EDITORIAL

SERIALITY, FICTION, AND THE POLITICAL NARRATION OF THE PRESENT

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Unlike other narrative devices, television series allow viewers to inhabit political conflict as duration — as slow, recurring processes that are often frustrating and ruthlessly contradictory. If narrative grants the viewer access to social and institutional situations that would be difficult to encounter in their own life, thereby broadening their understanding of human psychology and social relations (Oatley, 2011), serial fiction extends this simulative function to the tracking of more complex and delicate processes. The multi-plot structure, in particular, generates what we might call an informational convergence: scenes in which several narrative lines advance simultaneously, compelling the viewer to activate complex inferential processes in order to integrate the information into a meaning that exceeds what is explicitly shown. Similarly, devices for managing information — dramatic irony, surprise, the plot twist — regulate the viewer's knowledge in ways that shape their judgment of characters and situations of significant moral complexity. These narrative tools are mechanisms for training political judgment, because they demand of the viewer exactly the same operations — weighing contradictory perspectives, inferring hidden motivations, assessing the reliability of what is declared against what is enacted — that the understanding of power requires in contemporary democracies. In television series, power appears as a web of practices, affects, discourses, and institutions that narration makes visible precisely through everyday life. Politics infiltrates minor gestures, institutional routines, grey zones between legality and illegitimacy. In this way, series have become spaces where contemporary societies rehearse their modes of understanding — and of self-deception — with regard to power.

This special issue of *Series. International Journal of TV Serial Narratives*, entitled "Seriality, Fiction, and the Political Narration of the Present," explores this relationship between serial fiction and politics from different angles. It does so, moreover, in tribute to the work of José Luis Villacañas Berlanga, whose philosophical thought and public engagement constitute one of the most sustained and productive examples of political analysis through fiction in the contemporary Spanish intellectual landscape. The relationship between the articles in this issue and Villacañas's work is neither one of dependence nor of application: it is a matter of structural affinities. The four essays that make up the monograph address the relationship between fiction and power with a depth and theoretical sensibility that finds clear resonances in Villacañas's intellectual trajectory, and one of them — Antonio Rivera's — engages explicitly with his work.

From his work in intellectual history to his most recent essays, José Luis Villacañas has thought political power as a complex historical reality, as a profound expression of the narrative forms that legitimise or challenge it. In *Historia del poder político en España* [A History of Political Power in Spain] (Villacañas 2014), power appears as a process of institutionalisation that is never fully achieved, riddled with tensions between centre and periphery, legality and legitimacy, obedience and consent. What power bequeaths to the present, Villacañas writes, is above all a perceptual inheritance: "it shapes the eyes through which power wishes to be seen" (Villacañas 2014, prologue). And yet, "if anything characterises Hispanic political history, it is that plurality always in search of new equilibria" (Villacañas 2014, prologue): a plurality that resists totalising narratives and that demands, precisely, other ways of seeing. One of the constant axes of this reflection is the fragility of institutions, which prove to be precarious historical constructions, dependent on habits, memories, expectations, and affects that are ceaselessly negotiated. When these mediations erode, power does not disappear: it becomes opaque, and often presents itself as inevitable destiny. This diagnosis is relevant for understanding why contemporary politics re-emerges time and again as narrative drama: because institutions can no longer absorb conflict without making it visible.

This historical sensibility is radicalised in his analysis of populism. In *Populismo* [Populism] (Villacañas 2015), Villacañas identifies a narrative structure of power. Populism, he argues, is "the political theory that has always known that reason is a scarce and improbable good" (Villacañas 2015: 9): it operates with affects rather than concepts and constructs a totalising narrative that promises to restore a lost unity — "to reconstruct the nation around a new populist core" (Villacañas 2015: 50) — through direct identification between leader and people, blurring institutional complexity and displacing political responsibility onto an omnipresent enemy. The result is the production of a self-sufficient and emotionally closed symbolic world, a kind of collective *Gestalt* in which "everyone sees in that image what they desire" (Villacañas 2015: 49), and which substitutes historical experience with the coherence of narrative.

This symbolic construction is crucial for the dialogue with fiction, and it allows us to identify a deep convergence between two apparently distant intellectual traditions. From the standpoint of political philosophy, Villacañas shows that power constitutively tends to withdraw from experience: it produces symbolic worlds that replace reality with their own

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narrative, shaping the citizen's eyes until the very operation of shaping becomes invisible. Power, in this sense, does not lie: it generates a second perceptual nature in which domination appears as order, exclusion as normality, and violence as landscape. From cognitive science, the theory of fiction as social simulation (Oatley 2011, Mar et al. 2006) shows that fictional narrative operates in the opposite direction: it does not add another layer of unreality to the world, but generates the conditions for social reality to emerge in its complexity, making accessible dimensions — motivations, consequences, the perspectives of others — that direct experience does not offer with such density or such freedom. The convergence is not coincidental. In both cases, fiction appears as a device for the *production of reality*: against the constitutive opacity of the political, which tends to close the world within a self-sufficient narrative, fiction reopens experience, restoring density, ambiguity, and conflict to what the discourse of power has simplified. What Villacañas practises when he reads a novel or a television series as an instrument of political analysis — dismantling the narrative of power through another narrative that restores the complexity of the real — is structurally analogous to what cognitive psychology describes when it shows that fiction improves the reader's social understanding: in both cases, narrating is not escaping reality but making it appear.

This use of fiction becomes explicit in *Freud lee el Quijote* [Freud Reads Don Quixote] (Villacañas 2017), a key work for understanding the singularity of José Luis Villacañas's relationship with narrative. There, the Cervantine novel appears as an epistemological laboratory in which the relations between imagination, truth, and modernity are put to the test. Don Quixote embodies the conflict between a promise of meaning and the resistance of reality: the heroic fantasy that responds to the trauma of the father's impotence — of the empire, of the Church — through a paranoid pursuit of omnipotence that the reality principle defeats time and again. What is decisive, however, is not the defeat but the device Cervantes invents to narrate it: humour, understood as a form of knowledge that allows the ideal and the reality principle to be held together without either cancelling the other. As Villacañas writes: "there must be no contradiction between truth, ideal, and humour. This is why it must always present reality and its deformation, seen from the hero's fantasy" (Villacañas 2017, ch. 9). Cervantes thus emerges as "a hero of moral rationalisation in times of suffering" (Villacañas 2017, ch. 8), whose health consisted in writing a work that simultaneously avoids paranoia, melancholy, and nihilism. The lesson is profound: fiction is not a detour from knowledge, but an irreducible mode of access to the complexity of experience when direct access has been blocked. Cervantine humour, as Villacañas reads it, is an eminent case of fiction's function as a device for the production of reality: it neither consoles nor evades, but allows the truth of the ideal and the truth of defeat to be sustained together, without either cancelling the other. What Cervantes achieves through the doubling of narrator and character — maintaining exaltation and lucidity simultaneously — is precisely what cognitive science describes as the central mechanism of narrative simulation: the capacity to inhabit another's perspective without losing one's own, thereby expanding the reader's repertoire of social understanding (Mar et al. 2006). This idea also runs through *La revolución pasiva de Franco* [Franco's Passive Revolution] (Villacañas 2022), where the analysis of Francoism shows how a regime can stabilise itself not only through explicit violence but through a narration that naturalises obedience, neutralises the experience of loss, and transforms passivity into historical destiny. Villacañas describes a society split between "a life without squeamishness, given over to a no-holds-barred struggle for survival" and "an official life that was sadistic, sinister, sometimes paternalistic, always haughty, which accepted as something naturalised the violence of an insensitive apparatus, often latent but always feared" (Villacañas 2022, ch. 17). Villacañas himself turns to cinema — to Berlanga's *El verdugo* [The Executioner], "the best description of the logic of the Regime" (Villacañas 2022, ch. 17) — to show how audiovisual fiction can make visible what the official narrative of power has rendered invisible: the structural violence that subjects have internalised to the point of being unable to name it. Here, a narrative conception of power comes clearly into view: political history is not merely a succession of events but a lived plot, organised by narratives that structure perception, affect, and expectation. Political truth therefore demands a close reading of those plots, their silences, and their subjective effects. It is worth noting, in this context, that Villacañas has not only read fiction as an instrument of political knowledge but has practised it: his novels — *Cosecha helada* [Frozen Harvest] (1995), *Regreso del invierno* [Return of Winter] (2003), and *La mano del que cuenta* [The Hand of the Storyteller] (2011) — testify to a sustained conviction that fictional narrative constitutes a mode of access to historical experience that the essay, on its own, does not exhaust.

This conception of fiction as an alternative instrument for understanding the world extends with particular clarity into Villacañas's journalistic activity, especially his articles

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published in *Levante-EMV*. These texts represent, in this writer's view, one of the richest, most honest, and most original analyses of the Spanish democratic scene in a context of information saturation and impoverished political debate. A central feature of these articles is the insistence on the reading of signs. Villacañas returns again and again to the idea that the destruction of freedom does not begin with great ruptures but with minor details, progressive normalisations, apparently trivial gestures. In September 2022 and again in October 2025, commenting on Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* — and its television adaptation — he uses the novel as a narrative theory of authoritarian escalation: a story that shows how political evil establishes itself in everyday life before becoming visible as catastrophe. The same gesture appears in his reading of *The Residence* (May 2025), a detective comedy set in the White House that Villacañas turns into an anatomy of Trumpism. The series allows him to distinguish between the everyday banality of individuals — pettiness, clumsiness, opportunism — and hatred as a structuring political passion, aimed at the destruction of institutions from within. The figure of the usher Winter, who patiently records the misdeeds of power, thus becomes a symbol of something central to Villacañas: the necessity of memory, archive, and writing as minimal conditions of institutional resistance. Also in January 2025, commenting on *Conclave*, Villacañas uses cinematic fiction to think through classic problems of political theory: the relationship between chance and providence, the productivity of doubt against fanaticism, and the need to save the institution as the only firm reality in a world of fragile and morally ambiguous subjects. The film serves him to defend a political ethics of responsible scepticism, deeply consistent with his critique of redemptive certainties. In September 2022, writing about *Alcarràs*, Villacañas dwells on the rhythm, silence, and materiality of peasant suffering to vindicate a conception of cinema as a cruel art, capable of imposing an experience of reality irreducible to simulacrum. In that text, he explicitly engages with Antonio Rivera's book *La crueldad de las imágenes* [The Cruelty of Images], emphasising that the filmic image is not an innocuous representation but a form of presence that compels us to look at what we would rather ignore. This conception of the image as perceptual resistance is key to understanding the politics of contemporary seriality: if fiction is social simulation, as Oatley (2011) argues, audiovisual fiction adds a perceptual and *embodied* dimension that intensifies that simulation to the point of making it an inescapable sensory experience.

THE ARTICLES IN THIS ISSUE

Read from the conceptual horizon traced by the work of José Luis Villacañas, the four articles that make up this special issue can be understood as convergent analytical exercises that work — from seriality — on the same structural problems that run through his thought: space as a form of power, the border as a political device, raison d'état as the production of closed symbolic worlds, and the dystopian imagination as a test of institutional self-limitation.

In Bandiralli's article, devoted to serial topopolitics, it is proposed that territory functions as an active political device, as a form of exercising power over space. In his analysis of *The Gringo Hunters* and *The Bridge*, Bandiralli shows how sovereignty is exercised less through explicit decisions than through the narrative organisation of space: surveilled zones, transit corridors, ambiguous enclaves where legality is suspended without entirely disappearing. The concept of *topocracy* thus emerges as a category that describes a form of spatial governance rather than an ideology. This emphasis connects directly with Villacañas's reading of power as a historically situated reality. In *Historia del poder político en España*, Villacañas (2014) insists that power never acts in the abstract: it becomes territorialised, embeds itself in concrete spaces, and produces centres and margins. Bandiralli's analysis offers a serial translation of this intuition: series do not "represent" power but make it visible as a spatial distribution of possibilities and prohibitions — something Villacañas has repeatedly described when analysing the relationship between sovereignty, political centre, and periphery.

The article by Laura Ysabella Hernández García deepens this spatial dimension, but shifts the focus toward the Mediterranean border as a narrative space for the normalisation of suffering. Her analysis shows how these series construct the Mediterranean as a *borderscape*: a space saturated with surveillance, humanitarian rhetoric, and structural violence. In the cases she studies — from *Lampedusa* to *Unwanted* — the border appears as a site where politics is exercised precisely through the suspension of experience: the dead become statistics, life trajectories become flows, and responsibility becomes technical management. This approach resonates powerfully with a central concern of Villacañas's, present both in his philosophical work and in his journalistic writing: the idea that the destruction of the political community begins when the suffering of others becomes narratively bearable. In several articles in *Levante-EMV*, Villacañas insists that the danger lies not only in violence but in its discursive normalisation. Hernández's

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work shows how seriality can operate in the opposite direction: reintroducing affect, temporality, and the body where institutional discourse has produced moral anaesthesia.

Antonio Rivera García's contribution on *Esterno notte* [Exterior Night] constitutes perhaps the most direct point of contact with the Villacañian theoretical core. The series deploys a multiplicity of viewpoints, aesthetic registers, and tonal modulations that prevent any narrative closure of the event. Raison d'état thus appears not as objective necessity but as a narrative construction that protects itself, producing a parallel reality in which sacrifice becomes inevitable. This operation coincides with Villacañas's critique of symbolic constructions that foreclose political judgment — a central concern both in *Populismo*, where he shows that "populism cannot take the step toward institutional reconstruction without disappearing" (Villacañas 2015: 64), because it needs to keep the crisis open in order to perpetuate itself, and in *La revolución pasiva de Franco*, where he shows how Francoism built a symbolic framework — religious, imperial, paternalistic — capable of turning obedience into destiny and violence into everyday landscape (Villacañas 2022, chs. 6 and 17). For Villacañas, the greatest political danger is not the isolated lie but the construction of coherent symbolic worlds that replace historical experience with a self-sufficient narrative. Rivera shows how *Esterno notte* breaks precisely that self-sufficiency: by fragmenting the narrative, introducing the grotesque, and destabilising viewer identification, the series restores to the event its tragic and unresolved flavour. This connection is reinforced if we recall that Villacañas has explicitly engaged with Rivera's theoretical work on cinema, particularly *La crueldad de las imágenes*. In his journalistic articles, Villacañas emphasises that the filmic image is not a neutral simulacrum but a form of presence that compels one to look at what power seeks to metabolise narratively. The reading of *Esterno notte* proposed by Rivera is situated exactly in that register: seriality does not console, does not explain, does not redeem; it exposes.

Finally, Donstrup's article on feminist political dystopias — with *The Power* as the central case — addresses a problem that also persistently runs through Villacañas's work: that of the self-limitation of power. Donstrup reads the series as an exploration of the paradoxes that arise when power is redistributed without stable institutional mediations. The series shows how the emergence of a new sovereign capacity, even when it presents itself as emancipatory, tends to reproduce logics of domination, violence, and exceptionality. This argument engages clearly with Villacañas's warning against fantasies of political redemption. In *Populismo*, Villacañas (2015) shows that the populist logic is structurally incompatible with institutional differentiation, because "institutions parcel out demands, fragment interests, allow for policy verification, and demand concrete accountability. All of this fractures the people" (Villacañas 2015: 64). What this implies — and what Villacañas's civic republicanism opposes to populism — is that the real political problem is not who exercises power, but how it is limited. Donstrup's analysis confirms this intuition from the side of fiction: dystopia functions as a narrative experiment that tests the limits of any politics that confuses empowerment with legitimacy. Seriality here allows the conflict to remain open, without resolving it into a reassuring moral.

Taken together, the four articles illustrate concepts akin to Villacañas's work. Each one, from its own object and method, shows that contemporary politics cannot be understood without attending to the narratives that organise space, affect, legitimacy, and experience. In that shared gesture — analysing power where it is narrated — lies the true coherence of this issue and the intention of this well-deserved tribute.

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