. One plotline is significantly shorter than the other two because there are multiple merging points. When the first plotline is absorbed into the second, it leaves the remaining two plotlines to revolve in an alternating pattern around each other until the final point of convergence unifies those into one. Thus, the spiralling circular narrative has multiple moments of anagnorisis that are staggered throughout the development of the narrative. After the first moment of anagnorisis merges three of the plot threads into two, the reader knows to look for a secondary point of anagnorisis where the final two alternating plotlines will converge into one.

The braided narrative focuses on the links between storylines instead; yet, like alternating narratives, braided narratives still ultimately obey linear plot presentation since 'the braid represents a progression of discourse time; the top of the braid indicates the beginning of the novel, and the bottom illustrates the end.'[10] In the following illustration, I show the overall

[8] Sarah J. Maas, *Throne of Glass,* 8 vols (New York City: Bloomsbury YA, 2013-2019).
[9] 'Braid', *New Oxford American Dictionary.*
[10] Corinne Bancroft, 'The Braided Narrative', *Narrative,* 26.3 (2018), 262-81, (p. 266).

linear progression of a braided narrative from beginning to end as well as the convergence of previously divergent plotlines.

According to Sinor, each of the three strands plays a distinct role in the narrative. The primary storyline (A-plot) is the 'present tense line, meaning it occurs closest in tone to the moment from which the narrator is narrating' regardless of whether the narration is occurring in the present tense.[12] The present-tense line acts as the narrative arch that provides the greatest degree of structure throughout the plot. The secondary plotline (B-plot) is known as the research strand which 'does not have to unfold along a narrative line' and can interweave with the present-tense storyline where the author sees fit to change to an alternative scenario or viewpoint.[13] The research strand allows the character to experiment and learn things that will help them later in the present-tense thread. The last strand (C-plot) of the braided narrative is 'the past tense thread that appears in scene-based chunks.'[14] The past-tense strand is the shortest of the three narrative threads and provides the most exposition about past information such as biographical information about the protagonist. Braided narrative already allows a degree of temporal manipulation by following different temporalities rather than simultaneous temporalities as in the alternating narrative model. It also gives readers a more complex syuzhet to manage mentally 'by layering and intertwining multiple narrative threads…activat[ing] readerly attachments to individual characters and encourag[ing] a broader attention to the interconnections of a community.'[15]

In addition to focusing on multiple temporalities and the ways in which divergent plotlines eventually converge into a denouement, braided narrative also includes multiple narrators: 'braided narratives have distinct narrators who tell different stories that both conflict

[12] Jennifer Sinor, 'Deserting the Narrative Line: Teaching the Braided Form', *TETCY,* 42.2 (2014), 188-96, (p. 192).
[13] Ibid, p. 193.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Bancroft, p. 264.

and intertwine in the same storyworld.'[16] The use of multiple narrators is what sets braided narratives apart from alternating narratives because 'novels that have several storylines but a single narrator are not braided.'[17] The additional narrators allow multiple points of view to be shared with the reader and provide conflicting viewpoints that a reader must reconcile as the narrative threads weave together. Furthermore, even though braided narratives begin with divergent narrative threads, they must eventually converge: 'these stories cannot…"stand alone."'[18] The threads of a braided narrative do not form a complete narrative without their counterparts. If one were to extricate a single thread, one would be left with an incomplete or fragmented plot. For example, the micro-narratives in *Cloud Atlas* can be split up from each other and retain enough individual autonomy to be understood in isolation from each other because they are loosely connected but not braided.[19] On the other hand, *The Ten Thousand Doors of January* [2019] is an example of braided narrative because three seemingly divergent plotlines following three different narrators are interwoven to reach a unified endpoint.[20] If one were to unravel the three plotlines in this novel, the individual plot threads would fail to stand alone.

While spiralling circular narrative borrows many elements from braided narrative, such as the multiple plotlines spanning multiple temporalities featuring more than one narrator, what separates it from the braided narrative is as follows: a particular use of an *in media res* beginning that begins at the end, convergent structural coincidences that merge the multiple plotlines, and a denouement that revisits the temporal ending point that began the narrative. Spiralling circular narrative untenses time to provide the moments of anagnorisis that cause the inward, centripetal rotation towards the denouement. The denouement acts as the fixed central

[16] Ibid, p. 266.
[17] Ibid, p. 268.
[18] Ibid, p. 269.
[19] David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas. Atlas* (New York City: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2004).
[20] Alix E. Harrow, *The Ten Thousand Doors of January* (New York City: Redhook. 2019).

point which unifies the divergent plot threads. Because a spiralling circular narrative deals with time in a non-linear and non-chronological manner, it cannot be characterised as part of existing alternating or braided narratives. For example, *Crossings* and *The Fifth Season* both begin *in media res;* however, rather than simply starting in the middle of a tale, they both make explicit reference to beginning at the denouement. *Crossings*, according to the Baroness Sequence, opens with the following line: 'This is where the story ends: at this writing desk, on this wobbly chair.'[21] *The Fifth Season* opens its story with, 'Let's start with the end of the world, why don't we? Get it over with and move on to more interesting things.'[22] From the very start, an active reader should realise that these novels will fill in the pieces that lead up to their respective self-proclaimed ends. Therefore, the narrative's circular intent is explicitly proclaimed from the beginning.

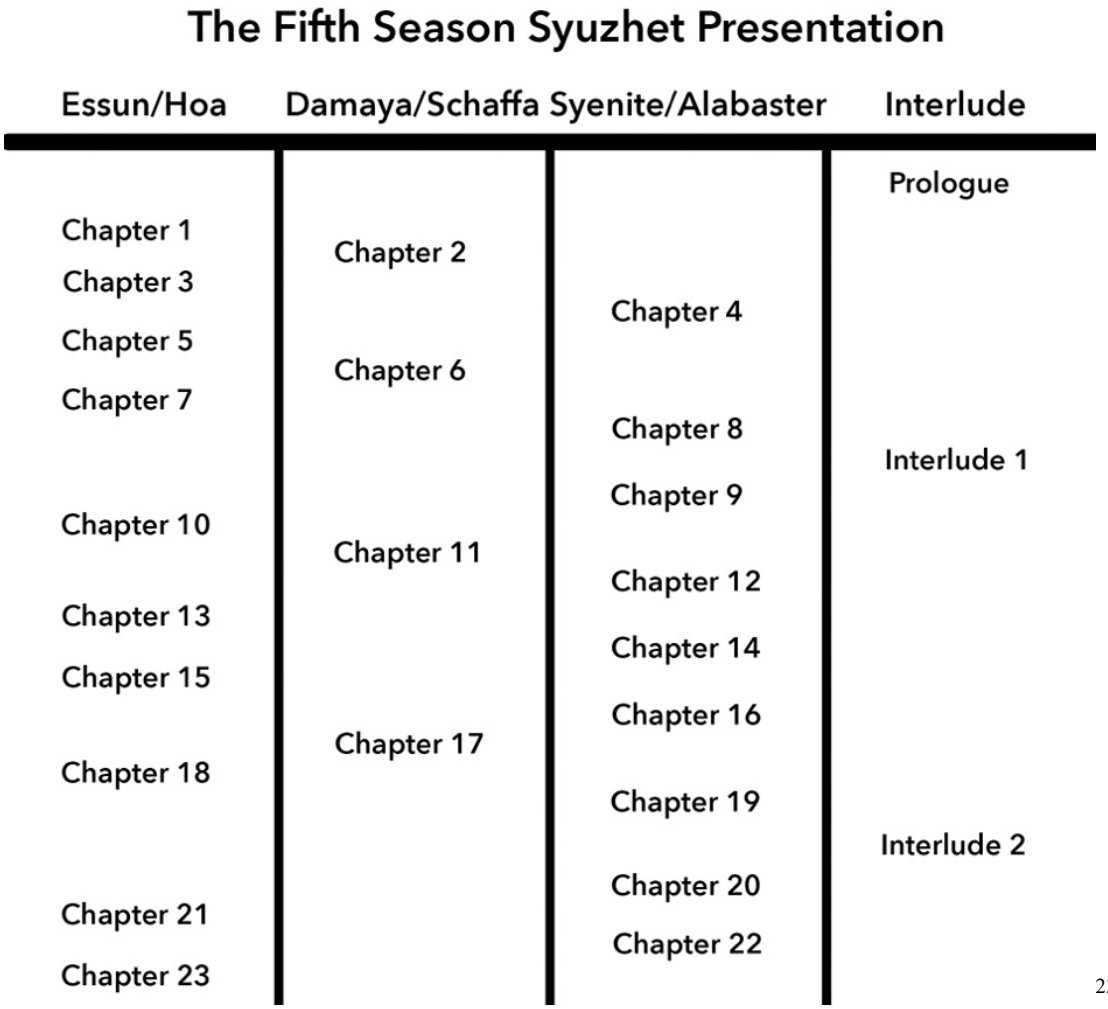
Additionally, there are multiple moments of anagnorisis that arise as each divergent thread of the narrative is absorbed into the present-tense thread. In a spiralling circular narrative, the past-tense thread is absorbed first, leaving the research strand and the present-tense strand to continue alternating until a second point of anagnorisis merges those two remaining threads into one unified plotline. For example, in *The Fifth Season,* Essun's storyline is the present-tense thread that drives the overarching narrative progression. Damaya's storyline is the past-tense thread that recounts Essun's childhood years even though the reader initially believes that Damaya is a second, autonomous character who is existing simultaneously with Essun. Syenite provides the research-strand as the version of Essun who is testing the limits of her orogenic powers as she learns from Alabaster. It is not until Damaya's plotline is absorbed into Syenite's plotline that the first moment of anagnorisis occurs, informing the reader that these are two identities belonging to the same character. This

[21] Landragin, p. 150.
[22] Jemisin, p. 1.

revelation sets up an anticipation for the reader that somehow Essun's identity will likewise be connected to Damaya and Syenite's. This anticipation sets up the second moment of anagnorisis where the anticipation of a second merging point comes to fruition, merging Damaya, Syenite, and Essun's identities together as one. As the identities of Essun are merged together, the *in media res* beginning is circled back to, not identically as in *The Kingdoms,* but referentially as in *DODO.* If the reader is paying attention, they will recognise the revisiting of the *in media res* moment through the dialogue at the denouement.

3.2. A Visual Examination of Spiralling Circular Narrative in *The Fifth Season* and *Crossings*

In order to clarify the spiralling circular narrative model further, I will provide a visual mapping of the syuzhets in *The Fifth Season* and *Crossings.* In Illustration 6 I have outlined the three divergent plotlines and plotted the chapter numbers from *The Fifth Season* in sequence according to the plotline with which they coincide.



[23]

This illustration shows how the chapters are divided among the three primary plotlines along with three minor interjections provided by the preface and two interludes. Damaya/Schaffa's plotline, as the past-tense thread is clearly the shortest of the three major plotlines. After Chapter 17, it drops out of the alternating pattern altogether. The illustration also shows that the plot starts and ends with Essun/Hoa's plotline in Chapters 1 and 23. The Essun/Hoa plotline is the present-tense thread because it has the most rotations of the three plotlines, signifying that it is the A-plot. The Syenite/Alabaster plotline is the research-thread that provides a great deal of personal exposition about the phase of Essun's life where she begins to explore the

[23] Illustration 5, *The Fifth Season* Syuzhet Presentation at a glance, created by Stephanie Katz.

extent of her powers. The two interludes that interrupt the narrative function as asides from Hoa to 'you'. The second-person narrative usage in the interludes explicitly asks the reader/narratee to notice specific things to come in the next section of the plot, which I shall discuss in greater detail later in this chapter.

The structure of spiralling circular narrative is further revealed by an examination of both syuzhet layouts of *Crossings:*

Crossings Syuzhets At-A-Glance

Baroness Sequence			Straightforward Sequence		
Education of A Monster	City of Ghosts	Tales of the Albatross	Education of A Monster	City of Ghosts	Tales of the Albatross
	Ch 1. The Hotel Room (part 2)		Ch 1. A Disgraceful Episode		
	Ch 2. The Cemetery		Ch 2. A Touching Reunion		
		Ch 3. Alula	Ch 3. A Suitable Candidate		
Ch 5. A Disgraceful Episode	Ch 4. The Apartment		Ch 4. An Unsuitable Candidate		
		Ch 6. Pierre Joubert		Ch 5. The Cemetery	
	Ch 7. The Auction House			Ch 6. The Apartment	
				Ch 7. The Auction House	
Ch 8. A Touching Reunion				Ch 8. The Palace of Justice	
		Ch 9. Jean-Francois Feuille		Ch 9. The Baudelaire Society	
Ch 10. A Suitable Candidate				Ch 10. The Sheherazade	
	Ch 11. The Palace of Justice			Ch 11. The Hotel Room	
		Ch 12. Jeanne Duval			Ch 12. Alula
Ch 13. An Unsuitable Character		Ch 14. Edmonde de Bressy			Ch 13. Pierre Joubert
	Ch 15. The Baudelaire Society				Ch 14. Jean-Francoise Feuille
		Ch 16. Hippolyte Balthazar			Ch 15. Jeanne Duval
	Ch 17. The Sheherazade				Ch 16. Edmonde de Bressy
		Ch 18. Madeleine Blanc			Ch 17. Hippolyte Balthazar
	Ch 19. The Hotel Room (part 1)				Ch 18. Madeleine Blanc
	Ch 20. The Hotel Room (part 3)				

[24]

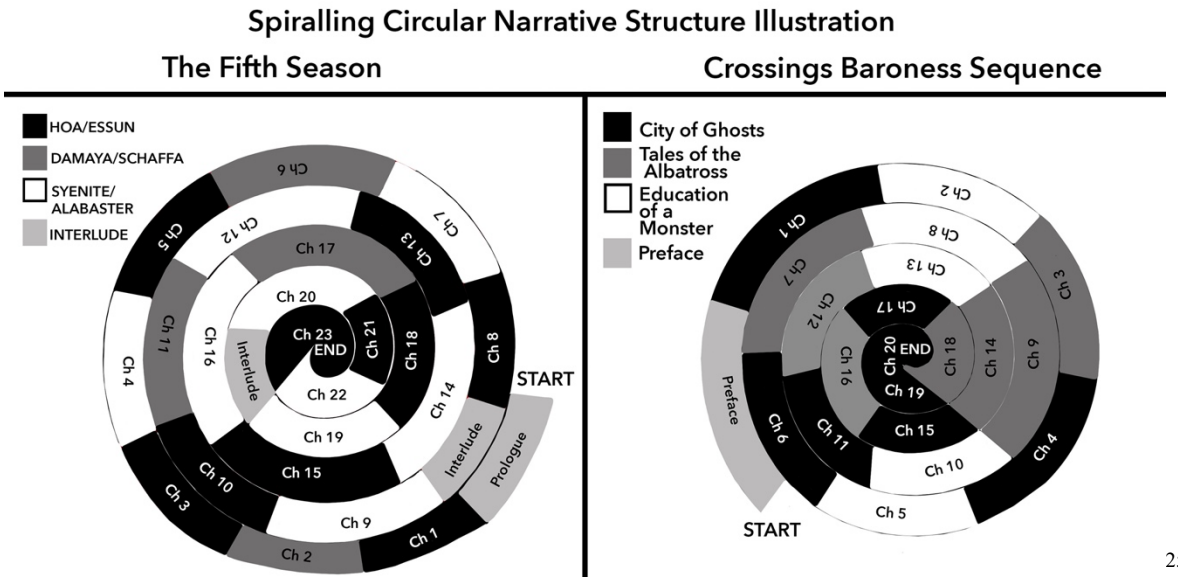
In this illustration, I have compared the straightforward sequence of *Crossings* with the Baroness Sequence to show the difference between the two syuzhet presentations. The straightforward sequence clearly shows the separation of the three micro-narratives while the Baroness Sequence depicts their integration. In this version of the syuzhet, the reader gets an entirely different and unique reading experience than if they were to read the novel cover-to-cover with each micro-narrative functioning as its own contained work. According to the Baroness Sequence, not only does the plot circle back to its temporal beginning point but it also circles back to same pagination sequence where the novel started. Chapter One begins on page 150 and ends on page 153 before instructing the reader to jump to page 39 for the next

[24] Illustration 6, *Crossings* Syuzhet At-A-Glance, created by Stephanie Katz—for a larger version, see Appendix 7.

chapter in the Baroness Sequence. The Baroness Sequence ends by having the reader circle back to page 154-55 where, instead of a footnote directing the reader where to turn next, it simply reads 'The End.' While 'The End' actually ends the 'City of Ghosts' story—which is the middle of the three micro-narratives—it is still technically the middle of the text according to a straightforward way of reading.

If the reader chooses the straightforward approach, they will encounter three separate stories that do not integrate or conform to spiralling circular narrative. It is *only* the Baroness Sequence that creates the spiralling circular narrative and so it is the only sequence that I shall discuss in my analysis of *Crossings.* Because the novel does not assign chapter numbers due to the dual presentation, I have assigned chapter numbers for the ease of illustrating their ordering between the two methods of reading. The Baroness Sequence has twenty chapters opposed to the straightforward sequence which only has eighteen; this is because the Baroness Sequence splits 'The Hotel Room' chapter into three parts as it shuffles the story sequence to achieve the spiralling circular narrative presentation. Furthermore, one can see that *Crossings* starts and ends not only with 'City of Ghosts,' but in the same chapter, 'The Hotel Room,' from 'City of Ghosts.' Even without translating this illustration into a circular mapping, one clearly sees that the plot circles back on itself.

The next illustration shows how *The Fifth Season* and *Crossings* are circularly mapped to form their respective spiralling circular narratives:



25

In this illustration, I have taken the respective syuzhet layouts of *The Fifth Season* and *Crossings* and created an illustration to visually depict the alternation of the multiple plotlines, the centripetal integration of the chapters, and the merging of the three plotlines into a singular fixed point. In *The Fifth Season,* one can see that the rotation of Damaya's plotlines disappears after Chapter 17; this corresponds to the first moment of anagnorisis where Syenite's plotline absorbs Damaya's plotline and the reader recognises that Damaya and Syenite are the same person. From this point on, the active reader will anticipate a future merging of Syenite's and Essun's characters given the previous merging and the many parallels that exist between the remaining two plotlines. In Chapter 22, the reader receives confirmation of the anticipated merging of Syenite and Essun's character identities through a second moment of anagnorisis that occurs when all three identities are mentioned together.[26] At this point, the reader understands the connection between Damaya, Syenite, and Essun and can reflect back on the story in order to better understand how their identities merge during the rotation of their individual micro-narratives.

[25] Illustration 7, Spiralling Circular Narrative Structure Illustration, created by Stephanie Katz—for larger version, see Appendix 8.
[26] Ibid, p. 449.

In *Crossings,* the micro-narratives are more pronounced because they are presented as individual standalone narratives in the table of contents. The reader only discovers the Baroness Sequence by reading the Preface. The author serves as the overt narrator of the Preface as he introduces each of the three narratives:[27]

> The first of them, "The Education of a Monster," appears to be a short story written by Charles Baudelaire… The second story, "City of Ghosts," is a kind of noir thriller set in Paris in 1940, seemingly narrated by Walter Benjamin, in which "The Education of a Monster" plays a pivotal role. The third story, "Tales of the Albatross," is the strangest of the three: it seems to be the autobiography of a kind of deathless enchantress.[28]

While the Preface is separate from the three micro-narratives that it introduces, it briefly puts the author in the role of narrator as he explains how the book is designed to be read. Aside from presenting the reader with an alternate reading sequence, the preface is self-contained and extradiegetic to the micro-narratives that comprise the actual novel.[29] 'Education of a Monster' is the shortest of the three strands and *should* function as the past-tense thread; however, 'Tales of the Albatross' contains the most historic information and functions as the role of the past-tense thread. 'City of Ghosts' functions as the present-tense thread because it is where the Baroness Sequence begins and ends, and it is the micro-narrative that has the most prominence in the rotation of the three stories. However, both 'City of Ghosts' and 'Education of a Monster' share some of the functions of the research-thread. In 'City of Ghosts' Benjamin's loyalty is tested as to whether or not he believes Madeleine's 'Tales of the Albatross.'; In 'Education of

[27] Fludernik defines an overt narrator as 'one that can be clearly seen to be telling the story—though not necessarily a first-person narrator and to be articulating her/his own views and making her/his presence felt stylistically as well as on the metanarrative level' Fludernik, Monica, *An Introduction to Narratology,* trans. by Patricia Hauasler-Greenfield and Monica Fludernik (New York City: Routledge, 2009), p. 21.
[28] Landragin, p. xv-xvi.
[29] Extradiegetic refers to existing outside of and separate from the primary narrative. Though the preface is part of the novel, it is separate unto itself. Rather than playing a narrative role, it merely instructs the reader on the alternate method of reading the book (for example., the Baroness Sequence) in a way that captures the reader's attention immediately because it draws attention to itself through the use of an extradiegetic overt narrator claiming the author's identity. See further Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method,* trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), pp. 228-231.

a Monster,' Baudelaire is also tested in his belief of 'Tales of the Albatross' which results in the very work that Benjamin and Madeleine are willing to risk their lives to protect.

The moments of anagnorisis are more strongly pronounced in *The Fifth Season* than they are in *Crossings.* In *The Fifth Season,* Damaya explicitly chooses the identity of Syenite, and Alabaster refers to Essun as Syenite, making Syenite the connecting thread. In *Crossings,* there is a degree of working memory that must be engaged for the reader to keep track of which of the two protagonists has crossed into a new body. Working memory is engaged to a further degree because, in addition to keeping track of two characters' multiple crossings, the two characters continually intersect in their subsequent incarnations across time. The structural coincidences require that the reader keep all of these characters clear and maintain vigilance in knowing who is narrating at each point across the three micro-narratives.

In this section, I have created and relied upon several illustrations to visually depict complex narrative concepts before delving into textual analysis. My goal is to provide clear visuals that show the transformation of the syuzhets of *The Fifth Season* and *Crossings* according to their respective chapter structures to map the rotation of their respective multiple plotlines to reveal their centrifugal spiralling shape. While it is difficult to show visually how the centralised end-point of the spiralling circular narrative temporally revisits the *in media res* beginning without the possibility of three-dimensional illustrations, I shall analyse and discuss how this process occurs in the next section.

3.3. Starting at the Centre and Unravelling the Spiral

Since spiralling circular narratives involve multiple narrative threads and multiple narrators, it is useful to analyse *The Fifth Season* and *Crossings* in a manner that might be thought of as backwards. In looking at how the spiralling threads all conjoin at the centre first and then working out, the analysis of this form's architecture is streamlined. In both *The Fifth*

Season and *Crossings,* these central points show the culmination of the most significant structural coincidences through anagnorisis to examine how the multiple threads converge. In *The Fifth Season,* the multiple threads come together when Essun realises that Alabaster caused the Rifting that began the novel: '*You* tore that rift up north… *You* split the continent. *You* started this Season.'[30] When reflecting on the novel, the reader will notice that Hoa explicitly tells 'you' the narratee/reader to remember the man who causes the Rifting: 'here is a man who will matter a great deal.'[31] Hoa describes how 'the earth is with him. Then *he breaks it*' signifying the physical splitting of the earth that sparks the Season.[32] While the Rifting is the central event that links beginning and end, the reunion between Alabaster and Essun also solidifies the recognition that she is the same person as Syenite and Damaya. The reader experiences the first moment of anagnorisis when Damaya sheds the name associated with her past-tense thread:

> 'I, I picked a rogga name.'
> He does not chide her on her language. 'Have you now?' He sounds pleased. 'What?'
> She licks her lips. 'Syenite.'
> Schaffa sits back in the chair, sounding thoughtful. 'I like it…It forms at the edge of a tectonic plate. With heat and pressure it does not degrade, but instead grows stronger.'[33]

The reader has already been thoroughly exposed to both Damaya and Syenite by this point in the narrative, but this is the moment where the reader is overtly told by Damaya that she is assuming a new identity. The reader also learns the meaning in the choice of Damaya's new name which reflects the type of woman and orogene that she has proven to be during her time as Syenite. Many of Syenite's characteristics are amplified through Essun as Essun is arguably the hardest, if not the strongest, of her three selves. Therefore, the reader can begin to actively anticipate that somehow Syenite's identity will unite with Essun's before the narrative end.

[30] Jemisin, p. 448.
[31] Ibid, p. 4.
[32] Ibid, p. 7.
[33] Ibid, p. 331.

The second moment of anagnorisis that links Damaya/Syenite with Essun is casually dropped without the same degree of overtness as the first moment of anagnorisis. Instead of Essun making a declaration or explaining how she assumed a third identity, the moment of recognition comes through Alabaster's recognition of Essun as the woman he once knew as Syenite. Not knowing that Essun has changed her identity, Alabaster calls her by her nickname, Syen. Essun quickly corrects him and informs him of her current name.

In case the reader misses this first reference, Jemisin provides three follow-up references to ensure that the reader notices that Damaya/Syenite/Essun are one and the same. The second reference is again more subtle than overt as Hoa narrates the reunion: 'Then he turns his attention to you. (To her, Syenite.) To *you,* Essun. Rust it, you'll be glad when you finally figure out who you really are.'[34] In the third reference, Alabaster corrects himself in how he addresses Essun, 'I'm not going to kill you, Sy—Essun.'[35] Though all three references have been woven into the dialogue, the repetition increases the significance and reinforces the connection in the reader's mind culminating in the final reference that is the most overt: 'What I want you to do, my Damaya, my Syenite, my Essun, is make it worse.'[36] This is the only time in the novel that all three of Essun's identities are spoken together, solidifying the two moments of anagnorisis into the one central, unifying point that connects the three divergent plotlines.

In addition to Essun acting as the primary structural coincidence, Hoa as narrator plays an important role in linking the three plotlines. Hoa is both an overt and covert narrator.[37] He is overt in the sense that he explicitly calls attention to his own narrative voice, but he is covert in the sense that his identity is hidden until late in the narrative. The seeds of Hoa's identity are

[34] Ibid, p. 446.
[35] Ibid, p. 447.
[36] Ibid, p. 449.
[37] 'An *overt narrator…*is a narrator who clearly manfests himself as narrator throughout the text' (p. 26) and 'covert narrators employ "the rhetoric of fiction", that is, [they] guide the emotions and reception of their narratees in myriad subtle ways, and that tales never really tell themselves' (p. 27-28). See further, Irene J. F. de Jong, 'Narrators and Narratees,' *Narratology and Classics: A Practical Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 17-46.

planted early on, however, when he refers to Essun before properly introducing her: 'The woman I mentioned, the one whose son is dead. She was not in Yumenes, thankfully, or this would be a very short tale. And you would not exist.'[38] The reader does not yet know that the 'you' the narrator is talking to is Essun. He first mentions Essun as a forty-two year old woman living in Tirimo whose son has just been murdered.[39] Hoa does not assign Essun's identity to the reader until chapter one when the reader realises that the narrator is not addressing the reader as 'you' but is talking to 'you' Essun; through this process Hoa prompts the reader to identify with Essun. The reader also does not realise at this point that 'the boy—for that is what he resembles' who breaks free from the geode is Hoa.[40] The revelation of Hoa's role as narrator does not occur until Chapter 22 when he says, 'I was glad when she found the little town called Tirimo…I introduced myself to her eventually, finally, ten years later…But she is—was—special. *You* were, are special.'[41] From the beginning of the narrative the reader has known that Essun's journey began in Tirimo, just as it has been made clear that she has been followed by an unusual boy called Hoa for much of the narrative. Hoa prepares the reader for the second moment of anagnorisis where Alabaster joins Damaya, Syenite, and Essun's identities in the last chapter by instructing *you* to listen and learn.[42] Hoa once again uses the second-person 'you' to directly engage the reader via Essun's avatar to prepare the reader for the second moment of anagnorisis. However, in the announcing of Hoa's role as narrator, teleological retrospect will allow the reader to see the instrumental function of his role as a narrator and a structural coincidence.

In retrospect, the reader recognises that Hoa has known Essun since well before she became Essun. He shares that he waited ten years to introduce himself to Essun, implying that

[38] Ibid, p. 9.
[39] Ibid, p. 10.
[40] Ibid, p. 13.
[41] Ibid, p. 443.
[42] Ibid.

he knew her before she knew him. The connection here appears within Hoa's description of his transformation as a little boy. The active reader will notice Hoa's description as non-human and therefore make the reader interested to know what he is: 'The boy—for that is what he resembles—puts [a stone] in his mouth and chews.'[43] His non-human status is confirmed by the fact that he eats stone and has been born of stone. His identity is further called into question when he saves Essun from the kirkhusa by turning it into stone. The concept of stone eaters has been referenced throughout the novel, but Essun as Syenite does not meet one until Allia:

> The stone eater at the core of the obelisk floats before her. It's her first time being close to one. All the books say that stone eaters are neither male nor female, but this one resembles a slender young man formed of white-veined black marble…The cracks spread over his skin and the stiff illusion of his clothing, *into* him, through him. *Are you all right?* She wonders, and she has no idea why she wonders it… The stone eater closes his mouth, and opens his eyes, and lowers his head to look at her. 'I'm fine,' he says. 'Thank you for asking.' And then the obelisk shatters.[44]

The description of the stone eater is a subtle callback to Hoa's rebirth from the geode where he is eating pieces of himself.[45] He does this again when he and Essun make it to Castrima, but this is the first time that Essun observes Hoa eating:

> 'Rocks,' you say. 'You've been carrying…rocks?' Hoa hesitates, then reaches for one of the white pieces. He picks it up; it's about the size of the tip of your thumb, squarish, chipped badly on the side. It looks hard. He eats it. You stare…It's the first time you've ever seen him eat. 'Food,' you say. 'Me.' He extends a hand and lays it over the pile of rocks with curious delicacy.[46]

In addition to the revelation of Hoa as a stone eater and the fact that Syenite once freed a stone eater from an obelisk, the final connecting point comes after the destruction of Meov. Hoa shares, 'that is when I found her, you see. The moment of the obelisk's pulse was the moment in which her presence sang across the world…Many of us converged on her then, but I am the one who found her first…I told her that I was called Hoa. It is as good a name as any.'[47] Not

[43] Ibid, p. 13.
[44] Ibid, p. 263.
[45] Ibid, p. 13.
[46] Ibid, p. 395.
[47] Ibid, p. 443.

only does this moment link Hoa's introduction as narrator with his introduction to Essun on the road from Tirimo, but it links Hoa to the obelisks when he explains that he found Essun through her call to the obelisk.[48] The only time that Essun had ever connected with an obelisk before was in Allia when Syenite raised the obelisk that had imprisoned Hoa, freeing him.

The moment that completes the temporal circle is unusually covert tying Hoa's role as narrator with Essun's multiple identities to the syuzhet opening which started with the end of the world, to the actual end of the storyworld. Hoa does this by addressing 'you' once more and asking the reader to remember:

> This is what you must remember: the ending of one story is just the beginning of another. This has happened before, after all. People die. Old orders pass. New societies are born. When we say 'the world has ended,' it's usually a lie, because the *planet* is just fine. But this is the way the world ends. This is the way the world ends. *This is the way the world ends.* For the last time.[49]

The reader is led to believe that the ending Hoa is referring to is the Rifting. However, when Essun learns that Alabaster used the obelisks to cause the rifting and he asks her if 'the obelisks still come when you call,' as the garnet one did in Allia, the reader realises that the end of the world that Hoa foreshadows is not what has happened, but what is going to happen: '"I don't want you to fix it," Alabaster says… "No, what I want you to do…is make it worse."'[50] Because *The Fifth Season* is the first book of a trilogy, the reader will not get to experience the end of the world yet.

When teleological retrospect is invoked, there is the implication that when the novel opens with 'Let's start with the end of the world, why don't we? Get it over with and move on to more interesting things,' that something has happened to Essun to cause Hoa to narrate her life's story back to her.[51] It is assumed that Hoa is narrating from a position where he has

[48] Ibid, p. 83.
[49] Ibid, p. 14.
[50] Ibid, p. 448 and p. 449.
[51] Ibid, p. 1.

intimately learned every detail of Essun's lives. That could only have happened after an ending in which the current world order has died but the planet is still fine. Therefore, Essun must accept Alabaster's request to use the obelisks. Hoa's narrational tactic merges Essun's three identities using the Rifting as a catalyst and the foretold end of the world as the temporal moment to which it circles back.

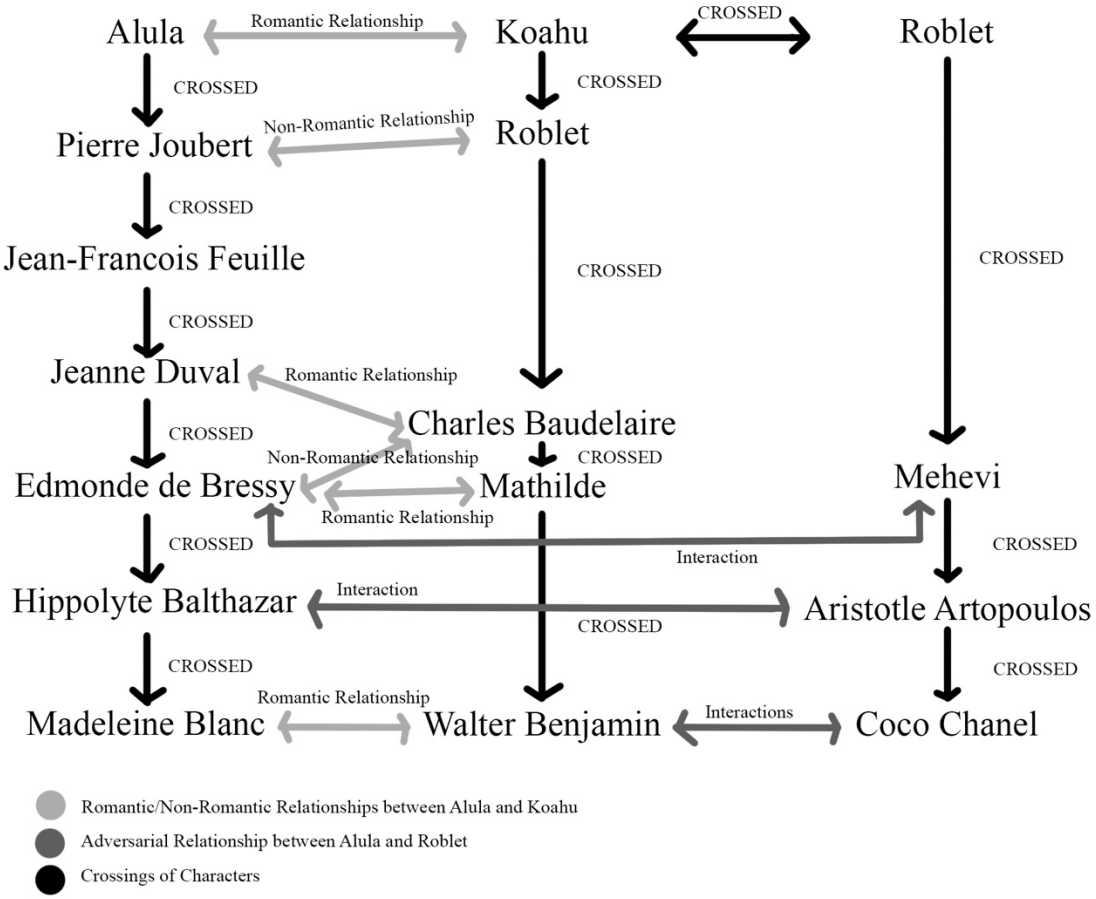
In *The Fifth Season,* the multiple identities of Essun and the unique role of the narrator's use of second person direct address to 'you' the narratee/reader are the most important structural coincidences. In *Crossings,* the theme of identity and the use of narration is used differently. Identity is still used as a structural coincidence, but narrative is just as important as character and narrator voice because of the three micro-narratives. All roads lead back to the micro-narrative entitled 'The Education of a Monster' which positions that micro-narrative and its character-author, Charles Baudelaire at the centre of the narrative spiral.

In *Crossings,* the Baroness Sequence starts and ends with the same scene, but that scene has been divided between the first chapter and the last where Benjamin has finished writing the novel that he started composing in the first chapter. While the reader is led to believe that Benjamin is merely writing a romance novel before killing himself, when one reads the rest of *Crossings* and circles back to this scene, the reader learns that Benjamin has been expanding the writings started with Baudelaire's 'Education of a Monster.' Baudelaire's writing is Alula's first successful attempt to get Koahu to record 'Tales of the Albatross' in his own words in preparation for his next crossing. When Benjamin tells the prison doctor, 'I would like you to look me straight in the eyes and tell me exactly why it is that you hate me so,' he is not asking for a confession, he is asking for uninterrupted eye contact to cross.[52] The act of crossing is what creates the multiple identities in *Crossings* unlike in *The Fifth Season* where one singular character had compartmentalised herself into three separate identities.

[52] Landragin, p. 155.

In *Crossings,* identity acts as a structural coincidence but there are two characters who cross multiple times into multiple bodies:

Crossings Key Characters and their Relationships/Interactions



[53]

The many crossings make the reader pay close attention in order to understand who is speaking at any given time. Alula, the primary narrator, crosses into six different bodies—Pierre Joubert, Jean-Francoise Feuille, Jeanne Duval, Edmond de Bressy, Hippolyte Balthazar, and Madeleine Blanc. Each of these people have their own entry in 'Tales of the Alabatross.' Jeanne Duval and Edmond de Bressy are referenced implicitly and explicitly in Baudelaire's

[53] Illustration 8, *Crossings* Key Characters and their Relationships/Interactions, by Stephanie Katz. For a larger version, see Appendix 4, *Crossings Summary*.

'The Education of a Monster,' while Madeleine takes a leading role in 'City of Ghosts.' Both micro-narratives are written from the point of view of Koahu who does not have as many crossings as Alula. Koahu inhabits both Baudelaire and Benjamin and uses them as his narrative voices despite the fact that he also originally crosses with a French doctor named Roublet and a suicidal pregnant French teenager called Mathilde. Mathilde is the 'you' that Baudelaire writes 'Education of a Monster' for at the instruction of de Bressy.

I revisit this discussion about narrator reincarnation because narrator identity has structural significance. In addition to providing varying voices to each divergent plot thread, the multiple narrators act as structural coincidences. Particularly in *Crossings* where the narrator's voice switches between Alula and Koahu depending on which micro-narrative the reader is engaging with, the reader must pay attention to who is speaking in the overarching fabula timeline.

> Your name is Mathilde. You are a sullen, bovine sixteen-year-old girl. Despite the assurances of the nuns who discharged you into Madame Edmonde's care, you can barely read. Admittedly, you recognize the letters of the alphabet, but that can hardly be called reading. You can scribble your name, but that can hardly be called writing. Still I trust that Madame Edmonde knows what she is doing.[54]

Here, Baudelaire prepares his next body for the crossing. Baudelaire, a well-known real-life poet and writer, makes a big deal of Mathilde being barely literate. This is not an act of condescension. Baudelaire wishes his next crossing to be with someone literate because he is writing a history of 'Tales of the Albatross' at the behest of Madame Edmonde de Bressy (who was once his former lover, Jeanne Duval, who was his original lover Alula), so that his next self will read and remember what has been written. Unlike Alula, Koahu, does not possess memory after crossings. Only Alula retains memory post-crossing: 'My name is Alula. I am the one who remembers. Your name is Koahu. You are the one who forgets.'[55] This is why,

[54] Landragin, pp. 1-2.
[55] Ibid, p. 157.

after Baudelaire is convinced that Madame de Bressy is telling the truth about her experience with crossings, Baudelaire chooses to trust Madame Edmonde's selection of Mathilde as his next crossing. Mathilde never assumes the role of narrator that it appears Baudelaire is preparing her for. Instead, she becomes the referent for Alula to continue the story.[56] Because of the interconnectedness of Alula and Koahu and their respective crossings, the act of crossing is a key structural coincidence since characters assume both narrator and referent roles depending on the alternation between who is narrating. What one character shares about a particular body is often supplemented when referenced by the other narrator, but from a different point of view. These criss-crossing roles of narrator and referent help the three micro-narratives to braid together because of the intertwining of character identities.

The reader is first alerted to the strange relationship between Koahu as Baudelaire and Alula as de Bressy due to de Bressy's one-sided prior knowledge of Baudelaire. This is not mere fandom, though de Bressy will become an avid collector of Baudelaire's work and the President of the Baudelaire Society when Alula shares her experience as de Bressy. Instead, Koahu meets de Bressy in what is presented as part of a riddle:

> 'My name is Madame Edmonde de Bressy.'
> 'De Bressy… Your name is unfamiliar to me.'
> 'That is of no consequence.'
> 'Why are you lavishing such generosity upon a complete stranger?'
> 'You are not a complete stranger.'
> 'Do we know each other?'
> 'In a manner of speaking.'
> 'I do not recall having ever met a Madame Edmonde, or even a Mademoiselle Edmonde.'
> 'That does not alter the fact that we have had occasion to know each other, in a distant past... Monsieur, listen carefully to what I have to tell you. All the stories Jeanne Duval told you were true—every last one. They were not fantasies. They were not hallucinations.'[57]

[56] The referent is different from the narratee. A narratee is who the narrator is directly talking to while a referent is who the narrator is talking about.
[57] Ibid, pp. 14-16.

The meeting between de Bressy and Baudelaire has similarities to the one-sided prior knowledge that Erszebet possessed of Melisande in *The Rise and Fall of D.O.D.O.,* except in this instance, de Bressy does not withhold the answer to her perceived riddle very long:[58]

> 'It was less of a riddle and more of a statement of fact.'
> 'It was a riddle, and I spent the entire night seeking its answer.'
> 'Then I fear you wasted your time. The riddle is its own answer.'
> I felt a sudden wave of ill temper wash over me, a lifelong habit that has worsened with age. I let it pass before continuing. 'You said everything Jeanne ever told me was true. Surely not *everything.'*
> 'I said all of her stories were true. Jeanne was not capable of lying, but about certain things her word was her honor.'
> … 'You will excuse me if I ask you for proof of your knowledge.'
> Madame Edmonde sighed. 'Where to begin? Shall I tell you about Koahu and Alula, and how they loved one another? Or about the island of Oaeetee, the chief Otahu, and the sage Fetu? Shall I tell you about the *Solide,* its captain Marchand, the surgeon Roblet, and the sailor Joubert?'
> I was in disbelief.[59]

Though the reader will not realise it until all of these instances come to pass in the syuzhet, Edmonde has just explicitly shared how 'Tales of the Alabatross' connects with what Baudelaire knows about Koahu from Jeanne, *and* that de Bressy knows what Jeanne knows because she is Jeanne. She immediately follows this up with further details to prove her connection to Baudelaire:

> Madame Edmonde remained perfectly still until she finally said, in almost a whisper, 'Do you remember the last occasion you saw Jeanne?'
> 'How can I forget?'
> 'How many people have you told about it.'
> 'No one.' How could I have told anyone? I was too ashamed.
> 'If I told you, now, would that be sufficient proof?'
> I nodded. 'Yes. I suppose it would.' And yet I didn't want to hear.
> 'You had just awoken from one of your nightmares. Jeanne began to console you, as she had done throughout the years. But that morning you would not be consoled. Her tales had long ceased to comfort you. And on this occasion you were especially inconsolable.' Madame Edmonde paused. 'Do you remember how you responded?'
> I nodded shamefully. 'Yes,' I murmured. 'I'm afraid I do.'…
> 'Of course, it wasn't the first time you'd lost your temper. But this occasion was different, wasn't it?...And what made it different was that you took out your belt and you began whipping me.'[60]

[58] See Chapter Two, pp. 70-71.
[59] Ibid, p. 18.
[60] Ibid, pp. 19-20.

De Bressy knows intimate details of Baudelaire's relationship with Jeanne Duval because she was Jeanne Duval, and before she was Jeanne Duval, she was Alula. Not only does de Bressy provide proof that she was Jeanne by confronting Baudelaire with information that he has never told anyone else about, but she also slips into referring to Jeanne as 'me.' The details she provides about the abuse that Baudelaire unleashed on Jeanne are further substantiated by Alula when she composes her entry as Jeanne in 'Tales of the Albatross':

> A nightmare woke him. I asked what he had dreamed. He did not wish to tell me. I asked him again and he told me to be silent. 'Did you dream of an island?' I asked. He turned to me with his eyes narrowed hatefully and said, 'Say the word again and I shall make you regret it.'
> 'Did you dream of sailing a ship?' For the first time since I had known him, he slapped me. The impact of the slap spun my head, but I would not be quelled…Charles took his belt from his trousers and began flailing me as I cowered before him, crouched on the ground, my arms wrapped around my head. But I would not be stopped. He tore the dress from my back and whipped me, cursing me as he did so, calling me a slave. By the time he was done, as warm blood trickled from the welts on my back, Charles collapsed on the divan.[61]

The consistency of the descriptions between Jeanne's recounting of the beating and de Bressy's recounting of Jeanne's beating are for the reader's benefit more than Baudelaire's. The reader gets further proof that de Bressy and Jeanne are both incarnations of Alula in the repetition of this scene; however, the first reference is enough for De Bressy to persuade Baudelaire to do what Jeanne Duval could not by getting him to write 'Education of a Monster.' The reader will not understand why this information was so pivotal beyond his embarrassment by his behaviour until they are re-presented with it in Jeanne's entry. Likewise the reader will not understand why Mathilde's degree of literacy is important to Baudelaire until Alula records her side of de Bressy's story.

Alula shares that she as de Bressy, and Koahu as Mathilde, kept the son that Mathilde was pregnant with. They embark on a romantic affair where de Bressy 'gave her the story

[61] Ibid, p. 251.

Charles had written before the crossing, which he'd entitled, "The Education of a Monster," but she could read only a little and she resisted every attempt I made to read it aloud to her.'[62] Alula's plan to help Koahu remember is foiled not only by Mathilde's inability to read the record Baudelaire recorded but the unwillingness to believe in crossings. Mathilde remains ignorant even after de Bressy founds the Baudelaire Society and entrusts the society to Mathilde. The structural coincidence here is two-fold: First, Alula and Koahu continue their affair throughout several crossings as Jeanne Duval and Charles Baudelaire, as de Bressy and Mathilde, and again as Madeleine and Benjamin. Secondly, the Baudelaire Society and 'Education of a Monster' play a role in eventually convincing the doubting Koahu of his and Alula's true identities once they embody Madeleine and Benjamin, respectively. When Benjamin realises the truth of 'Education of a Monster' and Madeleine's 'Tales of the Albatross,' Benjamin obeys Madeleine's prompting to continue writing his experience to prevent continued forgetting:

> You *must.* You must get away. You must write down everything you know about crossing—everything I've told you, everything you've lived through yourself, and the manuscript too, you must include that. Make a book, a book about the crossing, a book that will remind you of who you are when you have forgotten. Once you've done that, you must make a crossing yourself. Then, when the war is over, when Paris is free once more, come find me. I'll be waiting.[63]

In a sequential reading, this is the last interaction between Madeleine and Benjamin before Benjamin is in prison writing his romance novel prior to killing himself. In the Baroness Sequence, the reader jumps to the end of the novel, and they now realise that Benjamin never intended to kill himself. When he asks the prison doctor to look him in the eye, he is planning to cross with the prison doctor. The manuscript that Benjamin was writing will be the first thing that Benjamin sees when he crosses with the prison doctor, thus bringing the narrative full circle. It closes the book on Benjamin's life but leaves the reader with many unanswered

[62] Ibid, p. 274.
[63] Ibid, p. 139.

questions as to how he will find Alula again, who Alula will cross with next, if they will ever be able to right the wrongs they unleashed by disobeying the first rule of crossing, and if they will ever return to the island of Oaeetee and live happily ever after. Thus the denouement does not provide a definitive end to *Crossings* as it circles back on itself at the centre of the spiral. Instead, it leaves a great deal unresolved even though the structural coincidences of Alula and Koahu across the three micro-narratives have converged. When attempting to create the linear fabula of this narrative, the reader knows that Benjamin crosses with the prison doctor. Only in retrospect can the reader sort out the fabula to see how the structural coincidences have contributed to this narrative shaping. Unlike the infinite loop which subverts causality to prevent mental mapping of an accurate fabula, spiralling circular narrative allows for a linear fabula to be constructed because of the autobiographical/biographical element. If one unwinds the spiral into its three distinct narratives, *The Fifth Season* and *Crossings* would look like this:

The Fifth Season Fabula

Ch 2	Damaya, in winters past
Ch 6	Damaya, grinding to a halt
Ch 11	Damaya, at the fulcrum of it all
Ch 17	Damaya, in finality
Ch 4	Syenite, cut and polished
Ch 8	Syenite on the highroad
Ch 9	Syenite among the enemy
Ch 12	Syenite finds a new toy
Ch 14	Syenite breaks her toys
Ch 16	Syen in the hidden land
Ch 19	Syenite on the lookout
Ch 20	Syenite, stretched and snapped back
Ch 22	Syenite, fractured
Ch 1	you, at the end
Ch 3	you're on your way
Ch 5	you're not alone
Ch 7	you plus one is two
Ch 10	you walk beside the beast
Ch 13	you're on the trail
Ch 15	you're among friends
Ch 18	you discover wonders down below
Ch 21	you're getting the band back together
Ch 23	you're all you need

Crossings: A Novel Fabula
(Baroness Sequence chapter numbering)

Ch 3	Alula (circa 1771)	TOA
Ch 6	Pierre Joubert	TOA
Ch 9	Jean-Francois Feuille	TOA
Ch 12	Jeanne Duval	TOA
Ch 5	A Disgraceful Episode	EM
Ch 8	A Touching Reunion	EM
Ch 10	A Suitable Candidate	EM
Ch 13	An Unsuitable Candidate	EM
Ch 14	Edmonde de Bressy	TOA
Ch 16	Hippolyte Balthazar	TOA
Ch 18	Madeleine Blanc	TOA
Ch 2	The Cemetery	COG
Ch 4	The Apartment	COG
Ch 7	The Auction House	COG
Ch 11	The Palace of Justice	COG
Ch 15	The Baudelaire Society	COG
Ch 17	The Sheherazade	COG
Ch 19, 1, 20	The Hotel Room (parts 1-3) (circa 1944)	COG

TOA = Tales of the Albatross
EM = Education of a Monster
COG = City of Ghosts

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A linear fabula is easily constructed with both novels not only due to their biographical/auto-biographical nature, but also because they both start at the end of their stories. By starting at

[64] Illustration 9, Linear Mapping of Chapters in *The Fifth Season* and *Crossings* according to the Baroness Sequence, created by Stephanie Katz—for larger version, see Appendix 9.

the end, there is a note of finality at the denouement whether the narrative goes on (as it does in the sequels to *The Fifth Season*) or sets up the ability to go on (as in *Crossings).* There is also a lack of paradoxical relationship between cause and effect because one's life tends to be experienced linearly according to an Augustinian presentation of time. As a result, the direction of time's arrow is preserved in the fabula state even if the syuzhet is presented out of order and untensed by the narrator/narratee relationship. Ironically, while spiralling circular narrative is the most complex of the circular narratives in its construction, it is the simplest in its ability to deconstruct into a linear fabula.

In Illustration 10, it is evident that in *The Fifth Season,* Damaya is the youngest version of Essun with Syenite being the middle identity. In *Crossings,* there are more bodies inhabited by the protagonists than in *The Fifth Season*; however, once one knows that Alula is the narrator of 'Tales of the Albatross' and Koahu is the narrator of 'Education of a Monster' (as Baudelaire) and 'City of Ghosts' (as Benjamin), the linear construction is easy to map because of the cross-referencing of characters. There is even an inclusion of date references to help further solidify the fabula mapping. Alula provides the date of birth, crossing, and death of each of her inhabitants up until Madeleine. Alula's birth is listed as circa 1771, Baudelaire writes that his tale 'begins, early last month—that month being March of 1865,' while Benjamin starts his tale 'Monday, May 27, 1940' and continues writing throughout the German occupation of Paris during WWII.[65] The dates provided establish a start and end time to the narrative as a whole which allows the reader to either use the other dates provided through 'Tales of the Albatross' to help create a linear mapping or to track the crossings. *The Fifth Season,* on the other hand, being a science-fantasy novel that exists in a secondary world and does not use a real-world dating system to aide readers, must use the context in the points of anagnorisis to construct a linear fabula as Essun's three identities merge.

[65] Landragin, p. 157 and p. 3.

3.4. The Roles of the Narrator and Narratee in Shaping Spiralling Circular Narrative

3.4.1. Narrational Paradox

Paradox has been a central theme throughout the discussion of circular narrative, and this is no different with spiralling circular narrative. However, in the case of spiralling circular narrative, paradox is not so much temporal as narrational. Glowinski and Stone describe the phenomenon of paradoxical narration as when 'starting the story, the narrator possesses an absolute knowledge of its subject, but reveals it step by step, and not right away.'[66] With this technique, the narrator chooses the sequential ordering for a desired effect on the reader, deliberately sharing or withholding information to maximize this effect. This is not to say that temporality is absent from narrational paradox; instead, narrational paradox becomes further paradoxical when temporal distortion is added through mixed verb tenses. Though Prince does not explore paradoxical narration, he offers the following writing on temporal narration:

> An examination of the chronological links between the times of occurrence of the narration and the narrated yields three major possibilities: The narration may follow the narrated in time… It may precede it, a situation which is relatively rare and occurs in the so-called predictive narrative… it may also be simultaneous with it.[67]

When paradoxical narration is combined with the temporal narrational tactics that Prince describes, the narrator has the ability to untense time in the way plot events are ordered. A narrator can untense time through what Schlickers and Toro describe as 'an unresolved contradiction in which *what is* and *what is not*… are presented in spatio-temporal simultaneity. Narrative procedures of metalepsis, pseudodiegesis, metamorphosis, endless loops, strange loops and Mobius strips, as well as *mise en abyme aporetique* and *mise en abyme a l'infiniti*

[66] Michal Glowinski and Rochelle Stone, 'On the First-Person Novel', *New Literary History,* 9.1 (1977), 103-14, (p. 105).
[67] Gerald Prince, *Narratology: The Form and Functioning of Narrative* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1982) p. 27.

generate contradictions of this kind, which do not allow resolution.'[68] This strongly suggests that narrational paradox appears to favour narrative loops, experimentation with the role of narrator (for example, extradiegetic narrators, heterodiegetic narrators who are also characters, and so on), and *mise en abyme'*s embedded images that mirror embedded narratives, all of which can be used to untense narrative time and create the grounds for circular narrative to occur at the narrational level. Paradox of narration is seen in *The Fifth Season* through the heterodiegetic narrator, Hoa, who has witnessed all of Essun's life and is re-presenting it to her using spiralling circular narrative rather than linear narrative.[69] In *Crossings,* Alula and Koahu are homodiegetic narrators who are aware of their own respective journeys but not necessarily all of each other's journeys.

Because the spiralling circular narrative embraces braided narrative's multiple temporalities, there are aspects of all three of these narrated times in *The Fifth Season* and *Crossings.* Certain aspects of the two novels are narrated in retrospect, or in the past, while others are narrated as if in a present state where the narrator is simultaneously narrating things that are happening. There is a degree of predictive narration particularly in *The Fifth Season*

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[68] Sabine Schlickers and Vera Toro, *Perturbatory Narration in Film: Narratological Studies on Deception, Paradox and Empuzzlement* (New York City: Walter de Gruyter, 2017), pp. 6-7. Thakkar defines the term *mise-en-abyme* as 'a phrase whose meaning encapsulates the endless cycle of comprehending and interpreting meta-fictional reference… For narrative—and other kinds of art as well, such as painting—the phrase has come to mean a moment of site or self-reflection, or a sense of self-consciousness that heightens the reader's awareness of the artistic medium.' Thakkar, Sonali, 'Mise-en-Abyme', *Narration and Memory* (2013) <narrativeandmemory.wordpress.com/2013/10/20/mise-en-abyme/> No Pages. [accessed 17 September 2022] (para.1). Mise-en-abyme aporetique is the French term for the infinite interpretation of an aporia which is defined according to the *New Oxford American Dictionary* as 'an irresolvable internal contradiction or logical disjunction in a text,' which resembles a paradoxical mind game. 'Aporia', *New Oxford American Dictionary* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[69] Twenty-first century narratological discussion of narrators has deemed the term 'omniscient narrator' out-of-date for its God-like and creationist implications. Paul Dawson, Ruediger Heinze, and Monica Fludernik both favour the term 'heterodiegetic narrator' to refer to a narrator who exists outside the text and knows more than the characters within the story: see Paul Dawson. *The Return of the Omniscient Narrator: Authorship and Authority in Twenty-First Century Fiction,* p. 32; Ruediger Heinze. 'Violations of Mimetic Epistemology in First-Person Narrative Fiction, p. 282; Monica Fludernik. *An Introduction to Narratology,* p. 31. Dawson writes that the omniscient narrator is 'a trope, a figure of speech denoting a particular type of narrational performance, not simply a quality of narratorial knowledge. We need not take the notion of an "all-knowing" narrator literally.' (Dawson, pp. 54-55). Similarly, Fludernick prefers the term homodiegetic narrator to refer to a first person narrator who is also a character within the storyworld (p. 31; p. 90).

and ‘The Education of a Monster’ where second-person narration is used to tell the narratee/reader things that *will* happen. Richardson notes that such narration is ‘particularly devious, since it can refer to the protagonist, the narrator, the narratee, or the reader; authors using this form regularly play on this ambiguity as well as on its multiple possible meanings.’[70] He recognises how multiple narrators, especially when second-person narration is included, help to create a ‘centripetal text that begin[s] by producing a number of seemingly disparate voices and stances only to reduce them to a single narrating position at the end.’[71] Though Richardson does not make a connection to spiralling circular narrative, it is evident that the rotation of multiple narrators contributes to the centripetal motion that creates the spiralling circular narrative text. As the connections between narrators are drawn, the divergent voices merge the multiple plotlines together regardless of whether the narrators themselves merge.

In *Crossings,* Baudelaire uses the future tense in writing to Mathilde because the events he is preparing her for have not occurred yet. The reader only learns what happens after the fact from Alula when she fills in the pieces using past tense narration. Benjamin uses past and present narration to recount what has transpired up until the point that he arrives at the end of his own story and has caught up with his own timeline. Because Madeleine is in Benjamin’s past, he uses past tense; however, Alula as Madeleine uses a mix of past, present, and future tense. She shares about her crossing from Hippolyte Balthazar to Madeleine leading up to the temporal point when Benjamin’s narration takes over. There is a gap in Alula’s narration as Madeleine, which picks up after she parts from Benjamin, and reflects in the present-tense about having been reunited with Koahu before imparting suggestions for his future crossing: ‘Choose your inheritor wisely. Choose someone who wishes to die, and if you cannot, choose

[70] Brian Richardson, *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006), p. 14.
[71] Ibid, p. 62.

someone who deserves to.'[72] The reader is led to understand that Benjamin is following Madeleine's advice by crossing with the Nazi prison doctor who will die in Benjamin's body after watching Benjamin ingest the morphine before the crossing.

In addition to paradoxical narration both novels use second-person narrative voice to uniquely involve the active reader. In the case of both texts discussed in this chapter, at least one character identity is assigned to the reader from each novel. Hoa assigns the role of Essun to the reader throughout *The Fifth Season* while Alula talks to 'you' Koahu in 'Tales of the Albatross' and Baudelaire talks to 'you' Mathilde in 'Education of a Monster.' The explicit assignment of an avatar in *The Fifth Season* consistently reminds the reader of their role as an active character within the text and asks the reader to search for plot connections in order to understand the identity assigned. In *Crossings,* this narrative device is used more sparingly and asks the reader to assume more than one avatar. The reader is therefore engaged differently because they experience being narrated to and narrated about by different people.

3.4.2. 'You' the Reader

Narrator and narratee play distinct roles in spiralling circular narrative and engage the reader directly by pointing to things the reader should explicitly remember through the use of second-person 'you' narration. Because of the relationship the reader shares with the character, the novel becomes metafictional and 'highlight[s] an important difference between the real world, where we can imagine—but never literally read—someone else's mind, and the world of fiction where we can easily look into somebody else's consciousness.'[73] While it is not unusual for novels to use the narrator as a means to provide the reader with a glimpse into a character's consciousness, both *Crossings* and *The Fifth Season* take advantage of this

[72] Landragin, p. 359.
[73] Alber, p. 86.

phenomenon by making the characters' memories a shared experience with the reader. By creating this intimate relationship between character, narrator, and reader through shared character memories, the novels explore what Fludernik calls 'the joint between time and space' that initially separates but then provides the convergence for the multiple plotlines.[74] The use of character memories makes the reader feel as though they are gaining exclusive, private information beyond the limitations usually employed by narrative voice. In cases like these, the narrator dictates the presentation of the narrative events rather than vice-versa.

When the reader is assigned the identity of one or more characters, as is the case in *The Fifth Season* and *Crossings*, the result is that the reader is paradoxically provided information by an extradiegetic narrator that goes beyond what they would otherwise learn directly from the protagonist; however, they are still limited to experiencing the plot with the protagonist. The extradiegetic narrator limits the presentation of plot events so the reader cannot know too much too soon. To achieve this paradoxical narration, the narrator can employ second-person 'you' narration to talk directly to the reader and also assign them a specific character identity to follow. According to DelConte, one can see how second-person narration adds another degree of complexity to narrative temporality by manipulating the degree of distance second-person 'you' has with 'you' the reader:

> The rhetorical distance created by assigning experiences to 'you' only exists when we narrate those experiences in the past or present tense (having already happened or currently happening). When we narrate in the future conditional, the tense specifies that the 'you' hasn't done…these things; the experience, then, lies with the narrator regardless of how much or little a reader might feel addressed and imagine him/herself in the hypothetical scenario.[75]

An example of this is illustrated through the way Hoa narrates to 'you' Essun, as if the things she is experiencing have not already happened, even though they have. The reader is

[74] Fludernik, p. 150.
[75] Matt DelConte, 'The Influence of Narrative Tense in Second Person Narration: A Response to Joshua Parker', *Connotations,* 23.1 (2013-14) 55-62, (p. 60).

misdirected because they are experiencing these events for the first time even though the events have occurred in Essun's past. Hoa's use of present tense makes the events feel like they are happening 'now,' and it is only after the moment of anagnorisis that the reader realises the deceptive use of present tense.

By choosing to read the book, the reader also chooses to accept the role as Essun's avatar which puts them in a doubly active role. The reader becomes more engaged with the text when assigned the limited view of the protagonist who is trying to rediscover her identity through Hoa's narration. The reader's active engagement is deepened when Jemisin uses Hoa to give explicit commands to the reader via Essun such as telling the reader 'There are things you should be noticing here. Things that are missing, and conspicuous by their absence.'[76] Even though Hoa is articulating a moment of recognition for Essun, because the reader is assuming Essun's avatar, Hoa is prompting the reader to recognise what Essun is recognising.

In 'Education of a Monster' and the first few pages of 'Tales of the Albatross,' Alula and Koahu as Baudelaire explore how second-person narration is really a twist on first-person narration because 'I' is writing to 'you' the recipient.[77] In *The Fifth Season,* Hoa camouflages his 'I' personhood by refusing to refer to himself as he narrates to 'you', Essun; however, Baudelaire makes full use of his 'I' identity in preparing 'you,' Mathilde, for her crossing and briefly assigning Mathilde's identity to the reader. Likewise, Alula uses 'I' to talk to 'you'/Koahu. Time and tense also come into play when more experimental forms of narration are used. Hoa uses a mix of past, present, and future tenses as he narrates Essun's life story back to her and hopes she will remember. Similarly, Koahu as Baudelaire and Benjamin uses a mix of tenses. As Baudelaire and Benjamin, Koahu records Alula's stories from 'Tales of the

[76] Ibid, p. 150.

[77] Mieke Bal explains 'The "you" is simply an "I" in disguise, a "first person" narrator talking to himself; the novel is a "first person" narrative with a formal twist to it that does not engage the entire narrative situation, as one would expect it should' (*Narratology*, p. 29.). I disagree slightly with Bal's definition here because, in the case of *Crossings* and *The Fifth Season,* the first-person narrator is clearly not talking to himself but to a named narratee (Mathilde or Essun) respectively.

Albatross' while adding moments of present narration about the life of the current body he is inhabiting, but Baudelaire, specifically, uses some future tense when directing himself to Mathilde as a means of preparing her for what will happen. The 'you' in this case, even though it is only used sparingly in Baudelaire's micro-narrative, 'constitutes an element of instability, defamiliarization, and cognitive disorientation that draws attention to itself.'[78] It is jarring to the reader due to its rarity in literature and thus calls attention to itself.

In *Crossings,* the use of second-person narration is less prominent than in *The Fifth Season,* but there is still a distinct relationship between narrator and narratee. Because Alula and Koahu take turns narrating in their different incarnations, whoever is narrating is talking to the other as they keep finding each other in their different forms. Though the reader is not asked to assume a character avatar throughout the narrative, there are moments where the line between narratee and reader are blurred: 'As I write these words, it occurs to me that I have never known a tale to be so *beyond belief* as that which I am about to relate to you, dear girl.'[79] In 'The Education of a Monster,' Baudelaire uses a mix of first- and second-person to talk to 'you' who will become his next incarnation: 'We will meet with you tomorrow at the same splendid church where we met today.'[80] 'The Education of a Monster' acts as the past-tense thread, the shortest of the three strands in *Crossings.* Aside from the use of the second person in this thread, the other two threads resort to a mix of first- and third-person narrative. Multiple narrators aid in the shaping of spiralling circular narratives because 'centripetal texts…begin by producing a number of seemingly disparate voices and stances only to reduce them to a single narrating position at the end.'[81] The active reader of spiralling circular narratives must realise their role as receiver of the narrative whether or not they are explicitly assigned a

[78] Jan Alber, *Unnatural Narrative: Impossible Worlds in Fiction and Drama* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016) p. 86.
[79] Alex Landragin, *Crossings* (New York City: St. Martins, 2019) p. 1.
[80] Ibid, p. 37.
[81] Brian Richardson, *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006), p. 62.

character avatar by one of multiple narrators. The use of 'you' not only speaks to the reader on a more personal level, inviting them to participate in the narrative as a specific character, but it also aids in teleological retrospect by telling 'you' what is important to store in the working memory. The plot information relevant to 'you' will be more easily recalled by the reader because it speaks directly to them. Therefore, the 'you' helps guide the reader across the multiple plotlines to the singular point at the centre of the spiralling narrative through its distinctly separate role from the other narrators, narratees, and character referents.

This section discussed the specific and paradoxical role that narration plays in crafting spiralling circular narrative. By experimenting with degrees of extradiegesis and limited point-of-view through the use of second-person narration, the narrator gives the reader the illusion of omniscience in certain situations while being limited to what a character is experiencing in other cases. Paradoxical narration additionally plays with time through mixed verb tenses, contributing to the untensing of time that is common in circular narratives. Lastly, the use of multiple narrators resembles braided narrative's usage of multiple narrative voices, but the narrators contribute to merging plotlines or merging their own identities to craft the centripetal spiral that bring divergent plotlines together.

3.5. Conclusion

The Fifth Season and *Crossings* are both examples of the spiralling circular narrative sub-set that further demonstrates the diversity of its typology. Spiralling circular narrative is the most complex in its narrative architecture due to its multiple narrators and narratees as well as its multiple divergent plotlines which converge through more than one point of anagnorisis. However, given that it has a defined end point that is circled back to and it engages the reader directly through second-person 'you' narration, a reader can unravel the spiralling circular narrative and construct a linear fabula unlike other circular narrative forms.

The greater significance of the spiralling circular narrative is that it adheres to the circular narrative framework I established but it also adds several additional criteria through the usage of techniques borrowed from alternating and braided narratives. The multiple divergent micro-narratives initially hide but provide multiple moments of anagnorisis which merge the narratives through the past-tense thread, research-thread, and present-tense thread. Even when these threads do not strictly follow their temporal roles, they still maintain a degree of autonomy that disappears when they all coincide in moments of anagnorisis. The reader sees through teleological retrospect that there are many active structural coincidences inevitably weaving them together.

Furthermore, while other forms subvert causality to untense time, spiralling circular narrative uses narrational paradox to distort time by means of narrators and narratees that engage a 'you' reader. The use of the second person in *The Fifth Season* and *Crossings* assigns one or more of these 'you' identities to the reader, asking the reader to assume that specific character's identity. The overt relationships between narrator and narratee, the prominent theme of identity discovery, and the assigning of a 'you' character identity to the reader have shown to be distinctive features of the spiralling circular narrative. As a result, the reading experience is different from other circular narrative forms because the reader looks for connections between character identities rather than connections of plot events. Consequently, the reader is limited to the information the narrator chooses to share, or withhold, from their character avatar and is at the narrator's disposal to dictate the presentation of events in a strategic way.

Of the three circular narrative sub-types that I have discussed in these first three chapters, spiralling circular narrative is by far the most complex in its construction. In the next chapter, I shall examine the final subset of circular narrative which encompasses multi-volume works that form circular narratives within circular narratives. Having already introduced *The*

Fifth Season in this chapter as part of a greater trilogy, the next chapter will examine how Jemisin's trilogy as a whole builds on the spiralling circular narrative in *The Fifth Season* to also create a macro-circular narrative that spans all three volumes. Additionally, it will introduce the visual realm of circular narrative in *Doctor Who* Series Six which also features concentric circular narratives with the mid-series providing one circular narrative and the full-series providing an even larger circular narrative. The audio-visual features of film narratives will be used to compare and contrast the role of the viewer versus that of the reader and evaluate how a multi-sensory narrative experience provides quicker memory recall and more immediate connections for processing circular narratives.

CHAPTER FOUR

Circularity in Serialised Literature and Television

Up to this point in my thesis, each chapter has analysed circular narrative in accordance with standalone novels. This chapter will illustrate how circular narrative can span multi-volume, or *serial,* narratives. In addition to examining how circular narrative structure is constructed across a literary series, I will also introduce how it applies to the visual medium of the television series. This marks the transition point in my thesis where I will discuss the cross-disciplinary application circular narrative has beyond literature.

This chapter will analyse how N.K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth Trilogy* uses circular narrative across its three volumes.[1] This chapter is not intended to function as an equal comparison between Jemisin and *Doctor Who* Series Six or between the novel and the audiovisual narrative forms. Rather, it will examine circular narratives within circular narratives in multi-volume/multi-episodic series. While the last chapter illustrated the spiralling circular narrative variant with regard to the first book of the *Broken Earth Trilogy,* I will broaden my exploration of N.K. Jemisin's trilogy to show how the series as a whole also exhibits circular narrative. *The Fifth Season* and the *Broken Earth Trilogy* use circular narrative in two different ways.[2] While the *Broken Earth Trilogy* includes the spiralling circular narrative of *The Fifth Season* within its overarching circular narrative, *Doctor Who* Series Six uses concentric circular narratives. The latter houses time-loops and infinite loops that form neatly closed circles. Additionally, *Doctor Who* Series Six is the first multimedia narrative work I examine in this thesis and it provides a transition into the audiovisual media of storytelling through its serial narrative structure.

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[1] N.K. Jemisin, *The Broken Earth Trilogy,* 3 vols (New York City: Orbit, 2015-2017). See summary and list of key characters in *The Obelisk Gate* in Appendix 5. See summary and list of key characters in *The Stone Sky* in Appendix 6.

[2] N.K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season* (New York City: Orbit, 2015). See summary and list of key characters in Appendix 4.

I shall also address the difference between reader response and viewer response. Because film and television are multi-sensory, memory recall becomes even more important to comprehending circularity; however, because more senses are being engaged simultaneously, memory recall becomes more immediate in ways that are not as achievable through reader response. The purpose of this chapter is twofold: first to explore micro-circular narratives within macro-circular series, and second to transition between reader response and cognitive film theory/viewer response. Whereas active engagement on behalf of the reader is imperative to recognising circularity in the written narrative, it becomes doubly important in the recognition of circularity in multimedia narratives because there are differing types of information which must be absorbed, stored, and made available for recall. Before analysing the nuances between the reader and the viewer, I shall discuss the traits unique to serial narratives which cause them to be classified as *complex narratives*. While the term 'complex narrative' was initially coined by Aristotle, Buckland expands the concept of Aristotle's definition[3]:

> The term Aristotle uses for complex is *peplegemnos,* which literally means "interwoven." In a successful complex plot, the second line of causality (which introduces recognition and reversal) is interwoven into the first, the characters' plotline.[4]

While all the circular standalone narratives analysed in this thesis have been complex in the way they juggle multiple plotlines across multiple temporalities, serial narratives also lend themselves to complex categorisation.[5] Their extended length, created by shorter instalments, naturally allows for the development of multiple plots over extended periods of time. Though there may be alternating sequences within each instalment, they ultimately weave together to create a unified story. The level of complexity within each instalment and across

[3] Aristotle, *Poetics,* trans. by Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin Books, 1996), p. 18.
[4] Warren Buckland, 'Introduction: Puzzle Plots,' *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema,* ed. by Warren Buckland (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 1-12, (pp. 2-3).
[5] Complex standalone narratives have been discussed in every novel analysed in this thesis.

the series as a whole creates the ability for nested circular narratives as I shall discuss by first examining the *Broken Earth Trilogy*.

4.1. The Series vs. The Novel

From a narratological standpoint, little scholarship has been produced about the structure of series; however, serial narratives have been in existence at least since *The Arabian Nights* [in circulation since Eighth Century A.D.] which featured a series of embedded narratives within the overarching plot.[6] Since the nineteenth century, the printing presses popularised serial narratives.[7] Many works of that period studied as novels today were originally published as serials, such as *The Pickwick Papers* [1836-37].[8] Contemporary series have earned the distinction of complex narratives because, as Hven states, they 'embrace non-linearity, time-loops, and fragmented spatio-temporal realities to demonstrate a contemporary interest in personal identity, memory, history, trauma, embodied perception, and temporality.'[9] They do this on a large, multi-episodic scale where plot consumers must also juggle multiple competing plotlines spanning multiple instalments.

Serials are unique in that they can exist across any media and genre because they are characterised by narrative composition: 'Serials are defined through the practice of offering a narrative text to consumers in isolated, materially independent units available at different but

[6] See Victor Watson, *Reading Series Fiction: From Arthur Ransome to Gene Kemp* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2000), p. 1.; *The Arabian Nights: Tales from a Thousand and One Nights,* trans. by Sir Richard F. Burton (New York City: Modern Library Mass Market Edition, 2004); *The Arabian Nights* is thought to have been written in the eighth century ('Scheherazade and the Arabian Nights.' *CSUN University Library.* Published 27/01/2015. www.library.csun.edu/SCA/Peek-in-the-Stacks/arabian-nights#:~:text=Scholars%20have%20concluded%20that%20the,Dr., [accessed 03 August 2022] and translated into English in the early 1700s. See further Amy Tikkanen, 'The Thousand and One Nights,' *Britannica,* No Date, Britannica.com/topic/The-Thousand-and-One-Nights, [accessed 03 August 2022].

[7] Robert C. Allen, 'Introduction,' *To Be Continued…: Soap Operas Around the World* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 1.

[8] Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers* (London: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 2000); Kathleen Kuiper, 'The Pickwick Papers,' *Britannica,* No Date, Britannica.com/topic/The-Pickwick-Papers, [accessed 03 August 2022].

[9] Steffen Hven, *Cinema and Narrative Complexity: Embodying the Fabula* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), p. 7.

predictable times: in a word, in successive episodes.'[10] Because of the successive nature of serial narratives, Allen suggests that the relationship of the consumer is different between a serial and a standalone narrative:

> Episodicity is *the* crucial trait which distinguishes the serial (and the series) from the 'classic' narrative text—that is, the single-unit realistic narrative, including the novel in book form, the feature film, the radio play, and so on. While a classic text can be consumed however the consumer wishes, because he or she generally has material control over the text in its entirety before beginning to consume it, serials' mode of presentation places consumers at the whim of the medium… (or, more precisely, at the whim of those who command the medium that presents serial texts).[11]

Unless they are able to access a series that is already finished, some people must wait a substantial period of time for the next volume to find out how the narrative progresses.

Both literary and television series must 'embrace a balance between episodic and serial form, allowing for partial closure within episodes while maintaining broad narrative arcs across episodes and even seasons.'[12] In *The Fifth Season,* one can observe this through the degree of closure provided by the merging of Essun's three identities while the novel itself is not closed. Instead, it leaves readers with a cliffhanger when Alabaster asks Essun to help him capture the Moon.[13] In *Doctor Who* Series Six, each episode has a varying degree of closure that allows it to tell a complete story while also setting up gaps that will induce the viewer to watch the next episode in order to see how the narrative resolves. While *The Fifth Season* and *Doctor Who* Series Six jump around both in time within each episode/instalment and across the series as a whole, they are also crafted to be consumed in a specific order. Reading *The Obelisk Gate* before *The Fifth Season* would mean that the reader misses out on much of the narrative groundwork laid in the first book that establishes the relevance of elements such as the obelisks, the Moon, and the Seasons. From a circular narrative standpoint, structural coincidences

[10] Robert C. Allen, *To Be Continued…: Soap Operas Around the World (*London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 27-28.
[11] Allen, p. 28.
[12] Jason Mittell, '"Previously On": Prime Time Serials and the Mechanics of Memory', *Just TV* (2009) < http://justtv.wordpress.com/2009/07/03/previously-on-prime-time-serials-and-the-mechanics-of-memory > [accessed 06 July 2022].
[13] Jemisin, *The Fifth Season,* p. 449.

become doubly important in serialised narratives because they must interweave plot points across multiple instalments, strategically revealing information that builds suspense as to what will happen next while also filling in gaps from previous instalments. The last episode must also return to the temporal starting point of the first episode to complete the narrative circle.

Serials are unique on both the narrative level and the consumer level. From a narrative standpoint, Allen says the serial 'is a form of narrative organized around institutionally imposed gaps in the text. The nature and extent of those gaps are as important to the reading process as the textual "material" they interrupt,' regardless of whether they are literary or multimedia texts.[14] From a consumer standpoint, Allen discusses what Iser termed '"a wandering viewpoint" within the text as we move through it, looking back upon the textual terrain already covered (what Iser calls retention) and anticipating on that basis what might lie around the next textual corner (pretension).'[15] Both of these standpoints support a circular narrative structure because of the plot gaps, though these will span a greater number of narrative instalments and demand more from the active reader. As the reader traverses the series and reflects on plot connections, the structural coincidences will also prompt the reader to make predictive hypotheses about how plotlines will converge.

The last point that is unique to the serial narrative is that it implies a commitment on behalf of the consumer to continue engaging with the same characters and episodic plot instalments within the series: 'series-reading is always conscious and always deliberate. You cannot read a series of twelve novels by chance…Reading a series involves a special relationship between reader and writer in which the reader has made a conscious decision to sustain.'[16] If one comes to a series in the middle, there is usually a compulsion to go back to

[14] Allen, p. 17.
[15] Ibid, pp. 16-17.
[16] Victor Watson, *Reading Science Fiction: From Arthur Ransome to Gene Kemps* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2000), p. 1.

the beginning of the series and read each volume sequentially to fully understand and appreciate the plot's complexity. The same is true of television series, although television sometimes makes it easier for viewers to start in the middle and quickly catch up with plot events through the use of a narrative recap at the beginning of new episodes which summarises the most important plot points from previous episodes. Construction of narrative series, therefore, is heavily reliant on sequential ordering of plot materials to prevent consumer confusion, promote engagement with the narrative, and guide the consumer through longer and more complex narrative structures.

Series also invoke expansive temporalities at the narrative level, extend the length of time it takes the consumer to read/watch the narrative, and have their own paradoxical component in what Watson calls 'the search for familiarity combined with strangeness. Readers of a series want more of the same—but with a difference.'[17] A reader is usually drawn to a series because of the characters and/or storyworld. They make a commitment to spend extended time there but, at the same time, continuously expect the characters and storyworld to evolve in new, engaging ways. The paradox of familiar novelty is thus built into the modality of serial storytelling. Series can potentially span numerous volumes (such as Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time* series [1990-2013]):[18] *Doctor Who* is currently on its second life, after running from 1963 to 1989 and being revived in 2005. Not only do such series span a great deal of time within the storyworld, they also are released over longer periods of time and require considerably more time to consume.

[17] Ibid, p. 205.
[18] Robert Jordan and Brandon Sanderson, *Wheel of Time,* 14 vols (New York City: TOR Books and Orbit Books, 1990-2013).

4.2. Circularity in The *Broken Earth Trilogy*

Temporal awareness is a prominent theme throughout all three instalments of Jemisin's *Broken Earth Trilogy*. As a specific type of series, a trilogy often follows a linear thesis-antithesis-synthesis formula. The Hegelian definition of trilogies 'require three related books or films that tell a single overarching story, but with the proviso that each book would also have to be "intelligible on its own."'[19]According to this definition, a trilogy cannot merely be a singular work with 'subsequent additions…in a sense, "tacked on,"'[20] and must, from its inception, be a narrative strong enough and lengthy enough to sustain three volumes in a specific order, with each volume also containing a complete beginning, middle, and end. In science-fiction and fantasy, this definition does not hold true. Instalments of science-fiction and fantasy trilogies usually *cannot* stand alone because each volume can potentially use cliff-hangers to prepare the reader for the next volume.

The *Broken Earth Trilogy* challenges the linear temporality of a traditional trilogy since it allows for the temporal ending point in Book Three to reunite with the starting point in Book One. In the *Broken Earth Trilogy,* the continued use of Essun as a reader avatar prolongs the relationship between the reader and narratee, allowing the reader to continue discovering both storyworld and plot along with the protagonist. This narrative technique also allows for temporal manipulation in the syuzhet because the text capitalises on the reader's limited point-of-view contained within the character of Essun. The reader is only allowed to know what the narrator, Hoa, presents in the order that he chooses to present it.

I shall use a diagram to analyse the major structural plot points of each novel in the *Broken Earth* trilogy to show how the events progress linearly across all three novels. The diagram is not temporally 'to scale' given the thousands of years between the Shattering and

[19] Robert T. Tally, Jr., 'Three Rings for the Elven Kings: Trilogizing Tolkien in Print and Film', *Mythlore* 36.1 (2017), 175-90, (p. 176).
[20] Ibid, p. 177.

the Rifting; however, it does create a reference for where events are in relation to the Rifting, in relation to Syl Anagist, and in relation to each other, which will be important in analysing how the trilogy forms a circular narrative.

The Broken Earth Trilogy Fabula Ordering

Book 1: *The Fifth Season*	Book 2: *The Obelisk Gate*	Book 3: *The Stone Sky*
		- Syl Anagist
THE SHATTERING	THE SHATTERING	THE SHATTERING
		- Moon thrown out of orbit - Father Earth begins the Seasons - World ends and is reborn
- Schaffa meets Damaya and takes her to the Fulcrum - Syenite meets Alabaster; goes to Allia - Syenite sees stone eater (Hoa) in obelisk, frees him, destroys Allia - Antimony saves Syenite and Alabaster and brings them to Meov - Syenite and Alabaster have a child - Schaffa tracks Syenite and Alabaster and attacks Meov - Antimony saves Alabaster, Syenite kills son, destroys Meov	- Schaffa is reborn after Meov - Schaffa goes to Found Moon	
- Hoa changes to human-esque form - Hoa goes in search of Essun - Antimony witnesses Alabaster cause the Rifting and Fifth Season		
THE RIFTING	THE RIFTING	THE RIFTING
- Jija kills Uche and kidnaps Nassun - Essun goes in search of Nassun - Essun meets Hoa - Essun goes to Castrima - Essun reunited with Alabaster and Antimony; Alabaster turning to stone - Alabaster asks Essun to make the Rifting worse	- Nassun finds Uche dead - Nassun goes with Jija to Found Moon	
	- Essun learns to contact the Obelisks - Schaffa finds Nassun and begins training her - Essun tasked to catch the Moon to save the world - Hoa disappears and is reborn as a true stone-eater - Renanis attacks Castrima; Essun accidentally destroys Castrima and kills Alabaster - Nassun learns to contact the Obelisks - Nassun tasked by Schaffa to catch the Moon and end the world - Essun pregnant, goes into a coma	- Essun awakens as Castrima goes to war with Renanis - Nassun kills Jija - Nassun and Schaffa go to Corepoint - Hoa takes Essun to find Nassun at Found Moon; they learn Nassun is in Schaffa's care - Essun decides to save Nassun from Schaffa and kill Schaffa - Essun follows Nassun to Corepoint - Essun and Nassun battle to save/ destroy earth - Essun sacrifices herself to save Nassun - Nassun restores the Moon to its orbit - Essun turns to stone - End of seasons, end of orogeny - World reborn (again) - Hoa, Antimony reunite as they wait for Essun to awaken - Hoa tells Essun the story of who she is

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[21] Illustration 10, Fabula glance of the *Broken Earth* trilogy, created by Stephanie Katz—for larger version, see Appendix 10.

This illustration shows the forward fabula trajectory of events across all three novels. However, the syuzhet in each of the three novels presents events out of linear order. The role of the obelisks begins in *The Fifth Season* when Essun freed Hoa from his entrapment in the obelisk; *The Obelisk Gate* offers more insight into the role of the obelisks and their origins; but their full significance is not realised until the end of *The Stone Sky*. The obelisks act as one of the primary structural coincidences that connect the multiple volumes of this series.

The Obelisk Gate also introduces three warring factions of stone eaters: those who wish to save humankind through the restoration of the Moon, those who wish to destroy humankind through the restoration of the Moon, and those who wish to achieve harmony between humans and stone eaters. In discussing the war, Alabaster hints that Hoa and Antimony are many thousands of years old:

> 'This is a three-sided war. More sides than that, but only three that you need to concern yourself with. All three sides want the war to end; it's just a question of how. We're the problem, you see—people. Two of the sides are trying to decide what should be done with us.'
> That phrasing explains a lot. 'The Earth… and the stone easters?' Always lurking, planning, wanting something unknown.
> 'No. They're people too, Essun. Haven't you figured that out? They need things, want things, feel things, same way we do. And they've been fighting this war much, much longer than you or I. Some of them from the very beginning.'
> 'The beginning?' What, the Shattering?
> 'Yes, some of them are that old. Antimony is one. That little one who follows you too, I think… Some of them saw it all happen.'
> …… You're too floored to really react. Hoa? Seven-ish years old, going on thirty thousand. *Hoa?*[22]

Alabaster's words and Essun's suspicions in this passage are confirmed through the revelation of Hoa's identity and age in Syl Anagist Zero. While the active reader has suspected that Houwha is another name for Hoa, it is explicitly confirmed when Hoa and Antimony refer to each other as Houwha and Gaewha, respectively.[23]

[22] N.K. Jemisin, *The Obelisk Gate* (New York City: Orbit, 2016), pp. 166-67.
[23] N.K. Jemisin, *The Stone Sky* (New York City: Orbit, 2017), pp. 310-11.

In *The Stone Sky,* Hoa and Antimony are both key players in orchestrating the Shattering that started the Fifth Season phenomenon. *The Stone Sky* has the pivotal role of bringing the trilogy to a conclusive ending and providing structural synthesis. Syl Anagist relays the events leading up to the Shattering which occurred thousands of years before Essun's timeline. It explains how the Moon was first separated from Father Earth by Houwha.[24] The chapters count down backward as if to the launch of a rocket. The proverbial 'launch' that occurs in Syl Anagist Zero is the Shattering, which separates the Moon from its orbit around Father Earth, scattering of the Obelisks, and starting the Seasons. As part of the collateral damage, Houwha becomes trapped inside the Garnet Obelisk which Essun later finds in *The Fifth Season*. Lastly, as part of this revelation, one of the most important things that *The Stone Sky* accomplishes is revealing *why* Hoa has been narrating Essun's life story back to her. As this answer is made clear at the end of the trilogy, the circular narrative structure across the trilogy becomes apparent:

> I come here, to the heart of the mountain beneath Corepoint. To attend to you. There is no one true way, when we initiate the process…Alabaster, as you would call him, may not fully remember himself for centuries—or ever. You, however, must be different. I have brought you here, reassembled the raw arcanic substance of your being, and reactivated the lattice that should have preserved the critical essence of who you were. You'll lose some memory. There is always loss, with change. But I have told you this story, primed what remains of you, to retain as much as possible of who you were.[25]

In this passage, the reader learns why Hoa has spent the entire trilogy narrating Essun's life story to her—from her days as Damaya, Syenite, and Essun—in attempt to restore her memories and identity. The circular narrative completes its circle as the reader learns that Essun turned into a stone eater at the end of *The Stone Sky* and Hoa has been restoring Essun's memories to her from the start of *The Fifth Season*. In retrospect, this gives new context to the

[24] The Shattering was the Rifting before the Rifting, the cataclysmic event that started the Fifth Seasons that is recorded in the Syl Anagist Zero chapter of *The Stone Sky.*
[25] *The Stone Sky,* pp. 396-97.

opening words of *The Fifth Season:* 'Let's start with the end of the world, why don't we?'[26] One now understands that the end of the world that Hoa discusses is not The Rifting but the end of the world brought about by Essun. As narrator, Hoa freely moves throughout narrative time, arranging the syuzhet circularly by starting at the end, filling in all the pieces across the trilogy's three volumes, and controlling when the reader discovers the plot connections.

Because all three volumes of the *Broken Earth Trilogy* build sequentially on each other, they must be read in order for the events of the plot to make sense to the reader. Due to the extended length of a trilogy in comparison to most stand-alone novels, the number of structural coincidences is more numerous and intricately woven together as the plot builds to its denouement. Hoa is the biggest structural coincidence across the *Broken Earth Trilogy* because of his multiple roles: he is the voice telling the story and he is a character in the story—one of only two characters who has been alive since before the Shattering. Another major structural coincidence is Essun's role as primary narratee and the recipient of Hoa's narrative. While the main focus of the trilogy is Essun's life, the way that her life intertwines with Hoa's role as narrator closes the narrative circle. One could look at Hoa and Essun as completing halves of the same circle: 'that's what this is. The beginning. You, Essun, will see the end.'[27] What Hoa began by ending the world with the Shattering, Essun will finish by sacrificing herself in the war among the factions of stone eaters.

[26] N.K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season* (New York City: Orbit, 2015), p. 1.
[27] Ibid, p. 50.

4.2.1. Essun

Contrary to *The Fifth Season, The Stone Sky* ends at the beginning: 'Time grows short, my love. Let's end with the beginning of the world, shall we?'[28] Though *The Fifth Season* begins at the end of the world, it is Essun's personal new beginning. *The Stone Sky* explains this phenomenon by filling the reader in on how Essun is transforming from human to stone eater. The entire purpose of the narrative is Hoa's attempt to restore Essun's identity to her in her new form. While in *The Fifth Season,* the reader experiences the former identities and lived experiences of Essun, in *The Stone Sky* the reader experiences the former identity and lived experiences of Hoa: 'In those memories I was someone else, just as the Stillness was someworld else. Then, and now. You, and you.'[29] It is crucial that *The Stone Sky* answers the question raised in *The Fifth Season* regarding why Hoa is narrating Essun's life story back to her. To complete the circle started in *The Fifth Season, The Stone Sky* must go further in the history of the Stillness. This is one of the instances where Hoa, as narrator, is able to manipulate time since all of the events that have transpired over the course of the trilogy have happened in his and Essun's pasts:

> 'There's something, an artifact, at the heart of the Fulcrum.'
> 'What kind of artifact?'
> 'I'm not sure. I'm really not!' Binof raises her hands quickly, shaking off Damaya in the process, but Damaya's not trying to hold her anymore. 'All I know is that…something's missing from the history. There's a hole, a gap.'
> 'What?'
> 'In *history.* '[30]

The gap that Binof warns Damaya about is the obelisks, which were built within the Fulcrum before Yumenes even existed. In Syl Anagist, the reader learns that Hoa is responsible for helping create the obelisks and triggering the Shattering which caused the obelisks to be erased from history and the moon to be thrown from its orbit. Essun learns about the existence of the

[28] *The Stone Sky,* p. 1.
[29] Ibid.
[30] *The Fifth Season,* pp. 316-17.

long-forgotten Moon at the end of *The Fifth Season. The Stone Sky* serves as Hoa's confession as to how he 'opened the Gate and flung away the Moon' that Essun was tasked to recapture.[31]

As identity has been an important theme throughout the trilogy for Essun, when looking back at the series, one understands that Hoa's second-person narrative asides to Essun are intended to reshape the identity she lost through her sacrifice. In *The Fifth Season,* Hoa tells Essun, 'You're still trying to decide who to be. The self you've been lately doesn't make sense anymore; that woman died with Uche.'[32] While in this moment, Hoa appears to be referencing Essun's mental breakdown after the death of Uche, it has a secondary relevance because Essun is still deciding who she wants to be as Hoa is narrating to her in her transition from human to stone eater. Hoa refers to Essun's search for identity multiple times in his narration. Later in *The Fifth Season,* Hoa tells Essun, 'You think, maybe, you need to be someone else. You're not sure who. Previous yous have been stronger and colder, or warmer and weaker… You could become someone new, maybe. You've done that before; it's surprisingly easy. A new name, a new focus.'[33] Though Hoa speaks of the specific time in Essun's life after Uche's death, there is greater meaning here regarding the macro-level of the series. Essun decides 'you must stay Essun,' but after she sacrifices herself, she has infinite possibilities as to who she can become.[34] Hoa feels the need to remind Essun of who she was because he wishes to see her reborn a certain way:

> For that is when I found her, you see. The moment of the obelisk's pulse was the moment in which her presence sang across the world: a promise, a demand, an invitation too enticing to resist. Many of us converged on her then, but I am the one who found her first. I fought off the others and trailed her, watched her, guarded her…I introduced myself to her eventually, finally, ten years later, as she left Tirimo...But she is—was—special. *You* were, are special. I told her I was called Hoa.[35]

> So this is my confession, my Essun. I've betrayed you already and I will do it again. You haven't chosen a side yet, and already I fend off those who would recruit you to

[31] *The Stone Sky,* p. 7.
[32] *The Fifth Season,* p. 42.
[33] Ibid, p. 172.
[34] Ibid.
[35] *The Fifth Season,* p. 443.

> their cause. Already I plot your death. It's necessary.[36]

In these passages, the reader sees that Hoa has been protecting and manipulating Essun for a long time. After she freed him from the obelisk and he realised her power, Hoa chose her for his side of the war to recapture the Moon. Hoa knew the sacrifice Essun would be forced to make when he chose her. In channelling all of the obelisks through herself, the power would destroy her. Hoa realises that he is exposing his true nature as he discusses the greater warring forces. He also explains to Essun, and thereby the reader, why he has been narrating to Essun in Essun's *voice*:

> I want to keep telling this as I have: in your mind, in your voice, telling you what to think and know. Do you find this rude? It is, I admit. Selfish. When I speak as just myself, it's difficult to feel like part of you. It is lonelier. Please; let me continue a bit longer.[37]

> In this moment I remind myself of why I continue to tell this story through your eyes rather than my own: because outwardly, you're too good at hiding yourself. Your face has gone blank, your gaze hooded. But I know you. *I know you.* Here is what's inside you.[38]

From a narrative perspective, second-person narration has allowed the narrator to limit what the protagonist and the reader know during the reading experience. It has also assigned the reader the identity of the protagonist to encourage the reader to pay attention to the development of plot events. However, from the level of the story, the reader learns that Hoa has adapted this storytelling style out of his desire to shape Essun back into who she once was based on his intimate knowledge of having studied her for so long. In the admission of Hoa's narrative choices, the reader is once again reminded of how Hoa explicitly began by telling Essun 'You are dead. But not you.'[39] The old, human Essun is dead, but the new stone eater Essun, while in a different form, is the same person. This circles directly back to the very

[36] *The Obelisk Gate,* p. 76.
[37] *The Obelisk Gate,* p. 280.
[38] *The Stone Sky,* p. 156.
[39] Ibid, p. 388.

beginning of *The Fifth Season,* when Essun is first introduced as protagonist and as reader avatar: 'You are Essun. Remember?'[40] The importance of restoring Essun's identity drives the entire trilogy.

4.2.2. Hoa

Like Essun, Hoa has several transformations in form and identity throughout the *Broken Earth Trilogy.* He initially begins his life as Houwha, a hybrid human-stone magical being known as a 'tuner.'[41] When the reader looks at the events surrounding Hoa's narrative, they notice that Syl Anagist and the Shattering are teased many times throughout the first two novels, though the moment of anagnorisis regarding their significance does not occur until *The Stone Sky.*[42] When engaging in teleological retrospect as a reader, it is evident that Hoa's plotline is intertwined with several second-tier structural coincidences that include the Moon and the Obelisks. Hoa's relationship with the obelisks predates Essun's by tens of thousands of years. The obelisks cause his and Essun's lives to cross paths as he seeks to repair what he broke:

> This is what you need to understand. 'What does the Earth want?'
> Alabaster's gaze is heavy, heavy. 'What does any living thing want, facing an enemy so cruel that it stole away a child?'[43]

Because Hoa took away Father Earth's only child, the Moon, he needed the help of someone who understood the loss of a child in order to help fix it. Essun, having lost both Corundum and Uche, understands the primal parental desire to reunite parent and child. This is why Essun sacrifices herself rather than lose her last child. In capturing the Moon, she saves Nassun and also restores Father Earth with his son, the Moon:

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[40] *The Fifth Season,* p. 15.
[41] Ibid, p. 50.
[42] See *The Fifth Season* p. 2, pp. 7-8, p. 24, p. 38, p. 115, p. 231, pp. 317-18. See *The Obelisk Gate* pp. 75-76, p. 92, p. 103, pp. 162-69, p. 207; See *The Stone Sky* pp. 310-43.
[43] *The Obelisk Gate,* p. 207.

> ‘Nassun!’ you shout again, anguished. She cannot hear you. But you see, even from where you are, the fingers of her left hand have turned as brown and stony as your own. She’s aware of it, you know somehow. She made this choice. She is prepared for the inevitability of her own death. You aren’t. Oh, Earth, you just can’t watch another of your children die. So… you give up.[44]

Hoa did not understand the loss he was causing when he separated Father Earth from the Moon. Essun did. While Hoa’s actions caused irreparable harm to the Stillness and to himself, Essun helped provide healing.

Additionally Hoa and Essun both understand the process of self-transformation on a storyworld scale. Hoa’s first transformation occurs with the Shattering. When he and the other tuners decide to throw the Moon of out orbit, it transforms the tuners from their hybrid-human/magical form into stone eaters. Hoa relays, ‘I screamed as wave upon wave of alchemy worked over me, changing my flesh into raw, living solidified magic that looks like stone.’[45] Hoa explains to Essun that he does not recall how he returned to Earth after the Shattering, but he later explains that ‘One hundred years after Father Earth’s child was stolen from him, twenty-seven obelisks did burn down to the planet’s core.’[46] Considering that Essun as Syenite first discovered Hoa trapped in the Garnet obelisk, the reader can infer that Hoa returned to Earth because he had been trapped in one of those twenty-seven failing obelisks. When Essun first discovers Hoa in the Garnet obelisk, she describes him as having ‘been dead for an age of the world.'[47] According to the fabula timeline of the book, Hoa would have been trapped in the obelisk for nearly thirty thousand years before Essun discovered him and set him free. His second transformation, therefore, occurs when Syenite frees him from the obelisk. Before Syenite frees Hoa from the garnet, she describes him in great detail:

> All the books say that stone eaters are neither male nor female, but this one resembles a slender young man formed of white-veined black marble, clothed in smooth robes of iridescent opal. Its—his?—limbs, marbled and polished, splay as if frozen in mid-fall.

[44] *The Stone Sky,* p. 385.
[45] Ibid, p. 341.
[46] *The Stone Sky,* p. 342.
[47] *The Fifth Season,* p. 263.

> His head is flung back, his hair loose and curling behind him in a splash of translucence. The cracks spread over his skin and the stiff illusion of his clothing, *into* him, through him.[48]

This passage confirms that Hoa returned from the Moon to the Earth via the damaged obelisk because of the way Syenite describes him as splayed in mid-fall. However, when the reader first meets Hoa, it is after his second transformation when he changes from the near-dead, age-old stone eater into the little boy who goes to find Essun:

> No one is around when the object groans faintly and then splits, fissioning neatly along its long axis as if sawed. There is a loud scream-hiss of escaping heat and pressured gas as this happens…Then the object grows still for a long while. Cooling. Several days pass. After a time, something pushes the object apart from within and crawls a few feet before collapsing. Another day passes. Now that it has cooled and split, a crust of irregular crystals, some clouded white and some red as venous blood, line the object's inner surface. Thin pale liquid puddles near the bottom of each half's cavity, though most of the fluid the geode contained has soaked away into the ground underneath. The body that the geode contained lies facedown amid the rocks, naked, his flesh dry but still heaving in apparent exhaustion. Gradually, however, he pushes himself upright. Every movement is deliberate and very, very slow…The boy—for that is what he resembles—puts this in his mouth and chews…With an effort, the boy regains control of himself. He reaches into the geode—moving faster now—and pulls loose more of the crystals. He sets them in a small pile atop the object as he breaks them loose. The thick, blunt crystal shafts crumble beneath his fingers as if it is made of sugar, though they are in fact much, much harder. But he is in fact not actually a child, so this is easy for him.[49]

This lengthier passage is important to consider for several reasons. The first is that—as one reads the novel for the first time—it explains that this boy, who will later be identified as Hoa, is not human. The second is that, when looking at the events of the trilogy in retrospect, it establishes Hoa's second transformation from stone eater to boy. Third, it paints a very vivid picture of the transformation a stone eater undergoes, which will be revisited during Hoa's third transformation in *The Obelisk Gate.* Building on the theme of Essun's feelings of loss as a parent, Hoa strategically chooses to appear to her as a young boy, not very much different to the son she lost. Hoa's third and final transformation occurs after his fight with Steel in which

[48] Ibid, p. 263.
[49] *The Fifth Season,* pp. 12-13.

Steel rips him apart in attempt to kill him and stop Essun from helping him save humankind. Instead of dying, Hoa is reborn in the same way as described at the beginning of *The Fifth Season.* He describes how Essun sees the extent of Hoa's magic for the first time during this transformation: 'magic—he is *made* of it, every inch of him is alive with it, you've never seen anything like this.'[50] In his retelling, Hoa even refers to what he had previously relayed to Essun in his narration of what happened to him after the Rifting:

> The cracking open of the geode is loud, explosively violent. A flicker of pressure-driven plasma curls forth and scorches or melts all the belongings you left in the room…It's so hard that it's hard to breath…Quickly the heat diminishes to uncomfortable, and not dangerous. You barely notice. Because what rises from the split in the geode, moving too human-smoothly at first but rapidly readjusting to a familiar sort of punctuated stillness…is the stone eater from the garnet obelisk. Hello, again.[51]

The pattern of emerging from a geode is the same, though this time Hoa has reverted back to his original stone eater form. Having gained Essun's trust through his boyish form, Hoa transforms back to his original form after his near-death experience so that he can better protect Essun from the stone eaters that seek to kill her. Not only does this transformation trigger anagnorisis for Essun as she recognises who Hoa truly is and has been all along, but it also triggers anagnorisis in the reader who is discovering these things with Essun through Hoa's limiting second-person narration.

The second moment of anagnorisis in which the structural coincidence of Hoa's true identity and age is revealed occurs in *The Stone Sky.* The reader is encouraged to make the connection between Houwha and Hoa given the similarities in the letters and syllable sounds. The connection is explicitly made in Syl Anagist Zero when Gaewha is revealed to be Antimony and Remwha is revealed to be Steel. Before Hoa reveals how and why he and the

[50] *The Obelisk Gate,* p. 255.
[51] Ibid, pp. 257-58.

other tuners decided to throw the Moon out of orbit, there is a brief 'moment in the present' where Hoa and Antimony reflect on what they did:[52]

> Gaewha, Antimony…pauses. 'Do you regret what you did?'
> It's a foolish question. All of us regret that day, in different ways and for different reasons. But I say, 'No.'[53]

In reflecting back upon the day itself, Hoa presents a different attitude and, in this revelation, answers all of the questions concerning the origins of the events of the trilogy:

> Remember. We were not the only ones who chose to fight back that day. This is a thing I will realize only later, when I visit the ruins of Syl Anagist and look into the empty sockets to see the iron needles protruding from their walls. This is an enemy I will understand only after I have been humbled and remade at its feet…but I will explain it now, so that you may learn from my suffering.[54]

In this passage, there are several important details worth drawing attention to in addition to what is revealed at the story level. At the story level, the first revelation is that Hoa and the tuners did not start the war unprovoked. Like the orogenes after them, the tuners were used, oppressed, and exploited. Unlike the orogenes, the tuners fought back. The second noteworthy detail is that Hoa describes the ruins of Syl Anagist exactly as Binof showed Damaya when they discovered the empty socket at the Fulcrum. Hoa considers Yumenes and the Fulcrum ruins of his former civilisation. The suffering that he mentions is his transformation from a form of flesh to a form of stone. It was only after his tens of thousands of years trapped in an obelisk and the kindness shown to him by Essun that he decided to change sides in the war. In terms of the structural level of the plot, these passages reveal Hoa/Houwha and Antimony/Gaewha's identities, their ages, and their role as structural coincidences. The conversations between Houwha and Gaewha confirm their roles in the gap in history that Tonkee/Binof first alerted Damaya/Essun to in *The Fifth Season.*[55] When Tonkee/Binof and

[52] *The Stone Sky,* p. 310.
[53] Ibid, p. 311.
[54] Ibid, p. 335.
[55] Jemisin, *The Fifth Season,* pp. 297-331.

Damaya/Essun found the empty obelisk holes, neither they nor the reader knew the significance that this detail would come to have. As the obelisks' role evolved over the course of the trilogy, the reader now understands how Houwha and Gaewha used the technology to bring about the first end of the world.

All of these structural coincidences regarding Essun, Hoa, Father Earth and the Moon, and the Obelisks are strategically planted across all three instalments of the *Broken Earth Trilogy* out of chronological order. When one takes the time to sort through them, understand how they work together across all three volumes, and compare their fabula order with syuzhet presentation, it becomes clear how the trilogy conforms to circular narrative. From the moments of anagnorisis surrounding Hoa's identity and the teleological retrospect that allows the reader to understand, upon reflection, that the entire trilogy is Essun's life being narrated back to her during her transition from human to stone eater, the plot is tightly woven together for strategic narrative effect. Yet, it is only as the reader takes on Essun's avatar and reflects on the sequence of events that they can appreciate the multi-volume circularity created in this trilogy. If the events had not been presented non-sequentially via a limited second-person narrative technique that allowed the narrator to freely dictate the arrangement of the events presented to the protagonist/reader, the circularity could not have been built into the narrative structure. The narrator's use of retrospective narration is how the events are able to connect in a multi-volume circular narrative arc. This demonstrates that although there is a linear progression in the thesis-antithesis-synthesis themes of a trilogy, the actual syuzhet presentation allows for temporal manipulation through creative narration for the purpose of shaping a series' fabula in different ways.

The spiralling circular narrative in *The Fifth Season* starts and ends with the rifting after merging the three identities of Essun. *The Obelisk Gate* and *The Stone Sky* complete the series circular narrative by building the significance of the obelisks and the stone eaters and filling in

the historical information surrounding Hoa and the start of the Fifth Seasons, respectively. By continuing Essun's story in *The Obelisk Gate* and bringing in her daughter Nassun's journey, the reader is given a sense of what is at stake should Essun fail to recapture the Moon. Similarly, by learning about Syl Anagist in *The Stone Sky,* the reader learns why Essun is being asked to reunite Father Earth and the Moon. However, the circular narrative surrounds Hoa narrating Essun's life back to her. The reader learns in *The Fifth Season* that Hoa is reminding Essun of her past identities, but the reader does not understand *why* until completing all three books. Therefore, the circular shape of the entire trilogy is a result of Hoa's retrospective narration, manipulating the sequential ordering of Essun's lifestory along with elements of Nassun's story and his own story. Upon realising this, the reader will be prompted to engage in teleological retrospect to match their fabula mapping with all the information Hoa has provided.

The serialised nature of the *Broken Earth Trilogy* allows for multiple circular narratives because of the multiple instalments that each play an individual narrative role in addition to a wholistic role in forming the trilogy. In the next section, I shall illustrate how the television series, *Doctor Who,* uses many similar techniques to achieve a concentric circular narrative structure. In *Doctor Who* Series Six, there are thirteen episodic instalments that contribute to the concentric circular narrative structure. The smaller circular narrative is contained within the first half of the series while the larger circular narrative encompasses the whole thirteen-episode arc. However, before diving into *Doctor Who,* I must address television as a multi-sensory medium of storytelling and review how the addition of audiovisual motion-picture-driven storytelling engages a viewer differently than a reader.

4.3. Television as a Multi-Sensory Mode of Storytelling

4.3.1. The Episode and the Series

Unlike film, television is a distinct medium unto itself: 'Spectators go to the movie theatre; television comes to them in their own living rooms. Films run for a couple of hours; television runs all the time… Films are carefully constructed works long in the making; television runs on a short production schedule.'[56] Television shares more in common with the literary series than with film, despite its audiovisual mode of storytelling. The narrative structure of episodic television has many commonalities with that of a literary series because of their shared complex narrative forms, lack of closure and reliance on cliffhanger endings to draw consumers back for the next instalment, as well as the distance between narrative instalments that is controlled by the narrative producer.

However, unlike a literary series, a television series has more temporal constraints in its 'highly restrictive structured delivery system: weekly episodes of prescribed lengths, often with required breaks for advertisements… Constraints like these make television storytelling distinct from nearly every other medium—a parallel would be if literature demanded the exact same page count for every chapter of every novel, regardless of genre, style or author.'[57] It is worth noting that streaming services and the advent of binge-watching has disrupted the weekly delivery method of television narratives. While television distributors are circling back to the weekly method since the COVID-19 pandemic, there are still a large number of series released all at once on their respective streaming platforms, allowing viewers to watch all episodes of a series continuously.[58] The changing delivery systems are what make television studies particularly challenging: 'television series reside in the constant mutation—and therefore instability—of television's forms and platforms, a medium which has never had a fixed

[56] Marie-Laure Ryan, '3 Moving Pictures.' *Narrative Across Media: The Languages of Storytelling* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), pp. 195-201, (p. 199).
[57] Mittell, n.p.
[58] Examples include many Netflix original series such as House of Cards (2013-2018), Orange Is The New Black (2013-2019), and Stranger Things (2016-Present).

identity…be it production, broadcasting, reception or consumption.'[59] However, when *Doctor Who* Series Six originally aired, it was released week-to-week via the BBC in the UK and BBC America in the USA, making viewers tune in each week to see the narrative continuation. I shall examine viewer reception of this series with this in mind.

Doctor Who, as a television series, is unusual in that it has elements of the non-serial television show and the soap opera as well as having the distinction of being considered 'complex TV':

> It refers to series which variously combine episodic and soap opera logic and which fully involve the viewer by encouraging concentration and participation through storylines that are aesthetically as well as narratively rich…characterised by stories with a highly articulated logic and temporality which is often non-linear, like *puzzle films...* through the prism of a complex arrangement of elements along a temporal axis, with the dialectic between innovation and repetition as its basic unit.[60]

Episodic narratives that are non-serialised tend to 'be organized around a single protagonist or small group of protagonists and to be teleological: there is a single moment of narrative closure (obviously involving the protagonist) toward which the plot moves in relation to which reader satisfaction is presumed to operate.'[61] *Doctor Who* has a small group of protagonists comprised of the Doctor and his companion(s) who drive the narrative progression. While they often travel together and operate as a unit, there are occasions where they are split up and have concurrent plotlines within a single episode. Unlike the non-serial, however, *Doctor Who* does not have a single moment of closure within each episode or within each series. Each episode and series provides a cliffhanger that sets up the subsequent episode or series allowing for the long-form serialisation unique to television. *Doctor Who* is consistent with the complex TV or *puzzle film* categorisation because of its non-linearity which continuously opens up new plot gaps as previous plot gaps are filled, preventing narrative closure and creating the need for flashbacks

[59] Berton, Mireille, and Marta Boni. 'How to Study the Complexity of Television Series? Towards a Spatial Approach', *TVSeries Online* (2021) <http://journals.openedition.org/tvseries/4991> No Pages. [accessed 05 July 2022] (para. 8 of 27).
[60] Berton and Boni, (para. 12 of 27).
[61] Allen, p. 17.

to remind viewers of previous plot material before introducing each new episode. Like a soap opera, *Doctor Who* 'trade[s] narrative closure for paradigmatic complexity,' which may sound oxymoronic to how most people view soap operas.[62] As narratives, soap operas are usually looked down upon by some viewers and critics for their trite, gossipy, and outlandish plots that can bring dead characters back to life after long hiatuses; however, *Doctor Who* embodies this particular aspect through the Doctor's ability to regenerate along with the potential for characters who were thought dead to be brought back to life because of the Doctor's ability to travel through time and space.

Because of *Doctor Who*'s unique relationship with time, characters, and serialisation of plot, it cannot be accurately classified as either a non-serial or a soap opera. Instead, it is a semi-serialised show, a sub-classification of episodic television that 'serves a long-term narrative plot but also features a certain form of autonomy based on a particular theme linked to a character's specific viewpoint. However, contrary to what happens with the formula semi-serialized show, *episodes do not follow the same narrative pattern each time.*'[63] There is a difference pointed out here between formula semi-serialised shows such as many detective series that are also commonly referred to as procedurals because of the strict narrative procedures they follow. *Doctor Who* is a non-formulaic semi-serialised show because it does not follow a strict procedural narrative structure which helps create an environment for circular narrativity. The lack of procedure, the lack of closure, and its status as a complex TV series due to its non-linear/temporal complexity all work to provide the groundwork for circular narrative construction. While I shall illustrate all of these points in my analysis of *Doctor Who* Series Six, first I wish to further explore temporality in the visual narrative further.

[62] Ibid, p. 18.
[63] Sarah Hatchuel and Claire Cornillon, 'Analysing the Semi-Serialized Television Fictions: The Ethical Stakes of Narrative Structures', *Narratives/Aesthetics/Criticism Series,* 4.1 (2020), 57-64, (p. 58).

4.3.2. Time and Temporal Manipulation in Television/Visual Narrative

Another substantial difference between multimedia storytelling and literary storytelling is the presentation of time. In film and television, 'time can be slowed or speeded up so that the invisible is revealed. As if by magic, a bullet's trajectory through the air or the many stages of a flower's bloom can be made visible and comprehensible.'[64] Time can be compressed or expanded to 'make a few seconds seem like hours or… a century into minutes.'[65] While certain temporal effects can be achieved by manipulating the frame rate at which a camera records motion to speed it up or slow it down, post-production editing is what makes many temporal manipulation techniques in visual storytelling possible. One of the techniques that has evolved with film narration is the use of the flashback as a means of temporal manipulation. The flashback was originally used 'psychologically, as character recollection' to signify a character reflecting upon an earlier event that is important for the viewer to know but occurred in a time off-screen before the syuzhet of the film began.[66]

As viewers became more familiar with the concept of the flashback, it allowed 'filmmakers to delete the memory alibi and move straight between past and present' via temporal jumps and gaps.[67] Bordwell explains how the technique of the flashback, once used 'for moments of shock and suspense are the stuff of normal scenes today.'[68] The flashback continued to evolve as the 1990s saw a movement in film narration of 'repetitive flashbacks, replaying a situation with fresh emphasis or varying points of view' to give it new or deeper meaning with each repetition.[69] This narrative development began to change the way viewers interacted with film narrative as the parallelism between syuzhet and fabula diverged due to

[64] Dennis W. Petrie and Joseph M. Boggs, *The Art of Watching Films* (New York City: McGraw Hill Education, 2018), p. 3.
[65] Ibid, p. 4.
[66] David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film,* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), p. 78.
[67] David Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), p. 90.
[68] Ibid, p. 180.
[69] Ibid, p. 92.

the evolution of new technologies, particularly with film editing: 'Rapid editing oblige[d] the viewer to assemble many discrete pieces of information, and it sets a commanding pace: look away, and you might miss a key point.'[70] Instead of merely filling in plot gaps, flashbacks could be used to create them by 'choosing to present certain pieces of fabula information and [holding] back others.'[71] This will be demonstrated in the analysis of *Doctor Who* Series Six where the Doctor's companions witness the Doctor's death and, through flashbacks and flashforwards, live the events leading up to this moment of his death while also attempting to change its outcome due to their foreknowledge. However, in the viewing process, certain events and sequences of events, or even sound or music cues, are repeated to help trigger memory in the viewer as they try to construct a cohesive linear fabula.

The film and television media take advantage of certain technologies and techniques that allow viewers to recognise circular narrative more easily than in written texts; this is because audio and video clues provide immediate reminders of events past and trigger immediate moments of anagnorisis. Unlike literary texts which depend on the attentiveness of the reader and the ability of an author to re-present things with written descriptions, the visual and audio stimuli allow for near-instant recall in the viewer. Throughout the entirety of *Doctor Who,* there are iconic sounds associated with the TARDIS and the sonic screwdriver that a viewer quickly learns to associate with those objects. In Series Six of *Doctor Who,* specifically, certain characters have their own sound motifs that are directly associated with that character. The Silence have a specific noise they emit which can alert a viewer to their presence even before they are visually shown on the screen. Music can be used in the same way as non-musical sounds such as the use of the *Doctor Who* theme song to identify the show or the children's lullaby that is sung throughout the second half of Series Six which triggers the

[70] Ibid, p. 180.
[71] Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film.* p. 55.

subject matter of the Doctor's death. Whenever this tune is played, even though the lyrics change with each iteration, the consistent melody stimulates the awareness of the lead-up to the Doctor's impending death and thereby creates an ominous and foreboding tone.

In terms of visual cues, the viewer is guided regarding what to focus upon based on what is shown (or not shown) on the screen. Because there are endless visual stimuli to potentially survey when watching any visual media, certain objects will be given more importance than others through the use of camera techniques such as close-ups. An object can also be given more importance when viewed from a low camera angle looking up in a way that gives that object more screen presence and power. When the TARDIS is shown from a low angle, it symbolises the Doctor coming into a situation from a position of strength. Contrastingly, an object can have power taken away when looked at from above in a way that diminishes its size and power. In situations where the TARDIS is shown from above or at a great distance, the Doctor is often in a disadvantaged situation. The same technique can also be used for portraying people. Meanwhile, suspense can be created by objects kept out of a visual frame and discussed by characters who draw viewer attention to the object's absence. Additionally, things can be given further importance through repeated presence on screen. For example, the use of the tally marks on characters' skin to count the Silence is a repeated visual motif that alerts the viewer to the presence of the Silence. Amy Pond's inconclusive pregnancy scan repeatedly prompts the viewer to wonder whether Amy is or is not pregnant.

Flashbacks manipulate time in a television episode and serve as a means of filling in plot holes, expanding a story, and stimulating the viewer's working memory to recall information or look for narrative connections. For example, various sequences from the Doctor's death on Lake Silencio will be replayed throughout the series as other characters 'remember' the event in later episodes. Rather than having the character remember the event through dialogue, it is much faster to show a replay of the event through a flashback. It is also

more effective in reminding the viewer of exactly what happened previously. Editing therefore shapes the visual narrative syuzhet and determines the evolution of story, especially over multiple episodes. It can more easily allow for circular narrative construction because of multi-sensory triggers that can interrupt a story to tie past information to a present story moment or vice versa. Editing 'implies… only a partial representation of the story as a whole where the viewer must fill in the gaps.'[72] Just as the reader engaged in teleological retrospect, the viewer 'acts retrodictively…the direction of thought is reversed using what comes later to explain what happened earlier.'[73] In the case of *Doctor Who* Series Six, the viewer experiences a future event of which they will be reminded through all of the editing techniques I have introduced here, and they will have to fill in the plot gaps throughout the series as new information is also introduced to provide greater context surrounding the inciting event of the circular narrative.

4.3.3. Cognitive Media Theory and Memory and Television Series Engagement

The last theoretical piece of the transition from literary analysis to television analysis regarding circular narrative is the role of the viewer. Because of the multi-sensory aspects of film and television, it is necessary to look at cognitive media theory as a parallel to reader response theory. Cognitive media theory is challenging to work with for two reasons. First, it is not a unified theory: it borrows from film theory, psychology, cognitivism, neurological sciences, philosophy, narratology, and more in a piecemeal fashion that leaves much to be desired when applying it to how viewers actually respond to audiovisual narratives. As a result of its non-unity, 'cognitivism remains at some distance from the centre of the film/screen studies enterprise, often dismissed or ignored.'[74] The second challenge with cognitive media

[72] Noel Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 404.
[73] Ibid, p. 406.
[74] Currie, Gregory, 'Cognitive Film Theory', *Arts and Minds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 153-174, pp. 153-54.

theory is the fact that 'cognitivism is a realist position in so far as it emphasises the similarities between our responses to film and to events and processes in the real world. But of course no cognitivist supposes that film and reality are interchangeable,' thus there is little research applied to cognitivism in films and television series that deal with the non-real, like *Doctor Who.*[75] Therefore, just as I had to develop my own type of reader by way of the active reader to examine how readers respond to circular narratives, I have similarly had to consider how I use cognitive media theory to examine how viewers respond to circular narratives in film and television. To accomplish this, I have relied extensively on the writings of David Bordwell who has contributed the most useful applications of cognitivist media theory to film and television narratives:

> The 'spectator' is not a particular person… Nor is the spectator an 'ideal reader,' which in recent reader-response criticism tends to be the most fully equipped perceiver the text could imagine, the one most adequate to all the aspects of meaning presented. I adopt the term 'viewer' or 'spectator' to name a hypothetical entity executing the operations relevant to constructing a story out of the film's representation. My spectator, then, acts according to the protocols of story comprehension.[76]

I agree with Bordwell's criticisms of the 'ideal reader' which I also explored in my discussion of the 'active reader.' Bordwell recognises the limitations that an 'ideal' consumer of texts poses because no real person can match such ideal standards of comprehension. His choice of the 'spectator' focuses on narrative comprehension, just as my active reader did; however, I prefer Bordwell's use of the word 'viewer' rather than 'spectator' because a spectator has too great a degree of distance from that which they are watching. Bordwell also recognises the importance of an active consumer, writing that the 'spectator is active; his or her experience is cued by the text.'[77] Because active engagement is just as crucial in recognising circular

[75] Ibid, p. 171.
[76] David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), p. 30.
[77] Ibid.

narrative in film and television as it was in recognising the form in literature, I will use the term 'active viewer.'

The relationship between the producer of the television series' narrative and the active viewer parallels the relationship between the author and active reader: 'one aspect of viewer cognition a filmmaker can influence in order to shape viewer experience is attention. Attention is the allocation of processing resources to a point in space, an object or visual feature, resulting in an increase in information gathered by the senses.'[78] The visual gathering of information is determined by *saccades* which are the rapid eye movements 'which we constantly check against our reigning "cognitive maps."'[79] The eyes are naturally programmed to look for facial recognition and focus on new or continuing action, separating these stimuli from the background visuals that set the stage for the action. One way that a 'filmmaker can direct visual attention to a specific element within a scene is by cutting to a close up…presenting it in sharp focus; or by directing audio attention to objects out of shot using off-screen sounds. By controlling what the viewer sees and what they do not see, the filmmaker directs viewer comprehension.'[80] One prominent way in which *Doctor Who* uses audiovisual stimuli to guide the viewer's attention is through the use of the TARDIS. Not only does the TARDIS command visual attention when it appears from thin air as an eye-catching, blue-coloured police box, but its presence can also be recognised off-screen through the iconic 'whooshing' noise associated with its appearance or disappearance. This is particularly noticeable in 'The Doctor's Wife,' 'The Almost People,' and 'The Rebel Flesh' episodes of Series Six where the TARDIS moves without the Doctor being on board. Sounds, like the TARDIS noise and the compilation of sounds associated with the Silence, are considered 'rhythmical presentation[s]… of pure tones

[78] Tim J. Smith, 'Audiovisual Correspondences in Sergei Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky:* A Case Study in Viewer Attention', in *Cognitive Media Theory* (New York City: Routledge, 2014), pp. 85-105, (p. 85).
[79] Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film,* p. 32.
[80] Smith, pp. 85-86.

[that] have also been shown to entrain visual attention and quicken visual orienting and perception' by the active viewer.[81] Audiovisual stimuli like these work in conjunction with narrative dialogue and actions to create schemata which are 'memory structures… "activated" when short-term memory needs to draw on them.'[82] Memory plays an even more important role in media studies because there is more information for the active viewer to store and recall; however, editing techniques allow easier and more immediate access to these memory schemata.

Schemata 'guide our hypothesis making' when it comes to narrative understanding.[83] As the viewer absorbs visual, audio, and narrative schemata, they are filed away into the short-term memory from which they can be recalled through repetition of specific visual, audio, or dialogue cues via flashbacks. Repetition in flashbacks presents 'cues, patterns, and gaps that shape the viewer's application of schemata and the testing of hypotheses' as the active viewer attempts to create a linear fabula from the nonlinear syuzhet.[84] Causality drives such hypotheses which, as in previous circular narratives, is not always concretely discernible. In *Doctor Who* Series Six, causality is impossible to *know* because the Doctor crosses his own timeline in attempt to prevent his own death. As a result, the question of 'which came first?' comes into question as it did back in Chapter Two with *DODO*.[85] Without the Doctor knowing of his impending death, he would not know how to prevent his own death; however, without preventing his own death, the Doctor would die without the ability to regenerate.

Throughout the series, schemata are used to guide the viewer to make hypotheses about how the Doctor's death will be prevented. The narrative gaps that surround this event ask the viewer to pay attention to any flashback or repetition related to this event; however, the

[81] Ibid, p. 93.
[82] Steve Connolly, 'What do Film Teachers Need to Know about Cognitivism?: Revisiting the work of David Bordwell and Other Cognitivists', *Film Education Journal,* 1.2 (2018), 133-46, (p. 138).
[83] Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film,* p. 31.
[84] Ibid, p. 33.
[85] See Chapter Two, p. 100.

flashback of the Doctor's death is, in reality, a flashforward of something that characters will remember even though it has not happened yet. The flashforward as flashback is yet another paradoxical feature used to create the circular narrative structure and guide the viewer 'in a teasing way [as] it lets us glimpse the outcome before we have grasped all the causal chains that lead up to it.'[86] Flashbacks are usually used to fill in past information that an viewer will need in order to understand forthcoming plot events while flashfowards tease an event that has not yet happened; however, when a flashforward is employed as a flashback, it creates a paradox by presenting something that has not yet occurred in the storyworld timeline as though it has happened. As a result, the viewer will actively try to predict how these chains, or structural coincidences, fit together while also anticipating the course of the future to change in order to spare the Doctor's life. *Doctor Who* provides a unique sense of omniscience in the viewer because the viewer instinctively knows that the titular character cannot be killed off for good if the show is to continue. Therefore, the viewer has the equally unique position of anticipating that a plot twist will occur to reframe the Doctor's death when it is circled back to in the series finale.

4.4. Circularity in *Doctor Who* Series Six

Doctor Who Series Six explores the themes of spacetime, identity, and foreknowledge. With foreknowledge of the Doctor's impending death, the Doctor's companions are challenged to use their foreknowledge to change future outcomes.[87] While flashforwards are rarely used

[86] Ibid, p. 79.

[87] The thirteen episodes of *Doctor Who* Series Six are written by different people, though showrunner Steven Moffat contributed the greatest number of episodes. Each one is also directed by different people. Traditionally, a showrunner sculpts the overarching plot points that the contributing writers include in their respective episodes so that there is a cohesion to each instalment within the series. Nearly all of the episodes in this series contribute to the overarching premise of the sixth series' circular narrative surrounding the Doctor's death. Some contribute more heavily than others. The episodes written by Moffat himself drive the overarching narratives most strongly and thus provide the most structural coincidences and moments of anagnorisis. Episodes contributed by other writers use repetition to keep the structural coincidences planted by Moffat's episodes fresh in the viewer's mind while adding minor nods in the dialogue that will tie into the overarching

in serials, *Doctor Who* uses them to create temporal and causal subversion within the series' plotlines and syuzhet presentation across individual episodes. In addition to the time travel concept that drives each episode of *Doctor Who,* the flashforward presented in the first episode of Series Six creates a unique kind of temporal distortion that Elsaesser defines as retrocausality:

> Temporal loops involve what is variously known as retrocausality, reverse time causality, retroaction, deferred action… At its it most basic, these terms refer to the possibility of the future influencing the past, with effects preceding causes. Rather than accepting time's arrow pointing in one direction only, retroactive causality allows for causal movement to occur in two directions, and not only from past to future.[88]

While Elsaesser defines and applies retrocausality to the works of Philip K. Dick, its application is much broader, especially within the science-fiction and fantasy genre where temporal distortion is a common trope. This quotation helps to explain how the use of flashforwards can invoke retrocausality to create a temporal loop where characters use foreknowledge of the future to change certain future events from coming to pass. This temporal phenomenon contributes to the circular narrative in *Doctor Who* Series Six in which the Doctor's death in the series premiere functions as the future moment that the rest of the episodes then attempt to explain and change through retrocausality. Because of the numerous jumps from future to present to past editing techniques serve as the narrative function in this particular television series. While some series do have actual narrators who use voiceovers to help guide the narrative, most do not. Editing effectively takes on the function of film/television narrator because it is the mode that ultimately orders the presentation of events which may or may not differ from how the episode was written. Because of editing, the fabula beginning/middle/end

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story if one is paying attention. Because the purpose of this thesis is to examine narrative structure largely in isolation from writer intent, I shall not focus on the individual writers or directors with regards to this series. Instead, I shall focus on the narrative coincidences, denouement, anagnorisis and teleological retrospect that are fundamental to circular narrative.

[88] Thomas Elsaesser, "Philip K. Dick, the Mind-Game Film, and Retroactive Causality", in *Hollywood Puzzle Films* (New York City: Routledge, 2014), pp. 143-64, (pp. 150-51).

of episodes and series become arbitrary. According to Elsaesser, editing can be used as a means of narrative distortion:

> There may well be a beginning, a middle, and an end, but they certainly are not presented in that order, and thus the spectator's own meaning-making activity involves constant retroactive revision, new reality-checks, displacements and reorganization not only of temporal sequence, but of mental space and the presumption of a possible switch in cause and effect.[89]

Editing can be used as a form of narrational paradox because of the way it manipulates temporal sequence, strategically revealing or withholding plot information to guide viewers into making hypotheses they will continuously revise during the viewing process as Elsaesser mentions. In doing this, the viewer engages their working memory to map a fabula expecting traditional causal relationships to become clear even though the plot may not satisfy this. For example, *Doctor Who* refuses to satisfy traditional causality in Series Six at the end and challenges the viewer to reflect upon the course of the series as they attempt to determine which came first, the Doctor's death or the Doctor's attempt to save himself from death. It leads the viewer to question how, if the Doctor did not know he was going to die, he could have prepared an alternative path. However, one could simultaneously ask how the Doctor could prepare for his death if he had been killed. A paradoxical temporal loop is created for the viewer to retroactively examine by looking at the many structural coincidences planted across the series' thirteen episodes. Furthermore, a circular narrative is created as the series throws the viewer *in media res* at the moment of the Doctor's death and then fills in the pieces leading up to his death along with his ability to circumvent them. Retrocausality, in combination with teleological retrospect, leads to the possible defiance of linear fabula if the cause/effect relationship is subverted as it is in this series.

[89] Thomas Elsaesser, "The Mind-Game Film", in *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2009), pp. 13-41, (p. 21).

In addition to the full-season arc relating to the Doctor's death, there is also a sub-circular narrative that revolves around the identity of the mysterious River Song. The sixth series of *Doctor Who* is thereby a circular narrative within a circular narrative comprised of both a mid-series circular narrative and a full-series circular narrative. The mid-series circular narrative takes place between the series premiere episode and the mid-series finale episode (Episode 7), whereas the full-series circular narrative occurs over the course of the entire series from season premiere to series finale (Episode 13). The series focuses on a concept Todorov terms the 'retrospective future.' He writes this retrospective future, 're-established at the moment a prediction is fulfilled, is completed by the prospective future, in which we are confronted with the prediction itself. The denouement of the plot is recounted, from the very first pages, with all the necessary details.'[90] His definition includes the concept of teleological retrospect and denouement, but it focuses on a future event as if occurring in the past: 'In reading the ending in the beginning and the beginning in the ending, we also learn to read time itself backwards, as the recapitulation of the initial conditions of a course of action in its terminal consequences.'[91] I take the theory that Todorov applied to the literary fairy tale and apply it to *Doctor Who* Series Six as an audio-visual narrative mode. In this context, the retrospective future is the death of the Doctor.

To examine how the Doctor's death invokes a circular narrative structure, I will analyse the structural coincidences in *Doctor Who* Series Six using what I term *overt* and *covert* structural coincidences. *Overt* coincidences are self-conscious and establish themselves as events worth remembering. River Song's imprisonment for murder is an example of an overt coincidence, as is the introduction of Madam Kovarian, the woman with an eye patch who mysteriously appears and disappears at seemingly random moments. *Covert* coincidences are

[90] Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 152.
[91] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative Volume 1* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 67-68.

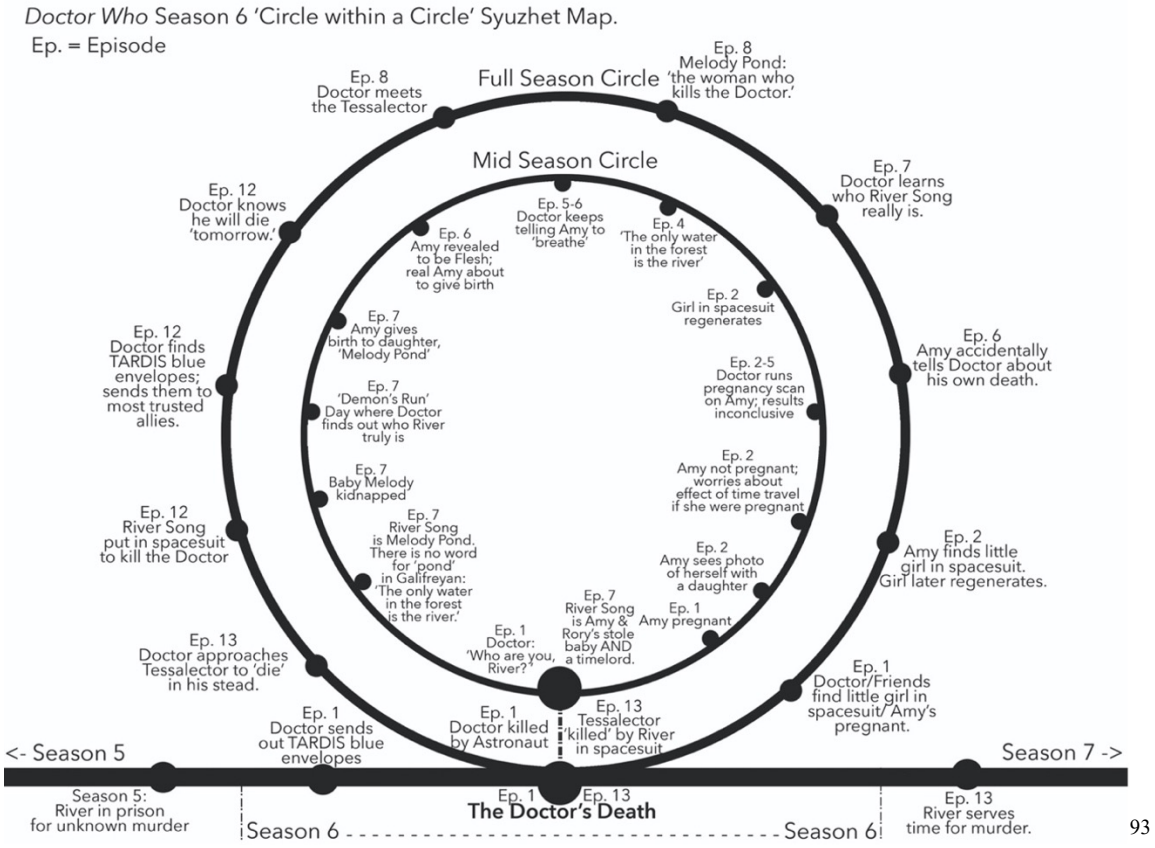
those which do not draw attention to themselves. The viewer does not realise that covert coincidences *are* coincidences until the point of anagnorisis; these include the significance of a shapeshifting robot called the Tessalector (Episodes 8 and 13) and of the Flesh, a cloning device that creates doppelgangers of its human subjects (Episodes 5, 6 and 7).

Because *Doctor Who* Series Six is so complex with thirteen individual episode narratives, a mid-season arc, and a full-season arc, it is helpful to visually lay out the contributing overt and covert structural coincidences as they occur within each episode in order to refer back when mapping the circle-within-a-circle syuzhet. Rather than attempt a linear plotting of the entire season's fabula which, due to the time-travel nature of the series would have to span unknown hundreds if not thousands of years, it is more effective to plot the events used as structural coincidences within each individual episode so that the connections between the structural coincidences are more easily seen. The following episode map of the sixth series of *Doctor Who* shows that there are overt and covert structural coincidences which build gradually over the course of the entire season. These can be more easily connected when seen across the season map than by attempting to explain each plot point in detail or pick out each structural coincidence during the process of casual viewing.

Doctor Who Series 6 - Structural Coincidences At-A-Glance

Episode 1 The Imposible Astronaut	**Episode 2** Day of the Moon	**Episode 3** The Curse of the Black Spot	**Episode 4** The Doctor's Wife	**Episode 5** The Rebel Flesh	**Episode 6** The Almost People	**Mid-Series Finale** **Episode 7** A Good Man Goes to War	**Episode 8** Let's Kill Hitler	**Episode 9** Night Terrors	**Episode 10** The Girl Who Waited	**Episode 11** The God Complex	**Episode 12** Closing Time	**Series 6 Finale** **Episode 13** The Wedding of River Song
A letter arrives to Amy, Rory, and River on TARDIS blue paper with coordinates/date. Doctor and companions reunite at Lake Silencio, Utah. Doctor wears a Stetson now. Doctor is 1103: 'I've been running faster than I've ever run before. Now it's time for me to stop.' Doctor tells Amy she's put on a few pounds. Amy sees Silence but can't remember. Doctor is killed by an Apollo astronaut; companions bury Doctor. Doctor shows up with TARDIS blue invitation, surprising his grieving friends. Doctor is 909 years old. Amy and River talk about stopping Doctor's death from coming in the future. Doctor, Amy, Rory, and River travel back to 1969 to find a little girl who is frightened of the spaceman coming to eat her. Amy keeps seeing silence and keeps forgetting. Amy keeps feeling sick. Amy tells Doctor she's pregnant. Amy and Doctor find little girl trapped inside the spacesuit. Amy shoots at the little girl.	Amy, Rory, and River hunt the Silence and mark their skin to 'remember' an encounter. Amy tells Doctor she was mistaken, she's not pregnant. She worries if she were pregnant, if time travel would have an effect on the child. Amy searches for the little girl at an abandoned children's home. 'The child, she must be cared for. She's important. That's what they said.' - orphanage caretaker. Amy sees a woman with an eyepatch appearing to her through a sliding panel in a door - doesn't really exist. Amy finds a photo of herself holding a baby girl. The little girl in the spacesuit finds Amy. Amy is taken. Doctor, Rory, and Riiver fight the Silence to save Amy. Doctor scans Amy for pregnancy; results inconclusive. The little girl from the spacesuit is dying in NYC. She regenerates.	Doctor, Rory, & Amy visit a stranded pirate ship. Doctor: 'If something's gonna kill you, it's nice that it drops you a note.' Doctor: 'We've all got to go sometime.' - Amy reacts oddly. The Doctor notices. As Amy sleeps, a voice wakes her up: 'Just stay calm.' - Woman with the eyepatch is peering at Amy through a portal on the ship where none really exists. Amy has a flashback of Doctor being killed by Astronaut. Doctor still scans for pregnancy; results inconclusive.	Amy and Rory talk out of Doctor's earshot: Amy: 'We saw him die.' Rory: '200 years in the future.' Amy: 'Yes, but it's still going to happen.' Doctor meets Idris, the TARDIS in the flesh. As Idris dies, she whispers to Rory. Rory: 'I don't understand, there isn't a forest in here.' Rory to Doctor: 'At the end, she was talking, she kept repeating something. "The only water in the forest is the river." She said we'd need to know that someday.'	Doctor still scans Amy for pregnancy reading; still inconclusive. Doctor keeps trying to drop Amy & Rory back home; is unsuccessful. They crash land on an island. Doctor: 'We were here, this was it.' Rory: 'What are you talking about, we've never been here before. Amy: 'We came here by accident.' Doctor (corrects himself): 'Yes, I know. Accident.' Doctor meets the Flesh and the Almost People. Doctor tells Amy to 'Breathe.' As Doctor scans the Flesh, it reads him. Begins to clone the Doctor. Cleeves to Doctor: 'You seem to know something about the flesh.' Amy: 'Do you, Doctor?' Doctor doesn't answer. Amy opens a door and sees eyepatch lady staring back through portal. Closes portal without a word and vanishes. No remnant where portal was. Doctor meets the Flesh Doctor.	Both Doctors tell Amy to 'Breathe.' Amy showing stomach pains - thinks she's torn a muscle. Eyepatch lady reappears and vanishes again. Amy tells Doctor about seeing the woman with the eyepatch. Amy talks to Flesh Doctor and asks him if he can die. Amy tells Flesh Doctor that he invited them to see his death - Amy accidentally told real Doctor about his upcoming death. Didn't realize Doctors had switched shoes to trick Amy as to which one was real. Doctor could only learn about the Flesh through Amy's eyes. Flesh Doctor: 'Push, Amy, but only when she tells you to.' Doctor: 'I said Breathe, Pond, remember? Breathe.' Amy experiences crippling pain; she is having contractions. Amy is made of Flesh. Real Amy is somewhere else, with eyepatch lady. Amy goes into labor on a space ship far away.	Amy gives birth to Melody Pond. A soldier gives Amy a prayer leaf with Melody's name written in the language of the Gamma Forest. Eyepatch lady takes Melody away from Amy. Rory and Doctor build army to go save Amy. River can't yet join. Battle of Demon's Run - day Doctor learns who River really is. Eyepatch lady = Madam Kovarian. Rory saves Amy and brings Melody back. Doctor learns Melody is human plus time lord. Silence/Madam Kovarian plan to use Melody as a weapon to kill the Doctor. Melody dissolves into Flesh in Amy's arms. Real Melody stolen by Madam Kovarian. River appears to tell Doctor/Amy who she is. River Song is Melody Pond; she translates the prayer leaf. The forest people don't have a word for pond because the only water in the forest is the River. Doctor goes to find Melody and return her to Amy.	Doctor still is searching for Melody. Enter Mels. Young Amy tells Young Mels all about the Doctor. Adult Mels hijacks Doctor, Amy, & Rory to go kill Hitler. Berlin 1938. Tessalector Robot introduced - it identifies Mels as the woman who kills the Doctor. Hitler shoots Mels. Mels begins to regenerate. Mel is short for Melody Mels is Amy & Rory's daughter. Last time she regenerated she was a little girl in New York. Mels regenerates as River Song. River kisses the Doctor with poisoned lipstick. Doctor is dying. Doctor doesn't die here. He dies at Lake Silencio - his death is a fixed point. River trained to kill Doctor for Silence. Silence will fall when the question is asked. The first question. The oldest question in the universe, hidden in plain sight. River saves the Doctor. Doctor gives River TARDIS diary. River to study archaeology; she is looking for a good man.	No plot contribution. Introduces the 'Tick Tock' melody.	No real plot contribution. One call back line. Doctor: 'Sometimes knowing your own future is what enables you to change it.' Foreshadowing.	Doctor talks to Minotaur: 'You've lived so long even your name is lost. You want this to stop.' Minotaur: 'For such a creature, death would be a gift... I wasn't talking about myself, Doctor.' Doctor helps Minotaur reach a peaceful end, led to consider his own. Doctor drops Amy & Rory back home. Amy my callback: 'If you run into my daughter, tell her to visit her mum sometime.'	Doctor goes on Farewell Tour. Visits Craig. Craig: 'You always win. You always survive.' Doctor: 'Those were the days.' Doctor to Craig: 'Very soon, I won't be here. My time is running out. Silence will fall when the question is asked... Thing is it's tomorrow. Can't put it off any more. Tomorrow is the day I...' Doctor saves the world one last time from Cybermen. Doctor borrows TARDIS blue staionery from Craig. Tells Craig he's going to America. Craig gives Doctor a Stetson. River studies at Uni. Madam Kovarian uses Tick Tock song. Madam Kovarian and Silence enslave River in space suit. Madam Kovarian: 'You never really escaped us, Melody Pond. We were always coming for you.' Melody: 'How do you know who I am?' Madam Kovarian: 'I made you what you are. The woman who kills the Doctor.' River floats in space suit under Lake Silencio. Tick Tock song plays.	Time has stopped. Everything exists all at once. Doctor meets Tessalector to find info about the Silence. Tessalector: 'Is there nothing else we can do?' It was the Doctor's death that would bring the Silence. Amy opens TARDIS blue envelope. River opens TARDIS blue envelope. River Song was there twice at his Death. River inside space suit. Drains her weapons, doesn't kill Doctor. Amy in charge of military unit. Eye patch is how you can remember Silence. Madam Kovarian tied up. Only Doctor and River can re-start time if Doctor dies. Doctor convinces River to let him die. Doctor & River get married. Doctor tells River one last secret. Doctor is hiding in Tessalector version of himself. River kills the Tessalector. Real Doctor goes into hiding. River goes to prison. Doctor learns the first question, the question that must never be answered hidden in plain sight: Doctor Who?

The full-series circular narrative uses more overt coincidences as it is the more important storyline to which the mid-series circular narrative heavily contributes. The mid-series circular narrative relies on much more covert coincidences that will develop in significance in their mid-series denouement and their contribution to the second half of the series.



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This illustration takes the structural coincidences from the linear illustration and visually plots those events using teleological retrospect and denouement to illustrate how teleological retrospect and denouement create narrative circularity. This visual representation illustrates the two circular narratives that coexist within the sixth series of *Doctor Who.* The smaller circle revolves around the identity of River Song and reaches its moment of anagnorisis by the mid-series finale in Episode 7. The larger circle revolves around the Doctor's death and spans the

[92] Illustration 11, Doctor Who Series Six Structural Coincidences At-A-Glance, created by Stephanie Katz; In order to show the major structural coincidences of Doctor Who Series Six in a single glance, the illustration has had to be flipped sideways—for larger version, see Appendix 11.
[93] Illustration 12, Circular Mapping of *Doctor Who* Series Six Syuzhet, created by Stephanie Katz—for larger version, see Appendix 12.

entirety of the series before closing its loop. If one looks at the full-series circle, one sees the central point that identifies the Doctor's death in both Episode 1 and Episode 13. This event is the connecting point of the circular narrative because it is the inciting moment of teleological retrospect and the denouement revealed by the structural coincidences in an act of anagnorisis. The exact same sequence of film showing the Doctor being shot and killed by an Apollo astronaut on the shore of Lake Silencio is repeated in both Episode 1 and Episode 13, but the context changes greatly over the development of the season's narrative arc.

The full-series circular narrative more heavily relies on overt coincidences to ensure the viewer does not miss the moments of anagnorisis and denouement in the finale. The mid-series circular narrative relies on more subtle covert coincidences and dwells on revealing the identity of River Song which will also play a larger role in shaping the full-series circular narrative. This builds on a concept introduced in Series Five, Episodes 4 and 5 (*The Time of Angels* and *Flesh and Stone)* as River Song is seen serving a prison sentence for murder. Episode 1 of Series Six brings that character detail to the forefront when the younger Doctor asks River, 'Who are you? You're someone from my future. Guessing that, but who? Okay, why are you in prison? Who did you kill?' The answer is impeded by two covert structural coincidences that delay anagnorisis. The first covert structural coincidence is Amy's announcement to the Doctor in Episode 1 that she is pregnant, only to be retracted in Episode 2. I consider this a covert coincidence because it is subtly dropped into conversation between characters without drawing attention to the fact that these lines of dialogue will become of greater importance later on.

The second covert coincidence also concerns Amy's pregnancy. She mentions to the Doctor in Episode 2 her concern that if she were to become pregnant her child might be abnormal due to her time spent on the TARDIS. While initially this conversation is written off as a joke as Amy teases about her child potentially having three heads, her child is revealed in

Episode 7 to be half-time lord with the ability to regenerate. Part of this coincidence is overt when the little girl in Episode 2 is seen regenerating before her identity is revealed in Episode 8. There is much discussion in the first two episodes of Amy potentially being pregnant. Images of the pregnancy scan are seen but not discussed as the results toggle between positive and negative. This leaves the viewer wondering whether Amy truly is pregnant until the end of Episode 6 when the Flesh Amy disintegrates, and the real Amy is in a delivery room at Demon's Run with Madam Kovarian overseeing the delivery of her unborn child.

A third covert structural coincidence comes via another line of dialogue that becomes a repeated phrase: 'the only water in the forest is the river.' The phrase is first uttered in Episode 4 when the dying Idris whispers the phrase to Rory and warns him that it will be of importance in the future. Anagnorisis surrounding this phrase is revealed in Episode 7 after Amy gives birth to her daughter Melody Pond. When River Song later reveals to the Doctor that she is Melody Pond, Amy and Rory's daughter, the discrepancy between her two names is explained by the translation of her name from English into the fictitious timelord language of *Gallifreyan.* River informs Amy and Rory, and thereby the viewer as well, that the word Pond does not translate because 'the only water in the forest is the river,' which is a call back to Episode 4. If the viewer has not been paying attention, this is a potentially easy structural coincidence to miss as two episodes have passed since its first utterance. When this phrase is repeated in Episode 7, it acts as both a moment of anagnorisis and a denouement for the mid-series arc. It is a moment of anagnorisis because its repetition coincides with the revelation of River Song's identity. It is a denouement because the Doctor's question from Episode 1 to River of 'Who are you?' has now come full circle and been answered. Through its answering, it completes the mid-series circular narrative while also contributing substantial expositional information that will help complete the full-series circle.

The full-series circular narrative builds on the covert coincidences from the mid-series circular narrative while also introducing its own overt coincidences from Episode 1. One example of an overt structural coincidence in the full-series circular narrative is the blue TARDIS envelopes that invite the main characters to witness the Doctor's death in Episode 1. These are noted as important from their arrival in Episode 1 because of their unmistakable TARDIS blue colour. Because they are not signed, the characters and viewers are left to wonder who sent the envelopes since they are the catalyst that draws the characters back together for the inciting incident which is the Doctor's murder. The envelopes are discovered to have their origin in Episode 12 when the Doctor himself asks his human friend, Craig (James Corden), if he can borrow them. The Doctor invites his friends to watch himself die knowing that they will not only be a comfort but a help to figure out his murderer and even attempt to stop it. Another overt coincidence is the Flesh, which is introduced in Episodes 5 and 6 and is discovered to have greater significance in Episode 7 when the moment of anagnorisis plays out. In Episode 7, the viewer learns that Amy is really on the space station called Demon's Run about to give birth. The Amy who has been traveling with the Doctor for the first six episodes of the series has been a Flesh Version.

As the mid-series circle progresses into the full-series circle, the viewer is invited to question whether River Song killed the Doctor. The viewer already knows that River Song is in prison for murder; however, the viewer is misled regarding the facts of this crime. In Episode 8, Melody Pond makes several failed attempts to kill the Doctor before she ultimately becomes the woman who *saves* the Doctor. Three important things happen as a result of this episode. First, the viewer already knows Melody would be unsuccessful at killing the Doctor in 1940s Berlin because they have seen the Doctor die at Lake Silencio. Second, the viewer knows that River and the Doctor have been lovers through their overt flirting and several kiss scenes. Episode 8 explains how River's journey from killer to lover begins. Finally, the viewer is left

to wonder if River is falsely accused of murder because of the first two factors. The denouement that triggers viewer anagnorisis is not revealed until Episode 12 when River is forced by Madam Kovarian into the spacesuit at the bottom of Lake Silencio, and it appears to the viewer that she will kill the Doctor after all. The viewer has a greater moment of anagnorisis when the death scene from Episode 1 is revisited in Episode 13 and clearly reveals River inside the astronaut suit. This would explain why, in Episode 1 the Doctor tells the yet-unknown astronaut, 'It's okay. I know it's you.' However, in Episode 13, the scene plays out differently, with different dialogue. In Episode 13, instead of the Doctor greeting the astronaut with verbal recognition, there is visual recognition when River is seen inside the suit. The Doctor's line then changes to one of expectancy: 'Well, then. Here we are at last.'

Yet this time, as the scene plays out, River fails to kill the Doctor; this is in direct opposition to what viewers have seen in Episode 1 and subsequent flashbacks when the astronaut successfully killed the Doctor. The death scene in Episode 13, therefore, answers one question while raising another. It confirms that River did kill the Doctor in Episode 1 by revealing her inside the spacesuit, but at the same time, it raises the question of whether River is able to rewrite time in this depiction. Throughout the series, the Doctor has told his companions (and the viewer) that his death is a fixed point that cannot be rewritten, yet River appears to prove in this moment that this is not the case

The final episode provides one last major piece of the puzzle through the revelation of the Tessalector's significance as a structural coincidence. Though the viewer already knows of the connection between Melody Pond and River Song, a new structural coincidence is introduced by way of a transformative robot known as the Tessalector who identifies Melody Pond as the woman who kills the Doctor. The Tessalector is a covert structural coincidence that does not reappear until Episode 13, by which time River Song is revealed to be the person inside the spacesuit from Episode 1. The role of the Tessalector is brief but critical as the real

Doctor asks the Tessalector to stand in his stead and 'die' for him. The Doctor hands the Tessalector one of the TARDIS blue envelopes that were sent out in Episode 1, acquired in Episode 12, and now shown to be instrumental in helping the Doctor save his own life. When the death scene plays out again after the wedding of River and the Doctor, the viewer learns that River killed the Tessalector version of the Doctor, not the real Doctor. When Dorian, the man decapitated by headless monks, recognises the Doctor putting his head back in its burial crypt, he asks the Doctor how he managed to escape. The viewer is shown a montage where the Doctor takes up the Tessalector on its question 'is there anything else we can do?' from earlier in the episode. When this scene plays out the first time, the Doctor is shown walking out wordlessly, sadly. When the scene is replayed here, the Doctor pops back in and answers the Tessalector. The montage continues to show the Doctor's wedding where he whispers to River to look into his eye. When she does, she sees the real Doctor standing inside the Tessalector version of the Doctor.

The bait and switch allows the show to continue with future series. The Doctor explains to Dorian, 'Time said I had to be on that beach, so I dressed for the occasion.' The scene further explains why River is in prison for allegedly killing the Doctor, though in reality, she is innocent. Dorian asks the Doctor, 'And Dr. Song? In prison all her days?' The Doctor explicitly outlines how River is able to break in and out of prison so easily by teasing, 'Her days, yes, but her nights? That's between her and me, eh?' River also confirms this when she escapes out of prison to visit her mother and shares that she lied to protect Amy, Rory, and the Doctor by pretending not to recognise herself in the astronaut suit on the beach at Lake Silencio because she had the foreknowledge that it was not the real Doctor who would die that day.

Meanwhile, the first full-series covert coincidence is the teasing of a question, 'The first question, the question that must never be answered, hidden in plain sight.' This question is first mentioned by the Tessalector when the Doctor asks about the Silence in Episode 8.

> Tessalector: The Silence is not a species, it is a religious order or movement. Their core belief is that Silence will fall when the question is asked.
> Doctor: What question?
> Tessalector: The first question. The oldest question in the universe, hidden in plain sight.
> Doctor: Yes, but what is the question?
> Tessalector: Unknown.

The answer to this question has been teased not only in the title of the show since the series began in 1963, but also in the first episode of Series Six when Canton Everett Delaware III asks, 'Doctor who, exactly?' to which Amy replies, 'God knows.' The answer is further teased, yet never truly answered when, in Episode 13, Dorian warns the Doctor that the day of his reckoning is still to come.

> Dorian: It's all still waiting for you. The fields of Trensalor, the fall of the Eleventh, and the question.
> Doctor: Goodbye, Dorian.
> Dorian: The first question, the question that must never be answered, hidden in plain sight—the question you've been running from all your life. Doctor *who?*

In addition to an already complex series, the viewer is left with a cliff-hanger question at the end of the series that will set-up subsequent series, hopefully answering the titular question that has been hidden in plain sight for over fifty years. However, while the viewer might not yet have the information to answer this question, there is still a great deal that they can reflect upon over the course of Series Six as they engage in teleological retrospect. Having completed viewing of the entire series, the viewer can begin looking for deeper connections between all of the structural coincidences listed, and the many more that proved too numerous to include in this chapter. When reflecting on the way the plot points laid out in Illustration 12, featuring each episode at-a-glance, compared to Illustration 13, featuring the concentric circles that illustrate the connections between the mid-series and full-series circular narratives, one can more clearly see how these circular narratives were so carefully crafted.

4.5. Circular Narrative Similarities between *Broken Earth* Trilogy and *Doctor Who* Series Six

Many structural similarities exist between the *Broken Earth Trilogy* and *Doctor Who* Series Six in spite of their media differences. Both contain a micro-circular narrative housed within a macro-circular narrative that spans the entire series. One contribution to this structure is the fact that both the *Broken Earth Trilogy* and *Doctor Who* Series Six use *in media res* to throw the reader into the end of the story rather than the middle. The *Broken Earth Trilogy* opens at the end of Essun's human life and the end of the era of Seasons in the storyworld. *Doctor Who* Series Six opens with the Doctor's death, a seemingly terminal event. Both series take their respective narrative endpoints and, through much temporal jumping around, circle back to that endpoint and provide an entirely new context for the reader/viewer. The *Broken Earth Trilogy* uses flashbacks to provide information about Essun's past and Hoa's past, which occurred many tens of thousands of years prior to Essun's existence. *Doctor Who* Series Six jumps around in time from the 1940s to the 2010s, to the far future and everywhere in between, as the show takes advantage of its time travel trope. The jumping around in time severely manipulates the syuzhet in both series in terms of the sequential ordering of events. It is only upon completion of both series and the engaging of a reader/viewer in teleological retrospect that they will understand just how deliberate the ordering has been in contributing to the concentric circles. The temporal manipulation through such heavy use of anachronisms allows the reader to feel as though time has been untensed in both series, making it more difficult for the reader/viewer to mentally assemble a chronological fabula. While a fabula ordering is ultimately achievable in the *Broken Earth Trilogy,* the relationship between cause and effect is subverted to such an extent that it becomes impossible for one to decipher the ordering of events surrounding the Doctor's death.

Another similarity in the structure of both series is the use of a central event that grounds the 'present' of the series. In the *Broken Earth Trilogy,* this event is the Rifting. *The Fifth Season* starts with the Rifting which is the event grounding Essun's present despite the temporal jumping around from Damaya to Syenite to Nassun's concurrent plotline and Syl Anagist's distant past plotline. The Rifting grounds all three novels and gives readers a familiar event to help them compare other events to in the timeline of the storyworld. In *Doctor Who* Series Six, the Doctor's Death acts as this event. Even though it is an event technically in the storyworld future, because it is first presented as 'present' to the characters and it is referred to or shown in some degree of repetition throughout each episode of the entire series, it is the event that grounds and drives the narrative development of the series. It is the point that the viewer refers back to in their mind as they attempt to figure out how other events in the series related temporally to the Doctor's death.

Identity and death are further common themes in both series. The mid-series circular narrative in *Doctor Who* Series Six revolves around establishing River Song's identity. *The Fifth Season* similarly revolves around establishing Essun's identity from previous versions of herself. The question of identity provides the opportunity for many plot holes to be raised and filled in over the course of a series, and the filling-in of plot holes is one way that structural coincidences can easily interweave together into moments of anagnorisis that rejoin a temporal point to itself when it is revisited later in the syuzhet. Lastly, there is the common theme of death and resurrection though not necessarily in a Biblical sense. Rather than a joyous Biblical resurrection, the resurrection in the *Broken Earth Trilogy* and *Doctor Who* are neutral or negative in tone. While Essun sacrifices herself for Nassun and humanity before being resurrected as a stone eater, her transformation and resurrection is one of a neutral tone. It is neither celebrated as a heroic return nor painted in a negative light. Essun merely transforms from one form to another and, after Hoa's finishes narrating Essun's history back to her, she is

left with a decision of what to do next without any pomp and circumstance. In *Doctor Who* Series Six, however, the Doctor's death and resurrection—not to be confused with regeneration—is met with an ominous warning. The Doctor tells Dorian, 'I got too big, Dorian, too noisy. Time to step back into the shadows.' Dorian warns the Doctor, 'You're a fool, nonetheless. It's all still waiting for you. The fields of Trensalor, the Fall of the Eleventh, and the question.' While die-hard fans of the show will anticipate what these events might mean, the Fall of the Eleventh does not imply a positive event being foreshadowed. Both the *Broken Earth Trilogy'*s ending with Essun's rebirth and *Doctor Who* Series Six's ending with the Doctor faking his own death provide denouement for their respective series while also leaving an opening for potential continuation. While it is unlikely that the *Broken Earth Trilogy* will continue with subsequent volumes, *Doctor Who* had already been greenlit by the BBC for a seventh series during the original airing of Series Six preventing *Doctor Who* from achieving the degree of narrative closure provided in the literary *Broken Earth Trilogy.*

4.6. Conclusion

This chapter was ambitious in the amount of ground covered in relation to circular narrative and in the transition from literary to multimedia discussion. However, the structural similarities between the *Broken Earth Trilogy* and *Doctor Who* Series Six helped bridge the media gap while also introducing the cross-disciplinary application of circular narrative. In addition to exploring a fourth subset of circular narrative in the concentric circular model, I explored the nuances of serial narrativity in comparison to the standalone narrative text and discussed the differences between the active reader and active viewer. Unlike previous chapters, this chapter proved challenging in that I could only find one example of a circular narrative within a circular narrative from each media type. While Chapters Three compared proverbial apples to apples by looking at two spiralling circular narrative novels and Chapter

Five will compare proverbial oranges to oranges through the circular narrative films of Christopher Nolan, this chapter could not avoid the challenges of comparing apples to oranges due to the lack of multi-volume/multi-episodic circular narratives that exist. Therefore, establishing firm comparative points is difficult and something that will be grounds for future study. However, this chapter succeeds in exploring serial narratives that contain embedded circular narratives within overarching circular narratives and lays important groundwork for the final chapter.

Setting up the role of the active viewer is even more important for the next chapter, as I further explore circular narrative's multimedia relevance in three standalone films by narrative auteur-director Christopher Nolan which apply circular narrative to the *puzzle film* genre. Audiovisual schemata and working memory will play a greater role in Nolan's films because of the narrative complexity of his plots. Despite the fact that *Doctor Who* spans thirteen hour-long episodes while Nolan's films average two-and-a-half hours each, Nolan's temporal experimentation proves far more challenging for the viewer to understand. Ironically, it is because of Nolan's temporal experimentation that he provides the most efficiently structured circular narrative films. Having looked at *Doctor Who* as the bridge between the textual and the audiovisual, I choose to examine the films of Nolan because he is a master of the puzzle film genre and has crafted multiple films that showcase circular narrative as a form of the complex puzzle film narrative like no other filmmaker.

CHAPTER FIVE

Circular Narrative in the Films of Christopher Nolan

In this final chapter of my thesis, I wish to expand the application of circular narrative to audiovisual storytelling in feature-length stand-alone films. Having introduced the cross-disciplinary applications of circular narrative in the last chapter with regard to the multi-episodic series *Doctor Who,* this chapter will examine three films from director Christopher Nolan who specialises in crafting narratives that adhere to a genre known as puzzle films. Puzzle films 'challenge deep-seated culture conventions that regulate and try to stabilize consciousness and representation, plus the attendant concepts that support these conventions (agency, discrete identity, memory, temporal linearity, singularity, etc.)'[1] Puzzle films lend themselves to circular narrative because of their distortion of temporality and causation. Nolan uses the puzzle film genre very specifically with relation to challenging the viewer's understanding of time, causality, and memory use. While all of the novels in this thesis have aspects of puzzle narrative, literary examination of this genre is not prevalent. The puzzle genre has been explicitly studied in relation to film, and Nolan is the master of the puzzle film.

I have chosen to focus specifically on the films of Christopher Nolan in this chapter because Nolan has the unusual distinction of being an auteur director who specialises in the crafting of narrative. Unlike most auteur directors who have an easily recognisable visual style, Nolan films are made recognisable by his distinct *narrative* style because he, together with his brother Jonathan Nolan, writes his own materials. Christopher Nolan's preoccupation with time creates micro- and/or macro-circular narratives in many of his films (*Memento* [2001]*, The Prestige* [2006]*, Inception* [2010]*, Interstellar* [2014]*, Dunkirk* [2017]*,* and *Tenet* [2020]). The

[1] Warren Buckland, 'Introduction: Ambiguity, Ontological Pluralism, and Cognitive Dissonance in the Hollywood Puzzle Film', in *Hollywood Puzzle Films,* ed. by Warren Buckland (New York City: Routledge, 2014) pp, 1-14, (p. 5).

three Nolan films that I will analyse in terms of their temporal subversion and circular narrative structure are *Inception*, *Interstellar*, and *Tenet*.[2] Each of these films explore time and temporal understanding in different and ever-increasingly complex ways with *Interstellar* and *Tenet* drawing their narrative inspiration from two different temporal paradoxes, the Twin Paradox and the Grandfather Paradox, respectively.

In the analysis of these films, I show how the sub-models of circular narrative that I applied to literary works crossover into film narratives, thereby reinforcing the strength of the narrative framework. However, by switching the storytelling medium, I will further explore the difference between reader-response and viewer-response that I introduced in the last chapter. First, I will examine the nuances of the puzzle film genre to explore how it lends itself to circular narrative plotting.

5.1. Circular Narrative and the Puzzle Film

According to Buckland, puzzle films 'embrace non-linearity, time loops, and fragmented spatio-temporal reality. These films blur the boundaries between different levels of reality, are riddled with gaps, deception, labyrinthine structures, ambiguity, and overt coincidences.'[3] Puzzle films employ a variety of methods to create suspense by withholding strategic plot information. They also mislead the viewer into making wrong hypotheses about the denouement in order to provide a twist ending. Viewers have become sophisticated enough to avoid blurring the boundaries between reality and plot beyond the need for suspension of disbelief required to enjoy a film. The puzzle film, therefore, does not expend time and energy on this aspect of Buckland's definition, but instead challenges a viewer's attention to plot detail

[2] *Inception,* dir. by Christopher Nolan (Legendary Pictures, 2010); *Interstellar,* dir. by Christopher Nolan (Paramount Pictures, 2014); *Tenet,* dir. by Christopher Nolan (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2020).
[3] Warren Buckland, 'Introduction: Puzzle Plots', in *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema,* ed. by Warren Buckland (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 1-12, (p. 6).

through distortion of time, the use of riddles and mazes in the plot, deception through unreliable narrators, and repetition of audiovisual sequences that help form the circular narrative.

The puzzle film genre is thought to have evolved with the 'rise of "new media,"' which opened up new possibilities for the ways narratives are crafted, simultaneously creating more sophisticated viewers who can follow along.[4] Unlike classical film narratives 'that employ a single plot unfolding chronologically over time,' the puzzle film fits into the classification of complex film.[5] Complex films 'involve multiple plots with timelines that double back on themselves, demanding considerable attention to follow the film.'[6] The complex film juggles multiple plotlines occurring simultaneously or across different time periods, diverging syuzhet from fabula. It asks the viewer to become more actively engaged in looking for connections between multiple plotlines and multiple storyworlds or temporalities. Complex films fall into the category of postclassical films which are 'at once classical and "classical-plus."'[7] What Bordwell means by 'classical-plus' is that postclassical films respect and still largely adhere to the strict formula of screenwriting narrative rules, but they play with nonlinear techniques such as non-sequential syuzhets, temporal distortions, repetitions of scenes, and experimentation with plot gaps. Postclassical films are like the nonmimetic literary narratives discussed in the introduction.[8] If classical films are comparable to mimetic narratives due to their mimicry of linearity in the way humans perceive the direction of time to run and postclassical films are nonmimetic, then avant-garde films resemble antimimetic or unnatural narratives that forego all structural narratological rules. Because circular narrative is guided by structural conventions built upon narratological rules, the form is nonmimetic; thus postclassical films have the

[4] Buckland, *Hollywood Puzzle Films,* p. 3.
[5] John Seamon, *Memory & Movies: What Films Can Teach Us About Memory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015), p. 26.
[6] Ibid, p. 27.
[7] David Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), p. 7.
[8] See Introduction, p. 14.

potential to utilise circular narrative since they also follow narrative conventions that defy linearity but do not forego narrative structuralism altogether.

The puzzle film is an even more complex version of the complex postclassical film narrative because puzzle films create puzzles for both characters and viewers to navigate. At the narrative level, they 'blur the boundaries between different levels of reality, are riddled with gaps, deception, labyrinthine structures, ambiguity, and overt coincidences.'[9] The puzzle film thus allows for the circular narrative form because of its predisposition toward overt coincidences, temporal distortion, and creation of plot gaps to be filled over the course of the film. This challenges viewers to 'rearrange events, disambiguate their relations and order, and in doing so, gradually construct a story.'[10] The viewer will most likely attempt to solve the puzzle before the protagonist as a means of making a game out of watching the film, therefore seeking out connections between overt structural coincidences and the moments of anagnorisis where divergent plot points finally converge.

Unlike classical film narratives that wrap up their plots neatly with minimal loose ends at the denouement, a puzzle film often does the opposite: 'Reflection in puzzle films does not bring closure; it rather opens the film system up, introducing one additional level of uncertainty.'[11] This makes it likely that a viewer will engage in teleological retrospect after completing the viewing of a puzzle film. At the end of such a film, there is often a twist that, instead of providing closure, opens the film up for new interpretations of the way the pieces of the puzzle connect.

The mind game film goes even further than the puzzle film in that it outright acknowledges that it intends to play games with the characters and the viewers; Nolan's films

[9] Buckland, *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema.* p. 6.
[10] Ibid, p. 7.
[11] Maria Poulaki, 'Puzzled Hollywood and the Return of Complex Films', in *Hollywood Puzzle Films,* ed. Warren Buckland (New York City: Routledge, 2014), pp. 35-53, (p. 45).

consistently utilise such mind games. This type of film often uses time as its mode for manipulating characters and viewers by disrupting traditional temporal ordering or the relationship between cause and effect. It further offers a challenge by presenting 'worlds that often look just like ours, but where multiple time-lines coexist, where the narrative engenders its own loops…where there may well be a beginning, a middle, and an end, but they are certainly not presented in that order, and thus the spectator's own meaning-making activity involves constant retroactive revision.'[12] In all three films being analysed in this chapter, the settings appear as though they are in the real-world, but games are played with the characters and the viewer by upsetting the physical laws of the real world in the storyworld. Just as circular narrative in other media relies on a specific pattern of narrative construction and the role of the reader to recognise that pattern, the same is true of circular narratives in puzzle films. Poulaki notes the central importance of viewer engagement in understanding the structure of such films:

> Apart from the internal loops caused by the reflexive reference of one element to the other, it is also common that puzzle films end with one more, bigger loop, with the opening scene being repeated slightly altered or through a different perspective toward the end of the film. This loop corresponds to the self-referential process of *reflection*…Reflection in puzzle films does not bring closure: it rather opens the film system up, introducing one additional level of uncertainty.[13]

What Poulaki identifies as the importance of reflection, I have already been referring to as teleological retrospect throughout this thesis. Poulaki recognises that reflection after the fact provides a reader or viewer with a new series of possibilities to consider retroactively and retrospectively. The editing of these films attempts to help viewers recognise circular narrative and prompt them to recognise the right plot points so they can make educated connections through teleological retrospect.

[12] Thomas Elsaesser, 'The Mind-Game Film', in *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema,* ed. by Warren Buckland (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 13-41, (p. 21).
[13] Poulaki, pp. 44-45.

5.2. How Viewers Process Film Narrative

Film is a unique storytelling medium since 'cinema is a temporal medium in ways in which other image art forms are not.'[14] While the act of reading a literary novel or a graphic novel is temporal in that it takes up the reader's time and the reader is semi-conscious of time's progression through the plot, a film presents the viewer with the inescapable fact that they are watching time pass before their eyes through visual action sequences.[15] An action sequence is comprised of still frames which, when edited together at a certain speed, mimic the passage of time as if it is transpiring at a speed that seems 'normal' to the viewer's eyes.[16] It mimics how one sees reality play out in the real world. A narrative film is created by playing the sequence of still frames at a specific frame rate and displaying an action to which dialogue and sound are added to create a visual story. Editing helps manipulate narrative at the level of the visual image and the level of temporality. Films create the circular narrative structure through editing. Editing becomes key in triggering the viewer's memory to remember important visual images, bits of dialogue, and/or sound cues at pivotal plot moments where they gain new relevance and are repeated by allowing the viewer to see how structural coincidences converge in moments of anagnorisis.

In his seminal works on cinema, Gilles Deleuze distinguishes two predominant functions of the film image. The first function he defines as the movement-image; the second function he calls the time-image which adds a temporal aspect to the still image.[17] The movement-image functions similarly to a flipbook where individual frames are combined in sequence to create a scene that depicts motion. The time-image gives the effect of time passing

[14] Bruce Isaacs, 'The Image of Time in Post-Classical Hollywood: *Donnie Darko* and *Southland Tales',* in *Hollywood Puzzle Films,* ed. by Warren Buckland (NYC: Routledge, 2014), pp. 198-213, (p. 198).
[15] In this instance, I am not referring to an action sequence as a fast-paced, intense sequence such as a car chase or shoot-out. Instead, I define an action sequence as a sequence of images edited together to show a complete action.
[16] This rate is 24 frames per second.
[17] See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

whether it is a few seconds, days, months, or even years. It allows longer stretches of time to be visually compressed for storytelling purposes. The single movement-image, or frame, as I shall refer to it, contains what is present on screen for the viewer to see. While what is in the frame is important, sometimes what is deliberately hidden from the frame or left out of the frame can be equally significant because it withholds key information from the viewer to create suspense which can be resolved later in the viewing. The movement part of the movement-image refers to either the camera movement in relation to the object in the frame or the movement of the objects within the frame in relation to the camera. There is also a third option which Deleuze does not discuss where both parties are moving in relation to each other, such as a moving camera following a moving object in a car-chase or action-heavy scene. These three options are recorded or edited together in a specific sequence called a shot, which contains an action that plays for a particular duration of time.

Shots are then edited together into longer sequences 'which inherit the movement and the duration' of a more extended period of time that can encompass multiple related actions.[18] In the editing room, a shot-sequence changes with each change of camera angle to create an even longer category called a scene, which usually has its own beginning/middle/end. Scenes are separated from each other by a change in location or time and can be comprised of any number or duration of shot-sequences. A montage, on the other hand, is an edited sequence of shots 'by means of continuities, cutting, and false continuities,' that show an extended passage of time condensed into a shorter visual timespan.[19] Scenes and montage, therefore, cross over from the movement-image into the realm of the time-image because they show the passage of time 'and thus gives us the image of time' passing on the screen at a speed that mirrors the speed at which humans perceive action in the real world.[20] Frames, shots, sequences, scenes

[18] Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image,* p. 25.
[19] Ibid, p. 29.
[20] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image,* p. 34.

and montages are 'linked moments in time' and help contribute to film's unique quality as a temporal-visual storytelling medium in ways that other visual storytelling media such as the graphic novel cannot.[21]

Editing determines the syuzhet presentation of scenes in a filmic narrative and 'allows time to be manipulated by omitting a certain time span;' furthermore, 'it is only when the cinematic cut is introduced that temporality is given a direction.'[22] This is because the cut 'marks the length of the shot and makes it possible to revise the order of shots.'[23] Cuts can also be made to change from one camera angle to another within the same scene. The cut is not only used as an ellipsis to condense linear time but can also redirect time through flashbacks, flashforwards, and repetition. While there are countless editing techniques, the ones I will be discussing in relation to the relevant films are specifically those incorporating flashbacks and repetition which are heavily relied upon for temporal distortion.[24] Through the use of such techniques, the viewer is tasked with the responsibility of 'engag[ing] memory systems to understand individual scenes and connect those scenes into a coherent story.'[25] When flashbacks or repeated sequences are utilised, it disrupts the mirroring of fabula and syuzhet during a film-viewing experience and asks the viewer to cognitively attempt to piece together a linear fabula which may or may not prove possible depending on how cause and effect are manipulated in the plot.

Just as readers try to transform the syuzhet of a literary work into a linear fabula, film viewers do the same: 'The narrative film is so made as to encourage the spectator to execute story-constructing activities…While watching a narrative, the spectator takes as one goal the arranging of events in temporal sequence…If the narrative presents events out of chronological

[21] Peter Verstraten, *Film Narratology.* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), p. 13.
[22] Verstraten, p. 16 and p. 14.
[23] Ibid, p. 79.
[24] While flashforwards were used in *Doctor Who* Series Six in the previous chapter, they are not used in the three Nolan films I am examining in this chapter.
[25] Seamon, pp. 25-26.

order, we must fall back on our ability to rearrange them.'[26] However, 'because movies are conveyed through visual, auditory, and discourse information, movie makers have more techniques at their disposal for constraining inference processes than novelists.'[27] In puzzle films, these processes of inference are not constrained so much as they are opened up, owing to the number of multimedia techniques associated with the genre. Puzzle films use the visual level, the auditory level, and the narrative discourse level to frustrate the viewer's ability to mentally construct causal relationships. What is unique about the puzzle film genre is that the viewer knows going into the viewing experience that 'certain crucial information [will be] withheld or ambiguously presented,' and chooses to participate anyway.[28] Part of the appeal of this genre is that each plot event is a 'new piece of the puzzle…that does not fit the current temporal structure of the system and thus requires the viewer to reconsider the structure and change it in a systemic reflexive mode: to create a new past, present, and future in which this piece will find its place.'[29] Puzzle film viewers accept the challenge of consuming a narrative that will be presented out-of-order, and they become actively engaged in trying to predict the outcome through a continuous game of making mental hypotheses and re-organizing their understanding of events as new information is presented: 'there may well be a beginning, a middle, and an end, but they are certainly not presented in that order, and thus the spectator's own meaning-making activity involves constant retroactive revision…and reorganization not only of temporal sequence, but of mental space, and the presumption of a possible switch in cause and effect.'[30] The puzzle film is like a narrative riddle that asks the viewer to become a willing participant, but it also promises no revelation of a firm solution to the narrative puzzle.

[26] David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film.* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), p. 33.
[27] Joseph P. Magliano, Katinka Dijkstra and Rolf A. Zwaan, 'Generating Predictive Inferences While Viewing a Movie', *Discourse Processes,* 22.3. (1996), pp. 199-224, (p. 201).
[28] Elsaesser, 'The Mind Game Film', p. 14.
[29] Poulaki, p. 43.
[30] Ibid, p. 21.

The retroactive revision continues after the viewing experience and transforms into teleological retrospect as the viewer reflects on the events presented in the film and tries to find a semblance of causally related sequential ordering for which there will never be confirmation. A puzzle film will 'demand considerable attention to follow the film' and 'makes demands on our conscious attention…that are heavily influenced by a film's plot structure.'[31] These 'demands' include putting the viewer into an active role where memory-engagement plays a crucial role in leading the viewer to make the right assumptions: 'We need semantic memory to understand a film's dialogue and action, episodic memory to remember the sequence of events being shown, and working memory to focus on individual scenes and make appropriate connections between them.'[32] Because of puzzle film's narrative complexity and the multiple senses engaged in processing an audio-visual narrative, more than one type of memory recall is required of a viewer, especially in observing circular narrative. Semantic memory, episodic memory, and working memory all work individually and in conjunction with one another so that the viewer is guided by the film's plot to store the correct information in their short-term memory. Because there are so many stimuli to process when watching a film, the mind cannot possibly store every detail. The plot, therefore, helps the brain process which elements of the story are most likely to be important. These audiovisual cues get stored in the short-term memory based on the brain's hypothesis-making skills which anticipate the information will be of greater use later on in the viewing process.

Because film is a multi-sensory narrative experience, more facets of a viewer's memory are engaged. In order to form plot connections while watching a film, one must remember visual and audio cues that may be repeated at any moment. The repetition of video and audio cues act as stronger memory triggers because they are far more immediate than repetition in

[31] Seamon, p. 27 and p. 26.
[32] Ibid.

literary plots. The repetition of a visual scene triggers the viewer's memory of the first presentation of that scene because human brains are conditioned to remember visual stimuli. People recognise faces and recall actions, but they are even more likely to remember when one of these is missing: 'When information is missing, perceivers infer it or make guesses about it. When events are arranged out of temporal order, perceivers try to put these events in sequence. People seek causal connections among events, both in anticipation and in retrospect.'[33] For example, in Nolan's film *Tenet,* the viewer sees a woman dive off a boat, but they do not see her face. Because the brain is also designed to reduce uncertainty and ambiguity, this scene will imprint on the viewer's mind as something worth remembering because the woman's identity is purposefully kept hidden. They will search for and anticipate an answer as to who she is. When the action is later repeated and her identity revealed, the plot connection surrounding this visual is doubly strong as a result of the repetition, the facial recognition, and the retroactive ability of the viewer to understand the scene because of the new context it has gained. Sound can also be a powerful tool to condition viewer memory. For example, repeated dialogue, repeated sound cues, or repeated musical refrains help the viewer to associate sound with character and with plot.

Editing techniques such as repetition and/or the flashback allow for a viewer's memory to be quickly triggered into remembering past audiovisual information. This signals a need for the viewer to make connections at specific moments of anagnorisis in the plot and later on reflect on those through teleological retrospect. Pacing also demands that viewers pay close attention because there is the risk that if you 'look away…you might miss a key point' which reveals a key piece of information.[34] In a puzzle film, the syuzhet can '*flaunt* or *suppress* gaps in the fabula…when we know that there is something we need to know,' but have not yet been

[33] Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, p. 34.
[34] Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It,* p. 180.

made privy to.[35] Films like *Inception, Interstellar,* and *Tenet* heavily rely on these gaps to set the viewer on the quest of searching for structural coincidences and making continuous hypotheses in order to teleologically reflect on why they did or did not foresee the moment of anagnorisis.

While editing usually comes as the final element of filmmaking after the film has been written and produced, Christopher Nolan is one of the few film directors who reverse engineers his film narratives. Because he realises the importance of film narrative and often writes or co-writes all of his screenplays, he carefully structures his narratives with the editing process in mind to achieve a specific pace while manipulating sequential ordering to achieve certain narrative patterns like the circular narrative. Nolan is unique in that one recognises a 'Christopher Nolan film' not so much by its visual design but by its narrative design.

5.3. Christopher Nolan as Film-Narrative Auteur

Though filmmaking is a collaborative art-form comprised of hundreds of people on and off camera, the artistry of a narrative film is usually attributed to the film's director: 'Traditionally the "author" of the film was thought to be the screenwriter, the author of the script upon which the film was based. The French New Wave theorists disagreed. They believed that the written script of a film is only a blueprint, raw material that achieves meaning or significance only when the words are embodied in images of the screen.'[36] As a result of their work, an auteur is now attributed to the director of a film. An auteur carries the connotative distinction of marking a director's unique style as 'an artistic signature…marking the director

[35] Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film,* p. 55.
[36] Marilyn Fabe, *Closely Watched Films: An Introduction to the Art of Narrative Film Technique.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), p. 121.

[as] the primary source for artistry and unity… in a set of films.'[37] Today they are the chief overseer of script development, creative design and aesthetic of the film, camera movement, and editing.

While most auteurs are known for their camera technique and cinematic design, Christopher Nolan's auteurship is more recognisable in the crafting of his narratives than in his technical filmmaking skills. This is not to say that Nolan lacks a cinematic aesthetic of his own, but he is one of the few contemporary directors who carefully creates and controls every aspect of narrative production from script to screen. As narrative craftsman, Christopher Nolan explores themes of time, paradox, and puzzles in many of his feature films. He can be considered a master of the mind-game type of puzzle film narrative, playing games with the characters and/or the viewer by withholding key plot information to create ambiguity at the story-level and viewer-level.[38]

Since he writes most of his films with his brother, Christopher Nolan maintains more artistic control than most directors have in shaping the script and the film. Nolan has the ability to tailor a script from concept to final cut and to manipulate temporal story construction to an even greater degree. Nolan has been quoted as saying, 'I feel like films are uniquely suited towards addressing paradox, recursiveness, and worlds-within-worlds,' which are the aspects he capitalises on as a film writer, director, and auteur.[39] As Shone explains, Nolan's films explore these areas in different ways:

> *Following* chops up three different timelines and cuts back and forth between them. *Memento* cuts back and forth between two timelines, one running forward, the other backward. *The Prestige* cuts between four timelines. *Inception* cuts between five of varying speeds where five minutes spent dreaming is equal to an hour in the real world. Whole lifelines can play out—men and women can grow old together—in the time it

[37] Erin-Hill Parks, 'Developing an Auteur Through Reviews: The Critical Surround of Christopher Nolan' in *The Cinema of Christopher Nolan: Imagining the Impossible,* ed. by Jacqueline Furby and Stuart Joy (London: Wallflower Press, 2015), pp. 17-30, (p. 18).
[38] See further Elsaesser, 'The Mind-Game Film,' p.18 and p.38.
[39] Ibid, p. 6.

> takes a van to fall from a bridge. In *Interstellar,* a father is separated from his daughter by relativity's distorting effects on time.[40]

This succinctly sums up Nolan's auteur style as a filmmaker who focuses on temporal manipulation as his calling card. In addition to these films, Nolan also pushes the boundaries of time in *Dunkirk, Tenet,* and *The Dark Knight Trilogy* [2005-2012]. In every single one of his films, he finds some way, either on the micro-narrative or macro-narrative level, to challenge the viewer's understanding of time.

In addition to his predilection for multiple timelines, temporal relativity, and paradox, Nolan frequently has his films start and end in the same place whether from a framing standpoint or a narratological one. *Memento* uses circular framing with the repetition of opening monologues; the film opens at the end with Leonard (Guy Pearce) shooting Teddy (Joe Pantoliano) in an inverted sequence. The viewer watches the scene un-happen before their eyes as the polaroid of Teddy's dead body lightens to the point where Leonard inserts the photo back into the camera, the blood flows back into Teddy's body, and the bullet shoots back into Leonard's gun. At the end of the film, when the scene plays in a forward sequence, the viewer understands that Leonard uses his memory loss to lure Teddy to his death so that he can keep forgetting who truly murdered his wife. The relationship between backward and forward storytelling is a concept that Nolan will use again in *Tenet.* In *Memento* and *Tenet,* editing techniques that invert time help to distort the flow of time for the viewer. Nolan also uses colour as a means to help the viewer keep track of which temporal direction they are moving in. *Memento* contains a mix of black-and-white footage and full-colour footage. In *Tenet,* the colours red and blue signal to the viewer which scenes are inverted and which are normal. I focus on *Tenet* in this chapter rather than *Memento* because *Tenet* uses circularity in a much more complex way. The finality of *Memento's* circling back to the same moment creates a

[40] Tom Shone, *The Nolan Variations: The Movies, Mysteries, and Novels of Christopher Nolan* (New York City: Alfred A. Knopf, 2020) p. 92.

simple time-loop that provides closure by filling in all the plot holes. *Tenet*, though it only uses circularity on a micro-narrative scale, opens up a whole new spectrum of narrative interpretations through teleological retrospect because of the way in which the circle connects the inverse and forward-moving plotlines.[41]

Dunkirk also uses circularity on the solely visual micro-narrative scale. Due to the minimal dialogue in this film, these visual narrative circles are easily missed because they rely on visual observation of causal distortion. For instance, Collins's plane is shot down before Mr. Dawson, Peter (Tom Glynn-Carney), and George (Barry Keoghan) first see the three British Spitfires fly out over the British Channel for battle. The reason for this is because the film is broken down into three temporal periods: By Ground, which covers one week on the beach at Dunkirk; By Sea, which covers one day following Mr. Dawson's boat to help evacuate the beaches at Dunkirk; and By Air, which covers a single hour following three Spitfire pilots. The cutting between these three timelines distorts the presentation of linear time when Collins's plane is shot down before it even enters the battle. The timelines align briefly as Mr. Dawson's boat arrives at the scene of the crash to save Collins from his downed plane but are then distorted again when the film cuts back to Peter noticing Collins's plane getting shot down and asks his dad to go and save the pilot.

Similarly, when the Shivering Soldier (Cillian Murphy) character is found by Mr. Dawson (Mark Rylance) sitting on top of a sunken battleship, the viewer is not expecting to see how the Shivering Soldier became stranded on the sunken vessel. However, when the film cuts to follow Tommy (Fionn Whitehead), one of the soldiers on the beach, Tommy encounters the Shivering Soldier in a life raft the night before Mr. Dawson rescues him. Once the Shivering Soldier is on the boat with Mr. Dawson, he is adamant that they not return to Dunkirk, but the viewer does not discover the extent of what the Shivering Soldier has endured before his rescue

[41] See Illustration 14.

until after his rescue. Because dialogue and exposition is sparse in *Dunkirk,* the viewer is not told to look for these temporal connections surrounding certain characters and chains of events. The viewer will not realise where the narrative circles back on itself across its three temporal streams unless they are familiar with Nolan's method of storytelling. Armed with the knowledge that Nolan is a puzzle film auteur who often constructs temporal loops within his films, a viewer may anticipate and recognise this narrative technique. Nolan's personal preoccupation with manipulating time as an auteur has contributed to the circular narrative structure of the three films to be analysed in this chapter (*Inception, Interstellar, Tenet).*

Nolan also relies on paradox to structure circular narrative in his films. In *Interstellar,* Nolan explores the concept of the Twin Paradox which pertains to Einstein's theory of relativity:

> The story is simple: one twin is sent to space at a high velocity, close to the speed of light, and leaves the other twin behind on Earth. From the astronaut twin's perspective, the journey to space has lasted several years, and afterwards he returns expecting to meet his brother. But when he lands on Earth, he discovers to his astonishment that the time that went by on Earth is significantly longer than the time that went by on the spaceship, and his twin brother is significantly older than him.[42]

In *Interstellar,* Nolan uses the Twin Paradox but changes the primary players from twins to a father and daughter. When Cooper (Matthew McConaughey) leaves on his interstellar journey, he is in his mid-40s and his daughter Young Murph (Mackenzie Foy) is twelve. When Cooper is finally reunited with Old Murph (Gina Rowlands), he is roughly the same age as when he left Earth, but she is now an old woman on her death bed. In *Tenet,* Nolan plays with the concept of the Grandfather Paradox as the driving force of the narrative which 'creates an infinite explanatory loop which cannot be untangled with logical and rational arguments.'[43] I have already explained the Grandfather Paradox earlier in this thesis in relation to Natasha Pulley's

[42] Alon Halperin, *The Network of Time: Understanding Time & Reality through Philosophy, History and Physics* (Tel Aviv: eBook Pro Publishing, 2020), p. 108.
[43] Ibid, p. 109.

The Kingdoms, which also utilised this paradox as part of its narrative development.[44] In *Tenet,* the Grandfather Paradox is applied to the concept of time moving forward and backward simultaneously. The Protagonist (John David Washington) tries to stop a future event that will alter the past by crossing between the forward and backward temporal strands to make different attempts at intervention and prevent the Grandfather Paradox from wiping out civilisation. In addition to these narrative themes, Nolan carefully plants structural coincidences that pay off in moments of viewer anagnorisis through the visual direction of his narrative vision.[45]

Both *Inception* and *Tenet* are designed with puzzles in mind. In *Inception,* the character of Ariadne (Elliot Page) is asked to design mazes for the dreamers that the viewer gets to view as sketches on paper, 3D models, and eventually as the settings for the dreamers to navigate.[46] In *Tenet,* the Freeport building is designed like a pentagon maze, which the Protagonist and Neil (Robert Pattinson) have to negotiate in order to find what Sator (Kenneth Branagh) is hiding at the centre. In *Interstellar,* the maze theme is replaced with codes. Murph interprets the dust code on her bedroom floor as a Morse Code message from her ghost, while Cooper understands the same phenomenon as binary code leading to coordinates on a map. Their differing approaches lead them to alternative conclusions to the same puzzle which both prove useful at different points in the narrative timeline. The binary code leads Cooper to coordinates on a map belonging to NASA that begins his interstellar journey while Murph's Morse Code warning Cooper to 'Stay' helps her to decipher the Morse Code that Cooper uses to talk to Murph through the watch from the tesseract.

[44] See Chapter One, p. 47.

[45] Additionally, Nolan's directorial style adds elements of sophistication and artistry to his big-budget features making him one of the few auteurs to cross over from the independent filmmaking scene to the studio blockbuster scene. This has allowed him to spend more than $100 million USD on the production of each of his feature films for the last decade. He has utilised big-budget special effects, visual effects, and action scenes in conjunction with challenging narrative materials.

[46] When referring to Ariadne the character, I shall use the gendered pronoun 'she.' When referring to actor Elliot Page, I shall use the gendered pronoun 'he.'

Stylistically, *Inception* and *Tenet* are also similar with visual effects and special effects that challenge gravity and time. In *Inception,* Ariadne plays with the physics of the dreamworld by creating physically impossible situations. In the hotel level of the dreamworld, there is a sequence where the characters experience loss of gravity due to what has transpired in the previous level of the dreamworld, and the characters must adjust their plan to overcome this difficulty. *Tenet* exhibits the reversal of action sequences such as the battle at Stalsk-12 where the red team and blue team carry out the temporal pincer movement. There is another scene in the Freeport where the Protagonist encounters an inverted version of himself, who fights with unnatural backwards movements that seem to defy time and gravity. These are both impossible situations that are only made possible in a cinematic world through camera and editing techniques and are easily identifiable as Nolan-esque qualities.

In terms of Nolan's cinematic style, *Inception* and *Tenet* are spectacle films with impossible action sequences, impressive cinematography, and music befitting a cinematic epic. Both accelerate plot at high speeds and do not let up on the intensity of the story from start to finish. *Interstellar,* however, differs from *Inception* and *Tenet* in that it is stylistically simpler, audibly quieter, and narratively slower-paced. Even though it has sequences of visual spectacle, special effects, visual effects, and anti-gravity stunts, the score is gentler and the pace more deliberate. The viewer is allowed space to breathe between scenes and positioned as a spectator rather than a part of the film. Sound does not fill every silence in *Interstellar.* Instead, silences are used artfully for dramatic effect and to let the characters and viewer ponder the information distributed at key moments throughout the film. One theory for the stylistic difference in *Interstellar* is that it is more of an environmental warning presented as entertainment, whereas *Inception* and *Tenet* are designed for escapism, spectacle, and mental exercise. An auteur can exhibit different cinematic styles depending on the story they wish to tell, yet there will still be undeniable characteristics that exist across their body of work which are recognizable to a

viewer familiar with their work. The themes of the puzzle film mind-game narrative, exploration of temporal subversion and paradox, and the use of editing to manipulate the relationship of causality are themes that pervade most of Nolan's film repertoire.

5.4. A Case Study of Three Circular Narrative Films by Christopher Nolan

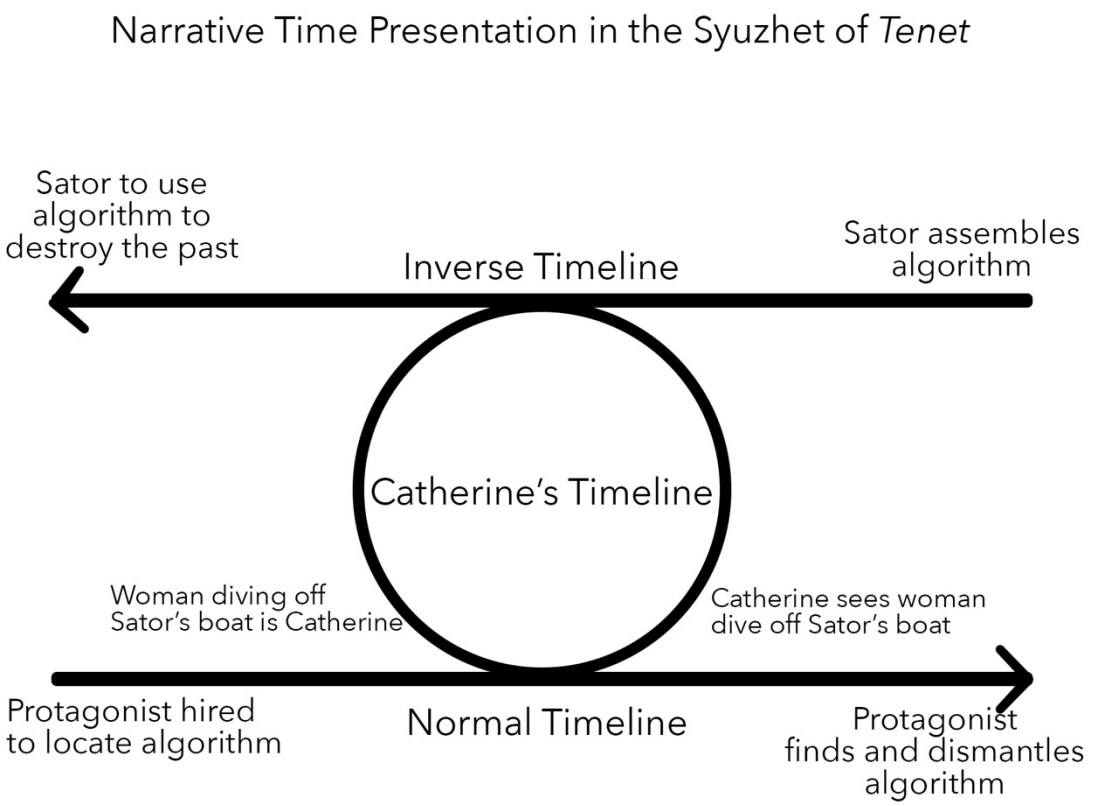
In this section, I focus on three of Christopher Nolan's films that utilise circular narrative structure in interesting ways. *Tenet* uses circular narrative on the micro-narrative level while the plot as a whole explores the concept of inverted, or reversed time. The micro-narrative circular sequence aims to answer one simple question about the identity of a woman that Catherine (Elizabeth Debicki) sees dive off her husband's boat. Rather than providing a simple revelation of the woman's identity, Nolan creates a mind-game narrative for the viewer to examine, ultimately repeating the inciting moment after providing entirely new context surrounding the woman's identity. In *Inception,* the simple time-loop model of circular narrative is used as the film circles back to its *in media res* opening sequence after taking the viewer on a journey that explores dreams as different levels of puzzle-like mazes. *Interstellar* provides an example of the infinite loop discussed in Chapter Two, but I examine the ways in which audiovisual stimuli make the narrative structure more easily recognisable to the viewer.[47] Ultimately, each of these films are chosen to explore how circular narrative applies to long-form standalone films and is more easily observed and understood by the viewer because of the way the brain perceives visual image and audible dialogue in the working memory. In my analysis, I use screenshots from each of the films to provide a visual reference for some of the structural coincidences and moments of repetition that connect the circular narratives of these films. Each frame is time-stamped in the footnotes for exact reference.

[47] See Chapter Two, p. 90.

5.4.1. *Tenet* (2020)

Tenet is, at the time of writing, Christopher Nolan's most recent and his most narratively and temporally complex film. There are two inversely-moving timelines which can only be crossed through a temporal portal. To a viewer, the inverse temporal relationship shown in several key actions scenes is especially disconcerting and confusing; Carroll writes that 'the reason it's jarring, of course, is that all of us nonfictional characters experience time in the same way… which defines the arrow of time.'[48] The nonfictional characters that Carroll mentions are the human viewers who are limited to living in and perceiving time as forward-moving from past to present to future. Seeing time run backwards in *Tenet* is jarring and disconcerting because it feels wholly alien in nature. However, this inverse presentation of time is not without actual scientific tenets. Many of Nolan's films are cinematic spectacles and possess elements of science-fiction and fantasy, yet they are still rooted in actual science. *Tenet* is no different. *Tenet* uses the Grandfather Paradox to explore '"backwards causation" which is the influence of a certain action in the present on the past and not just the future.'[49] Backwards causation assumes knowledge of the future informs the present to save the past, thus reversing the relationship of cause and effect. This complex concept can be better understood in the following illustration, representing both the inverse relationship of time and the micro-circular narrative that occurs in *Tenet.*

[48] Sean Carroll, *From Eternity to Here: The Quest for the Ultimate Theory of Time* (New York City: Dutton, 2017), p. 26.
[49] Halperin, p. 145.



[50]

This illustration shows how the Protagonist's forward-moving timeline is at odds with Sator's inverse-moving timeline. Within the film, colour is used to help the viewer keep track of which direction time is moving throughout the narrative. The colour red symbolises forward-moving normal time, whereas the colour blue symbolises inverted time. When Sator holds Catherine hostage in Talinn on one side of the turnstile as the Protagonist watches from the other, Sator and Catherine are lit with blue lights while the Protagonist is lit with red.

[50] Illustration 13, *Tenet* Syuzhet illustration, created by Stephanie Katz.

 [51]

 [52]

When the two parties attempt to communicate with each other from opposite sides of the turnstile, their speech is inverted and they cannot understand one another. The Protagonist can only realise what Sator is asking him when he crosses through the turnstile and becomes inverted. Colour is used similarly in the temporal pincer movement at Stalks 12 to help the viewer keep track of which characters are moving in which temporal direction. The Protagonist, as part of the forward-moving team, wears red arm bands while Neil, as part of the backward-moving team, wears blue arm bands.

[51] Illustration 14, Still from *Tenet,* Time Code 01:22:53.
[52] Illustration 15, Still from *Tenet,* Time Code 01:22:59.

 [53]

 [54]

 [55]

[53] Illustration 16, Still from *Tenet,* Time Code 02:02:44.
[54] Illustration 17, Still from *Tenet,* Time Code 02:03:01.
[55] Illustration 18, Still from *Tenet,* Time Code 02:01:21.

The first and third of these frames illustrate the colour differentiation between the two temporal teams. The middle frame shows both teams moving in different directions simultaneously. It uses a giant circular image that subtly hints at the circular narrative Nolan has interwoven into the film. This circular location resembles the round face of a clock and visually symbolises one group going around the clock in a clockwise manner with the other group going counter-clockwise or backward.

The temporal pincer movement at Stalsk-12 provides a distraction for Catherine to kill Sator before he can enact the Grandfather Paradox to destroy himself, the past, the present, and the future. Sator has prior knowledge of the future and the past whereas the Protagonist only has knowledge of the past and present. The Protagonist is at a disadvantage because he must figure out what Sator already knows. The challenge for the Protagonist is to begin thinking of time as occurring all at once, not in the linear pattern that he is used to: only once he abandons his traditional understanding of causality is he able to stop Sator.

Catherine is the character caught in the middle of the two counter-moving temporal trajectories, making her the means of connecting the two through creation of a micro-circular narrative. Catherine and the Protagonist have their first substantial conversation in a restaurant. During this conversation, Catherine explains that her husband is blackmailing her and mentions a memory that will prove to be of great importance:

> Catherine: I glimpsed some other woman diving off the boat. And he'd vanished. I've never felt such envy.
> Protagonist: You don't seem the jealous type.
> Catherine: Of her freedom? You know how I dream of just diving off that boat?

As Catherine explains her envy of the woman diving off Sator's yacht, there is a flashback that provides visual accompaniment to the dialogue.

 [56]

 [57]

These two frames show Catherine watching an unidentifiable woman dive off Sator's yacht. This moment will be repeated later on in the syuzhet with several key differences. The first is a change of costume. In the first presentation of this scene, Catherine wears a backless red and white patterned dress. In the moments before she sees the unidentifiable woman dive off her husband's boat, they share a seemingly intimate moment where he reaches for her affectionately.

[56] Illustration 19, Still from *Tenet,* Time Code 00:30:25.
[57] Illustration 20, Still from *Tenet,* Time Code 00:30:26.

 [58]

In this scene Sator's face is partially hidden to build suspense regarding his identity. However, even though Catherine is squarely in the centre of the frame, Sator controls the power in the way he reaches for her. This corroborates what Catherine tells the Protagonist about her husband controlling her. She is seen here as an object of his desire and, given that her body position is turned away from him and away from the camera, it is understood that his feelings are unrequited. When this scene is replayed, many of these elements will shift as Catherine has gained bravery and autonomy over the course of the narrative.

While Sator tries to realise the Grandfather Paradox and the Protagonist attempts to intervene, Catherine is manipulated by both men to different ends until she defies both parties to take matters into her own hands. This time, Catherine holds all the power as a result of the knowledge she has gained from her time with the Protagonist and Neil who have taught her about the Grandfather Paradox and temporal inversion.

[58] Illustration 21, Still from *Tenet,* Time Code 00:29:57.

 [59]

In the repetition of Catherine's memory where she tries to love Sator again, she instigates the romance. The attempt does not last as Catherine can no longer pretend to love the husband who is planning to destroy the world and everyone in it. Catherine changes her tone from temptress to assassin, positioning herself in a place of power by standing above Sator. Her power is compounded by the gun she points at him as well as a difference in her appearance that Nolan strategically withholds from Sator. While the viewer may notice that Catherine is not wearing the same clothes from the first presentation of this scene, Sator has not picked up on this detail. He assumes he is talking with his wife from their past, not the future. Before shooting Sator, Catherine lifts up her shirt to show Sator the scars that he left her with when he shot her with an inverted bullet in the turnstile.

[59] Illustration 22, Still from *Tenet,* Time Code 02:16:10.

 [60]

While the viewer has the rare position of foreknowledge regarding Catherine's scar, Sator is caught unaware. Though Sator believes that he holds all the power in their relationship and has been distracted by the temporal pincer movement occurring in the future at Stalsk-12, Catherine's scar shows him that he is dealing with a future version of his wife who is filled with vengeance and no longer afraid. Instead of waiting for the signal from the Protagonist that will give her permission to kill her husband, she acts autonomously. Having lived the scene already in the past, Catherine knows that her past self will be arriving with her son shortly. When she pushes Sator's dead body overboard and dives into the water, her past self catches a glimpse of her future self, revealing that it was Catherine who dove off the boat all along.

[60] Illustration 23, Still from *Tenet,* Time Code 02:16:21.

 [61]

 [62]

 [63]

[61] Illustration 24, Still from *Tenet,* Time Code 02:18:14.
[62] Illustration 25, Still from *Tenet,* Time Code 02:18:23.
[63] Illustration 26, Still from *Tenet,* Time Code 02:18:25.

Before diving off the boat, Catherine pauses to look at her past self pulling up with her son in the moment that started the circular narrative. Knowing that she has saved humanity and her son, she dives from the boat and is watched by her past self who the viewer already knows is envious of the freedom exhibited by the woman diving from the boat. While Catherine has completed her circular narrative, the greater opposing narratives between the Red and Blue Teams continue as they try to diffuse the algorithm Sator constructed.

While the plot of *Tenet* is so extraordinarily temporally complex that it could warrant its own thesis, *Tenet* is a good example of a micro-circular narrative. Returning to my illustration of the syuzhet in *Tenet,* one can see how Catherine's storyline connects the opposite temporal timelines of the Protagonist and Sator while also functioning as an inciting incident, moment of anagnorisis, and moment of resolution that contributes to the overarching plot.[64] Without Catherine seeing her future self diving off Sator's boat, she would never have begun the journey to stand up to her husband and take action to free herself. However, without killing Sator and diving from the boat, Catherine would have never inspired her past self to take action. Thus, her micro-circular narrative is both circular and recursive because she will always have to see her future self diving off the boat after killing her husband in order to spur her past self into killing her husband. Without Catherine continuing this circular journey in perpetuity, the larger plotline between the Protagonist and Neil traversing forward- and inverse-time cannot operate simultaneously.

The puzzle film narrative of *Tenet* distorts causality even beyond Catherine's circular narrative. In one of the last scenes after the algorithm has been dismantled at Stalsk-12, the viewer gets a glimpse of a potentially larger circular narrative that extends beyond the film syuzhet. The Protagonist, having been suspicious of Neil's prior knowledge of inversion throughout the entire film, finally asks Neil about the origins of his foreknowledge.

[64] See Illustration 15.

Protagonist: You're really going back in?
Neil: I'm the only one who could've got that door open…See that's me in there again, weaving another pass in the fabric of this mission.
Protagonist: Neil, wait.
Neil: We just saved the world, we can't leave anything to chance.
Protagonist: But can we change things if we do it differently?
Neil: What's happened's happened. Which is an expression of faith in the mechanics of the world, not an excuse to do nothing.
OMITTED
Protagonist: Hey, you never did tell me who recruited you.
Neil: Haven't you guessed by now? You did. Just not when you thought. You have a future in the past. Years ago for me. Years from now for you.
Protagonist: You've known me for years?
Neil: For me, I think this is the end of a beautiful friendship.
Protagonist: But for me it's just the beginning.

This passage hints that Neil has to keep reliving his own circular journey in order to ensure the outcome that has just been achieved is maintained. However, as is characteristic of puzzle films, with the denouement, there are many new questions raised in the denouement that the plot can never answer. Neil explains to the Protagonist that even though the world has been saved, things cannot be left to chance. He uses the phrase 'what's happened's happened' to imply that sequential orderings are set in stone. They cannot change, but they must be protected. Neil informs the Protagonist that he was the one who recruited Neil all along, but this took place long before the viewer first meets Neil in the syuzhet of the film. It is something that the viewer will never witness. Having seen Neil's death while attempting to pick the lock to the algorithm in Stalsk-12, however, the viewer realises that when Neil goes back into the field, it is with the knowledge that his mission will inevitably be suicidal. The Protagonist, on the other hand, has yet to experience the fullness of his grand role in the greater temporal pincer movement that encompasses the entire plot. Hence, the entire plot has the potential to be circular; because there is no definitive synchronisation or repetition of moments at the macro-level, one can only speculate on its complete form.

5.4.2. *Inception* (2010)

As a puzzle film, *Inception* uses embedded narratives that directly relate to each layer of the dream. Nolan's preoccupation with circles in comparison to linear shapes is a prominent theme in the narrative and in the shape of the narrative construction. Like a maze or a puzzle, *Inception* is a film that is 'intrinsically architectural':

> [It] not only feature[s an] intricately designed narrative but also foreground[s] and thematize[s] the architectural process involved in [its] own narrative construction; [it] features characters who are programmers, designers, and architects and [it] deploys a range of spatial metaphors—including lines, layers, and circles.[65]

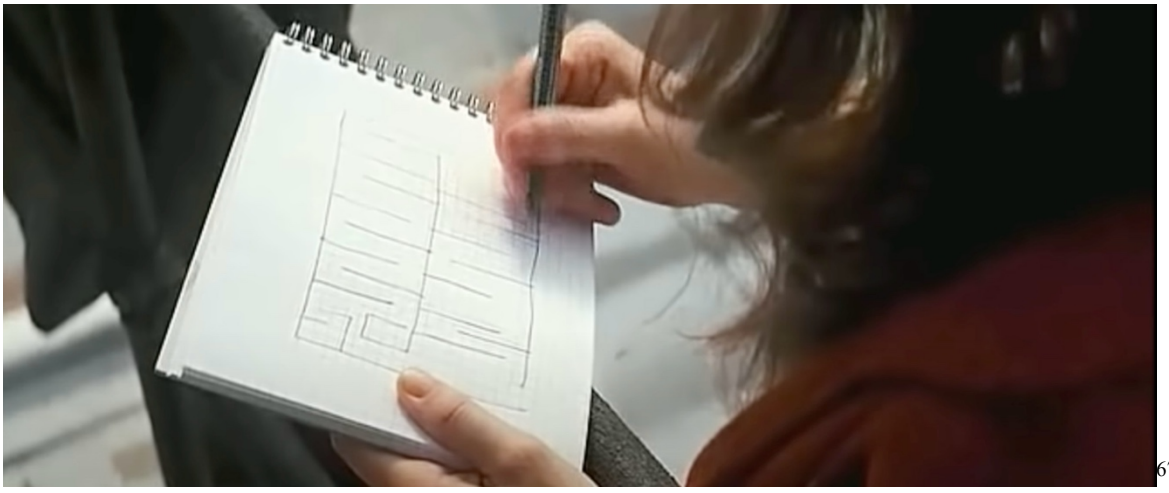
There are five levels of embedded narratives within *Inception.* The outermost layer is that of real life, and the innermost is limbo, with three layers of constructed dream-space existing in between the two. The viewer is never entirely sure if they experience the real life layer in this film or whether everything takes place in some level of the dreamworld. Each level of the dream-within-a-dream-within-a-dream that hosts the primary plot quest is architecturally structured through Ariadne who is the conduit through which the narrative relays a great deal of exposition to the viewer. Ariadne is able to ask questions that the viewer is likely wondering but cannot ask. Therefore, as Ariadne learns the rules of the storyworld, so does the viewer. The circular narrative in *Inception* is reflected through many circular symbols throughout the film.

[65] Allan Cameron and Richard Misek, 'Modular Spacetime in the "Intelligent" Blockbuster: *Inception* and *Source Code*' in *Hollywood Puzzle Films,* ed. by Warren Buckland (New York City: Routledge, 2014), pp. 109-24, (p. 110). This quote was originally written about two films—*Inception* and *Source Code*. Since *Source Code* is not relevant to this chapter, the quote was edited to change plural references to singular references.

[66]

One circular image is that of the clock face, a symbol of importance in *Inception* and *Interstellar* since time and temporal distortion/manipulation is a key theme in both films. The speed of the second hand in *Inception* moves in relation to reality. In the dream, the second hand moves a little slower than it does in reality. In deeper dream levels, the second hand moves even slower. In limbo, time becomes a concept that is totally abstract.

There are also allusions to circularity in the circular maze that Ariadne draws in her audition to become Cobb's (Leonardo DiCaprio) new architect, and in Cobb's explanation of simultaneous creation and perception.


[67]

[66] Illustration 27, Still from *Inception,* Time Code: 00:12:37.
[67] Illustration 28, Still from *Inception,* Time Code: 00:25:24.

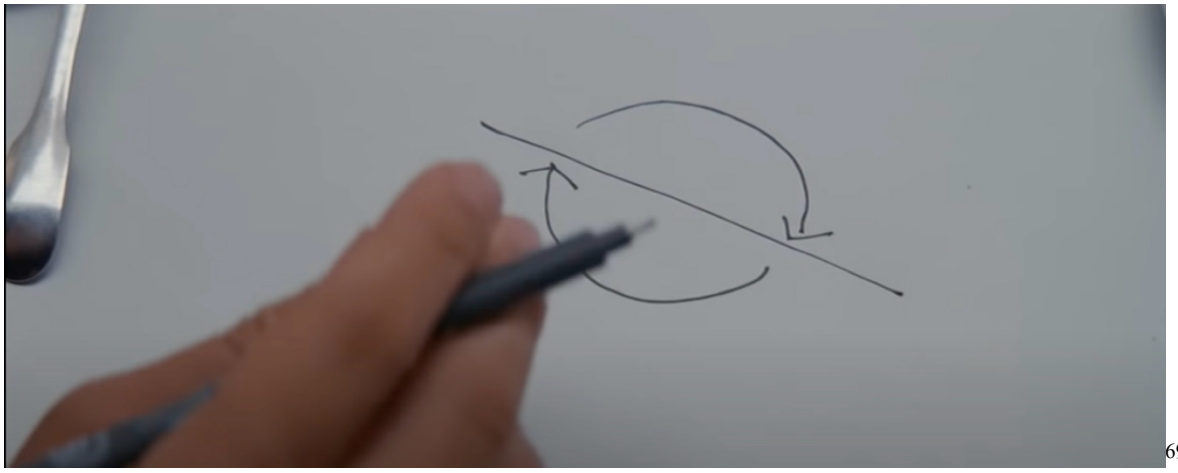
In these frames, Cobb asks Ariadne to design a puzzle with certain time parameters. When Ariadne thinks in terms of linear lines and boxes, she repeatedly fails Cobb's test. It is not until she begins to think outside of the proverbial (and literal) box, that she creates a circular maze that satisfies Cobb's criteria and provides a subtle nod to the way Nolan is constructing the narrative shape of the film.

 [68]

The importance of the circle is reiterated in Cobb's first lesson to Ariadne about designing and building the architecture of a dream reflected in the screenshot below and the surrounding dialogue:

> Cobb: Imagine you're designing a building, right? You consciously create each aspect, but sometimes it feels like it's almost creating itself, if you know what I mean.
> Ariadne: Yeah, like I'm discovering it.
> Cobb: Genuine inspiration. Now in a dream our mind continuously does that.
> Cobb: We create and perceive our world simultaneously, and our mind does this so well that we don't even know it's happening.

[68] Illustration 29, Still from *Inception,* Time Code: 00:25:39.

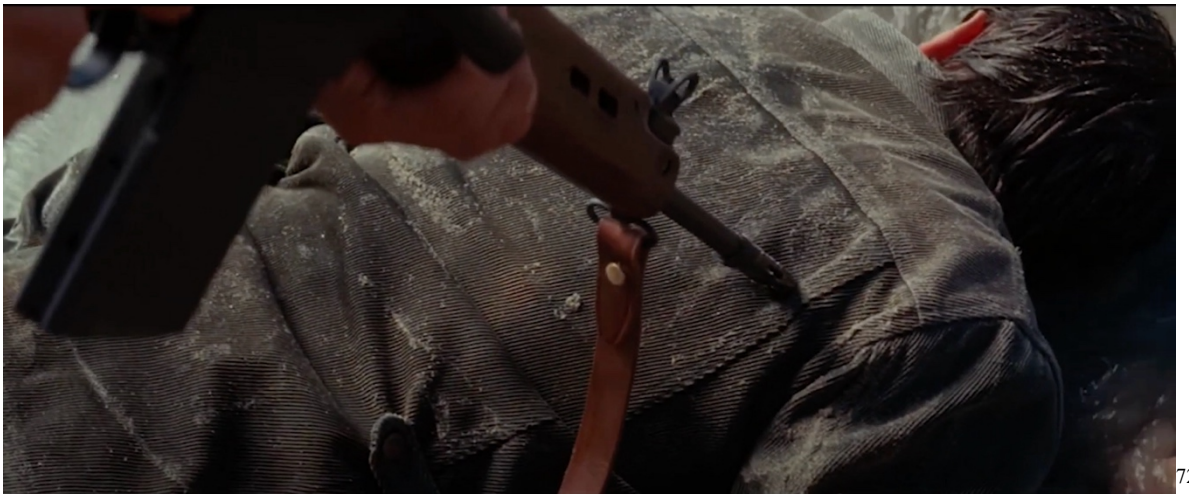
 [69]

When Cobb draws the two circular arrows forming two halves of a whole circle, he is explaining the symbiotic relationship that a dreamer undergoes in creating and experiencing the dreamworld simultaneously. The viewer is educated on the psychology of dreaming through the conversational exposition between Cobb and Ariadne: 'Let me ask you a question. You never remember the beginning of your dreams, do you? You just turn up in the middle of what's going on.' Here, Cobb indirectly explains *in media res* to Ariadne and the viewer in this quote. Just as *in media res* plays a role in all circular narratives, Nolan uses it to begin this puzzle film. The viewer is thrown into the middle of an ongoing action in a strange environment with no context just as if one were entering the dream-state. The following three screenshots from the *in media res* beginning both provide a great deal of information and raise many questions within the first two minutes of the film. These frames will be repeated almost exactly to complete the circular narrative after arranging the structural coincidences to converge in a moment of recognition triggered by the repetition.

[69] Illustration 30, Still from *Inception,* Time Code: 00:26:36.

 [70]

 [71]

 [72]

[70] Illustration 31, Still from *Inception,* Time Code: 00:00:57.
[71] Illustration 32, Still from *Inception,* Time Code: 00:01:04.
[72] Illustration 33, Still from *Inception,* Time Code: 00:01:24.

These frames provide the viewer with structural coincidences that they do not yet know will be structural coincidences. The viewer assumes that Cobb, the man who washes up onto the beach, will be the protagonist based on the fact that he is the first character that the viewer meets. This triggers the working memory to note that his importance going forward. The working memory is secondarily drawn to the two faceless children on the beach who seem drastically out of place in such a harsh natural environment. Their pastel-coloured, flowing clothes are a sharp juxtaposition of innocence and freedom in comparison to the surrounding scenery. The juxtaposition is further intensified by the guard with a semi-automatic machine gun who discovers that Cobb is also armed. All of these visual stimuli send up flags to the working memory to store this information and try to make sense of it going forward, prompting the viewer to become actively engaged.

The second part of the opening sequence changes location to a fortress with traditional Japanese décor. Cobb is dragged by armed guards before an old man, Saito (Ken Watanabe), who is presented with Cobb's gun and a metal spinning top.

 [73]

In this frame, Nolan chooses to show the circular top in sharp focus in the foreground while the gun is blurred in the background. The close up shot of the top signifies that it is an object of importance, even more important than the gun. The viewer is told through subtitles that

[73] Illustration 34, Still from *Inception,* Time Code: 00:01:49.

Cobb asked for Saito by name, establishing at least a one-way recognition between the two characters. The first line of dialogue spoken in English is asked by Saito to Cobb: 'Are you here to kill me?' The viewer is led to assume that this line is in response to Cobb's gun. The line opens the possibility for an adversarial relationship between the two characters as it sounds like the anticipation of a threat. However, it is spoken in such a way that it shows Saito seems more amused than angered or scared.

Saito then quickly turns his attention, and therefore the viewer's attention as well, back to the spinning top: 'I know what this is. I've seen one before, many many years ago. It belonged to a man I met in a half-remembered dream.' The turn of phrase here is curious because it fails to show recognition of Cobb. Instead, Saito remembers the totem, not the man. Saito associates the top with a man he once knew, but he does not explicitly tie the totem to Cobb. This bit of dialogue triggers the predictive inference part of the working memory to add even greater significance to the top as it has now been visually *and* audibly featured. As Saito spins the top, setting it into a spinning circular motion, the viewer is subliminally made aware of the importance of circularity that will continue to be prominent throughout the cinematic imagery and narrative structure.

 [74]

[74] Illustration 35, Still from *Inception,* Time Code: 00:02:32.

As the top spins, the scene changes for the first time. The location remains the same, yet the version of Saito introduced in the opening sequence as an old man is now replaced by a man the viewer is led to assume is a younger version of Saito due to the fact that he is sitting in the exact same chair in the exact same room. Cobb, now clean shaven and dressed in a suit, remains in the room, alerting the viewer to a temporal shift even though there has been no spatial shift. The spacial shift sets up the notion of layers of time nested within each other. The spinning top gains significance as Cobb uses it to determine which level is reality. The revelation of the top's significance also gives the viewer a way to judge what may or may not be a dream going forward in the narrative. While the second level dream located at the Japanese fortress shows greater and greater instability as Saito becomes aware that he is dreaming, the editing intercuts simultaneous events happening at the first level dream in Saito's apartment in the middle of a war-torn street as well as the level of reality on the bullet train.

The last structural coincidence of importance connecting the opening scene to its repetition later on in the syuzhet is a repeated line spoken first by Saito to entice Cobb to take the job to create inception. Saito asks Cobb: 'Do you want to take a leap of faith, or become an old man, filled with regret, waiting to die alone?' The line serves as an audible catalyst to the viewer to connect the two ends of the circle together when it eventually triggers Saito to come out of limbo and return to reality.

In the first level of the dream when Saito is shot, the phrase is repeated a second time, emphasizing its importance even more.

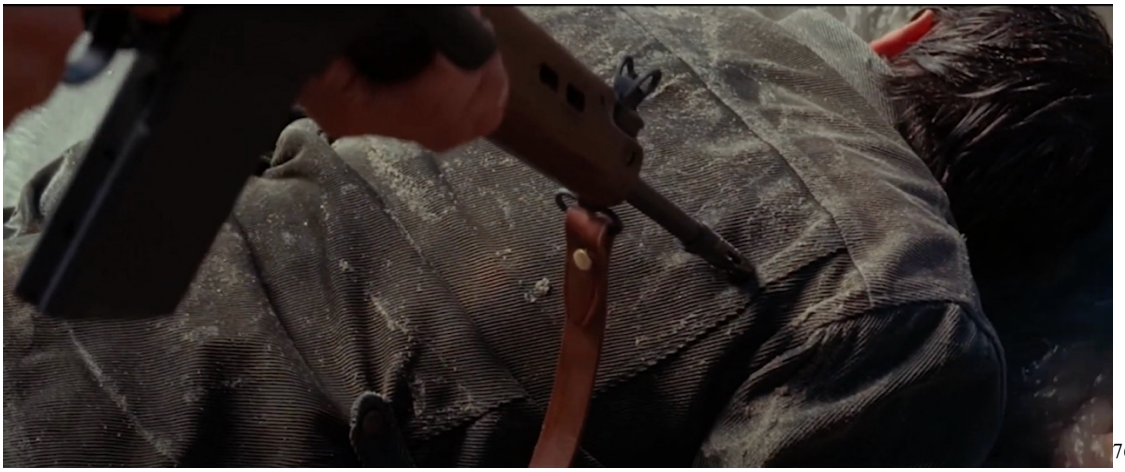
> Cobb: You're going to be lost down there so long that you're gonna become an old man.
> Saito: Filled with regret.
> Cobb: Waiting to die alone.

With each repetition, the dialogue becomes more significant and prompts the viewer's working memory to store it away as something of potential importance to be recognised later on. When the viewer watches Cobb wash up on the beach in limbo for the second time, it provides a

visual reminder of the opening sequence and suggests that the viewer should notice what is new and different in this iteration. Given what the viewer has learned through Cobb's history with his late-wife Mal (Marion Cotilliard), viewers now realise that one can spend decades in limbo. Therefore, it is understandable that Saito could have become the old man first presented at the start.

 [75]

In this repetition, Cobb's two children are no longer shown playing on the beach before Saito's guards discover Cobb's gun and take him to see Saito.

 [76]

[75] Illustration 36, Still from *Inception,* Time Code: 02:15:26.
[76] Illustration 37, Still from *Inception,* Time Code: 02:15:32.

Cobb sits before Saito in the traditionally decorated Japanese-style fortress and the opening dialogue is repeated, but an omitted piece from the first iteration is added, and the lines are redistributed by the characters:

> Saito: So… have you come to kill me? *I've been waiting for someone to come for me…* *
> Cobb: Someone from your half-remembered dream…?
> Saito: *Cobb? Not possible—he and I were young men together. And I am an old man…*
> Cobb: *Filled with regret?*
> Saito: *Waiting to die alone, yes.*
> *Cobb: I came back for you… I came to remind you of what you once knew… That this world is not real.*
> *Saito: You came to convince me to honour our agreement.*
> Cobb: *Yes, and to take a leap of faith. Come back, and we'll be young men together again.*[77]

The viewer now understands why, when Saito asked if Cobb was there to kill him at the beginning of the syuzhet, he did not seem angered or afraid. Now Saito's face is shown to be hopeful as he says this line. The italicised lines, omitted from the first exchange, show that Saito has been waiting to be killed in order to wake up from limbo. When Cobb finishes Saito's line about being 'an old man filled with regret,' it not only triggers the viewer's memory but spurs both Cobb and Saito to remember what has propelled them from stasis into action in the past. Saito remembers his agreement with Cobb and knows that he will become a young man again when they wake up back in reality. At the end of this re-presentation of the opening sequence without the purposefully omitted materials, the syuzhet has now circled back on itself through the use of repeated visual imagery and repeated dialogue.

As is typical in puzzle film narrative form, the end circumvents traditional Hollywood closure. The film's narrative ends with Cobb spinning the top totem one final time after being reunited with his children. Rather than toppling to indicate that Cobb is back in reality, the top wobbles a few times before the film cuts to black with the top still mid-spin. Viewers are left to employ teleological retrospect in order to decide whether Cobb is in reality or still dreaming.

[77] Italics mine to denote line omitted from first presentation.

Though the viewer is shown the faces of Cobb's children's for the first time in the entire film, implying that time has progressed beyond the dream loop where all Cobb could see was his children's backs, Nolan does not to give the viewer the finality they so crave, thus keeping this puzzle film a puzzle.

5.4.3. *Interstellar* (2014)

In *Interstellar,* the eternalist idea that 'present, past, and future are all equally real and equally existent' plays a prominent role in the plot's circular narrative.[78] *Interstellar* also explores the Twin Paradox that I discussed briefly earlier in this chapter.[79] Instead of using twins, *Interstellar* explores temporal relativity using a father/daughter dynamic with the general idea that 'the astronaut…moves at a very high velocity, and so his rate of time has been significantly slowed down compared to the rate of time on Earth. For this reason, the time that went by on the spaceship was shorter than the time that went by on Earth.'[80] The Twin Paradox is hinted at when Cooper tells Murph goodbye, gives her the watch that matches his, and he tells her, 'By the time I get back, we might even be the same age.' While eternalism and the Twin Paradox are two ways that Nolan manipulates understanding of time, he also introduces the idea of spacetime curvature to help create the circular narrative. Spacetime curvature is actually a theoretical scientific phenomenon that Sean Carroll defines as a close loop in time and space:

> If spacetime were curved…a remarkable thing would happen: We would travel on a time-like path, always moving forward into our future light cone, and yet eventually meet ourselves at some moment in our past. That is, our world line could describe a closed loop in space, so that it intersected itself, bringing us at one moment in our lives face-to-face with ourselves at some other moment.[81]

[78] Carlo Rovelli, *The Order of Time* (New York City: Riverhead Books, 2018), p. 108.
[79] See Chapter Five, p. 207.
[80] Halperin, pp. 108-09.
[81] Carroll, p. 96.

In *Interstellar,* Cooper meets himself in his curved spacetime when he crosses the wormhole and enters the fifth dimension where he becomes Murph's ghost. Dr Brand (Anne Hathaway) also crosses herself when she experiences a phenomenon of 'the first handshake' in space, not realising that she would be shaking her own hand as she orbited close to Gargantua. Carroll writes that 'the curvature of spacetime…brings you into contact with your own past. This is a central feature of general relativity.'[82] The curvature of spacetime also attempts to explain how this phenomenon of crossing one's own timeline could occur and how a circular narrative can create a closed loop that must perpetually repeat itself because it is 'depressingly predestined…to come back precisely to the state in which it started.'[83] The narrative of *Interstellar* circles back not to the opening scene, but precisely to the point where the inciting incident of Cooper and Murph interpreting the code left by her ghost occurs.

The syuzhet of *Interstellar* uses the eternalism of time and the Twin Paradox to turn the relationship between cause and effect on its head as the viewer, through teleological retrospect, is caused to question the chicken-and-egg paradox. One way that Nolan attempts to help the viewer ponder this puzzle is by presenting a semiotic temporal reference point in Murph's watch. Bordwell observes that a watch can serve as a 'conventional means of signalling the relations between syuzhet and fabula,' and Nolan uses the watch in *Inception* to show the relativity of time between dream levels.[84] In *Interstellar,* the watch is used as the device that shows the existence of a temporal paradox across multiple dimensions and still allows the protagonists a means to communicate that leads to a narrative denouement. *Interstellar* is deceptive in that it gives the illusion of a simple, linear narrative that then circles back on itself by merging past, present, and future. In creating a circular narrative and erasing the distinction between past, present, and future, the film suddenly becomes quite complex narratively and

[82] Ibid, p. 97.
[83] Ibid, p. 104.
[84] Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film.* p. 80.

wakes the viewer out of a passive viewing state where they must invoke teleological retrospect to recall the subtle structural coincidences from their working memory.

The originating event is actually introduced in the title frame, but the structural coincidence is planted shortly thereafter when ten-year-old Murph observes a strange force pushing books off of her bookcase. In the title frame, shown below, the entirety of the film's major symbolic set pieces are shown at a glance: Murph's bookcase, a toy space ship, and the floating dust that represents the decaying situation of the earth as well as the gravitational anomaly that 'speaks' to Murph's father, Cooper.

[85]

The one important item missing from this frame is the watch which is given to Murph by Cooper, but which Murph casts aside and forgets about for many years in the fabula timeline. Given Nolan's strategic attention to detail as a storyteller and filmmaker, it is likely that the watch is purposefully left out of the opening frame for several reasons. The most likely reason is so that the viewer is not alerted to it right away. Instead, by focusing on the spaceship, the viewer is guided to focus on the assumption that there will be interstellar space travel to come. Another reason the watch is likely omitted from the opening frame is to symbolise the aspect of forgotten time that plays a prominent theme. Time is also left out of Professor Brand's

[85] Illustration 38, Still from *Interstellar,* Time Code: 00:00:07.

(Michael Caine) equation, and time seems to be forgotten when Adult Murph (Jessica Chastain) first records a message to Cooper explaining that he had once said they would be reunited when Murph turned the same age as Cooper when he left. Lastly, time is forgotten in the physical aspect of the watch itself which Murph casts aside in her anger at Cooper for leaving her. The watch is forgotten about for years, though it is the key to reuniting Murph and Cooper *and* saving humanity. Since this is a puzzle film, Nolan holds this key piece of evidence from the opening frame and delays the importance of the watch until later on in the narrative.

The last element of the opening frame to be discussed is the bookshelf filled with books. Nolan places the bookshelf and bookcase in the background, again drawing the viewer's attention more toward the foregrounded objects of the spaceship and falling dust. However, the bookshelf/books, like the omitted watch, play an important role and are more than a background set piece. Young Murph refers to the books falling off her bookcase as the communication efforts of an unknown 'ghost' trying to convey a message. Nolan subtly misleads viewer perception in the opening image by omitting or putting into the background the most important elements of the film narrative and focusing the camera's gaze on two objects that play more of a minor role. Even though interstellar space travel is the vehicle to move the narrative along and the dust is the means which leads the characters to NASA, it is the watch and the phenomenon of Murph's 'ghost' pushing books off of her bookshelf that actually help reunite her with Cooper to close the circular narrative.

Murph's ghost is first mentioned when Young Murph hears Cooper waking from a nightmare and tells him: 'I thought you were my ghost.' The viewer is led to infer that Young Murph heard scary noises in the middle of the night and assigned their presence to a 'ghost' or spirit. Though Murph's face is disguised somewhat by the darkness of the frame, her voice and demeanour are calm. What the viewer does not yet realise is that Nolan has just given away the ending to the film in this simple line because it turns out that Cooper *is* Murph's ghost. At this

moment, however, Cooper disregards her concern, leading the viewer to also disregard the major plot reveal.

Murph's 'ghost' continues to be a talking point for her, though the viewer will not take it seriously, just as Cooper does not take it seriously until he sees the phenomenon of the dust settling into binary lines in Murph's room.

 [86]

While Cooper is focused on the gravitational anomaly spelling out coordinates in binary, Murph is more focused on the missing books that have been pushed out of her bookcase in the background behind Cooper.

 [87]

[86] Illustration 39, Still from *Interstellar,* Time Code: 00:20:57.
[87] Illustration 40, Still from *Interstellar,* Time Code: 00:21:36.

Young Murph believes her 'ghost' is speaking to her in Morse code through the pattern that the 'ghost' pushes the books off of her shelves.

After Cooper agrees to go on the NASA space exploration, several things happen in quick succession that build the structural coincidence surrounding the ghost which the working memory will call upon later at the moment of anagnorisis. Young Murph and Cooper have the following exchange before he leaves:

> Cooper: After you kids came along, your mom, she said something to me I never quite understood. She said, 'Now we're just here to be memories for our kids.' And I think I now understood what she meant. Once you're a parent, you're the ghost of your children's future.
> Murph: You said ghosts don't exist.
> Cooper: That's right. I can't be your ghost right now. I need to exist. Because they chose me. They chose me, Murph. You saw it. You're the one that led me to them.
> Murph: That's exactly why you can't go. I figured out the message. It was Morse code…
> Cooper: Murph—
> Murph: One word. You know what it is? 'Stay.' It says, 'Stay,' Dad.

Again, Nolan gives away the plot twist in this exchange of dialogue when Cooper tells Young Murph that parents exist to be the ghosts of their kids' futures. Cooper thinks he is speaking metaphorically, but he is actually speaking literally: He *is* the 'ghost' of Young Murph's present and future. This will be revealed later and raise the question of *how* Cooper could have been Young Murph's ghost in that moment while also physically being present in the past. Cooper is the force behind Young Murph's bookcase spelling out the message to 'stay' in Morse code as he is also *in* Young Murph's bedroom giving her the watch that will serve as their means of communication in the future.

 [88]

Cooper explains that when he is traveling through space, time will run more slowly for him, introducing the concept of the Twin Paradox and temporal relativity into the narrative. However, just when Nolan introduces something of importance, he asks the viewer to mentally throw it away as Young Murph physically throws the watch away.

 [89]

Throughout Act One, *Interstellar* appears to be a linear film, but this changes at the Act 2 break when Cooper is sent into outer space and Nolan begins to invoke 'non-traditional non-linearity.' In using this phrase, I am making a distinction from the way non-linearity typically uses analepses and prolepses to fill in missing information in a linear primary storyline. *Interstellar* does not use flashbacks and flashforwards the way they are commonly used

[88] Illustration 41, Still from *Interstellar,* Time Code: 00:39:27.
[89] Illustration 42, Still from *Interstellar,* Time Code: 00:40:12.

because the film does not present time as a linear concept. Since time is presented as existing all at once and the speed of time being a variable concept, when *Interstellar* cuts back-and-forth between Cooper and Murph's storylines, the viewer thinks they are watching simultaneous plotlines; however, they are really experiencing flashbacks and flashforwards because time is relative and moving at different speeds for Cooper and Murph, not occurring simultaneously.

As Cooper travels through space time, he has a conversation that will factor into the moment of anagnorisis that sets up the denouement. As Cooper and Dr Brand (Anne Hathaway) head to Miller's planet, Romilly (David Gyasi) stays behind to analyse quantum data surrounding the black hole, Gargantua, in an attempt to solve the problem of singularity. A black hole is another real scientific phenomenon defined as 'an object with a gravitational field so enormous that even light cannot escape…and whose center is a singularity in spacetime; this center would be a place where it seems spacetime is either terribly weird or perhaps no longer exists.'[90] Because no scientific data has, as yet, been collected from the centre of a black hole, Nolan uses this gap in the scientific knowledge base to introduce some fantasy elements. As the spaceship sends data to Romilly, he tells Cooper: 'If we could see the collapsed star inside [the black hole], the singularity, we'd solve gravity.'[91] At first, this sounds like mere jargon, but it foreshadows what is to come since the seeds of gravity's importance were already planted through the binary coding in Young Murph's bedroom.

By sending Cooper into the blackhole to solve the question of singularity, Nolan uses his imagination to present the viewer with a hypothetical solution that includes multiple dimensions and using gravity as a portal to a mythical fifth dimension. Nolan plays with the

[90] Paul. J. Nahin, *Time Machine: Time Travel in Physics, Metaphysics, and Science Fiction* (New York City: Springer-Verlag, 1993), p. 59.
[91] Singularity is defined by Nahin as 'infinitely dense and ha[ving] a gravity field infinitely strong…through which anything can fall into the hole, but through which nothing, not even photons can escape' (Ibid).

idea of gravity as a fifth dimension which allows a person to transcend the other four dimensions of infinite time and space. When Cooper sacrifices himself to a black hole which brings him to the fifth dimension, gravity allows him to communicate across time and space to Young Murph. Cooper's communication from the fifth dimension to Young Murph is the unknown yet familiar phenomenon which she calls her 'ghost.' As Cooper falls into the Tesseract, Nolan 'repeats' images that the viewer has already seen earlier in the syuzhet but uses different angles. The viewer sees the backside of Murph's bookcase in her room as the moment of anagnorisis is revealed that Cooper is Murph's 'ghost.' Through the bookcase, the viewer sees Cooper's point of view as he shoves her books off the shelf from inside the tesseract.

 [92]

The viewer remembers the image of the fallen books from Act One, even though the image itself is different.

[92] Illustration 43, Still from *Interstellar,* Time Code: 02:21:59.

 [93]

The images do not have to be exactly the same to trigger the working memory to connect the image of the fallen books from earlier in the syuzhet because the overall gist of the image is what is remembered, not the specifics. The books are just the trigger that begins to connect the narrative circle. Nolan shows several other 'new' angles of prior information to help the viewer recall the scene when Cooper left.

 [94]

The viewer is given an outside perspective that shows never before seen footage from the scene where Cooper leaves. The viewer sees the moment before Cooper comes in to say goodbye to Young Murph. This is intercut with Adult Murph in her old bedroom trying to remember the past as a way to save humanity's future. To give the viewer a glimpse of Murph engaging with

[93] Illustration 44, Still from *Interstellar,* Time Code: 00:40:55.
[94] Illustration 45, Still from *Interstellar,* Time Code: 02:22:43.

her memories, Nolan intercuts Adult Murph in her bedroom with Young Murph. The difference is where Cooper is in relation to these two temporal moments. While Cooper is outside the physical door with Young Murph, Cooper is also outside the bedroom in the tesseract trying to communicate with Adult Murph. In the tesseract, he is allowed to witness past, present, and future converge in a way that Murph cannot.

 [95]

 [96]

As the viewer assumes Cooper's avatar from the fifth dimension, allowing them to see Young Murph's and Adult Murph's timelines 'simultaneously,' Cooper remembers the way her ghost communicated by pushing the books off of the bookshelf. The viewer sees Cooper push the books off the shelf and realises this was not an action to catch Murph's attention but to catch

[95] Illustration 46, Still from *Interstellar,* Time Code: 02:23:18.
[96] Illustration 47, Still from *Interstellar,* Time Code: 02:23:21.

his own attention. At the same time that this is happening, Adult Murph is also pulling the books off of her shelf to replicate the message she had seen as a young girl. From Cooper's perspective, the viewer sees Young Murph staring at the bookshelf and digging out her notebook to decipher the code:

 [97]

In the meantime, Adult Murph stares at the bookcase and puts the one missing object from the title frame at the beginning of the film—the watch—on the shelf where it should have been but was forgotten until this point:


[98]

As Murph places the watch on the bookshelf and begins to put the pieces together regarding the watch and the message in Morse code, she finally has her moment of recognition, realising

[97] Illustration 48, Still from *Interstellar,* Time Code: 02:24:37.
[98] Illustration 49, Still from *Interstellar,* Time Code: 02:24:42.

that Cooper is and was her ghost. This recognition closes the temporal loop of the narrative circle, conjoining two seemingly unrelated temporal events into a unified whole. Adult Murph understands that her ghost was communicating both in Morse, as she had originally thought, and also in binary as Cooper had realised. Now that Murph recognises the fact that Cooper is and was her ghost, she begins searching for the way that he is trying to communicate with her now and the future. She discovers the mode of communication through the second-hand on her watch, which is no longer moving in a forward motion but rather mirroring Morse code as Cooper spells out his message from the fifth dimension.

 [99]

Murph's rediscovery of the watch recalls the discussion Cooper had with Romilly and Dr Brand about love being something that transcends dimensions. With Cooper inside the black hole and the robot TARS possessing the quantum information to solve singularity, Cooper realises that love is how he will be able to transmit the data to Murph using gravity as the means to spell out the message in Morse code via the watch's second hand.

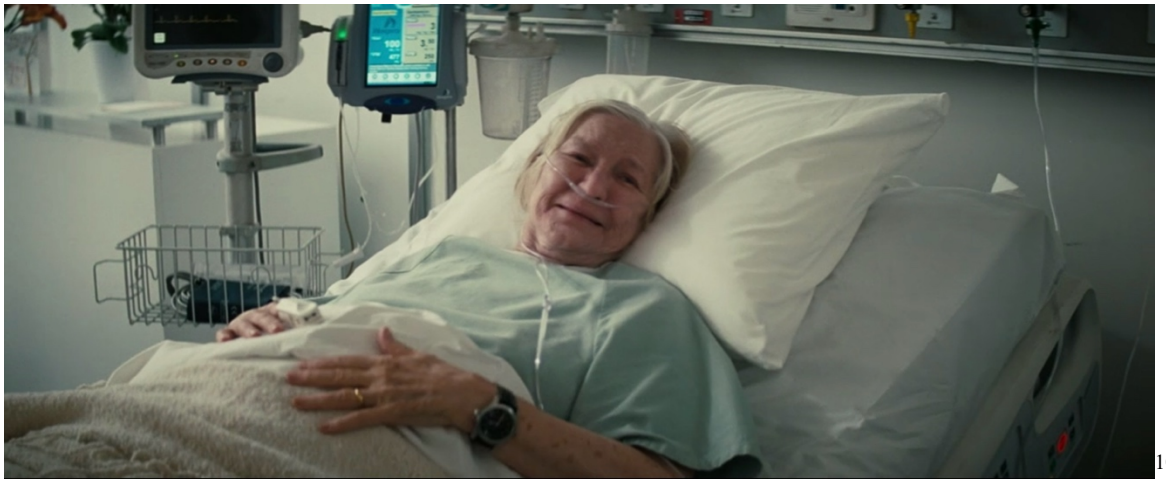
> Cooper: Don't you see, TARS? I brought myself here. We're here to communicate with the three-dimensional world. We're the bridge. I thought they chose me—they never chose me—they chose Murph.
> TARS: For what?
> Cooper: To save the world. They have access to infinite time and infinite space but no way to find what they need, but I can find Murph and find a way to tell her like I found this moment.
> TARS: How?

[99] Illustration 50, Still from *Interstellar,* Time Code: 02:32:03.

OMITTED
Cooper: The watch. That's it. She'll come back for it.
TARS: How do you know?
Cooper: Because I gave it to her. We use the second hand. Translate the data into Morse and feed it to me.
TARS: What if she never comes back for it?
Cooper: She will. Because I gave it to her.

Murph does come back for the watch and, upon realizing that her dad was the ghost the entire time, notices the second hand moving in dots and dashes. The self-fulfilling prophecy that Cooper shared when he first left now gains new meaning: When Cooper told Murph that parents were just the ghosts of their children's future, he literally became her ghost so that he could communicate with in her future.

While the narrative loop is closed through the anagnorisis that Cooper is Murph's ghost, there is a secondary moment of anagnorisis. When Old Murph is reunited with Cooper, who has aged only in years but not in physical appearance, the viewer's working memory should recognise Old Murph from the opening interview.

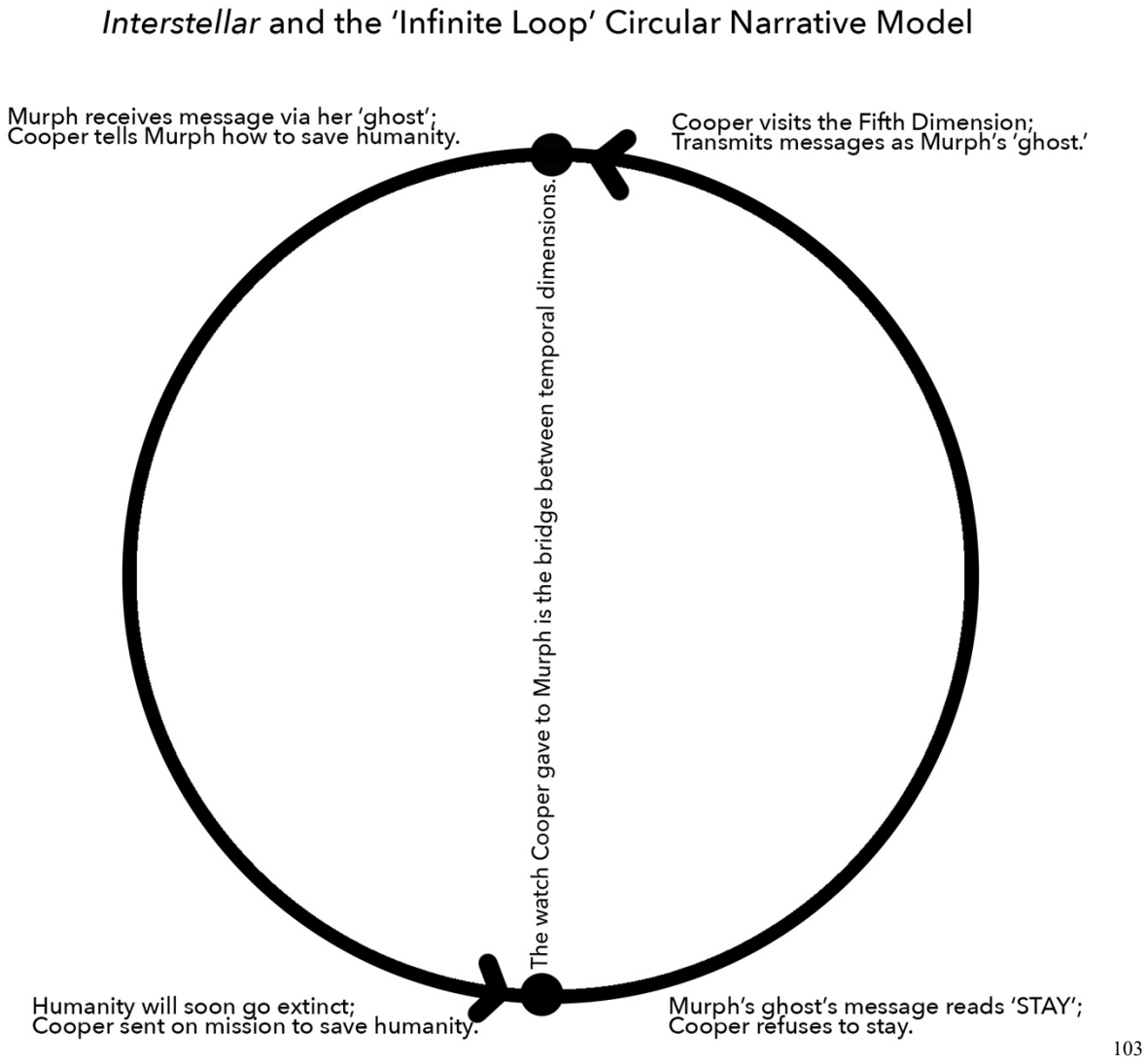
 [100]

[100] Illustration 51, Still from *Interstellar,* Time Code: 02:40:11.

 [101]

Though Cooper could not get Young Murph to stop him from leaving, from the fifth dimension Cooper was able to communicate with Adult Murph so he could be reunited with Old Murph in the future. Because of time existing all at once, the two were able to save each other across dimensions, resulting in the closing the second narrative circle at the denouement. Because of the way events are structured in the film, both Cooper and Murph must continue to make their same decisions continuously to ensure the same denouement is reached, thus perpetuating an infinite loop circular narrative like that seen in Chapter Two with *DODO*.[102]

[101] Illustration 52, Still from *Interstellar,* Time Code: 00:01:17.
[102] See Chapter Two, p. 97.



[103]

This figure illustrates how the infinite loop must continue the same sequence lest the integrity of the circular narrative fall apart. *Interstellar* is distinct from *DODO* because not only is the syuzhet circular, but the fabula is as well. Cooper must ignore Murph's warning to 'stay' so that he can continually go into the black hole and communicate back to her as her ghost; each event relies on the sequential ordering of the other events in a symbiotic relationship so that the denouement connects the dots to reach the same conclusion. In order for Murph to save the

[103] Illustration 53, The 'Infinite Loop' Circular Narrative Model, created by Stephanie Katz—for larger version, see Appendix 13.

world and reunite with Cooper, Cooper must continue to leave on the suicidal space mission so that he can transcend dimensions to relay information back to Murph.

Interstellar relies heavily on structural coincidences to build circularity, and it keeps the denouement in front of the viewer's subconscious rather than explicitly at the forefront. When the narrative circles back on itself, it revisits these elements with newfound viewer recognition as to their significance due to teleological retrospect. Teleological retrospect helps the viewer to connect the proverbial dots that were initially overlooked or taken for granted in the context of the greater narrative. In this paradoxical method of storytelling, the puzzle comes as the viewer must question which came first: Cooper communicating from the fifth dimension as Murph's ghost to gain Young Murph's attention *or* Young Murph noticing her 'ghost' in order to leading Cooper to NASA and the journey that would take him away from her. To find the answer, one must put aside the traditional linear understanding of time and accept time as existing all at once in a symbiotic relationship—or in a giant circle.

5.5. Conclusion

Unlike novels which can take days/weeks/months to read, one can usually consume a film in a single uninterrupted sitting. Because film condenses time so that a viewer can experience an entire narrative in a two-hour block, the working memory does not have to store plot information for the greater length of time it takes one to read a novel. The memory storage in watching a film is more easily and more accurately accessible for the viewer to reflect upon; whereas, during the reading experience details relating to structural coincidences can be forgotten, making it more difficult for the memory to recognise repetition or structural connections. Therefore, the multisensory experience of film, the condensing of time on behalf of the viewer, and the editing techniques that trigger working memory with immediacy give films the potential to be a more successful vehicle for circular narratives. Nolan's films, in

particular, are 'designed to entrap and ennoble their protagonists as well as beguile and bedevil their audiences'[104]—a feat that Nolan's circular narratives do with overwhelming narrative efficiency. Even after the film ends, a Nolan film 'cannot be unwatched. It isn't even really over. In many ways, it has only just begun.'[105] This is certainly the case for the viewer attempting to unravel the inverted causation of *Tenet,* the simple time-loop that spans five spatio-temporalities in *Inception,* or the impossible fabula of *Interstellar's* infinite loop.

This chapter has focused specifically on the films of Christopher Nolan because he has developed a signature style of narrative craftsmanship that utilises circular narrative. However, there is greater application for the concepts discussed in this chapter and the methods of analysis used to be applied to other films. This chapter was intended to illustrate the diversity of media that circular narrative can be applied to, and this extends well beyond the work of one director. Understanding how audiovisual storytelling media like film and television series speak to viewers on a multisensory level, engaging working memory in multiple facets for more immediate recall of important plot information, provides a groundwork for viewer response to be studied more in-depth in relation to circular narrative, puzzle films and mind-game films, and cognitive film theory in general. Furthermore, the technical side of filmmaking such as the editing technique and roles of the movement image and time image also provide the tools to deconstruct film narratives and to search for other circular narrative works that will continue broadening the application of this typology.

In reflecting upon the circular narratives of both the literary and the audiovisual media types, both forms can help with the analysis of circular narrative going forward. The puzzle film genre has many relevant tropes that are applicable to the novels that I examined despite the fact that there is no literary equivalent to this genre. I focused on the science-fantasy hybrid

[104] Shone, p. 45.
[105] Ibid, p. 6.

genre because it was the closest category that offered examples of narratives that pushed the boundaries of understanding time. However, science-fantasy lacks a real-world grounding that the puzzle film genre allows for as I demonstrated in the case of *Tenet.* Science-fantasy can rely too much on the fantastic and impossible to tamper with temporality whereas the puzzle film genre streamlines the narrative modality. It is possible that literary circular narratives exist in other genres, but science-fantasy is most associated with temporal manipulation through devices like paradox and time travel. The puzzle film genre opens the possibility for other genres such as mysteries and psychological thrillers to readily contribute circular narrative offerings that would be much more difficult to identify through literary searches.

While genre is one crossover feature that can aid analysis of circular narratives across media types, one area where literary theory is stronger is in the analysis of the consumer. Reader response provides far more tools to examine reception and recognition of circular narrative than is currently accessible through cognitive media theory. The division between sensory perception, memory storage and recall, and narrative understanding are drastically compartmentalised from each other. There is far more emphasis on empirical research in film viewership than in comprehension of narrative design.

Tenet, Inception, and *Interstellar* all illustrate how circular narrative, as a narrative framework, can be applied to multimedia narratives such as stand-alone films. These films also confirm that the literary criteria I established in Chapter One for the analysis of circular narratives hold strong in application to other media. Not only do the structural narrative criteria crossover from the literary narrative to the cinematic narrative, but there is an argument to be made that from the viewer response standpoint, circular narrative is easier to recognise because of its multi-sensory facets. The immediacy of recalled images and sound cues used in cinema to trigger the viewer's working memory helps the viewer to recognise repetition and connection faster. The multi-sensory narrative vehicle that films utilise also provide more immediate

engagement with the viewer, quicker manipulation of sequential ordering through editing techniques, and cause the viewer to continually make and revise predictive inferences that may or may not be confirmed through teleological retrospect. Therefore, inclusion of circular audiovisual narratives such as *Doctor Who* in the last chapter and Nolan's films in this chapter create cross-disciplinary relevance for continued discussion of circular narrative in literature and in the visual arts.

CONCLUSION

Over the course of this thesis, I have created a framework for typifying circular narrative as an autonomous narrative form. I have shown how circular narrative is different from existing narrative typologies, established criteria that govern how it functions as a narrative form, and presented several variations that the form can assume when applied to specific literary and multimedia narrative works. While narratology, as an academic field, has been distracted by other interests, I discovered in my reading of science-fiction and fantasy literature that circular narrative was being used by authors but had not yet been studied in depth by critics. In my research into narratology, it was surprising to see how the field had failed to keep up with experimental narrative forms that authors were already widely using. Circular narrative was a model that I saw used repeatedly in twenty-first century science fiction and fantasy works, but I did not anticipate that its usage dated back to Heliodorus' *Aethiopica.*

In examining *Aethiopica* compared to the contemporary novels in this thesis, I noticed distinct structural patterns develop. Those patterns—including the *in media res* beginning, the use of overt and covert structural coincidences, and a denouement that revisits the *in media res* beginning after providing the reader with much greater narrative context—guided my research into circular narrative and enabled me to define circular narrative as a new narrative typology. By listing common structural elements and themes pertaining to circular narrative, I have shown that it is a form that adheres to narrative conventions which prevent it from being improperly categorised as unnatural, as some critics have attempted to do.

In addition to the structural framework I set forth, I also uncovered the importance of the reader/viewer in recognising how an author or filmmaker constructs circular narrative. Though the narratological elements were crucial in understanding the validity of circular narrative as a new form, it became apparent upon further research that the role of the reader

was of equal importance. In order to recognise a novel or film as circular, the narrative consumer must actively engage with the plot to understand how story events connect to form the circle. The role of the reader is unique to circular narrative in comparison to other narrative forms because the reader has to actively search for plot connections carefully structured by the text. While the author is responsible for interweaving structural coincidences that reveal connections at a carefully plotted moment of anagnorisis, the reader has to recognise when anagnorisis has occurred and reflect upon the narrative text post-consumption to better understand the circular architecture of the narrative. Without a reader willing to engage actively with the text, it is possible that the circular narrative construction could go unnoticed and unappreciated. Unlike other narrative forms in which a reader can passively consume a plot and walk away with a sound-enough understanding of causality, circular narrative asks the reader to participate in a much deeper manner. Not only must the reader pay attention to plot construction during the reading experience, but they are often positioned to reflect upon the text afterward to test hypotheses regarding how the circular narrative is constructed. This process of teleological retrospect is especially important where causal relationships are challenged in ways that open the denouement up to inconclusive interpretations.

In addition to discussing the complex relationship between text construction and reader response in relationship to circular narrative, I also identified circular narrative as an overarching narrative typology that contains multiple sub-sets like the *time-loop,* the *infinite loop,* the *spiralling circular narrative,* and the *concentric circular narratives.* In addition to the variations of circular narrative structure that I have defined and explained in detail over the course of this thesis, I have also shown that circular narrative has greater applications beyond singular works and novels to include multi-plot series and multimedia narratives. By examining multi-plot series and multimedia narratives, I put forth a broader utilisation of the form within a cross-disciplinary context.

While I have shown great variety of application within this thesis regarding circular narrative, there were certain limitations I faced. One limitation was the decision to only focus on materials published or produced post-2000. While I made this decision consciously so that I could write about materials that did not already have extensive literature in existence and focus on recent examples of this form, this limited the number of circular narratives within the science-fiction and fantasy genres that I could access. Though I could contribute theoretical writings and critical analysis on relatively new works, I did not have the opportunity to look at the evolution of circular narrative in the centuries between *Aethiopica* and *The Fifth Season.* However, one commonality that all of the twenty-first-century circular narratives that I studied did possess was a cinematic style of writing. I would hypothesise that the evolution of new media influenced the filmic style of novel writing detected in these works. However, if unlimited by the restrictions of this project, I would have expanded the time-period for novel selection to include prolific writers such as Heinlein and LeGuin who are known to have pushed the boundaries of narrative structure.

A secondary challenge was the scarcity of critical material that overlapped between cognitive studies and narrative studies. Because of the importance of the reader's ability to engage actively with the text, remember plot information when it was repeated at the moment of anagnorisis, and recognise the circular narrative shape, I was forced to pull information from cognitive studies, reader response theory, and memory studies, and find the links between them. Cognitive studies relating to narrative studies were limited in number and, those that I could find, focused on empirical research with different research parameters. Meanwhile, the reader response works focused on individual reader bias and failed to present a useful framework for how readers engaged with plot at the narrative level. There was much discussion of how readers identified with characters, narrators, story discourse, and meaning, but little of it extended to how readers comprehend plot construction. Memory articles were also challenging to find in

relation to humanities studies. Plenty of psychological and medical journals on memory were available but it was difficult to find research on memory as a storage and recall system outside of the one book, *Memory & Movies,* by John Seamon.[1] Seamon's work applied memory to film viewers and proved tangential enough to the topic of narration to be applied to literature. While I was able to piece together information that could relate to narrative cognition at a basic level, I was surprised by the lack of overlap between cognitive and narrative studies.

In addition to the unexpected challenges that presented themselves during my research, I also encountered several themes that I did not anticipate to find common to circular narrative structure: causal distortion, paradox, and eternalist views of time. The paradoxical distortion of cause and effect was prevalent across many of the literary works discussed in this thesis. The Grandfather Paradox in *The Kingdoms* and *Tenet* was explicitly brought to my attention and, upon exploring time from a physics perspective in my research, I found evidence of other paradoxes that were included in the circular narratives that I had selected, such as the Twin Paradox. The writings of physicists such as Rovelli, Nahin, and Carroll broadened the way I understood time from a narrative standpoint. Furthermore, their writings were consistent with how Christopher Nolan explored time in his circular narrative films in a way that could not be ignored. In *Interstellar* and *Tenet,* the Grandfather Paradox and Twin Paradox were used to subvert causation and prevent construction of linear fabulas. The theories that the physicists discussed gave a degree of scientific legitimacy to the works analysed in this thesis regarding their seemingly impossible fabulas and treatment of time existing all at once. When examining this eternalist perspective of time, it appeared as a common thread among all of the works and led me to re-evaluate the way I thought about narrative's treatment of time. I had realised going into my research that circular narrative did not adhere to linear treatment of time, just as I

[1] Seamon, John, *Memory & Movies: What Films can Teach us about Memory* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2015).

understood that it used flashbacks and flashforwards in more complex ways than are typically seen in narratives classified as nonlinear. However, learning about the eternalist concept of time existing everywhere all at once gave the temporal jumps in circular narrative new context as non-chronological anachronisms. By foregoing the concept of linear narrative, time in circular narrative is not limited by fixed points in time. Time becomes completely relative to character rather than event.

Given the cross-disciplinary applications of circular narrative which I have discussed in this thesis by including *Doctor Who* Series Six and several films by Christopher Nolan, I have demonstrated that circular narrative form has even greater potential relevance for researchers to explore. One area for future research pertaining to circular narrative is examining films by directors other than Christopher Nolan. I chose to focus on Nolan because of his unique position as a narrative auteur and master of the puzzle film genre, and because so many of his films have elements of circular narrative. However, there are numerous other films that utilise recursive methods of narrative that could potentially contribute to the understanding of circular narrative patterns such as *Source Code* [2011], *Edge of Tomorrow* [2014], *Déjà Vu* [2006], and *Arrival* [2016].[2] While these films already fall into the puzzle film genre and include elements of science-fiction and/or fantasy, there is reason to believe that circular narrative can apply to films outside of this genre. Because I established temporal distortion and paradox as key narrative themes that contribute to circular narrative's construction, circular narrative could be applied to other genres beyond science-fiction and fantasy as well so long

[2] See *Source Code,* dir. by Duncan Jones (Universal Pictures, 2011); *Edge of Tomorrow,* dir. by Doug Liman (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2014); D*éjà Vu,* dir. by Tony Scott (Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2006); and *Arrival,* dir. by Dennis Villenueve (Paramount Pictures, 2016).

as there is temporal distortion or distortion of causation. For example, *Fifty First Dates* [2004], *Before I Fall* [2017], *If I Stay* [2014], and *About Time* [2013] are romantic comedies that utilise elements of recursiveness and temporal distortion.[3] One could also examine how the integrity of circular narrative is upheld or changed in adaptations of novels into films such as Nolan's *The Prestige.* I have already established that Nolan played an active role in writing his own screenplays, but *The Prestige* is a unique case where he wrote the screenplay from an already-published novel. While Nolan's writing influences include authors who explore temporal distortion such as Jorge Luis Borges, Raymond Chandler, Vladimir Nabokov, and Christopher Priest, it would be interesting to analyse the degree of circular narrative construction, if any, that existed in Priest's *The Prestige* [1995] before Nolan adapted it.[4] Furthermore, N.K. Jemisin's *The Broken Earth Trilogy* was just greenlit for adaptation to the screen by Sony/Tristar. While it is yet to be determined whether the series will be adapted into feature films or episodic series, it will be interesting to see if the adaptation utilises the circular narrative structure.

The short story is the second potential area for future research drawing from such as examples including the short stories of Jorge Luis Borges such as 'The Secret Miracle' [1943] 'The Library of Babel' [1941], 'The Circular Ruins' [1940], and 'The Garden of Forking Paths' [1941], to name a few.[5] In the course of my research, there were short stories in *The Time Traveler's Almanac* anthology [2013] edited by Jeff VanderMeer and Ann VanderMeer, as well as N.K. Jemisin's collection of stories, *How Long Til Black Future Month?* [2018], that

[3] See *Fifty First Dates,* dir. by Peter Segal (Columbia Pictures, 2004); *Before I Fall,* dir. by Ry-Russo Young (Open Road Films, 2017); *If I Stay,* dir. by R. J. Cutler (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2014); and *About Time,* dir. by Richard Curtis (Universal Pictures, 2013).
[4] See Shone p. 91, p. 164, p. 203, p. 7, and p. 149.
[5] See Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Secret Miracle,' 'The Library of Babel,' 'The Circular Ruins', and 'The Garden of Forking Paths,' in *Collected Fictions,* trans. by Andrew Hurley (New York City: Penguin Books, 1999) pp. 157-62; pp. 112-18; pp. 96-100; and pp. 119-28.

offered hints of circular narrative structure.[6] I chose to focus on longer-form circular narratives because they allowed for more complex plotlines that are developed over a greater length of time which not only enabled structural coincidences to play a more prominent role but also allowed for in-depth analysis that rigorously tested my framework for circular narrative. Having established a framework for circular narrative at the novel and series-level, it would be interesting to see how short stories have to condense structural coincidences over the course of far fewer words and strip circular narrative structure down to its barest essence. While novels allow authors the room to build layer upon layer of overt and covert structural coincidence, the short story challenges the author to experiment with narrative forms in a highly efficient and streamlined manner.

A third area for future research into circular narrative is its application to additional visual modes of storytelling such as the graphic novel or the video game. Graphic novels have the potential to use circular narratives similarly to the way films do because of their usage of visual frames to tell stories. Graphic novels resemble film storyboards where the narratives are plotted through still, illustrated frames. The ample number of science-fiction and fantasy graphic novels that explore temporal themes may utilise repetition of visual frames to revisit an *in media res* beginning. Furthermore, the graphic novels and comic books that are serialised would provide potential for multi-volume circular narratives series to exist. Additionally, video games as a visual narrative medium have the potential for circular narrative development because they make the gamer an active participant in the narrative. The gamer is given a degree of autonomy to make decisions that influence a narrative but are ultimately designed by the creator. The gamer embarks on a specific quest which puts them in a unique position to actively participate in and engage with narrative in ways that graphic novels, literary novels, and films

[6] See *The Time Traveler's Almanac,* ed. by Ann VanderMeer and Jeff VanderMeer (New York City: Tor Books, 2014); See N.K. Jemisin, *How Long Til Black Future Month?* (New York City: Orbit, 2019).

do not. More importantly, because the video game assigns the gamer an avatar, similarly to what N.K. Jemisin did in *The Fifth Season* and Alex Landragin in *Crossings: A Novel,* there is great potential to further understand the role of narratee avatar in relation to circular narrative through the gaming world.

Lastly, in my research into circular narrative, there was evidence to suggest that the detective fiction genre may lend itself to circular narrative construction because of its *howdunnit* nature that engages a reader actively as they look for clues to solve the murder. The detective genre already throws the reader *in media res* into an ongoing crime with the understanding that the plot will circle back to explain how the crime was committed or how the detective pieced the clues together to solve it. The clues are overt structural coincidences that eventually provide the reader with a moment of recognition. This is not to say that all detective novels are circular narratives, but they contain a number of the narrative elements to be an efficient vehicle for circular narratives to be used in an entirely different genre.

As I have approached the end of my research, I have seen the publication of more science-fantasy novels that appear consistent with circular narrative structure. I believe my research has identified a narrative trend close to the beginning of its popularity as more materials of the literary and audiovisual kind are emerging. In addition to the new materials coming out, I have also identified numerous further potential applications of circular narrative without even broaching the potential for other narrative typologies that have yet to be discovered. In making a case for circular narrative's addition to the narratological canon, I have also aimed to show how narratology is significantly behind the times in critically analysing what writers have been doing for decades. Circular narrative is only one narrative form that attempts to fill out the spectrum between linear narratives and unnatural narratives, but there are many other potential forms waiting to be discovered. In addition to presenting a case for circular narrative's relevance in the narratological field, this thesis strongly suggests that

narratology is still a timely academic field in literary studies. Narratology should not be wholly abandoned as structuralism and formalism have been because there is much still to discover and learn from studying the mechanics of narrative. My thesis offers the contribution of circular narrative, its multiple sub-variations, and its widespread potential for future cross-disciplinary applications to the field of narratology.

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Appendix 1: *The Kingdoms* Synopsis

The Kingdoms follows Joe Tournier, a man who wakes up on a train from Edinburgh to London with no memory. Taken by a kind stranger to a psychiatric ward, Joe is brough home by a man claiming to be his former employer. Joe learns he has a wife and a daughter, and he attempts to return to normal life until he gets a mysterious postcard signed 'M' asking him to come home. The postcard features a lighthouse that has only just completed construction despite the fact that the postcard is over one hundred years old. Joe volunteers to work at the lighthouse in attempt to find answers and, upon arriving, learns of a portal in the North Sea that transports those who cross it into another time and dimension. On his travels, Joe meets Kite and, against Kite's better judgment, joins his sailing vessel where he slowly begins to discover his true identity. Joe learns through a series of letters from a woman named Madeleine that she is not the M he is seeking. The M who wrote the postcard is Kite, whose given name is Missouri. Joe discovers his past romantic relationship with Kite and that Kite was the kind stranger who took care of Joe when he woke up on the train with amnesia. Jem further uncovers that his real identity is not Joe Tournier but Jem Castlereagh. As Jem and Kite fight to restore the French-conquered Londres to its rightful British nation, Jem discovers that the life he left behind as Joe no longer exists due to a phenomenon known as the Grandfather Paradox. Joe is forced to abandon that version of himself and start his life over as Jem, consciously aware of the self that no longer exists, but now destined for the life he always wanted with Kite.

The Kingdoms Key Characters:

Joe Tournier (aka Jem Castlereagh) – amnesiac protagonist
Missouri Kite—Jem's former lover and captain of *The Kingdoms*
Agatha—Kite's sister, Jem's wife used to disguise his affair with Missouri.
Madeleine—the woman Joe falsely believes he was married to, a red herring in the narrative

Appendix 2: *The Rise and Fall of D.O.D.O.* Synopsis

Melisande Stokes begins her *Diachronicle* diary in 1860's London where she has been stranded from her home in twenty-first century Boston. Over the course of her Diachronicle entries, she relays the events of a top-secret government organization called the Department of Diachronic Operations (DODO) that specialised in travel across time and dimensions with the help of witches. Melisande and Tristan are approached via Facebook by a witch claiming to have met Melisande back in 1860s London and preserved herself so that she could perform magic once again with DODO. Melisande, having never met this witch before, does not understand how this woman could know so much about her and DODO's clandestine operations. The witch, Erszebet, insists that Melisande persuaded her to stay alive for over 150 years so that she could aide DODO in their DEDEs.

As DODO grows and their operations across the Strands of time prove successful, they hire more witches from historical DTAPs, including an Irish super-witch called Grainne. Grainne has the unusual ability to perform mind-control, which she uses on Dr Roger Blevins, the director of DODO. Grainne runs black-operations to stop the creation of the photographic technology that renders magic obsolete. As Melisande and Tristan learn what Grainne is up to, Grainne strands Melisande in 1860s London right before the event that brings about the end of magic. Because Melisande has worked with Erszebet, she is shocked to see Erszebet in London, and begs Erszebet to send her back to the twenty-first century. As Melisande informs Erszebet of what happens to magic, Erszebet preserves herself so that she can one day meet Melisande and Tristan and be of service to DODO.

DODO Key Characters:

Melisande Stokes—Twenty-first century linguist and DODO employee stranded in 1861 London
Tristan Lyons—instrumental figure in launching DODO
Rebecca East Oda—wife of Frank Oda who has bloodlines tracing back to witches
Frank Oda—scientific mastermind of the ODEC time travel device
Erszebet—a witch recruited by Melisande in the past to help perform magic in the twenty-

first century
Grainne—an Irish superwitch who uses mind control to achieve her own personal goals
Frederick Fugger—a modern member of the famous Fugger German banking family
Athanasius Fugger—a member of the famous Fugger German banking family active in 1601
London

Appendix 3: *The Fifth Season* Synopsis

Hoa relays the story of the orogene, Essun. Born Damaya, Essun is brought by her adoptive Guardian, Schaffa, to the Fulcrum where she will be trained to use her orogenic abilities in ways that will not be feared as greatly by non-orogenes or Stills. Orogenes are used as a commentary on race relations as Damaya is trained to fit a mold that will be non-threatening, to curtail the extent of her inherent power and ability. Damaya proves to be an exceptionally able orogene which consistently puts her life in danger by those who fear the power of orogenes. Upon passing her first test at the Fulcrum, she chooses a new identity to define her. She chooses the name Syenite for its unbreakable quality that only gets stronger under pressure. In her experiences as Syenite, she is taken underwing by Alabaster, an orogene of unusually strong ability, who outwardly plays by the rules of the Fulcrum but covertly shows Syenite the full spectrum of her powers and grooms her to one day help him revolt against the Fulcrum and free the orogenes. His education is costly, forcing them into exile when the Fulcrum recognises Syenite's degree of orogenic ability and attempts to kill her and Alabaster. She is eventually discovered, and her life threatened once more which prompts her final change of identity. Her final identity is Essun, a woman who tries to blend in and not call attention to herself until her children begin to show displays of orogenic ability causing her husband to murder one of them. The trauma spurs Essun into a mental place where, upon reuniting with Alabaster, she is ready to help him burn down the system that has kept them enslaved. Hoa acts as her new guardian because she extended kindness to him when she freed him from the obelisk where he was also enslaved for millennia. Hoa is narrating Essun's life story back to her in all three iterations of her given and chosen identities because Essun is in a state of transition to a fourth self, and Hoa wishes for Essun to emerge from this fourth transformation with her previous identities still a part of her consciousness.

The Fifth Season Key Characters:

Essun, Syenite, Damaya—all names for the same woman. Damaya is the youngest version, Syenite is the middle version, and Essun is the 'present' version.
Hoa—a stone eater many thousands of years old who poses as a young boy, also the narrator of the story
Alabaster—Syenite's mentor, an orogene of extraordinary power who teaches Syenite things about her powers that the Fulcrum and Guardians believe are dangerous
Schaffa—Damaya's mentor who reinforces the Fulcrum-created propaganda that orogenes are evil and to be feared
Tonkee, aka Binof—a child from Damaya's past who has taken an interest in Essun's powers
Antimony—a stone eater who has attached herself to protecting Alabaster

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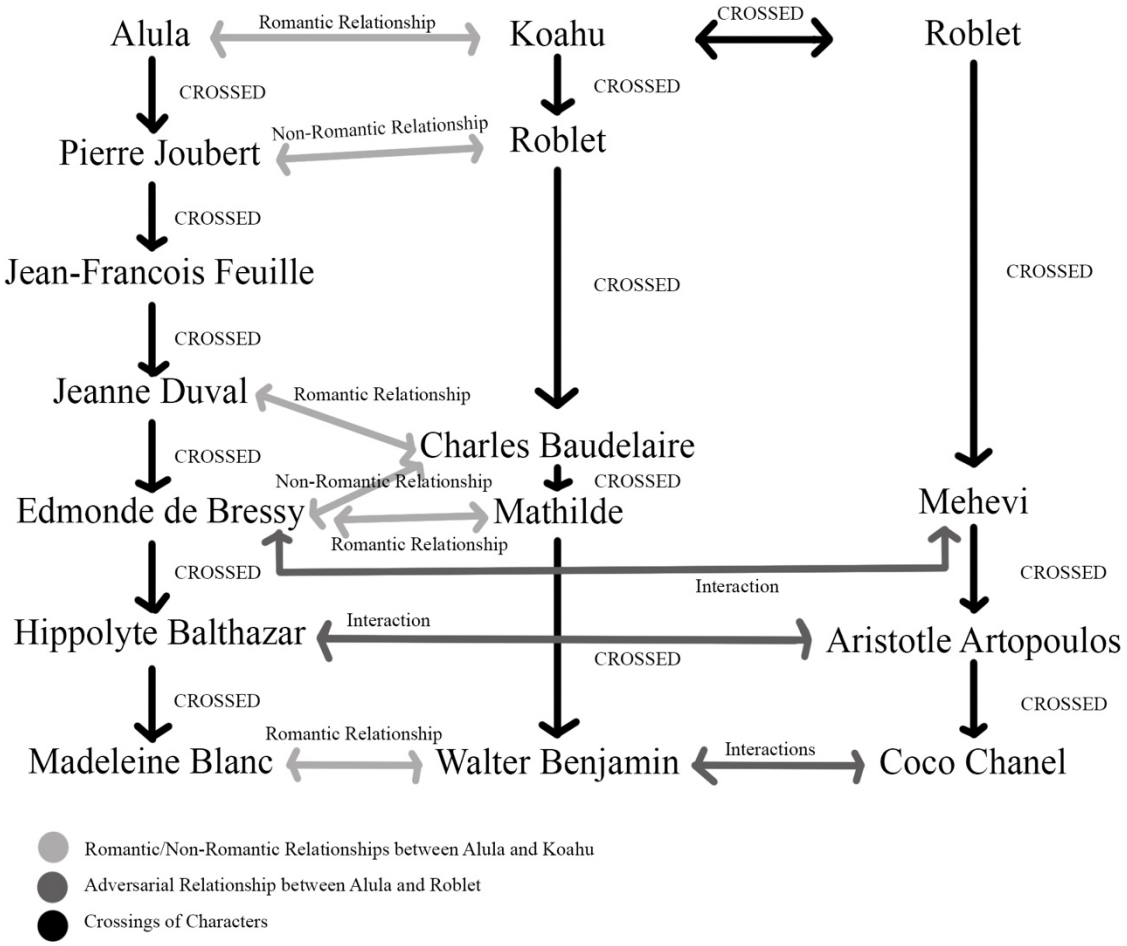
Appendix 4: *Crossings* Synopsis

Alula and Koahu are lovers from the remote Pacific Island of Oaetee where the art of Crossing from one person's body to another is seen as a sacred ritual. Koahu, out of curiosity, violates the only law associated with crossing when he crosses with a visiting French doctor. The law states that when someone crosses, they must either cross back or kill the person they crossed with or else it will bring about the destruction of the world. When Alula crosses with a French sailor in order to go after Koahu and bring him back to right his wrong, she discovers that Koahu does not remember his previous existence. Alula, however, is able to carry memories with her in each crossing. She spends her life crossing from body to body in pursuit of Koahu to remind him of his true identity. She records her experiences in the various bodies she inhabits as part of a collection of autobiographical entries known as 'Tales of the Albatross.' When she finds Koahu in each of his new bodies, she shares the 'Tales of the Alabatross' with him to convince him to write them down in his own words so that he will remember who he is and return with her to their native island. She is successful in convincing Koahu as Charles Baudelaire to write his experiences in a short story called 'Education of a Monster,' and she is again successful when she convinces Koahu as Walter Benjamin to write his experiences in a novel called 'City of Ghosts.' However, in one of Alula's crossings with Edmonde de Bressy, she learns that the Frenchmen she originally crossed with has established himself as King Mehevi, a narcissistic god-like ruler of Oaetee, and vows revenge on Alula. Once he suspsects that de Bressy is Alula, Mehevi crosses and follows de Bressy, trying to entrap and kill Alula. With each body that Mehevi crosses with, he murders the former host and gouges their eyes out in a serial-killer-like method that gains the attention of French police.

See next page for key character illustration.

Crossings Key Characters and their Relationships/Interactions



Appendix 5: *The Obelisk Gate* Synopsis

Essun is asked by Alabaster to use the obelisks to capture the Moon. Meanwhile, the comm of Castrima is under attack by the comm of Rennanis, and Nassun travels with Jija to the Antarctic region of Found Moon where she meets Schaffa. No longer the same Schaffa that trained Essun, Schaffa has been broken from a near-death experience. He becomes the father and mentor that Nassun needs, teaching her how to use her orogenic powers unrestrained using 'Silver.' Alabaster also teaches Essun about the magic that Nassun refers to as 'Silver.' The use of magic had become obsolete because of the Fulcrum's fear of what orogenes might accomplish with unlimited power. As Essun learns to contact the obelisks, so does Nassun. The two find themselves on opposing sides of a war that has been going on since the beginning of time. Essun is being used by her stone eater, Hoa, to reunite the Moon with Father Earth in an attempt to stop the seasons. Similarly, Nassun is being used by a stone eater called Steel to use the Moon to destroy humanity. Hoa goes in search of Nassun and is nearly killed by Steel. In an effort to save himself, Hoa transforms back into the stone eater that Essun first met when she freed him from the Garnet obelisk. Hoa informs Essun that her daughter is still alive, and they go to Found Moon in search of Nassun. Essun learns the extent of Nassun's powers when she sees that her daughter has killed Jija by turning him to stone. Hoa explains what Schaffa and Steel are training Nassun to do. Essun resolves to stop Nassun to save the world, save humanity, and save her last child from death.

The Obelisk Gate Key Characters:
In addition to the same characters from *The Fifth Season,* these are the new characters introduced:

Nassun—Essun's daughter
Jija—Essun's husband/Nassun's father
Steel—the stone eater who attaches himself to Nassun

Appendix 6: *The Stone Sky* Synopsis

As war brews between the stone eaters who wish to save humanity and those who wish to destroy it, Essun and Nassun prepare for a final showdown. Both attempt to gain control of all the obelisks to open the Obelisk Gate that will reunite Father Earth with its lost child, the Moon. Meanwhile, Hoa explains how he separated Father Earth from the Moon tens of thousands of years prior.

Before becoming a stone eater, Hoa was a tuner called Houwha. He and his fellow tuners were being groomed for slavery to a centralized power, similarly to how the Fulcrum used the orogenes. In an act of rebellion, Houwha and the other tuners revolted and used their powers in a cataclysmic event known as The Shattering which destroyed civilization, threw the Moon out of orbit, and changed the tuners into stone eaters. Houwha became imprisoned in the Garnet obelisk where he remained trapped for tens of thousands of years, until Essun freed him from the Allia harbour.

As Essun learns about Hoa's past, she realises the importance of restoring the Moon so that the Fifth Seasons will no longer threaten the Stillness. However, Nassun is preparing to fight against Essun to destroy humanity. As the two face each other, Nassun knows that if Essun succeeds with her mission, magic will cease to exist in the Stillness and orogenes will no longer have powers. On the other hand, Essun cannot bear to see her last child die if Nassun does not abort her suicide mission. Essun sacrifices herself to save Nassun and humanity. In doing so, the Moon falls back into orbit, stopping the Season that Alabaster started with the Rifting. While Essun saves her daughter, she is turned into stone and begins her long transformation from human to stone eater. Hoa stays by Essun's side and reminds her of her former self as he waits for her to awaken in her new state. Meanwhile, Nassun adjusts to life in the Stillness without guardians, without orogenes, without slaves and masters, without powers.

The Stone Sky Key Characters:
In addition to characters from *The Fifth Season* and *The Obelisk Gate,* these are the new characters:

Houwha, aka Hoa—Hoa's pre-stone eater self
Gaewha, aka Antimony—Antimony's pre-stone eater self
Father Earth—previously discussed as legend, now displayed as very much real
The Moon—Father Earth's son