LEMONY SNICKET'S A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS *(1999-2006): A MUSICALLY-SHAPED NARRATIVE*

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Abstract: Lemony Snicket's 13-book series *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (1999-2006) is a prime example of music and literature feeding upon each other. The books can be considered a fragmented accordion-like text which unfolds its themes to its readership. The opening song of the Netflix adaptation (2017–2019) of the books rely on the accordion, which is itself mentioned throughout the narrative. The author's notorious love for this peculiar instrument (Handler 2012) has inevitably shaped the whole narrative of the novels. This focus on musicality allows us to explore different aspects of the novels. Apart from the various mentions of classical instruments, the text itself makes creative use of alliteration, assonance and both internal and structural repetition. Moreover, the accordion in itself is a telling instrument; just as in Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* (2005), the "poor man's piano" can be a symbol for both life and death or joy and nostalgia. The dichotomy between the accordion being both a folkloric and classical instrument transpires through the narrator's ambiguous position. This in turn showcases the duality between high and low culture, exemplified mostly by intertextuality. Most importantly, we can analyse this in the light of the versatility of the accordion which is reflected through the figure of Lemony Snicket. Just as Daniel Handler is an accordionist – a one-man band, capable of producing rhythm, harmony and melody simultaneously – Lemony Snicket is a multidimensional persona, as he is author, narrator and character at once, orchestrating his narrative at will. This paper thus focuses on the links between the novels and the image of the accordion in order to show the wealth of multifaceted writing. Mentions of the movie adaptation (2004), audiobook album song (2000–2006) and Netflix adaptation (2017–2019) further support this study.

Keywords: Lemony Snicket, *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, accordion, duality, folk, classic

1. Introduction

To begin our investigation, the first fifteen seconds of the Netflix series *A Series of Unfortunate Events*[1] (2017–2019) set the tone, with an energetic accordion, rock background, and the chorus "Look away," composed by Nick Urata with lyrics by Daniel Handler. Sung by Count Olaf (Neil Patrick Harris), the playful, self-reflexive opening engages viewers and reflects both the series and the original books.

This popular TV show (Welch, 2017 ; Saunders, 2018 ; Nelson, 2018) is an adaptation of a thirteen-book series of the same title, written by American author Daniel Handler under the pseudonym Lemony Snicket. It came out more than a decade before the creation of the series (1999-2006). The books follow the Baudelaire orphans – Violet, Klaus, and Sunny – who, after losing their parents and home, must constantly escape the schemes of an antagonist seeking their inheritance. The series features diverse characters, locations, and themes, narrated by Snicket, whose role as author, narrator, and character remains deliberately ambiguous.

This study focuses on *A Series* for two reasons. First, its author, Daniel Handler, is a musician, allowing exploration of the intersection between verbal and sonic elements in children's literature. Second, despite selling over sixty million copies in forty-one languages, the series has received little scholarly attention, though adaptations have renewed interest (Austin, 2013; Kaczyńska, 2018). More close readings are needed to understand how postmodern children's novels have gained prominence in the 2010s and 2020s.

This study focuses on the connection between word and sound. The novels are infused with musicality, and the popularity of the recent adaptation owes much to its opening song and lively accordion, an instrument with a historically ambivalent status. Handler's own musical interests, particularly in the accordion, have influenced his writing. Metaphorically, the accordion – folding, unfolding, hiding, and revealing words and sounds – illustrates how literature and music intertwine in the series.

This study argues that in *A Series*, words are shaped by music and that the novels explore the high/low culture divide, including the folkloric versus classical associations of the accordion. We first link Daniel Handler, the author, to the accordion to show its influence on the text. Next, we examine the narrator's ambiguous role, paralleling

[1] For simplicity, *A Series of Unfortunate Events* shall be referenced to as *A Series*.

Handler as a "one-man band" with Snicket as a "one-man *persona*," and explore the text's musicality and symbolism. Finally, we show how high and low culture are bridged through intertextuality and intermediality.

2. Daniel Handler the accordionist

We shall first focus on the real author,[2] Daniel Handler, and the importance of both the accordion and music in general.

2.1. A quick history of the accordion

First, it is necessary to clarify why the accordion matters both to this study and to the author's life. As an instrument that straddles high and low culture, moving between folkloric and classical traditions, its ambivalent status lends it a metaphorical significance that this article will later explore. Created in 1829 in Vienna by Cyrill Demian, the accordion functions with the principle of the free reed, or what Pierre Monichon (1971: 9) calls "l'âme de l'accordéon", the accordion's "soul," and is in-between the piano (referred to in French as the "piano à bretelles," or "piano with galluses" [Brut, 2022]) and the harmonica. We can broadly distinguish three types of accordions, but two interest us the most here: the diatonic accordion, used mainly to reproduce famous quadrilles and operas, and the chromatic accordion for folkloric music and dances, among which is the famous concertina, used mainly for clown shows.

Throughout the 19th century, the accordion circulated across both working-class and bourgeois milieus: it was linked to gypsy bands as much as to domestic entertainment. Its history in the United States is equally ambivalent. Played by slaves, Creole musicians, and immigrants as well as by wealthier families – especially women (Ward & Burns, 2002) – the accordion spread rapidly thanks to European migrants, notably Italians. Renowned performers such as the Diero brothers and Frosini helped popularise the "piano accordion," whose American "Golden Age" (1930s–1950s) was fuelled by its affordability, portability, and vigorous marketing (Jacobson, 2012). After World War II, it became a vehicle for nostalgia, while also gaining recognition as a serious

[2] This terminology shall be extensively explained later in our study; this notion stems from Wayne Booth's distinction between real and implied author, in which the real author is the person who has physically written the books.
See: Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1961).

instrument, entering orchestras and flourishing in Gospel, Blues, and jazz.

Its popularity nevertheless waned in the late 20th century as rock music and the electric guitar overshadowed it. Still, the accordion continued to assert its place among traditional instruments (Monichon 1971: 10), even as it remained identified with popular culture – a strength for its communities, though one that partly explains its decline. Recent decades, however, have seen renewed interest: more rock musicians now incorporate it, and sales –particularly on the US West Coast – have risen (Gerber, 2014).

The very history of the accordion is hectic, being both an influence of and on many musical genres and shaping collective imagination: hearing the accordion can summon paradoxical feelings of nostalgia and joy, and it is this tension that we shall make use of in this study.

2.2. Daniel Handler's love for music

The author of the corpus under scrutiny, Daniel Handler, is both a writer and a musician. Daniel Handler has had a classical musical upbringing, as he explains in this interview (Smith, 2009):

> I was lucky, because I grew up in a household full of classical music. I didn't really know there was any other kind of music besides classical music until I was about 13. I took a lot of piano lessons, and my parents regularly took me to the opera, so I had a sort of privileged upbringing when it came to classical music.
>
> But I'm also a product of the San Francisco public schools, so from a young age I watched all the classical music programs, even in San Francisco, slowly be invaded by budgetary types.

Although he later discovered pop and rock, his tastes remained anchored in classical music. This affinity is particularly evident in *The Composer Is Dead* (2009), a picturebook combining text (Snicket), illustration (Carson Ellis), and music (Nathaniel Stookey). In this playful murder mystery, an Inspector interrogates each orchestral section, offering humorous yet accurate insights into their musical roles. For instance, the neglected Violas lament playing "the notes in the chords nobody cares about," highlighting Snicket's appreciation for the often-overlooked "inner voices" essential to orchestral texture.

Handler's interest in other genres – and in the accordion – developed alongside his classical background. He jokingly admits to

having taken up the accordion in college "to pick up women," wanting to join a band (Tulloch, 2014). The choice reflects the instrument's hybrid status, and his piano training eased the transition. He went on to play in groups such as the Edith Head Trio and Tzamboni, but his most significant collaborations were with Stephin Merritt of The Magnetic Fields, The 6ths, and The Gothic Archies, the latter contributing songs to the *A Series* audiobooks. Handler also frequently performs accordion pieces during readings and signings. A playlist he shared with the *New York Times* confirms his broad but classically inclined musical tastes (Garner, n.d.).

Although we may not go to the extent of saying that Handler has a musical career, music definitely models his writing career. Music is incorporated more sporadically in *A Series* but it cannot be overlooked. We shall now concentrate more precisely on our corpus in order to draw links between literature and music through the image of the accordion.

2.3. Classic music shaping *A Series*

Classical music has inevitably shaped the way *A Series* is structured and composed. The author was largely inspired by two tracks when writing the book – the string quartets by Shostakovich and "Preparation for the Final Mystery" by Scriabin, two classical music tracks which gave him the "ability to engage and also disengage the mind." ('Lemony Snicket', 2016) Moreover, Handler argues that the opera and the melodrama have had a deep influence on him (Smith, *ibid.*).

Opera emerged in early 17th-century Florence with sung dramas such as Peri's *Dafne* (1598) and *Euridice* (1600). It can be broadly divided into *opera seria* – serious mythological or historical dramas with renowned singers – and *opera buffa*, comic works depicting everyday life. The genre evolved through forms like the French *ballet de cour*, the English masque, and Italian *intermedi* (Abbate and Parker, 2012), with its survival largely owed to the shifting balance between music and poetry (Russano Hanning and Weinstock, 2023).

Melodrama originated within opera, initially synonymous with dramma per musica due to the shared use of the human voice. By the late 18th century, Rousseau's *Le Pygmalion* (1770) redefined it: theatrical monologues were paired with musical refrains, making music an accompaniment that intensified emotion rather than the work's core. The term "melodramatic" came to signify sensationalized emotional appeal, focusing on private, character-driven plots. Many operas are inherently melodramatic, with character-centered stories emphasizing

emotional resolution despite often flat, stereotypical characters (Waeber, 2013).

The fact that Handler was hugely inspired by the opera and melodrama to write *A Series* is an indicator of the books' themes and structures but also of the author's musical interests. Indeed, the novels are structured like theatrical acts. For example, up until *The Vile Village* (book 7), the pattern of the books roughly follows the five-act structure of a theatre play or opera performance. Moreover, internally, there is indeed "always something sinister going on," as Handler puts it, as there are multiple mentions of murder, arson, kidnapping, paedophilia and so on: death lurks around the whole book series, and it recalls the melodramatic tone.

Furthermore, in both the novels and the Netflix adaptation, the opera is linked to the past (the Baudelaires' parents) and to the root of the antagonist's evil quest. A mention of *La Forza del Destino* (1862), a famous melodrama by Giuseppe Verdi, is made in relation to the parents (Snicket, 2005: 8):

> "Our parents took a taxi to the opera one evening when their car wouldn't start." [Klaus said.]
>
> "I remember that evening well," Kit [Snicket] replied with a faint smile. "It was a performance of *La Forza del Destino*. Your mother was wearing a red shawl, with long feathers along the edges. During intermission I followed them to the snack bar and slipped them a box of poison darts before Esmé Squalor could catch me. […]"

Throughout the story, it becomes clear that Beatrice Baudelaire, the protagonists' mother, stole a sugar bowl from Esmé Squalor at the opera and is implied to have caused the death of one of Olaf's parents, leaving him orphaned (*ibid*.: 308). In the TV adaptation, this is made explicit when viewers see Beatrice shoot Olaf's father, explaining the grudge Esmé and Olaf hold against the Baudelaires. Snicket, present at the event, describes *La Forza del Destino* as a melodrama full of duels, secret marriages, and accidental deaths—exaggerating for effect, though the gun motif remains, recalled through a poster of the opera (*The Penultimate Peril*, 2005: 15-16):

> "The poster," Klaus said, "Mother said she purchased it during intermission… She said it was the most interesting time she'd ever had at the opera."

> Violet remembered, "The poster had a picture of a gun, with a trail of smoke forming the words of the title."
>
> Sunny nodded, "*La Forza del Destino*."

Through the opera and the melodrama, there is a clear connection between literature and music throughout *A Series*. We can observe how music shapes the way *A Series* is written and how this stems from the author's biographical interest in both fields. Building on this analysis, we shall now turn our attention to the versatility of the role of the author-narrator-character encompassed in the *persona* of Lemony Snicket in order to understand more thoroughly how music is at the very core of the work, especially from a metaphorical point of view.

3. A three-dimensional role: Lemony Snicket as a versatile tool

Handler is both writer and musician, or more precisely accordionist, a "one-man band," who can produce rhythm, harmony and melody simultaneously. We shall now see that he holds an even more flexible role as the different diegetic planes are constantly crossed.

3.1. A convoluted author-narrator relationship

The mystery of *A Series* lies not only in the protagonists' outcome, but also in the fictional life of its narrator, Lemony Snicket. Following the investigation Ela Wydrzynska (2021) conducted on Pseudonymous Bosch, the narrator of *The Secret Series* (2007-2011), we can observe similar conclusions. Indeed, the two *personae* are very much like, and one can contend that Pseudonymous Bosch, or rather Raphael Simon, was greatly inspired by Lemony Snicket/Daniel Handler to create his own *persona*. Why is the latter so ambiguous? We must introduce a few concepts in order to understand clearly how he is author, narrator and character of *A Series*.

Snicket claims authenticity in his novels, arguing that everything the reader learns in the novels has really happened; unable to change the story, the narrator's duty is, according to him, simply to report the facts (Snicket, *The Reptile Room,* 1999: 85): "And as fervently as the Baudelaire orphans wished their circumstances were different, I wish that I could somehow change the circumstances of this story for you."

By constantly addressing readers, Snicket highlights the text's artificiality, which is both metaleptic and metafictional. To distinguish between authorial layers, we can consider real *versus* implied authors. The real author and readers exist outside the text, while Wayne Booth's implied author – the mental image readers construct from the work

(Booth, 1961; Toolan, 2001: 65) – helps differentiate Handler from Snicket. Even if debated, texts with self-aware authors always convey an "authorial persona" (Wall, 1991: 5), as Snicket does. Gregory Currie's (2010) distinction between internal and external authors further clarifies the difference between implied authors and character-authors, as seen in narrators like Watson in *Sherlock Holmes*, who is both a character and, within the story, the author of his own narrative. In the same fashion, Snicket acts as the internal author of *A Series* as he appears to be in the process of writing it; he also seems to exist as the external author, because it is his name that the reader sees on the cover of the book series.

Real author: Daniel Handler, writing under the pseudonym 'Lemony Snicket'

Implied author: Lemony Snicket (the reader's mental image of who Snicket is based on what can be known from the text about him, and the identity believed to be the external author

Narrator: a character-author version of Lemony Snicket (internal author) who narrates the story as he is investigating it in first-person and in the present tense

Characters: Violet, Klaus and Sunny Baudelaire in third-person, past tense

Narratee: "*You*", direct address accessible only by the narrator

Implied reader: the reader the text is meant to address. We can assume this role aligns with the narratee as Snicket is both the implied author and the narrator.

Real reader: the reader in the real world, who aligns him/herself with the implied reader to navigate the story-world the way it is intended by the implied author

Fig.2: Booth's teller and receptor roles as portrayed in *A Series*; model adapted from Ela Wydrzynska's paper (2021: 235) with her permission

No references are ever made to Daniel Handler in the books, and the latter even goes as far as pretending to be Snicket's agent during signing event, rarely ever presenting himself as the author of the books (Benfer, 2000).

The image thus created in the mind of the real reader is inspired almost completely by Snicket, and not by Handler. We may assume that Lemony Snicket holds the roles of external author, implied author, internal author and narrator at once (fig.2). This gives him an all-

encompassing eye and authority over the text, and the image of the accordion is fitting here: the plethora of roles allows Snicket to give a chosen tempo to the novels, and it ultimately points toward a complete manipulation of the text.

3.2. Making the narrative levels more complex: Snicket the character

Most interestingly, however, Snicket is not only author and narrator: he is also a character in his own story. His subjectivity and authority were already assessed through the conflation of the two discussed roles, but the inclusion of a diegetical position further complicates his relationship with his own text. Although it is not made clear from the beginning of the book series, a few hints are given to the reader. The epigraphs present at the beginning of each novel are addressed to "Beatrice," and express a form of longing, as we understand that the woman has died (Snicket, 1999):

For Beatrice—

I would much prefer it if you were alive and well.

The woman is decidedly part of the diegesis, as she is put on the same level as other characters of the story: "The Baudelaire orphans have asked it, of course. Mr. Poe has asked it. I have asked it. My beloved Beatrice, before her untimely death, asked it, although she asked it too late. The question is: *Where is Count Olaf*?" (Snicket, 2000: 109) The reader gradually identifies the woman with the protagonists' mother, Beatrice Baudelaire: Snicket was meant to marry Beatrice, but she decided to marry someone else (*ergo*, Bertrand Baudelaire). This is made explicit in the last volume, as Snicket clearly implies he knew Beatrice Baudelaire (Snicket, *The End*, 2006: 38): "I can see her now, […] telling me not to worry about the party that was beginning downstairs."

Beatrice Baudelaire serves as the primary lens through which the narrator is characterized. Lemony Snicket is also part of the Snicket family, whose members appear in the story: Jacques Snicket is killed by Olaf in book 7, and Kit Snicket aids the children from book 11 onward. From book 8, Olaf references the "Snicket files," which the children eventually discover. A photograph shows their parents, Jacques Snicket, and an "unknown man" with the caption suggesting a possible survivor of a fire (Snicket, 2001: 109). While the Baudelaires hope it might be a parent, the reader realizes it is Snicket, depicted with his face hidden, clutching a notebook and pen – hinting at his role as the story's concealed writer.

Furthermore, he crosses their path for a brief moment in book 12, and it is one of the few moments when Snicket distances himself from his narration (Snicket, 2005: 245-246):

> […] but before her siblings could answer, the children felt a shadow over them, and looked up to see a tall, skinny figure standing over them. In the darkness the children could not see any of his features, only the glowing tip of a skinny cigarette in his mouth.
>
> "Do you three need a taxi?" he asked […].
>
> The siblings looked at one another, and then squinted up at the man. The children thought perhaps his voice was familiar, but it might just have been his unfathomable tone […].

The words in bold are those used to define the mysterious man; it is perhaps the only instance in the text where a character is so undefined ("shadow," "figure," "the man"), as his face and tone are indistinguishable and difficult to qualify – which is a characteristic trait of Snicket. Even if this passage does not clearly indicate Snicket's presence at a diegetical level, his withdrawal from a narratological point of view – which happens every time the 'unknown (Snicket) man' is mentioned – tends towards our argument.

All in all, Lemony Snicket appears to be a multidimensional *persona*, who manipulates his narration at will through his versatile status of (external, internal and implied) author, narrator and character. This all-encompassing role is not dissimilar to the image of the accordion: Vincent Lhermet argues it is the "Swiss Army knife of musical instruments," (2016) able to produce multiple tasks at once and tune in with all the other instruments, whether they are popular or classical.

3.3. Readership and co-creation

Throughout the book series, Snicket holds a form of power and authority over both his text and his readership. This would leave the latter in a passive position; but it is here that the versatility of Snicket's role (and of the image of the accordion) comes most into play. Snicket does exert his authority but constantly subverts it and even submits it to his young readers, motivating their free thought and interpretation through postmodern techniques and playfulness. Metalepsis, metafiction and constant narrative interruptions are admittedly meant to engage the reader.

One of the key features of the narrator of *A Series* is his propensity to define words and concepts, and one should be wary of these definitions, which are, most of the time, correct only in a contextual sense, as exemplified hereafter: ""I will thank you not to be impertinent," Aunt Josephine said, using a word which here means "pointing out that I'm wrong, which annoys me."" (Snicket, 2000: 56) This is something to be found throughout the whole text, and serves the playfulness of language ("The World Is Relative Here", 2019: 32):

> This conceit is carried out throughout all of the series' texts: Snicket uses the definition trope to characterize, editorialize, and comically subvert the meaning of words within their context. This returns us to the metafictional concept of Derridean play, where the multiplicity of meaning inherent in language is emphasized.

Playfulness is closely linked to the accordion, traditionally associated with popular gatherings like fairs, circuses, and the French *bal musette*. The TV adaptation's opening song captures this playfulness, balancing bright and somber tones. In the text, the accordion's bellows – shaping the tone and "feeling" of notes – mirror Snicket's narrative, which hides and reveals elements through playful postmodern techniques, shifting the mood and inviting readers to fill in the gaps.

Because the narrator is unreliable and manipulative, meaning is co-created by the reader. Following Jauss (1978) and Iser (1985), a text exists only in interaction with its audience, who bring expectations and interpretations unique to their experience. A Series intentionally engages readers in this process, using the narrator's unreliability and playful techniques – a dynamic reflected in the image of the accordion. Having traced this image through author, narrator, and character, we now turn to a broader perspective: what links children's literature and the accordion as forms that inhabit the space between high and low culture.

4. Reconciling high and low cultures through literature and music

A Series is a book series mainly targeted at a young audience, as it is a middle-grade novel (8 to 12-year-old children). As works of children's literature, the novels are often placed within what is commonly perceived as a "lower" cultural category, especially when contrasted with the "high" culture of general literature—a divide reflected, for instance, in the disproportionate number of literary awards granted to each field. Yet several features of the series broaden

its intended readership, suggesting that *A Series* ultimately speaks to a much wider audience. The concept of dual audience (Wall, 1991)[3] or crossover novels (Falconer, 2009; Harju, 2012; Burnes, 2016) can be applied to our corpus here, and we shall see in what ways through the concepts of intertextuality and intermediality.

If the novels appeal to a wider audience, we may challenge the notions of high and low culture in the context of *A Series* through the lens of literature and music. The image of the accordion, conversely, is an image of the in-between, as it is caught between folkloric and classical music, as Monichon argues (*ibid.*: 6)[4]:

> […] Can we fault an instrument for expressing popular thought or for evoking the folkloric nature of a region? For enabling the performance of a Bach fugue or a Franck chorale? Can one blame it for moving, for being able to cover a whole range of feelings and passions by translating what each human being experiences deep within themselves?

4.1. The symbolic use of music: hope and nostalgia

Music holds a particular meaning for the real/implied author, and this transpires through the image of the accordion. The accordion symbolically came to represent feelings of longing and of nostalgia during WWII, especially for immigrant populations who thought of their native European lands. Jazz music amplified this phenomenon by combining the accordion with the saxophone: when used in soft, low tones, the instruments provide both feelings of comfort and remembrance. There is a profusion of mentions of music and instruments throughout the novels. The characters, like the author, have a good classical music upbringing, as they are able to identify concepts and instruments (Snicket, 2001: 140):

[3] A dual audience is to be found in books that are written to address both children and adults simultaneously; double address is more common, for children's books attract adult audiences, but are not originally meant for them. We argue that *A Series* was intended for both audiences. See: Wall (*ibid*.).

[4] Original quote : "[…] Peut-on reprocher à un instrument d'exprimer la pensée populaire ou d'évoquer le caractère folklorique d'une région ? De permettre l'exécution d'une fugue de Bach ou d'un choral de Franck ? Peut-on lui reprocher d'émouvoir, d'être capable de parcourir toute la gamme des sentiments et des passions en traduisant ce que chaque être humain ressent au plus profond de lui-même ?", my translation.

> "'The subliminal emotional tenor of a mob's unruliness lies in solitary opinions, expressed emphatically at various points in the stereo field.'"
>
> "Tenor? Stereo?" Violet asked. "It sounds like you're talking about opera."

Violet's misapplication of her brother's words to the opera suggests her familiarity with the genre. Classical instruments appear frequently throughout A Series, reflecting the musical background of the author, narrator, and characters, with over 35 mentions across the series. While not pervasive, music punctuates each book, sometimes for characterization – such as the violin, associated with Nero (*The Austere Academy*, 2001) – and sometimes symbolically, as when the Baudelaires recall their parents bonding over music: "Occasionally, [Bertrand Baudelaire] would play one of [the Baudelaires'] mother's favorite pieces of music on the phonograph, and she would rise from the sofa and dance awkwardly […]." (Snicket, 2005: 12) Key instruments like the piano and accordion also carry significance: the piano evokes memories of the parents, seen when the children encounter its burnt remains (*The Bad Beginning*).

Music often carries strong symbolic weight in children's literature, as in Mark Zusak's *The Book Thief* (2005), where the accordion represents both reassurance and death. For Hans, Liesel's adoptive father, it recalls debt, survival, and sustaining his family during war, while also foreshadowing his death. The instrument thus embodies the union of literature and music as a source of comfort. In *A Series*, the accordion's symbolism is subtler, evoking nostalgia and longing. The father of the real author is a WWII Jewish immigrant from Germany who came to the USA in 1939; Handler argues that this intergenerational trauma has shaped his life and his writing (Dery, 2015).

Fear, fatality, and powerlessness shape the author's psyche, and Lemony Snicket shares these traits. In A Series, instruments like the piano evoke nostalgia, while the accordion—mentioned five times—is primarily tied to Snicket and the past. Described as "dusty" in book 1 and linked to an opera memory in book 12 (The Penultimate Peril, 126), it recalls both personal history and a brief musical career. Here, the accordion is associated with classical music rather than popular culture, bridging its image in collective imagination with its actual use. The first example is particularly interesting to prove how the accordion is symbolically used in *A Series* because in this extract, Snicket is making a list of things that are important to him and that come to characterise

him in the eyes of the real and implied readers. The accordion becomes a symbol for the past (Snicket, 1999: 124):

> I am certain that over the course of your own life, you have noticed that people's rooms reflect their personalities. In my room, for instance, I have gathered a collection of objects that are important to me, including a dusty accordion on which I can play a few sad songs, a large bundle of notes on the activities of the Baudelaire orphans, and a blurry photograph, taken a very long time ago, of a woman whose name is Beatrice. These are items that are very precious and dear to me.

By describing the objects "precious and dear" to him, Snicket grants the reader a controlled glimpse into his intimate space. His life revolves around three elements – music (the accordion), literature (the Baudelaires), and love (Beatrice) – with the accordion listed first, though described as "dusty" and playable only for "a few sad songs." This connection between the instrument and Snicket's melancholy is reinforced in book 8 (*The Hostile Hospital*, 259), linking his musicality to time, nostalgia, and unfulfilled potential. Introduced early in the series, the accordion anchors the persona to the past. Overall, we may say that music is used at multiple levels in *A Series*, as it influenced the way the text is structured, how the sentences are formed, how the characters interact between one another and how the reader interacts with the text, especially through symbolic musical language. Music, particularly through the piano and the accordion, is associated with literature, the past, nostalgia, but also with hope, as it encapsulates the impulse of life and of movement within it.

4.2. Intertextuality and intermediality

The text uses literature and music symbolically, especially through musical language and the accordion's imagery. Both the accordion and children's literature occupy a space between "high" and "low" cultures – classical and folkloric music, popular and general literature. A Series bridges these gaps through playfulness, language, and the interplay of different art forms. Intertextuality and intermediality expand the fictional universe, allowing Handler to showcase his love of music and its versatility. We will briefly define these concepts and their connection to musicality and the bridging of cultural categories.

Intertextuality is a concept developed by Mikhail Bakhtin but which was popularised in Western academia by Julia Kristeva in her work Bakhtin, Word, Dialogue, Novel. (1967) The text is a dialogue between different types of writing – a reader, writer and writing that collide through a particular cultural context.

The term "dialogue" is essential here, as past and present contexts interact to create new content. Roland Barthes, (1967) a poststructuralist who also formed a more precise theoretical frame around the concept, argues that the text does not exist on its own, and that it consists of many other texts which form an intricate dialogue (and, conversely, do not belong solely to the author any longer). According to him, any text is intertextual by nature because meaning is created between texts and not within them. The goal of intertextuality is manifold, as it allows the author to parody, pastiche or pay tribute to another piece of work.

A text will thus explicitly or implicitly reference another, which will create a large artistic web and engage the reader. Intertextuality is omnipresent at a literary level, as Snicket constantly alludes to or even parodies known literary authors and works, from Herman Melville ("Queequeg" in book 11, a reference to a character in Moby Dick) to George Orwell (a character named Georgina Orwell appears in book 4, recalling the author's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*) through Lewis Carroll ("Briny Beach" is a reference to the poem "The Walrus and the Carpenter" in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*). Although it is a long-established phenomenon, intertextuality, pastiche and self-referenciality are all features of postmodernism in both literature and music, (Manuel, 1995: 227) and are, unsurprisingly, quite common in *A Series*.

In music, intertextuality is a hallmark of the postmodern, encompassing the adoption of earlier styles or the incorporation of literary references, such as Led Zeppelin's "Ramble On," which mentions Mordor from Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Kostka and de Castro (2021) note that musical intertextuality serves similar purposes as in literature, including parody, collage, and dialogue with the past. In *A Series*, composers and musicians are frequently mentioned, with one of the most modern references being Justin Timberlake's "Cry Me a River" (*The Penultimate Peril*, 190).

The presence of music is even more striking in the TV adaptation of the novels. In episode 1 (Hudis and Sonnenfeld, S01E01, 6:45-7:00), for instance, there is a direct reference to James Brown's song "Super Bad" (1971):

VIOLET: And what's that thing James Brown said?
KLAUS: I got somethin' that makes me want to shout
LEMONY: I got somethin' that tells me what it's all about.

The reference to the singer (1933–2006) creates a temporal clash, as the modern allusion contrasts with the TV show's aesthetics. While younger viewers may miss it, older audiences enjoy the recognition, and the comic effect is enhanced by Snicket's tone conflicting with the upbeat music. The 2004 movie adaptation, scored by Thomas Newman, relies more on classical music than the TV series, suiting the Gothic aesthetics.[5] Newman's compositions feature intertextual references to other composers; for example, the theme "Hurricane Herman" combines violins, cello, clarinet, flute, horns, and percussion, with dissonant high notes creating tension. The music rises in intensity but stops abruptly, echoing Hans Zimmer's style and embedding Newman's work in a broader musical network. Although Newman draws on many influences, he uses the orchestra innovatively, treating it like a "tone tank" that combines instruments to create varied sound textures rather than a harmonious whole. Intertextuality links the text, TV, and movie adaptations, engaging audiences through familiar references.

Intermediality, in contrast, describes the dialogue between different media rather than texts, allowing analysis of A Series novels alongside its 2004 movie and 2017–2019 TV adaptation. As Müller (2000) explains, audiovisual works integrate structures and concepts from other media, creating aesthetic layers that enrich the viewer's experience.

Intermediality is, overall, the necessary dialogue between different media, and nowadays, this is oftentimes between text and digital platforms such as the theatre, cinema, television and so on, especially in the context of adaptations. They rely heavily on intermediality, and find

[5] Many critics have argued that the movie looks like a 'Tim Burton movie,' Burton being renowned for propagating the Gothic aesthetics under discussion. By Gothic aesthetics, we mean that the props, locations/CGI renderings, clothes and lighting used in the movie recall what Gothic has come to represent in collective imagination following the literary genre's evolution throughout the centuries. *See:* Starzecki, Caroline. "Repenser le stéréotype gothique avec les orphelins Baudelaire de Lemony Snicket (1999-2006; 2017-2019)" *Imaginaires*, 25, 11-32: https://doi.org/10.34929/imaginaires.vi25.50

themselves at a crossroads with Henry Jenkins' notion of convergence (2006: 20):

> By convergence, I mean the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want. […]
>
> In the world of media convergence, every important story gets told, every brand gets sold, and every consumer gets courted across multiple media platforms.

The "courting" of media, as Jenkins notes, applies to *A Series* as well. While the movie and TV adaptations blur the line between intertextuality and intermediality, we will focus here on a musical extension: the 2006 audiobook album Tragic Treasury: Songs from A Series of Unfortunate Events by The Gothic Archies, primarily Stephin Merritt (voice) and Daniel Handler (accordion). Handler's direct involvement makes this album central to the corpus, linking each of the thirteen tracks (plus two extras) to a specific novel – track 1, "Scream and Run Away," corresponds to the first book:

The Count has an eye on his ankle
And lives in a horrible place
He wants all your money
He's never at all funny […]

The first verse introduces Count Olaf, highlighting his traits, his house, and his ambitions, all drawn from the first novel. The music is deliberately whimsical, favoring dissonance over harmony: the accordion dominates, yet sounds slightly off, the flute similarly falters, and the cymbals have a deliberately rough quality. Merritt's voice is coarse and occasionally out of tune, prioritizing spontaneity over precision. The result is an intentionally artificial aesthetic, creating a distinctive, experimental tone that pervades the entire album.

The songs accompany the narrative, shaping the listener's imagination and linking music and literature through intermediality. Found in the audiobook, album, and Netflix adaptation, they combine words and sound to engage the audience. Their purpose is consistent: blending influences and celebrating language while highlighting the popular. The accordion, associated with both classical and folkloric music, appears whimsical and playful, reinforcing this hybridity. The TV adaptation features the most songs (about six), while the movie has

none. By combining text and music, the narrative's meaning is expanded, and audience engagement is heightened.

Intertextuality and intermediality allow the narrative to thrive, especially through music, which – across adaptations and the album – shares hybridity, playfulness, and theatricality. The mix of classical and popular instruments in this postmodern children's series blurs cultural boundaries and shows how text and sound complement and shape each other. Just as the novels influenced the musical adaptations, the music also shaped the TV series' atmosphere. Composer Jim Dooley, who scored the second Netflix season, watched the movie beforehand and drew inspiration from its aesthetic (Staff, 2018). With Handler involved in the scripts and still performing accordion pieces from *Tragic Treasury*, the music is fully integrated into the *A Series* universe.

The accordion and music in the Snicketverse challenge the division of literature and music into "high" and "low" categories. *A Series* embraces hybridity, blending genres, media, and words with sound. Through intertextuality and intermediality, art feeds on art, revealing the series' complexity in both Snicket/Handler's multidimensional *persona* and the text's layered structure.

5. Conclusion

This study explored *A Series of Unfortunate Events* from both musical and literary perspectives. Music and text intersect at diegetic, metaphorical, and structural levels. The blending of real/implied author and narrator/character gives Snicket authority, while the accordion symbolizes duality and versatility: like the instrument, the narrator can reveal or conceal the story. Yet the unsaid words empower the reader, highlighting Snicket's multidimensional persona.

By leaving space for absence and imagination, co-creation becomes possible. The accordion mirrors *A Series of Unfortunate Events*: both exist between high and low, folkloric and classical cultures, bridging the gap through intermediality and adaptation. Music shapes the text at structural, diegetic, extradiegetic, and metaphorical levels. The novels' postmodern playfulness, intertextuality, and self-reflexivity amplify this connection, engaging the audience's imagination and knowledge.

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LES DESASTREUSES AVENTURES DES ORPHELINS BAUDELAIRE (1999-2006) DE LEMONY SNICKET: UN TEXTE CONSTRUIT PAR LA MUSIQUE/CALITE

Cet article examine la relation entre texte et musicalité dans le cadre de l'ensemble romanesque *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (1999-2006) ou *Les Désastreuses aventures des orphelins Baudelaire* en français, écrites par l'auteur américain Daniel Handler sous le pseudonyme Lemony Snicket. L'oeuvre est un excellent exemple d'arts complémentaires qui se nourrissent l'un l'autre. Les livres peuvent être considérés comme un texte fragmenté à l'image d'un accordéon qui se déploie. La musique d'ouverture de l'adaptation Netflix (2017-2019) des livres s'appuie sur le son si particulier de l'accordéon, qui est lui-même mentionné sporadiquement tout au long du récit. L'amour notoire de l'auteur pour cet instrument particulier a inévitablement façonné sa plume et le caractère de son auteur-narrateur. Cette focalisation sur la musicalité nous permet d'explorer différents aspects des romans.

Outre les diverses mentions d'instruments classiques, le texte lui-même fait un usage créatif de l'allitération, de l'assonance et de la répétition interne et structurelle. L'accordéon est en soi un instrument révélateur. Comme dans *The Book Thief* (2005) de Markus Zusak, le "piano du pauvre" peut symboliser à la fois la vie et la mort, ou la joie et la nostalgie. La dichotomie entre l'accordéon, instrument à la fois folklorique et classique, transparaît à travers le statut ambigü et ambivalent de l'auteur-narrateur. La polyvalence de l'accordéon se reflète dans le personnage de Lemony Snicket. Tout comme Daniel Handler est un accordéoniste - un "homme-orchestre" capable de produire simultanément du rythme, de l'harmonie et de la mélodie -, Lemony Snicket est une entité multidimensionnelle qui orchestre le récit à sa guise. Notre étude met en lien les romans et l'image de l'accordéon afin de mettre en lumière la richesse de l'écriture de l'auteur : nos observations seront étayées par l'adaptation Netflix (2017-2019) et la bande musicale accompagnant les audiobooks (2006).

Keywords: Lemony Snicket, accordéon, musicalité, hybridité