

How to Adapt the Protagonist's Perspective from Page to Screen: the Case of *Outlander*

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Abstract

The article analyzes how the television adaptation of Diana Gabaldon's novels, *Outlander*, preserves the protagonist's unique perspective from book to screen. We will delve into the specific narrative and audiovisual strategies employed by the show to keep the depth of the book's first-person narrative and to mirror its intimacy. The paper will focus particularly on the first season to evaluate the effectiveness of three key techniques: the voice-over narration, the customized opening credits, and the use of Gaelic without subtitles. These devices not only maintain but occasionally enhance the emotional and psychological depth of the protagonist's centrality as both a narrative anchor and a bridge to audience engagement. This analysis will also reveal how these strategies are used to forge a strong protagonist-viewer connection enriching the storytelling experience. After exploring the inaugural season, the paper will finally offer a brief consideration of how the application of these strategies evolves in subsequent seasons.

Keywords: First-person narrator; *Outlander*; subjective narration; audiovisual storytelling techniques; viewer engagement.

ISSN: 03928667 (print) 18277969 (digital)

DOI: 10.26350/001200_000271

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1. Introduction

Outlander stands out as a significant phenomenon in contemporary television landscape appreciated by a broad audience all over the world for its ability to weave real historical events with drama, fantasy, adventure and romance, creating a perfect mix of different genres. Lives depend on and gravitate around historical facts that impact significantly not only their experiences but, most importantly, the narrative complexity. Based on Diana

Contributo sottoposto a *double-blind peer review*.

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Gabaldon's novel series¹ first published in 1991, *Outlander* premiered on screen in 2014 under the production of Sony Picture Television and broadcasted by Starz² and the guidance of Ronald D. Moore³.

Given its remarkable success, *Outlander* has also become a subject of academic inquiry. Existing studies largely focus on its blend of genres, its historical and cultural representation, its engagement with gender themes, and its impact on cine-tourism in Scotland⁴. However, in this article we shift focus to concentrate more on the narrative structure of the show, specifically how it manages to keep the protagonist's centrality during the transition from page to screen.

The main character's perspective in the novels is established through the first-person narrator, a technique that allows direct access to thoughts, emotions, and personal struggles, thereby creating a deep connection between character and reader⁵. In audiovisual adaptations, this introspective

¹ The *Outlander* saga is composed of the following novels: Gabaldon, Diana. 1991. *Outlander*. New York: Delacorte Press. Gabaldon, Diana. 1992. *Dragonfly in Amber*. New York: Delacorte Press. Gabaldon, Diana. 1993. *Voyager*. New York: Delacorte Press. Gabaldon, Diana. 1996. *Drums of Autumn*. New York: Delacorte Press. Gabaldon, Diana. 2001. *The Fiery Cross*. New York: Delacorte Press. Gabaldon, Diana. 2005. *A Breath of Snow and Ashes*. New York: Delacorte Press. Gabaldon, Diana. 2009. *An Echo in the Bone*. New York: Delacorte Press. Gabaldon, Diana. 2014. *Written in My Own Heart's Blood*. New York: Delacorte Press. Gabaldon, Diana. 2021. *Go Tell the Bees That I Am Gone*. New York: Delacorte Press.

² As of today, *Outlander* counts eight seasons. The eighth season was released on March 6, 2026, in the US, and on March 14 in Italy, released weekly, for a total of 10 episodes. In Italy, the series was initially broadcast on Fox Life and later made available on streaming platforms such as Now TV. It should also be specified that the eighth and final season is not included in this essay, as it is still ongoing.

³ Ronald D. Moore was the executive producer and developer of *Battlestar Galactica* (2004–2009). In *Outlander*, he serves as the creator and showrunner.

⁴ Since its release, *Outlander* has sparked numerous studies on different levels. Many dissertations have focused on the adaptation process, while the most significant academic studies address topics such as historical authenticity (N. Neconesnic, N.-N. Morărașu, "Scottish Resistance through Language in *Outlander* by Diana Gabaldon", *Cultural Perspectives - Journal for Literary and British Cultural Studies in Romania*, 27 (2022): 133-154); the representation of Scotland and its culture (R. Noorda, "From Waverley to *Outlander*: Reinforcing Scottish Diasporic Identity through Book Consumption", *National Identities*, 20, 4 (2017): 361-377); the role of female characters and gender issues (C. Donelan, "'Sing Me a Song of a Lass That Is Gone': Myth and Meaning in the Starz Original Series *Outlander*", *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 35, 1 (2017): 31-53); and the fantasy, historical, and romantic genres (K. Zorčec, "Writing Historical Fiction: *Outlander* within the Romantic Tradition of Waverley", *Patchwork Student Journal*, 4 (2020): 120-135; M. Ruzin, "The Phenomenon of Time Travel and Science Fiction", *International Journal of Social Sciences VISIONS*, 43 (2024): 223-238). Additionally, the series' impact on Scottish tourism has been examined (J. Potočnik Topler, "Film Tourism as a Tool of Tourism Development: The Representation of Scotland in the *Outlander* TV Series", *TIMS Acta*, 13 (2019): 79-88).

⁵ G. Genette, *Figures I, II, III*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1980.

depth is translated through specific cinematic techniques, ensuring that the protagonist's point of view remains the narrative epicenter and a vital conduit for viewer engagement. This article demonstrates how this approach has been effectively employed in *Outlander*, where such techniques preserve the intimacy of the original first-person narrative. Specifically, the analysis will focus on three key techniques: the use of voice-over, a tailored main title song, and the strategic deployment of unsubtitled Gaelic. These elements collectively enhance narrative depth and viewer immersion, fostering a layered storytelling approach that encourages a participatory exploration of the protagonist's conflicts and experiences⁶.

While these techniques are not exhaustive, they highlight the adaptive processes through which the subjectivity of the original novels is transposed onto the screen. Such strategies illustrate the innovative storytelling methods that make *Outlander* a compelling case study in audiovisual adaptation.

The theoretical framework supporting our analysis is primarily grounded in Jason Mittell's theories of narrative complexity, as outlined in his *Complex TV*⁷. Here, drawing from Murray Smith's alignment theory, he explores how trust and emotional involvement between audience and character are established⁸. Constant exposure to characters' emotions and thoughts helps the viewers to deeply understand their beloved characters. One of the cornerstones of complex television, as Mittell suggests, is its ability to engage viewers in a form of playful investigation, intuitively reconstructing the characters' inner world. This dynamic is particularly evident in *Outlander*, where the protagonist's multifaceted mind and emotional depth become fertile ground for this type of viewer involvement⁹.

From a narrative level, Michael Z. Newman's insights into the poetics of television structure further illuminate how serialized television storytelling operates across multiple layers – beats, episodes, and arcs – each designed

⁶ A significant academic contribution on the adaptation of *Outlander* is represented by E. De Carli, G. Diehl Lage, "Adapting Outlander: The Matter of Narrative and Focalization in Literary and Audiovisual Romance", paper presented at the *III Seminário Internacional de Língua, Literatura e Processos Culturais*, Universidade de Caxias do Sul, Brazil, May 19-22, 2014. This work analyzes the changes in narrative and focalization between the novel and the television series. However, the present study distinguishes itself by delving into specific audiovisual techniques – such as voice-over, the title sequence, and unsubtitled Gaelic – used to preserve the intimacy of the protagonist's point of view and to centralize her role within the narrative.

⁷ J. Mittell, "Characters", in *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, New York: New York University Press, 2015.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 118-163. Here, the concept of Murray Smith's alignment is discussed and applied to the realm of television.

⁹ *Ibid.*

to reinforce emotional engagement and narrative cohesion. Particularly relevant for our analysis is Newman's conception of the *beat* as a micro-unit of meaning, often focused on character subjectivity and emotional resonance, which aligns closely with the show's use of voice-over and internal focalization¹⁰.

While not part of the scholarly tradition of television studies, some selected concepts from screenwriting experts such as John Truby and Robert McKee¹¹ provide useful tools to frame the protagonist's development in *Outlander*. Specifically, Truby's notion of the *moral need* – the internal flaw or ethical conflict that drives the character's transformation – helps explain how the audience connects emotionally with the protagonist's journey. Similarly, McKee's distinction between internal and external conflict is especially relevant for analyzing the show's portrayal of the main character's struggle between past and present, duty and desire.

2. The voice-over technique

Outlander tells the story of an English nurse from World War II, Claire Beauchamp, who mysteriously travels back in time to the Scottish Highlands in 1743 in the middle of the Jacobite uprisings¹². She meets Jamie Fraser, a young Highlander, they fall in love and start a passionate love story. Immersed in a completely different historical and cultural context, Claire faces many obstacles and undergoes an intense internal conflict: on one hand, the desire to return to her own time to reunite with her husband Frank; on the other, the growing sense of belonging to the new world.

In the nine novels of the *Outlander* saga, Diana Gabaldon employs different narrative prospectives: she starts with the first-person viewpoint of Claire in the first book, then in the following books she incorporates the third-person narration or the first-person perspectives of other characters to explore new themes and enter the minds of multiple people. Here, we focus particularly on the first novel and therefore the first season where most of the

¹⁰ M.Z. Newman, "From Beats to Arcs: Toward a Poetics of Television Narrative", *The Velvet Light Trap*, 58 (2006): 16-28.

¹¹ R. McKee, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting*, New York: HarperCollins, 1997; J. Truby, *The Anatomy of Story: 22 Steps to Becoming a Master Storyteller*, New York: Faber & Faber, 2008.

¹² It refers to a series of insurrections in the 17th and 18th centuries where supporters of the Stuarts, seeing them as the legitimate heirs, fought against the English government. The conflict culminated in the Battle of Culloden on April 16, 1746, where the Scottish clans were finally defeated.

narration unfolds in the first person¹³, providing readers and audiences with direct access to Claire's interiority.

The first-person narrator is also known in literature as the *character-bound narrator* where the storyteller is not an outsider but a character within the fabula, ensuring that all events and experiences are presented through his or her perspective¹⁴. However, translating this inner dimension to the screen presents a complex challenge for audiovisual language, which relies primarily on visuals and dialogues, often avoiding voice-over due to fears of redundancy or narrative dissonance¹⁵.

Initially, Moore and his team elaborate the series without voice-over, convinced that Claire's point of view could be represented through actions and dialogues. However, at the request of Starz CEO Chris Albrecht, the project was revised. The off-screen narration was integrated as the better solution to preserve the subjectivity of the protagonist, which in the novels was essential to create empathic resonance¹⁶. This decision, far from being a merely technical adjustment, reflects what Nannicelli defines as a form of distributed creative agency, in which narrative and stylistic choices emerge from collaborative processes involving writers, directors, producers and, most notably, the showrunner¹⁷. In this case, Moore plays a key role in preserving the protagonist's subjectivity as a central narrative axis, guiding the adaptation process through a coherent vision shared across the production

¹³ In the first season, there is one exception where Jamie provides the voice-over instead of Claire in episode nine, *The Reckoning*. I have omitted an in-depth analysis of this episode due to space constraints. Although some critics suggest that this change might offer context and justification for Jamie's actions (De Carli, Diehl Lage, "Adapting *Outlander*: The Matter of Narrative and Focalization in Literary and Audiovisual Romance"), a thorough investigation is necessary to fully understand its impact. Such analysis should consider audience responses and internal production discussions, if available, to assess how this narrative decision influences character development and viewer engagement.

¹⁴ M. Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 3rd ed., Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009.

¹⁵ Jason Mittell explores this topic in his book *Complex TV*, explaining that voice-over can both enrich the narrative by providing direct access to a character's thoughts and internal motivations, and pose narrative challenges, such as potential redundancy or disruption of the visual storytelling flow. According to Mittell, it must be used judiciously to avoid becoming a crutch that diminishes narrative complexity rather than enhancing it.

¹⁶ T. Bennet, *The Making of *Outlander*: The Official Guide to Seasons One & Two*, New York: Delacorte Press, 2016, 30-31.

¹⁷ T. Nannicelli, *Appreciating the Art of Television: A Philosophical Perspective*, New York: Routledge, 2016, 18-51. See also T. Nannicelli, H.J. Pérez, eds., *Cognition, Emotion, and Aesthetics in Contemporary Serial Television*, New York: Routledge, 2022.

team: “She is a central character and we need to fix her in people’s consciousness immediately as the main person of interest”¹⁸.

The concept of *alignment* theorized by Murray Smith¹⁹ and applied to television by Jason Mittell in *Complex TV* provides a crucial framework for understanding the narrative function of the voice-over in *Outlander*. According to Smith, alignment refers to a set of narrative devices that allow viewers to connect with a character and access his or her world, thoughts, emotions, experiences, and so forth. In *Outlander*, the voice-over serves precisely this purpose, granting viewers privileged access to Claire’s inner world and creating a deep emotional bond. Through her reflective narration, the audience not only witnesses her journey but also engages with her moral dilemmas and personal growth, fostering both intellectual and emotional involvement.

At the same time, even these moments of explicit interiority conveyed through voice-over, leave what Mittell refers to as interpretative ‘gaps’²⁰, something that is left unsaid that the viewer must actively fill. These gaps push the viewers to decipher the thoughts and intentions of the characters through a process of intuitive reasoning, described by Blake Vermeule as ‘mind-reading’²¹. In *Outlander*, in fact, Claire’s voice-over often presents a partial or reflective view of her experiences, inviting viewers to fill in the blanks: why does she say what she says? How might she truly feel? What unspoken fears or desires underlie her words? This engagement deepens the viewers’ connection to Claire, transforming them from observers to active participant in her emotional and moral journey.

An illustrative example of this dynamic is the adaptation of the prologue from the first novel, which in the series is translated into the introductory teaser of the pilot episode, *Sassenach*. The two following excerpts demonstrate how the series sought to preserve the essence of the character-bound

¹⁸ T. Bennet, *The Making of Outlander: The Official Guide to Seasons One & Two*, New York: Delacorte Press, 2016, 7.

¹⁹ M. Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

²⁰ Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, 119-132.

²¹ B. Vermeule, *Why Do We Care About Literary Characters?*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. Here, Vermeule explains that intuiting a character’s inner life is fundamental to understanding how and why we become emotionally invested. Narratives invite us to access the emotional states of characters through the process of “mind-reading,” engaging us in an intuitive exploration of their thoughts and feelings. The characters we align with most strongly are those with whom we spend the most time and who display the most compelling emotional dynamics.

narrator from the book while inviting viewers into Claire's subjectivity through voice-over²².

The prologue from the novel:

People disappear all the time. Ask any policeman. Better yet, ask a journalist. Disappearances are bread-and butter to journalists.
 Young girls run away from home. Young children stray from their parents and are never seen again. Housewives reach the end of their tether and take the grocery money and a taxi to the station. International financiers change their names and vanish into the smoke of imported cigars.
 Many of the lost will be found, eventually, dead or alive. Disappearances, after all, have explanations.
 Usually²³.

The teaser in the tv series:

People disappear all the time.
 Young girls run away from home.
 Children stray from their parents and are never seen again.
 Housewives take the grocery money and a taxi to the train station.
 Most are found, eventually.
 Disappearances, after all, have explanations.
 Usually²⁴.

The key difference between the two is that Gabaldon conceives the prologue as a detached reflection on the theme of disappearance, imagined as if spoken by the book itself: "I prefer to leave the prologues ambiguous. Who is speaking? The book itself (though I do imagine that any given reader may hear the book speaking with the voice of one or another of the characters)"²⁵. In the show, however, these words are spoken directly by Claire to establish her perspective as the central narrative frame from the outset, reinforcing alignment and emotional investment. The visual context of her narration adds ambiguity as it does not provide additional clues to help the audience fully understand her situation. We just see evocative images of the Scottish Highlands with a haunting melody, leaving us to wonder: why is Claire reflecting on disappearance? What does it mean to her? This subtle ambiguity

²² De Carli, Diehl Lage, "Adapting *Outlander*: The Matter of Narrative and Focalization in Literary and Audiovisual Romance".

²³ D. Gabaldon, *Outlander: Cross Stitch*, London: Arrow Books, 2014, 9.

²⁴ See the opening scene of episode one, season one of *Outlander*, titled "Sassenach".

²⁵ D. Gabaldon, *The Outlandish Companion*, Vol. 1, "Answers", London: Century, 2015, 371.

engages the audience who immediately tries to read Claire's state of mind and to intuitively piece together the significance of her considerations.

The framing of these shots further reinforces alignment by mimicking Claire's perspective – whether through the camera preceding her movements²⁶. These cues invite the audience to share her gaze and, by extension, her emotional experience, enhancing their engagement with her narrative journey.

Following the teaser, Claire's voice-over continues to provide insight into her inner world while leaving room for interpretation. In a key moment, adapted from the novel, Claire is presented in a private and contemplative situation, offering a profound glimpse into her introspective nature. She reflects on a turning point in her life as she gazes at a vase in a shop window: "Even now, after all the pain, and death, and heartbreak that followed, I still would make the same choice". This statement reveals her deep internal conflict and hints at the transformative journey ahead. It informs us that her story is worth watching because, despite all the pain she endured, she would do it all over again and this immediately piques our curiosity, as we want to know what happened to her and how she overcame it. Furthermore, this realization indicates that Claire's statement is the result of a profound journey of personal growth. Reaching this level of awareness required her to confront and navigate a strong internal conflict – a journey of transformation that the series invites viewers to witness firsthand. Yet, it also leaves interpretive gaps: why does she feel this way? What events shaped her resolve? These unanswered questions compel the audience to actively reconstruct her emotional trajectory once again, aligning them even more closely with her perspective.

Mittell's observations on the interpretive gaps in complex television highlight how such storytelling techniques engage viewers in playful investigation. By blending explicit narration with implicit cues, *Outlander* creates a layered viewing experience that combines the intimacy of Claire's voice-over with the audience's active participation in decoding her inner world.

In this sense, the voice-over's role as a device of alignment closely corresponds to what Newman defines as a *beat*, a short narrative unit – typically no more than a few lines or moments – that conveys an emotional shift or highlights a moment of character reflection. These beats represent the smallest building blocks of serialized storytelling and are essential to shap-

²⁶ There are many examples to consider. In this article I refer to the first season, particularly its early episodes, which focus heavily on the protagonist's internal focalization to structure the narrative and establish a deep connection with the viewer.

ing the emotional rhythm of an episode because they give space to characters' feelings, doubts, or conflicts. In *Outlander*, many of Claire's voice-over interventions can be read as narrative beats. They crystallize an emotion or dilemma, give the audience a pause for reflection, or open interpretive space through ambiguity²⁷.

During the first season, the voice-over continues to play a crucial role in exploring Claire's internal conflict, as significantly demonstrated in episode four, *The Gathering*. Here Claire is still a guest of the MacKenzie clan at Leoch Castle and participates in the annual gathering, a solemn event during which members swear loyalty to the clan chief. However, as the castle buzzes with preparations, Claire devises a plan to escape and return to Craigh na Dun, the stone circle that might take her back to her own time²⁸. In a key moment at the beginning of the episode, Claire finds herself in a camp near the castle, surrounded by the festive atmosphere and liveliness of the clan members. In this context, the voice-over reveals her internal conflict: "Despite my eagerness to leave, my heart lifted whenever I walked through the encampment, and a small part of me regretted my imminent escape". This phrase underlines the growing tension between the desire to return to her own time and the unexpected bond she is beginning to form with the world she now inhabits. Although the desire to escape remains predominant, the first signs of nascent affection for the people and the place that surround her are already emerging. This moment marks the beginning of a gradual change, which intensifies throughout the season, especially through the increasingly deep relationship with Jamie. Episode after episode, the off-screen narration becomes a tool to highlight this slow but inevitable emotional attachment.

This evolution culminates in episode eleven, *The Devil's Mark*, when Jamie, having learned the truth about Claire's time travel, takes her to Craigh na Dun to let her return to her own era. Here, Claire chooses to stay, effectively reversing her initial desire. The absence of voice-over in this pivotal

²⁷ In his concept of a *poetics of television* in *From Beats to Arcs: Toward a Poetics of Television Narrative*, Newman focuses on prime-time serials (PTS) broadcast during U.S. prime time and proposes a three-tiered narrative structure for serialized dramas: the micro level of beats, the episode level, and the macro level of multi-episode arcs. While *Outlander* was created for a premium cable network (Starz) and does not strictly follow the industrial logic of traditional PTS formats, it nonetheless adopts several of their aesthetic principles. Chief among these is the use of emotionally charged beats to modulate pacing and deepen viewer investment.

²⁸ Time travel in *Outlander* occurs through a passage formed by a circle of megalithic stones, located in a fictional place called Craigh na Dun. These stones function as temporal portals and, according to the rules of Gabaldon's universe, allow only certain chosen individuals, the time travelers, to pass through and move between different eras.

scene is a deliberate choice, allowing the image and action to communicate the weight of her decision without the need for verbal explanation. By withholding narration, the series trusts the audience to interpret Claire's internal conflict through her body language, the setting, and the subtle visual cues – inviting them to engage actively in deciphering her transformation.

The stone circle itself serves as an example of what Mittell describes as external cues that communicate a character's emotional state²⁹. As Claire approaches Craigh na Dun, the visual presence of the stones becomes a silent yet powerful symbol of her internal struggle. Without the need for voice-over, the stones embody her conflicting desires: the possibility of returning to her previous life with Frank versus the emerging realization of her bond with Jamie and the life she has begun to build in the 18th century. The mere sight of the stones prompts viewers to intuitively connect them with Claire's inner turmoil, demonstrating how visual symbolism can replace spoken narration to convey complex emotional dynamics.

In later seasons of *Outlander*, the use of voice-over undergoes significant evolution. If in the first season it represents Claire's inner self and maintains the subjective point of view that characterizes the novel, in the second season, the voice-over is less present. It also happens from the second novel onward, and it might want to reflect greater stability in the characters' lives and less need to explore just Claire's mind. In the third and fourth seasons, indeed, as the plot progresses and the cast of characters expands, the focus shifts to multiple narrative lines. By the latest seasons, the off-screen narration becomes occasional, used primarily to emphasize key moments or transitions, rather than as a continuous tool for internal exploration.

This change in the use of voice-over is significant: from a foundational tool for exploring characters' interiority and establishing a lasting relationship with the viewer, to a flexible element employed as needed according to the narrative demands. In later seasons, it is not just Claire telling the story, but also other characters share their viewpoints. However, we must acknowledge that the show employs other narrative techniques and visual elements to maintain the alignment between the viewer and Claire, including the use of flashbacks and flash-forwards, music, and other cinematic devices. A striking example of voice-over used as a structural element can be found in *Fleabag* (Amazon Prime Video, 2016-2019), where it breaks the fourth wall, establishing a direct and dynamic relationship with the viewer while never losing its effectiveness throughout the seasons. In contrast, in *The Handmaid's Tale* (Hulu, 2017–), adapted from a novel with a first-person narrator

²⁹ Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, 119-132.

just like *Outlander*, the use of voice-over is minimal, sacrificing some of the intimacy and direct involvement found in the novel – a level of intimacy that *Outlander* succeeds providing not just in the first season.

In the case of *Outlander*, the strategic use of voice-over in the first season effectively translates the protagonist's subjectivity and moral dilemmas, as its role was tied to Claire's journey of transformation. Its gradual marginalization in later seasons reflects not only a shift in narrative focus – similar to the books – but also the decision to employ other strategies alongside Claire's inner voice as a primary storytelling device.

3. The main title song perspective

Maintaining Claire's centrality within the story of *Outlander* requires not only the adoption of narrative techniques such as voice-over but also a thoughtful integration of audiovisual elements capable of reinforcing the protagonist's subjective point of view. For instance, Ronald D. Moore, aware of the importance of constructing a narrative experience that reflects Claire's emotional journey, attributes a strategic role to the opening title credits, envisioning it not merely as an introductory device but as a tool that extends storytelling beyond the visual plot³⁰. Under his direction, the goal of preserving Claire's subjectivity was embraced not only by the writers' room, but also by composers, directors, and designers – each contributing to a unified vision orchestrated through the collaborative framework typical of serial television production³¹.

This integration of audiovisual elements aligns with modern serialized storytelling, which often transcends images and dialogues to include complementary components – such as opening credits and soundtracks – that expand the narrative and deepen audience immersion³². The title sequence of *Outlander* is an example of this approach as it is not just an entertaining introduction but mostly a narrative device that foreshadows the series' central themes. It reflects Claire's personal journey and the historical-cultural

³⁰ T. Bennet, *The Making of Outlander: The Official Guide to Seasons One & Two*, New York: Delacorte Press, 2016, 22-27.

³¹ This notion of a coordinated creative vision draws on the idea of distributed authorship in television production. As argued by Ted Nannicelli, television authorship is best understood not as the expression of a single individual, but as the outcome of intentional collaboration among various creative professionals working under a unified narrative purpose. See: Nannicelli, *Appreciating the Art of Television: A Philosophical Perspective*.

³² Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*.

context of the story, and at the meanwhile it reinforces her centrality and invites the viewer into an emotionally immersive understanding of her perspective. Audiovisual elements, indeed, can shape the audience's alignment with characters, offering a more complex understanding of their internal states through symbolic and emotional cues.

The choice of the title song was essential in defining the series' identity. Bear McCreary, the show's composer, recounted that he proposed from the outset *The Skye Boat Song*, a traditional Scottish ballad penned by one of Scotland's most celebrated authors, Robert Louis Stevenson³³. However, to align it with Claire's narrative perspective, McCreary altered the original lyrics, shifting the focus from a male protagonist to a female one by changing key pronouns and references. Below is just the refrain of the adapted song:

Original text by R. L. Stevenson

Sing me a song of a **lad** that is gone,
Say, could that lad be I?
Merry of soul, **he** sailed on a day
Over the sea to Skye³⁴

Text by B. McCreary

Sing me a song of a **lass** that is gone,
Say, could that lass be I?
Merry of soul **she** sailed on a day
Over the sea to Skye

This deliberate adjustment ensures that the song mirrors Claire's personal journey, placing her firmly at the center of the narrative. Additionally, McCreary chose to use a female vocalist, instead of the traditional male rendition, further reinforcing the connection between the audience and Claire.

As McCreary himself noted: "I'm using music to communicate character, time period, and locations all at the same time"³⁵, demonstrating how the title sequence is used not only to set the historical and cultural tone of the series but also to deepen the emotional alignment with its main character.

The images accompanying the title sequence work in synergy with the adapted music, creating a narrative framework that reflects Claire's experiences and the story's central themes. Among the sequences shown here are dancers around the stones at Craigh na Dun – a clear reference to time travel – followed by a scene of Claire, newly arrived in the 18th century, fleeing. The montage includes Frank's hand turning up the volume on a radio – a gesture that takes

³³ "Outlander Sassenach", Bear McCreary Official Website, last accessed November 27, 2024, <https://bearmccreary.com/#blog/blog/outlander-sassenach/>.

³⁴ R.L. Stevenson, *Songs of Travel and Other Verses*, edited by Sidney Colvin, 1996, Project Gutenberg, last accessed November 27, 2024, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/487/pg487-images.html>.

³⁵ Bennet, *The Making of Outlander: The Official Guide to Seasons One & Two*, 26.

the viewer back to the 20th century – and then two lovers on a pier, an English soldier preparing a flogging, and the dancers once again. Other images feature a profile of Claire, Jamie in formal attire without revealing his face, Claire's hand stitching sutures, and men playing shinty, a traditional Scottish sport. Each image serves as an external signal that invites viewers to intuitively connect the visuals with Claire's inner emotional state. For example, the recurring shot of the standing stones evokes not only the supernatural element of the story but also Claire's personal conflict, as we have seen in the previous paragraph.

The distinctive ability of the title sequence to adapt across seasons, altering musical arrangements, instruments, and even the language of the song, further illustrates its role in maintaining Claire's centrality while reflecting the evolving narrative and themes³⁶. In second season, part of the story is set in France, and the title sequence incorporates baroque instruments and a verse sung in French. This pattern continues across all seasons, with lyrics and music arranged to suit the storyline. From the fourth season onward, the series is primarily set in America during the Revolutionary War, and the title sequence includes folk American instruments, such as the fiddle and banjo, evoking the folk songs and ballads of the era. These adjustments ensure that the title sequence remains closely tied to Claire's perspective, mirroring her journey and the environments she inhabits.

By integrating music, imagery, and narrative themes, the title sequence exemplifies how audiovisual storytelling can transcend its introductory role to become a central element of character alignment. While the lyrics and melody explicitly highlight Claire's journey, the interpretive gaps created by the visuals – such as the fleeting images of the stones, the lovers, or the soldiers – engage the audience in actively piecing together the emotional and thematic connections, offering a sort of summary of Claire's life. This alignment strategy not only reinforces Claire's subjectivity but also deepens the viewer's immersion in her story, fostering an empathetic and participatory engagement with the narrative.

4. Unsubtitled gaelic

The third element examined in this essay, which significantly contributes to centralizing the protagonist's role, is the choice to use the Gaelic language without subtitles in the first season. Moore and his team made this decision

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 22-27.

because they believed it was functional in shaping the relationship between Claire and the viewer. Gaelic serves at first to immerse the audience in the historical and cultural context of 18th-century Scottish Highlands, but most importantly it is a device through which we can reflect Claire's inner conflict. Trapped into an unfamiliar world, she does her best to understand and adapt yet feels a strong pull to return to her own time. This dual desire – to stay and to leave – defines her moral dilemma, and the linguistic estrangement created by Gaelic amplifies this internal tension, allowing the viewer to share her experience.

In the historical period in which *Outlander* is set, Gaelic was widely spoken in the Highlands, and Diana Gabaldon incorporates it into her novels, often explaining its meaning through paraphrase. In the first season, however, Ronald D. Moore decides to retain Gaelic in the dialogue without providing subtitles, diverging from the novel's approach. This choice, while contributing to historical authenticity, is primarily designed to make the audience feel the same sense of alienation and disorientation experienced by Claire³⁷. The lack of translation transforms the linguistic experience into a reflection of her emotional state, making the audience active observers who, like Claire, attempt to decipher implicit meanings through context and detail. As they watch, viewers focus on intonations, gestures, and situations to understand the dialogue in this ancient language, finding themselves emotionally and cognitively engaged in the scene. Àdhamh Ó Broin, the production's linguistic consultant, describes Moore's decision as bold, noting that it challenges traditional conventions of audiovisual storytelling while simultaneously making the series more immersive and authentic³⁸.

Gaelic is used in the first season from the very first episode, with the druidic chant performed around the stones of Craigh na Dun, taken from the *Carmina Gadelica*³⁹, a collection of Scottish spells and invocations. This song helps create a ritualistic and mysterious atmosphere that accompanies Claire's journey and, at the same time, aligning the audience with her sense of confusion. The linguistic element thus serves not only to convey narrative meaning but also to amplify the audience's emotional and cultural immersion, drawing them into the historical context depicted.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ "The Carmina Gadelica", last accessed November 27, 2024, <https://sacred-texts.com/neu/celt/cg1/index.htm>. The *Carmina Gadelica* is a collection of prayers, hymns, charms, spells, and invocations from the druidic tradition, gathered in the Gàidhealtachd regions of Scotland between 1860 and 1909 by Alexander Carmichael. The song for the "Rune of the Muthairn".

Another example of the narrative use of unsubtitled Gaelic appears in the fifth episode of the first season, *Rent*. Here, Claire travels with a group of MacKenzie clan men into the Highlands to collect rents from tenants. Throughout the journey, the men often converse in Gaelic, deliberately excluding Claire from the discussion. This linguistic isolation is explicitly expressed through her voice-over: “What troubled me was that they were clearly using Gaelic to exclude me”. This sense of alienation underscores her status as an outsider in an unfamiliar world. The feeling of estrangement intensifies when Dougal MacKenzie, the leader of the expedition, delivers impassioned speeches in Gaelic to the tenant farmers during the collections, raising additional sums beyond the required rents. Unable to understand the content of these speeches and receiving no explanations from the men, Claire suspects that Dougal is exploiting the farmers to enrich himself or the clan. However, during one of these speeches, Claire finally recognizes a word that allows her to understand everything: “Stuart”. At this moment, the voice-over intervenes to contextualize the term, explaining that it refers to the Jacobite cause, a political movement aimed at restoring the Stuart dynasty to the British throne after their deposition during the Glorious Revolution of 1688. This revelation overturns Claire’s initial interpretation: the money collected is not intended for the clan but to finance a future rebellion against English rule.

This awareness evokes mixed emotions in Claire. On one hand, she develops growing empathy for those men, who shift from being perceived as criminals to rebels willing to risk everything for a cause they believe in. On the other hand, she feels profound melancholy, knowing the tragic outcome that awaits their struggle, as she is already aware of the Jacobite cause’s eventual failure. The audience, like Claire, experiences this revelation as a moment of emotional and cognitive alignment. The combination of unsubtitled Gaelic, contextual cues, and Claire’s voice-over exemplifies how the viewer is invited to reconstruct the narrative meaning and share in the protagonist’s perspective based on external signals and implicit narrative cues.

This scene in *Rent* clearly exemplifies the narrative impact of unsubtitled Gaelic: the viewer’s perspective aligns with Claire’s, as both are immersed in an unknown context, forced to actively decipher and interpret their surroundings, sharing the same experience of discovery and disorientation. Like Claire, the audience becomes an outside character, a distant and uninformed observer, left in the dark until they grasp a revealing detail. Through the voice-over, Claire immediately communicates her understanding to the audience, turning each discovery into a moment of emotional and cognitive connection.

While the use of Gaelic without subtitles in the first season plays a central role in building the bond between character and audience, its usage evolves in subsequent seasons. The ancient language is gradually relegated to individual words or expressions, now familiar to viewers, such as Jamie's endearment for Claire, "*Mo Nighean Donn*", or "*Slanje*" for toasting⁴⁰. In other cases, subtitles are introduced, or Gaelic is abandoned in favor of English. This shift reflects both the narrative evolution and the changing relationship between Claire and the new world: from an alien and distant figure, Claire gradually becomes an integral part of that context. Similarly, the introduction of subtitles addresses narrative demands that prioritize clarity over the creation of estrangement, signaling a shift in the relationship between the viewer and the story.

5. Conclusions

The analysis conducted demonstrates how the three techniques examined – the voice-over, the opening title sequence, and the use of unsubtitled Gaelic – played a crucial role in centering Claire within the narrative of *Outlander*. These tools not only enabled the translation of the main character's emotional intimacy and subjective point of view from page to screen but also align the audience with Claire's perspective, fostering a participatory and immersive narrative experience. Through these strategies, the series leverages key principles of alignment and engagement, as outlined in contemporary theories of complex television.

Among the elements analyzed, the title sequence emerges as the most versatile and consistent tool. Its ability to adapt to thematic and narrative changes across seasons – by modifying musical arrangements, instruments, and lyrics to reflect historical and cultural contexts – demonstrates how audiovisual storytelling can evolve alongside the narrative while maintaining a clear focus on the protagonist. The title sequence, through its interplay of music and imagery, exemplifies how external signals can guide the audience's intuitive understanding of Claire's emotional journey, creating a bridge between character and viewer.

The use of Gaelic without subtitles, stands out for its extraordinary effectiveness just in the first season, where it creates a shared experience of disorientation between Claire and the audience. The series encourages viewers to

⁴⁰ The meaning of these expressions is clarified from the very first season. "*Mo Nighean Donn*" means "My brown-haired lass", while "*Slanje*" means "Cheers".

actively interpret the language through gestures, intonations, and contextual cues, mirroring Claire's own attempts to adapt to an unfamiliar world. This strategy reinforces the audience engagement through external cues, inviting viewers to read the protagonist's emotions and thoughts through narrative gaps. However, the gradual marginalization of Gaelic in subsequent seasons reflects Claire's evolving relationship with the 18th-century world to which she increasingly belongs.

Finally, the voice-over proves to be an essential narrative device, particularly in the first season, where it preserves the introspective depth of Claire's literary first-person narration. By granting direct access to her thoughts and emotions, the voice-over facilitates an empathetic connection with the audience, translating the character's internal conflicts into visual and auditory terms. Its decline in later seasons reflects a shift in narrative focus but underscores the importance of strategic use when maintaining alignment with a protagonist's perspective. Comparing *Outlander* with other series like *Fleabag* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, help us to understand that the success of voice-over depends on its ability to balance introspection with narrative pacing, ensuring it enhances rather than detracts from the overall storytelling.

Ultimately, *Outlander* serves as a compelling case study for understanding how audiovisual techniques can translate a protagonist's central perspective from page to screen. The series' use of alignment strategies illustrates the potential of complex television to engage audiences on both emotional and cognitive levels. However, the evolutionary trajectory of these techniques across seasons also highlights their limitations, emphasizing the need for coherence with the broader narrative arc and the specific goals of each season. Further research could explore how such techniques might be refined to sustain audience engagement and narrative depth over the long term, particularly in serialized storytelling that spans multiple seasons.