

Cell phone fiction: Serial poetics and platform vernacular

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Abstract

Norms and conventions for cell phone fiction have been in the making for a long time without being clearly codified and established as commercially or critically viable mainstay phenomena. This paper explores new manifestations of the emerging poetics of cell phone fiction, meaning the narrative and stylistic principles by which audiovisual short form serial narratives are constructed with the cell phone as intended user interface. We analyze and discuss cell phone fiction developed by two commercial players, Quibi and SnapChat. We have chosen as our main cases two serials that are generically alike but nevertheless demonstrate significant differences of style and narrative design — *When The Streetlights Go On* (Quibi, 2020) and *Class of Lies* (Snap Originals, 2018). The main differences can be understood in relation to diverging forms of “platform vernacular” (Gibbs, *et al.*, 2015). Despite its so-called turnstyle functionality, Quibi’s *When The Streetlights Go On* is shown to embrace the stylistic and narrative design of long form media, whereas SnapOriginals’ *Class of Lies* opts for a ‘vertical only’ platform, a hyper emphatic style as well as going a long way to accommodate its users and the vernacular of cell phone *practices* and practices associated with Snapchat as a social media application.

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Introduction

The popular breakthrough of the Internet and Internet-connected devices in the 1990s paved the way for new forms of storytelling, genre conventions and stylistic parameters as regards serial fiction in a variety of media and genres (*e.g.*, Allen and van den Berg, 2014). This article focuses on the tradition of serial fiction produced for cell phones as the primary form of consumption. Since 3-G technology — commercially introduced in mid-2001 — was essential to the successful distribution of video, we are referring to a form of audiovisual communication whose technological infrastructure has been in place for about 20 years. In contrast to the advent of serial narratives for radio and television, norms and conventions for cell phone

fiction have been in the making for a long time without being clearly codified and established as commercially or critically viable mainstay phenomena. Early examples of so-called “mobisodes” in connection with *24*, *Lost*, *Prison Break*, and *Doctor Who* pointed in different directions and today appear parenthetical rather than foundational for later developments within the field. The ill fate of Quibi and Snapchat’s recent halt to commissioning Snap Originals suggests that a mutual frame of reference between the producers and distributors of cell phone fiction and its audiences for understanding and appreciating the norms and conventions of the form have yet to be consolidated. Drawing on the genre historiographical concepts of Thomas Schatz (1981) serial cell phone fiction is still stuck in a protracted experimental stage. But is that really the case? Questions concerning audience uptake and appreciation set aside can one at least identify generic, narrative, and stylistic norms and traditions at play within cell phone fiction?

By highlighting the cell phone as the intended consumption platform we hypothesize that the aesthetic traditions of cell phone fiction can be delineated along more distinct lines as regards their stylistic, generic and/or narrative traits. In other words, we want to explore the poetics of serial cell phone fiction. Poetics in this context are understood as the principles by which audiovisual short form serial narratives are constructed with the cell phone as intended user interface. We will — when relevant — refer to other serial traditions (*e.g.*, Web and television series) but scope does not allow us to explore these connections in close detail.

We will analyze and critically discuss examples of cell phone fiction developed by two different but commercially ambitious players, Quibi and SnapChat. We have chosen, as our main cases, two serials that at first glance appear to be generically alike, namely *When The Streetlights Go On* (Quibi, 2020) and *Class of Lies* (Snap Originals, 2018). Even if the protagonists of *Class of Lies* are in their late teens if not early 20s, both serials feature several trademarks of the teen series. They both thematize identity formation of the adolescent main characters and furthermore include recurring tropes of the teen series such as the highlighting of insider/outsider dynamics while using high school/college as a primary venue (Marghitu, 2021). Our analyses of these two cases will demonstrate significant differences of style and narrative design. We will not go so far as to argue that our case studies are representative of the programming offered by their respective services but we believe that our case studies have wider implications and will illuminate core differences as regards the poetics of cell phone fiction.

The field of short-form serial fiction is often defined on the basis of episode lengths of *below* 15 minutes (*e.g.*, FX Networks Research) echoing qualitatively defined definitions of the short fiction film (*e.g.*, Raskin, 2002). However, as regards short-form serial fiction with cell phones as intended user interface, episode lengths are usually much shorter. At the extreme end is short-form serial fiction on platforms such as Vine, TikTok and Instagram where episodes are often ultra-brief, sometimes running down to a few seconds. SnapOriginals and Quibi serials represent a form of artistic and commercial spearhead within cell phone fiction in the sense that they are commissioned, high-end, scripted productions with episode lengths of around 5–10 minutes. The commissioning activities are thus closer to those of Facebook Watch (launched in 2017) and YouTube Originals (2016–19) yet stand out from these players on the grounds of their cell phone-only strategy, more brief episode lengths and a different genre repertoire. Ideally, the stylistic and narrative design of *each* serial on whatever platform should be analyzed with respect to its “platform vernacular” (see below), which considers hardware and software components as well as the overall communicative and commercial context that the show is situated in.



Cell phone fiction and platform vernacular

Foregrounding our field of study as *cell phone* fiction implies a risk of overemphasizing the importance of the cell phone as a viewing device to the serial poetics that we are analyzing. Indeed, one of the recurrent questions — both commercially and artistically — is to what extent it is recommendable to ‘lock in’ to a particular type of screen. An article written about the demise of Quibi also highlights this problem:

The old chestnut here, of course, is finding ways to monetise this approach. The secret ingredient in the magic pudding that is financial viability for short-form screen content remains undiscovered. But history repeatedly tells us, loud and clear, that locking up the content on a single screen with zero engagement strategies is a recipe for a short life, and not a happy one. (QUT Digital Media Research Centre, 2020)

On the other hand, the device of consumption is a significant parameter to consider when delineating an inquiry into serial poetics since its affordances and materiality invite for particular forms of engagement. For instance, media sociological research has for decades emphasized that for instance screen size matters to how you engage with content (Hjarvard, 2005; Rigby, 2018).

There are many reasons to suspect that both the advent of video-on-demand and the advent of Web series and SoMe fiction has affected existing stylistic and narrative traditions (see, *e.g.*, Viskum and Heiselberg, 2020). Platformization, appification and on-demand-practices within other cultural fields provide interesting grounds for comparison. Studies of the interplay of art and commerce within the music industry indicate that compositional design of popular music has altered as a consequence of the underlying commercial logic and viewing habits associated with subscription-based music services such as Spotify (*e.g.*, Gauvin, 2018). The evidence is still questionable in these respects but it is worth asking whether we are witnessing aesthetic shifts within our field of study?

To reflect further on the different narrative traditions at play in serial fiction produced with cell phones as the primary form of consumption we incorporate the concept of “platform vernacular” [1]. According to Gibbs, *et al.* “each social media platform comes to have its own unique combination of styles, grammars, and logics” [2]. They term this a platform vernacular which to them constitutes a genre of communication. Platform vernacular emerges from “the affordances of particular social media platforms and the ways they are appropriated and performed in practice” [3]. Gibbs, *et al.* emphasize the importance of technology in that the affordances “are built into the hardware and software of social media platforms” and therefore both “delimit particular modes of expression or action” and “prioritize particular forms of social participation.” [4] They also add that platform vernacular is “shaped by the mediated practices and communicative habits of users” using the Twitter hashtag as an example [5].

Platform vernacular is reminiscent of the longstanding theoretical concept of medium specificity but without its — in film theory — often normative implications and with the different premise of assuming a digital platform as the site of communication. Platform vernacular also brings pertinent contextual factors such as technology, economy, and social practices more to the fore than is traditionally incorporated into medium specificity theories in film studies. However, two aspects of medium specificity theory (and its legacy) could be better integrated into platform vernacular theory, *i.e.*, theories of psychology and closer analyses of the aesthetic properties of the genre of communication. We will reflect on the importance of attention economy theory (our cases call for it) but our strongest theoretical-methodological ambition is to bring closer audio-visual analyses to platform vernacular theory.

Lastly, we will draw two perspectives from the concept of platform vernacular that are less clearly distinguished by Gibbs, *et al.* but are important in the context of this article. First, platform vernacular can be established according to *device* (*i.e.*, cell phone, tablet, PC, TV set). Second, platform vernacular can be established according to *communicative service* (*e.g.*, SnapChat, Quibi, Instagram, TikTok). This will prove important as it helps uncover central differences among our two cases. Furthermore, Gibbs, *et al.* invoke the term to differentiate among *social* media platforms but the term is also helpful in guiding analyses of media platforms who are not readily identified as social media platforms (such as Quibi for instance). Gibbs, *et al.* focus less on the significance of commercial interests to the way in which platform vernacular is established and negotiated but we will take their use of “logics” to include commercial logics which will prove significant to the narrative traditions that we are highlighting. Although the types of serial fiction we are

studying here do not strongly invite for co-construction or remix, their narrative and stylistic design says a great deal about *intended use* including quite different conceptions of attention economy (see Gauvin, 2018).

In the following we will present each of our respective services followed by an analysis of the two cases, first Quibi and *When The Streetlights Go On*, then SnapChat/Snap Originals and *Class of Lies*. We will start out by analysing the beat structure of the two shows, the beat being the smallest narrative unit (Newman, 2006).

Quibi: *When The Streetlights Go On*

Quibi was a short-form subscription-based streaming service that commissioned content for viewing on mobile devices. It was founded in August 2018 by Jeffrey Katzenberg with Meg Whitman as its CEO. Quibi raised US\$1.75 billion from investors (Spangler, 2020) and was to date the most ambitious attempt to capitalize on short-form serial content. The service launched in April 2020 as the COVID pandemic was raging but shut down in December of 2020 after falling short of subscriber projections. Quibi was a tiered SVOD service with a no-ad tier of US\$7.99 per month and an ad-inclusive tier of US\$4.99 month with 25 to 35 year-olds as their publicly declared primary target audience (Whitman, in Jarvey, 2019). One of the defining aesthetic principles of Quibi series was its turnstyle functionality enabling viewers to watch shows in both horizontal (landscape) and vertical (portrait) modes. Each show was thus shaped according to two different compositional principles (Finn, 2020). The processes for producing and post-producing these versions of a show differed (Giardina, 2020) but for instance a static two-shot in landscape mode where one character walks across the room to another may be a closer shot panning with a character in portrait mode (as seen in, for instance, *Survive* [2020]).

When The Streetlights Go On

When The Streetlights Go On (*WSGO*) was written by Eddie O’Keefe and Chris Hutton and directed by Rebecca Thomas who started off as an independent filmmaker (*Electrick Children*, 2012) before moving in the direction of serial drama, most notably as an episode director of *Stranger Things* and later directing all 10 episodes of the FacebookWatch show, *Limetown* (2019), starring Jessica Biel and Stanley Tucci. The show was produced by Anonymous Content & Paramount Television Studios.

The episodes of *WSGO* have a duration of approximately seven to nine minutes. The first episode runs 8 minutes and 45 seconds and can be broken down into the following four beats:

Beat one: Setting the scene (90 seconds)

The pre-title sequence runs 90 seconds. Fading in from an all-white background, the neck and upper back of a black teenage boy at his typewriter is slowly disclosed to us ([Figure 1](#)). A measured voice-over narration leads us into the episode (first unassigned, later assigned to the character that we are witnessing — 15 year old Charlie [Chosen Jacobs]). The beat establishes time and place specifically — Colfax, summer of 1995 — and also establishes the *culture* of the time (Jim Carrey as the biggest star in Hollywood, Seal’s *Kiss from a Rose*, Michael Jordan back from his stint in baseball, *et cetera*). Charlie’s voice-over then accounts a series of dire events that we witness happening that summer in Colfax ultimately establishing the narrative thrust of the show: “Our town was put under a dark spell in the summer of 1995. It began with a heatwave and didn’t end until six months later when the Monroe sisters were finally dead”.



Figure 1: The first shot of *WSGO*. Quibi/Paramount Television Studios+Anonymous Content. Cinematographer: Aaron Morton.

The beat is information-heavy yet intensity-low. The voice-over and camera movements are leisurely paced. The editing rhythm is unrushed. The 17 shots of the sequence amount to an ASL of 5.3 seconds while the ASL of the episode in its entirety clocks in at a more brisk 3.7 seconds. Given that the deaths of the Monroe sisters are revealed to us early on, the narration establishes a horizon of expectations regarding who the perpetrator is but more centrally how it came to be — including the mystery of ‘the stories residing within’ this so-called “dark spell”.

Beat two: The Monroe household (108 seconds)

After a very brief title card, yet another slow disclosure leads into this beat which introduces the Monroe sisters — and their parents — to us. To the sound of Nathalie Merchant’s mellow hit single *Carnival* a lateral camera movement across a stereotypical teenage girl bedroom ultimately comes to rest on Chrissy Monroe (Kristine Froseth) at her make-up table.

A mysterious groaning voice (presumably the murderer) is introduced in a phone call directly to Chrissy marking a mid-point in the beat. A missing perfume bottle leads Chrissy to her younger sister’s room. Becky’s (Sophie Thatcher) character traits are established through a series of contrasts. Merchant’s *Carnival* is replaced by the grungy tones of Madder Rose’s *Car Song* playing on Becky’s record player. The set-design establishes even stronger contrast. While Chrissy’s walls were dressed with cut-outs of young teenage models, Becky’s feature anti-establishment posters with large-looming pieces of texts such as “Pig Zombies” ([Figure 2](#)).



Figure 2: Foreground-background dynamics between the two Monroe sisters. Costume, make-up and props enhance contrast. Quibi/Paramount Television Studios+Anonymous Content. Cinematographer: Aaron Morton.

Posture and lines of dialogue enhance the contrasts even more, Chrissy teasingly suggesting Becky's fragrance to be more like "grungy, Bohemian weirdo" than CK One. Tensions are further highlighted by playful "fuck you"-exchanges before Chrissy runs down the stairs saying farewells to her parents — lying to them about her plans for the evening (homework with Brad at the library).

Daddy Monroe tries to put up a strict face ("Curfew is at 10.45 young lady"). Yet Chrissy's reply ("I'll be home at 11") remains unchallenged indicating a deft ability of bending the rules. Mommy Monroe's response bears sign of resigned protest.

Beat three: The affair (121 seconds)

Chrissy walks to a parked car to meet a mature man whom we quickly learn is her teacher, Mr. Carpenter (Mark Duplass): "You got a D on your *Crime and Punishment* essay". The voice-over (Charlie again) establishes Mr. Carpenter's background as we see flashbacks from his teaching focusing on his alternative teaching style in the aftermath of Kurt Cobain's death: playing *Nevermind* (we hear "Smells Like Teen Spirit") in all his classes without saying a word. Charlie's voice-over concludes: "He was the teacher all the guys wanted to be and all the girls wanted to be with". Mr. Carpenter reveals to Chrissy his intentions of leaving his wife ([Figure 3](#)). Her response is joyous surprise although she comes across as more level-headed than Mr. Carpenter.



Figure 3: Mr. Carpenter reveals to Chrissy his intentions of leaving his wife. Quibi/Paramount Television Studios+Anonymous Content. Cinematographer: Aaron Morton.

Beat four: The murder (209 seconds)

A hooded man suddenly enters the backseat of the car and disrupts the happy occasion. “I have a handgun pointed at the back of your head. Start the car and drive,” the voice instructs Mr. Carpenter. He instructs Mr. Carpenter to drive the car to a location in the woods. He then instructs Chrissy and Mr. Carpenter to get out in front of the car’s headlights, then undress, then kiss. The beat ends with the hooded man shooting both of them in the head.

In terms of the generic, narrative and stylistic design of *WSGO* it is important at the outset to state a few reflections on the serial’s mode of address. Although the serial can clearly be characterized as a teen drama it also speaks strongly to the 40–50 year old viewer who can look back on *teen experiences* rooted in the mid 1990s. This frame of reference is subtly established in the brief title card for the show where flickering thin horizontal lines playfully alludes to a faulty cathode ray tube television screen ([Figure 4](#)).

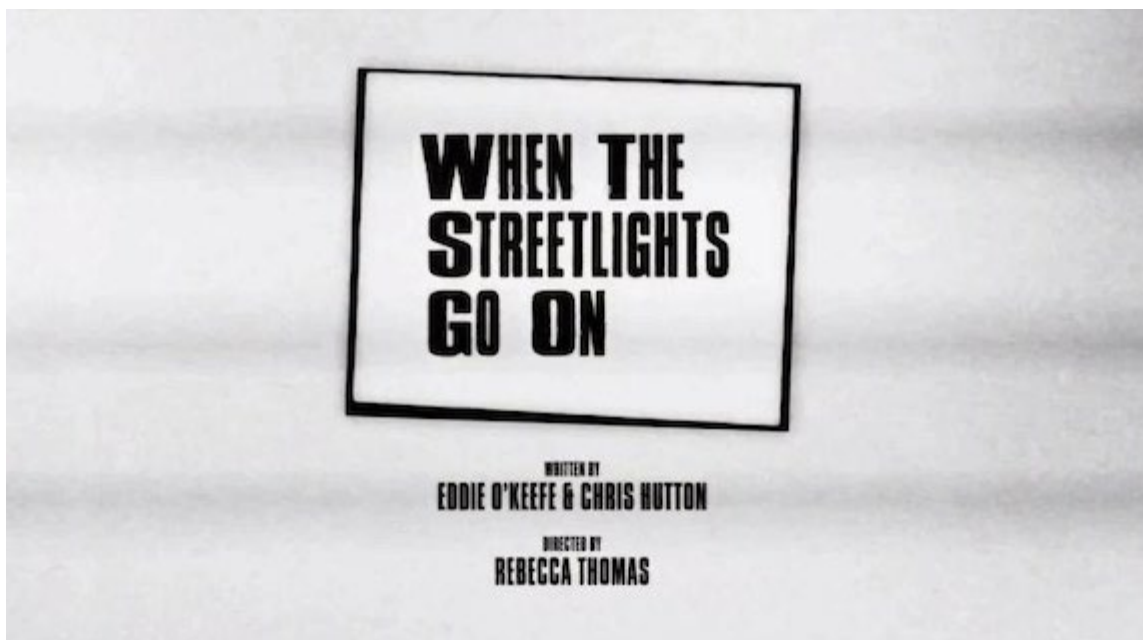


Figure 4: The title card references a cathode ray tube television screen. Quibi/Paramount Television Studios+Anonymous Content.

Closer analysis of the show reveals that this is more than a playful reference. The title card acts as an entryway paratext (Gray, 2010) establishing an experiential frame that is enforced by other narrative and stylistic devices. The function of popular culture and voice-over address is particularly important in this regard. *WSGO* is told in flashback by an *adult* male voice (that of main character Charlie, played by Nnamdi Asomugha) and it ends with Charlie returning to the school for a ‘reunion’. Apparently, the time of the reunion (the present) is also (close to) the time of the voice-over. The voice-over establishes a painfully nostalgic retrospective tone including the use of and references to period specific music (such as *Linger* (1993), The Cranberries) and films from the first half of the 1990s as well as to typical high school curricular literature of the time.

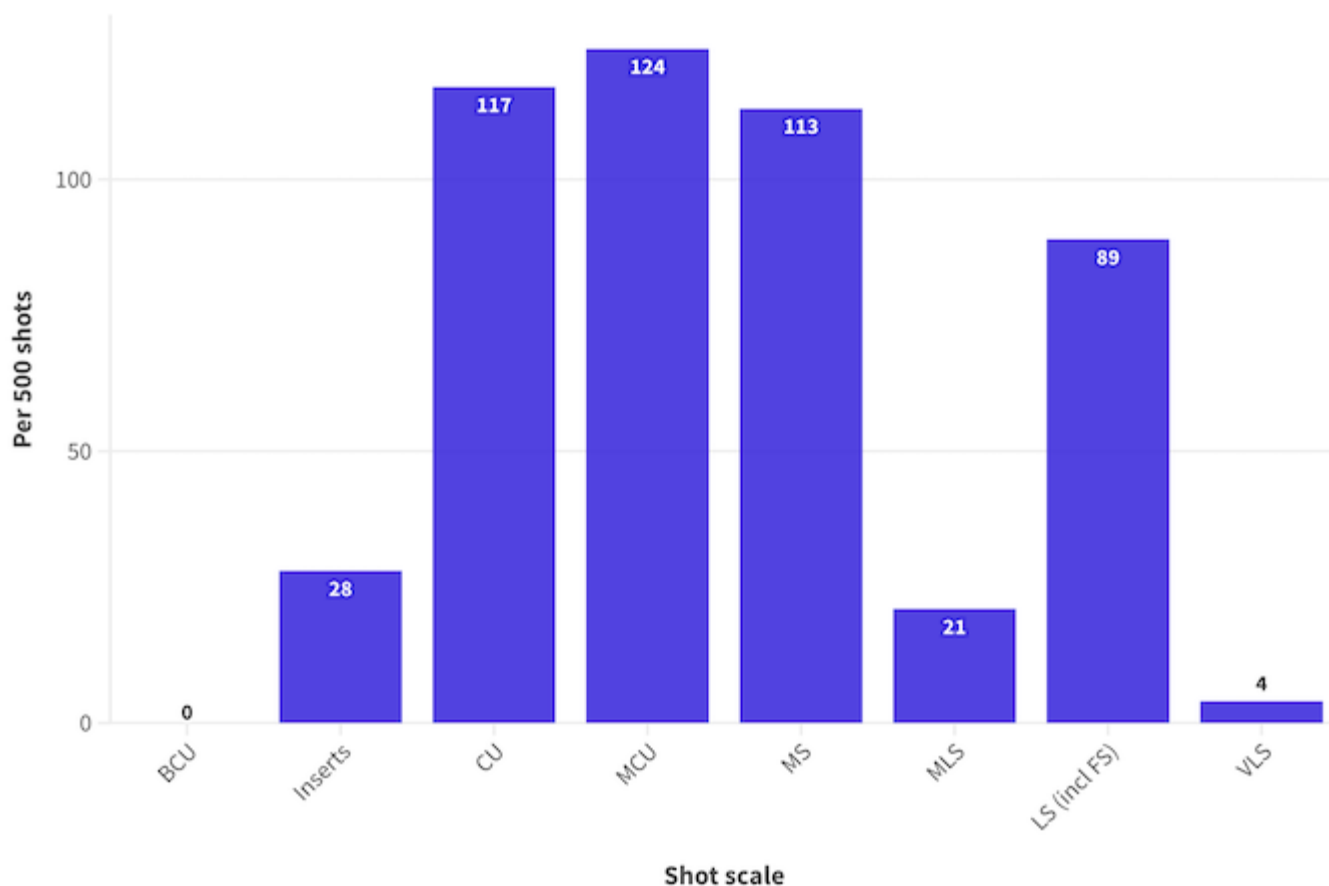
Charlie’s adult voice and the characters’ engagement with pop cultural references carry particular sociocultural values and are woven into the narrative fabric of the serial. Adult Charlie’s slightly patronizing characteristic of “Chrissy’s more traditional American charm” clearly testifies to a stronger appreciation of countercultural values, which the aspiring journalist Charlie not only cultivated in his youth but presumably reinforced in his adult life. Charlie’s position in the small-town community (the taste-culturally ambitious but worldly inexperienced, a university student and city dweller *in spe*) is expressed through the aid of references to film, literature, and music. For the climactic Halloween scene in episode 8, Charlie is dressed as Samuel L. Jackson’s cult-like Jules in *Pulp Fiction* (1994), while high school-pretty boy and star basketball player Brad (Ben Ahlers) is dressed as mainstream icon Ace Ventura recalling the Jim Carrey reference in the opening voice-over. The limits of Charlie’s cultural knowledge are also established by his lack of recognition that his date, Berlize, is dressed as Radiator Girl from *Eraserhead* (1977) — a movie that apparently is a little too sophisticated for teenager Charlie. Rather than understanding these intertextual references as postmodern pastiche they establish cultural frames of reference addressing and speaking to viewers familiar with the youth culture of 1995.

This double mode of address is interesting in many respects. Compared to Snap Originals it is revealing of Quibi’s older target group — the primary target group established as 25– to 35-year-olds but with its tiered pricing service in mind, also looking to recruit subscribers in older age groups. It is also interesting in relation to the specific stylistic and narrative design of the serial.

Quibi was meant to appeal to cell phone consumption but the narrative and stylistic design of *WSGO* is reminiscent of long-form television drama. As mentioned earlier, the set-up in the first episode is information-heavy yet intensity-low. The editing rhythm, camera movements, and diction of the voice-over is unrushed and leisurely paced as if we are being prepared for a longer sitting — a one-hour drama series or a feature film. The decoupage of the first episode is remarkably reminiscent of classical conventions of intensified continuity (Bordwell, 2002), including the traditional decoupage of establishing shots, leading into closer views (e.g., a two-shot), shot-reverse shot editing featuring singles or over-the-shoulder shots followed by reestablishing shots.

Considering that the cell phone is the designated viewing platform there are a surprising number of full shots (14), long shots (11) and very long shots (1) constituting approximately 20 percent of the total number shots in the first episode (141, see [Figure 5](#)). There are no big close ups and only six medium long shots. The close up (33 including 8 inserts), medium close ups (35) and medium shots (32) are the workhorses of the first episode not unlike conventional long form TV drama [6].

Shot scale distribution, "Cicadas", When the Streetlights Go On (per 500 shots)



Note: Larger version available [here](#).

A remarkably high number of shots also feature two or more characters (38) not including the numerous over-the-shoulder shots of the first episode. There are also numerous examples of foreground-background dynamics that play out much clearer in horizontal mode. Consequently, the compositional design of the

shots speak clearly to a horizontal viewing mode associated with conventional long form drama than to the vertical viewing mode that the turnstyle functionality offers in theory.

The individual episodes contain both episodic arcs as well as serial arcs yet the overall narrative design of the 10 episodes *in their entirety* also align with the story arcs associated with the longer narratives, e.g., as in the three act-structure (Field, 2005) and four act-structure models (Thompson, 1998) or what in the Nordic context is known as the “berettermodelen” (sometimes referred to as “The Hollywood Model”) (see [Figure 6](#)).

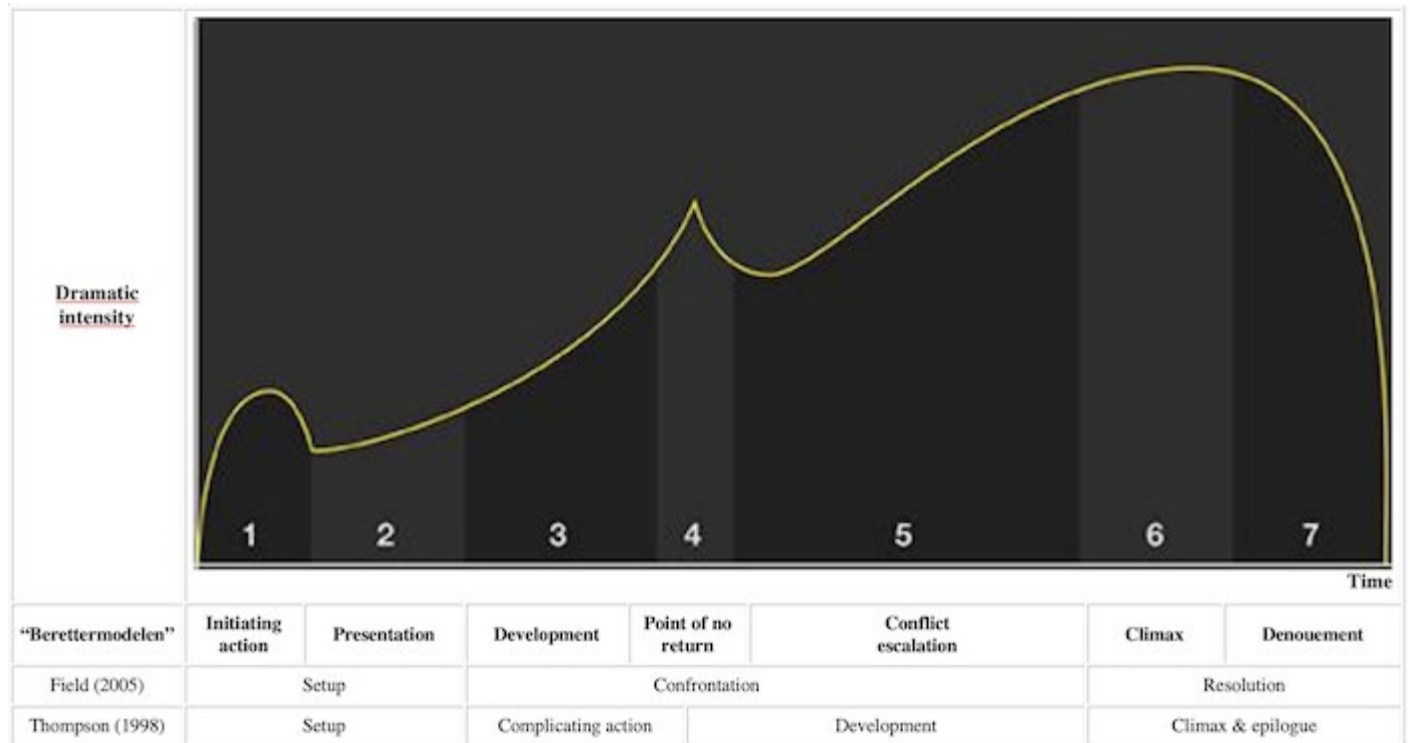


Figure 6: Three dramaturtical models. Graphical illustration of “Berettermodellen” from the Danish Film Institute used as the baseline for Field’s (2005) three-act model and Thompson’s (1998) four-act model.

Note: Larger version available [here](#).

Looking at the distribution of shot lengths across the 10 episodes, there is for instance a correlation of the editing intensity and narrative intensity as indicated when comparing [Figure 6](#) and [Table 1](#). Note for instance that the narrative intensity of the initiating action in the first episode (the murder) is reflected in a more brisk editing tempo in “Cicadas”.

Table 1: Average shot length (ASL) in <i>WSGO</i>.			
Title	Duration	Shots	ASL
1. <i>Cicadas</i>	8m 40s	141	3.69
2. <i>Closed Casket</i>	9m 26s	101	5.60

3. <i>Wrong Number</i>	7m 33s	82	5.52
4. <i>Homecoming</i>	7m 27s	95	4.71
5. <i>Notes From the Wrong Side of the Tracks</i>	8m 8s	98	4.98
6. <i>Deodorant & Nicotine</i>	7m 55s	104	4.57
7. <i>Warmth of the Sun</i>	8m 40s	109	4.77
8. <i>Halloween (climax)</i>	8m 33s	146	3.51
9. <i>Annotations</i>	7m 9s	87	4.93
10. <i>When The Streetlights Go On</i>	8m 50s	109	4.86

Note also that the eight episode, “Halloween”, marks the narrative climax of the season and that this narrative intensity is reflected in the dynamic editing of this episode: in particular, the editing of a climactic fight scene in the episode between murder suspect — and Becky’s love interest — bad boy Casper Tatum (Sam Strike) and Chrissy’s on-and-off boyfriend Brad. Obviously, the brief episode length allows for perfunctory, on-the-fly, consumption but the narrative structure of the 10 episodes come across as a feature movie chopped up into serialized bits staying true to the hybrid form that it is advertised as: a “movie in chapters”. From the perspective of its narrative organization, *WSGO* fundamentally aligns itself with traditional long form narratives and its proposed tailoring to the cell phone screen as a specific site of consumption is more superficial than fully developed. In that sense, *WSGO* does not display strong platform integration and is thus in closer proximity to platform neutral shows on more traditional VOD providers such as Netflix or Disney+. Our analysis suggests that *WSGO* shows only moderate signs of being aligned with a specifically cell phone-based platform vernacular.

What about the turnstyle functionality of Quibi? Does that not tie the show to a new poetics of cell phone fiction? If used regularly during watching, no two viewers would be experiencing the same audiovisual text, each shifting from one mode of presentation to another on different occasions and thus being presented with different visual compositions with varying aesthetic effects. Surely, this provides the filmmakers with a range of interesting audio-visual options?

Initially, it is important to stress that the portrait and landscape modes do in fact carry functional differences. If one compares the portrait and landscape modes, character and character relations are generally respected, *i.e.*, the same character/characters will most often remain in frame in both versions. Certain *mise-en-scène* elements to the right and/or left of the characters are left out whereas *mise-en-scène* elements above and below the characters are now visible. Consider for instance the shot below from Chrissy’s conversation with Mr. Carpenter as viewed in landscape and portrait modes (Figures 7–8).



Figures 7–8: Chrissy & Mr. Carpenter in landscape vs portrait mode after the mysterious stranger has entered the car. Quibi/Paramount Television Studios+Anonymous Content. Cinematographer: Aaron Morton.

For instance, Mark Duplass' use of his hands as a performative feature is by and large omitted when viewing the scene in portrait mode. On the other hand, the dark shadow looming above his head becomes more apparent in portrait mode, subtly pointing to the grim future awaiting him and Chrissy in a way not apparent in landscape mode. Similarly, the posters on the walls in Becky's room are more difficult to discern in portrait mode and hence some of the character contrast is less clearly articulated than in landscape mode.

On closer scrutiny however, *WSGO* does not activate a wide range of these available options. Looking at the first episode of *WSGO* there are no significant aesthetic effects tied to *shifting* the mode of viewing at specific points in time. Rather than appealing to *switching* from one mode to the other, the portrait and landscape modes come across as *alternative* modes of viewing the entire show. Beyond aligning with the personal habits of *some* users, we are not given significant aesthetic reasons to watch the show in vertical mode. Although a few background elements at the top and bottom of the frame *not* visible in landscape mode can *become visible* in portrait mode, the general impression is that the portrait mode cuts out more than it reveals. The emphasis on keeping the character/characters in frame also results in compositions that

seem to cast the characters into cramped enclosures disregarding for instance the convention of establishing “look space” and sucking out the space and *mise-en-scène* elements surrounding the characters [7]. The premise of *simultaneously* allowing for landscape mode viewing seems to have become a compositional straightjacket for *WSGO*. Rather than developing completely different compositional principles and rethinking traditional decoupage on the basis of the portrait mode as the baseline, the portrait mode comes across as being an aesthetically compromised version of the landscape version of the same show.

Snapchat: *Class of Lies*

Snapchat brands itself as a camera company but considering the gradual diversification into for instance gaming and curated series, Snapchat could today more accurately be described as a multimedia messaging app.

Snapchat had 375 million daily active users (DAU) globally in Q4 2022 and describes the majority of its users as being 18–34 years old [8]. Ratings of the Snap Originals are difficult to find. According to the *Hollywood Reporter*, one of the first Snap Originals, *Dead Girls Detective Agency*, reached 14 million unique viewers during its pilot season (Jarvey, 2019).

There is scant public information from Snapchat as to the strategic and financial roles as well as functions of Snap Originals. Given its introduction in October 2018, the launch of Snap Originals in 2017 comes across as a response to diversification strategies of its chief competitors, Facebook and Instagram, particularly the launch of Facebook Watch in August 2017 and Instagram TV (IGTV) in June 2018.

Already in 2015, however, when launching the Discover feature, Snapchat responded to the increasing diversification of other SoMe platforms stating that “This is not social media” but rather a new way of “putting narrative first” (Tweedie, 2015). The Discover feature evolved into including Snap Originals and the commissioning of shows was thus part of Snapchat’s development into an increasingly hybrid multi-functional communicative platform. Consequently, Snap Originals stand out from Quibi serials in the sense that they were linked to the former company’s continuous diversification strategy.

On 31 August 2022 Snapchat terminated the commissioning of fully funded original content. While the future state of serial fiction on Snapchat is uncertain, the initial use of the term “Snap Originals” clearly associated these productions with curated content on VOD platforms as in “Netflix Originals” or “Amazon Originals”. However, the role of Snap Originals *within* the overall context of Snapchat is very different from the role of serial narratives within more traditional VOD platforms. In an otherwise positive article on Snap Originals, Kathryn VanArendonk (2020) noted how remarkably poor the platform supported its own shows: “... the Discover page is an impossible morass, an unending wash of forms mixed together ... If you’re looking for a Snap Original, there are two options: stumble upon it by chance, or already know it exists.”

Aside from the abovementioned context-of-use-differences between Snap Originals and Quibi shows, the most pertinent difference is that Snap Originals are fully dedicated to the vertical screen format.

Class of Lies

Class of Lies (CoL) was launched in the autumn of 2018, with only one season being produced. The series was created by screenwriter Tessa Williams (*Riverdale*) and tells the story of Missy (Tatsumi Romano) and Devon (Camille Ramsey), two college friends who host a popular podcast solving crimes live on the air using their considerable STEM skills. The focal point of the 12 episodes of season 1 was the disappearance of a close friend, Bea (Lee Rodriguez). Another arc revolved around the relationship between Devon and Missy who, due to experiences in their past, dealt with loneliness and anxiety in very different ways. This

will impact their relationship as season 1 unfolds.

The episodes of *CoL* have a duration of around five minutes, the first episode, which we will be focusing on here, lasting 4 minutes and 55 seconds, excluding three commercial breaks (approximately 30–35 seconds in all) and a teaser trailer for season 1 lasting 30 seconds. As was the case in our analysis of *WSGO* we will use the concept of beats in the outline of the episode.

The first episode can be split up into the following beats:

Beat one: Podcast visualization (33 seconds)

Using split screen and voice over, the episode jumps straight to a visualization of possible scenarios in the case Devon and Missy are currently solving on air: A woman has been found dead in her bathtub.

The disparate stylistic and narrative strategies of the two shows become evident when comparing the opening of *WSGO* to the opening of *CoL*. Whereas the opening of the former is leisurely paced with an ASL of 5.3 seconds, the first beat in *CoL* has an ASL of 2.2 seconds (the initial 33 seconds) and literally opens with a high-pitched scream. Overall the intensity is high. As a member of the audience, you will navigate graphic overlays, jump cuts, split screens, non-diegetic sounds and music and voice-over in addition to fast-paced editing.

Beat two: Live podcast (64 seconds)

The murder visualization segment is followed by a scene taking place in the dorm room where the podcast is recorded. The camera moves briskly from a long shot to a two-shot and then into a medium close-up of Devon revealing that the fast-paced voice over taking us through beat 1 belongs to Devon and Missy. They solve the case in a mere 64 seconds.

Beat three: The party (74 seconds)

On that same night they go to a party where Missy talks to Bea who is a mutual friend. We are briefly introduced to two other characters, Tiger (Lucas Gage) and Bea's ex-girlfriend, Lennox (Kat Kuei Chen), who will later become enmeshed in the central storyline of the season as foe and helper respectively.

Beat four: After the party (24 seconds)

Beat 4 consists of two scenes combined by means of a split screen. Missy is back home in the dorm room while Devon is hooking up with one of her teachers. Missy feels lonely and disillusioned even if she is in denial: "Being alone is underrated. It's a superpower. See, Devon needs relationships to cope with emptiness, I don't need other people to be fulfilled — not anymore." (Missy's voice-over)

Beat five: The morning after (97 seconds)

In split screen we witness Missy brushing her teeth while reading a book, *Unraveling a Murder*, and Devon saying goodbye to her one-night-stand in high spirits. Midway through the beat, split screen is no longer employed and Missy is now on the phone. She is leaving a message for her sister, Ava (Vivien Ngô), who disappeared years ago. Missy claims to be living life on the wild side thus denouncing her claim in the voice-over that she does not need other people to be fulfilled. Missy ends up admitting as much. Missy is interrupted by "the sweet sound of email" (Missy in voice-over), and we learn that she has a contact that Devon does not know about — on the dark Web feeding them unsolved cases. Devon enters the room the moment Missy finds out that their next case revolves around the disappearance of Bea.

Whereas our analysis of *WSGO* suggested a relatively indistinct platform vernacular in the sense that its mode of address, narrative structure and style were reminiscent of traditional long form drama, our analysis of *CoL* reveals a more distinct platform vernacular within the emerging poetics of cell phone fiction.

The narrative and stylistic design of *CoL* can to some extent be seen as a *radicalized* version of prime-time serials on traditional broadcast networks retooled to a younger audience consuming serial fiction on their cell phones — a device that arguably offers more distractions than viewing on a TV set (notifications, incoming messages, incoming-calls etc.). Compared to prime-time serials, *CoL* will indeed be shown to stand out for its hyper-condensed narrative structure, its faster editing and busier soundtrack. Nevertheless, it does not suffice to merely describe the narrative and stylistic characteristics as a radicalized version of prime-time serials. We will refer to the style of *CoL* as a *hyper emphatic style* and argue that both the stylistic and narrative design of the show must be understood within the context of a *distinct platform vernacular* that demonstrates an embrace of the cell phone as the designated platform of consumption as well as incorporating the communicative context of Snapchat as a social network service into the aesthetic texture of the show.

First of all, the conceptualization of the audience and the aesthetics of immersion are negotiated differently in *CoL* from what we witnessed in *WSGO*. Compared to *WSGO*'s double mode of address, *CoL*'s mode of address is eye-level and straightforwardly implies a teen/young adult audience. The audience's point of view is clearly aligned with Missy and Devon — particularly the former whose thoughts and emotions are communicated to us by point-of-view editing and a voice-over not spoken from the safe distance of adulthood. As opposed to the slow-burn introduction to the narrative in *WSGO*, *CoL* literally starts with a woman screaming, suggesting it subscribes to a narrative model that starts out with extreme dramatic intensity assuming viewers will be moving on to other things if not strongly hooked from the get-go (Viskum and Heiselberg, 2020).

Although the first episode of *CoL* is considerably shorter than the first episode of *WSGO*, it contains *five* beats — one of which (beat 4) even combines *two* scenes in one — giving an average duration of a mere 58 seconds across the unevenly structured beats. Tempo is also of essence when looking at the entire season. In helicopter perspective, *CoL* somewhat adheres to a four-act structure. The initiating action is presented at the end of the first episode (Bea's disappearance), the momentary break-up of Missy and Devon in episode 6 serves as midpoint (though not essentially a point of no return) and the climax occurs at the end of episode 11 with Missy and Devon — within the same few seconds — both finding Bea and discovering the chief culprit to be Devon's father. However, the particularities of its narrative design become more visible on closer inspection.

In terms of the twists and turns occurring across the twelve episodes' total running time of a mere 54 minutes, the narrative of *CoL* completely *outpaces* traditional prime-time serials as described by Newman (2006) and Thompson (2003). The show lays out a remarkably intricate and interweaved plot architecture. After initially following wrong leads, Bea's disappearance turns out to be tied to a convoluted medical experiment by Dynasty DNA with girls having a specific blood mutation. Most of the numerous characters in the show are involved in or subject to the experiment (“a full-blown conspiracy”) and the secret character “Hermes” appears to lead a resistance whose contours are only partially revealed. *CoL* packs as much plot structure into its 54 minutes as one could find in a season of 12 one-hour episodes. In her article on Snapchat's foray into mobile storytelling, Kathryn VanArendonk (2020) offered an explanation for this extreme narrative condensation, arguing that Snap Originals operate from “a place of scarcity” with each episode being “edited down to a few minutes of ultra-lean narrative machinery.” She elaborated:

(Snapchat) is first and foremost a messaging platform. Any brief gap when nothing happens on a Snap Original is an invitation to stop viewing, so the creators must aim to make you stay (or at least come back when you inevitably leave to answer a message). (VanArendonk, 2020)

Tempo is also of essence to the audio-visual style of *CoL*. In the following we will further analyze the various components of this *hyper emphatic style*. Compare for instance the average shot length (ASL) of *CoL* ([Table 2](#)) to the numbers listed earlier for *WSGO* ([Table 1](#)). It is apparent that *CoL* is more briskly edited with three episodes having ASLs below two seconds (“ASL” column). Compared to drama series

and feature films, the editing tempo is extremely high. We have not come across any TV series edited that briskly and very few feature films clock in below the two-second mark.

<p>Table 2: To give a better estimate of the visual activity of the show we have counted the duration of split screen passages and in parenthesis included the total number of shot changes within each of the represented screens.</p>						
Title	Duration	Shots	ASL	Split screen (percent of duration)	Shots including shots within split screens	ASL including shot changes within split screens
1. <i>A True Crime Mystery You Need to Watch</i>	4m 55s	80	3.69	1m 18s (26.4 percent)	112	2.63
2. <i>How to Find a Missing Person</i>	5m 07s	77	3.99	25s (8.1 percent)	85	3.61
3. <i>Next Step Interrogate the Roommate</i>	3m 58s	69	3.45	31s (13 percent)	82	2.90
4. <i>Why You Should Never Trust the Roommate</i>	5m 50s	81	4.32	34s (9.7 percent)	105	3.33
5. <i>Why You Shouldn't Flirt With the Dark Side ...</i>	5m 20s	109	2.94	31s (9.7 percent)	123	2.60
6. <i>Did Our Heroines Just Become Villains</i>	4m 43s	97	2.92	1m 41 (35.7 percent)	133	2.13
7. <i>Devon's</i>						

<i>Hot Hookup Might Be the End of Her ...</i>	4m 34s	77	3.6	16s (5.8 percent)	84	3.26
8. <i>What Happens Next Will Shake You to Your Core</i>	4m 8s	73	3.4	48s (19.4 percent)	94	2.64
9. <i>What Really Happened to the Missing Girls?</i>	4m 30s	156	1.73	27s (10 percent)	172	1.57
10. <i>Find out What Really Happened to Bea</i>	3m 59s	122	1.96	52s (21.8 percent)	159	1.50
11. <i>Name a More Iconic Duo ... We'll Wait</i>	3m 8s	99	1.9	7s (3.7 percent)	101	1.86
12. <i>This Finale Will Make Your Heart Race</i>	3m 45s	81	2.78	20s (8.9 percent)	91	2.47

These analyses underline what Sean Mills (formerly VP of Snap Originals) has argued about the format: “... shows are created with fast-paced mobile behavior patterns in mind, employing overlaid graphics, split screens, quick cuts, and other modern video elements.” (Constine, 2018). Shaun and Andrew Higton who wrote/directed Snap Original *Dead of Night* also reflect on how they on their part arrived at a fast editing pace: “When we were cutting a show we would see it on a screen and it is like, man, this thing is going by way too fast ... We looked at it, you know, on the phone we would be like; hey, we can go faster.” (Snap Originals, 2019)

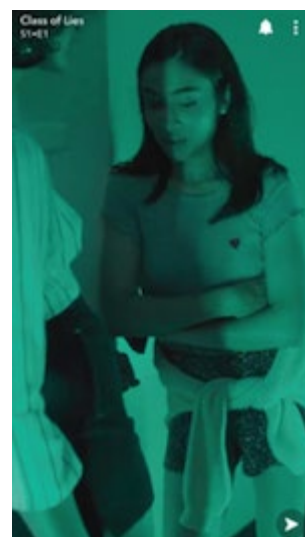
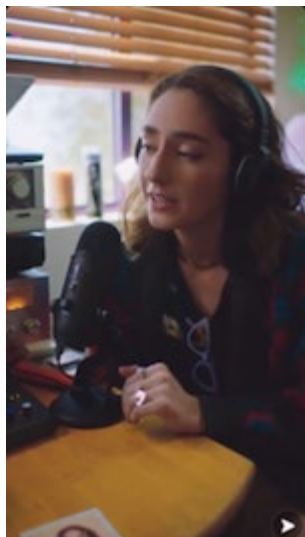
Key to these statements is the understanding that the smart phone as a device allows for a more visually busy aesthetic. Adding to the sense of tempo is also an extremely busy soundtrack and a continuous use of camera movement. Roughly 30 percent of the shots in the first episode of *CoL* contain notable camera movement but the show displays more minute movement in almost all shots across the 12 episodes. There is rarely a quiet moment in *CoL*. Not merely is there a frequent use of underscore music but visual transitions are repeatedly emphasized by sound cues including extremely brief flashbacks presented in pulsating shot clusters. Hyper emphatic vertical montage principles are thus part and parcel of *CoL*'s

stylistic agenda.

The hyper emphatic style resonates with research conducted into the effect of screen size on viewer immersion (Rigby, *et al.*, 2016; Cutting, 2021). In a 2016 study it was concluded that “watching content on a very small screen (4.5 inches) results in lower immersion than when watching content on a much larger screen” [9]. Briefly put, a hyper emphatic style is particularly important in the case of cell phone uptake in terms of increasing the likelihood of immersion and engagement.

An important component of *CoL*'s hyper emphatic style relates to its vertical-only mode of presentation. Referring to various points of criticism launched at vertically presented moving images, Kathleen M. Ryan (2018) presented arguments for the vertical format motivated on account of the kind of *production* and the kind of *use* that the cell phone encourages [10]. She discussed how the smart phone brought forth various challenges to also relatively recent video-sharing-services such as YouTube (accommodated with the introduction of YouTube Shorts in 2020). Rather than focusing on how the audiovisual aesthetics of for instance SnapOriginals must be hyper emphatic to *compensate* for the immersive trade-off compared to larger screens, Ryan argued that vertical video on small screens is not inherently *less* appropriate for visual storytelling than widescreen formats on larger screens but formulates its own logics of immersion (Ryan, 2018). As Rafe Clayton (2022) similarly pointed out: “[...] vertical moving images watched on a mobile device can potentially provide significant immersive experiences of intimacy and allow unique personal connection between media product and audience.” [11].

In addition to the complex theoretical discussions on ‘frames’ and ‘containers’ in past and present screen cultures (see *e.g.*, Somaini, 2019; Shackleton, 2017) there are also pragmatic compositional implications of producing ‘vertical screen only’. Most frames contain only one person sitting or standing. Enclosing characters in tight two-shots as in beat 2 (Figure 9) and beat 3 (Figure 11) has camera distance as a potential trade-off and perhaps therefore we move into closer shots relatively quickly (Figures 10 and 12).



Figures 9–10: Snap
Originals/Makeready+Unicorns & Unicorns.
Cinematographer: Jeff Powers.

Figures 11–12: Snap
Originals/Makeready+Unicorns & Unicorns.
Cinematographer: Jeff Powers.

The pilot episode in fact contains only four two-shots of Missy and Devon despite establishing them as a protagonist pair. The vertical frame favors singles. Even over-the-shoulder shots (see Figure 13) require a careful choreography of blocking and camera movement because including a foreground character leaves a

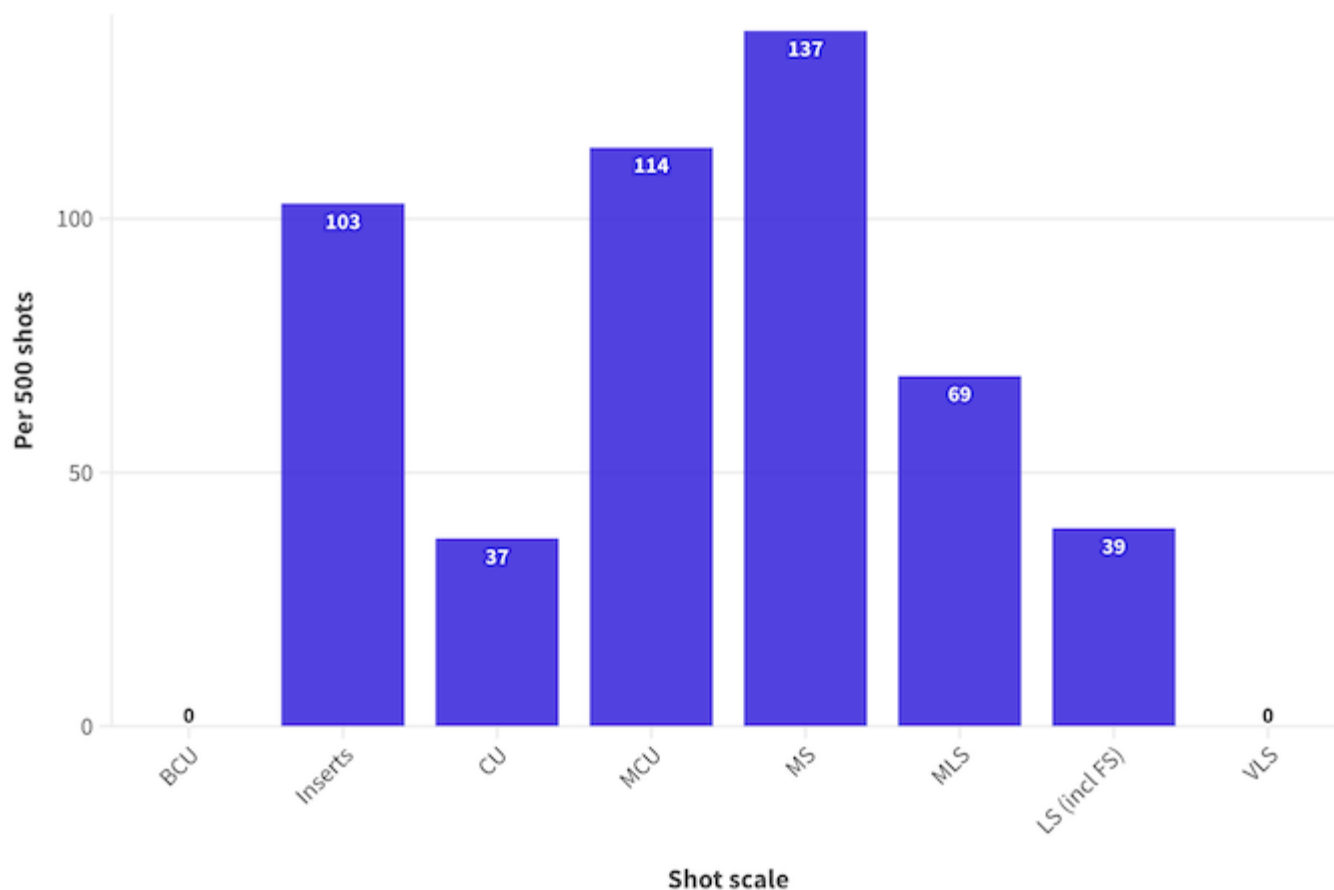
very thin slice of space to work with. The lack of width is also a challenge when staging in depth as staging in depth traditionally occurs on the horizontal axis. [Figure 14](#) shows how it can be done vertically by “stacking” the characters on top of each other. A more restrained style would also allow for developing the foreground-background interaction of Missy and Devon along vertical or diagonal lines but — typical for the hyper emphatic style of the show — we move on to singles too quickly to allow for this.



Figures 13–14: Snap Originals/Makeready+Unicorns & Unicorns.
Cinematographer: Jeff Powers.

Given that viewers would be watching Snap Originals on their cell phones or tablets (*i.e.*, a small screen) one might expect a preference for close-ups. A shot scale analysis of the first season of *CoL* (including separate shots in split screens) revealed quite different aesthetic patterns. The predominant shot scale in *CoL* was the Medium Shot and the Medium Close Up whereas there were surprisingly few traditional Close Ups in the show.

Shot scale distribution, episodes 1-12, Class of Lies (per 500 shots)



Note: Larger version available [here](#).

This can partly be understood as a function of the vertical dimensions of the frame which better allows for including the upper part of the human body. Compare for instance the Medium Close Up of Missy in episode 6 (presented below) to the way a 16:9-framing of the same material would come across (Figures [16-17](#)).

Figure 16: To the left: A shot of Missy in episode 6 that statistically is registered as a Medium Close Up.
Figure 17: Below: a 16:9-cutout of the same shot.
Snap Originals/ Makeready +Unicorns & Unicorns.
Cinematographer: Jeff Powers.

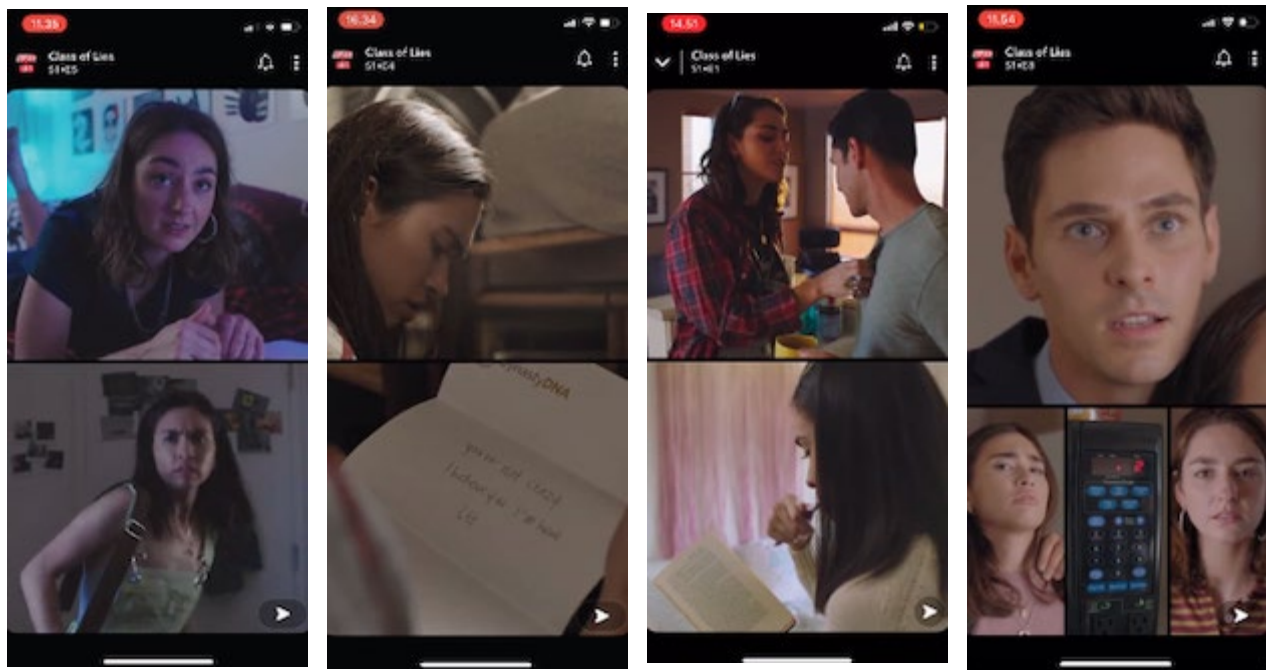


Another significant difference from *WSGO* concerns the use of Inserts. Focusing on *details* is a well-established trope of crime narratives but taken to extremes in *CoL* partly due to a heavy emphasis on inserts in split screen passages. Inserts make up a staggering 43.7 percent of all shots (96/220) in split screen passages in the first season of *CoL*. In the non-splitscreen sections of the show Inserts make up only 16 percent of full-frame shots (179/1121) so Inserts are a significant stylistic feature of splitscreen aesthetics in *CoL*.

That said, *CoL* and other Snap Originals bypass the limitations of the vertical screen in different ways, the use of split screen being the most noticeable. Judging from the many split screen-oriented SnapOriginals, splitting up the image in two or more screens is integral to SnapOriginal's cell phone poetics. In the case of *CoL*, the segmentation of the first season shows that split screen use varies considerably across episodes. The first episode uses split screen for 26.4 percent of its duration (the outliers are episode 6 with 35.7 percent and episode 11 with 3.7 percent).

A wide range of titles have been experimenting with the use of split screen in both cinema and in serial fiction but it has remained a minor trope according to Jim Bizzocchi (2009). He argued that the resurgence of split screen aesthetics in the beginning of the twenty-first century had to do with changes in the media landscape where we had become accustomed to many-windowed screens (desktops, games etc.). The split screen is employed in an attempt to satisfy an audience "capable of switching among multiple screens of the computer desktop's standard Graphic User Interface or the more rapid oscillation between the control and display frames of a video game [...]" [12]. Apart from accommodating an audience used to oscillating between screens, the split screen aesthetic serves different purposes in the overall stylistic and narrative strategy of *CoL*.

In many instances split-screen playfully *transposes* either well-established compositional principles or editing principles. Below are examples that transpose traditional editing figures but in more condensed form.

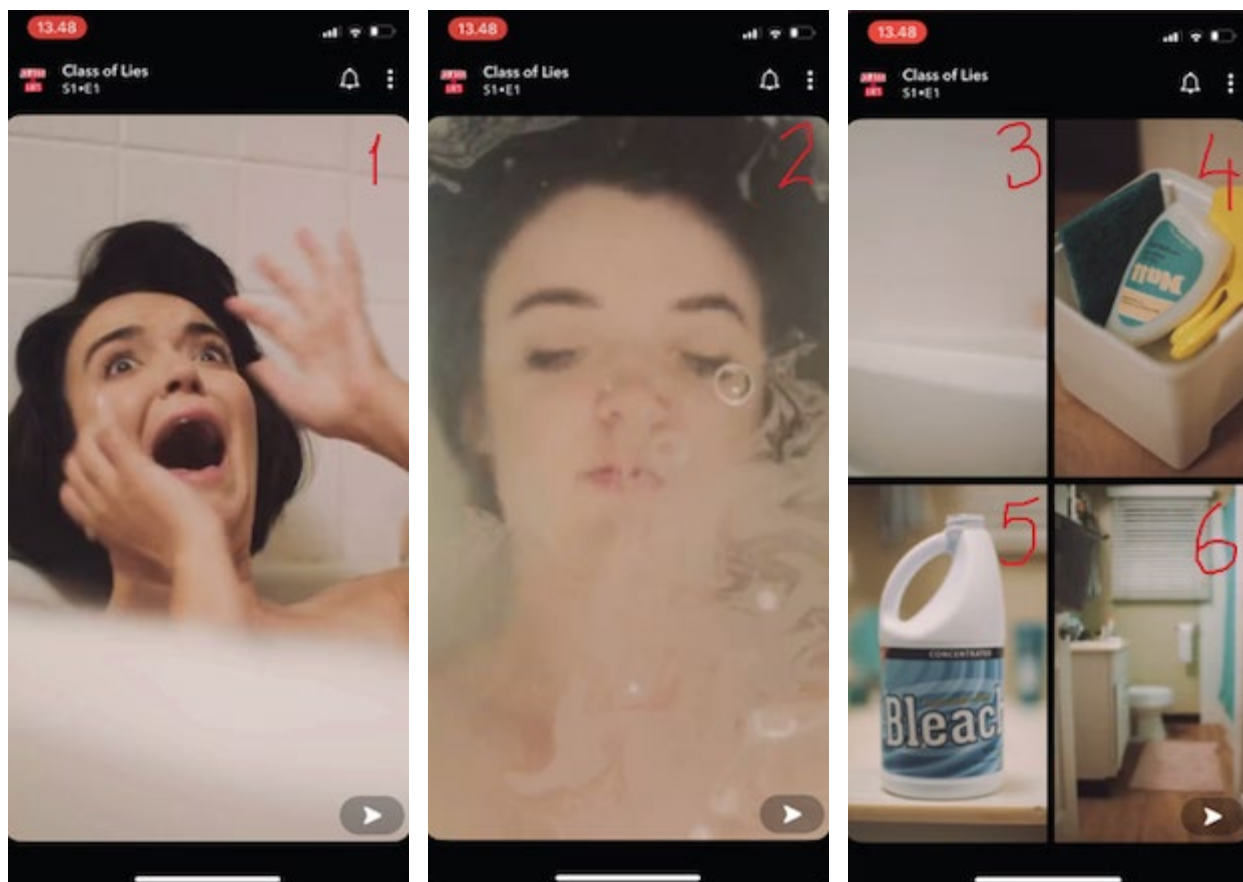


Figures 18–21: Snap Originals/Makeready+Unicorns & Unicorns. Cinematographer: Jeff Powers.

[Figure 18](#) represents a variation of shot/reverse shot editing simultaneously presenting us with shot and reverse shot. [Figure 19](#) represents a variation of a point of view sandwich. *CoL* makes use of this split-screen figure on a couple of occasions. Instead of a sequentially presented point-of-view-sandwich of a character looking (shot a), a shot of what the character is looking at (shot b: either an optical point of view shot or an eyeline match) followed by a return to the initial shot (shot c), *CoL* settles for two shots in one split-screen image: one of a character looking outside of frame and another of the object of her gaze. [Figure 20](#) can be understood as a split-screen alternative to parallel editing, contrasting Missy's morning routines to those of Devon. A later example in episode 8 is a variant of more complex decoupage building to a narrative climax that would traditionally include shot/reverse shots and cutaways motivated by out-of-frame glances by Missy and Devon. However, in this case four shots are combined in one split screen: Missy and Anderson (who has Missy in his grip), Devon standing opposite the two and a microwave about to explode to the side ([Figure 21](#)).

Even though split-screen passages can be seen to transpose well-established compositional or editing principles, they are neither functionally nor experientially identical to what *CoL* would look like and be experienced like if the show instead relied on those well-established principles. Teasing out all the functional differences is beyond the scope of this article but a few highlights are in order. For one, in all these cases, narrative condensation is one of the implied functions of its split-screen aesthetic. The simultaneous presentation of shots otherwise presented sequentially takes less time. It is not necessarily easier for audiences to process split screen aesthetics. In many cases the split screen passages in *CoL* are not strongly guided and much is demanded from the viewer in terms of connecting the dots. Furthermore, the actual application of split-screen also constitutes a more complex addition to the decoupage of *CoL* than is apparent from at first view. If we take a look at the first shots of *CoL* for instance, we first see extremely brief shots of a woman screaming ([Figure 22](#)) followed by extremely brief shots of her drowning underwater ([Figure 23](#)) immediately followed by the first split-screen passage of the show with each of the four shots appearing timed to the sound of three water drops and the last to a door shutting ([Figure 24](#)).

Altogether these shots last a mere five seconds but both the spatial and temporal logic is essentially a complicated mosaic rather than a transposition of traditional decoupage.



Figures 22–24: Snap Originals/Makeready+Unicorns & Unicorns. Cinematographer: Jeff Powers. Numbers added by authors to show the order of their appearance.

Numbered 1-6 according to the time of their appearance in the episode (Figures 22–24), their diegetic temporal order is quite different:

6: The woman enters the bath room with her cleaning utensils. You can glimpse the utensils at the left frame edge.

5 & 4: The inserts of bleach and nail polish remover. It is impossible to determine a temporal difference between the two.

1: The shot of the woman screaming is an imaginary shot tied to one of Devon's accounts of how the woman died. Had it happened, it would have to occur before shot 2.

3: The shot of the woman's limbless hand sliding into the tub.

2: The shot of the woman under water.

The spatial logic of traditional decoupage would also have the establishing shot (shot 6) presented first as opposed to last before cutting into closer views and concluding with shot 2 as the end of a cause-and-effect chain. Consequently, while split-screen passages in *CoL* draw on well-known editing patterns they do not *replicate* traditional decoupage.

Finally, *CoL*'s platform vernacular is also clearly embedded within Snapchat as a communicative platform.

First of all, Snap Originals integrate SNS-applications in their storylines such as Snap Map. Many SnapOriginals also emulate conventions of face-to-face communication through a mode of address that Snapchat terms “Screen Reality”, *i.e.*, all the footage you are shown is as recorded by the camera phone of a character. These diegetically integrated communicative practices and applications are not merely Snapchat-based but draw on the entire repertoire of cell phone communication practices. Even more important to their platform vernacular is the way in which Snapchat embeds their shows within the external media environment. In fact, the default visual display is not the diegetic frame but a hybrid of the diegetic frame and an interface that includes cell phone specific information (*e.g.*, time, battery level, wifi signal) and Snapchat specific icons (*e.g.*, title logo, notifications icon, forwarding icon, AR-lens).

Whereas *WSGO* essentially established a voyeuristic viewer position, the outside media environment is not only theoretically available but visually present in *CoL*. The interface is not transparent and does not erase itself [13]. Snap Originals — also *CoL* — instead establish what we call a polyvalent viewer position. At least three different viewer positions are at play. The hyper emphatic style aggressively calls upon the viewer’s attention to the moving images and sounds of the show itself. Presenting you with the footage as recorded by the camera phone of a character instead emulates conventions of face-to-face communication and thus constitutes a different mode of address (see for instance *Dead of Night* [2019–20] or *Co-Ed* [2018]). And finally, Snap Originals position the viewer so as to be open to different types of distractions. Some are of a non-diegetic kind such as the remarkably abrupt programmatic advertisement breaks. Others can better be described as paratextually integrated distractions meaning that they are not part of the diegetic text but part of the Snapchat communicative environment — *e.g.*, certain Snapchat functionalities remain visible and thus facilitate detours (*e.g.*, trying on an AR-lens as in *Breakwater* [2022] or forwarding a recommendation to a friend). Since we screen-recorded *CoL*, Snapchat has in fact adjusted its interface bringing in even more non-diegetic elements into the visual display than illustrated by the frame grabs in this paper.



Conclusion

Both Quibi and Snap Originals have had little time to establish specific traditions as regards serial poetics but even if Snapchat and Quibi to some extent had similar objectives, the approach to creating cell phone fiction varies significantly. Despite their generic likeness, *CoL* and *WSGO* thus pursue very different avenues. The table below summarizes some provisional differences that our analyses have highlighted:

Table 3: Differences of <i>CoL</i> and <i>WSGO</i> .		
	Class of Lies (Snap Originals)	When The Streetlights Go On (Quibi)
Genre	Teen drama	Teen drama
Implied audience	Young adults	Double mode of address
Narrative	Hyper condensed serial narrative	Movie-in-chapters- structure
Viewing mode	Vertical only (portrait mode)	Horizontal logic (landscape mode)

Style	Hyper emphatic style	Intensified continuity
Platform vernacular	Distinct Strong platform integration	Indistinct Weak platform integration
Viewer position	Polyvalent	Voyeuristic

Similarities aside, it is evident that the differences are substantial in regards to style and narrative design. Quibi's target group is the older of the two (25–35-year olds) and maybe as an extension thereof the stylistic and narrative design the more traditional of the two.

WSGO mimics long form narratives, its narrative best described as a hybrid of television serial and feature film: It lends an episodic structure to its 10 individual episodes yet the full duration of the show and season arc is strongly reminiscent of a traditional feature film. A few Quibi shows such as the Steven Soderbergh-produced *Wireless* (2020) (Perez, 2020) integrate Quibi's turnstyle technology into its aesthetic design but *WSGO* and a sampling of other Quibi shows suggest that the turnstyle technology was not strongly integrated within the vernacular of the platform.

Whereas Quibi — at least *WSGO* — embraces the stylistic and narrative design of long form media, *CoL* takes a different route. Its aesthetics of immersion are negotiated differently. *CoL*'s aesthetic strategies can be seen as a radicalized version of contemporary serial television yet the poetics of Snap Originals are also of a different order. Combined with the aesthetic implications of being distributed on a 'vertical-only' platform — such as the predominance of split-screen aesthetics — the overall impression is of a serial that aside from embracing a hyper emphatic style goes a long way to accommodate its users and the vernacular of cell phone practices as well as practices associated with Snapchat as a social media application. The latter are even more apparent in other Snap Originals that place additional emphasis on for instance 'screen reality' aesthetics, e.g., showing us the action from the perspective of the character's camera phones (for instance *Co-Ed*), and Snapchat affordances such as AR-lenses. Quibi and Snapchat shows thus demonstrate different forms of platform integration and hence different forms of interrelationship between serial fiction and platform vernacular.

As outlined in the introduction, Quibi and Snapchat stand out among short form content providers. Unlike TikTok, Vine and Instagram, they invested significantly in commissioned material and the exclusive emphasis on cell phone consumption sets them apart from the likes of Facebook and YouTube and more 'traditional' streaming services like Netflix or Disney+. However, Quibi ceased to operate in 2020, and Snapchat recently stopped commissioning SnapOriginals. The resurgence of cell phone fiction in the latter half of the 2010s and its apparent demise in the new decade re-emphasizes the precarious status of this form of storytelling — at least if understood as a commission-based, commercially viable form of production delivered by professional production companies. Whereas there is a shortage of critically acclaimed examples of cell phone fiction, the resurgence nonetheless demonstrates a remarkably rich variety of stylistic and dramaturgical staging principles. Large sections of Quibi's content library were acquired by Roku in 2021 but without the turnstyle functionality and rebranded as a Roku Originals. *WSGO* was among these acquisitions. What little platform integration the turnstyle functionality at least offered in theory is now disentangled from watching *WSGO* as a Roku Original. But at least the show is available as are SnapOriginals commissioned from 2016 to 2022. As regards Snap Originals, the title of Toni Maglio's 2022 article in *IndieWire*, "Snap Originals, we hardly knew you", aptly echoes our reflections upon re-watching these shows today: We clearly identify characteristics of a particular platform vernacular yet can simultaneously see that they are still in a formative phase that had not yet to found a consolidated form.

With the more recent cooling off of the intense commissioning activity that characterized the so-called streaming wars, the status of commissioned, professionally produced serial fiction for cell phones has

become even more precarious. Perhaps the practice of building an aesthetic tradition on the exclusive basis of a smartphone is a commercial dead end. Currently, it seems more likely that the poetics of serial fiction on cell phones will be driven by ‘creator economy’ stakeholders and follow different commercial logics (e.g., partnership-driven and/or branded content deals rather than traditional commissioning).

Nevertheless, our analysis of *CoL* and *WSGO* suggest that cell phone fiction already offers rich avenues of aesthetic strategies (couched within different forms of commercialization). By taking on — and inviting for — different forms of engagement the two shows demonstrate the flexible and variable nature of cell phone poetics. Hopefully, our comparative analysis and identification of different poetic avenues can inform subsequent studies of cell phone fiction as it evolves across time. In particular, we believe that the concept of platform vernacular is an excellent but under-explored analytical tool that can usefully guide the way in which we delineate different strategies within the emerging poetics of cell phone fiction. **FAM**

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Notes

[1.](#) Gibbs, *et al.*, 2015, p. 257.

[2.](#) *Ibid.*

[3.](#) Gibbs, *et al.*, 2015, p. 257.

[4.](#) *Ibid.*

[5.](#) Gibbs, *et al.*, 2015, p. 257.

[6.](#) See Salt, 2006, pp. 266–275.

[7.](#) See also Barr, 1963, p. 19.

[8.](#) Snapchat, 2023, “2023 Annual report,” p. 12.

[9.](#) Rigby, 2018, p. 138.

[10.](#) Ryan, 2018, pp. 254–258.

[11.](#) Clayton, 2022, p. 651.

[12.](#) Bizzocchi, 2009, p. 8.

[13.](#) Bolter and Grusin, 1999, p. 318.

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Editorial history

Received 5 September 2023; revised 10 January 2024; accepted 12 April 2024.



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Cell phone fiction: Serial poetics and platform vernacular
by Jakob Isak Nielsen and Henrik Højer.
First Monday, volume 29, number 5 (May 2024).
doi: <https://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v29i5.13281>