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Way Beyond the Radio. Looking at the remediation  
processes in the podcast *S-Town* through the lenses  
of Gérard Genette's theories

Abstract

Placing itself within a broader debate on the role of literary theory and its tools in media studies, this article applies Gérard Genette's notions of transtextuality and paratextuality to the study of podcasts' remediation processes. After providing a theoretical framework on the textual nature of the podcast, which justifies the application of the Genettian theories to this medium, this work proceeds with analyzing the ground-breaking podcast *S-Town*'s remediation of the radio, the novel, and, of its predecessor, *Serial*. Re-thinking the remediation processes in terms of transtextual and paratextual relationships not only helps identify which aspects of the different media are remediated but also highlights the narrative function these remediations often perform. The analysis thus reveals that in *S-Town*, remediation processes are used to create a metanarrative discourse about the distinctive media characteristics of the podcast. Finally, the article questions how the relationship between the tools of literary theory and theory itself manifests within this analysis.

1. *Reinterpreting Podcasting through the Lens of Literary Theory*

As Federico Bertoni notes, it has been several decades that literary theory and critical studies have been grappling with a paradoxical situation (2018, 14). On the one hand, there is a proliferation of discourse, both within and outside academic circles, proclaiming an impending crisis that the discipline would be hurtling towards (Emre 2023; Guillory 2022), particularly in its semiotic-structuralist branch: the multitude of books and essays addressing this issue over the past four decades (Cain 1987; De Man 1989; Lavagetto 2005; Segre 1993) could be interpreted as the most evident manifestation of this perceived crisis (Berto-

ni 2018). Additionally, in recent times, this sentiment has not diminished, and instead, it has been further exacerbated by the crisis of legitimacy (Guillory 2022) that has affected the socio-economic role of this discipline, which hardly fits within the contemporary late-capitalist logic (Bertoni 2018) and is often perceived as a “luxury that can no longer be afforded” (Guillory 2022, conclusion). On the other hand, however, as literature loses its traditional position of prestige, “a remarkable, sometimes risky, interest in the texts and modes of literature from scholars in several other disciplines” (Ceserani 2010, 1) can be witnessed. To borrow the maybe over-enthusiastic words of Paul de Man, “literature is everywhere” (De Man 1989, 18), or at least, so it seems.

While this narrative turn (Kreiwirth 1992) can be interpreted as evidence of the still-living presence of literary theory, attention must be paid to the potential throwbacks: namely that “this centrifugal explosion of the literary space [...] also entails an inevitable loss of specificity, prestige, and cultural primogeniture”<sup>1</sup> (Bertoni 2018, 19), and that the pleasing reuse and layering of meanings of terms traditionally pertaining to this field may also result in a significant change in their sense (Meneghelli 2013). In this context, reflecting on the role of literary theory in our present and its potential new applications is a delicate matter that must be approached with care.

This work aims to contribute to this ongoing debate by arguing that the tools elaborated by literary theory can still have a valuable role in contemporary critical and theoretical discourse and prove helpful in interpreting new creative forms.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, the present study suggests that Gérard Genette’s theories concerning the relationships between texts, as exposed in *Palimpsests* and *Paratexts*, may prove beneficial in identifying and analyzing the remediation processes of a medium that has recently emerged in our media landscape: the podcast.

It should be noted that early studies on podcasting have partially addressed the topic of remediation in podcasts (Berry 2006; 2016), debating mainly whether podcasts had to be considered solely as a technology that remediates radio (Lacey 2008) or as an independent medium with its own identity (Bonini 2015; 2022; Heise 2014; Berry 2018). However, these studies have yet to explore

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1 All texts without an English translation have been translated by the author of this article.

2 In recent years, several studies have pursued similar objectives, emphasizing the relevance of the topic. For examples, see Ensslin, Round, and Thomas 2023; Thomas 2020; Murray 2018.

the narrative functions these techniques play in podcast narratives. In this regard, literary theory tools may come to the rescue.

By leading a thematic and formal analysis of the groundbreaking podcast *S-Town*, the study reinterprets its remediation processes (Bolter and Grusin 1999) of the radio, the novel, and its well-known predecessor *Serial* in terms of transtextual and paratextual relationships. This analysis will reveal that in *S-Town*, the remediation processes serve to create a metanarrative and self-reflexive discourse about the podcast's medium identity.

In doing so, this work does not have the ambition to finalize a narratology-based approach for analyzing podcasts – which could be problematic given the medium's ongoing evolution – but rather to suggest a few potential applications that could be more organically integrated into future research and to serve as a starting point for inquiring about what the application of literary tools in emerging fields reveals regarding the current state of literary theory. Additionally, what *S-Town* metanarratively states about the medium of podcasts may offer valuable insight into analyzing this new form of media. However, it is important to first define what is meant by the term 'podcast.'

## 2. *A Theoretical framework for Podcasting*

Providing a clear definition of what a podcast is can be more challenging than expected. This is due to the hybrid nature of podcasts (Bonini 2022) and their distinctive media practice, podcasting. This practice, as described by Dario Llinares, is "liminal," since it "emerges out of an idiosyncratic yet fluid set of technological, economic, creative, social and disciplinary conditions" (2018, 124).

In general terms, podcasts can be considered audio content distributed via RSS feeds and consumed on demand. The term was first coined in 2004 by Ben Hammersley from the combination of the words 'broadcasting' and 'pod,' referencing Apple's iPod device. The word denotes both the individual file, the entire program, usually divided into episodes, as well as the technology required to produce, receive, and listen to that program (Bonini 2015; Heise 2014). Hence the confusion concerning this medium, despite its ever-growing popularity. Indeed, in its dual nature of distribution technology and autonomous medium with specific characteristics, the word podcast can refer to significantly different products: radio or tv shows broadcasted live and later

distributed by podcast technology, multifaceted grassroots products, or even high-budget production podcasts.

So then, what makes the podcast – meant as a medium and not just as a distribution system – different from a radio show or other audio products? According to Tiziano Bonini, the main difference is that the “podcast is a text” while the radio is a flow (2022, 9). Bonini refers to Raymond Williams’s definition of audiovisual media flows, namely the characteristic way – by flow, in which the information conveyed by audio-visual media is structured (1975). The flow not only governs the sequence of shows in a television palimpsest or in a radio clock, but is also present within the single program – whose discrete units are connected by the insertion of advertisements – and ultimately in the seamless succession of images and sounds within those individual units (Bonini 2013, 11), resulting in a flow that catches the viewer or listener. As Bonini explains, in radio, this way of organizing the information leads to “background listening,” where the listener “listen[s] to the radio” rather than “to a specific text on the radio” (2022, 9). Conversely, podcasts present a solid textual component in how they organize the information they convey. The interviews or recorded excerpts, when included, are typically embedded within a narrative structure that follows a storyline. The medium, then, fosters “forward listening,” whereby the listener’s attention is directed toward a particular content rather than the medium’s overall flow. This is also facilitated by podcasts’ on-demand modes of consumption (Ibid.).

It should be highlighted that this is not the only way in which the listener experiences the text when listening to a podcast. Indeed, episodes are often created from written scripts read aloud or performed, and podcast platforms frequently provide transcripts whose reading can accompany the audio playback. In the following chapter, I will delve deeper into this topic. For now, it is worth noting that due to the ‘textuality’ of podcasts, Genette’s theories can be applied successfully to their study.

As previously mentioned, this work will employ Genette’s notion of transtextuality, which refers to “all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts” (1997a, 1). Among the various relationships that Genette recognizes as transtextual, this study will focus on intertextuality, which refers to “the actual presence of one text within the other” (Ibid.: 2); metatextuality, which concerns “the relationship most often labeled ‘commentary’” (Ibid.: 4); hypertextuality, defined as “any textuality uniting a text B to

an earlier text A” (Ibid.: 5); and paratextuality, which encompasses “those elements that surround [the text] and extend it, precisely in order to *present* it, in the usual sense of this verb but also in the strongest sense: to *make present*” (Genette 1997b, 1),<sup>3</sup> as further elaborated upon in Genette’s *Paratexts*. Additionally, this study will consider two paratextual typologies that are often overlooked: the factual paratext and the public reading.

One last crucial point requires clarification before delving deeper into the subject. *S-Town* falls within the realm of non-fiction. First, this categorization stems from external factors extending beyond the work itself, encompassing the practices of the cultural industry, contextual elements inherent in production and management, and its audience and critical apparatus (Mittell 2004; Turnbull 2014, introduction). Additionally, from a narrative perspective, *S-Town* also falls within the category of those “historical narratives employing literary devices typically associated with creative literature, thereby blurring conventional reception boundaries”, which Lorenzo Marchese defines as non-fiction (2019, 20).

Regarding its narrative dimension, the ambiguity of *S-Town*, marketed as long-form journalism yet containing elements of fictional writing (including speculative insights into characters’ inner thoughts), has garnered significant attention and critique (Romano 2018; Alcorn 2017) – especially given its sensitive subject matter, to be detailed in the forthcoming chapter. I contend that the remediated media and their inherent reception frameworks wield a pivotal influence in shaping perceptions of *S-Town*’s non-fictional classification. Examining remediation processes as transtextual relationships can, therefore, be profoundly insightful in elucidating their impact on the reception and status of the final text.<sup>4</sup>

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3 Applying the notion of paratext to the analysis of new media is nothing new (Birke and Christ 2013). However, many scholars warned about potential problems that would result from this use (Stanitzek 2005), now suggesting that the boundaries of this concept should be narrowed to only textual elements (Birke and Christ 2013, 70) or alternatively to those elements that share an actual spatial proximity with the text, re-thinking the paratext “as a place, and not as a form” (Del Lungo 2009, 110). However, if these attempts to narrow the notion of paratext can avoid some ambiguities, they also risk depriving new media studies of potentially valuable perspectives. For an example of the use of factual paratext in analyzing new media, see Gallerani 2019; 2022.

4 Several contributions have analyzed the role of transtextual relationships – particularly paratextual ones – in the reception of the fictional and non-fictional status of texts. For examples of such applications of Genettian theories see Rak 2013, ch. 1; Altman et al. 2014.

3. “So I am doing a radio story. I am here from New York.”  
*S-Town remediation of the radio*

*S-Town* is a podcast consisting of seven episodes that was released in March 2017. It was produced by Serial Production, the team behind the pioneering podcast *Serial*, and *This American Life*, NPR’s landmark program of high literary long-form journalism. It is crucial to bear in mind *S-Town*’s affiliation with these two influential shows, which is continually referenced throughout the podcast via narrative and paratextual elements, to comprehend the meta-textual use of the remediation processes it performs.

Upon its release, *S-Town* demonstrated innovative characteristics compared to other podcasts and audio products. The most significant new features were the length of the episodes, referred to as “chapters,” which were approximately one hour each, and their simultaneous release, replicating Netflix’s distribution model. Hosted by Brian Reed, reporter of *This American Life*, as mentioned, the podcast was presented as a non-fictional account.

The story begins when Brian Reed receives an email from John B. McLemore, a horologist from Woodstock, Alabama, requesting his help in solving an alleged murder that the Woodstock police would have covered up. After a long correspondence with McLemore, Reed departs from his radio studio in New York and travels to Woodstock to investigate. However, upon arriving, he soon realizes that no murder has taken place. As Reed warns in the very first episode, though, someone will eventually die (2017, ch. 1): John McLemore commits suicide, and from that point forward, Reed’s investigation shifts towards understanding what motivated McLemore, with whom he developed an unconventional friendship over the months, to take his own life.

Brian Reed thus is both a character and the narrator of the story, presenting an account of the events that occurred months prior. The listener, therefore, is presented with a complex and composite narrative, incorporating excerpts from interviews and recordings within a robust and literary structure that makes no attempt to conceal its editing processes. Within this auditory landscape, the voice of the Reed-narrator can be readily discerned from that of the Reed-character based on their distinct acoustic properties. While the listener hears the character through field recordings, the Reed-narrator’s segments are frequently presented in voiceover and recorded in a studio, resulting in higher sound quality.



Drawing on the example of *S-Town*, we can now explore the textuality of podcasts in greater detail. Indeed, to better understand S-Town's listening experience, it is helpful to consider the distinction Roland Barthes makes between the speech, the written, and the writing (2010, 1-7). Although dialogues and interviews feature prominently in the narration and retain their aural form, they should be regarded as transcriptions (i.e., "the written") rather than speeches, as they would be in a live radio show. This is because the listener only hears recordings of these conversations, which have been subjected to extensive editing. As a result, the original speech loses its distinctive elements (Ibid.: 4) and acquires a logical coherence to fit into the storyline that was not necessarily present in the original (Ibid.: 5). In contrast, the account provided by Reed as a narrator constitutes a purely writing component. Thus, if the 'written' part of *S-Town* originally comprised a speech that was later transcribed, Reed's narrative represents writing that has subsequently been transformed into an oral account. It is now evident how crucial remediation – understood as "the representation of one medium in another" (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 48) – is in the narrative structure of podcasts. The use of these techniques in podcasts is a clear indication of their digital nature.

In the case of *S-Town*, the radio is the medium whose remediation comes across more evidently, and does so, first and foremost, thematically. Reed states from the very first episode his role as a reporter in *This American Life*, the radio show McLemore writes to. In fact, his position in the American public radio is what brings him into contact with McLemore:

REED: "John B. McLemore lives in Shittown, Alabama." That's the subject line that catches my eye one day in late 2012, while I am reading through emails that have come into our radio show, *This American Life*. (Reed 2017, ch. 1)

In addition to introducing himself as a radio reporter to his interviewees, Reed consistently describes his project as a radio show: "So I'm doing a radio story. I'm a reporter. I'm here from New York" (Ibid.: ch. 3). Remarkably, the term 'podcast' is never mentioned in *S-Town*.

Moreover, the radio destination of Reed's audio project is implicitly suggested through the reactions and comments of his interviewees. For instance, Allen Bearden, a friend of McLemore whom Reed interviews in chapter four, expresses concern about being on air and assumes that the program will be

broadcasted: “You know I could tell you my theory on something, but I’m not going to do on the air” (Ibid.: ch. 4). Another significant example of how the radio nature of Reed’s investigation is implied is in chapter seven, where Reed reads a letter from Olim Long, a long-time friend of McLemore. Olim expresses his interest in listening to Reed’s show and therefore asks him on which radio station it will be broadcasted:

REED: Can you let me know when the segment will air, Olin writes, I would very much like to listen. Also, I need to know the radio station number, AM or FM. (Ibid.: ch. 7)

The listener cannot help but notice that the show never aired on the radio, and Reed’s response to Bearden’s and Long’s questions and doubts is omitted from the narration. From this, it can be inferred that the radio show to which Reed alludes is not the audio show the listener is listening to, *S-Town*; instead, this latter can be seen as the account of how Reed makes such a radio show. Thus, a hypertextual relationship exists between *S-Town* and the radio program, with *S-Town* serving as the hypertext and the imaginary radio show as the hypotext. This relationship occasionally takes on nuances of metatextuality, which is made evident at the textual level through the constant presence of operational details, such as Reed’s description of how he readies his recording equipment: “as I’m getting out my recording equipment, I hear murmurs from other people wondering who I am” (Ibid.: ch. 2).

Thinking about *S-Town* and the fictional radio program in terms of hypertext and hypotext also offers valuable insights into how the recorded dialogues and interviews are situated in the narrative. As Reed observes in his metanarrative asides, he records these interviews with the intention of using them for the radio program, making them the avanttexts of the fictional hypotext, which are later incorporated into the hypertext of *S-Town*. As a result, *S-Town* not only thematically presents itself as a radio product but also adopts some of the technical features of the radio as a camouflage strategy in its formal language. The hypertextual perspective, hence, can help identify the radio elements that *S-Town* remediates: the avanttexts, namely the distinctive remediation practices of the radio, specifically regarding recordings and the telephone.

It might be worth spending a few more words on the radio’s peculiar remediation of the phone inherited by *S-Town*. Specifically, I would like to draw attention to two radio genres with which *S-Town* stands in continuity: the last



interview and the imaginary interview.<sup>5</sup> While the former involves an authentic dialogue with a person at the stitch of death (Gallerani 2022, 68), the latter involves, “a virtual communication with what is now a ghost whose voice returns from the beyond” (Ibid.: 69). While the telephone’s use in *S-Town* is undoubtedly due to practical needs – specifically, to put two distant subjects into communication in a way that can be later embedded into an audio narrative – as Gallerani writes, “from dialogues between people distant in space to [impossible interviews], the step is short” (Ibid.: 76).

Indeed, as listeners discover in the second episode that McLemore has committed suicide, they come to realize that the dialogues between McLemore and Reed heard up to that point were, in fact, a form of last interview. As the story unfolds and Reed investigates McLemore’s motivations for his action, listeners continue to hear recordings of phone calls and conversations between the two, almost as in response to Reed’s assumptions or doubts. These interviews, heard after the character’s death, stand as impossible interviews.

*S-Town* thus effectively leverages the widely acknowledged spectral quality of telephone usage in radio broadcasting (Arnheim 2003, 180) to “value the scoop constituted by a meeting that a press correspondent ma[kes] possible by bringing to the public those voices that we will no longer be able to hear” and thus make the listeners hear “the voice of the spectrum” (Gallerani 2022, 70). *S-Town*, then, also remediates the radio’s genres. The remediation of radio, then, bears diverse implications and significance. Reed’s association with public radio cultivates prestige and reliability, nurturing trust among interviewees and listeners. His presumed adherence to journalistic ethics within NPR investigations, coupled with the use of recordings and phone calls fostering a false sense of testimonial authenticity, contributes to bestowing a non-fictional status upon the narrative.

Additionally, Reed’s background in radio predominantly manifests in his expertise, which he adapts to the new medium. In this adaptation, which is represented thematically and also formally through the remediations of the avanttexts, *S-Town* acknowledges the legacy that podcasting inherits from radio. Ultimately, *S-Town* seems to recognize the enduring nationwide relevance that public radio maintains, even in remote areas like Shittown, Alabama – an institutional relevance podcasting has yet to achieve. Simultaneously, though,

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5 For an overview on these two media genres see Gallerani 2022.

Reed's series reveals its divergence from radio by highlighting, in the podcast listeners' experience, its non-broadcasted distribution model, i.e., not being on air. This is underscored by the recurrent paradoxical allusions made by interviewees to the show's future on-air broadcasts.

However, this does not stand as the sole element distinguishing *S-Town* from conventional radio programs. One such aspect is the prominent presence of metatextuality, which draws attention to the constructed nature of the narrative and its editing. *S-Town* is not a radio program because, instead of being a speech, it is a transcription of, and a writing about, that speech. These elements are foregrounded in the narrative of *S-Town* through its remediation of two other media.

4. "From Serial Production, This is Shit-Town". *S-Town's* refashioning<sup>6</sup> of *Serial*.

*S-Town* also renegotiates the boundaries of its medium identity by dialoguing implicitly with the best-known podcast at the time, *Serial*.<sup>7</sup> It is noteworthy that *S-Town* inherited many of its listeners from *Serial*: this also explains how the podcast managed to reach 16 million downloads in the first week after its release (Quah 2017). *S-Town's* intertextual discourse would have been readily comprehensible to the listeners of *Serial*.

Again, *S-Town* most explicitly refers to *Serial* thematically, as the first episodes of the two podcasts exhibit palpable parallels in their plot. In *Serial's* first episode, the *Baltimore Sun's* reporter Sarah Koenig receives an email soliciting her to investigate a cold case: the murder of Hae Min Lee, for which her at-the-time boyfriend Adnan Syed was convicted. The email was written by an old

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6 Bolter and Grusin (1999, 49) define "refashioning" as the remediation that occurs "within a single medium." When applied to literary objects, this concept shares obvious parallelism with the literary theory notion of intertextuality.

7 The Peabody Award describes *Serial* as the show that "launched the podcast as mass entertainment" (2017) becoming the "Podcasting's first breakout hit" (Carr 2014). Indeed, with an up-to-that-point download record of 5 million, *Serial's* release is recognized as both a factor and a symptom of what Richard Berry calls the "golden age of podcasting" (2015). *Serial* not only enjoyed great success with the public but also saw legitimacy from the media and cultural institutions, such as the *New Yorker*. With *Serial*, the podcast began to be considered as a medium with its own characteristic modes of expression.

acquaintance of Adnan who believed in his innocence. Sarah Koenig's investigation is narrated in twelve episodes, released on a weekly basis.

The two podcasts also share a parallelism in the temporal relationship between narrated events and their account:

KOENIG: I first heard about this story more than a year ago, when I got an email from a woman named Rabia Chaudry. (Koenig, ep. 1)

*S-Town*, though, remarks its affiliation with *Serial* not only in its plot but also through its paratextual elements. The opening credits of each episode, which follow a brief preview, feature the podcast's theme song and the voice of Brian Reed stating: "from *Serial* and *This American Life*, I'm Brian Reed. This is Shittown" (2017). Given the proximity to the actual text of the podcast, the credits can be considered peritextual.

Another paratextual element, less explicit but more revealing, underlines the shared authorship of *S-Town* and *Serial*. As already mentioned, each episode is called 'chapter.' The listener encounters this paratextual information textually, when selecting the episode they want to listen to from the chosen interface, and aurally. In fact, at the beginning of each episode, the voice of Sarah Koenig enunciates the word "chapter" followed by the corresponding episode number. These "intertitles", as Genette calls them (1997b, 130), are in themselves paratexts. However, in this case, the paratextual information does not only reside in the intertitles' wordings but in the voice reading them. Sarah Koenig's voice, then, represents a case of the paratextual function assumed by public reading, to which Genette briefly refers to (Ibid.: 370).

If Genette categorizes public reading as epitextual, Sarah Koenig's reading is peritextual. Nonetheless, its paratextual function is evident, as it serves as "a statement of identity [...] explicitly putting at the service of a new [podcast] the success of a previous one and, above all, managing to constitute an authorial entity without having recourse to any name, authentic or fictive" (Ibid.:12).

As the parallels in the plot, this paratextual information can be grasped only by some listeners: those who have listened to *Serial* and can recognize the intertextual references. Nevertheless, if understood, this information enables a much more profound interpretation of the podcast. The shared authorship between the two podcasts can also be regarded as a form of factual paratext, namely "the paratext that consists not of an explicit message (verbal or other)

but of a fact whose existence alone, if known to the public, provides some commentary on the text and influences how the text is received” (Ibid.: 7).

*S-Town* remediates *Serial* to leverage the credibility this association provides, reinforcing its podcast identity and setting itself apart from a traditional radio program. Specifically, it fosters the anticipation of a narrative reminiscent of *Serial*'s innovative attributes: an intimacy and transparency unattainable within traditional broadcasting but fundamental elements of the podcasting medium.<sup>8</sup> As observed in the previous paragraph, considering *S-Town*'s metanarrative attributes, these expectations are upheld. However, even as it appropriates certain elements from Koenig's highly regarded podcast, *S-Town* also purposefully creates distance from them, thereby also redefining listeners' expectations of the medium.

As previously noted, *S-Town* diverges from *Serial* in its genre: a shift that becomes more apparent due to the initial parallelism. By the second episode, it becomes evident that *S-Town* is not a true crime story, and that Brian Reed plays the part of the investigative reporter only on the diegetic level. Instead, Reed's role in the narrative is primarily focused on collecting the stories of other individuals without engaging in any deductive activities or investigations. The questions Reed asks merely serve as a pretext for the interviewees to share their stories, which often surpass the scope of Reed's initial inquiry.

One individual who particularly exemplifies this narrative hypertrophy is John McLemore. In his conversations with Reed, McLemore often launches into monologues, seamlessly touching on a wide range of topics, including his upbringing, his concerns about climate change, and various conspiracy theories. These verbose audio tracks, which could have been edited down, are intentionally included to highlight McLemore's narrative prowess.

In the face of McLemore's overwhelming ability to spin a tale, Reed paradoxically finds himself at a disadvantage and frequently relinquishes his role as narrator to assume that of a listener:

REED: I can't tell if John's being straight with me. John seems so smart and in control. It's hard to believe he could accidentally be stumped by his own maze. I could see him engineering this situation to make things more, I don't know, literary, conjuring this garden path metaphor that he knows I won't be able to resist. (2017, ch. 1)

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<sup>8</sup> Lance Dann and Martin Spinelli dedicate an entire chapter to *Serial* in their book *Podcasting: The Audio Media Revolution*, asserting that intimacy and transparency are pivotal elements shaping the distinctiveness and innovation of Koenig's narrative.

The phenomenon of interviewees proliferating stories during their conversations with Brian Reed is a recurring dynamic in *S-Town*, as evidenced by Reed's repeated use of expressions such as "he's telling me stories" and "he told me all sorts of stories" when commenting on his interactions with them. This trait has led Ella Waldmann to characterize *S-Town* as a podcast that transitions from "storytelling" to "story-listening" (2020). This proliferation of stories, however, has consequences on the narration, making it impossible to confine *S-Town* to a specific genre. Instead, Reed's investigation serves as a narrative framework that incorporates stories from various genres. As a result, *S-Town* breaks free from the limitations of the true crime genre that listeners have come to expect from podcasts, expanding the possibilities of what can be achieved through audio storytelling in this medium.

Finally, *S-Town* diverges from its antecedent not only in terms of genre but also in its serialization model. Indeed, as the name suggests, Sarah Koenig's podcast is a 'serial', "characterized by being narratively articulated in open episodes, which lack a definite conclusion and end with a cliffhanger" (Cardini 2004, 66). Conversely, *S-Town*, despite being divided into episodes, nullifies the serial consumption of its narrative by simultaneously releasing episodes whose length deters from binge-listening. This aspect is further emphasized through the ultimate remediation enacted by *S-Town*: that with the novel.

##### 5. "A seven-chapter novel." *S-Town's remediation of the novel*

*S-Town's* remediation of the novel was the focus of the majority of studies on this podcast (Waldmann 2020, Cardell 2021). In addition to its use of literary storytelling, these studies have underscored two elements the podcast remediates from the novel: the paratextual nomenclature employed by the podcast for the intertitles, referred to as 'chapters,' and precisely their simultaneous release. These two elements help to counteract, in the listener listening experience, the perception of *S-Town* as a serial product and contributed to making its narrative perceived as a "completed story" (Waldmann 2020, 6).

As Cardell points out, then, it is not surprising that *S-Town* has been widely recognized as an audio novel not only among scholars but also among the general audience (2021). This reception has been actively nurtured by Reed himself, who consistently emphasized in his interviews that *S-Town* should

be regarded as a novel. This perspective was further validated by the Peabody committee, which, upon conferring the podcast with an award, described it as “the first true audio novel, a nonfiction biography constructed in the style and form of a seven-chapter novel” (The Peabody Award 2017).

Certainly, by remediating the novel, *S-Town* further exhibits its narrative’s constructed quality and editing processes. By rejecting a serial structure, *S-Town* further distinguishes itself from radio, the medium with which this type of serial storytelling has been associated since its origins. Moreover Brian Reed, by exploiting the novel’s reception as a trusted and prestigious medium, goes beyond mere format considerations, asserting aesthetic value and prestige for his work, aiming to transcend the stigma associated with digital content (Cardell 2021).

Simultaneously, considering *S-Town* as a novel introduces its own set of challenges, beginning with the fundamental observation that McLemore is not a fictional character (Ibid.: 2). Telling McLemore’s story through a narrative framework is problematic because it posits Reed as the interpreter of the meaning in McLemore’s life (Bibler 2020). While the exposure of narrative mechanisms implicit in Reed’s claim to consider *S-Town* as a novel may partly constitute an attempt to negotiate with journalism ethics, “there is no doubt that Reed’s description of his podcast as a literary product is also [...] connected to market forces” (Cardell 2021, 13).

Setting aside ethical implications, however, I posit that these novel-derived techniques are an integral component of the broader discourse through which *S-Town* negotiates its medium identity and characteristics, and their implications can only be fully understood when put in relation to the other types of remediation highlighted in this analysis.

## 6. Conclusion

Rethinking the remediation processes of *S-Town* in terms of transtextual and paratextual relationships helped both in defining the narrative functions these techniques serve in the podcast’s storytelling and in identifying which specific features of other media were being remediated.

In *S-Town*, the remediation processes assume a metanarrative function, allowing the podcast to engage in a discourse on its own media identity by remediating



other media. The first remediated medium discussed was the radio. It was observed that *S-Town* takes up some of radio's characteristics in its genre, themes, and language. However, Reed's podcast ultimately sets itself apart from the radio by thematically and formally highlighting its non-live quality. As evidenced in the analysis, the non-live nature of the podcast is closely tied to its textual quality. This textual nature of the podcast, which served as the theoretical premise for our analysis, was further underlined in *S-Town*'s metanarrative discourse through the remediation of the novel and of the podcast *Serial*. While *S-Town* benefits from the legitimacy associated with *Serial*, it also diverges from the true-crime genre of its predecessor and, through the stories narrated by the interviewees, it constructs a composite narrative that is difficult to confine to a single genre.

Podcasting is thus represented as a medium that draws upon the techniques and expertise of radio but eventually stands apart from it in significant ways. The structured narrative, which possesses a relevant metanarrative quality, is represented as the podcast's distinct characteristic. Indeed, the podcast does not strive to create the illusion of a real-time experience but rather accentuates the role of editing. Moreover, *S-Town* emphasizes the capacity of podcasting to engage in narrative styles beyond those of a specific literary genre. The proliferation of narratives identified in the analysis could be understood as the attempt to recreate the "return of oral spell" carried by electronic media, observed by Gabriele Frasca (2015, 27).

Many of the observations made regarding *S-Town* may also be applicable to other productions, given the influential role it played. The paratextual features of podcasts, specifically, along with the paratextual function of the voice in podcast narratives, could be an incredibly productive area of investigation for this medium.

To conclude, it is pertinent to revisit the opening inquiry of this article, namely, how to understand the relationship between theory and the tools of theory itself in the analysis of *S-Town* and what it may reveal about the endurance of literary theory in new media. Since the demonstrated efficacy of tools developed during the heyday of literary theory in the analysis of *S-Town* stemmed from their ability to identify and scrutinize the presence and quality of remediation, it may be inferred that these tools no longer find their niche in the discourse of literary theory per se. Rather the use of these tools in the analysis of *S-Town* testimonies their fundamental transference to other areas that have incorporated, to some extent, the functions and objectives hitherto exclusive to literary discourse.

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