EDITORIAL

INTRODUCTION: MENTAL TV. CHANGING THE NARRATIVE OF MENTAL DISORDERS ON TELEVISION

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1. **INTRODUCTION**

Over the past fifteen years, fictional representations of mental disorders in television series have increased significantly and received widespread international attention (Orm et al. 2023, Vidal-Mestre et al., 2024, Paiva et al., 2024). As a medium integrated into all our daily lives like no other, this increase is not only relevant in terms of the fictional narratives these shows tell, but also in how they shape their viewers' critical understanding of the characters and mental states represented in them. In 1995, Otto Wahl has already observed that:

> Depictions of mental illness ... are pervasive and consistent in the stereotypes they present. There is every reason to expect that they ... will shape the public's views, and that consumers of mass media will come to see people with mental illnesses as they are depicted in the media. (Wahl 1995, 92)

Historically, productions have capitalised on the *otherness* of mental disorders, presenting characters as either comedic misfits unworthy of serious consideration or as erratic, threatening, and violent antagonists. The majority of entertainment media –including television, social media, film, and video games–, still draw on negative stereotypes and stigmatising imagery when engaging with mental disorders. Yet the recent surge of shows about protagonists with mental disorders in television has reshaped these stereotypes, at times by adding new connotations to previously solely negative aspects. This can be partly explained by growing cultural demands from both audiences and creators to move beyond one-dimensional and sensationalist portrayals.

In this special issue, we focus on examples in which contemporary shows and serials introduce new character types and narrative arcs, placing characters with mental disorders at centre stage rather than the fringes of the plot. Our aim is to explore how these series represent and narrate non-normative mental states, and what effects such productions have on viewers and the cultural narrative of mental disorders. With this dual focus on aesthetic, narrative, and formal shifts in contemporary television, as well as the potential social and cultural influence of these productions, we, together with the contributors to this issue, wish to pay tribute to the changing narrative of mental disorders on screens internationally. Television's medium-specific attributes, its longevity and seriality, have given rise to new modes of representing and narrating mental states that fall outside a culturally perceived norm. Far from merely exchanging a neuro-normative for a neurodiverse protagonist, contemporary TV series have pushed the medium's conventions of visual and narrative storytelling. Here too, we have every reason to believe that these alternative, more nuanced representations of neuro-non-normativity in contemporary television will shape the public's views and understanding of mental disorders.

2. **A NEW AUDIOVISUAL LANGUAGE FOR MENTAL DISORDERS**

To capture the volatile subjective experience of mental disorders, contemporary television series have abandoned time-honoured visual and narrative tropes of the comic relief or the dangerous *other.* No longer reduced to their non-normativity, characters break free from the narrative confines of their mental states. The opening up of audiovisual conventions of representing mental disorders has reified in larger shifts in televisual storytelling, establishing a reciprocal encouragement of diversifying the narratives audiences can see on screen. What has been called "quality TV" (McCabe 2010), "Must-See TV" (Lotz 2007), "complex TV" (Mittell 2015) or, tellingly, "batshit TV" (Mittell 2022) is a form of storytelling in which alternative modes of narration, new forms of visualisation, and cultural negotiation meet.

Characters with mental disorders have often been functionalised as a means to elicit audience anxiety in crime dramas (e.g., *Criminal Minds* [CBS, 2005–]; see also Stuart 2024, 35) or to awe neuro-normative viewers with unthinkable feats, as characters' non-normative mental states endow them with special talents or savant powers (e.g., *Sherlock* [BBC, 2010–2017], *Hannibal* [NBC, 2013–2015], *The Good Doctor* [ABC, 2017–2024]; see also Beirne 2019). Moving beyond generic categorisations, characters with a mental disorder are now increasingly part of different types of TV programmes: they may be the lead singer of a musical, as in Rachel Bloom and Aline Brosh McKenna's *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (The CW 2015–2019), or the star of a stand-up comedy show that is their life, as in Raphael Bob-Waksberg's *BoJack Horseman* (Netflix 2014–2020) and Richard Gadd's *Baby Reindeer* (Netflix 2024). These series defy genre conventions while also inviting viewers to rethink the expectations and assumptions they tacitly bring to these series – not only pertaining to the plot but also about characters' mental states.

Far from yet another functionalisation of non-normative mental states to aestheticise and dramatise non-normativity,

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these modes of representation aim to make characters' subjective experiences accessible to viewers. It is not an effort to externalise symptoms and conditions, but to invite viewers into characters' internal worlds and minds. This endeavour also lies at the heart of an increasing number of series that introduce variations to serial narration and conventional narrative structures. Merging episodic with serial structures, shows such as Brian Yorkey's *13 Reasons Why* (Netflix 2017–2020), Cary Joji Fukunaga and Patrick Somerville's *Maniac* (Netflix 2018), and Joseph Gordon-Levitt's *Mr. Corman* (Apple TV+ 2021) offer viewers episodic glimpses into characters' mental states while advancing an overall narrative.

In this, these series eschew reducing characters to an embodiment of their mental states and conflating their conditions with their personality. Although the means differ, shows, such as Sam Esmail's *Mr. Robot* (USA Network 2015–2019) and Noah Hawley's *Legion* (FX 2017–2019) achieve the same effect in that they immerse viewers in the protagonists' subjective worlds and taking them "on an experiential journey" (Mittell 2022, 265; Kreitler 2025). This journey is further extended through the use of shifts in narrative focalisation, as exemplified by Netflix's *Everything Now* (2023). Such narrative choices stand testament to these shows' commitment to portraying mental disorders as a complex, shared experience that affects individuals and families alike, rather than confining it to a single character.

Not limited to purely aesthetic or formal considerations, some TV shows demand to be considered from an intersectional perspective. Addressing the entanglement of various identity categories, including race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, shows, such as Donald Glover's *Atlanta* (FX 2016–2022) and Sam Levinson's *Euphoria* (HBO 2019–) seamlessly embed discussions of mental states in their plots, presenting them as part of the human condition that defies reductive binaries and simplistic categorizations. It is this advancing pluralisation and diversification of characters, narratives, aesthetics, and forms of storytelling that we see as emblematic of what we call "Mental TV". Television's artistic and creative potential to reinvigorate perception of and reflection about the cultural narrative of mental disorders.

3. **FROM POP CULTURE TO CULTURAL DISCOURSE**

Whether we ascribe an educational mandate to television, or whether we see it as pure entertainment – we cannot deny that its tropes and narratives have a significant impact on how we all perceive and conceive of the world around us. As Neil Postman aptly puts it:

> Television is our culture's principal mode of knowing about itself. Therefore —and this is the critical point— how television stages the world becomes the model for how the world is properly to be staged. It is not merely that on the television screen entertainment is the metaphor for all discourse. It is that off the screen the same metaphor prevails. (2005, 92)

Taking Postman's admonition seriously, the pluralisation and diversification of characters, representations, and narratives about mental disorders on TV could move beyond being a trend or tendency in serial narration. Presenting audiences with complex characters, alternative narratives and forms of narration, and situating mental disorders as part of – and not apart from – society, these shows contribute to a gradual normalization of non-normative mental states in media and beyond.

At the same time, and as Susan Sontag has cautioned in 1978, metaphors, and especially metaphors about illness, come with a price: "The disease itself becomes a metaphor. Then, in the name of the disease (that is, using it as a metaphor), that horror is imposed on other things" (1978, 60). Certain mental disorders – particularly schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and dissociative identity disorder – are represented excessively in fictional narratives, often in sensationalised or misleading ways. By contrast, conditions such as depression, panic disorder, and social anxiety disorder have become culturally 'accepted.' Disorders such as Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) and certain forms of high-functioning autism (level 1) have become normalised through popular psychology and their framing as symptomatic of broader neoliberal pressures. While these representations often aim to elicit empathy, they also reinforce a hierarchical structure in which some mental disorders are rendered intelligible, relatable, and even valorised, and others continue to be pathologised, stigmatised, and socially marginalised (see also Elsaesser 2021, 98).

This special issue bringst together authors whose work foregrounds television series that resist the commodification and appropriation of mental disorders, instead encouraging viewers to reconsider their assumptions about non-normative mental states. Their contributions chart a path forward by emphasising the medium's potential to shape and transform

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cultural discourse around mental health. In the six articles featured in this issue, the contributing authors explore a diverse array of genres – including animated series, horror dramas, and domestic noir – and international productions that challenge Western-centric narratives. Together, they offer a critical and multidimensional analysis of how mental disorders are represented, narrativised, and reimagined within contemporary screen cultures.

4. IN THIS ISSUE

Responding to contemporary TV series formal and aesthetic innovations, the issue opens with Eric Dewald's article on *BoJack Horseman*, which analyses how animation enables a sophisticated depiction of psychological distress. Dewald argues that the show's high serialisation, animated style, and anthropomorphic characters create an aesthetic distance that allows viewers to engage with non-normative experiences otherwise inaccessible to them. Scribbled overlays, surreal dream sequences, and visual metaphors externalise characters' internal psychological states without reverting to sensationalised representations common in live-action productions. According to Dewald, *BoJack Horseman* does not attempt to offer clear solutions to mental disorders, but embraces human struggles and their complexities through a distinctive blend of visual creativity.

Moving from animation to horror series, Ahmad Hayat's article examines how U.S. slasher series, such as *Bates Motel* (A&E) and *Scream: The TV Series* (MTV), use serialised storytelling to explore mental disorders like Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID). Hayat argues that the genre's targeting of cable television has given rise to psychologically complex characters whose conditions are not a fixed aspect of their personality but evolve over time. These series integrate mental health as a central element of both character development and thematic exploration, evident in their plots and narrative structures, which feature hallucinations, flashbacks, and dream sequences. While recognising the enduring presence of genre tropes and sensationalism, Hayat contends that such portrayals embody a tension between creative intentions and institutional demands, especially branding strategies designed to appeal to socially conscious audiences. Slasher series, then, function both as entertainment and subtle vehicles for exploring the enduring effects of psychological distress within serialised formats.

It is not only aesthetic concerns that TV programmes pick up on. Turning to the gendered dimensions of mental disorders, Katharina Hendrickx investigates how Netflix's *The Woman in the House Across the Street from the Girl in the Window* parodies domestic noir and thereby critiques the genre's entrenched negative stereotypes about women's psychology. Drawing on Gothic conventions, such as the madwoman, the unreliable narrator, and the haunted domestic space, Hendrickx examines how the series both reinforces and satirises portrayals of female trauma. The protagonist's fragmented narration – marked by hallucinations, memory lapses, and emotional confusion – aligns her with traditional Gothic protagonists. While these narratives are often seen to centre around female trauma, they simultaneously commodify it, reducing complex psychological experiences to formulaic tropes. The show's self-awareness creates space for critical reflection on the politics of believability, narrative control, and the representation of women's suffering.

As a complementary reading, Anna Caterino evaluates the entanglement of gender and mental disorders through the lens of masculinity in *The Winchesters*. Rather than relying on graphic war reenactments, the series uses subtle cues to convey trauma and visualise the protagonist's PTSD as an ongoing lived experience rather than a dramatic plot twist or villainous trait. Caterino underscores how the show explores intersecting traumas, including familial abandonment and childhood abuse, situating them within a broader multigenerational cycle of harm. Contrasting masculine vulnerability with typical 'tough guy' archetypes, the series resists the notion of linear healing by portraying a protagonist who remains engaged in the process of coping.

The final two articles broaden the geographical and cultural scope of the issue by focusing on Indian and Korean television. Narrowing in on Indian 'over-the-top' series, Neha Singh analyses the inconsistent depictions of mental health across Indian broadcast television and streaming platforms. The article argues that, although OTT platforms have allowed for more realistic portrayals, particularly of non-psychotic disorders like anxiety and depression, classical television series still rely on melodramatic tropes and stigmatising stereotypes. These negative portrayals are shaped by India's socio-historical context, including colonial psychiatric legacies and recent legal reforms, such as the Mental Healthcare Act from 2017. The article presents a narrative and cultural analysis of sixteen Hindi-language series, highlighting how psychotic and developmental disorders are often sensationalised or romanticised. Based on this review, Singh advocates

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for televisual approaches that are both culturally sensitive and intersectional, emphasising their potential to enhance awareness and challenge entrenched stigmas.

The final article of this issue by Min Joo Lee moves the discussion to Korean dramas and their representation of caregiving dynamics. Focusing on three series – *It's Okay, That's Love* (2014), *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* (2020), and *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* (2022) – Lee examines how these dramas challenge the dominant caregiver/care-recipient binary by portraying protagonists with disorders as emotionally and psychologically capable individuals. While these series reposition neuro-non-normative characters as active agents in their own narratives, Lee also critiques the continued reliance on time-honoured tropes. For one, romantic love is often portrayed as a cure, and maternal blame persists as a recurring element. For another, all protagonists are highly accomplished professionals, which implies that societal acceptance depends on productivity and success, thereby reinforcing neoliberal ideals. Despite these limitations, Lee concludes that Korean dramas hold significant potential as tools of public education and cultural transformation.

With this issue, we hope to provide an overview of the changes and emerging shifts in representations of narrativisation of mental disorders in television series, moving beyond binary valorisations of 'good' or 'bad' or 'realistic' and 'fictionalised' portrayals. Representation is not a zero-sum game, and, as all contributions show, there is no single way of engaging with highly individualised, subjective, and idiosyncratic lived experiences of neuro-non-normativity. As the various productions discussed in the contributions show, television creators have embraced the creative and artistic potential of engaging with the world differently in order to tell different stories, but also stories of difference. It is in this shift, from *othering* mental disorders to acknowledging their difference as part of being human, that we see the social, cultural, and political potential of Mental TV. To return to Wahl's (1995) words once more, we can only hope that, here too, these reimaginings of mental disorders "will shape the public's views, and that consumers of mass media will come to see people with mental illnesses as they are depicted in the media" – as complex individuals who are more than their mental states.

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