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"Kids, you may be wondering how many of these stories I'm telling you are true. It's a fair question." – The birth of humour through the rebirth of the narrative in *How I Met your Mother* (CBS, 2005-2014)

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- 1 *How I Met your Mother* (CBS, 2005-2014, henceforth *HIMYM*) is an American sitcom composed of nine seasons and 208 twenty-minute episodes in which a character-narrator, Future Ted (the Ted Mosby of 2030), an architect who also happens to be a hopeless romantic, retrospectively tells his two children the story of how he met their mother. Until the very last episode, Future Ted is only manifested through a voiceover that introduces (almost) each episode or comments on the action to then shift to an audiovisual mode (see Allrath, Gymnich and Surkamp 2005, 19). This structure allows him to recount the events that took place from 2005 to 2013, that is to say from the moment he met Robin, a young Canadian woman with whom he fell in love, to the moment he met their mother. He mostly talks about his dating life and about his four best friends, who all live in Manhattan: Barney Stinson, who is a bachelor, a womanizer, and a pathological liar; Marshall Eriksen, Ted's college roommate and a lawyer; Lily Aldrin, a Kindergarten teacher and Marshall's girlfriend then wife; and Robin Scherbatsky, who quickly becomes part of the group. *HIMYM* has been described as rather innovative when it comes to experimental narrative techniques, and Future Ted indeed uses both the audio and the visual channels to narrate his story in inventive and sophisticated ways; he also appears to be an unreliable narrator as he repeatedly admits that everything he is recounting isn't true, and the TV series becomes reflexive and meta-narrative at times (Cornillon 2006, 163). The main aim is to participate in the

creation of humour in the sitcom, although this element has not yet been analysed in previous studies.

- 2 This paper will focus on the link between the use of innovative techniques to narrate the story and the creation of humour. More specifically, I will try to explain how the repetition (or rebirth) of a narrative by an unreliable narrator can lead to the birth of humour. The first part will expose the theoretical framework of narratology in TV series and explain why *HIMYM* can be considered as a complex TV series. Part 2 will be dedicated to the analysis of two episodes in which the same story is repeated and reborn each time: *The Mermaid Theory* (*HIMYM* 6x11)¹, in which future Ted cannot recall events properly and retells the same story again and again, trying to get it right, and *The Ashtray* (*HIMYM* 8x17), in which Future Ted provides embedded narratives, which turn out to be the same story told from three different points of view.

1. Theoretical Framework

1.1. The (re)birth of narratology in TV series

1.1.1. Narratology: from literature to TV series

- 3 In the introduction to *Narrative Strategies in Television Series*, Allrath, Gymnich and Surkamp (2005, 1-2) argue that "television is replete with narrative forms and genres" and call for a "narratology of TV series". Indeed, narratology has mostly been developed for the analysis of written narratives and narratological tools have to be adapted and extended to be used for the analysis of TV series. Chatman (1978), who was one of the first scholars to apply narratological concepts to audiovisual media, argues that certain specific characteristics of films have to be taken into account in order to do so, notably the existence of "two information tracks": a sound track and a visual track. Chatman (1978, 158) writes:

Films endow narrative with interesting new possibilities of point of view manipulation, since they have not one but two, co-temporal information channels, visual and auditory (and in the auditory, not only voices but music and sound).

- 4 This statement can be applied to TV series (and other audiovisual media) as well as films. Point of view manipulation is indeed made possible and interesting thanks to the combination of images on the one hand and voices, music and sound on the other hand: the viewers can be manipulated by more than words, but also by sounds and moving images, unlike in novels. This is particularly true of TV series which display "narrative complexity", a term that was coined by Mittell and that he extensively develops in *Complex TV: the Poetics of Contemporary Storytelling* (2015). One of the characteristics of complex narratives is that they play on differences between story time and discourse time² (Mittell 2015, 26):

Complex narratives often reorder events through flashbacks, retelling past events, repeating story events through multiple perspectives, and jumbling chronologies – these are overt manipulations of discourse time.

- 5 These manipulations of discourse time are used to encourage the viewers to actively take part in the viewing process, but also to manipulate them³. Allrath, Gymnich and Surkamp (2005, 4) argue that other complex/experimental narrative techniques in TV series may include "multiperspectivity"⁴, "unreliable narration"⁵, "innovative functionalizations of voice-over narration and of audiovisual presentation of

consciousness"⁶, as well as "intramediality, intermediality and metafictionality"⁷. *HIMYM* resorts to several of these techniques and has been defined as a complex narrative with an unreliable narrator (Cornillon 2006, Favard 2014).

1.1.2. Narrators in TV series

- 6 Allrath, Gymnich and Surkamp (2005, 2) apply Chatman's (1990, 134) definition of the "cinematic narrator" to the narrator of television narratives and argue that he/she "is the composite of a large and complex variety of communication devices"; an audiovisual narrator can use both the auditory and the visual channels. Allrath, Gymnich and Surkamp (2005, 13-14) also argue that unlike narrators in novels (although some novels feature no narrator at all; see for example Patron (2021)), narrators in TV series are usually "voiceless"⁸ and "non-anthropomorphic"⁹ narrators; they therefore prefer the term "narrating agency":

It presents the narrated world and thus tells the story, fulfilling the narrator's function of selecting what viewers come to know by determining which events, locations or characters are shown. The camera or filmic composition device also determines how the story is presented, whether viewers, for example, see a close-up of a face or the entire person (full shot).

- 7 However, in many TV series, including *HIMYM*, there are "voice-over narrators" who fulfil a role closer to that of narrators in novels and other literary texts (Allrath, Gymnich and Surkamp 2005, 14). Nevertheless, these voice-over narrators cannot fulfil the exact same functions as the narrators in novels because of the existence of the auditory channel and the visual channel: they can be part of the source of the information conveyed by the auditory track (in addition to music and sound), but not of the visual track. Allrath, Gymnich and Surkamp (2005, 15) add that voice-over narrators can play a more or less prominent role, and sometimes "become one of the main structural features of a series". They give the example of Carrie Bradshaw in *Sex and the City*, but Future Ted in *HIMYM* plays an even more prominent role as I will develop below.

1.1.3. Character focalisation in TV series

- 8 TV series may resort to character focalisation and which can become one of the characteristics of TV series, according to Allrath, Gymnich and Surkamp (2005, 19-20), who further argue that "[i]nternal focalization can be fixed, variable, or multiple; that is, a series can either concentrate on the thoughts, emotions and visions of only one character or juxtapose those of several characters". Juxtaposition shows "a clash of different views of the fictional world or emphasize[s] differences between characters".
- 9 Character focalisation is different in literature and in TV series because the latter resort to different technical means: "the visual track or the soundtrack or both" (Allrath, Gymnich and Surkamp 2005, 20). The visual techniques used for character focalisation are, for instance, the blurring and distortion of pictures, or the use of different colours (for example, sepia or black-and-white images are often used in "memory sequences"). Other visual techniques may include point-of-view shots, camera movement which imitates the movement of the character, gaze shots, reaction shots, etc. Techniques related to the soundtrack may include voice-overs, possibly with distorted voices, but also music and sound effects. Quite often there is indeed a

combination of several devices, such as when voice-overs representing thoughts are heard without lips moving on the visual track.

1.1.4. Text worlds in TV series

- 10 *Text-World Theory*, which was mostly developed by Stockwell (2005 (2002)), Gavins (2007) or McIntyre (2007), who based their theories on Werth (1999), can be useful in analysing TV series (Allrath, Gymnich and Surkamp 2005, 25). It finds its roots in cognitive linguistics, and more specifically in the notion of mental spaces. It makes a distinction between discourse worlds (defined as “the situational context surrounding the speech event itself” by Werth (1999, 83)), text worlds (the fictional worlds which are created), and subworlds (which are created within the text-worlds). This theory can be used to understand how readers (or in this case, viewers) manage to make sense of texts (or TV series) thanks to the construction of different text-worlds and sub-worlds. As Gavins (2007, 12) points out, “[i]n all cases readers [or viewers] will begin processing a text with the assumption that its textual world has an identity with the actual world until they are presented information to the contrary.” The most evident application of this theory is to analyse manipulations of discourse time (see 1.1.1) in “what if” episodes, as pointed out by Bandirali and Terrone (2017, 105) or Allrath, Gymnich and Surkamp (2005, 26). These episodes explore “a counterfactual, that is, an unrealized possibility in the fictional world”. Bandirali and Terrone (2017, 105) suggest that this stylistic device be called “flashbeside”, because “it explores a possible world which is beside the fictional world.” *Text-World Theory* can also be used to analyse other episodes as unrealised possibilities in the fictional world do not solely occur in “what if” episodes.
- 11 Indeed, Allrath, Gymnich and Surkamp (2005, 26-27) use *Text-World Theory* to explain that in TV series, the projection of alternative possible worlds can fulfil different functions, including humour, which is the focus of this article; they argue that a “clear distinction between one character’s possible world and the textual actual world suggests that the events of the fictional world are not accurately reflected in the character’s mental representations, which may produce comic effects or raise epistemological questions” (Allrath, Gymnich and Surkamp 2005, 26). They give the example of *Scrubs*, in which the main character, J.D., regularly imagines alternative scenes besides the series’ actual world, but similar processes are used in *HIMYM*, as I will explain in 1.3. In TV series which are less humorous than *HIMYM*, the representation of alternative worlds and/or resorting to multi perspectival narration can make it “impossible for the viewers to decide which events are factual and which ones are only virtual.” This is the case in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* 6x17, in which it is suggested that Buffy never was the vampire slayer but had actually been a patient in a mental institution since before the series had begun because she believed she was a vampire slayer. Allrath, Gymnich and Surkamp (2005, 26-27) further argue that the representation of alternative worlds can lead to a form of unrealistic transgression, for example a representation of “the characters’ reflecting on their own fictionality” and they link this interest in ontological questions to a “postmodern aesthetics”; interestingly, Booth (2011, 7) talks about “postmodern schizophrenia” to describe the feeling of disorientation that viewers may be faced with when confronted with temporal complexity in TV series. This, of course, is not incompatible with humour.

1.2. (Re)telling narratives and the birth of humour in TV series

- 12 The type of narrative complexity that is the focus of this article is the repetition of the same narrative several times¹⁰. Different authors wrote about the repetition of narratives, be it in literary narratives, conversational narratives, or audiovisual narratives; the central idea in all of these theories is that when the same story moment is repeated, it is never represented in the exact same way. For example, Chatman (1978, 78-79) applies Genette (1972)'s theory on narrative modes to audiovisual narratives and argues that films and TV series resort to repetitive event depiction, which is defined as repetitive discursive representations of the same event. He argues that "multiple discursive representation of the same story moment" can sometimes be confused with "single discursive representations of single different, if highly different, story moments". More recently, Allrath, Gymnich and Surkamp (2005) argue that repetitions of narratives in complex TV series could be analysed as the representation of slightly different alternative worlds within the TV series. Lambrou (2020, 6-7) writes this about the retelling of conversational narratives:

While the underlying narrative structure in the retelling may replicate that of the original, it is likely that no two retellings are identical because of variables such as the audience, which requires tailoring the story, which in turn affects the rhetorical goal of the telling, its tellability¹¹, and the narrator's performance and stylistic choices.

- 13 The reliability of the narrator can be added to this list: a narrator's memories may fade or alter with time, and two people who witnessed the same scene may not have perceived it in the same way and may tell it differently. This idea that no two retellings are identical echoes Deleuze's (1968) thesis that all things are defined by the differences between them and that in every repetition, something unique, or singular, occurs.
- 14 But how does repetition lead to humour? Humour theories are generally divided into three general approaches: superiority, incongruity, and relief (see for example Dynel (2013)). In superiority theory, the audience (or in this case, the viewership) laughs at someone who is represented as inferior to them or at the misfortunes of someone¹². Relief theory, on the other hand, implies that humour allows the audience to release a form of tension or to overcome their inhibitions, and hence has a sort of cathartic effect¹³. I will argue that the best of the three approaches to explain how humour can arise from the rebirth of a narrative is the incongruity approach, as incongruity necessarily requires the co-existence of (at least) two elements that do not match. Indeed, the Cambridge dictionary defines "incongruity" as "the fact that something is incongruous", and "incongruous" as "unusual or different from what is around or what is generally happening". The two (or more) elements involved here are the different narratives or the different text worlds: all the different versions of the narrative – or alternative text worlds – are compared to the first version that was given or to what is implied to be the "right" version, and all the other scenes or text worlds are considered as "incongruous" as compared to these. Every time a narrative or a scene is repeated, a new, different text world arises, and the viewers recognise the narrative but also acknowledge its singularities. The discrepancy between what is expected and what actually is, between two (or more) alternative worlds, or between two (or more) points of view creates incongruousness and an element of surprise (Ross 1998, 7); this incongruous complexity may participate in the creation of humour and repetition may thus become comic repetition.

- 15 Naturally, incongruity does not always lead to humour. General humour theories (such as the incongruity theory) do not always agree on what elements can lead to a humorous response and why, but according to McGraw and Warren (2010, 1142), who conducted a broad review of existing literature on the subject, three conditions do facilitate humour: firstly, humour is often aroused by a form of violation such as a "breach of norms" or "taboo content". Secondly, it occurs in situations which are "perceived to be safe, playful, nonserious, or, in other words, benign". The third condition reconciles the first two: "humour requires an interpretive process labelled simultaneity, bisociation, synergy, or incongruity" (McGraw and Warren 2010, 1142). The repetition of inconsistent stories can be irritating, or even distressing in some cases. For the repetition to be humorous, the viewers need to recognise the violations in the narrative told by Future Ted (in the case of *HIMYM*, the violation can be of different natures: it can be a violation of what is considered as the first narrative or the "right" version of the narrative, or it can be considered as a breach of the maxims of quality, quantity and manner, but there are also societal violations and taboos in the excerpts that will be studied below). The viewers also need to acknowledge that the context is safe and playful, which is achieved by the simple fact that they know they are watching a sitcom. Finally, identifying incongruities between the different versions of the narratives while knowing that the context is playful enables viewers to interpret these incongruities as humorous.

1.3. *HIMYM*: a complex TV series with an unreliable narrator

1.3.1. A complex narration based on flashbacks

- 16 Cornillon (2016, 163) writes that *HIMYM* resorts to sophisticated narrative techniques, as will be shown in this part, thereby implementing a reflection on the narrative and its functions and on the place of fiction in our lives. Narrative complexity is made clear from the pilot (Mittell 2015, 26¹⁴) : *HIMYM* is what Favard (2014, 28) calls "one of the longest flashbacks in the history of television", or what Booth (2011, 7) calls "an extensive flashback":

By extensive flashback I mean that a television show's entire narrative is presented as a flashback. These types of shows are usually framed by events that take place in the future of the narrative portrayed onscreen. For example, almost every episode of *How I Met Your Mother* opens with a two-shot of two children and the on-screen title "2030"— indicating that the show takes place almost twenty years in the future. The first episode of the series, "Pilot," depicts the narrative situation: the off-screen narrator, talking to the children, elucidates that he is going to "tell the story" of how he met their mother. Occasionally, the action of the contemporary narrative cuts back to these two children and their father, who comment on the plot. In this way, the show seemingly tells two stories: the first is the titular one of how the main character (Ted) finds and falls in love with his spouse; the second story is the narration of the first story to the children and their reaction to that story.

- 17 Nevertheless, *HIMYM* is such a narratively complex show because within this extensive flashback, there are more embedded flashbacks (Booth 2011, 10-11). Indeed, in almost every episode, the characters are at McLaren's (the bar they go to night after night) or in the apartment they rent above the bar, and they tell stories that happened before. As pointed out by Favard (2014, 40), "[t]hese flashbacks are associated with visual and auditory cues (a rapid, blurry, lateral tracking shot and a "whoosh" [...]) that create the

'aesthetic code' of *HIMYM*'s temporal shifts." As a consequence of these numerous flashbacks, the narrative seems to extend indefinitely because Future Ted engages in labyrinthine narration, based on digression (Cornillon 2016, 163); he gradually appears to be a very unreliable narrator, both because he delays the revelation of the main information (how he met the mother of his children) so much and because the information he provides seems inaccurate, or at least questionable.

1.3.2. Future Ted as the ultimate unreliable narrator

- 18 According to Cornillon (2016, 163), Craig Thomas, who co-created *HIMYM*, said in an interview that Ted was an unreliable narrator: the images he provides correspond to his version of the facts but not to reality. There are several reasons why Future Ted can prove unreliable: in some cases, he just cannot recall how events unfolded properly. He admits that his memory may be failing him on several occasions ("It's probably not how it happened but here's how I remember it", he says in *HIMYM* 4x22). For example, in *HIMYM* 3x05, he calls the girl he was dating by then "Blah blah" because he cannot remember her name; in *HIMYM* 3x17, he tells the story of his 30th birthday and hints at the presence of a goat that he got in a fight with, only to reveal at the end of the episode that he had the story wrong because the goat was actually involved in his 31st birthday. Sometimes he conceals details from his children and to the viewers through ellipses ("I tell you a lot of inappropriate stories but there's no way in hell I'm telling you this one. Don't worry though, it was not that great." *HIMYM* 1x15) or through the modification of some visual elements (throughout the series, the characters are frequently shown eating sandwiches, although it was explained earlier in the series that "eating a sandwich" is a euphemism for "smoking weed"). Finally, he also sometimes tells blunt lies: at least on two occasions, he lies about the identity of the mother, even though for a few seconds only (in *HIMYM* 1x09, he pretends she was a stripper; in *HIMYM* 6x24, he pretends she was a girl sitting in a café).
- 19 Cornillon (2016, 164) argues that the main reason why Future Ted is unreliable is because the story that he is narrating is not the story of how he met the mother of his children, as he pretends, but the story of how he is "totally in love with Aunt Robin", as his daughter points out in the last episode. However, Future Ted does not (at least, not always) try to deceive his children: he believes he is telling the true story on many points, but he actually is mistaken because the story he is telling is that of a middle-aged man trying to start a new life, which confers a particular status to the digressions in his narrative. Future Ted's narrative may not be factual, but it is not false: he talks about his feelings, without even noticing (Cornillon 2016, 170), and justifies his actions to both himself and his children. The complex narrative construction leads to a redefinition of the notion of unreliable narrator and to a questioning of the place of narratives and of fiction in our contemporary world (Cornillon 2016, 164). Favard (2014, 32) argues that Future Ted, as unreliable as he may be, does not actually make the story more confusing, quite the contrary:

Future Ted is repeatedly proven to be an unreliable narrator who lies, omits, modifies and doesn't accurately recall events of his life; however, this does not make the story more confusing. It is this unreliability, the erratic nature of Future Ted's storytelling, that constantly reminds us of his position of power, and enables both the kids and the viewer to catch proleptic glimpses of events to come.

- 20 At a macroscopic level, on several occasions, Future Ted confuses timelines, which enables the viewers to learn about events to come (Lily and Marshall are going to get married and have children, for example). This leads to the creation of suspense (for example, the children and the viewers grow eager to learn about the goat story), but the information that is revealed sometimes proves quite moving for the viewers and constitutes a reward for the children and the viewers who sit for a very long time, waiting for the end of the story, oblivious to the fact that the journey is more important than the ending. At the microscopic level – that is to say, in each episode –, as the sitcom (short for “situational *comedy*”) is meant to be humorous, the main function of the unreliable narrator is to create humour¹⁵.

1.3.3. Different narrators, different focalisers, different text-worlds

- 21 As Cornillon (2016, 171) points out, Future Ted is not the only unreliable narrator in the TV series¹⁶. As I explained in 1.3.1., *HIMYM* offers many flashbacks within the main extensive flashback, and quite often, these embedded narratives seem to be neither narrated nor focalised by (Future) Ted. The narrators of these embedded stories seem to be no more reliable than Future Ted as they sometimes “tell” but also “imagine” stories (Favard 2014, 33):

In the first eight seasons, approximately 110 out of 184 episodes deal with at least one member of “the gang” telling or imagining a story. While many are just recounting events that prompt the rest of the gang to react, a great number of episodes go further. [...] But if, on the first level, Future Ted is a powerful narrator figure, on this second level, it is Barney who stands out as a master of storytelling.

- 22 Barney is indeed very often depicted as a man who lies to women to get what he wants – and who lies in general, because he wants to make every story “legendary”. He gives the other characters “fake history lessons”, rewriting history to create his own mythology: for example, in *HIMYM* 3x17, he explains the history of *the Bro Code*, a “list of do’s and don’t’s for all bros”. From the opening line of his narrative, the viewers understand that he is actually rewriting the history of the *Declaration of Independence*: “The year was 1776. The place: Philadelphia. Benjamin Franklin and George Washington were having a drink.” In this palimpsest of American history, the humorous dimension emerges thanks to the discrepancies and incongruities that the viewers can identify in his narrative. Although this tendency to lie might be ostentatious in Barney, all the characters prove to be unreliable narrators at one point or another. As Cornillon (2016, 171) argues, none of the characters actually narrate facts: they narrate the “stakes” of these facts. They do not confuse fiction and reality; they prefer to build narratives which are a fictionalised version of reality. They give birth to new narratives by (re)inventing the facts, mostly for humorous purposes. One example of this is *HIMYM* 3x15, in which each character explains how they would have handled the conversation that Marshall has with his superior, Artillery Arthur. The viewers understand that these scenes did not take place and that the characters just imagined them, and a form of incongruity between the alternative text worlds arises. The viewers also understand that these narratives are meant to be playful, which allows them to interpret them as humorous.
- 23 In these embedded stories (be they alternative worlds, flashbacks, or memory sequences), the other characters may become both focalisers (which is made evident through voice overs, for example) and/or narrators, for example through images: in

other words, both the auditory channel and the visual channel are used by unreliable narrators, both in the extensive flashback and in the embedded narratives. While viewers may doubt explicit narrators and voice-overs, they tend to believe that images are more reliable than words and usually do not question a verbal narrative supported by audiovisualisation (Jost 2016, 21). In *HIMYM*, however, images are no more reliable than words: viewers cannot trust what they are told or shown.

- 24 This multi-layered narration, told by unreliable narrators, appears as a patchwork of events Ted lived through and of narratives that he heard in the past; he admits on several occasions that his narrative may not be reliable because he was not part of the story: "Now, I wasn't there, but from what I heard, it went something like this" (*HIMYM* 1x12) / "This is how your Aunt Robin swears it happened" (*HIMYM* 4x03). Retelling a story necessarily changes it.

2. Case study: repeating narratives to create humour in *The Mermaid Theory* and *The Ashtray*

- 25 In this part, I will more specifically focus on two episodes in which the same story is repeated and reborn every time it is told: *The Mermaid Theory* (*HIMYM* 6x11), in which Future Ted cannot recall events properly and retells the same story again and again, trying to get it right, and *The Ashtray* (*HIMYM* 8x17), in which Future Ted provides embedded narratives, which are the same story told from three different points of view. The main difference between these is that in *The Mermaid Theory*, there is one main unreliable narrator (Future Ted), while in *The Ashtray*, there are several unreliable narrators. In order to collect the data, I carefully watched the episodes and used the scripts available on the Internet, but added details such as the timing, stage direction, or sounds.

2.1. *The Mermaid Theory*

- 26 *The Mermaid Theory* is the eleventh episode of season six; Ted tries to remember the details of the argument between Barney and Lily but he cannot, which leads to several plot holes. The title of the episode refers to one of Barney's theories according to which the more time you spend with someone, the more likely you are to want to sleep with them: you will picture them as manatees at first (unattractive beings), but they will eventually turn into mermaids (attractive beings). The part of the story which includes Barney and Lily is divided into four scenes:

- I. In the apartment, on the couch (repeated four times)
- II. At the bar / on the street (repeated four times)
- III. At the bar / in the booth (repeated three times)
- IV. At the bar, standing (only once)

- 27 Ted starts his narrative by repeating scene I, trying to remember the source of the fight:

- (3:19 *in the apartment*) BARNEY: Lily, I guess that leaves just you and me. Want to hang?
- (3:22 *image freezes*) FUTURE TED: And then Lily said something to Barney that insulted every fiber of his being.
- (3:26) LILY: Nah.
- (3:27) BARNEY *gasps*

(3:29 *image freezes again*) FUTURE TED: Wait. No. It had to be more than just, "Nah." Oh, I think she said...

(3:33 *scene restarts*) LILY: You're a big stupid octopus head!

(3:36) BARNEY *gasps*

(3:37 *image freezes*) FUTURE TED: No, that doesn't make sense. (3:39 *back to both Lily and Barney*) Okay, hang on. (The image unfreezes but Lily and Barney don't move and start looking at the camera, looking embarrassed) What did she say? She said, um, uh

(3:47 *switch to the children on the couch*) To be honest kids, I'm having a little trouble remembering exactly what their fight was about. Hey, it was 20 years ago! I'll remember. Anyway, the next night...¹⁷

- 28 Ted admits that he is not reliable because he cannot recall events that took place 20 years ago, but he fails to admit that he was not even there for most of the events that took place during the episode (although he does in other episodes). His status as an unreliable narrator is confirmed by both the audio and the visual tracks: Future Ted, through the voiceover, explicitly admits that his narrative "doesn't make sense" and that he is "having a little trouble", which is reinforced by the use of gap fillers. On the visual track, the image freezes repeatedly to give Future Ted time to recollect his memories, the scene restarts, and Lily and Barney end up looking directly at the camera because they're embarrassed and waiting for Future Ted to tell them what to do. This, on the one hand, contributes to a portrayal of Future Ted as a puppet master who controls his characters and the narrative. On the other hand, it shows a conflict between "worlds that are usually kept separate" and "disrupts the traditional fictional contract that institutes a clear separation between what Text World Theory calls 'Text World' (the situation depicted by the Text) and 'Discourse World' (the 'situational context surrounding the Text, including the interaction between discourse participants like writers-readers for example)" (Sorlin 2016, 201). The meta-narrative dimension, together with the fact that the story is told twice but differently, contribute to the birth of incongruity. It becomes obvious that viewers can rely neither on Future Ted's words nor on the images he provides, but as they are aware of the playful and nonserious dimension of the scene and of the entire sitcom, the context is interpreted as "safe" and the scene as humorous. The humorous interpretation is also reinforced by the presence of canned laughter during the scene. Ross (1998, 1) writes:

There is a strong social aspect to the way people respond to humour. If you watch your favourite comedy in the presence of people who remain straight-faced, it can stop you from finding it funny. Because it's important to sense other people are responding to humour, 'canned laughter' is used for television or radio comedy.

- 29 In other words, canned laughter indicates what is meant to be humorous and when the viewers are supposed to react to the humorous stimuli (Terry 2021,14).
- 30 Future Ted also resorts to other strategies to tell the narrative he cannot remember; instead of trying to fill in the details, which leads to out-of-context absurd lines such as "You're a big stupid octopus head!", he sometimes decides to rewrite the dialogues to make them vaguer, as in the first time he tells scene II:

(6:23 *at the bar*) FUTURE TED: That same night, Barney and Lily were still fighting about, um **something**. Or was it **that other thing**?

LILY: Barney.

BARNEY: Save it, Lily. I am still mad at you for... **something**, ... and for **that other thing**.

LILY: Look, I'm sorry I hurt your feelings. But let's be honest. You've been super sensitive lately.

BARNEY (*crying*): No, I haven't! God, how can you say that?!

(6:51) LILY: Watch out! (*they both yell as a motorcycle drive past them in the bar*)

(6:52 *Image freezes*) FUTURE TED: Wait. They were on the street.

(6:54 *same scene again but with Lily and Barney on the street*) LILY: Watch out!

BARNEY: Oh! Wow. Thanks, Lily. You saved me. You saved us. (*looking at his ice cream*) Look, I know you didn't mean... **whatever it was you said that made me so mad.**

LILY: **I think I probably didn't.**

- 31 Thanks to the use of vague terms such as indefinite pronoun "something", evaluative verbs ("think") and epistemic adverbs ("probably"), the dialogue is altered; the viewers are aware of the lack of accuracy of the dialogues relayed by Ted because they are too vague. Future Ted is also fully conscious of the plot holes and incongruities that are sprinkled across his narrative, be they the dialogues, problems of non-congruent personalities (Barney is be "super-sensitive" and cries), or absurd scenes (with the motorcycle in the bar). The fact remains that Ted was not there when Lily and Barney first had this conversation, so he could not have repeated the exact same words; even if he had been there, his memories of events that took place 20 years ago would have been altered. Nevertheless, in this failed rebirth of the dialogue and of the entire scene, incongruities are made obvious and exaggerated, and as the viewers are fully conscious of the humorous purpose, they are likely to interpret the scene as humorous and to laugh.

- 32 When Future Ted starts recounting scene III, the dialogues seem more accurate and more likely to have taken place to the viewers, and a detail in the dialogues enables Future Ted to understand that he could not get his story straight because he was mistaken on one major point:

(12:20 *at the bar*) FUTURE TED: Okay, back to Barney and Lily and whatever the hell they were fighting about.

(12:24) LILY: Seriously? I step away for five seconds, and you eat all my onion rings? No surprise there.

(12:31) BARNEY: What's that supposed to mean? Are you calling me fat? If there is one thing you never do, it is call a woman fat right to her face!

(12:41 *image freezes*) FUTURE TED: Wait. Barney's not a woman. That's right – **Barney wasn't hurt by Lily, Lily was hurt by Barney!**

- 33 Future Ted then proceeds to retelling the first three scenes, each of the three scenes beginning with a WOOSH and a flash of white light¹⁸. The three scenes are considerably shortened as compared to the first two times Future Ted told them as he only keeps the central lines. Lily's and Barney's roles and dialogues are switched, but apart from that, the scenes are only defined by this small variation:

Back to the first scene between the two of them – WOOSH + white flash of light

(12:49) LILY: Wanna hang?

BARNEY: Nah.

LILY: (*gasps*)

Back to the second scene between the two of them – WOOSH + white flash of light

BARNEY: Watch out!

LILY: (*gasps*) Wow thanks, Barney. You saved me. You saved us. (*looking at her ice cream*)

Back to the third scene between the two of them – WOOSH + white flash of light

(13:04) LILY: If there's one thing you never do, it's call a woman fat right to her face!

(13:09 *shift to the kids*) FUTURE TED: **Okay, now I'm on track. The rest of this story should make perfect sense.**

- 34 Nevertheless, Future Ted soon proves to be unreliable again as a few seconds later (in what I call scene III), Barney asks Lily if she wants to see a magic trick when they are both sitting in the booth: he places the bottle of beer above her belly and it floats in the air, which leads him to admitting, once again, that he cannot get his story straight and gives up: "Okay, that makes no sense. Kids, I'm officially admitting defeat. I will never remember this story. I'm sorry for wasting your time." However, this is once again a lie because he finally remembers the details by the end of the episode:

Marshall and Robin are at the restaurant

(16:07) MARSHALL: Once a mermaid gets pregnant, she becomes a manatee again.

Never thought I'd say that sentence.

(16:13 *image freezes*) FUTURE TED: **Wait! That's it! That's what Barney and Lily were fighting about! The Mermaid Theory! But their argument didn't happen at the same time as all this other stuff. I'm literally in the wrong year! It happened much, much later when Lily was...**

(16:26 *Back to scene I - WOOSH + white flash of light*)

(16:27) FUTURE TED: ... **pregnant!**

- 35 Future Ted then proceeds to retelling all four scenes, and everything seems to make perfect sense this time: in scene I, Lily refuses to spend time alone with Barney because he spends the whole time undressing her with his eyes, and Barney retorts that there is no risk as she looks like a "big fat manatee". In scene II, Barney actually saves Lily and her baby, not Lily and her ice-cream. In scene III, he places his bottle of beer on her pregnant belly. Once all the incongruities are resolved and the original narrative emerges, the narrative is not so humorous any longer. This might be in contradiction with some incongruity-based approaches to humour that imply the resolution of incongruities, as pointed out by Ritchie (1999, 79):

There is sometimes a debate as to whether incongruity alone is sufficient for humour, or whether it is necessary for the incongruity to be resolved; that is, to be shown to be logical, or at least less incongruous than was first thought.

- 36 In this excerpt, the humorous dimension lies in the incongruities in the scenes, and the resolution is actually more touching than humorous. As Favard (2014, 32) argues, Lily's pregnancy "is not news to the kids, who already know their cousin Marvin, but this information is a proleptic clue for the viewer, who learns that Marshall and Lily will finally have a baby by Season Seven". This proleptic clue is rather moving for the faithful viewers, who have been following the group's adventures for six seasons. The incongruities in the repetition of the narrative, together with the incongruities with the main plot and with what faithful viewers know about the characters, contribute to the creation of humour, and the resolution of the incongruities is heart-warming. Future Ted, as a narrator, did not try to manipulate the children this time, but screen writers, through repetition and alternative text worlds, did manipulate the viewers, who are likely to find the episode both humorous and touching, and this manipulation is reinforced by the combination of the sound track and the visual track.

2.2. The Ashtray

- 37 *The Ashtray* is the seventeenth episode of season eight. The episode includes three main embedded narratives¹⁹: Ted, Robin, and then Lily all tell Marshall about that time when Lily took her friends Ted and Robin to an art gallery opening and ran into the Captain, Zoe's former husband. They do so because Ted gets a message from the Captain asking

him to "call him back at his earliest convenience" and he wonders what he wants to talk to him about. Contrary to *The Mermaid Theory*, in which one character told the same story over and over again, this episode resorts to multiperspectival narration, a concept for which Allrath, Gymnich and Surkamp (2005, 18) give the following definition:

[M]ultiperspectival narration [is] the presentation of a fictional world from different points of view, where one has two or more extra- and/or intradiegetic narrating agencies. [...]

[It] juxtaposes two contradictory versions of one story, told by two intradiegetic narrators. [The] perspectives challenge and relativise each other without converging to a single focal point. [...]

While multiperspectivity of the type just described can be found very frequently in written narratives, it is unusual in television narratives.

- 38 In this episode, the three intradiegetic narrators are Ted, Robin and Lily. The narratives they tell are divided into two parts: the first one takes place at the art gallery, the second one takes place in the Captain's office²⁰. After Ted tells his narrative, Robin tells hers, arguing that Ted's vision of the unfolding of events is erroneous because he had smoked weed; Lily then tells her version of the unfolding of events, claiming that Robin's was erroneous as well because she was drunk. The narrative can be divided into eleven parts:

	Ted's point of view (1mn23)	Robin's point of view (2mn06)	Lily's point of view (1mn22)
1	(2:21) LILY: This place is so fancy. I hope I don't embarrass myself.	(7:09 Flashback in a WOOSH and sliding image) TED (high, eating like a pig): Mmmh mmmh. Delicious. (7:12) LILY: This place is so fancy. I hope I don't embarrass myself.	(13:06 Back to main scene in a WOOSH and sliding image) (13:06) TED (high, eating like a pig): Mmmh mmmh. Delicious. Shrimpy for me. (Robin, drunk, air playing drums) (13:09) LILY (reproachfully): This place is so fancy. I hope I don't embarrass myself.
2	(2:24) TED: What? Lily, come on. You got nothing to be embarrassed about.	(7:14) TED (mouth full) Come on, Lily. You got nothing to be embarrassed about.	(13:14) TED (mouth full) Come on, Lily. You got nothing to be embarrassed about.
3	(2:28) ROBIN: Dude, look who it is. (2:30) TED: And who should walk in but... (2:33 Images slide and WOOSH) BARNEY: Daddy's home. (2:35) TED: Nope.	(7:23) ROBIN: Dude, look who's here. (7:25) BARNEY (with two women in swimsuits and an electric guitar): Daddy's home. (7:28 main scene) TED & ROBIN: Nope.	(13:19) ROBIN (drunk): Dude! Look who's here. (13:21) BARNEY (with two women in swimsuits, an electric guitar and glitter): Daddy's... (13:22 main scene) TED & ROBIN: Nope.

4	(2:36 <i>Images slide and WOOSH</i>) THE CAPTAIN: Well, well, Ted Mosby, my old nemesis. What are you doing here?	(7:30 <i>Images slide and WOOSH</i>) THE CAPTAIN: Well, well, (<i>Ted shrieks, obviously scared</i>) Ted Mosby, my old nemesis. What are you doing here?	(13:25 <i>Images slide and WOOSH</i>) THE CAPTAIN: Well, well, (<i>Ted shrieks, obviously scared</i>) Ted Mosby, my old nemesis.
5			(13:29) ROBIN (<i>seductively to the Captain</i>): Hello... sailor! (13:32 <i>back to main scene</i>) ROBIN: No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no... Okay yeah, that's what happened.
6	(2:41) TED: Um, well... Lily saw an ad for this... (2:44) THE CAPTAIN: Gallery? (2:46) TED: So we... we came to check out the... (2:47) THE CAPTAIN: Artwork. (2:50) TED: And then we ran into... (2:51) THE CAPTAIN: Me.	(7:35) TED (<i>stammers, very slow</i>): Um, well... Lily saw an ad for this... (<i>pause</i>) (7:46) THE CAPTAIN: Gallery? (7:49) TED: So we... we came to check out the... (7:57) THE CAPTAIN: Artwork? (8:01) TED: And then we ran into... (8:08) THE CAPTAIN: Me. (8:11) ROBIN (<i>voiceover</i>): and the Captain wasn't glaring at you, he couldn't take his eyes off... (8:14) THE CAPTAIN (<i>to Robin</i>): Hey, nice to see you again. (<i>handkissing</i>) (8:15) ROBIN: Yeah you too. (<i>romantic music in the background</i>)	
7	(2:53) TED (<i>thinking</i>): Man, this guy's so rude. I mean, I get why he's mad. I did stick it to his ex-wife... repeatedly. Still, he's being a jerk. Someone needs to bring him down a peg.	(8:18) TED (<i>out loud, Lily's obviously embarrassed</i>): Man, this guy's so rude. I mean, I get why he's mad. I did stick it to his ex-wife... repeatedly. Still, he's being a jerk. Someone needs to bring him down a peg.	

8	<p>(3:04) THE CAPTAIN: I'm sorry. Where are my...</p> <p>(3:06) TED: Manners. That's how that feels. <i>(high fives the waiter)</i></p> <p>(3:11) THE CAPTAIN: This is my art consultant, Shelly.</p> <p>(3:13) ROBIN <i>(interested)</i>: Art consultant? What's that?</p>	<p>(8:31) THE CAPTAIN: I'm sorry. Where are my manners. This is Shelly, my art consultant.</p> <p>(8:36) ROBIN <i>(interested)</i>: Art consultant? What's that?</p>	<p>(13:37) <i>Images slide and WOOSH, back to flashback)</i></p> <p>(13:38) THE CAPTAIN: This is Shelly, my art consultant.</p> <p>(13:42) ROBIN <i>(drunk, mocking, insulting)</i>: Art consultant? What's that?</p>
9	<p>(3:15) LILY: Oh, Shelly helps the Captain select artwork based on its aesthetic appeal and value as an investment. That's why I think she's gonna love this elephant painting. I think this artist is going places. <i>(meanwhile, the Captain signs Ted that he is going to kill him; focus on their two faces)</i></p>	<p>(8:38) LILY: Shelly helps the Captain select artwork based on its aesthetic...</p> <p>(8:42) TED: Manners. That's how that feels. <i>(hits the waiter)</i></p> <p>(8:49) LILY: ... appeal and value as an investment. That's why I think she's gonna love this elephant painting. I think this artist is going places. <i>(meanwhile, the Captain tries to seduce Robin by giving her languishing glances and a romantic music plays; close-up on Robin's face)</i></p>	<p>(13:45) LILY <i>(embarrassed)</i>: Shelly helps the Captain select artwork based on its aesthetic appeal and value as an investment. That's why I think she's gonna love this elephant painting. I think this artist is going places. <i>(meanwhile, Robin tries to seduce the Captain by giving him languishing glances and a romantic music plays; close-up on Robin's face; the Captain is not responding)</i> You'd have to be a real Dumbo not to enjoy this painting. Get it? <i>(laughs awkwardly)</i> 'Cause he's an elephant.</p>
10	<p>(3:27) SHELLY: Well, I should go. Captain, we'll talk tomorrow?</p>	<p>(9:00) SHELLY: Well, I should go. Captain, we'll talk tomorrow.</p>	<p>(14:04) SHELLY: Your sense of humour is as good as your taste in art. Captain? We'll talk tomorrow?</p>
11	<p>(3:30) THE CAPTAIN: At ease. <i>(to the gang)</i> Hey, if you like art, you should see the painting I just acquired. It's in my apartment just upstairs. It's gonna blow you away. <i>(suspenseful sound)</i></p>	<p>(9:05) THE CAPTAIN <i>(to Robin, seductively)</i>: If you like art, you should see the painting I just acquired. It's gonna blow you away.</p>	<p>(14:12) THE CAPTAIN <i>(to Lily)</i>: If you like art, you should see the painting I just acquired. It's in my...</p> <p>(14:17) TED: Manners. That's how that feels. <i>(hits the waiter)</i></p> <p>(14:23) THE CAPTAIN: In my apartment, right upstairs. It's gonna blow you away.</p>

- 39 There are very few differences in the dialogues apart from the narrators' voiceovers and a few added or deleted lines. This is especially true in Lily's narrative, in which she does not repeat everything as Robin had already quite accurately told this part of the story (6 and 7). Later in the narratives, Lily and Robin add scenes in which Ted was not present. But the main differences are not to be found in the words that the characters utter.

- 40 Firstly, especially in Ted's and Robin's narratives, time perception is significantly different: the scene lasts 1 minute and 23 seconds when told by Ted and 2 minutes and 6 seconds when told by Robin. Ted omits one substantial detail in his narrative: before he went to the art gallery opening, he smoked a joint with his girlfriend Betty. This altered his perception of time and of the events that unfolded that day²¹, and when Robin corrects Ted's story, it appears that Ted was actually very slow that day. Ted believes that the Captain was interrupting him all the time (6), but Robin actually reveals that Ted could not find his words because he was high on drugs: there are at least 4 seconds between the moment when Ted interrupts a sentence and the moment when the Captain completes those sentences. This culminates in Lily's narrative: Ted thought he interrupted the Captain with "manners" (8), but the conversation actually went on without him noticing: he said it much later in Robin's narrative (9), and even later in Lily's narrative (11).
- 41 Secondly, the camera also focuses on different characters according to who tells the story in order to show whose point of view it is: for example, in (9), the camera focuses on Ted and the Captain during Ted's narrative, and on Robin and the Captain during Robin's narrative. Some of the close-ups on the characters' faces are reaction shots which reveal the focalisers' inner feelings (Allrath, Gymnich and Surkamp 2005, 20).
- 42 Thirdly, acting also differs in the three narratives: the characters' attitudes seem quite "normal" when the narrative is told by Ted, except for the Captain who seems exceedingly threatening. In Robin's narrative, Ted is obviously high, while the Captain acts seductively, and Robin looks puzzled. In Lily's narrative, Robin is obviously drunk, and Lily is obviously irritated at her friends and embarrassed.
- 43 Fourthly, the characters' attitudes are not only shown in their facial expressions but also in their intonation, for example with Lily in (1) ("This place is so fancy. I hope I don't embarrass myself."): she sounds worried in Ted's narrative, and angry in the last two. It is also evident in Robin's line in (8) ("Art consultant? What's that?"): she sounds interested in the first two and insulting and mocking in the last one.
- 44 Finally, the music and sounds that can be heard in the background are different in the three narratives: it is suspenseful in Ted's narrative, romantic/erotic in Robin's, while in Lily's narrative, it is almost absent, except for a few seconds during which it is similar to the music in Robin's narrative. In all cases, they are rather caricatural, which emphasises the incongruities between the different narratives and in turn, participates in the humorous process as the viewers understand that the caricatures are meant to be playful.
- 45 Once again, there are differences in both in the visual and the sound track in the three versions of the narrative. These differences contribute to giving birth to humour, and the stereotypical, caricatural use of music, acting, etc. reinforces this humorous dimension by drawing the viewers' attention to the fact that a narrative can be very different depending on who tells it; conversely, a scene can turn out to be very different depending on acting and the other devices of film making mentioned above.
- 46 Lily's textual world clearly conflicts with Ted's and Robin's, which shows that their mental representations of events are not right. It also shows that in this episode, none of the narrators are reliable, except maybe for Lily as she was the only one who was not under the influence of marijuana or alcohol. Barney's interventions (3) mirror Ted's unreliable narration:

TED: Barney, you weren't there. Why is it so important that you be part of this story?

BARNEY: Because crazy stories are my thing. You have architecture, Marshall has the law, Lily has art, Robin has pleasing me sexually. You all have a passion that drives you. Well, if I have a passion, it's taking life and turning it into a series of crazy stories. If you can do that without me, then... I don't even know who I am anymore.

TED: You know what, Barney? Now that I think about it, you were there.

ROBIN: That's right, you were.

- 47 At the very end, Ted and Robin give in and decide to agree with Barney. Robin appears to be the most unreliable narrator of them all: she does not remember everything right because she was drunk, and she lies twice: once to please Barney, and once to pretend that the Captain tried to seduce her and not the other way around. Even the Captain seems to be unreliable as he says at the end that Barney was there. How can the viewers know where the truth lies, in the end, when all the narrators try to deceive them, both through the visual and the sound tracks?

Conclusion: the birth of humour through the rebirth of the narrative

- 48 In the two episodes under scrutiny, manipulation is reinforced by the combination of the visual track (images) and the sound track (dialogues, music and sound). The use of different narrators' voiceovers, reaction shots, flashbacks, music, sounds, as well as the actors' gestures, mimics, and intonations are as many elements that are used by the collective sender (that is, the TV series crew and actors) to both confuse the viewers and make them laugh. The viewers know that images are no more reliable than words as they differ every time the narrative is reborn and a new text world is created. The unreliable narrators keep forgetting details because of time, alcohol or drug consumption; they also deliberately lie or omit details. The repetition of the narratives makes it obvious that the narrators give birth to new narratives by reinventing the facts and by creating alternative text worlds. Because of the variations in the narratives, narrators create their own text world(s). In each of these text worlds, singular or unique elements occur, and the differences between the different text worlds lead to incongruity and contribute to the birth of humour because the viewers are aware of the nonserious and playful dimension of the series. The representation of alternative worlds also shows that the characters reflect on their own fictionality, which points to a meta-narrative dimension in the series. Truth does not really matter in the end, only the way(s) the story is told gives birth to humour, as Ted argues in *HIMYM* 5x19: "Kids, you may be wondering how many of these stories I'm telling you are true. It's a fair question. After all, there's a fine line between a good story and a bold-faced lie. [...] People need the lie."

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NOTES

1. The number before "x" refers to the season, and the number after "x" to the episode.
2. According to Mittell (2015, 26), *discourse time* is "the temporal structure and duration of the story as told within a given narrative, which almost always differs from *story time* via ellipses skipping over uneventful moments." *Story time* is the time frame of the diegesis, and *narration time* is the temporal framework involved in telling and receiving the story and is strictly controlled for film and television, unlike in novels: reading speed varies among different people at different times, but viewing speed does not (an episode is about 20 minutes long for every viewer, unless they take a break).
3. This could be considered as a defining feature of TV series in general.
4. Please note that multiperspectivity is rather rare in TV series compared to novels, but there are instances or episodes in which the same scene is told several times from different points of view.
5. This will be developed later on. An unreliable narrator is a narrator that cannot be trusted (because they lie, because they contradict themselves, etc.).
6. For example, a voice-over narrator can frame the narration, there can be a black and white representation of dreams, visions, or memories, etc.
7. Intramedial references are references to other TV programmes. Intermedial references are references to literary texts and to films, for example. Metafictional elements usually "bear the artificiality of the narration". See Allrath, Gymnich and Surkamp (2005, 35-38).
8. "In contrast to narrators in written texts, however, audiovisual storytellers typically do not surface as 'speakers'; TV series (like other types of TV narratives and films) usually have a 'voiceless' narrator, and thus normally do not give rise to the illusion that there is a 'person' or persona telling the story." (Allrath, Gymnich and Surkamp 2005, 14).
9. They are not bodily present and do not have human characteristics.
10. This article focuses on repetition and retellings of narratives within the same episode, within the same series – that is to say intra-textual repetition; this does not include intertextuality as parody described by Genette in *Palimpsests*.
11. The reason why the story is told.
12. As Ross (1998, 53) points out, this is a case in which humour necessarily has a target. This approach can be quite relevant, especially when it comes to situational humour. In *HIMYM*, humour can also sometimes rise from a form of superiority as the characters tend to make fun of each other.

13. According to Ross (1998, 63), "[t]he psychic release theory of humour explains the triggering of laughter by the sense of release from a threat being overcome – such as a reduction of fears about death and sex."
14. Mittell (2015, 26) writes: "we know instantly that *How I Met Your Mother* will use [...] techniques such as on-screen graphics and voice-over, as well as framing the narrative scope for us." He adds that the series uses "reflexive devices such as freeze-frames, embedded flashbacks, split screens, and the voice of Future Ted."
15. Naturally, the narrator is also here to frame the narrative and to provide details that the viewers would not have access to otherwise.
16. The only episode that is not narrated by Future Ted is narrated by Future/Alternative Robin (*HIMYM* 7x12). In this episode, she tells her children how she revealed their father, Barney, that she was pregnant. Nevertheless, she proves to be an extremely unreliable narrator as well at the end of the episode, when it is revealed that she is actually sterile and that she never had children.
17. Bold font is used to draw attention to the elements that are central to the arguments developed in this part.
18. Earlier, when Future Ted repeated scene I twice and scene II twice, there were no WOOSHes and no flashes of white light. This device is only used when he goes back to telling a scene that was told earlier in the episode.
19. There are also narratives embedded within these narratives.
20. For reasons of space, I will only focus on the first scene as the processes used in each scene are similar.
21. A similar process is used in *HIMYM* 7x11, when Marshall and Ted get stoned at a concert and Lily is pregnant.

ABSTRACTS

How I Met your Mother (CBS, 2005-2014) is an American sitcom in which Future Ted (the Ted Mosby of 2030) retrospectively tells his two children the story of how he met their mother. It has been described as an innovative sitcom that relies on sophisticated, inventive narrative techniques, both on the audio and the visual channels. The complexity of the narration arises from the unreliability of the narrator as well as time manipulation, among other elements. This paper focuses on the link between the use of innovative techniques to narrate the story – more specifically the repetition of a narrative by an unreliable narrator – and the creation of humour. Particular attention is given to two episodes in which the same story is repeated and reborn each time: *The Mermaid Theory* (*HIMYM* 6x11), in which future Ted cannot recall events properly and retells the same story again and again, trying to get it right, and *The Ashtray* (*HIMYM* 8x17), in which Future Ted provides embedded narratives, which turn out to be the same story told from three different points of view.

How I Met your Mother (CBS, 2005-2014) est une sitcom américaine dans laquelle Futur Ted (le Ted Mosby de 2030) raconte rétrospectivement à ses deux enfants l'histoire de sa rencontre avec leur mère. Cette sitcom a été qualifiée d'innovante, notamment parce qu'elle s'appuie sur des techniques narratives sophistiquées et inventives, tant sur le plan sonore que sur le plan visuel. La complexité de la narration découle du manque de fiabilité du narrateur ainsi que de la manipulation du temps, entre autres éléments. Cet article se concentre sur le lien entre

l'utilisation de techniques innovantes pour raconter l'histoire – plus particulièrement la répétition d'un récit par un narrateur peu/non fiable – et la création d'humour. Une attention particulière est accordée à deux épisodes dans lesquels la même histoire est répétée et renaît à chaque fois : *The Mermaid Theory* (HIMYM 6x11), épisode dans lequel Futur Ted ne peut se souvenir correctement des événements et raconte la même histoire encore et encore et essaie de retrouver ce qui s'est passé, et *The Ashtray* (HIMYM 8x17), épisode dans lequel on retrouve la même histoire racontée de trois points de vue différents, sous forme de récits enchâssés.

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