

SERIAL TOPOLITICS. SPATIAL ATTITUDES IN GEOPOLITICAL DRAMA

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ABSTRACT

By examining the spatial attitudes of television series as modes of narratively and visually engaging with spatiality,

this paper argues that the concept of topocracy should be understood as an attitude of geopolitical control over territory. Narratively, topocracy shapes the creation and resolution of conflict over the possession of space. Visually, it is expressed through a set of camera positions and the gaze of a dominant subject, enhanced by perceptual prostheses, such as surveillance cameras and drones. To illustrate the concept of topocracy, two television series will be analysed: *The Gringo Hunters* (2025-) and *The Bridge* (2013-2014). Both set along the United States–Mexico border, they display complementary spatial attitudes.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The television series *The Gringo Hunters* (2025-) opens with a high-angle shot of a port area in Mexico. The camera tracks backwards to gradually reveal more spatial elements, thereby serving a mapping function. In the following shot, it moves forward into the interior of a building, focusing on a man who is observing the port through binoculars: he is the commander of a police unit tasked with tracking down American fugitives who illegally attempt to seek refuge in Mexico. From his elevated vantage point, the man with the binoculars dominates the space and supervises his team's mission via radio communication, while his operatives follow a fugitive, in a long sequence that ends with the criminal's arrest.

This contemplative scene is characterized by distance, elevation, and a gaze imbued with a sense of possession, all features that stem from a culturally grounded perceptual model. As Felice Cimatti (2024: 23) argues:

within the Western tradition, gazing is the primary means through which the body of a perceptual subject takes possession of the world. Through vision, human beings embrace the visible, which presents itself in its entirety. Therefore, the spectacle of the world is nothing more than an object that is fully available to the subject that contemplates it. Interestingly, the gazing subject observes the object from an external — seemingly privileged — position.

The television series *The Bridge* (2013-2014) is also set along the United States–Mexico border, although in this case the investigation unfolds across both countries. When a woman's body is found precisely at the border (with one half of the body in Mexico, and the other half in the United States), two detectives — an American woman and a Mexican man — arrive at the scene. Since the victim is an American judge, the American detective insists on being assigned the case. The dialogue between the detectives is presented through a shot-reverse-shot sequence, with each shot filmed alternately on one side and then on the other side of the border: this visual division emphasizes the narrative conflict that develops episode by episode.

The Gringo Hunters and *The Bridge* are examples of police procedural drama that can also be classified as geopolitical television (Saunders 2017), due to the centrality of the border in their storytelling. Not only does such an element acquire

narrative significance by causing conflict, but it also becomes aesthetically important, as space is framed through a specific use of the camera.

The issue of spatial control in these television series will be examined in both narrative and visual terms, within the framework of *spatial imagination* (Bolson 2007, Montani 1999), using methodologies drawn from geographical and television aesthetics, narratology, and political philosophy. Reference will also be made to film theory and textual analysis, in order to investigate shooting angles and their relevance to television style.

Imagination is understood as that level of “original intermediation [...] between something factual and something meaningful” (Montani 1999: 14). As a medium, television seriality is one of the possible imaginative forms of this in-between space, of what lies between reality and a representation that seeks to convey meaning. Serial imagination is spatial not only because it fills a space, but especially because it transforms factual space, producing a shift from a primary ontology — the space of the real, the space of life — to a secondary ontology — the space of fiction. This transformation occurs because, in audiovisual practice, “a shot establishes a relationship between the position of the camera and that of the subject, creating a surface of imaginary contact between the space of the filmed and that of the filming” (Aumont 1989: 16).

A homogeneous set of television attitudes towards space will be explored. The term “attitude” will be used in the same sense as the phrase “propositional attitudes” in the philosophy of language, where it denotes the relationship between a thinking individual and content that is thought (Richard 1980). In the context of textual analysis, Francesco Casetti introduces the notion of *communicative attitude* to categorize various “forms of gaze” (Casetti and Di Chio 1990: 243), including subjective and objective shots. Attitudes are an organized form of the specific spatial experience proposed by audiovisual media. As with any spatial experience, this involves “the use and perception of the spatial qualities of objects and environments” (Garroni 1981: 248). A particular spatial attitude that expresses an intention of control and dominion will be analysed. Termed “topocracy”, it refers to the concept of *topolitics*, coined by Jacques Derrida to describe “the link between the local and the political” (Derrida and Stiegler 1996: 58). Two categories of spatial attitude will be investigated: a narrative one, characterized by causal chains of events and organized around conflict; and a visual one, determined by the position and dynamics of the camera.

2. SPATIAL ATTITUDES OF THE NARRATIVE: TERRITORY AND CONFLICT

Narrative texts are structured around two principles: every story is set, and unfolds, in a specific space; every story is grounded in conflict. The first principle may seem self-evident, with narrative space functioning as an “action-space” (Sesonske 1973) that sparks the viewer’s interest in the pragmatic dimension of television series — a kind of interest that is focused on a fictional three-dimensional structure that encompasses environments, characters, actions, reactions, and interactions. Actions are linked by a design that can be episodic, as it is in television series; seasonal, as it is in serials; or both episodic and seasonal, as it is in serialized series. The second principle, which concerns conflict, is based on the structure of a narrative as a causal chain of events in which characters face obstacles in pursuit of their objectives. As Michael Z. Newman observes, “Television is a story machine” (2006: 16), where the concept of machine refers to the fact that television series consist of mechanisms that ensure narrative development. Each episode is divided into smaller beats, or scenes, arranged in a sequence called a plot, which is characterized by “twists and turns”, “complications and reversals” (Newman 2006: 18). In these sequences of beats — episodes — conflict becomes fundamental. As Newman highlights, an episode consists of “Structures of problems and solutions so that the central conflict introduced in the beginning of an episode has often been overcome by the end” (Newman 2006: 20). Conflict is crucial to setting the story machine in motion and progressing towards a resolution, which is always partial and temporary in television series. Within the series structure, the central role of conflict in the action-space is not incompatible with that of the character, as in each story conflict arises from the relationship between an individual and the world. As Robert McKee (1997: 146) explains:

A character’s world can be imagined as a series of concentric circles surrounding a core of raw identity or awareness, circles that mark the levels of conflict in a character’s life. The inner circle or level is his own self and conflicts arising from the elements of his nature: mind, body, emotion. [...] The second circle inscribes personal relationships. [...] The third circle marks the level of extra-personal conflict [...]: conflict with social institutions [...], and conflict with both man-made and natural environments — time, space, and every object in it.

Such a third circle will be examined, with characters facing conflict characterized by a strong spatial component. As it has already been mentioned, any conflict is set in space. Yet, only in some kinds of conflicts does space itself become a bone of contention. When space actually causes conflict, rather than being its mere setting, it transforms into territory, described as a “bounded space under the control of a group of people, with fixed boundaries, exclusive internal sovereignty and equal external status” (Elden 2013: 18). The television series analysed in this paper are distinguished by a narrative structure that is not only spatialized — as is typical of any series — but also territorialized, since “the configuration of a given area is shown in light of socio-political relationships” (Furia 2023: 53).

At a basic level, no television series can ignore the territorial issue: even a sitcom mostly filmed in interiors such as *Friends* (1994-2004) needs to contend with the fact that it is set in New York, rather than London or any other city. However, in certain television series, the territorial issue becomes central to framing the narrative conflict, with the characters seeking to dominate and control territory. Western television series provide a case in point, as they depict the transformation of a space considered devoid of governmental structures and characterized by wilderness into an area governed by rules, and hence civilized. This shift is driven by conflict, in terms of both the natives’ way of life and the legal or illegal exploitation of available resources. This view resonates with Ernesto C. Sferrazza Papa’s observation that, in the period following the discovery of America, “Europe was perceived as a *territory*, whereas America, given its geographical features, was seen as an amorphous *space*” (2019: 71). A similar dynamic emerges in some science-fiction series centred on the conquest of unexplored worlds, with no borders and no rules. This is evident in *For All Mankind* (2019-), which portrays the colonization of the Moon by the United States and the Soviet Union. The narrative premise posits that the Soviets are the first to land on lunar soil, prompting the Americans to engage in fierce competition for its territorialization. In this scenario, conflict involves two great countries on Earth and smaller groups of colonizers on the Moon, as they establish borders, enclose and annex spaces in which to plant their flags.

Other television series do not focus on neutral spaces to territorialize, but on already developed territories whose complex nature, far from being fixed, is constantly subject to social change and negotiation. Such negotiations may occur at an urban level, as in *The Wire* (2002-2008) and *Show Me*

a Hero (2015), in a national context, as in the Denmark-set *Borgen* (2010-2022), or on a global scale, as in *24* (2001-2010) and *Homeland* (2011-2020). In the age of globalization and the digital revolution, the political subject's need for power remains anchored to the land, and hence, to territory: what multiplies are "indirect powers", such as technology, economy, and religion, which — by their very nature — tend to cross boundaries and "transcend fixed spaces" (Sferrazza Papa 2019: 132). This results in conflict between local and global dimensions, between territorial and extraterritorial governments, as it is shown, at an extreme level, in *24* and *Homeland*. In *24*, the United States faces an external terrorist threat that has originated domestically or is systematically supported by forces pursuing transnational economic interests, from narcotrafficking to the military industry. In *Homeland*, the secret service of the United States is engaged in a long and complex fight against terrorism based on a concept of homeland "that is both physical, thus reflecting the inviolability of the territory, and value-oriented, focusing on freedom and democracy" (Tagliani 2016: 14).

Therefore, territory becomes the context in which narrative conflict unfolds, with causal chains of events involving characters, groups, and communities — a process that develops due to territory itself being characterized by dialectics, negotiation, tension, and dynamism. In this sense, territory serves as a catalyst for endless narrative interest, since it is instrumental in "developing clear, ongoing stories about compelling characters facing difficult obstacles" (Newman 2006: 17), which is the main objective of television storytelling.

The next section will show how, besides generating the necessary conflict to set the story machine in motion, territory leads to a specific television gaze, an attitude towards space that is aimed at controlling, ruling, and owning — the attitude of topocracy.

3. SPATIAL ATTITUDES OF DISCOURSE: TOPOCRACY AND THE GAZE

The relationship between space and power is a central theme in the interdisciplinary debate on the spatial turn that characterised Western culture in the latter part of the 20th century. In particular, in a 1967 lecture, Michel Foucault introduced the concept of "heterotopias" (2009), spaces that serve to isolate, compensate for or purify what normal society cannot integrate, revealing the underlying power relations; Foucault later explained how power uses spatial organisation for sur-

veillance purposes (1975). Henri Lefebvre, on the other hand, emphasised the political and ideological nature of the production of space, as "the representation of space [is] in thrall to knowledge and power" (1991: 50).

Measured, divided, enclosed, and regulated, space is also embraced by different kinds of gazes that aim at owning the world. These processes are oriented towards control and negotiation, although the latter can turn into conflict. Human existence as a whole is marked by radical boundary crossings and trivial condominium disputes, as space per se is what is divided and appropriated. Space has a political nature, since it serves as "the material transcendental condition that makes [...] action possible in the world" (Sferrazza Papa 2019: 14). When the original function of embracing and causing action is considered, space and politics blend into topolitics, a concept that Jacques Derrida uses to describe "the unbreakable relationship [...] between the necessarily spatial dimension of human action and the concrete practice of changing, structuring, and organizing the spatial *continuum*" (Sferrazza Papa 2019: 15-16). In this sense, what Sferrazza Papa terms "topolitical dispositions" (Sferrazza Papa 2019: 16) — that is, "the different ways in which human beings have created and affected the union between space and power" (ibid.) — are, in the artistic context, *topocratic attitudes, interpreted as the different ways in which a creator represents the union between space and power*. If "a desire to territorialize is implicit in any form of representation" (Furia 2023: 47), modern television series seem to be the most powerful manifestation of an ancient spirit that is strongly characterized by topocratic dispositions. In the same way as cinema did in the past, modern television series convey the idea of "the omnipotence of technology in the positivist era, becoming a visual variant of the ancient dream of ruling the world" (Bernardi 2007: 15).

The space of television series is the result of a shooting process that recreates a space that pre-exists the space of the shot. As a photographic process, shooting produces representational modalities that may make the image either in focus or out of focus, deep or shallow, thereby creating "a number of dramatic or emotional or accenting effects" (Sesonske 1973: 407). The same applies to the use of focal length, which determines the perceived distance within the action-space, producing different atmospheric or narrative effects. Therefore, the space of television series emerges from positional decisions that preserve the relationship not only between the two-dimensional space of the screen and the three-dimensional space of fiction, but also between primary ontology — real space — and secondary ontology — the portrayed space of the image.

In the following paragraphs, the spatial attitude of topocracy will be understood as the result of television series gazing upon space with the aim of controlling it, projecting onto it the intention to dominate, influence, and intervene, while establishing a continuous dialectic between the potentially uncontrollable real and the shot as a managing tool. The discursive means through which the topocratic attitude is constructed will be shown to be the identification of the point of view, in terms of height and angle.

If the initial point of reference is a shooting position aligned with the height of the human figure, with the frame perpendicular to the ground, then any deviation from this norm acquires a specific meaning, serving as “a clear marker of a deliberate effort to provide a particular dimension to the subject portrayed” (Rondolino and Tomasi 2023: 122). Such is the case in the opening sequence of *The Gringo Hunters*. Heights, angles, and tilts are distinctive features of a medium that operates through framing. They function as discursive aspects that enable the narrative world to materialize, while showing an intention to generate interest beyond that produced by the mere filming of the dramatic action. In this sense, the communicative attitude that Casetti describes as “unreal objective shot” clearly conveys a desire for power that is intrinsic to the filming apparatus, which “necessarily organizes space [...] under the complete control of the camera (1986: 82).

As Rudolf Arnheim argues, in audiovisual practices, “a clever position of the camera” is extremely effective, since “the perspective angle acquires meaning” (1957: 39), in a dual sense. On the one hand, the angle presents the object distinctively, emphasizing some of its features for expressive purposes, such as in a low-angle shot that highlights a character’s power. On the other hand, a set of angle variations helps to “satisfy the spectator’s sense of form” (1957: 39). In terms of expressive function, in the literature, the angle used is often associated with the way a character is portrayed (Berg and Erskine 2001: 377, Rondolino and Tomasi 2023: 92). With regard to aesthetic satisfaction, the search for unusual angles reflects the artistic concern with form in the audiovisual product, resulting in “pictorial surprise”, as Arnheim stresses (1957: 40). This contributes to the strong aesthetic appeal of some television series, as remarked by Byrne (2023) in his review of *Euphoria* (2019-): “Visually, it’s often beautiful too, [...] There are neat little nods to cinematic visionaries from Fellini to Busby Berkeley, and tracking shots for days”.

In television series, such visual decisions cannot be made in isolation or on a purely local basis, as the visual concept

needs to be taken into account — the set of distinctive features that characterize the design of a specific television series, especially in the cinematization phase (Richards 2021, Newman and Levine 2012). For instance, in the first season of *The Sopranos*, several Dutch angles emphasize the protagonist mobster as a dominant figure, especially in exterior settings. By contrast, high-angle shots convey a sense of spatial control and are used more for the setting than the characters, or they may highlight a character’s familiarity with, or belonging to, a specific place, such as in the high-angle shots of Los Angeles in *Bosch* (2014-2021).

The shooting angle thus serves as a clue to the intention of eliciting narrative, representational, or contemplative interest: television series do not merely record dramatic action, but turn it into a representation that may reflect a creator’s vision (De Caro and Terrone 2023: 12-15). This implies that the angle is an unambiguous indicator of an aesthetic process in development.

Such a process is aimed at *narrative* interest when a television series conveys descriptive details through particular camera angles, such as high-angle shots to show a caravan of settlers seen from high ground in western series, or low-angle shots to portray alien invasions in science-fiction series. *Representational* interest is evoked when the angle emphasizes a thought, comment, or thematic intention. In this sense, as Arnheim argues, the camera in *The Sopranos* looks up at Tony Soprano “as at a mountain” (1957: 39). *Contemplative* interest is specific to the cinematic medium, as it is generated by the possibility of observing the world without being seen, “experiencing the portrayed events from the outside, in a detached way, with no need to make any comment” (De Caro and Terrone 2023: 24). This is a distinctive feature of audiovisual experience as a “projection/protection” mechanism “that emerges thanks to enclosures and screens” (Casetti 2023: 34).

By emphasizing the relationship between camera and space, light can be shed on a common attitude in television series that is deeply rooted in the art of framing and, even more, in the history of life forms: an elevated point of view is understood as a position for defence and control (Appleton 1975) that enables one to “see without being seen” (Lorenz 2002: 140). In this sense, a topocratic attitude represents the full realization of audiovisual media, since they do not present viewers with the world literally, but allow them “to view it unseen”, as Stanley Cavell points out (1977: 40).

In the opening sequence of *The Gringo Hunters*, the dominating gaze, made even more powerful through binoculars, occupies an elevated position. All the operatives in the team

are in radio contact, but the commander addresses each of them only after observing them and, in some cases, after his gaze is returned. This creates internal ocularization (Jost 1987), whereby what the viewer sees corresponds to a specific character's gaze, while the series simultaneously establishes a spatial attitude. Such an attitude is that of topocracy, oriented towards the exercise of power over a particular manifestation of spatiality — the territory.

When the focus is on contemplative interest, an elevated position, or vantage point, contributes to initiating the transformation of space into landscape: it is this very position that enables a topocratic attitude, adopted by a gaze that conveys a desire to control the territory. The elevated position is literal in aerial shots, which have recently been replaced by drone shots, to the point that — at least quantitatively — the contemporary audiovisual system “is entering the drone age” (Christiansen 2017: 2). Showing absolute spatial control and influencing reality, this shooting approach strongly marks not only the visual style of *Homeland*, but also its reflection on the relationship between gaze and power. As Giacomo Tagliani argues, “the opportunity to maintain control over one's visual field and act from a distance is consistent with the logic of perception” (2016: 86). Today more than ever, what Casetti observes concerning the overhead shot seems to be particularly relevant, as this type of shot enables one “to dominate the field, construct reality, and share the omnipotence of the camera” (1986: 63-64). In visual terms, a topocratic attitude is thus often identified through the camera angle: zenithal and plongée shots convey the intention to control space by delimiting and mapping a geographical area.

Political thriller television series feature numerous topocratic attitudes, owing to their representing conflict that revolves around a bordered territory, a term that etymologically describes a land that is under the control of a particular entity. In such series, the spatial attitude is traditionally adopted by cameras mounted on military vehicles — ships, planes, tanks. This practice has recently evolved to encompass both “somatic images” (Antichi 2024: 25), showing a soldier's point of view through a helmet-mounted device, and “dense objective shots” (Buccheri 1996), which multiply the images captured by helmet-mounted cameras and drones via screens and monitors. A symbol of the scopic regime of topocracy in war narratives is the rifle sight, which frames the screen as a threatening iris and dominates space before the lethal shot. In this sense, series such as *Homeland* and *24* include multiple spatial attitudes that are oriented towards

control, in order to obtain data, documents, hints, and even defeat the enemy.

In all its manifestations, a topocratic attitude is not only the sign of an ongoing spatial transformation — with space turning into territory as an area defined by socio-political relationships (Furia 2023: 53) — but also “the hegemonic model shaping the regulatory and relational functions that govern the interaction between human beings and the environment in which they live and organize their life” (Mastromauro 2024: 13). Territory is a portion of land, as landscape is. However, while landscape is the object of a neutral and contemplative act, territory is the result of a negotiated and recognized division, aimed at creating space for human activity. Unlike landscape, territory produces narratives because it is the object of possession and conflict: “territory is the prerequisite for acts of power and their counterstrategies” (ibid.).

4. THE TWO SIDES OF THE BORDER: “THE GRINGO HUNTERS” AND “THE BRIDGE”

Several television series convey the idea of a globalized world where conflict is erratic and elusive, often unfolding in a digital environment or mediated through perception and action devices. As Félix Guattari has explained, “the contemporary human being is deterritorialized. Original existential territories — the body, domestic space, clan, cult — are no longer anchored to a fixed land, but to a world of precarious and constantly shifting representations” (2013: 29). However, this does not erase the stubbornly real dimension of local conflict or the ontology of borders as sites of local conflict; in general, David Morley notes “a return to forms of nationalist protectionism in many fields” and argues that “protectionist boundaries are clearly on the increase and are likely to continue to be hardened” (2021: 35). Sferrazza Papa argues, “political life remains strongly rooted in the soil, in the land” (2019: 121).

The two television series analysed in this paper can be situated within this context, as examples of the procedural crime genre that incorporate a strong political dimension. Both series aim at representing encounters and clashes with the other who inhabits the far side of the border. They both attempt to “create a space for comparing different horizons of waiting, which refers not only to diverging expectations about the future, but also to differing modes of experience” (Cecchi 2024: 31).

4.1 “The Gringo Hunters”: The Border Seen from Mexico

The Gringo Hunters is a Netflix series produced by Imagine Entertainment and Redrum in co-production with Woo Films, with Brian Grazer and Ron Howard serving as executive producers. Inspired by a true story and a Washington Post article, the show follows a Mexican special unit tasked with finding American fugitives along the United States–Mexico border. The series consists of one season of twelve 50-minute episodes. In line with the serialized format, the special unit in *The Gringo Hunters* deals with cases that are resolved by the end of each single episode, while the episode arcs coexist with a strong extended story arc throughout the season. The short arcs revolve around tracking down American fugitives — criminals accused of murder, drug trafficking, sexual abuse, and money laundering — while the long arc follows an internal investigation into the special unit commander’s murder. This murder turns out to be instrumental in a plan to redevelop the city of Tijuana by an ambitious and unscrupulous Mexican businessman, who partners with equally unprincipled American individuals.

As Christopher Meir points out, “the border between Mexico and the United States has long been the subject of a great deal of scrutiny and conservative American political rhetoric, but [...] privileged American mobility into Mexico is not controversial, nor is it often treated as political in nature” (2022: 75). The aim of the series is precisely to address both border crossings, from the north and south, in political terms, presenting the Mexican point of view. From a geopolitical perspective, the narrative of *The Gringo Hunters* is antithetical to that promoted by the Trump administration in addressing the illegal crossing of the United States–Mexico border, since “U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement has dedicated itself to pursuing, arresting, and deporting the undocumented Latino community, many of them innocent, without due process” (Rodríguez 2025). Mexicans who move to the United States seek better work and life opportunities, whereas Americans who illegally enter Mexico try to escape justice and prosecution: although the border crossed is the same, the direction of movement carries a radically different significance.

Narratively, the conflict described in each episode is based on a fugitive’s failed attempt to occupy what they perceive as an extraterritorial space, since they see Mexico as a refuge to escape the laws they have violated on American soil. The action of the special unit always concludes with the crimi-

nal being handed over to the US Marshals along the border. Therefore, the end of each episode reiterates that Mexico is not a neutral, amorphous space where one can hide to remain unpunished, but rather an “ordered space” (Resta 2025: 26), a territory with norms and rules to respect. By contrast, the narrative arc of the season reveals a more complex dimension of spatial conflict: it does not merely revolve around official heroes that hunt down fugitives, but it focuses on a more insidious invasion that circumvents legal norms. This invasion is largely driven by real estate investments, which enable the appropriation of someone else’s space. It is orchestrated by the Tijuana-based businessman, who uses political influence, corruption, and propaganda to manage such investments, framing them as opportunities for the lower classes to climb the social ladder.

This demonstrates that territory has not lost its significance, and human beings are not deterritorialized; rather, they move to increase their influence and control over neighbouring space, even though it is limited by a border. At the narrative level, two central issues drive the plot: whether the fugitive will ultimately be returned to the United States and whether American entrepreneurs will succeed in taking control of Tijuana. Therefore, the whole causal chain of events is governed by the spatial dimension, which, in the visual context, reveals itself as an attitude exhibiting the characteristics of topocracy.

The teaser before the title sequence in “Another Bad Hombre” (1.01) immediately introduces the gaze of topocracy, oriented towards dominion and control of the territory. Such control is exercised both by the characters — particularly the special unit commander — as highlighted in subjective shots, and by the camera, as evidenced in zenithal objective shots, including the aerial view of the bay that closes the sequence of the fugitive’s arrest and displays the series title in white lettering. After the arrest, two operatives escort the *bad hombre* to the border, according to standard procedure. The scene of the criminal’s handover concludes with a spectacular movement of the camera, which moves upwards, away from the characters, serving both descriptive and symbolic functions: it shows one side of the border with cars in a queue and the surrounding landscape, while emphasizing that the true issue at stake is control over the territory. Making reference to Montani’s reflection, this shot may be seen as existing in the space *between the factual and the meaningful*. Later in the episode, the special unit commander takes a witness to a safehouse located at a vantage point overlooking Tijuana: the strong relationship between

elevated position and territorial control is highlighted also in this case. The pilot episode is rich in high-angle shots serving a syntactic function at the beginning or end of a sequence: recurring throughout the season, this type of shot becomes a visual motif with a broader meaning. This visual motif appears in different variations, as seen in the opening of the sequence at the end of the pilot episode, when the special unit commander attends a secret night meeting on a hill overlooking Tijuana. However, in this instance, someone observes the scene from an even higher position, asserting control over the territory, with the meeting turning out to be a lethal trap.

“Escape to Baja” (1.02) opens with the most experienced member of the special unit already at the crime scene, confronting the aftermath of his commander’s death. At the end of the opening sequence, the camera moves upwards as previously described, leaving the confused detective behind, with neither guidance nor power: in this case, the high-angle shot indicates a setback, a break in the chain of command. This large exterior shot is followed by an interior zenithal shot of the agent washing his bloodied hands in a bathroom. The spatial attitude of control — or of its loss — remains crucial, from the social environment to individual situations.

In this sense, the seasonal arc centred on the Nueva Tijuana real estate operation is summarised in the spatial attitude we have highlighted so far, which reaches its symbolic climax in “The Mexican Dream” (1.07), when the local businessman presents the major project to an audience of stakeholders. While the man thanks the project partners and citizens for supporting him, images of the Tijuana of the future flash across a large screen behind him, showing skyscrapers, heliports and factories. All the shots in this video are taken from a bird’s eye view, and the presence of the businessman in front of the screen signifies that this bold and commanding view of the future is his own. This greedy gaze, focused on possession of the territory and its resources, is opposed, episode after episode, by another gaze, that of the *Gringo Hunters*, who are instead interested in justice and equality for citizens before the law. Later, in “428” (1.12), when the seasonal arc ends with the resolution of the case and the failure of the *Nueva Tijuana* project, two high-angle shots are used: one portraying the place of the final shooting and the other showing the “old” Tijuana by night. The balance of power has been redesigned, and the territory has — temporarily — returned under the control of justice.

4.2. “The Bridge”: The Border under the Control of the United States

Broadcast on the FX network, *The Bridge* consists of 26 episodes. It is the US adaptation of the longer Danish–Swedish series *Bron/Broen* (2011–2018), which has also inspired other international versions, including *The Tunnel* (2013–2018), set along the United Kingdom–France border, and *Pagan Peak* (2019–2023), set in the Austria–Germany border area.

The original format concept of *The Bridge* revolves around an investigation that takes place on both sides of a border, beginning with a peculiar murder case: when a body is found on the border, it turns out that it has been assembled from the halves of two different women, deliberately joined by the perpetrator to make the case fall under the jurisdiction of both countries involved. Responsibility for the murder is claimed by a killer who seeks to create chaos through heinous crimes, in order to draw media attention to social injustice. In this sense, *The Bridge*, as a format, aims at using the crime genre to address political issues. As Robert A. Saunders (2017: 7) points out:

While *The Bridge*, in its various incarnations, may be viewed as a straightforward noir crime-drama, it operates on a variety of other registers as well. Foremost among these is as a popular-cultural materialisation of wide-spread angst associated with the crossing of borders in the neoliberal realm where trade and transit demand that countries lower or eliminate barriers to movement.

The main idea behind the format is a comparison between two bordering countries that share economic and social features. For this reason, a US version of *The Bridge* was initially planned to be set on the United States–Canada border. However, production ultimately chose the volatile Texas–Chihuahua border, with a body being found on the Bridge of the Americas, which connects Ciudad Juárez and El Paso. Unlike the other adaptations, the US version highlights and exacerbates tensions between the two bordering countries, drawing inspiration from current events to address social and political issues.

The narrative structure of *The Bridge* is markedly serialized, with long story arcs that unfold across entire seasons. Unlike *The Gringo Hunters*, it develops no self-contained plots that are resolved within individual episodes. In the first season, the triggering event — the discovery of the assembled

body on the Bridge of the Americas — leads to an investigation on both sides of the border and gradually exposes a network of crimes: the unsolved murders of young Mexican women forced into prostitution, the poisoning of Mexican immigrants attempting to cross into the United States, and human smuggling through an underground tunnel connecting a ranch in Texas to Mexico. All of these strands are ultimately linked to a serial killer who, nicknamed the Bridge Butcher, spreads panic both through murder and the manipulative use of traditional media, turning journalists and police officers into pawns in his game. In an audio message, he speaks of constructing a tragic and unsolvable “dialectic” between irreconcilable poles: the United States and Mexico, the rich and the poor, the survival of the fittest and the breaking of that very principle. In the second season, *The Bridge* moves away from the source material “abandoning the plot device that drove Broen/Bron’s procedural narrative” (Wayne 2016: 9): now the long arc follows the fight against a powerful drug cartel that exposes rampant corruption among high-level authorities on both sides of the border. Despite winning prestigious awards, the series was cancelled after two seasons, due to a steady drop in viewership.

From a narrative perspective, the series establishes a topocratic regime, since all the conflicts depicted are grounded in a territorial dimension. The setting polarizes the parties involved, both on an individual level, as it is exemplified by the two detectives’ opposite personalities, and on a social level, highlighting gender and class differences. In visual terms, a topocratic attitude is conveyed through elevated, privileged, and dominant points of view. The title sequence ends with a high-angle shot of the Bridge of the Americas, with the series title displayed in white lettering, as in *The Gringo Hunters*. As Re (2016: 171) observes, the “opening title sequence continues to provide its traditional, paratextual function by connecting audiences to media content and introducing a storyworld”. In this case, it not only introduces the storyworld — conflict along the border — but also anticipates the spatial attitude of the series itself, that of topocracy. This spatial attitude becomes, through the recurring shot in the title sequence, an iconic and thematic element capable of summarising the concept of the series; as Chuck Bowen (2013) notes in a review of the first season:

Throughout *The Bridge* there’s a recurring image of the titular structure connecting the American city of El Paso with the Mexican city of Juarez. It’s a bird’s-eye master shot, taken at night, and we see

dozens of white and red lights glowing in the darkness as cars bustle across the border in both directions. It’s an image that succinctly and poetically encapsulates the show’s themes.

Although fewer high-angle shots are featured than in *The Gringo Hunters*, the use of this camera position is still significant, both when it is detached from the characters’ gaze — as in the three aerial shots opening “Maria of the Desert” (1.04) — and when it is connected with their gaze — as in “Rio” (1.03). In “Rio”, the detectives observe the crime scene of the poisoned Mexican immigrants’ bodies from an elevated vantage point. By examining the traces on the ground, the US detective realizes that she is standing exactly in the killer’s spot — the place he had chosen to watch the immigrants drink the contaminated water. In this scene, the topocratic attitude is embodied by different agents driven by opposite objectives: the killer seeks to see without being seen, while the detective adopts the killer’s spatial attitude to understand and catch him. In the same episode, another key character is introduced — a drug lord who hopes to help solve the Bridge Butcher case, since heightened police security on the Bridge of the Americas may compromise his trafficking. The man’s gaze, enhanced by large binoculars, embraces the entire town of Juárez, as he monitors his own territory — an area ruled through illegal norms and shaped by economic interests. His gaze dominates a border that should function not as a barrier, but as an opening to be continually crossed.

All the parties involved, with their complementary or conflicting objectives, exacerbate the gap between the two sides of the border. The distinctive feature of *The Bridge* lies in such a divide, since “the two ‘worlds’ depicted in *The Bridge* are radically — even shockingly — different, whereas in *Bron/Broen* and *The Tunnel*, there are enough international peculiarities to entertain the viewer, but not so much divergence as to stimulate trauma as the (visually constructed) border is crossed” (Saunders 2017: 14). The spatial attitude of topocracy remains the main connecting element between the two worlds and, just like *The Gringo Hunters*, *The Bridge* also ends with a high-angle shot. In the finale of the second season (which represents the conclusion of the series since FX has decided not to renew it), the two protagonists, the American detective and the Mexican detective, meet to find a solution to a difficult situation. In a long shot, the camera first rises slowly above the characters, then more and more quickly vertically until it includes in the same frame, as in a satellite view, the two sides of the border, the two unredeemably different worlds.

5. A CLEVER POSITION OF THE CAMERA. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study investigated a distinctive spatial attitude in television series focusing on social and political issues, an attitude we have defined as topocracy, which manifests itself through specific camera angles. In the two cases analysed, narrative and visual dimensions contribute to a spatial attitude oriented towards conflict, control, and dominion. In *The Gringo Hunters*, the power exercised by the United States is counterbalanced by the official power of the special unit, which combats illegal entries into Mexican territory. In *The Bridge*, the official power on the two sides of the border is undermined by an obscure and ruthless counterpower that resorts to any means to expose the contradictions of an unjust social system, clearly symbolized by the border. In both series, the reflection on social and political issues is mediated through spatial imagination, since “narratives offer a reflective experience of reality, allowing for the free play of imagination while leaving one to ponder” (Cecchi 2024: 43).

Both *The Gringo Hunters* and *The Bridge* are set in the era of digital surveillance, facilitated by mobile computing devices and technologies that permit “the act of looking or observing from a privileged power position” (Mann and Ferenbok 2013: 18). Interestingly, although such surveillance images appear in both series and are integrated into the construction of a topocratic spatial attitude, the most powerful visual device for highlighting the exercise of power and control by the camera or a character remains a simple high-angle shot. To convey an oppressive sense of command, a hegemonic project on reality, a Machiavellian plan to retain power, or a revolutionary strategy to challenge existing hierarchies, nothing is more effective than a clever position of the camera, as Arnheim points out.

Television series have taken on the task of depicting conflict fictionally. To fully understand how the territorial issue and the persistence of such a historically divisive element are addressed, the increasingly complex worldbuilding, the plot structure, and its elaborate spatial distribution should be carefully analysed, with particular attention to the positioning of the gaze within the fictional world.

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TV Shows

- 24 (2001-2010)
- Borgen (2010-2022)
- Bosch (2014-2021)
- The Bridge (2013-2014)
- Bron/Broen (2011-2018)
- Euphoria (2019-)
- For All Mankind (2019-)
- Friends (1994-2004)
- The Gringo Hunters (2025-)
- Homeland (2011-2020)
- Pagan Peak (2019-2023)
- Show Me a Hero (2015)
- The Sopranos (1999-2007)
- The Tunnel (2013-2018)
- The Wire (2002-2008)

