

Small and smaller screens

“Mosaic” offers genuinely innovative storytelling

Steven Soderbergh picks a perfect story for his branching narrative, “film experience” app—so much so that the conventional television series feels lacklustre



IN THE past half-decade there has been no shortage of shows that upend previously held notions of television. When, in 2013, Netflix started releasing episodes of its serial programming simultaneously, the weekly episodic format was supplanted by shows made for marathon viewing. Since then, the boundaries of the small and big screens have become less defined. Bong Joon-ho’s “Okja” premiered at Cannes but was released simultaneously in cinemas and on Netflix (<https://www.economist.com/blogs/prospero/2017/06/hog-wild>) . The most noteworthy film of 2017 for *Cahiers du Cinema* was, in fact, a series: David Lynch’s “Twin Peaks: The Return”.

Yet even in this age of inventive television, “Mosaic” sits apart. Directed by Steven Soderbergh, there are two versions of the “film experience”. One is an interactive app for computers and smartphones; the other is a six-part miniseries released on HBO on January 22nd. Neither version is intended to be supplementary. Rather, they offer different experiences of the same events.

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At the centre is Olivia Lake (Sharon Stone), the dazzling author of a popular children’s book who lives alone on a sprawling property in Summit, a ski resort town in Utah. Sophisticated, if not especially likeable, Olivia has a habit of burning through inappropriate men. On meeting a handsome young artist, Joel (Garrett Hedlund), she promptly invites him to live

in her barn. Meanwhile, she grows close to Eric (Frederick Weller), a silver-tongued venture capitalist with a hidden motive. During a party, Olivia goes missing, leaving behind a trail of blood and bleach. A man goes to prison, perhaps undeservedly. Four years later, when new evidence surfaces, Eric’s sister, Petra (Jennifer Ferrin), launches her own investigation.

The broadcast version is told in chronological episodes with a traditional narrative arc. The app version is longer—about seven and a half hours of footage, compared with six—and organised into 15 chapters that are navigated via a flow diagram. Chapters are labelled by character, dictating the perspective from which events are told. Certain details are revealed via “discoveries” that pop up mid-scene in the form of voicemails, email transcripts, flashbacks or classified documents. It is possible to go down two threads and end up with wildly different takes on the same events. Viewers, like the characters, do not have the full picture, even at the end. “I now realise that some of what we see may be true but isn’t the truth,” says Petra.

As a film-maker, Mr Soderbergh's path has been similarly multifaceted. He started in independent film, winning the Palme d'Or, Cannes's top prize, for "Sex, Lies, and Videotape" (1989) aged only 26. In 2001, he received the best director award at the Oscars for "Traffic". Then, in 2013, he publicly retired from film-making to pursue television. "The format really allows for the narrow and deep approach that I like," he told *New York* magazine. Developments in technology have given Mr Soderbergh new ideas. PodOp, a media technology company that he co-founded, aims to "let film-makers tell interactive stories at scale".



The danger with a project that makes use of new technology is that the story might play second fiddle. This is not the case for "Mosaic", which is engrossing, while feeling genuinely innovative. One of the themes examined is the slipperiness of identity—this is enriched by the subjective format of the app, where it is possible to examine certain characters from two, three or even four perspectives. It emphasises the blinkered way in which we experience the world.

Where "Mosaic" falls down is by trying to be two things at once. Originally conceived as a branching interactive app, a character-driven story has been repurposed into a television series motored by plot. Rendered this way, certain characters fall flat and some passages play awkwardly. On the bigger screen, a scene in which Olivia confronts Eric—one of the most dramatic moments—becomes overwrought and one-dimensional.

In the end, "Mosaic" is more interesting as an examination of how we assemble stories than as a story itself. There is something of "The Jinx" or "Serial" about the way the viewer is asked to play detective. Though the murder mystery is a natural genre, it is easy to imagine other sorts of stories being told in this way—complicated Russian novels, for example. Mr Soderbergh is working on two new ideas; Netflix is experimenting with interactive storytelling in its children's programmes. Other storytellers should follow their lead.

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