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"I'M NOT ALWAYS THE MOST RELIABLE NARRATOR": ON CHARACTER VOICE-OVER AS A RHETORICAL RESOURCE IN HBO'S *EUPHORIA*

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ABSTRACT
Voice-over narration features in various ways in contemporary TV series. One recent series that employs voice-over extensively is HBO's *Euphoria*. In the series, the protagonist, Rue, narrates repeatedly in each episode of the first season and critics have labelled her voice-over with terms such as "unreliable" or "omniscient". The aim of this article is to analyze the uses of character voice-over in *Euphoria* and to argue that such analysis requires examining the theoretical terminology often applied to film and TV voice-overs. The article argues that character voice-over should not be defined based on a structuralist narratological conception of the narrator. Rather, voice-over should be approached within a framework of narrative rhetoric and viewed as a medium-specific rhetorical resource. The proposed view, as opposed to one classifying different types of voice-over narrators, is better able to explain how voice-over works in serial storytelling and how this resource is employed in *Euphoria* to create different effects and affect the audience in various ways.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The use of voice-over narration in contemporary TV series is widespread and ranges across genres. Voice-over is employed in various ways to serve a variety of functions in such disparate series as *Dexter* (2006–2013), *Enlightened* (2011–2013), *Mr Robot* (2015–2019), and *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017–), to mention just a few examples. However, voice-over in serial narratives, as in cinematic storytelling, is usually connected to a fictional character, in most cases a protagonist. A recent series using character voice-over extensively and in complex ways is HBO's *Euphoria*, which premiered 2019 and was created by Sam Levinson. The aim of the following article is to analyze the uses of voice-over in this series, and to argue that such an analysis requires examining the theoretical terminology related to voice-over narration. More specifically, the article will argue in favor of viewing character voice-over as a medium-specific rhetorical resource, and it will illustrate the benefits of the proposed approach through the example of *Euphoria*.

In this series, the main character Rue, a teenager struggling with addiction, narrates and comments on events and other characters through voice-over in each episode.[1] What distinguishes *Euphoria* from other shows also featuring voice-over is the extent to which Rue's so-called "narration" is employed in each episode. The pilot begins *ab ovo*, in the womb where Rue once was happy, according to her. What follows are images of her birth, three days after the World Trade Center was attacked in 2001, accompanied by the voice of teenager Rue, telling her story from the womb to the present day.

Already in the first ten minutes, then, the viewer is introduced to how voice-over is employed across long spans of time, as well as the particular quality of Rue's voice. In the episodes following the pilot, a noticeable feature is how the voice-over is used to introduce other characters, relating their private lives, family histories, and even their fantasies. A question raised by critics and viewers is about what kind of voice-

1 This article focuses on the first season of *Euphoria*. Two special episodes, airing after the conclusion of the first season, will not be taken into account since they lack the use of voice-over and clearly depart from the serial design established in the eight episodes of the first season, a result in part of the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on the series' production. Season 2 premiered on January 9, 2022, after this article was finished, and therefore the episodes in the second season will not be used as examples in my analysis.

FIG. 1. PILOT 1.01

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over narrator can relate things that other characters have not shared with others, or express feelings the characters themselves may be unaware of.[2] In the mentioned example, a character presumably narrates her own birth and relates how her parents held her "under the soft glow of the television" while they watched "those towers fall over and over again" ("Pilot" 1.01). One solution might be to label Rue an omniscient narrator. However, in the same episode, when the central character Jules is introduced, Rue's comments are limited to what Jules herself has shared about her background. In addition, towards the end of the pilot, during a party where all the main characters in *Euphoria* merge for the first time, Rue's voice-over explains in a self-reflexive manner that "there's a couple of versions of what happened that night" and that she is "not always the most reliable narrator" ("Pilot" 1.01).

In the reception of *Euphoria*, critics have therefore mainly referred to Rue's "narration" as "unreliable".[3] However, to label Rue an unreliable character narrator is misleading if we assume this unreliability to continuously inform her voice-over. This conclusion does not explain her ability to relate certain details about the lives of different characters while, at other times, being restricted to her own subjective and often drug-addled point-of-view. In certain scenes or sequences, Rue might relate statements or express ideas that have been filtered through her fallible perception, while at other times her reliable commentaries on the series' events are vital for our understanding of its progression as well as the relations among characters. Furthermore, since the argument in favor of unreliable narration is often connected to the character's acknowledgment of her own unreliability, there is a certain irony to it: Why trust an unreliable narrator acknowledging her own unreliability?

In order to approach the use of character voice-over in *Euphoria*, we should not view the character Rue as a certain *type* of narrator. This view limits our understanding of how voice-over works by defining it as the act of someone telling a story. Instead, we should approach character voice-over as a protean rhetorical resource, in order to explain the varying functions it serves in this particular series. To elaborate on this rhetorical approach, we need to discuss more generally the problems with theorizing voice-over as narration, and the limitations of viewing voice-over as corresponding to a narratological typology of narrators, as is often the case when voice-over is approached in theory.

2. THEORIZING VOICE-OVER IN FILM AND TV SERIES

2.1. Voice-over as "Narration" or as Rhetorical Resource?

The notion of voice-*over* is usually distinguished from voice-*off*, a term referring to a voice belonging to a character that is simply off-camera. According to Sarah Kozloff, one can distinguish between *off* and *over* based on "the space from which the voice is presumed to originate" (1986: 3). The voice-off speaks from within the story, while the voice-over "comes from another time and space, the time and space of discourse" (3). Yet, there are examples when a voice in a film is both off and over, as discussed by Seymour Chatman (1999: 320), and as such the distinction between voices belonging to either story or discourse in film narration is not always viable. For the most part, though, audiences of film and TV have no problem understanding when to perceive a voice as being spoken over the images that are presented on-screen. This is an easily recognizable convention of cinematic storytelling and when we refer to it, we often talk about it as voice-over narration. However, if voice-over is understood a means for films to tell stories, a resource of film narration, there are reason not to view voice-over as narration in itself. In this section, I aim to elaborate on the theoretical consequences of equating voice-over with narration, understood according to a model of oral storytelling, in which someone, a teller, is recounting events and circumstances.

Kozloff's seminal monograph *Invisible Storytellers: Voice-Over Narration in American Fiction Film* has been a point of reference for most subsequent discussions of voice-over. In an attempt to define the term "voice-over narration," Kozloff conceives of "narration" as the act of someone communicating a narrative, which she understands as "recounting a series of events to an audience" (3). Her basis for this definition is the notion of "natural narrative," as presented by William Labov (1973). She also chooses to classify different types of narrators, based on Gérard Genette's typology, with the intent to apply what she calls "literary" narrative theory to film and "to

2 The use of voice-over in *Euphoria* initially inspired a "fan-theory" among certain viewers, claiming that the character Rue is in fact dead and therefore omniscient. See, for instance, Lawrence 2019 or Sharf 2019.

3 For example, in his review in *The Dartmouth*, Jordan McDonald states that "Rue is the ultimate unreliable narrator" and goes on to explain that "Rue, as narrator, takes liberties in her storytelling and invites us to trip alongside her" (2019). In *Rolling Stone*, Alan Sepinwall also refers to Rue as "the heroine and admittedly unreliable narrator of HBO's new teen drama *Euphoria*," yet notes that even "when Rue warns us not to believe her, she seems sincere and welcoming" (2019).

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test the universality of several key tenant of contemporary critical lore" (2). The difficulty with her definition of narration in connection with voice-over, according to Kozloff herself, is the fact that the disembodied voice of a first- or a third-person teller in a film never tells the story from start to finish. Instead, we usually hear only a few sentences or fragments. To establish these sentences as narration, she suggests linguistic analysis, and claims that regardless of how much the narrator speaks, and regardless of whether he or she actually recounts the action of the story, the structure of these sentences implies the narrative as a whole. Voice-over narration is therefore separated from "other types of speech by invisible speakers" (5). The aim for Kozloff, then, is to define voice-over as narration based on linguistic criteria and with a particular conception of narration stemming from oral storytelling.

In a related way, Christian Metz (2016) elaborates on the concept of the "I-voice," coined by Michel Chion (1999). The I-voice is said to designate the voice-over of the character who is narrating. It is, as such, the narrating voice of a character identified using the first person singular. At the same time, the status of the I-voice is stated to be "surprisingly imprecise" (Metz 2016: 109). Metz complicates the issue of character voice-over in a way that Kozloff does not, since her initial claim is that "we need a precise definition of voice-over narration" and because her approach is determined by Genette's supposedly "precise and useful method of classifying narrators," as she formulates it (Kozloff 1986: 6).[4] Metz argues that the I-voice can be applied to "a surprising variety of situations" (2016: 109) and that on closer examination several types are revealed. However, in his attempt to pinpoint the I-voice as a narrating voice, his arguments are closely related to Kozloff's view of the voice-over as the teller of the film. Metz explains that the I-voice is the voice of a character, but as long as it speaks and remains invisible, it "blocks its absent body from accessing the Voice of the film" (109). In other words, "it substitutes itself for that Voice and mixes itself up with something that it is not—that is, the point of origin of the narration" (109).

The question of "narration" in connection with voice-over is, as noted, inseparable from the larger issue of film narration. Kozloff approaches the relation between what she calls "the unseen speaker" and the "images presented on screen," and concludes that the voice-over narrator is both subordinate to a more powerful narrating agent and recognized as "the principal storyteller" (49). A voice-over narrator is subsumed by the narrating agent characteristic of film narration—what Kozloff refers to as the "image-maker", a term borrowed from Metz (1974: 21) —but she argues that viewers accept the voice-over as "the teller of the film" (48). For both Kozloff and Metz, then, the voice-over belonging to a character should be separated from the film narrator—the Voice of the film or the image-maker—yet when it speaks, the voice-over is paradoxically recognized as the narrator, the origin of narration.

Approaching character voice-over as narration, it becomes clear that both Kozloff and Metz have to explain when the voice-over is *not* narrating, in order to define the speaking subject as a narrator. They also have to explain the relationship between the voice-over narrator, speaking over the images, and the implicit film narrator. Their argument adheres, in other words, to what David Bordwell identifies as diegetic theories of film narration, insisting on locating the narrator as the enunciator, i.e., "the film's 'speaker'" (1985: 62). Bordwell rejects the idea of a cinematic narrator and the anthropomorphizing of film narration into a narrating agent. On the issue of voice-over, he follows Edward Branigan (1984) in arguing that personified voice-over narrators are "invariably swallowed up in the overall narrational process of the film, which they do *not* produce" (61). One might emphasize that neither Kozloff nor Metz claim that the character voice-over produces a film's narration. They rather argue that the audience perceives the voice-over as the teller of the film, or that this voice becomes mixed up with the origin of the narration. It is nevertheless clear that their view of film narration, in general, informs their understanding of voice-over as a form of narration in itself. By rejecting diegetic theories, Bordwell can instead approach voice-over narrators as a part the overall narrational process of the film. While I agree with his rejection of the cinematic narrator, the focus here lies on questioning the insistence upon assigning character voice-over the role of narrator. The rhetorical approach to character voice-over that I propose permits challenging the assumption that we must a priori define voice-over as narration, and that its use should conform to pre-existing types of narrators.

The notion of rhetorical resources, as presented by James Phelan within his rhetorical poetics of narrative, can be understood as the resources available within a particular narrative practice or medium to communicate with an audience (2017: 25-29). In Phelan's discussion of literary narrative fiction, resources encompass everything from paratexts to narrative arrangements, style, point-of-view, etc. The "narrator" is al-

4 It should be noted that Metz also makes use of Genette's taxonomy, as presented in *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (1980), by applying, for example, his concepts of diegetic levels (Metz 2016: 113). See also Chatman's discussion of voice-over and his employment of Genette's concepts (1999: 321, 327–329).

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so viewed as a resource within this approach, in opposition to classical narratology's view of the narrator as a structural principle inherent in all narrations. The narrator thus become an optional and varying resource of individual fictional narratives. In connection with voice-over, a shift towards narrative rhetoric enable recognizing that the voice speaking over the images can serve the function of a narrator without being one per se. Character voice-over, the focus here, can have narratorial functions without being limited by the definition of a homodiegetic narrator, derived from structuralist narratology. In addition, narrator-functions as such must be explicated in relation to how the voice-over is used in a certain work and within the context of a particular medium.

Although Phelan's focus is literary narrative fiction, he underscores that different media have different resources. As such, the notion of rhetorical resources provides a way to theoretically approach and re-conceptualize voice-over. By shifting the focus to voice-over as a rhetorical resource, our attention will be directed towards how voice-over is employed to create different effects and to affect the audience in various ways within a particular work. As Gilberto Perez notes, "rhetoric looks at the way construction elicits response and the way the work works on the audience" (2019: xix), which is also my intention here. To approach voice-over as a rhetorical resource is a point of departure, then, to understand the various ways in which Rue's voice-over is employed in *Euphoria*. To define her voice-over as narration per se is misleading, and to categorize her as a homodiegetic narrator would create problems rather than clarifying the complex uses of voice-over in the series. Furthermore, to emphasize, as I have done, that voice-over should be approached as a medium-specific resource acknowledges that the use of voice-over in the context of a series must consider the issue of seriality, or more specifically, how voice-over works in connection with, and serves, serial storytelling in television.

2.2. Voice-Over and Seriality

Although studies of voice-over have focused mainly on fiction film, the use of voice-over in TV series has also drawn some attention. There have been discussions of how voice-over typically functions as a narrative device in series as well as books and articles focusing on particular shows that feature voice-over. Since Kozloff was the starting point for the discussion in the previous section, it seems fitting to start this brief survey of the relation between voice-over and seriality with her attempt to extend the narratological typology of voice-over narrators to television as well. According to Kozloff, narrative theory can "provide crucial help in analyzing television narrators" (1987: 81) and she goes on to mention examples of series employing narrators that she regards as conforming to traditional narratological categories. One might say, then, that Kozloff's main purpose here is to apply an existing typology of narrators to the medium of television, not to examine how serial storytelling transforms the uses of voice-over and how it works in a particular series. Put differently, her approach is top-down, while the rhetorical approach to voice-over is bottom-up, viewing it as resource put to use within a particular medium.

However, Kozloff is not the only one with a narratological interest in voice-over in TV series. "The analysis of recent TV series is of particular narratological interest, since during the 1990s TV series increasingly began to employ experimental narrative techniques like multiperspectivity and unreliable narration as well as innovative functionalizations of voice-over narration and of audiovisual presentation of consciousness," writes Allrath et al. (2005: 4). According to the authors, "voice-over narrators seem to constitute the most obvious equivalent of the narrators one encounters in literary texts," but they also note that "there is a crucial distinction between narrators in written narratives and voice-over narrators in that the latter typically cannot be conceptualized as the *source* of the information conveyed by the visual track, which, after all, constitutes much of the story" (14). What they refer to as voice-over narrators are then said to be "a partial equivalent of literary narrators" and these narrators can, according to Allrath et al., be categorized with Genette's existing typology. In this regard, as the authors themselves note, they approach voice-over in the same way as Kozloff.

Allrath et al. also focus on certain features of voice-over connected in particular to serial storytelling, apart from just discussing the uses of voice-over common to both film *and* TV. The authors note that voice-over narration in series may play a prominent role, "thus becoming one of the main structural features of a series," yet they do not explicate what this entails. They mention the use of voice-over in series such as *Sex and the City* (1998–2004) and *The Wonder Years* (1988–1993), where it is both recurring and noticeable, but they do not explain how or why the voice-over becomes what they call one of the main *structural* features or how it works across episodes. The only aspect of voice-over that Allrath et al. focus on is how voice-over is used to provide summaries. Since serial storytelling depends on the gaps between episodes, there is a need to remind viewers about previous episodes, as is in the

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traditional recap sequence. Voice-over can thus offer a "technique of providing viewers with a short summary of previous story developments to facilitate their understanding of the current episode" (15). Jason Mittell also makes this connection between voice-over and "the mechanics of serial memory" (2015: 180). He explains that series can use diegetic strategies of dialogue and visuals cues as the primary means of making viewers recall events of previous episodes, but they can also use voice-over "to convey story information via a more self-conscious mode of narration" (183). Although voice-over is used to activate viewer's memories and to facilitate comprehension across episodes, as noted by Allrath et al. and by Mittell, viewing voice-over mostly as a means of providing story information risks reducing its complexities by making it into an expository device.

Voice-over should not, I argue, be forced to conform to a narratological typology of narrators. Nor should it be reduced to a narrative technique that simply provides viewers with information. Voice-over, as I will demonstrate in the following analysis of *Euphoria*, should rather be approached as a complex and varying resource of serial storytelling. To elaborate on this view, the resource of the voice-over can be connected to what Sean O'Sullivan refers to as serial "design," namely "the particularity of a series, its specific systems of habits, preferences, and protocol" (2019: 60). Attention to design, as O'Sullivan explains, depends on "our familiarity with the particular shape and infrastructure that a serial has chosen for its basic narrative unit, or segment" (59). In my analysis, the notion of design will provide a means to explicate the relation between voice-over and seriality in *Euphoria*, yet I will also show how recurring patterns in the series can *work* in different ways from episode to episode. Design is thus a useful term to identify the particular shape of individual episodes in a series, while also forcing us to recognize the varying uses of compositional patterns.

3. CHARACTER VOICE-OVER AS A RHETORICAL RESOURCE IN *EUPHORIA*

3.1. Characterization, Iteration, and the Materiality of Voice

Voice-over in *Euphoria* serves many functions. It provides commentary and character background, navigates among scenes and storylines, and reminds viewers of events in previous episodes. If "narration" is taken to be the communication of narrative, then the uses of voice-over in the series can scarcely be understood as corresponding to this definition. As I have noted and will continue to illustrate here, if Rue is understood as the someone who is telling the story, this raises questions related to how she might know certain things. Calling Rue the teller of the series creates problems in connection with, for example, how voice-over is used in relation to other characters. The voice-over is consistently used as a means of characterization, to create the protagonist through her own voice. Yet, not only Rue is shaped by the voice-over. Other characters in the series are also introduced through Rue's voice.

In a review in *The Independent*, Annabel Nugent criticizes the show for its "solipsism" and states that despite its "cold opens (each episode focuses on one character), the series is *filtered entirely through Rue's blinkered narration*" (my emphasis, 2021). Nugent argues that the show's "tunnel vision leads to wonderful complexity in our protagonist," yet it also "gives rise to the undeniable feeling that *Euphoria's* other characters [...] are being shortchanged" (2021). Her critique expresses a wish that the series should have focused more evenly on the many different characters, while at the same time recognizing the fact that Rue is the protagonist. Nugent's comment regarding the use of voice-over in the beginning of each episode also shows how she understand the voice-over as narration and as presenting Rue's recounting about other characters. She is referring here to a recurring feature in the series design, namely that at the beginning of each episode of the first season, the season finale excepted, one of the series' characters is portrayed. This recurring feature of *Euphoria* might be described as character portraits, which provide background as well as direct, detailed characterization of each character. These portraits are dominated by Rue's voice-over, yet we should not, as I will argue here, refer to these portraits as one character's narration about another. These portraits are indeed presented in Rue's voice, yet the voice-over is most often removed from the character of Rue herself, from her feelings towards and knowledge about the other characters. Instead of a particular narratorial slant—what Nugent refer to as filtered narration—the voice-over is dominated by detailed commentary about the character's family and inner life. The voice-over is also at times filtered through the character's own perspective. By approaching character voice-over as a rhetorical resource, I aim to argue for a different way of understanding the use of voice-over in connection with the portraits of other characters. My analysis will underscore the links between seriality and characterization, and demon-

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FIG. 2. (2.01)

FIG. 3. (2.01)

strate that the "solipsism" of *Euphoria* should be understood in thematic terms, rather than as a question of who is telling the story.

The first example of a character portrait, involving a character other than Rue, occurs in Episode 2, when Nate is introduced. The voice-over is very detailed, telling us about his body fat at a particular age and how he hates locker rooms full of naked guys, providing a mental list of his likes and dislikes about women, and so on. We are also told how he loves to protects his girlfriend Maddy and we see his fantasies about killing a hypothetical kidnapper. Nate's perspective is also reflected when the voice-over provides us with information that turns out to be false: "He also liked that Maddy was a virgin" ("Stuntin' Like My Daddy" 2.01), we are told, but in Episode 5, when Maddy is portrayed, we get confirmation that she is not. Moreover, there are instances of free indirect discourse, when Nate's thoughts are expressed in Rue's voice: "Plus, Maddy could be a real bitch" ("Stuntin' Like My Daddy" 2.01).

The employment of voice-over in Nate's portrait is repeated in the character portraits presented in the following episodes. These character portraits can be said to create what O'Sullivan refers to as iteration, in that the portraits provide continuity between episodes and a recognizable compositional pattern. The portraits also serve to navigate and remind the viewer about events in previous episodes, as in the traditional recap sequence. However, Rue's voice-over is used so extensively in these character portraits for thematic and aesthetic reasons as well.

To understand this, we cannot focus primarily on what the voice-over says, but rather analyze how it speaks. This is matter of narrative form, as I have illustrated, yet also a matter of the material qualities of the voice-over, as discussed by Ian Garwood.[5] The materiality of the voice-over should be approached in connection with the visual aspects of the series, which immediately becomes evident in *Euphoria*. Already in the first image of the first episode, Rue's voice speaks in relation to a particular isolated space: the womb. This is a recurring pattern in the series, the way the voice-over invokes a sense of safety, but also loneliness and isolation. During the party in the first episode, Rue is talking to the character Fez, and their dialogue turns into a monologue reminiscent of Rue's voice-over, because of the way she speaks and because the background sounds fade away. In the scene, the distinction between non-diegetic voice-over and diegetic sound becomes blurred, and the scene underscores how Rue's voice is often connected to a particular space, a space that is protected, isolated, or solipsistic, depending on the sequence.

In the character portraits, this quality of her voice makes the viewer perceive the characters of *Euphoria* to be isolated as well, living in their own worlds, so to speak (Figs. 3–4). The depiction of teenagers presents how the different characters are trapped in their own lives and often unable to communicate their thoughts and feelings to others.

Other characters are thus characterized through Rue's voice also for *thematic* iteration, that is, to establish and repeat certain themes throughout the series. These portraits are presented in Rue's voice but the voice itself is removed from Rue as a character, as demonstrated. Therefore, we should not understand the portraits as *narrated* by Rue, either through

5 Garwood is critical of Kozloff for connecting all types of voice-over to narrative, and for foregrounding voice-over's expository qualities at the expense of its material properties and effects. While recognizing voice-over as a type of dramatic narration, Garwood focuses on its material aspects, on how voice-over is "materialised by a vocal delivery characterised by as certain composure" as well as the "technology through which the voice is recorded and projected" (2013: 105–06).

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FIG. 4. (3.01)

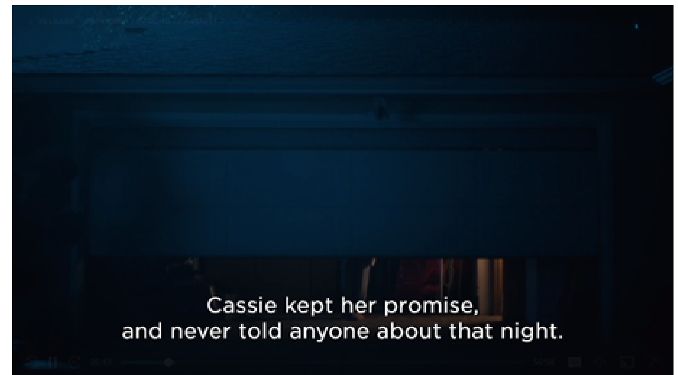

FIG. 5. (7.01)

omniscience or unreliability. The portraits provide the viewer with an intimate view into the lives of different characters, and the particular qualities of the voice of Rue provide a thematic as well as narrative coherence in the series.

However, the portrait of one character provides grounds to note the particular relations between Rue's point-of-view and the voice-over's presentation. In Episode 4, Jules's background-story is presented and we learn about her past, revolving around her sexual identity and her stay in a mental hospital. This character portrait follows the established pattern from previous episodes, summarizing the transition from childhood to teenager. But contrary to most of the other portraits, the presentation of Jules also includes a transition from sadness and trauma to possible happiness. It is in this regard, in the creation of a "happy ending" to Jules's background story, that the interference of Rue the character is perceivable. The story of Jules ends with her meeting Rue, a meeting described as "the night she met her new best friend" ("Shook One Pt. II" 4.01). This might be taken as a plain fact, yet it clearly functions as a conclusion to the story of Jules's life to date. The way this is stated by Rue indicates that it constitutes wishful thinking. This is underscored by the mention of a possible future together in New York, a dream implicitly attributed to Rue via the voice-over that, later in the series, is presented explicitly as Rue's own fantasy. In the three prior episodes, we have seen how Rue quickly becomes very attached to and almost obsessed with Jules, and that she is very keen on making her happy, as well as being happy together with her. The perspective in Episode 4 does not, then, come across as Jules's own, but rather Rue's narratorial slant, an expression of her concern for and feelings towards Jules. This portrait stands out in this regard, being the only one to characterize a character with whom Rue is close.

However, the narratorial slant is not a consistent feature in the presentation of Jules. Rather, it should be seen as a local effect, a way to use voice-over to create interpretative responses in a particular scene or sequence. This is important to note, since it illustrates the possibilities of approaching voice-over as a rhetorical resource. The approach enables acknowledgement and comprehension of how this resource can work to create different effects within a recurring feature of the series design. The voice-over can neutrally report facts about the characters' lives and thoughts, while it can also be filtered through the characters perspectives, as well as being connected to Rue, both as a compositional function and as a character in the story. These varying effects, and the way they affect the viewer's perception of these different characters, cannot be properly acknowledged if we begin with the conclusion that Rue, the character, is the narrator in these portraits, telling us about the lives of others. One problem with that approach, illustrated by Nugent's review, is that the portraits become more about Rue than the characters being presented. As I argue, the solipsism of *Euphoria* should not be related to a conventional notion of voice-over narration, but rather is more accurately understood in connection with the thematic and narrative coherence provided by the voice of Rue.

3.2. Serial Progression and the Wandering Voice of Rue

As discussed in previous sections, to define voice-over as narration and to view the character speaking as type of narrator creates theoretical as well as interpretative problems. If Rue is perceived as the narrator of *Euphoria*, she will likely come to be seen as unreliable. By adopting an approach to charac-

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ter voice-over as a rhetorical resource, we are better able to understand how the effects, functions, and affects produced by the voice-over are local as well as form of iteration. The effect of unreliability, for instance, may be used in a particular scene or episode, but it does not make Rue into an "unreliable narrator" per se. Similarly, the voice of Rue can be recounting the lives of other characters while, in the next scene, being at a loss to explain what is happening to her own character.

In this section, I want to look closer at how Rue's voice wanders between different points in time and why. If a voice-over narrator is perceived as the one recounting the events or telling the story, it will imply a retrospective act of narration. In some series, we find such a voice-over, where the voice is speaking from a certain narrative situation or particular occasion consistently. There are also examples of shows where the voice-over primarily uses voice-over interior monologue, i.e., to present what a character is thinking. The combination of retrospective telling and vocalized thoughts is also common in films and series. At times, however, it is not clear from where the voice speaks, and it is not uncommon to find a voice-over serving as a kind of invisible viewer, commenting on the images presented.

Although Metz's notion of the I-voice is limited by its focus on the usage of the grammatical first person, and thus forces the voice-over to be defined as a narrating subject, he also states that the I-voice is more than just "I": "While it is the voice of a character, it is also—owing to its invisibility—multiple, jumbled, and overarching. The notional place that it emanates from is subject to displacement and obfuscation, and sometimes it seems to be everywhere" (108). Character voice-over might thus be viewed as a floating "subject" with a "wandering deixis" (111). In other words, the voice-over often speaks in ways that transcend common ways of defining characters as narrators—as illustrated in the previous sections—and the voice-over can speak from different places and at various points in time. This might not be a problem for Metz, but his theoretical vocabulary, like Kozloff's, is unable to accurately account for this characteristic of voice-over. With the proposed rhetorical approach, the focus in no longer on who is speaking, or from where, but rather on how the voice works in a particular scene and across several episodes.

In *Euphoria*, Rue's voice-over does not emanate from any consistent occasion. It wanders among different positions. In the pilot, for example, Rue is initially speaking from a ret-

FIG. 6. (1.01)

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rospective position, looking back on events. First, in regards to her own life and upbringing and then, in regards to the events and characters that will dominate the first season. "It was the end of summer, the week before school started. I had no intention of staying clean. And Jules had just moved to town," Rue narrates, recounting the start of the events that will transpire ("Pilot" 1.01). Although the viewer does not yet know how the different characters will interact, Rue alludes to events that have not yet happened, creating curiosity: "In truth, I didn't have much of an issue with Nate until all the bullshit with Jules" ("Pilot" 1.01). This kind of retrospect telling, often used to provide exposition, is combined in the pilot with direct commentary on the scenes being shown. Rue's voice-over has the function, in these cases, of orienting the viewer as the episode moves among different locations and characters.

As Rue guides the viewer between scenes, the viewer is invited to share her perspective. When she refers to a particular scene as "bullshit," her voice, in combination with the visual composition, creates a critical distance that makes the viewer perceive the characters from her point of view (Fig. 5). In these instances of commentary, the voice-over is not a part of any kind of retrospective telling. Rather, Rue comments directly on the images being presented to the viewer, sometimes just in passing. "I mean, right?" she states, to underscore the absurdity of a certain scene, without further explanation ("Pilot" 1.01).

In most episodes, Rue's voice-over is also used to express what she is thinking in certain situations. A scene might begin with retrospective narration and then move into interior monologue. In Episode 2, for example, a drug dealer forces Rue to take Fentanyl at gunpoint, and she first comments on the scene in retrospect: "Now, I'm not gonna lie. That's when I started to get a little scared" ("Stuntin' Like My Daddy" 2.01). Later on, just before she takes the drug, we can her praying: "Dear God, I know I've been a cunt for, like, a lot of my life, and I was mean to Lexi and my family and I'm so, so, so sorry, but just please God, I'm begging you, do not let be die tonight" ("Stuntin' Like My Daddy" 2.01). In this example, the voice-over relates what Rue is thinking in this situation. In other scenes, Rue's voice can also be speaking in the present tense and be connected to her experience in a particular situation, yet the function might be different. In Episode 6, Rue is together with Jules at a party and Jules becomes very drunk, acting in ways that concern Rue. The voice-over relates to us that "this doesn't feel good," yet the main function of Rue's commentary is to move on to the explanation for Jules' behavior. The scene ends with Rue stating: "I just wish she'd told me about last night" ("The Next Episode" 6.01).

If this is taken to be Rue's thoughts at the time of action, it inevitably becomes improbable. How can Rue, in this situation, wish that she knew about last night, when she has no knowledge about what has happened to Jules? Although the statement might take the form of interior monologue, based on tense and deixis, its function is not to present what Rue is thinking but rather to motivate the following flashback, which only involves Jules. The function of the voice-over at the end of this scene is thus connected more to narrative progression than the interior of our protagonist. In Episode 7, one can find a similar example when the voice-over is used to vocalize Rue's paralyzing depression. In these scenes, mainly involving Rue lying in bed, we hear her thoughts and the scenes are limited to her isolated, interior point of view. Yet, when it becomes necessary to move away from Rue, the voice-over can shift from interior monologue to retrospective commentary from beyond her point of view: "But I wasn't the only one feeling down," we are told, a remark used to transition from Rue to Jules, and Jules' problems, of which Rue herself, at the time, knows nothing about ("The Trials and Tribulations of Trying to Pee While Depressed" 7.01).

These examples, together with several others, can be viewed as further motivation for why we should approach character voice-over rhetorically, instead of as corresponding to traditional notions of first-person (character) narration. The way the voice-over works in *Euphoria* is not limited, as we have seen, by any particular narrative form—retrospective telling, interior monologue, commentary, etc.—but rather uses different forms to serve a variety of functions, depending on the sequence and the series' over-all patterns. Metz is correct when he states that the voice of a character in a voice-over is multiple and overarching, and that the notional place from which it emanates is subject to displacement and obfuscation—and that sometimes it seems to be everywhere! By approaching character voice-over as a rhetorical resource, rather than through the limiting notion of the I-voice, or ideas about the character narrator, we are better able to explain this multiplicity and how this resource might be employed. This analysis of *Euphoria* thus aims to provide a variety of examples that illustrate how the effects, functions, and affects produced by the voice-over within and across episodes are local as well as forming a recurring pattern in the series.

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4. CONCLUSION

The aim of this article has been to analyze the uses of voice-over in HBO's *Euphoria* and to argue that doing so requires examining the terminology typically used to conceptualize voice-over narration. *Euphoria* has, in other words, been presented as a test case for a broader discussion on voice-over and its connection to narration as well as seriality. Therefore, the theoretical suggestions in the article are intended to be generally valid in regard to voice-over as a resource in film and, especially, TV series. Furthermore, the analysis has underscored the necessity of paying attention to how this resource is employed in a particular series. As Perez notes, a rhetorical approach deals in specifics and its "generalizations particularize" (2019: xxi), which has also been the ambition of my discussion of *Euphoria*.

The article has to a great extent retained the established terms used in discussion of this phenomenon in film and TV series. It has not been my intention to provide a new theoretical vocabulary or present neologisms, but rather to theoretically rethink the issue of voice-over in relation to a specific example. The notion of character voice-over has been promoted, since the term is intended to avoid connecting voice-over a priori to the role of a narrator. A character voice-over is, as should be clear by now, quite simply the voice of a character speaking over the visual track. The follow-up question to this explanation might then be: Who counts as a character voice-over? Is the unidentified letter-writer in Joseph L. Mankiewicz's classic film *A Letter to Three Wives*, or the unseen blogger in *Gossip Girl*, an example of character voice-over? Or do only characters presented on-screen, as part the story, qualify as character voice-overs? To me, such questions stem from an assumption that we need to categorize different speakers or tellers, and that we accordingly can sort examples into established categories. The notion of a character voice-over as a rhetorical resource is instead a generalizing term that is dependent on particular examples. The term may be imprecise, according to Kozloff's point of departure, but it is useful, as I have demonstrated. By aiming to determine what kind of narrator Rue is, and accordingly what she can tell us, we fail to understand the complex workings of voice-over in *Euphoria* as well as how this resource creates different effects and affects the audience in various ways. The interpretative responses generated by the voice-over can only be determined by looking at and listening to particular scenes and sequences, as well as recognizing the ways in which the voice of Rue becomes an integral part of the series' design.

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UNCOVERING THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE OF *BREAKING BAD* THROUGH A MULTIDIMENSIONAL QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

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KEYWORDS

TV series; Quantitative analysis; *Breaking Bad*; Narrative structure.

ABSTRACT

The quantitative analysis of TV series has so far focused on the interactions among characters, typically employing a network model. However, such analyses can exploit additional information extracted as manual annotation from the series. That additional information can help us obtain a more complete view of the series narrative structure, accounting for the sequence of scenes and shots. In this paper, we propose an analysis of the TV series *Breaking Bad* that relies on the measurement of locations and scenes as well as the speech and video presence of individual characters. We also exploit those data to measure the degree of concentration achieved by locations and individual characters. We observe a consistent pattern for most variables, which highlights the stylistic characteristics of the series.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The quantitative analysis of texts is now an established branch of research and has been applied to literary and non-literary texts as well. Most efforts have been devoted to representing the interactions among the characters through a social network and examining the sentiments that characters express. Examples of the former class range from the analysis of Shakespeare's Hamlet and the impact of possible modifications to the characters' network by Moretti (2011) to the description of the co-occurrences of characters appearing in Marvel Comics performed by Alberich et al. (2002) or in *A Storm of Swords* (the third book in the *Game of Thrones* series) by Beveridge and Shan (2016) to the detection of communities embedded in Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* by Newman and Girvan (2004). The latter class includes instead scholarly works directed at extracting the sentiments of characters from their words, as accomplished, for example, by Nalisnick and Baird (2013) for Shakespeare's plays. Some authors have also analysed characters' sentiment to predict movements in the plot (Gao et al., 2016).

Similar analyses for TV series are instead fewer and relatively more recent. Again, some examples can be considered for either the network approach or the sentiment-based analysis. Social network analysis has been applied to three TV series (*Mr Love*, *Westworld*, and the *Dream of Red Mansions*) (Zhang et al., 2018). Tan et al. (2014) have used the co-occurrence of characters in scenes to build the network describing characters' interaction in Stargate and Star Trek. The network built by Bazzan (2020) for four series (*Seinfeld*, *Friends*, *How I Met Your Mother*, and *The Big Bang Theory*) considers a richer set of interactions, considering both when two characters talk and when they touch or have eye contact. Bost et al. (2016) have proposed a new social network analysis method (narrative smoothing) to analyse series where parallel subplots are present. A survey of research efforts to extract networks of characters encompassing all works of fiction (e.g., novels, plays, movies, and TV series) has been provided by Labatut and Bost (2019). Basner (2021) has further proposed sentiment analysis based on a set of expert (human) scorers to analyse friendship ties among the characters in *Friends*.

However, the analysis of a TV series may go beyond the interaction between characters and consider the overall structure of the plot instead. A television story is filmed and watched in scenes and sequences, a fact that is ignored when we simply perform time integration by collapsing all the characters' appearances. In this paper, we propose a first step towards a structural analysis of TV series that considers the basic elements through which narration develops. In particular, we aim to uncover the narrative style expressed through plot structure by measuring several structural endogenous dimensions, including the video and audio presence of characters and information related to the locations and their re-use during an episode. The ultimate aim is to arrive at the stylistic signature of a TV series by examining its structural dimensions. Here we conduct the first example of such analysis on the series *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013), hereafter referred to as BB for short.

In order to pursue that stylistic investigation, we formulate the following research questions, focused on characters and locations:

- RQ1 Do some characters predominate over others?
- RQ2 Does the presence of characters evolve over time?
- RQ3 Does the series revolve around a few locations?
- RQ4 Do we observe frequent changes in locations?

The first research question helps us go beyond the obvious answer that Walter White takes the scene. We wish to examine the role of secondary characters and how much their presence lies behind that of the main character.

Through RQ2, we wish to see if the possible evolution of some characters over time, i.e., their growth and/or decline, betrays strategic choices by the series' authors. In the case of BB, we know of the spin-off associated with Saul, which was probably preceded by his presence getting bigger.

By the third research question, we wish to investigate how the series is placed between sitcoms and action movies. We expect to see a very small number of locations used over and over again (in the limit, a single location) if the series is more similar to a sitcom. On the contrary, if we observed many locations, the narrative style would be quite more dynamic.

The issue of locations is further analysed through RQ4, whereby we wish to see if the narration employs frequent changes of locations. That could also happen with a limited number of locations, e.g., two locations with a continuous swap back and forth between them.

After introducing the series in detail in Section 2, we describe the information we extract for each episode in Section 3 and report the results in Section 4. The final section is devoted to discussing the results.

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2. THE BREAKING BAD SERIES

2.1. *Breaking Bad* and Complex tv

On January 20, 2008, the first episode of a television series destined to become a global success was broadcast on AMC's cable channel: it was *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013). Conceived by Vince Gilligan, former screenwriter of *The X-Files* (1993-2002), the series would last five seasons, for a total of 62 episodes. Despite a non-exciting start in the ratings, it got more and more acclaim little by little, becoming a cult phenomenon. It received 139 awards across the most important TV series festivals (such as the Emmys or the Golden Globes); above all, it produced an infinite series of *speeches* with the public, according to the new practices of contemporary fandom (see Tralli, 2018:187-212 and Mittell, 2017: 430-477). The scholars who have approached the analysis of this television series have highlighted some of its aspects: its ethical aspects and especially those concerning the anti-hero protagonist (Grasso and Penati, 2016: 163-170; Martin, 2018: 357-397; Bandirali and Terrone, 2019: 11-21; Bernardelli, 2016: 1-19); its linguistic and narrative ones (Checcaglini, 2018 ebook: 1636-2104); and those concerning the contexts, politics (Pierson, 2013: 15-103). There has been no lack of studies on the protagonist's new form of masculinity (Faucette, 2013: 73-86) and the poetics of space (Martin, 2015: 151-158). Of course, *Breaking Bad* should be analyzed by placing it in the context of complex TV (Mittell, 2017), of which it is one of the most striking examples, also due to the importance of its transmedia strategy (Dusi and Grignaffini, 2020: 163-165).

Complex TV developed in what has been called the second Golden Age of American television (Thompson, 1997), which started in the 1980s but developed mainly in the following two decades. That is a period when we start talking about serialized series (Pescatore and Innocenti, 2012: 18-22), where the anthology plot (vertical plot) is flanked by a running plot (horizontal plot), destined to become the most important. That is the genesis of the so-called expanded narrative universes, some of which also take the forms of narrative ecosystems (De Pascalis and Pescatore, 2018: 19-30).

In these new forms of seriality, we are no longer faced with single self- contained episodes, but with interrelated and multistrand episodes (which follow more narrative arcs, generally linked to several characters, in addition to the main one), with many crossmedia or transmedia derivations (Jenkins, 2006). We begin to witness a type of writing that is much closer to literature, with each episode taking the form of a chapter within a long novel. The literary aspect of the series is visible through the intensification of narrative continuity and the contraction of seasonality (from 22 episodes per season to 8-13).

The series emphasizes the novelistic aspect and approach the novel form (Palmieri, 2018: 115-116). Vincent Canby of the New York Times has dubbed *The Sopranos* and a small number of other TV series *megamovies*: he compares them to Hollywood movies but points out that the show is so long and so involved that the term "movie" cannot do justice (Canby, 1999).

On the other hand, this temporal reduction corresponds to a textual and paratextual intensification, which expands the universe and leads to a spatialization of the series (Palmieri, 2018: 119-126).

Breaking Bad (2008-2013), a complex series par excellence, is a design model by derivation in the media panorama, where transmedia extensions are expected to originate from objects with a traditional narrative structure. Such extensions are "derivative products that were not foreseen when the series was designed but are added or generated by users creating an extended narrative" (De Pascalis and Pescatore, 2018: 27). In fact, BB comprises the following extras in addition to its 62 episodes:

- a miniseries of 5 mini-episodes entitled *Breaking Bad: Original Minisodes*, which told unreleased aspects of the series (available online and on DVD extras);
- the spin-off on one of the characters from the original series, the lawyer Saul Goodman, entitled *Better Call Saul* (2015-2020);
- the film *El camino* (2019), a sequel to the TV series and dedicated to the character of Jesse Pinkman;
- a game originating from the series, published in Italy in 2018 by Pendragon Game Studio under an exclusive license.
- a comic book (*Breaking Bad: All Bad Things*);
- many paratexts produced by fandom (among which the breakingbad.fandom.com site stands out).

They are transmedia products of the what-if type, as Mittell defines them, where different paratexts pose hypothetical eventualities rather than canonical certainties. Those paratexts invite viewers to imagine alternative stories, detach themselves from the main text, and project themselves into parallel dimensions, where the mood, the style and the tone of the series, and its characters lie in the foreground rather than the continuity with the plot and the canonical narrative world (Mittell, 2017: 512-518). Like all complex series, BB has seen 25 different directors (including lead actor Brian Cranston

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and Gilligan for five episodes, starting and closing the series with the pilot and the final episode) and at least ten screenwriters. What gives uniformity, continuity and meaning to the whole product is the stylistic presence of the showrunner, the aforementioned Gilligan. Without dwelling here on the role of the showrunner in contemporary television series, it will suffice to remember that spectators assigned him the authorial responsibility of the whole collective process, though in a complex system such as that of the production, writing, and realization of a television series. That responsibility is an honour and a burden at the same time because all the potential criticisms, such as for inconsistencies and lapses of style, lie on the shoulder of the showrunner (Mittell, 2017: 156-203).

2.2. The moral unraveling of a man: from Mr Chips to Scarface

When telling the genesis of BB, Gilligan claims he wanted to narrate the transformation of an American everyman, a nobody, a boring and dull man, into a ruthless criminal of the drug cartel: the metamorphosis of Mr Chips to Scarface (Grasso and Penati: 167). The series centers on Walter White, a middle-aged chemistry teacher in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Married, with a disabled teenage son and a daughter on the way, Walt has a boring life, is dissatisfied, full of debts (which compels him to get a second job in a car wash). His life changes dramatically when he discovers he has lung cancer and is without health insurance to help him pay for the expensive treatments. After stumbling upon an old student of his, now a drug addict, Jesse Pinkman, he decides to use his chemistry skills to make and sell methamphetamines. He will thus become the feared Heisenberg, violent, ruthless, immoral owner of the drug cartel in his city. Other characters revolve around him to better outline his character but also carve out a significant role according to the multilinear narrative mode typical of current seriality.

So, we have the narrative arc of the main character that outlines the journey of a hero, actually of an antihero who embraces his dark side. Walt is one of the *difficult men* told by the contemporary series (Martin, 2018). The narrative arcs of the other characters fold out along the main character subdued in Walt's spiral of evil and violence: hardly anyone saves itself within the immoral world of BB. We observe multiple stories unfolding simultaneously, with narrative arcs sometimes intertwining and other times diverging. Rather than being based on the narrative enigmas it proposes to the viewer (typical of a product like *Lost*), the functional aesthetic of the series, i.e., its "special narrative effect" (Mittell, 2017: 84-103), mostly develops through its ability to tell the transformation of his characters and the consequent evolution of the narrative world with depth, precision, and humanity. The complex characterization of Walt and the other characters causes the audience to get a sort of functional attachment to the story: "as spectators we are involved in the construction of the character, focused on the performance, fascinated by the attempt to read the mind of the assumed author and we cheer on Walt within the narrative" (Mittell, 2017: 275).

On the other hand, one of the main reasons for a viewer to watch a program is precisely the interaction with its characters: an emotional experience that allows us to enter the narrative world, a world that will accompany us for a long time, and which gratifies us like interactions with real people and situations. Each episode of BB is 45-47 minutes long, except for the pilot and the last two, which are over 50 minutes. Their structure is mainly horizontal. It is hard to find self-contained conflicts within a single episode. Each conflict resolution turns into a new problem to address: narrative continuity is privileged (except for episode 10 of the third season, which is a stand-alone one). Conceiving the product in seasons favors that choice as scriptwriters can think of it as a continuum since conception. Products of broadcast television are instead made from a single pilot, which, if successful, will develop over one or more seasons. Each episode opens with a teaser, followed by the theme song and four narrative acts typical of quality TV storytelling, such as *The Sopranos* (1999-2007). Those teasers are often flashforwards, subsequently linked up at the end of the episode or even at the end of the season: the narrative circularity is a crucial element of the whole series. They are narrative devices typical of the complex TV that serve to activate the attention of the viewer; they are narrative hooks (Thompson, 2012: 36) that are part of the storytelling of complexity, which requires greater participation on the part of the viewer in reading the story. These are typical techniques of the Baroque style of contemporary productions, which have fueled the viewer's awareness "of narrative mechanisms, encouraging him to get involved in the story but also to think about the formal aspects", that is, about "how" it is told (Mittell, 2017: 91).

3. MEASUREMENTS AND STRUCTURAL DIMENSIONS

As hinted in the Introduction, our aim here is to understand the narrative style of the series by examining its structural

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elements only. In this section, we describe the features that we consider representative of the structure of an episode and provide a rationale for them. We call them structural dimensions since they may be read as an overall multi-dimensional description of the structure of the series' episodes. We will derive those dimensions from a set of basic measurements of the episodes. Our approach is similar to that taken by Bost et al. (2020), who provided manual annotations for speech and speaker turns, shots, and interlocutors for several TV series, though we do not consider the same set of quantities as theirs.

For our purposes, we see the structure of an episode as a sequence of scenes, where a scene is an event that takes place entirely in one location or time1. We do not distinguish here between different shots in the same location, as long as the location stays the same (e.g., all that is filmed inside Walt's house is one scene, though the camera may zoom on a particular or get a different shot with a different angle). Since different scenes may be filmed in the same location, we also count the number of different locations used in the same episode. For example, in an episode made of the following sequence, we count three scenes but two locations:

- Scene 1: Walt's house;
- Scene 2: Jesse's house;
- Scene 3: Walt's house.

For each scene, we annotate its location, its duration (with a time resolution of one second), and the characters who are present. If several characters are present in the same scene, we attribute a visual presence as long as the duration of the entire scene to each of them. If the characters change during a scene, we keep track of those changes by attributing the actual presence to each character. In addition to the video component, we also account for the audio component by examining the dialogues. We count the number of speech lines for each character over the episode. For our purpose, we use the convention of considering a single line of speech for the character talking until another character takes the turn, no matter how many words or utterances the character pronounces. This convention exhibits some limits, of course, since long monologues are counted as a single speech line and are therefore undervalued. However, the other side of the coin is that this convention should be replaced by one stating when a new speech of line should be considered to start during a long speech by a character. Speech line detection could be accomplished based on the time elapsing between one speech line and the next one (i.e., assuming that a new speech line has begun when the time from the last word exceeds a given threshold), but it would leave us with the problem of (arbitrarily) setting the threshold. If the speaker starts speaking to a different character, we consider it as starting a new dialogue (hence, a new line of speech). Summing up, our basic measurements for each episode are:

- Number of scenes;
- Number of locations;
- Duration of each scene;
- Characters present in the scene;
- Duration of the presence of each character;
- Number of speech lines for each character.

All the measurements were taken manually, employing the time indication embedded in the video as played on Netflix. The data were then moved onto an Excel file and later saved as csv files. A list in R was created for each episode for the further processing steps with the following information (from which all the previous items can be extracted):

- Location;
- Starting time;
- Ending time;
- Characters and no. of speech lines.

As stated earlier, we employ those measurements to derive a set of structural dimensions. We consider first the video component and then the dialogues.

First, we consider the ratio of locations to scenes. We call this ratio the Location Rotation Index (RLI). Since the number of locations is not larger than the number of scenes, the RLI takes values in the (0-1] range. If that ratio is low, a small number of locations is used time and again during the episode. For example, if we have just two locations, and the camera swaps between them, building a total of 20 scenes (we have, e.g., the sequence Location A → Location B → Location A → Location B → Location A, and so on), the RLI is 2/20 = 0.1. On the other hand, if we have a single location used throughout the episode, the RLI is 1/1 = 1, since we have one scene that takes place in one location. Having defined the RLI that way, we have the advantage of it being limited to the unity interval; of course, the disadvantage is that its definition is a bit counterintuitive: low values of the Location Rotation Index show a significant rotation between locations (i.e., the same location being used over and over in alternation with the others).

Another video feature concerns the distribution of the episode's time among the locations. In this case, we wish to see if one or a few locations dominate the episode. If a single

1 see the page https://www.movieoutline.com/articles/ a- glossary- of- screenwriting- terms- and- filmmaking- definitions.html# for a list of terms

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location were used throughout the episode, we would have the maximum possible dominance, i.e., the equivalent of an economic monopoly. For that purpose, we borrow terminology and indices from the economic literature. We refer to the distribution of time among one or a few locations as a concentration phenomenon, and we employ a concentration index to measure the extent of that phenomenon. Examples of high concentration for locations are sitcoms, where one location is predominantly used. As to the specific concentration index to use, we follow the same choice made by Fronzetti Colladon and Naldi (2018) and Fronzetti Colladon and Naldi (2019) for characters in the Big Bang series and adopt the Hirschmann-Herfindahl Index (HHI). The genesis and definition of the HHI are well explained in Rhoades (1993) in its original function, i.e., to measure the degree of concentration in a market by summing the squares of the market shares. Naldi (2003) provide a comparison of its characteristics with other indices that serve a similar function. In this context, we can consider the fraction of time that a location takes within the duration of an episode as the equivalent of the market share. If the duration of the episode is D and we have n locations in that episode, with d_i being the overall presence of location i (in the same unit of measurement of the episode's duration, e.g., minutes), the HHI is defined as

$$HHI = \sum_{i=1}^{n} \left(\frac{d_i}{D}\right)^2.$$

For example, if we have 3 locations in an episode, which appear respectively for 20, 10, and 5 minutes (so that the overall duration of the episode is 35 minutes), the HHI is

$$HHI = \left(\frac{20}{35}\right)^2 + \left(\frac{10}{35}\right)^2 + \left(\frac{5}{35}\right)^2 = 0.429$$

This index takes value in the [0-1] range, with values close to zero representing a uniform distribution of presence and value close to one representing a high concentration of presence by one (or a few) location(s) instead. Actually, the minimum value of the HHI, representing the minimum degree of concentration possible, is not zero but depends on the number of locations. Precisely, if we had n locations that share the episode time equally, the minimum HHI would be min HHI = 1/n. For example, if we have just two locations sharing the episode time equally, we would have HHI = 0.5. So, we can use that floor value as a benchmark to check if there are concentration phenomena.

If we turn from locations to characters, we can similarly compute the HHI for the video presence of characters. We can exploit that index to distinguish episodes where a single leading character stands out (higher HHI) versus episodes where we observe more choral participation (lower HHI). In addition to the HHI, which provides a single value for each episode, we can dissect the presence of each character by computing its share of video time. We have to redefine the HHI to take into account that we are dealing with the presence of characters. If we indicate by L_i the set of scenes where the character i is present in the episode, by n_c the number of characters appearing in the episode, and by l_j the duration of scene j, the HHI is

$$HHI = \sum_{i=1}^{n_c} \left(\frac{\sum_{j \in L_i} l_j}{\sum_{i=1}^{n_c} \sum_{j \in L_i} l_j}\right)^2$$

While the HHI provides us with an overall indication of concentration, the character's share $HHI = \frac{\sum_{j \in L_i} l_j}{\sum_{i=1}^{n_c} \sum_{j \in L_i} l_j}$ helps us identify the contribution of each character.

In addition to the video sequence, we account for the audio component as well by examining the dialogues. As stated earlier, we count each character's number of speech lines over the episode. Again, we can compute the HHI concentration index for dialogues and the individual share of each character over the total number of speech lines. Again, we redefine the HHI in this context as follows:

$$\text{HHI} = \sum_{i=1}^{n_c} \left(\frac{s_i}{\sum_{i=1}^{n_c} s_i}\right)^2,$$

where s_i is the number of speech lines of character i in the episode.

Though some of those features could be retrieved automatically (e.g. from parsing the video or a script, as proposed, e.g., in Zhao et al. (2007)), we have opted for the manual annotation of each episode since this approach appears more reliable than automatic scene video segmentation.

The full list of structural dimensions that we have employed comprises the following (all are computed separately for each episode):

- No. of locations;
- Rotation Location Index;
- Concentration index of locations;
- Concentration index of visual presence of characters;
- Concentration index of dialogues;
- Video share of each character;
- Dialogue share of each character.

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4. **RESULTS**

In this section, we show the results obtained for the whole series. We have examined all the five seasons, whose composition is reported in Table 1. In the following subsections, we consider separately the results for locations (in Section 4.1, concentration phenomena among characters (in Section 4.2), and the presence of prominent individual characters (in Section 4.3).

4.1. Locations

As to the number of locations employed in each episode, we see in Figure 1 that the number oscillates in the (5,21) range. There is a wide variety of choices in the episodes, with no specific pattern emerging.

Season	No. of episodes
1	17
2	13
3	13
4	13
5	16

TABLE 1: COMPOSITION OF BREAKING BAD SEASONS

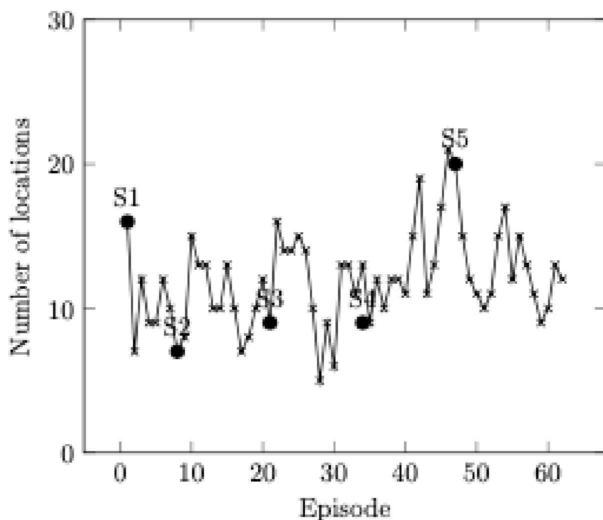

FIG.1. NUMBER OF LOCATIONS

However, not all locations are employed equally. In Figure 2, we report the HHI values for the locations, according to Equation 1. In the same picture we also draw the minimum theoretical value of HHI, i.e., that would occur if we had a perfectly balanced presence of the locations involved (e.g., three locations sharing equally the video time). We see that the episodes mostly exhibit an HHI well over the minimum dictated by the number of locations. In some episodes (namely, S1E3. S3E8, and S3E10), we even observe an exceptionally large HHI value (exceeding 0.5, which would correspond to a balanced duopoly), meaning one location is taking place nearly all the time. That location is Jesse's house in episode 3 of Season 1 ("... And the Bag's in the River"), the hospital in episode 8 of Season 3 ("I See You"), and the lab in episode 10 of Season 3 ("Fly"). By themselves, they account respectively for 78%, 74%, and 88% of the overall episode duration. On the other hand, the HHI is very close to its theoretical minimum (as we can check by observing when the two curves in Figure 2 nearly touch each other) in episodes 5 and 8 of Season 2 ("Breakage" and "Better Call Saul"), episode 9 of Season 4 ("Bug"), and episode 2 of Season 5 ("Madrigal"). In particular, in "Madrigal", Walt's house, the cafeteria where Lydia and Walt meet, and the interrogation room at DEA are the most employed locations but together grab just over one-third of the overall episode time.

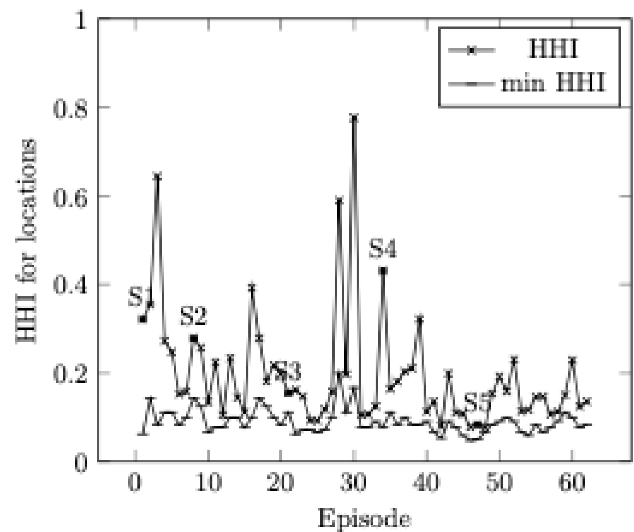

FIG. 2. HHI FOR LOCATIONS

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In order to examine the reuse of locations, we can turn to Figure 3 (which shows the number of scenes) and Figure 4, where we have plotted the Location Rotation Index. However, no specific pattern emerges. Some episodes show an RLI around 0.2 (each location is employed five times on average), but an equally large number of episodes exhibit an RLI in excess of 0.6 or even 0.8 (each location appears slightly more than once on average and quite less than twice).

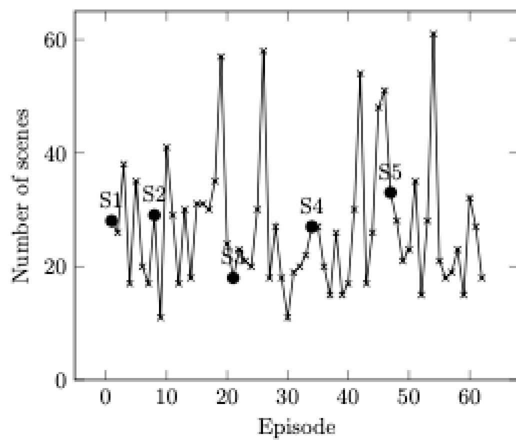

FIG. 3. NUMBER OF SCENES

Some locations are particularly relevant. In Figure 5 we have plotted the top locations by their video presence, both in terms of their overall minute count and the number of episodes where they appear. We see that Walt's house clearly stands out, and there is a roughly linear relationship between the overall minutes of presence and the number of episodes.

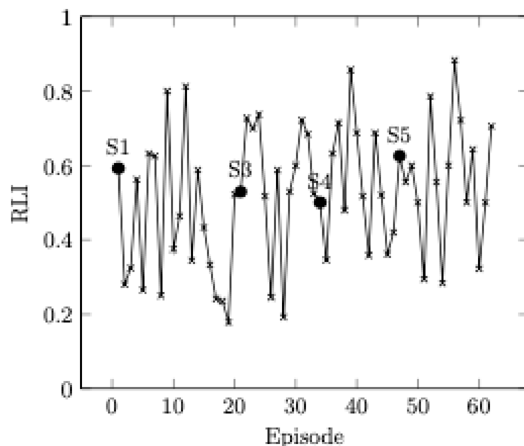

FIG. 4. LOCATION ROTATION INDEX

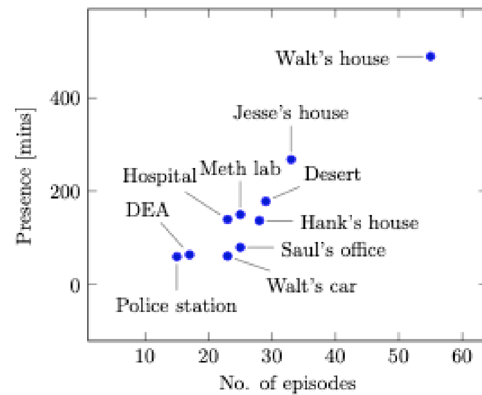

FIG. 5. TOP LOCATIONS

We can also observe the evolution of some of these locations over time. In particular, we plot the overall video presence of three important locations: Walt's house (in figure 6), the labs (in Figure 7), and the desert (in Figure 8).

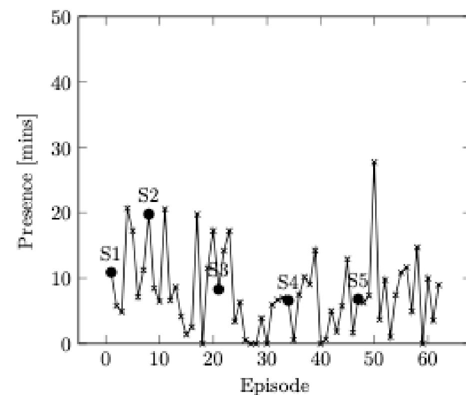

FIG.6. PRESENCE OF WALT'S HOUSE OVER TIME

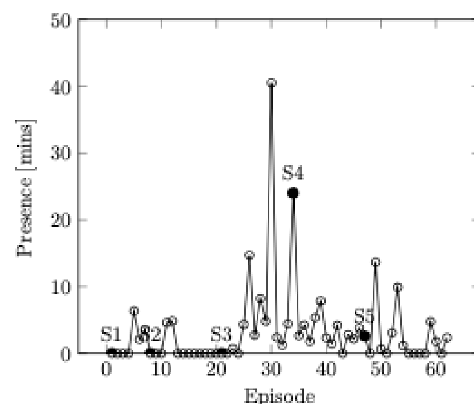

FIG. 7. PRESENCE OF LABS OVER TIME

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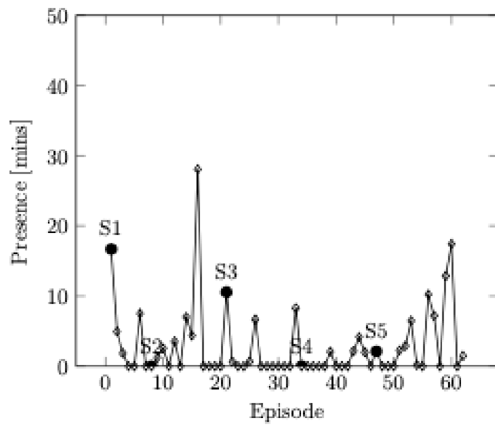

FIG. 8. PRESENCE OF DESERT OVER TIME

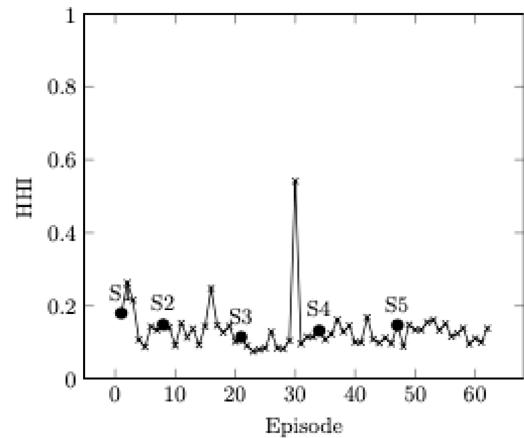

FIG. 9. HHI FOR CHARACTERS (VIDEO)

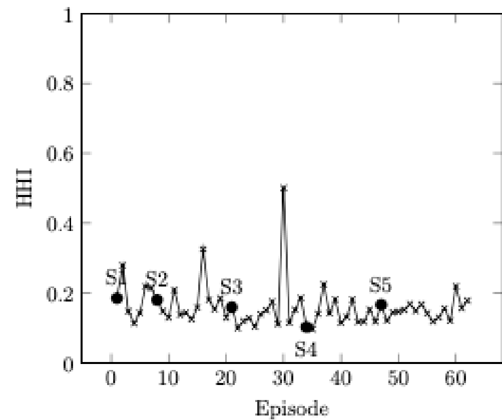

FIG.10. HHI FOR CHARACTERS (DIALOGUES)

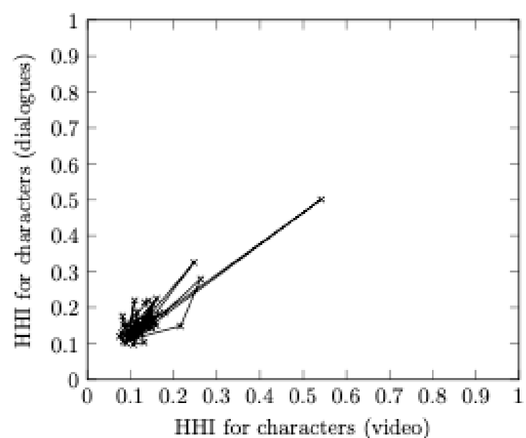

FIG. 11. HHI LOCUS FOR CHARACTERS

4.2. Concentration phenomena for characters

We can now examine the appearance of concentration phenomena in characters. We examine the concentration index for video presence and dialogues separately.

In Figure 9, we see that the concentration over time stays quite stable. For most episodes, it lies in the 0.1-0.2 range, which signals a moderate concentration (Laine, 1995). However, we notice occasional peaks beyond 0.2 and a single extremely large peak nearing 0.6, marking a very high concentration. The lowest peaks occur in episode 2 of Season 1 ("Cat's in the Bag...") and episode 9 of Season 2 ("4 Days Out"). In episode S1E2, Walt, Jesse, and Skyler take nearly the whole stage, with shares of 42.4%, 23.4%, and 18.2%, respectively, for a total of 84%. In S2E9, it is just the couple Walt-Jesse who dominate the episode; however, their relationship is much more balanced since Jesse gets 30% and is a close runner-up to Walt, who gets 38%. That duopoly completely fills episode 10 of Season 3 ("Fly"), for which we had already observed the dominance of the lab among locations in Section 4.1. The HHI achieves the all-time peak of 0.542.

Walt and Jesse share the scene again, with a joint share of 99%. However, Walt is the largely dominant character in their relationship with 65% of video share. The same pattern may be observed for dialogues in Figure 10, with peaks occurring in the same episodes as seen for the video presence.

The dwelling of the HHI in a specific region of their value space can be better observed if we plot the locus of HHI values, i.e., the trajectory made by the couple of concentration indices (HHI for video presence of characters and the HHI for dialogues) as time goes by. In Figure 11, we see that

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the near totality of episodes lies in the square marked by 0.1 and 0.2, with a thickening around the bisector, which means that the two HHI values are well correlated, with little chances of characters being present on the scene but mute. The escapes from that square are the episodes we have already mentioned, where both HHI values grow largely beyond 0.2.

4.3. Individual characters

We can now examine the individual role of the most significant characters in the series. We focused on five characters: Jesse, Skyler, Hank, Saul, and Gus. The choice of Jesse and Saul was due to them being the subject of a separate narrative paratext (the movie for Jesse and the spin-off series for Saul). The choice of the other three was due to the role they play within the narrative. Skyler is the wife of the protagonist, the adult in the family who makes important decisions and, above all, makes them in place of the protagonist (which is why we have counted neither Walt Jr. nor, of course, the newborn child). Hank, her brother-in-law, a DEA agent, represents the obstacle to the criminal life that the protagonist undertakes, the Law, which Walt breaks more and more violently. Finally, we chose Gus because he is Walt's true great antagonist (Sepinwall, 2013: 203).

In Figure 12, we report the results for Walt. His presence is continuous through the seasons, ranging from slightly below 20% to peaks that may reach 50-60%. However, we also notice a slight decaying trend over time.

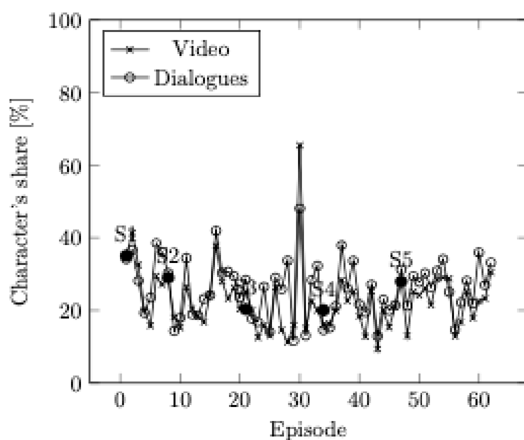

FIG. 12. WALT'S PRESENCE

The same chart for Jesse in Figure 13 reveals lower values than Walt's. Though achieving percentages often around 20%, Jesse cannot boast the same consistency. He exhibits a fluctuating start in Season 1, appearing marginally in episode 5 ("Gray Matter") and speaking little in episode 3 ("...And the bag's in the river"). His activity stabilizes in Season 2, where his presence goes slightly up and down 20%. His contribution falls significantly in Season 3, except the peak in episode 10 of that season ("Salud"), where he shares the screen fairly equally with Walt for the whole duration of the episode, achieving a 52% share. His presence in Season 4 is wildly oscillating, with peaks even over 20% but lows in episodes 3 and 11 ("Open House" and "Crawl space", respectively).

Devoid of peaks over 20% is instead the presence of Skyler (see Figure 14), which lies in the 10-15% range most of the time. She is, of course, absent from one episode ("Salud") that we have already mentioned, where Walt and Jesse entirely dominate video and dialogues.

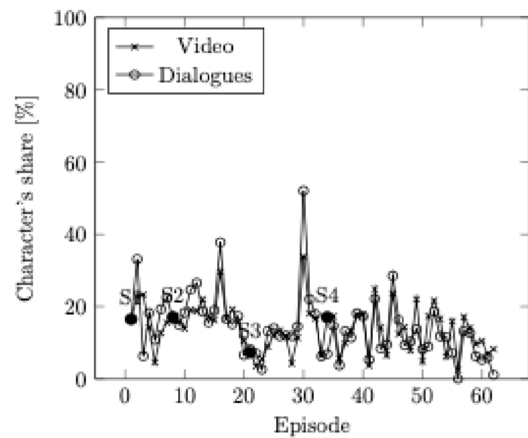

FIG. 13. JESSE'S PRESENCE

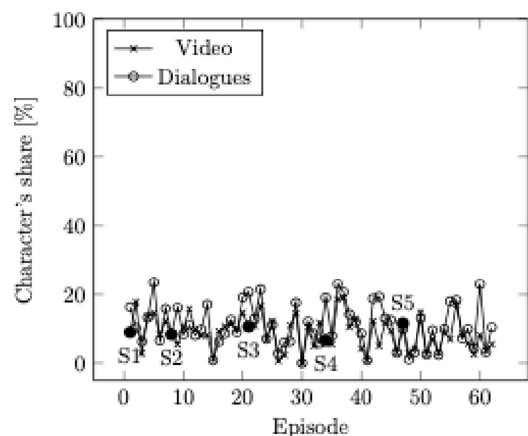

FIG. 14: SKYLER'S PRESENCE

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We can observe a similar pattern for Hank in Figure 15, with a presence around 10% in most episodes. However, his presence is not as continuous as Skyler's. He is absent from episode 2 in Season 1 ("Cat's in the Bag…"), episodes 4, 6, and 11 in Season 2 ("Down", "Peakaboo", and "Mandala"), episodes 10 and 13 in Season 3 ("Fly" and "Full Measure"), and episodes 6 and 10 in Season 4 ("Cornered" and "Salud").

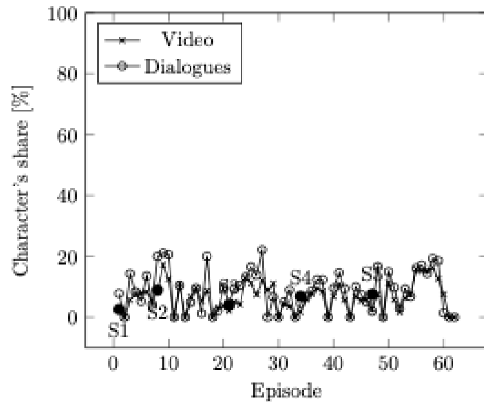

FIG. 15. HANK'S PRESENCE

The presence of Gus is instead limited to Seasons 3 and 4, as can be seen in Figure 16. It is a discreet presence, with shares well below 10% in most episodes. Also, he does not appear at all in some episodes, namely episodes 3 and 10 in Season 3 ("I.F.T." and "Fly") and episodes 2, 3, and 9 in Season 4 ("Thirty-Eight Snub", "Open House", and "Bug"). However, he occasionally plays a major role, especially in episode 8 of Season 4 ("Hermanos"), where he attains a share of 23% in the dialogues.

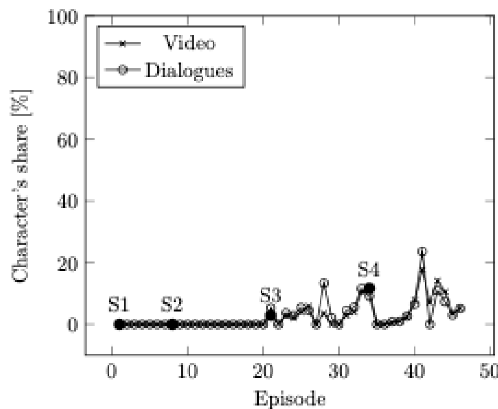

FIG. 16. GUS' PRESENCE

Finally, we consider Saul in Figure 17, who appears later in the series like Gus, but achieves a prominent presence in his very first episode (episode 8 of Season 2, aptly named "Better Call Saul"). After that initial peak, his appearances are discontinuous, with total absence in episodes 10 and 13 of Season 2 ("Over" and "ABQ"); episodes 1, 8, and 10 of Season 3 ("No M´as", "I See You", and "Fly"); episodes 2, 6, and 9 of Season 4 ("Thirty-Eight Snub", "Cornered", and "Bug"), which partially coincide with the absences of Gus. When present, Saul gets a marginal share of the order of some percentage point.

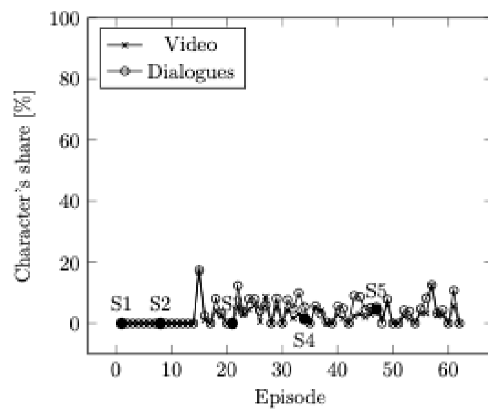

FIG. 17. SAUL'S PRESENCE

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The goal we set ourselves at the beginning of this analysis was to delineate a TV series' stylistic signature by analysing its narrative's structural dimensions. Our point of view examined the narrative ecosystem of BB in its endogenous elements, not considering the exogenous ones. Our approach is different from that suggested in other analyses on the narrative structures of TV series, which have explicitly considered the influence of production factors and the interaction with the fans on the narrative ecosystem (Pescatore and Rocchi, 2018: 229-244).

The data we have examined lead us to define BB as a highly concentrated narrative ecosystem: a polarised model that focuses on a few protagonists, where the initial narrative choices stay throughout the series. We can classify it as a stabilising selection ecosystem, where all diversity is diminished, and each element stabilises on one trait, the strongest one (Pescatore and Rocchi, 2018: 237-238). In the following, we organize our discussion around the four research questions we formulated in the Introduction.

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We start with RQ1 and RQ2, concerning the possible dominance by some characters and their evolution over time. BB's strongest element is naturally its protagonist Walt, whose dominating presence we have shown in Figure 12: the peaks of presence, persistence and constancy are his, both in terms of on-screen presence and dialogue, while the other characters merely act as outlines to delineate the trajectory of his actions. That is, they are functional to the psychological evolution of the protagonist. The presence of the other characters never reaches Walt's peaks. Jesse (see Figure 13) sometimes exhibits a high percentage, which, however, is not steady throughout the episodes. When they appear together, Walt is the largely dominant character in their relationship, with 65% of the video share.

Skyler's presence (see Figure 14) is less frequent than that of her husband and Jesse. The quantitative analysis confirms that she does not have the same specific weight as our protagonist. However, both share peaks mainly concerning the dialogue sphere. When they are on the screen, they play a fundamental role in the conversation. That specific weight shapes their role as detonators of our protagonist's reflections and actions.

The same discourse can be applied to Hank (see Figure 15) and Saul (see Figure 17): both exhibit low percentages of video presence, but the peaks concern the dialogues. They too, therefore, are subjects that detonate Walt's inner and outer actions.

Gus' case is somewhat different (see Figure 16): he exhibits low but constant percentages and does not dominate the dialogues. His understating presence reflects his character, which was delineated as a man of few words from the outset, representing a sort of a shadow of the protagonist, a presence looming over him. As it has been written, Gus is a kindred spirit of Walt, a criminal in whom Walt recognises himself, admires and fears, and would like to resemble (Sepinwall, 2013: 203). A kind of phantasmal projection, then, a silent but ever- present image in the background.

On Skyler, it must also be said that the lack of presence and the psychological characterisation considered by many to be stereotypical and macho, has aroused contrasting opinions. On the one hand, it attracted the hatred of the viewers (she is considered the most hated character in the TV series). On the other hand, it spurred a series of criticisms regarding the sexism and misogyny of the BB universe (Checcaglini, 2018 ebook: 1109-1191). However, we must recall that, as in *The Sopranos* and other series that focus on difficult men, women play a marginal role and almost always get in the way of the trajectories undertaken by our anti-heroes for whom, of course, the audience takes sides, albeit contradictorily (Martin, 2018: 362).

We can now turn to RQ3 and RQ4. As far as locations are concerned, no polarisation emerges as strongly as those concerning characters. We have more than a score of locations (see Figure 1), which change frequently during each episode (see Figure 4). The scene changes range between just under 20 and almost 60 (see Figure 3). No pattern of concentration emerges, so we can safely state that we are dealing with a TV series close to the action genre, which, by its nature, envisages frequent location changes and a certain dynamism. The only exceptions concern episodes constrained by forced narrative or production choices. Episode 8 of season 3, for instance, is dominated by the hospital because Hank has been injured, and the entire episode sees Walt and the other characters waiting for him to wake up. While episode 11 of season 3 is a stand-alone, with only Jesse and Walt present throughout the episode and filmed in only one location, the meth lab, because Gilligan could not film in other locations due to budget problems.

Apart from these anomalies, a fragmented pattern of locations emerges that makes us realise how our protagonist is always on the move as if BB were a sort of road movie of the soul: we follow Walt in his exterior and interior trajectories.

Of all the places he travels through, however, four recur most often in the five seasons: Walt's house, Jesse's house, the desert and the various methamphetamine laboratories (see Figure 5). Logically, these are the spaces where our protagonist, the fulcrum of the fictional universe, moves most. Nevertheless, these spaces are not simply places of transit for Walt's actions, subordinate to his progress, but are dense with symbolic meanings. A study on the poetics of spaces in BB highlights how these are emblematic of the metamorphosis performed by the protagonist: a banal family man who turns into the criminal mastermind of the drug cartel (Martin, 2015: 151-158). This radical mutation is underlined by the passage from the safe space of the family home to the dangerous and violent space of the desert and finally to the aseptic, cold and calculating space of the laboratory, which becomes more and more refined (we pass from an improvised camper to the highly efficient machine built on Gus's property). Mr Chips becomes Scarface, as has already been written, moving physically and psychologically in this triangle of places. We can therefore restrict our attention to the locations more tightly related to Walt's evolution, i.e., his house, the starting point, the labs where his transformation takes place, and the desert as a symbolic image of his character.

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If we look at the graphs on the presence of these three places, we can see that Walt's house is constantly present in the minute-length of the whole series with high average values (see Figure 6). The desert has less continuity but a series of peaks, as do the various laboratories. Thus, the house is a stop-over location, while the other two are more transit locations. A transit, however, that does not leave its protagonist unscathed. If we return to the study devoted to spaces in BB, it is stated there that, as the protagonist embarks on his criminal path, thus immersing himself in the laboratories and the desert (where the fixed or mobile laboratories are often located, the first laboratory being a camper van), the space of the house also changes: over the course of the seasons we witness its slow but inexorable disintegration (Martin, 2015: 156). As in *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, Walt remains the same (indeed, at some stage the cancer is even receding), but his moral devastation, his selling out to the money/power/violence triad, his loss of soul, is manifested in the house, which, like Dorian's canvas, mercilessly takes on all his inner rot.

From all these considerations, we can see that the narrative core of BB centres on a few clear elements (mainly characters, but also some recurring places), which determine long-term stability that does not foresee major upheavals. We could call it a solar narrative system: where Walt is the largest planet that illuminates all the others and holds them together by its gravitational force. Next to him are large planets, which in turn have other orbits, but which only make sense as a function of the central Sun. This strongly constraining structure means that, for instance, where certain characters meet with fan acclaim, their presence/importance does not change within the canonical narrative of the episodes, but rather a kind of narrative extroversion is preferred.

We refer, in this regard, to the characters of Jesse and especially Saul. About the former, who should not have survived even at the end of the first series, as Gilligan has recounted several times (Sepinwall, 2013: 197). His success with the public has allowed the film *El camino* to be dedicated to him, revealing what happens to him after the fifth season finale.

Saul, on the other hand, even became the protagonist of a very successful spin-off (*Better Call Saul*, 2015-), where we go back in time and find out how he became the character we knew in BB. We know that Saul arrived in the fictional universe of BB during the second season. At the beginning, as we can see from the graph dedicated to him (see Figure 17), his presence was felt, reaching a peak of 20%, like a kind of jolt in BB's polarised balanced universe. Afterwards, his presence then settled just below this value, staying on the low side, not gaining more space, thus levelling off at the substantial equilibrium of BB's narratively polarised ecosystem. However, given the popularity that his character increasingly gained with the public, the authors decided to dedicate a series to him, making him the center of the narrative. The detour granted by the spin-off made it possible, on the one hand, not to betray BB's narrative coherence and, on the other hand, to meet the needs of fans and their demands.

That consistency of narration makes us realise that Gilligan's initial idea in BB always stood firm and binding: he had a narrative model in mind and kept it consistent throughout the seasons. At the same time, however, knowing that one of the characteristics of the narrative ecosystems of contemporary TV series must also be that of being able to converse and react to the expectations/requests of the audience, he satisfies the fans by externalising their desires with other spin-off series and related paratexts.

This makes BB a very different series from the model of *Grey's Anatomy* (2005-), for example, where we see an increase/decrease of characters instead, a continuous variation and oscillation of the narrative. BB, like *The Sopranos* or *House* (2004-2012), perhaps because of their series-romance structure, as we defined it earlier, presents us with a polarised, highly concentrated narrative model. In contrast to BB's coherence, *Grey's* model could be described as low concentration, a dispersed model where the balance is provided by the narrative instability of the characters, despite its strong polarisation on locations (taking place practically always within the hospital). For this reason, it has been defined as a directional selection model (Pescatore and Rocchi, 2018: 238-239).

Thus, the BB model proposes a high concentration of a single character but dynamic location choices. Grey's Anatomy model, on the contrary, disperses the protagonists and concentrates on a location. As if in order to maintain the right narrative appeal of a TV series, one had to balance polarisation and dispersion: where the narration polarises on one element of the story (place or character), it is necessary to balance it with the dynamism of the other (places or characters, precisely), so that the narrative fabric never loses the viewers' attention.

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TV series

Breaking Bad (2008-2013)
Breaking Bad: Original Minisodes (2009-2011)
Grey’s anatomy (2005-)
The Sopranos (1999-2007)
The X-Files (1993-2002)

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THE FRAN LEBOWITZ SERIES IN SCORSESE'S *PRETEND IT'S A CITY* AND *PUBLIC SPEAKING*

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Fran Lebowitz, Martin Scorsese, *Pretend It's a City*, *Public Speaking*, Public persona.

ABSTRACT

Writer, humorist, and style icon Fran Lebowitz, author of *Social Studies* (1981) and *Metropolitan Life* (1978), then merged in *The Fran Lebowitz Reader* (1994 and 2021), has been the subject of Martin Scorsese's *Pretend It's a City* (2021) and *Public Speaking* (2010). Both introduce Lebowitz as a storyteller, social commentator, and public intellectual who narrates her life in the style of documentary performers (Waugh) without neglecting the techniques of the *cinéma vérité*.
Scorsese's two works on Fran Lebowitz do not conform to the usual biopic yet can be understood as a selective biography. In introducing Fran Lebowitz to a contemporary large audience, the combination of biographical perspective and quasi-*vérité* style addresses the opposition between private and public (Arendt and Habermas). Altogether, the two productions can be considered as a series with an opening (*Public Speaking*) and seven episodes (*Pretend It's a City*) that create Martin Scorsese's series on Fran Lebowitz. The biographical traits, paired with Lebowitz's status as public speaker, create a double portrait, almost a *doppelgänger*, as a split between the Lebowitz's performance and her representation.

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INTRODUCTION

Writer, humorist, and style icon Fran Lebowitz, author of *Social Studies* (1981) and *Metropolitan Life* (1978) – then merged in *The Fran Lebowitz Reader* (1994 and 2021) – has been the subject of two productions by Martin Scorsese, *Pretend It's a City* (2021, cited as *PIC*) and *Public Speaking* (2010, cited as *PS*). Over the years, Lebowitz has established herself as a public speaker, becoming a media figure known internationally. In his two works on Lebowitz's distinguished career as public intellectual and social commentator, Scorsese does not conform to the usual biopic, yet these two productions can be understood as selective fictional biographies.

The two Scorsese productions constitute one single work that could be titled *The Fran Lebowitz Series*. In *PS* and *PIC*, Scorsese also maintains a level of personal authenticity by inserting his presence as interviewer and interlocutor, as he did in other works such as *Italianamerican* (1974). The two Lebowitz-centered productions can be considered as a series in eight parts: a pilot (*PS*) and seven episodes (*PIC*).

PS and *PIC* fulfill the intent of the "serial flow," as defined by Dennis Broe (23). *PS* is about 82 minutes and the seven episodes of *PIC* range from 26:22 to 31:56 minutes each. "The series are designed to be consumed over a short period", as Dennis Broe says, and "the serial series attempts to create a parallel world of real or pure time that itself synchronizes with the viewer's time" (Broe 2019: 23). Both conditions are observed in the composite Lebowitz series, which has enjoyed success beyond expectations. According to Broe, "Television seriality and binge watching have developed as part of this new model of perpetual productivity, or integrated work and leisure" (2019: 2) through a process of "virtual accumulation" and "highly repetitive patterns" (2019: 3).

According to Bandirali and Terrone, "the vast amount of time that is available to television [series] can give rise to 'megamovies,'" where "TV series are rather supersize audiovisual narratives" (2021: 5). We witness what Stiegler defines as an "industrial manufacturing of an audience" that adds "to the addictive quality written into the narrative processes that has caused even twelve-step groups to refer to the consumption of television's new seriality as akin to 'morphine drip'" (2008: xii, quoted by Broe 2019: 44). For this reason, most people have watched *PIC* in one sitting just like they did with even more popular series, to maximize on time, enjoy the pleasure of binge watching, and taking advantage of the fact that the episodes were available at once on Netflix.

1. SCORSESE'S PRODUCTIONS ON LEBOWITZ BETWEEN DOCUMENTARIES AND FICTION

Scorsese has produced several nonfiction films and documentaries.[1] To him, as he explains in an interview with Raffaele Donato, "there was never any difference between fiction and nonfiction." He has sought authenticity and 'documentary power' in the faces, words, and actions of the characters in his narrative features" (Ribera 2017: ix); in Scorsese's words: "the first impulse of cinema was to record life" (Ribera 2017: 205). In this context, the early Scorsese shorts were, together with *American Boy* (1978), *Italianamerican* (1974), *It's Not Just You, Murray* (1974), *The Big Shave* (1967), and *What's a Nice Girl Like You Doing in a Place Like This?* (1963). In these productions, the line between fiction and factual narrative is always crossed. Lebowitz's double performance blurs even more the distinction between biographical facts and their narrative value. Thus, Lebowitz, who has appeared in cameo roles but has never been a thespian, becomes an actress by performing both her own self and her role as public intellectual.

Scorsese complicates the issue of performing by introducing in the context of cinematic acting a figure who is known for public speaking (Lebowitz).[2] The Scorsese productions on Lebowitz feature her as a storyteller, social commentator, and public intellectual who performs her life in the style of a documentary while nodding to the techniques of the *cinéma vérité*. In this case, there is no distinction between the style of documentaries and that of dramatic fiction because,

> Documentary performers 'act' in much the same way as their dramatic counterparts except that they are cast for their social representativity as well as for their cinematic qualities, and their roles are composites of their own social roles and the dramatic requirements of the film (Waugh 2011: 75).

1 For a complete list of documentaries produced by Scorsese, see Grist 2000: 306-308.

2 Lebowitz has been on several talk shows, with Jimmy Fallon, Jay Leno, David Letterman, Bill Maher, Seth Meyers, Conan O'Brian, among others. She has also participated in several documentaries on personalities of the art world and in films: for example, on David Wojnarowicz (2020), *The Booksellers* (2019), *Toni Morrison: The Pieces that I Am* (2019), *The Gospel According to André* (2017), *Mapplethorpe: Look at the Pictures* (2016), the PBS series *New York: A Documentary Film* (2000), *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013, playing Judge Samantha Stogel), *Superstar: The Life and Times of Andy Warhol* (1990), *Law and Order* from 2001 to 2007 (playing Judge Janice Goldberg), and had many other media appearances.

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The concept of "performance" is in fact at the core of Scorsese's considerations, according to editor David Tedeschi in an interview included in the extra features of Scorsese's *Rolling Thunder Revue: A Bob Dylan Story* (2020: 02:26 – 02:42):

> It's something Scorsese talks quite a lot about: how do you capture performance? What is it exactly? And of course he [Scorsese] started on stage in Woodstock and I think it was sort of a graduate level experience in these performances, filming them, and then editing them, understanding the whole process.

Scorsese and Lebowitz share a connection with New York. Is this enough to create a "cinematic bond" between the two? It's not an easy question. According to Raymond, no connection (other than New York, that is) seems obvious between "the Italian-American male filmmaker and the Jewish-American female writer" (2013: 165). Yet some sort of chemistry occurs. Again according to Raymond,

> the attraction [meaning the connection generating the two Scorsese productions, *author's note*] becomes clear, especially since Lebowitz has become known less as a writer and more as an intellectual commenting on the cultural scene. [...] Scorsese himself is mostly seen in the corner of the frame, laughing and responding to Lebowitz's remarks (Raymond 2013: 165-166).

In his interviews with Richard Schickel, Scorsese explained his work with Lebowitz just by saying, "I couldn't resist it." With the interviews to Lebowitz, and filming the public appearances, Scorsese understood how "you could make a different film every night," because, as Schickel argues, "so mercurial is the persona she has created and plays with a sort of noisy subtlety" (2011: 383). Schickel adds,

> However complex his filmmaking, both factual and fictional, becomes, he [Scorsese] remains wedded to the idea that the world offers no more intriguing spectacle than that of a man and/or a woman simply talking to each other or to a camera. To evoke a cliché, such figures are capable of containing multitudes. They are also able of containing Marty – by which I mean that his work on non-fiction film is not just something that keeps a workaholic busy. It is, I think, central to who he is an artist (2011: 383).

The success of the Lebowitz series in Europe has been a surprise to many. However, one must bear in mind that Scorsese's audience is manufactured around a specific New York mystique that occupies the fantasies of the Europeans who consume American popular culture, music, and literature. The charisma of the West Village, especially, still lingers in the mind of the generation who would dream of casually meeting with Joan Baez and Joni Mitchell, maybe even Bob Dylan, at the corner of Bleecker and MacDougal. For this reason, the fandom base that pursues Scorsese's projects on Lebowitz live in the "I love New York" state of mind.

2. FRAN LEBOWITZ'S PUBLIC PERSONA AND FICTIONAL BIOGRAPHY

The main topic in these Scorsese productions is however their narrative on Lebowitz: she performs her own persona, while Scorsese performs as viewer, fan, and facilitator of the narrative. Do they represent any kind of reality? Do they create a fictional world instead? As Bandirali and Terrone argue, "Fictional worlds differ from the actual world since they have a primary function, which consists in grounding and supporting the development of interesting stories" (2021: 8). *PS* and *PIC* make the point that New York would not be as interesting without Lebowitz's specific point of view or reiteration of the city's aesthetics and mores. Yet, in introducing Fran Lebowitz to a contemporary large audience, the combination of biographical perspective and *vérité* style complicates the opposition between private and public (I am introducing these terms, loosely, according to their use in Arendt and Habermas). What we have is therefore a fictional biography that is meant to accompany Lebowitz's public persona in the public sphere. We thereby see several characters portrayed, all developments of the same Fran Lebowitz, and beginning with the nineteen-year-old rebellious girl who left New Jersey for New York, where she had various jobs and then, in the 70s, wrote for Warhol's *Interview* and *Mademoiselle*.[3]

Lebowitz approaches public life paradoxically**,** by keeping private and public strictly separate. Her celebrity status is mediated in the public sphere by presenting specific charac-

3 See Marc Balet's interviews with Fran Lebowitz in *Interview* (and *Vogue*): Balet 1994, Balet 1991, Balet 1981, Balet 1980, Balet 1979; Alessandro 2021 online and Alessandro 2022; Clemente (2016); Kaiser (1989). Fran Lebowitz's articles in the column *I Cover the Waterfront* are now collected in the volume *Fran Lebowitz: I Cover the Waterfront* (*Andy Warhol's Interview: Volume 1: Best of the First Decade 1969-1979*, 2004). See also in *Interview*: Lebowitz 2019 and Lebowitz 1982.

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ters/masks, such as speaker, political commentator, TV and film personality, humorist and writer. Lebowitz merges these masks in an unusual form of self-branding. She drops selected biographical details to her fandom base, such as moving to New York in her twenties with 200 $, her diverse and random initial jobs before writing for *Warhol's Interview* and *Mademoiselle.* She keeps her public image under control as well as the opposition between public and private by avoiding all situations tied to gossip and the disclosure of personal emotions, and she carefully manages the information that she wants to be conveyed. She "presents" herself through "presentational media" instead of "being represented" through "representational media". She protects her "reputational persona" (Marshall 2015: 28).

Lebowitz does not hide from the public sphere: she hides her private life and self from the media while at the same time being visible all the time. Her idea of private life corresponds to Arendt's equation with secrecy. In "The Public and The Private Realm," Arendt explains that modern individualism determines the opposition between privacy and participation in society (191). According to Arendt, "'public' signifies the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it" (201). This idea is developed by Marshall as "secret life" (Marshall 2010: 500, echoing Arendt) to the fandom base. The negations on which Lebowitz's life are based include not revealing any significant fact about her private life, on top of not having a computer, not having a cellular phone, not managing her social media presence, not writing, not having a talk show, not participating in general to what people label as "social" and "public" lives. Lebowitz manages to handle this dichotomy between public and private with effortless ability to the extent that what we see in public seems to be her "natural" self.

Together with Lebowitz's status as public speaker, the biographical traits create a double portrait, almost a doppelgänger, and a split between the representation of Lebowitz and her performance. To the viewers and fans, Lebowitz's public persona as framed by Scorsese replaces fictionally the real person, enabling therefore an illusion of balance between media reality and biographical reality, paired however with biographical accuracy. Yet the doppelgänger created by the performance does not exist by itself. As Vardoulakis points out, "The doppelgänger, it will be argued, is an operative or effective presence to the extent that it effects the undoing of the framing of the subject by the opposition between mere presence and absence" (Vardoulakis 2010: 1).

Scott quotes a significant 2010 interview: "When an interviewer asked her why in *Public Speaking,* she did not discuss her personal life, Lebowitz replied, 'I'm not interested in other people so I don't expect other people to be interested in me, and if they are, too bad'" (Scott 2011: 124). Overall, one has a lingering doubt about how much biographical details one must give in the public sphere for the fandom base's curiosity to be satisfied. In both Scorsese productions, it looks like Lebowitz discusses her biography at length. Yet, despite the fictional element created by the narrative act itself, the question about how much biography must be revealed until the realm of private life is affected remains unsolved; that however echoes Arendt's concept of a private life that, not being made public, borders into secretive (2000: 182–230).

The focus of *Public Speaking* is on Lebowitz's eloquence in framing her biographical events, with various degrees of impact, into narrative. Her concept of public speaking is based on having a one-way conversation that includes an audience asking questions at the end of the talk, but in a way that always gives her the last word, meaning that she is in constant control. When Lebowitz fictionalizes her biography, she chooses facts with the purpose of turning them into emblematic events. In fact, her fictionalization of the conflict between private and public sphere is crucial to maintain a distance from an inquisitive fandom base. Her defense of privacy must not be read, however, as disdain for her audience: "The idea that Lebowitz's public image should be read as a performance, as a conscious process of withholding and disclosure, pertains to her desired social recalibration of the public/private dialectic that is the foundation of her ethical position" (Scott 2011: 121).

Lebowitz had various jobs before turning to writing and speaking professionally, becoming a social commentator, a fashion celebrity and socialite, and performing as an actress in numerous cameo appearances she was a cab driver, she did apartment cleaning, was a bartender and a belt peddler; she did advertising sales for *Changes* magazine, and many other specific micro-details show up in her oral biographical narrative. To which, we must add how Lebowitz learned how to play and then stopped playing the cello, how she learned to tell the time, or when she received a class wit award in high school. She was also expelled from Morristown High School after attending for two years, as well as from the Wilson School in Mountain Lakers in New Jersey (apparently, her acerbic sense of humor was more than the school could bear). She lived in Poughkeepsie briefly, and she worked for Project Head Start (Kaiser 1989: 137). All these details can

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be either part of her real life or, in part, of her fictional life. The difference between facts and fiction, however, can only be evaluated according to the context and the audience she is facing. As Brylla and Kramer write, "Western audiences live in a mass-mediated culture that filters reality through the prism of factual media; hence, their emotional and cognitive comprehension of the world is, to a significant extent, informed and consolidated by documentary film" (2018: 1). In this context, "filmmaking practices and sociocultural traditions negotiate the indexical link between representations and their real-life counterparts" (Brylla and Kramer 2018: 1.

The question therefore is how the Lebowitz-Scorsese productions inform our emotional and cognitive comprehension, and how Lebowitz's style, which is both natural and controlled, can be communicated through the medium of the documentary. A persistent issue in making documentaries concerns the level of authenticity and what we consider to be reality, as if a filmic production had to chronicle a daily diary. While nonfiction productions often aim at showing people in real life situations and events, Marquis indicates how Renov (1993) points out that "such efforts are finally 'fragile if not altogether insincere," because "documentaries are always 'the result of interventions that necessarily *come between* the cinematic sign (what we see on the screen) and its referent (what existed in the world)" (2013: 17).

Filmmaker Kirby Dick explains that a documentary film contributes to the creation of a doppelgänger that enters public consciousness in a way that "haunts any interaction between the subject and anyone who has seen the film" (2015: 47); this is precisely what happens to Lebowitz's representation through Scorsese's filmic lenses. Lebowitz's body language (mediated by her fashion style and in fact conveyed almost exclusively through it), her sharp humor and Scorsese's laughter, which follows Lebowitz's every utterance (as if Scorsese were playing an exaggerated version of the laugh track in a sitcom) are the strategies that confirm and at the same time unsettle the *vérité* that we are supposed to validate when watching *PS* and *PIC* as documentaries. Indeed, there are moments when you think you are watching the routine of a strange comedic couple, with Scorsese being the faithful sidekick.

We must consider that "seriality produces persona" (Marshall 2014 online). The structure is that of a "patterning of *personnage*" which, in turn, creates a "structures of familiarity for the audience, but also a structure of performance for the actor" (Marshall 2014 online) based on the repetition of "physical traits/appearance; speech patterns, psychological traits/habitual behaviours; interaction with other characters; environment; biography" (Pearson 2007, as mentioned by Lotz 2013: 23). This pattern is at the center of Scorsese's productions: Lebowitz is presented in similar outfits, performs constant routines such as walking around and being interviewed by Scorsese, and relating stories from her biography while she interacts both with Scorsese and other people on set. The result, Marshall again, is that "the seriality of character/*personage* [...] informs the idea of the actor" (2014 online). At the same time, seriality "informs the concept of persona in the contemporary moment," and this is done "as a form of productive performance of public self" on the part of the "actor-self" (Marshall 2014 online) – meaning the actor performing his/her own self, as Lebowitz performs her own self.

Does Lebowitz act? Not in any traditional sense, but she definitely performs. While filmmakers usually give precise indications to actors on how to act, Lebowitz follows her own method based on her awareness and experience as a speaker. Usually, Lebowitz's public performance are a mix of a half hour talk, an interview with a journalist and a one hour Q&A with the audience, depending on the location (US or abroad, so that there is dubbing). Her subjects are politics and American social mores, with a specific ironic take tied to a down to earth way of making commentaries and delivering punchlines. In the interviews in both productions (filmed in specific locations around New York that include the outdoors filming of her walking, but never at her home), Scorsese appears only as the interviewer and provides short camera movements directed at himself as he shares the scenes with Lebowitz and asks her questions. As classic Dutch documentarist Joris Ivens (1898-1989) advises to a filmmaker ("Use yourself or anybody as stand-ins – to keep the non-actor from exhaustion or self-consciousness," Ivens 1940 in Waugh 2011: 73), this is precisely what Scorsese does with Lebowitz, appearing as himself solely to break down Lebowitz's almost uninterrupted scenic presence.

This is in fact the point: her scenic presence. She is not a professional actor, yet she is not a non-professional actor either; she is a skilled performer, who makes a living out of her public performances, and Scorsese films her as such. He also anticipates her actions; as Ivens (1940) explains in Waugh, "The surest way to avoid loss of time with re-takes is to know and anticipate the real movements of the man [subject], to catch the regular rhythm of his [their] normal action[s] (which is far from re-enactment)" (Waugh 2011: 73). Scorsese's works on Lebowitz highlight their synergy in creating the Lebowitz character/subject, which in times

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generates more and more filming from one documentary to a seven-part docuseries.

Lebowitz seems to be implicitly dismissive of this approach. In the first chapter of extras at the end of *PS*, she says: "I don't believe in collaborations as you well know. To me, this is Marty's movie. [...] I didn't make this movie. You know, I have seen this movie seven times, I have seven different movies" (*PS* 00:29-00:46). Yet it is possible to look at the collaboration between Lebowitz and Scorsese as a study in the techniques that each use.

Essentially, those techniques reflect the dynamics in the Lebowitz-Scorsese "comedic duo" in action both in 2010 and 2021. Furthermore, Ivens' idea of "acting naturally" becomes quite emblematic in the interaction between them: their friendship and habit for each other's presence makes them perform by looking at each other and not at the camera, acting their own parts/roles, thus bringing a *vérité* quality to their screen presence. The idea of "a naturalistic, representational performance style borrowed from fiction" (Waugh 2011: 79) constitutes the performance. This idea of "natural" can be found in the "freshness of the performance" where in fact according to Ivens there is a "distance from the democratic ideal of collaborative performance": "He admits quite openly to manipulating and tricking his 'performers' into performing' and as to the results of their own performance" (Waugh 2011: 87).

The question is, how can we reconcile Ivens' insistence on naturalness and freshness (and they are some impressions that we have from the Lebowitz series) with Lebowitz performing essentially the same well-rehearsed role she has developed in other public shows and talks?

Lebowitz is able to convey a "natural" feel to her acting because performing without repeated takes is part of her show or series of gigs. Her work with Scorsese brings a natural feel to their collaboration as they know each other's ways of working and their work together has a feeling that comes from years of friendship and conversations together on and off screen. They are both skilled performers but performing (oneself) is not necessarily the same thing as acting. Sometimes the two roles coincide. Other times one takes over. It is the playfulness of the back and forth between performing and acting that gives the Lebowitz series its intriguing quality. One thing is consistent, though. They are never caught off-guard.

As we said, her persona is defined by a specific look, clothing, and set of behavior such as waking around, making comments on society, and creating an individual that exists only in the filmed locations of New York. The more she performs, the more she looks like a non-fictional person (a true New York City character). The more she looks like a non-fictional person, the more her audience expects her to perform in accordance to what she "is" or is perceived to be. As Kirby Dick has said about Jacques Derrida as subject of one of his documentaries, "Derrida must now contend with the existence of a virtual representation of himself" (Dick 2005: 47); so does Lebowitz now through Scorsese's filmic lenses.

3. SCORSESE'S *PUBLIC SPEAKING* (2010)

Public Speaking (2010) was filmed in various locations that include Graydon Carter's restaurant The Waverly Inn & Garden (at the booth facing Edward Sorel's *The Mural at Waverly Inn* that includes Lebowitz) in the West Village. It includes footage from an event at the New York Public Library in which Fran Lebowitz converses with Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison, clips from public speaking engagements, and footage shot at New York landmarks such as the Grand Central Terminal clock. Lebowitz's comments include reflections on writing, the AIDS crisis in the 80s, Times Square, James Baldwin, Andy Warhol and his impact on celebrity culture.

Araujo and Scheider define *Public Speaking* as a "selfie-biopic" (2019: 104), rather than a documentary, since to them "the most intricate problem [is] to classify the documentary" (2019: 115). "She [Lebowitz] is the star from the beginning to the end, self-confident, delivering her lines as she was on the stage all the time" (114). "Having Lebowitz running the show was a very intelligent strategy by Scorsese, and also the most intricate problem to classify the documentary. Would it be considered a documentary when we do not have any testimony of anybody else except of she-herself talking about herself?" (Araujo and Scheider 2019: 115-116).

This production, according to Mangan (quoted by Araujo and Schneider), is in Scorsese's early documentary style with one point of view only, in this case, Lebowitz's:

> It's shot in the style of his early documentaries, *Italian American* and *American Boy* – energetic, sinewy, beautiful – but perhaps 'documentary' is a slightly misleading term. It suggests the existence, even the introduction of a point of view or two other [*sic*] than the subject's own, and when you've got a camera trained on writer, wit, raconteur Fran Lebowitz, there is really no room for such indulgence (Mangan 2011 online).

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Yet there seems to be an agreement that this production is indeed a documentary. *Vogue* editor André Leon Talley defined this production as an expression of Lebowitz's personality: "HBO's *Public Speaking*, directed by Martin Scorsese and produced by Graydon Carter, is a witty new documentary about what makes Lebowitz who she is" (Talley 2010: 176).

Other critics are less concerned with genres and focus on the main character. Bellafante observes that "she [Lebowitz] is, in a certain dimension of her sensibility, only one or two micromillimeters from Woody Allen" (Bellafante 2010: 1). According to Franklin, "Lebowitz is a monologist, a person not in search of meaning but in search of an audience" (Franklin 2010: 1). Shawn comments that

> Ever vigilant, she [Lebowitz] guards the toolbox of words. The ground of her being is her belief that the only way people can understand anything at all is through the use of language [...]. And so she watches (Shawn 2010: 235).

Patterson describes her as follows:

> Fran Lebowitz, ace epigrammatist, is further a first-rate conversationalist, a hall-of-fame bibliomaniac, a chronic self-caricaturist, a gal-about-town, the soul of the city, a snappish social critic, a snappy dresser, a popular emcee, a mandarin, a mascot, and the least-prolific great humorist of the American experiment (Patterson online 2010).

Public Speaking is mentioned as "a documentary profile premiering tonight on HBO. It's something of an anthropologist's recording of an idiolect, a bit like the project of a landmarks' preservation committee, and a lot of fun" (Patterson online 2010).

Sequence after sequence, *PS* gives us an introduction to the world according to Fran Lebowitz. Her rhetorical ability consists in assessing the world and turning her opinions into a controlled stream of consciousness. In an on-stage conversation with Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison, Lebowitz is very candid about her lack of involvement: "I like doing this [public speaking] because this is what I always wanted my entire life, people asking me my opinion and also in this situation people are not allowed to interrupt so it's not a conversation; that's what I like about it. [...] I am always right because I am never fair" (*PS* 03:43-03:54 and 03:56-04:14).

The most significant art personality with whom Fran Lebowitz interacted in the 1970s when she moved to New York was Andy Warhol, although in the long run Peter Hujar and David Wojnarowicz had more influence on her. In *PS*, she explains that it was her writing on *Interview* that shaped her voice: "When I was young, my first real audience was with *Interview* magazine. At that time 99.9% of that audience was male homosexual and that audience was very important to me. This was part of what formed my voice" (*PS* 19:18 – 19:40).

Lebowitz however maintains a standard in her view of culture. Not everyone's story should become a story, nor can it have a universal appeal:

> What we have had in the last 30 years is too much democracy in the culture and not enough democracy in the society. [...] The culture should be made by a natural aristocracy of talent [...]. When Toni Morrison said "write the book you want to read," she did not mean everyone (*PS* 23:14-24:08).

Moreover, when Toni Morrison says how well she knows that art and education are not always well-accepted in the U.S. and asks Fran Lebowitz if this is a specific American anti-intellectualism, Lebowitz responds knowingly: "When they invented the term élite, they didn't mean rich, America loves rich people, they mean smart. We don't want any these élites here, we don't want any smart people in here" (*PS* 30:48 – 30:57). At the same, the belief that rich and smart stands in an equation is dismantled. As Lebowitz states, "The reason that most Americans think that the richest people are the smartest is that they've never met smart people and rich people, though never in one person" (Alhadeff 39). On top of that, as quoted by photographer and filmmaker Lauren Greenfield, Lebowitz dismisses the idea that the Americans' love affair with the rich will ever end: "Oh please, Americans do not hate the rich; they want to be them. Every American believes that they are the impending rich, and that will never change" (Soller 2018: 1).

The definition of artists, Lebowitz explain, can only pertain to specific groups: "To me there are only four kinds of artists: choreographers, writers, composers, and painters. What they do is make whole inventions. A movie director is part of a corporation" (Linville and Plimpton 1993: 165). Her point of departure for her argument on the matter of art is that "There is nothing new because the culture is soaked in nostalgia" (*PS* 01:11:11 – 01:11:16). There is also an indirect

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remark on the connection between nostalgia without the knowledge of the facts that are memorialized, so if someone is going to the exhibition of a young artist, while everyone could be saying, "this is amazing, [...] you look and thing, this is surrealism, this is one hundred years old. But you have to first know that, otherwise it seems like a new invention to you" (*PS* 01:11:38 – 01:11:47). Knowledge is gratifying, and "knowing everything is really pleasurable. [...] Especially watching people who don't know everything. I feel that I am at a stage in life that I would call, 'The Last Laugh' stage of life" (*PS* 01:20:20-01:20:32).

While what matters could be a matter of opinion, elevating moments in cultural history that seem to be more glamorous than the present is fairly common. Lebowitz is often asked if New York was better back then and in what way, and the response has to do with the gentrification of the city: "When a place is too expensive, only people with lots of money can live there, that's the problem. [...] You cannot say that an entire city of people with lots of money is fascinating. It is not" (*PS* 14:16-14:31). By watching *PS* alone, one could think that this is a well-done sketch of an interesting person who may or may have not more to say. It is a fairly complete piece in itself. The surprise is that it is just a prologue, like the pilot of a series that that nobody knew they wanted to see, until they did**.**

4. **SCORSESE'S *PRETEND IT'S A CITY* (2021)**

Pretend It's a City (2021) was filmed in 2020 before the pandemic in various New York locations that include the miniature replica of the Panorama of the City of New York at the Queens Museum of Art in Flushing Meadows-Corona Park (introduced in 1964 and updated in 1992, conceived by Robert Moses and built by Raymond Lester & Associates), the Waverly Inn, The Players Club in Gramercy Park, the New York Public Library, the area surrounding one of the five Picasso's busts inspired by Sylvette David, made in concrete and enlarged by architect I.M. Pei (who also designed the Silver Towers on Bleecker Street in the sixties), the Hess triangle, the Barthman clock, Calder's sidewalk on Madison between 78th and 79th, the Library Walk spread in numerous locations with various plaques of literary quotes, and various other places. Footage of Lebowitz in conversation with Alec Baldwin, Spike Lee, Toni Morrison, and Olivia Wilde, among others is also included.

Pretend It's a City is a Netflix Original Documentary Series in seven episodes. One of the unifying themes around Lebowitz is New York in general and her view on society, the human experience, as reflected in the visual arts and in literature. As Lebowitz says, "New York is never boring. [...] I'm sitting there, and I am just looking at my fellow man. And this is, most of the time, excessively interesting. Too interesting" (*PIC* 24:36: 24:08). The titles of the seven episodes are, "Pretend It's a City"; "Cultural Affairs"; "Metropolitan Transit"; "Board of Estimate"; "Department of Sports & Health"; "Hall of Records", and "Library Services."

An article in "Power of Women" featured Lebowitz and an interview about *PIC* where she mentioned "what type of production *Pretend It's a City* would be: a protracted one. 'Working with Marty, every single thing takes years,' Lebowitz says, cracking that she had to watch the show 'about a billion times' as he tried out different editing configurations" ("Power of Women" 2021 online). According to Berman, "No one enjoys Lebowitz's company more than Scorsese, which is presumably why he has done us the kindness of using his medium to share it. In their onstage Q&As, she reduces him to fits of giggles" (Berman 2021 online). Lebowitz adds that the series "It's basically about New York. So lots of it is Marty talking to me, interviewing me. It's not only about New York. He interviewed me on different subjects, many of which are New York," (Martin 2020 online).

About working with Lebowitz, Scorsese has commented:

> We always felt we should have topics. She'll start on a topic, and then it'll go off like a jazz riff into a thousand other places. Eventually, we might be able to pull it back. In a lot of the films I make, the types of actors I work with, the dialogue is like music — it's the timing and the emphasis. She has that (Itzkoff 2021: 1).

The structure of the series, however, as the episodes go by becomes so symmetric that there is a certain degree of reassurance in the repetition. As Panzer writes: "People who know and love Lebowitz will find this series comfortingly on-brand" (Panzer 2021 online).

There are various stories reported by Lebowitz about her interest in cinema and how it grew and impacted her life. The stories of the negotiations around her first published book also constitute part of her biographical narrative: she wanted to find the right venue for her first book, and the same ordeal was repeated with the second one as well. (It seems that in

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one of the publisher's meetings, someone jumped on the conference room table in the attempt of demonstrating how the book could be turned into a musical.) However, the narrative about insomnia in connection with the movie, *The Boy with Green Hair* (1948) and what prevented her from viewing films screened on TV in their entirety is perhaps the most amusing story in the entire series:

> When I was child, there was a tv show called *Million Dollar Movie* and it was a movie that they showed every day. They'd show the same movie every day for a week, so I started watching this movie *The Boy with Green Hair.* At exactly 7:30 about a half hour into this movie, I had to go to bed. [...] For the entire week, five days. I watched the first half hour of *The Boy with Green Hair*" (*PIC* S1:E6 17:41 – 16:35).

It took several years before she was able to watch the entire movie. Her passion for the literary texts and reading, however, is the most striking intellectual feature displayed in the series. "The second I learnt how to read it was unbelievable to me. [...] But reading [made] my world [...] a billion times bigger" (*PIC* S1E7 28:33 – 28:30). Lebowitz also relates that to her the first example of an intellectual operating in the public domain was James Baldwin with his compelling and authoritative tone.

In her conversation with Toni Morrison, Lebowitz shares quite a few sharp thoughts on writing. Not every idea should be put in writing and not everyone should write, because the pursuit of self-esteem should not be the starting point for over-sharing every single thought with a public. The idea of finding yourself in a book and inviting the reader in seems to be a point of debate between Lebowitz and Morrison:

> You should say "we," and I [Lebowitz] said, "why," and you [Morrison] said, "that invites the reader in." I [Lebowitz] said, "but I don't wanna invite the reader in. [...] I said, "I'm not a hostess. I'm a prosecutor. And you are a hostess, you want to invite them in." [...] Morrison: "I try very hard, I say, come on!" (*PIC* S1:E7 26:39 – 26:08)

Lebowitz always had the ability to see forward, even if, as she says, she was never as successful in school as she was accomplished as a writer: "It's not that I had a lifetime of success behind me that was buoying me up, but I just didn't think about it. I went to New York to be a writer. And that was it" (*PIC* S1:E2 22:15 – 22:05). Her parents did not try to dissuade her, but they were bound to a traditional view of the upbringing of a woman:

> People often asked if my parents wanted me to be a writer. No. Did they try to dissuade you? No. 'What did they want you to be?' 'A wife.' They wanted me to be a wife. They assumed that I would be a wife so they did not instruct me in anything other than things that would make me be a wife (*PIC* S1:E4 27:23 – 27:03).

In the end, a walk in New York with Fran Lebowitz seems to be the topic that most viewers grasped in *PIC*. Lebowitz has commented on this:

> New Yorkers have forgotten how to walk. One of the great things about New York used to be, yes, there were a billion awful people in the street but there was: every single person in the street knew that as you're walking toward other people, you move a little bit, they move a little bit. That's why everyone was still alive at the end of the day (*PIC* 22:39-22:11).

The conclusion is that walkers are not paying attention because they are either on their phones or because they live in a world of one:

> Sometimes I bumped into someone because they were not paying attention, and I thought, 'I'm gonna let them walk right into me.' They looked up, annoyed, and I said, 'Other people in a hotel lobby, isn't that astonishing? [...] And pretend it's a city where there are people who are not here just sightseeing, who have to go places, to their appointments, so that they can pay for all this junk that you come to see (*PIC* S1:E1: 22:04-21:23).

Lebowitz remarks that she may be the only person paying attention to the surroundings and life: "So now I feel that I am, by attrition, the self-appointed guardian of the City of New York, since I am the only one noticing anything" (Alhadeff 41). Perhaps the most striking image of the entire series is Fran Lebowitz walking through the Panorama of the City of New York at the Queens Museum of Art as if she were a giant woman overlooking (and loving, and judging)

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the entire city. Being the guardian of New York City is a job with no end in sight. Maybe that's the reason why there are rumors about a new Lebowitz-Scorsese series. Someone has to watch over the city.

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FROM A LITERARY GENRE TO A TELEVISION GENRE: THE CIRCULATION OF "FINNISH WEIRD"

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KEYWORDS
Genre; circulation; Nordic noir; television industry; brand.

ABSTRACT
This article examines Finnish weird, a television genre that was established to promote Finnish television series abroad. Originally a literary genre blurring the boundaries of sci-fi, fantasy and realism, the concept of Finnish weird was adopted by the television industry in 2018 when a number of series were branded as "Finnish weird" at an international industry event. In both production and reception, Finnish weird was mainly characterised by a comparison to Nordic noir. However, the genre failed to replicate the success of Swedish and Danish crime dramas and soon vanished from the industrial discourses. This article analyses the genre as cultural practice by examining the circulation of Finnish weird. Through investigating the origin of the concept, the practice of branding diverse television series as Finnish weird, and the generic discourses defining Finnish weird in relation to Nordic noir, this manuscript shows how the literary genre was appropriated and redefined for television.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In October 2018, a number of Finnish television industry organisations hosted a TV drama and cocktail event entitled "Finnish Weird" at the MIPCOM television festival in Cannes. The event showcased nine Finnish television series, diverse in terms of style, content, and target audience. By branding the shows as Finnish weird, the organisers aimed at establishing a new genre that would travel beyond Finnish borders. The concept has its origins in literature. Finnish weird, "suomikumma" in Finnish, was first identified by the internationally acknowledged sci-fi writer Johanna Sinisalo to describe her own works, but the concept was soon adopted for promoting Finnish literature abroad. As such, the concept was eligible also for the purposes of the television industry. Striving to find a domestic equivalent for the success story of Nordic noir, the Finnish television industry appropriated the concept in order to brand a diverse group of television series as Finnish weird. As a genre, Finnish weird was characterised by a comparison to Nordic noir: it was both similar to and different from the well-known Swedish and Danish crime dramas. The juxtaposition was particularly evident in the newspaper and magazine articles published before and after the MIPCOM event. However, the interest in Finnish weird faded quickly afterwards.

This article studies Finnish weird as a television genre by analysing the circulation of the concept. The main research question is how the concept of Finnish weird is used and defined, by whom, and for what purposes. I argue that the industry-led attempt to brand television series as Finnish weird failed because the genre lacked integrity and continuity. In addition to adopting the title of Finnish weird literature, the genre appropriated the popularity of Nordic noir television series.

Drawing from Jason Mittell (2004), the article addresses television genres as cultural categories that are subject to ongoing change and redefinition. While previous studies on screen genres mostly focused on film (e.g., Altman 1999; Neale 2000), Mittell (2004) provides a television-specific genre theory that pays attention to the key specificities of the medium. However, since the publication of Mittell's book, television as a medium has gone through a major transformation. The emergence of video-on-demand services increased the production and consumption of television series and enabled new televisual practices, such as binge-watching. Although some of Mittell's (2004: xiii–xiv) arguments, such as those concerning scheduling or television's rare pretension toward high aesthetic value, may now seem outdated, there is even more need for a television-specific genre theory than ever. In fact, with the surge of streaming services, both the number of television series produced and the ambitions toward high aesthetic value have reached new peaks.

Turning to Altman (1999), Mittell argues that there are no uniform criteria for defining a genre. Television genres may be identified by, for example, setting, profession, audience affect, or narrative form. Therefore, texts can be "regenrified" as the cultural contexts shift (Mittell 2004: 8; see also Altman 1999 and Neale 2000). Since there is nothing internal to television texts that would designate their categorisation, genres can only exist in intertextual relations in which texts are categorised through other texts. Thus, genres emerge from cultural practices, such as production and reception (Mittell 2004: 8).

This study is based on the assumption that genres are in a constant process of evolution and redefinition and, therefore, should be studied as discursive formations. As Mittell (2004: 11) states, "genres exist only through the creation, circulation, and consumption of texts within cultural contexts." The way of thinking of genres as being in a constant process of circulation and evolution also changes the way we should study them. To analyse the generic discourses in which genres emerge, we need to shift our attention from the texts to culturally circulating generic practices that categorise those texts. Instead of aiming to interpret texts or discourses in depth and seeking their real meaning, we need to focus on the breadth of discursive enunciations by mapping out and contextualising as many diverse enunciations of the genre as possible. By collecting instances of generic discourses in historically specific moments, we can also trace the formation and change of a genre from a bottom-up perspective (Mittell 2004: 13-14).

Drawing from Mittell's idea of studying genres as culturally circulating generic practices, this article maps out the circulation of Finnish weird. Valaskivi and Sumiala (2014) identify three main perspectives of circulation as a theoretical and methodological concept. First, circulation is a non-static and non-linear concept that is best analysed through tracking and tracing. Second, circulation is related to practice as action: it is a movement that brings ideas, items, and people together, and it should thus be studied by exploring the patterned forms of social action. Third, representations, such as texts, images, and symbols, are a material site of circulation. Therefore, the materiality of circulation can be explored by focussing on the characteristics and features of objects, ideas and actors contributing to circulation (Valaskivi and Sumiala 2014: 232-235).

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This article is separated into three sections, each of which focusses on certain generic discourses and practices. First, it will examine the history of Finnish weird by tracing the emergence and evolution of the concept through various media outlets. Second, it will analyse Finnish weird as a practice of branding (how and by whom the concept of Finnish weird was appropriated for the promotion of Finnish television series). The third part of the study will take a closer look at generic categorisations surrounding Finnish weird by analysing how Finnish weird was defined and evaluated in newspaper, magazine and online articles. Here, a special emphasis will be placed on the comparison of Finnish weird and Nordic noir.

Research materials for the study include a collection of newspaper, magazine and online articles, websites, industry event programmes, press materials, blog postings, and advertisements that employ the concept of Finnish weird. The data collection aimed at mapping out as broad a range of discursive enunciations as possible. The sources thus range from the introduction of Finnish weird as a literary genre in 2011 to the most recent instances that appeared in early 2019 and thus enable the tracking of Finnish weird across medium boundaries. A close reading of the material provides detailed answers for the research questions.

2. THE ORIGIN AND EARLY CIRCULATION OF FINNISH WEIRD

The earliest appearance of the concept can be traced back to 2011 and a literary journal called *Books from Finland*. The English-language journal aimed at readers interested in Finnish literature and culture was published from 1967-2015 (Booksfromfinland.fi 2019). In an essay published 5 November 2011, Johanna Sinisalo, a Finnish author known for her fantasy books, introduced the concept of Finnish weird. Works representing this literary trend included, in Sinisalo's words, "the blurring of the genre boundaries, the bringing together of different genres and the unbridled flight of imagination." This definition leaves Finnish weird open to very diverse texts. Sinisalo also forecast the future of Finnish weird by stating that "Finnish weird could very well become the next Nordic literary phenomenon, concept and cultural export product" (Sinisalo 2011). Thus, by making a reference to Nordic crime fiction, Sinisalo laid a bridge between Nordic noir and Finnish weird.

Sinisalo's statements were soon followed by a series of literary blogposts by author Jeff VanderMeer (2011). VanderMeer's texts were inspired by his visit to Finland, but instead of commenting on Finnish weird himself, VanderMeer (2011) quoted an unidentified source from Amazon and provided the reader with a list of related links. After being introduced to an international audience, the concept first surfaced in Finnish media in 2012, when YLE, the Finnish public broadcaster, published an article on Finnish weird (Sundqvist 2012). The text preceded Finncon 2012, the annual conference of science fiction and fantasy literature, which included a discussion on Finnish weird. The article presented Finnish weird as a new literary genre in which the elements of science fiction and fantasy were mixed with more traditional forms of narration in unexpected ways. Recently published works that fell into the category of Finnish weird were also described as "reaalifantasia" (real fantasy) and speculative fiction, with comparisons being made to magical realism and new weird. Finnish weird author Anne Leinonen stated that "Finnishness is now a brand that sells abroad. We should be open about producing stories from a northern, snowy, melancholic landscape" (Sundqvist 2012). The idea of using Finnish weird for promotional purposes was thus introduced. Again, a connection between Finnish weird and Nordic noir was made by asking whether "the next Millennium trilogy" would come from Finland (Sundqvist 2012).

A couple of years later, in 2014, the literary magazine *Granta* featured an interview with the editor of the newly launched *Granta Finland*. According to editor Aleksi Pöyry (Pöyry and Vilhena 2014), Finnish weird "portrays a realistic, palpable setting which gradually starts to acquire elements of fantasy." While Finnish weird never represents "full-blown fantasy," there is a constant tension between the real and the fantasy, Pöyry elaborated (Pöyry and Vilhena 2014). The interview anticipated the establishment of Finnish weird as a self-standing literary genre. The turn can be dated to the launch of *Finnish Weird*, an open access e-journal published once a year, as well as the introduction of the Finnish weird genre at the Frankfurt Book Fair.

The first issue of *Finnish Weird*, a journal showcasing current Finnish literature, was published in 2014. The website introduced *Finnish Weird* as a project of "weird" Finnish writers "producing memorable stories that blur and bend the genre boundaries" (FinnishWeird.net 2014). The issue opened with a text by Johanna Sinisalo, explaining the emergence of the concept. In her own words, she had been longing for a word to describe the work of writers "experimenting with elements of myth, magic and the fantastic." After seeing the film *Rare Exports*, which is a dark but also slightly comical story of the

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"grim origins of Santa Claus," she came up with the idea of "weird" and decided to call the genre of her works Finnish weird. As Sinisalo stated, with the absence of restricting historical references, Finnish literature had seen an outburst of highly original fiction, mixing the elements of sci-fi, fantasy, horror, surrealism and magic realism (Sinisalo 2014). While the journal *Finnish Weird* only published four issues, it played a crucial role in establishing a new literary genre and featuring upcoming authors, such as Emmi Itäranta, Tiina Raevaara and Maria Turtschaninoff.

Sinisalo's (2014) text summed up three features of Finnish weird, which were to characterise the genre also in the context of television: 1) internal diversity of the genre, 2) differentiation from Nordic noir and 3) genre as a brand. Even though Scandinavian countries did not invent crime stories, the international success of Swedish and Norwegian detective and crime fiction has made Nordic noir a label for certain quality. Similarly, Sinisalo argued, Finnish weird could be seen as a brand (Sinisalo 2014). Sinisalo's statement reveals that whereas Finnish weird might have emerged organically from the author's need to name her own works, she soon saw it as a brand that could be used to promote the sale of Finnish books. With a background in advertising, Sinisalo was, in fact, "consciously using the term as brand, aiming for the same effect that term 'Nordic Noir' evokes as a label for a certain quality of detective and crime fiction" (Samola and Roine 2018: 155).

The 2014 Frankfurt Book Fair, a major event for global publishing and media industries, designated Finland as a guest of honour. At the book fair, Finnish fantasy literature was presented under the label of "Finnish weird." In a press release, Maria Antas, the head of the literary programme "Finnland. Cool. Guest of Honour at Frankfurt Book Fair 2014," characterised Finnish weird as a combination of realistic environments, fantastic characters, Nordic mythology, legends and bizarre storytelling (Finnland. Cool. 2014). The concept of Finnish weird was thus adopted for promotional purposes.

After the book fair, Finnish weird surfaced in a few articles published in international journals and Finnish newspapers. In 2016, the concept appeared for the first time in relation to television, as YLE published an article entitled "Nordic Noir and Finnish Weird" (Forsman 2016). The author of the article, Liselott Forsman, then Executive Producer of International Drama at YLE, discussed Finnish weird as a literary genre and referred to Nordic noir. Her focus was, however, on the ongoing Gothenburg Film Festival, which featured a special theme, Finnish serial drama. Among the shows introduced at the film festival was *Bordertown*, which was also showcased at the MIPCOM festival a couple of years later (Forsman 2016).

More recent appearances of Finnish weird as a literary genre included Worldcon75, the 75th World Science Fiction Convention, which was hosted in Helsinki in August 2017. Worldcon published an anthology of Finnish science fiction and fantasy stories entitled *Giants at the End of the World. A Showcase of Finnish Weird* (Sinisalo and Jerrman 2017). In addition, Institut für Fennistik und Skandinavistik at the Greifswald University in Germany organised an information forum entitled "Nordic Noir and Finnish Weird" at its yearly Nordischer Klang festival in 2018. The forum gathered authors and scientists to share their thoughts on Scandinavian, Icelandic and Estonian crime literature and television fiction, as well as speculative fiction from Finland (Nordischerklang.de 2018). The event thus brought the literary genre and the television genre together, but also marked the fading interest in Finnish weird literature, as Finnish weird has not featured as a title or a theme of a literary event since then.

3. BRANDING FINNISH WEIRD

While the literary genre seems to have emerged from an author's need to find a description for her own works, the television genre was solely an industrial initiative. Finnish weird was probably first used in reference to television by Ville Vilén, the Creative Director at YLE, at the Edinburgh TV Festival in August 2018 (see Bakare & Waterson 2018). Anticipating the forthcoming showcase at MIPCOM, Vilén stated that Finland would be delivering uniquely Finnish shows with a tonality and feel that are distinct from its Nordic neighbours. "It won't be all woolly jumpers, snow and murders: instead it is focusing on youth programming, taking cues from Norway's Skam, and hoping to make something that travels beyond its borders," Vilén said in an article published by *The Guardian* (Bakare and Waterson 2018). An association between the concept and the export of Finnish TV series was thus established by YLE, the Finnish public broadcaster.

The Finnish weird event at the MIPCOM festival in 2018 was hosted by Business Finland, Audiovisual Producers Finland—APFI ry, YLE, Elisa Viihde and the Finland Film Commission. While Business Finland is a governmental organisation, the Finland Film Commission operates on a regional basis in cooperation with communal and regional authorities, offering help for international film and television productions,

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for instance, with location scouting, casting and finding production services. Audiovisual Producers Finland—APFI ry represents the interests of film and television producers, and Elisa Viihde is a subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) service.

The event showcased nine television series listed in Table 1. The table includes short descriptions of the shows, as well as information about production companies, broadcasters, release dates, and genres. The data is gathered from the APFI website (APFI.fi 2018) and from a handout entitled "Finnish Weird. Upcoming Finnish TV Drama 2018–2019" and published by Business Finland (2018) for the MIPCOM event. The sources thus represent industrial discourses.

As Table 1 indicates, the Finnish weird event showcased a heterogenous group of television series. The genres listed in the handout range from drama to spy thriller. Apart from one show, all the series deal with some sort of crime: smuggling, (bio)terrorism or spying. *Bordertown*, briefly described as "a unique take on Nordic Noir drama," features a police detective investigating murders while trying to keep his family together. By appropriating a title of a literary genre and making a reference to Nordic noir, Finnish weird is presented as an upcoming drama genre with certain qualities. A comparison to Nordic noir is employed to give possible buyers an idea of what the shows are about.

Nordic noir is a well-exploited brand in Denmark (Eichner and Waade 2015) and internationally. While the genre was born a crime drama, it now extends beyond procedurals. Due to the success of Scandinavian crime fiction, the concept of Nordic noir is now used to promote products that have very little in common with the original genre (Hansen and Waade 2017: 5-6). As Kääpä (2020) states, "Nordic-like" content refers to productions that aim at giving an impression of Nordic noirness while not really adapting to its parameters. Nordic noir has thus become a cultural brand— a "free-floating signifier for user engagement/marketing across different national and regional markets" (Kääpä 2020: 113–117).

The industrial practice of framing a generically unstable programme as a representative of an established genre is called generic placement (Murray 2004). Production companies and broadcasters may use both implicit and explicit generic enunciations in order to direct audience expectations (Keinonen 2013). At the MIPCOM event, an entire group of shows was framed with the title of Finnish weird literature and the references to Nordic noir drama to "activate the per-

Title	Broadcaster/ SVOD	Production company	First released	Genre (by the BF handout)	Description (by the Business Finland handout)
Welcome to Texas (*Aallonmurtaja*)	C More/ MTV	Warner Bros. Int. Television Production Finland	2017	Drama	An intense drama about a married couple who lead a smuggling operation
Arctic Circle (*Ivalo*)	Elisa Viihde (SVOD)	Yellow Film & TV	2018	Crime	An ensuing criminal investigation takes a grim twist when a deadly virus is found in Lapland
Bullets	Elisa Viihde, MTV, C More	Vertigo	2018	Drama thriller	An intelligence agency officer has to befriend an ex-terrorist
Bordertown (*Sorjonen*)	YLE	Fisher King Ltd	2016	Crime	A unique take on Nordic Noir drama
Hooked (*Koukussa*)	YLE	Moskito Television	2015	Drama	A drama series about addictions in relationships, in society, at work
Nerd: Dragon-slayer666 (*Nörtti: Dragonslayer666*)	YLE	Dionysos Films	2017	Youth drama/ comedy	A humorous series about a 19-year-old gamer whose mum destroys his computer
Secret Enemies (*Ratamo*)	C More /MTV	Moskito Television	2018	Thriller	A fast-paced thriller about a Russian oligarch spying on the Finnish government; both scarily realistic and incredible
Sherlock North	TBA	Snapper Films	TBA		Sherlock Holmes in subzero Northern Scandinavia, featuring a female Dr Watson from Finland and the coldest Moriarty ever
Shadow Lines (*Nyrkki*)	Elisa Viihde	Zodiak Finland	2019	Spy thriller	A secret service Finnish task force struggles to keep its homeland independent in 1950s Helsinki
All the Sins (*Kaikki synnit*) – *only in the BF handout*	Elisa Viihde	MRP Matila Röhr Productions	2019	Crime thriller	Crime thriller about complex relationships, small town prejudices and alternative lifestyles

TABLE 1. FINNISH WEIRD SERIES SHOWCASED AT THE MIPCOM EVENT

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ceived values and implications that surround these categories" (Murray 2004: 78) and to build a brand. As the series showcased at the MIPCOM event are diverse, Finnish weird itself remains an empty concept. The idea of a "Nordic-like" crime drama genre is undermined by the inclusion of the youth drama/comedy *Nerd: Dragonslayer666*. The show is described as "a humorous series about a 19-year-old gamer whose mum destroys his computer." The show obviously targets younger audiences both with its content and its form: with a length of 10 to 17 minutes, the episodes are remarkably shorter than the average drama or comedy series.

Although the country of origin appears to be an essential feature in Finnish weird, the Finnishness of the series can also be questioned. Most of the shows are internationally co-financed or co-produced—*Sherlock North* even exploits a story by a well-known Scottish author. The series presents "Sherlock Holmes in subzero Northern Scandinavia, featuring a female Dr. Watson from Finland and the coldest Moriarty ever." While branded as Finnish weird, the story was written by Arthur Conan Doyle and developed in collaboration with the Conan Doyle Estate Limited (SnapperFilms.fi 2018). It thus differs from the rest of the shows, which either have original Finnish scripts or are adaptations of Finnish novels.

The study of the industrial discourses and practices circulating around Finnish weird confirms that the genre emerged as an attempt to promote Finnish television series abroad. By appropriating a literary concept and making references to Nordic noir, the organisers of the Finnish weird event employed the practice of generic placement. Despite the diversity of the shows, they were established as representing a new, "Nordic-like" genre. The generic features of Finnish weird literature, such as combining mythical, magical and fantastic elements with reality, are absent in the series' descriptions. Understanding genre as circulation and, consequently, studying circulation as patterned forms of social action, thus draws our attention to those repetitive practices of inclusion and exclusion that define Finnish weird as a genre. The next chapter will take a closer look at how Finnish weird has been defined in relation to Nordic noir.

4. FINNISH WEIRD—SIMILAR TO AND DIFFERENT FROM NORDIC NOIR

While the genre was created for industrial purposes, it also attracted audience attention. At the time of the MIPCOM event, a number of domestic and international newspapers, magazines and websites published articles on the topic. The discussion of Finnish weird as a television genre was dominated by the discourse of defining Finnish weird through the comparison to Nordic noir—a feature which, again, can be traced back to Finnish weird literature.

As a literary genre, Finnish weird is characterised by the crossings of generic boundaries (Samola and Roine 2014: 28). As Samola and Roine (2014) state, as a genre, Finnish weird, as well as the new weird movement, have often been dubbed simply "speculative fiction," which is mainly defined by a thought experiment, a "what if." Johanna Sinisalo's texts, for example, are linked to the tradition of science fiction (Samola and Roine 2014: 31). At the same time, however, the literary genre has been characterised by a constant comparison to Nordic noir, a far more realistic genre.

Nordic noir has its roots in the Scandinavian police procedurals introduced by Mai Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö in the 1960s. Gradually, Swedish crime fiction built a wide readership both within and outside the Nordic region. Since the 1990s, novels by Henning Mankell, Leif G. W. Persson and Stieg Larsson paved the way for the immense international success of the genre in film and television, and a few years ago, the genre was re-branded as Nordic noir. Examples of the Nordic noir genre in television include literary adaptations, such as *Wallander* (2005-) and *Millennium* (2009-2010), as well as Swedish and Danish crime series based on original scripts (*Forbrydelsen/The Killing*, 2007-2012; *Bron/The Bridge*, 2011-) (Hansen and Waade 2017: 1-2).

As a genre, Nordic noir both broadens the geographical scope of the concept "Scandinavian crime fiction" and blurs the thematic reference, thus merely indicating that the stories include something "dark/black" and take place in the Nordic region (Hansen and Waade 2017: 8). In fact, adaptation and appropriation have become constitutive features of Nordic noir (Badley et al 2020: 2). Hansen and Waade (2017: 9) even argue that "Nordic noir is not a clearly defined genre but a concept with genre affinities." These affinities are able to travel over genres and media platforms (Badley et al 2020: 2). Thus, Nordic noir is a perfect example of a genre being in a constant process of evolution and only existing through the creation, circulation and consumption of texts (Mittell 2004).

Nordic noir in television is characterised by three main elements. First, traditional noir settings, like rainy, dark streets, industrial areas and harbours, are complemented with aerial shots of dawning cities and increasing light that reveals the crime. The second element includes extremely violent and possibly unmotivated murders. Third, the leading characters

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in Nordic noir struggle with traumatic pasts and have unstable personalities (Ruohonen 2018). In a research article entitled "Nordic noir is a strong brand, how about Finnish noir?," Ruohonen (2018) introduces three recent television series as examples of Finnish noir. The series (*Welcome to Texas*, *Deadwind* and *Bordertown*) were all showcased at MIPCOM. Among the series included in this analysis, *Bordertown* is the show that is most often described as Nordic noir. In the Business Finland handout, for example, *Bordertown* was described as "a unique take on Nordic Noir drama" (see Table 1), thus making an explicit connection to the preceding Swedish and Danish crime series. In the *New York Times* it was dubbed a "Nordic noir television series" (Aridi 2019), in the Finnish *Kauppalehti* as "the first Finnish Nordic noir series" (Erkko 2018) and in the British *Express* as "Scandi noir" (Mitchell 2019). Additionally, *Secret Enemies* is being described as a new show among other Nordic noir series by the Finnish tabloid *Iltalehti* (Huusela 2019).

As Hansen and Waade (2017) point out, television dramas are often classified as Nordic noir to "attract attention on a saturated television market." At the same time, stakeholders around the Nordic region are hesitant to identify their works with the genre. Presenting *Bordertown* as an example, Hansen and Waade state that while producers and distributors are interested in attaching their dramas to Nordic noir, they also stress their original contribution to the brand (Hansen and Waade 2017: 230). Actually, most of the sources analysed for this study characterised new Finnish drama series through a differentiation from Nordic noir. In an article published by the Nordisk Film & TV Fund, the writer of *Bullets*, Antti Pesonen, described how he wanted the series to "break away from the Nordic noir." This was done by abandoning the procedural form, letting the mood and emotions guide the series instead of the plot (Pham 2018). In the Finnish newspaper *Kaleva*, Mika Ronkainen, the director of *All the Sins*, said that Nordic noir is usually understood as dark colours, two cops in the leading roles being snappy for no reason and a lot of anxiety. Nordic noir also features the eroticised dead bodies of young women. "Well, our show is not like that," he stated. Ronkainen himself categorised *All the Sins* as Finnish weird (Isojärvi 2018). *Variety* echoed a similar view: "'*All the Sins*' begins in classic Nordic Noir with a body winched upside down in a barn as a shadowy assassin draws a knife seemingly to dispatch the victim. But, diverging from the Nordic Noir playbook, we never see the corpse" (Hopewell 2019).

Finnish weird is thus described as both similar to and different from Nordic noir. The binary discourse is most obvious in the case of *Arctic Circle*. In a 2017 article, *Variety* reported that the cast had been assembled for the Nordic noir *Arctic Circle*. According to the article, the producers of the series said the show would "eschew the typical dark and brooding Nordic Noir tropes while remaining in the crime genre" (Clarke 2017). *The Location Guide* stated that the Finnish-German co-production was re-inventing Nordic noir: "The show's location will play a major role in the series, separating it from the claustrophobic environments of other Nordic dramas and placing a greater emphasis on the expansive landscapes that you can find in Finland's scarcely populated north" (Deehan 2018). The Finnish *Kauppalehti* gave voice to Emmanuelle Bouilhaguet, the CEO of Lagardère Studios Distribution, the international distributor of *Arctic Circle*. Bouilhaguet described *Arctic Circle* as "something else than traditional Nordic Noir, as crime investigation is mixed up with virus investigation" (Erkko 2018).

In the advent of MIPCOM 2018, *Deadline* featured an article about Finnish weird (White 2018). "'Sherlock North' & Sky-Backed 'Bullets' Help Finnish Weird Go Global—MIPCOM" stated that "Finnish local producers are hoping that high-profile projects [--] can replicate the success of its neighbours and travel the globe." Citing Alan Sim, the executive producer at the SVOD platform Elisa Viihde, the article claimed that "Finnish drama feels different to series from other Nordic markets." Additionally, Vilén from YLE emphasised, "We're moving forward from that Nordic noir label" (White 2018). While these statements distance Finnish weird from Nordic noir, they do not specify the defining characteristics of Finnish weird. Nevertheless, Northern Irish writer Brendan Foley, who was working on *Sands of Sarasvati*, stated that "the emerging Finnish Nordic Noir, alongside its thriller core, has more dark humour and uses wild, wide landscapes to great effect" (White 2018).

Introducing three series showcased at MIPCOM (*Bullets, Arctic Circle* and *Sherlock North*) as well as eight new Finnish series, the *Deadline* article offered a different take on Finnish weird. The series (see Table 2) ranged from crime drama and thriller with similarities to Nordic noir (such as *Bullets* and *Arctic Circle*) to period dramas (*Invisible Heroes*), comedies (*Perfect Commando*) and even science fiction (*The White Wall*) (White 2018). *The White Wall* seemed to provide an intersection for two different generic discourses related to Finnish weird: first, the discourse of comparing or juxtaposing Finnish weird and Nordic noir, and second, the discourse of Finnish weird as a literary genre with connections to sci-fi and fantasy. In the Finnish newspaper *Kaleva*, producer of *The*

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Title	Broadcaster/ SVOD	Local prod company	Release date	Description (by the *Deadline* article)
Bullets	Elisa Viihde/ MTV/ CMore	Vertigo	2018	A female-fronted, twist-laden thriller and political drama
Arctic Circle (*Ivalo*)	Elisa Viihde	Yellow Film & TV	2018	A crime drama centering around a weaponized sexual virus threatening a remote arctic town
Perfect Commando		Fire Monkey	TBA	A comedy about a young, spoiled hipster from California who was going on a five-star holiday but ends up training to be a commando
The White Wall	YLE	Fire Monkey	TBA	A sci-fi drama about a mysterious white wall found deep underground at a nuclear waste depository
Invisible Heroes	YLE	Kaiho Republic	2019	A story of an officer for the Finnish Embassy in Chile during the Pinochet coup in 1973
The Peacemaker	YLE	MRP Matila Röhr Productions	TBA	A drama centering around a team of peacemakers sent to resolve international conflicts
Hard Diplomacy	MTV3	Fire Monkey	TBA	A rogue US ambassador, a shady Finnish engineering genius and a bomb going off during the US president's visit to Helsinki
The Emperor		Vertigo	TBA	The rise and fall of most powerful and colourful narcotics cop in Finland
Cold Courage	Viaplay		TBA	A series following two young Finnish women in London, bound together by a clandestine operation
Sherlock North	TBA	Snapper Films	TBA	Based on A. C. Doyle's 1903 short story about Sherlock Holmes travelling to the Nordic region
Sands of Sarasvati	Viaplay	Luminoir	TBA	A Finnish Noir eco-thriller about a team aiming to halt a single climate change event that is about to change the world

TABLE 2. THE FINNISH WEIRD SERIES INTRODUCED BY *DEADLINE* (WHITE 2018).

White Wall Roope Lehtinen said that "*The White Wall* is not even close to Nordic noir." The story does, however, include elements of science fiction (Kinnunen 2019).

As I have indicated in this section, Finnish weird has been most notably characterised by its juxtaposition to Nordic noir. While the concept and the brand of Finnish weird were adopted from the literary genre, the generic elements typical of Finnish weird literature, sci-fi and fantasy, are almost non-existent in the discourses on television. By making references to a well-known genre, Nordic noir, the comparative discourse adds to the recognisability of Finnish weird. Even the internal diversity of Finnish weird is also characteristic of Nordic noir.

5. **CONCLUSIONS**

This article addresses the ways in which Finnish television series have been branded as Finnish weird by establishing a new genre. The analysis traced the origin and circulation of the concept first in the context of literature and then in the context of television. While Finnish weird literature is known for its fantasy- and sci-fi-like features, they are not employed in the generic discourses surrounding Finnish weird television series. The MIPCOM event showcased a diverse group of series ranging from a youth drama/comedy to a spy thriller. Most of the series, however, were presented as drama. Through generic placement, Finnish weird was framed by references to the literary genre as well as to Nordic noir drama. The generic discourses constantly paralleled the series to and differentiated them from Nordic noir. These discourses took advantage of the familiarity of Nordic noir, while also presenting Finnish weird as a completely new and unique genre. By appropriating a literary genre to promote Finnish television series abroad, the television industry aimed at replicating the success of Nordic noir.

Nordic noir works very well as an inclusive term for promoting new products under the same heading (Hansen and Waade 2017: 7). Finnish weird was not, however, able to become an established television genre and a well-known brand for Finnish series. At the time this writing, a few years after the MIPCOM event, the concept of Finnish weird has disappeared from the discourses concerning both Finnish literature and television. The most recent appearances of the concept in the sources date back to 2019. Therefore, it is safe to say that Finnish weird did not become the "new Nordic noir."

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In fact, it can be questioned if Finnish weird ever even existed as a television genre. The existence of Finnish weird as a literary genre has also been questioned by Samola and Roine (2018: 156) by asking if "Finnish weird [literature] really works out apart from being a marketing category." Despite–or, rather, because of–their vagueness Finnish weird literature and Finnish weird television series manage to indicate that genres are culturally circuiting generic practices which emerge in historically specific moments.

While Finnish weird did not succeed in branding Finnish television abroad, a new attempt to promote the export of Finnish drama series has been launched. Focus on Finland is a joint project by industrial and governmental organisations, some of which were also involved in the organisation of the MIPCOM event (APFI.fi 2022). While the new project is not aiming to establish a new television genre, it remains to be seen whether it will be more successful than Finnish weird.

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THE PARADOX OF DISGUST REVISITED: THE META-EMOTIONAL ENTERTAINMENT EXPERIENCE OF *HANNIBAL*

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Quality TV; paradox of disgust; violence; meta-emotions, enjoyment; appreciation.

ABSTRACT
Using García's "paradox of disgust" as an example, this paper addresses paradoxical entertainment experiences. Building on the psychological concept of multidimensional meta-emotions (comprising suspense, enjoyment, appreciation, and artistic value), an empirical survey with 876 fans of the quality TV series *Hannibal* (NBC 2013–2015) was conducted. Results showed that respondents assessed the show as quality TV that was aesthetically appealing as well as quite violent. Moreover, the study indicated that *Hannibal* elicited a complex entertainment experience: Besides hedonic enjoyment and suspense, viewers also found meaningfulness and artistic value in it. This is in line with the theoretical assumption that a (positive) meta-emotion is a result of retrospective monitoring processes in which (negative) emotions that arise during media exposure are reflected upon, appraised, and responded to. Additionally, meta-emotions can be elicited directly by the media content, for instance by the aesthetized depiction of violence. In this study, the more viewers perceived *Hannibal* as aesthetically pleasing, the more they felt entertained by it. A more pronounced perception of the violence of the content, on the other hand, was associated with a diminished entertainment experience (and vice versa). If we concede effects of violent media content on individuals or the society as a whole, less (violence) might be more, not only to enhance viewing pleasure but also to lessen the potential for harmful effects.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE
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In his 2019 paper, Alberto N. García discusses the paradox of disgust. For him, disgust is an aversive reaction to something repulsive, such as graphic violence (see also the "paradox of aversion"; cf. García 2019a). Similarly, disgust is understood in this paper as a basic negative emotion triggered by the mere sight or sound of a fictional scene (Tan 2018; Reisenzein 2018) as opposed to moral disgust elicited by witnessing immoral actions (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen 2019). Despite its negative valence, the feeling of disgust can be enjoyed, for example, when appreciating a work of art (Silvia 2009; Wagner et al. 2014). Drawing on Strohl's (2012) concept of 'strong hedonic ambivalence', García asks how aversion can become a matter of aesthetic delight (García 2019b: 554). Using a close reading of scenes from the TV series *Hannibal* (NBC, 2013-2015) as an exemplar, he states that a hedonistic response to gruesome content "does not deny the negative aspects of particular emotional experiences, but instead proposes that the reflective assessment of those emotions can, in the right circumstances, be desirable" (García 2019b: 555). Building on this description, I want to introduce the notion of meta-emotions (cf. Bartsch 2008) from media psychology as an explanation of this phenomenon and test its appropriateness empirically also with regard to the TV series *Hannibal*.

1. THE PARADOX OF DISGUST

In relation to the TV series *Hannibal* (NBC, 2013-2015), García makes the valid point that "bloody carnage as the pinnacle of artistic enjoyment" is odd (García 2019b: 554). This phenomenon he describes as the "paradox of disgust", has in other circumstances been termed "the paradox of sad-film enjoyment" (Oliver 1993), "of suspense" (Carroll 1996), "aversion" (Korsmeyer 2008), or "horror" (Strohl 2012), to give but a few examples. Apparently, the observation that experiencing negative emotions during media use can be pleasant is quite common. Drawing on Korsmeyer (2008) and Strohl (2012), García argues, that there is some kind of reflective assessment of those emotions in play that might be desirable. His close reading of selected scenes of *Hannibal* suggests, that the series forces the viewer "to question the limits of aesthetic enjoyment, and potentially allow for a more 'complex' experience" (García 2019b: 562). This complex experience refers to Strohl's concept of 'strong hedonic ambivalence', "i.e. taking pleasure in an experience partly in virtue of its painful aspects" with the subject's enjoyment being embedded within pleasure (2012: 203f). Strohl distinguishes so called atomic experiences from complex ones, that is, experiences with internal structure. Atomic experiences interrelate and synergize into complex ones (Strohl 2012: 209):

> In some cases when one watches a horror movie, one experiences emotions of fear and disgust that have the pain structure. They would be outright painful and one would be fully averse to them if one were outside of an aesthetic context. In an aesthetic context, however, these emotions may fit well with one's more general condition and make a vital contribution to the pleasant character of the complex experience of engaging with an artwork. (Strohl 2012: 210)

This double-layered experience Strohl describes, has also been examined within media psychology under the term meta-emotion.

2. META-EMOTIONS AS COMPLEX EXPERIENCES

Audio-visual content might instigate all kinds of psychological responses: enjoyment, pleasure, enlightenment, but also suspense, melancholy, sadness, horror, disgust, or fear (cf. Bryant and Vorderer 2006). That viewers perceive even rather distressing feelings as overall pleasant can be explained with regard to the concept of meta-emotions (Bartsch 2008; Bartsch et al. 2008; Oliver and Bartsch 2010, 2011; Oliver and Raney 2011): A positive meta-emotion is the outcome of a retrospective monitoring process in which emotions that arise during exposure are reflected upon, appraised, and responded to. The basic idea of this evaluative meta-structure is that people can have "emotions about emotions" (Bartsch et al. 2008: 8). Meta-emotions can thus be understood as a retrograde emotional summation with an overall positive outcome (Bartsch 2008: 45). In Strohl's (2012: 209) diction: To understand the phenomenon of strong ambivalence one has to allow for the possibility that atomic experiences (like disgust) interrelate and synergize to compose a complex entertainment experience.

Bartsch (2008) states that successful shows do more than to represent and elicit first-level emotions. They also "communicate meta-emotions about the emotions that are represented and/or elicited in the viewer. The redundant cueing of positive meta-emotions provides an explanation of why

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media entertainment succeeds at making negative emotions like anger, fear, or sadness feel good." (Bartsch 2008: 52). In the case of *Hannibal*, I would argue, that the aesthetized depiction of gruesome acts of violence is supposed to cue positive meta-emotions (cf. Ziomek 2018).

Positive meta-emotions are not limited to enjoyment. Rather, they are multidimensional. To fully capture the concept, Oliver and Bartsch (2010: 75) propose three different dimensions: one which refers to the experience of fun and positively valenced emotions, a second one describing experiences characterized by emotional arousal and negative valence, and a third one which captures moving and thought-provoking experiences. With reference to this school of thought, I will term these three aspects enjoyment (hedonic in nature with positive valence), suspense, and appreciation (a reaction that is gratifying in an eudaimonic way, i.e., meaningful, thought provoking, or insightful) (cf. Oliver and Bartsch 2010, 2011; Oliver and Raney 2011). As Oliver and Bartsch (2011: 30) put it: "one plausible characteristic of content that gives rise to feelings of appreciation is meaningfulness, conceptualized in eudaimonic terms via the extent to which the entertainment fare inspires viewers to consider questions regarding human virtue [or lack thereof] and life's purpose". Enjoyment and appreciation are not mutually exclusive categories of entertainment experiences, nor opposite ends of a continuum. Rather, they cooccur (Oliver and Bartsch 2010: 76). This multifaceted notion of enjoyment is helpful to better understand pleasure derived in the context of cinematic entertainment, from dramas or art films (Oliver and Bartsch 2010: 45). I would argue that this also holds true for a television series like *Hannibal*.

The concept of meaningfulness also helps to explain the conflicting attraction to violent media content (Bartsch and Mares 2014; Weaver 2011; Weaver and Wilson 2009): A meta-analysis of empirical studies from almost 40 years of research by Weaver (2011) showed that overall perceived violence is detrimental to enjoyment. In an experimental study, Weaver and Wilson (2009) also showed that viewers preferred non-violent versions of quality series to violent ones, even if they had an affinity for violence, challenging the notion that violence is enjoyable because of some inherent or aesthetic appeal (p. 457). An alternative explanation of the attraction of violent media content was presented by Bartsch and Mares (2014). They suggested that watching violent, gory material might allow viewers to reflect on their personal lives as well as on life in general in a meaningful way. They argue that a need for meaning-making might be aroused by negative events that violate an individual's belief in the world as a just place where bad things do not happen to good people (including the self): "Therefore, we propose to conceptualize individuals' experience of meaning-making in the context of media violence as a form of eudaimonic appreciation" (Bartsch and Mares 2014: 960). Their empirical study supported this hypothesis: the generally negative influence of perceived gore on viewing interest was compensated by high levels of anticipated meaningfulness. This means that media violence is appreciated if it allows for a meaningful experience.

The entertainment experience of complex media, although quite new, has been researched extensively (Oliver et al. 2021). There is also a large body of work on aesthetic appreciation and aesthetic emotions (cf. Menninghaus et al. 2019; Schindler et al. 2017; Wagner et al. 2014; Leder et al. 2004; Leder and Nadal 2014). Less common, however, is the empirical exploration of non-narrative aspects of media content like aesthetic qualities within entertainment research (Oliver et al. 2021: 195). In this paper, I will therefore analyse both the aesthetic assessment and the entertainment experience of the quality TV series *Hannibal*, a show that combines horror and art by aestheticizing violence (Ziomek 2018).

3. *HANNIBAL*: COMPLEX ART-HORROR

A contemporary exemplar of a paradoxical, meta-emotions eliciting content is the TV series *Hannibal* (NBC 2013–2015) by Bryan Fuller. It is part of the story world of the titular serial killer and cannibal Hannibal Lecter created by Thomas Harris. The Lecter-corpus comprises four novels, five movies (with *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991) being the most famous one) and two adaptations for television (*Hannibal* and *Clarice* (CBS, 2021-)) so far.

Hannibal is an example of "art-horror" (Carroll 1990), it is a "a crowning moment in the aesthetics of disgust in contemporary television culture" (García 2019b: 562); it is "repugnant television" (García 2019a: 210). The protagonist transforms his victims "into artistic displays" (Ndalianis 2015: 2), drawing inspiration from medieval (i.e. the *Wound Man*) as well as more contemporary art (like Van Gogh, Picasso and Damien Hirst). At the same time, it "creates an effect of the appetizing yet repulsive by its juxtaposition of beauty and terror" (Schwegler-Castañer 2018: 625). In doing so, *Hannibal* aestheticizes violence: "Beautified depictions of violence often mask the horrific aspect of crime, encouraging people to enjoy the murder without being overwhelmed or repulsed" (Ziomek 2018: 135).

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Furthermore, Abbott (2018) argues that *Hannibal* is an apt example for a complex text (Mittell 2015). It is part of a transmedia network of connected content with the show blurring the lines between prequel, adaptation, remake, and reboot (Abbott 2018: 564). Abbot compares the show to "a televisual palimpsest (one text being superimposed upon another) in which elements of previous adaptations, narrative and aesthetic, are embedded within the matrix of the series, reworking and transforming Harris' stories, not only making them suitable for TV but signalling the changing face of twenty-first century TV" (2018: 553).

I would argue that the series bares all the hallmarks of quality TV (Schlütz 2015: 101), that is complexity (in terms of storytelling, cast, narrative ambiguity, and intertextuality), authenticity (due to realistic execution, controversial subjects, and ambiguous characters), and signature style (high production values, distinctive visual style, and techniques fostering reflexivity). Because of these features, *Hannibal* is particularly suited to an experience that encompasses both hedonic (enjoyment) and non-hedonic (appreciation) dimensions of pleasure, complemented by artistic evaluation.

4. CASE STUDY: THE ENTERTAINMENT EXPERIENCE OF *HANNIBAL*

The theoretical discussion has raised two sets of questions with regard to the entertainment experience of an art-horror series like *Hannibal*:

RQ1. How do viewers perceive a complex quality TV series that elicits strong hedonic ambivalence by cuing positive meta-emotions? Or, to put it more precisely:
  a. Do viewers perceive *Hannibal* as quality TV?
  b. To what extent do they assess it as violent and/or aesthetically valuable?
  c. How are these assessments related?

RQ2. How do viewers experience the show, i.e., which dimensions of the entertainment experience does Hannibal elicit? In other words:
  a. To what extent do viewers experience suspense, enjoyment, appreciation, and artistic value?
  b. How are these dimensions associated with each other?
  c. How does the overall entertainment experience relate to the perception of violence and aesthetic value, respectively?

These questions are addressed empirically by a survey with German *Hannibal* fans.

4.1. Survey Design and Sample

In order to explore the entertainment experience of *Hannibal* and answer the research questions above, an online survey was conducted in 2017 with German viewers of the show. At this point in time the third season of *Hannibal* had been aired. Participants were recruited on fan platforms and via a snowball system leading to a convenience sample. As a trigger warning, we informed prospective participants that the survey would touch upon the topic of violence, requested their age (they had to be 18 years or older in order to take part) and asked for their consent. Only then the survey started.

876 participants filled the survey in completely (50% male, 49% female, 1% did not specify their gender). On average they were 29 years old (*SD*=9,3). The majority (77%) had watched the complete series, i.e., three seasons with 39 episodes (another 15% watched at least two seasons, 6% watched at least one season, and 2% less than one season but more than two episodes). Most of the respondents (68%) watched it on streaming platforms. 19% of them had watched the series less than a month before participating in the survey, 36% less than half a year, 20% less than a year and 24% a year or more before filling in the questionnaire.

4.2. Measures

All concepts specified below were measured by multi-item Likert-type scales. After reversing items with negative polarity (for a more intuitive display of the index values) and testing for internal reliability, mean scores were calculated for use in subsequent analyses (for a comprehensive list of items, mean scores, and values see appendix, tables A1 to A4).

Quality TV. The concept of quality television series was operationalized according to the definition by Schlütz (2015: 101) using 5 items. Respondents were asked how they perceived narrative complexity, authenticity, controversial content, multi-layered characters, and distinctive style in *Hannibal* (scale ranging from 1'do not agree' to 7 'agree completely'). After testing for internal reliability, the items were collapsed into a mean index (for all descriptives see table A1).

Aesthetic judgement. In order to captivate perceived aesthetic value we adapted a semantic differential proposed by Holbrook (1986). It was originally developed to measure aesthetic responses to product features. Therefore, items

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that did not fit our object of study were omitted and supplemented by four items based on Leder et al. (2004). The complete scale comprised 14 items which were also rated on a 7-point-scale. After reversing some of the items (in order to indicate a more positive aesthetic judgement by a higher score) and testing for internal reliability, the items were again collapsed into a mean index (see table A2).

Violent content. The semantic differential also included 7 items for the perception of violence contained in the show (own wording). These items were processed in the same way as the aesthetic judgement above, albeit separately. High scores also denoted a more pronounced perception of violent content (see table A3).

Entertainment experience was measured using the scale proposed by Oliver and Bartsch (2010) without the items regarding lasting impression (7-point scale). We translated all items into German (cf. Schneider, Bartsch, and Gleich 2015) and adapted the wording for our purpose by replacing the term "movie" with "series". As in the original version of the scale, we included items regarding artistic value (Oliver and Bartsch 2010: 63). An exploratory analysis into the different facets of the entertainment experience showed that a four-dimensional solution (containing the subscales enjoyment, suspense, appreciation, and artistic value) worked for our sample (principal components analysis, varimax rotation, 78% explained variance; cf. Field 2009: 638ff). Testing for Cronbach's Alpha, each subscale as well as the entertainment experience as a whole displayed high internal validity. Items were thus compiled into corresponding mean indices (see table A4).

Further measures. Additionally, we recorded affinity for media violence (one-item measure) as well as sociodemographics such as age, gender, and educational background.

5. RESULTS

Research question (RQ) 1a (Do viewers perceive Hannibal as quality TV?) could be affirmed for our sample. Descriptive analyses showed a quality TV mean index of 6.1 (*SD*=0.8) on a 7-point scale with item means ranging from 5.8 (complex plot) to 6.4 (signature style) (see table A1). The high rating of signature style was a first indication of *Hannibal* having distinctive aesthetic value. An additional one-item measure supported this: asked for their personal opinion of *Hannibal* being a quality series, 98% of the respondents answered "(rather) yes".

RQ1b addressed the perception of *Hannibal* as having both aesthetic value and violent content. On a 7-point scale, overall aesthetic value was rated an average of 5.8 (*SD*=0.7). The standard deviation indicated that the assessment was rather consistent across the sample. The items participants rated highest were 'stylish' and 'sophisticated' (both *M*=6.5, *SD*=0.8). The attribute the series was less credited for (still above scale midpoint, though) was 'pleasing' with an average rating of 4.5 (*SD*=1.7) (for more see table A2). In contrast to this, violent content was rated 4.3 (*SD*=1.0) on average on the same scale with items ranging between 'aggressive' (*M*=3.0, *SD*=1.5) and 'gloomy' (*M*=5.0, *SD*=1.5). Thus, the *Hannibal* fans we surveyed perceived the series as more aesthetically pleasing than violent on average.

The relation of these assessments was addressed in RQ1c. A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to denote the linear relationship between aesthetic judgement and perceived violent content. A coefficient of +1 indicates a perfect positive relationship, a coefficient of -1 indicates a perfect negative relationship, while a coefficient of 0 indicates no linear relationship at all. In this case, there was a medium sized[1] negative correlation between the two variables ($r(874) = -.31$, $p = .000$). A negative correlation means that as one of the variables increases, the other tends to decrease, and vice versa (no causal relationship in one or the other direction is alleged). Apparently, perceived aesthetic value and violent content do not go together very well (at least for the fans interviewed). This might be an indication that violent content interferes with a positive entertainment experience. Alternatively, one could say that fans who particularly liked the show seemed to be less bothered by its violence (for whatever reason).

The second group of RQ dealt with the entertainment experience. RQ2a asked to what extent viewers experienced suspense, enjoyment, appreciation, and artistic value when watching *Hannibal*. Retrospectively, fans reported a very high overall entertainment experience (*M*=5.6, *SD*=1.1). The indices of the subscales ranged from 6.0 for both enjoyment and artistic value to suspense (*M*=5.3) and appreciation (*M*=4.8). That means that the respondents found *Hannibal* to be fun while cherishing its artistic value; they assessed it as suspenseful and, slightly less so, meaningful.

To address RQ2b (the association between the subdimensions of the entertainment experience) again Pearson

1 Values of ±.1 represent a small effect, ±.3 is a medium effect and ±.5 is a large effect (Field 2009: 173).

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correlations were performed. The correlations of the indices showed mostly large and positive effects: The association between enjoyment and artistic value was strongest (*r*(874)=.68, *p*=.000), followed by appreciation / suspense (*r*(874)=.65, *p*=.000), appreciation / artistic value (*r*(874)=.60, *p*=.000), suspense / artistic value (*r*(874)=.58, *p*=.000), enjoyment / suspense (*r*(874)=.57, *p*=.000), and enjoyment / appreciation (*r*(874)=.47, *p*=.000). These results were in line with the assumption of Oliver and Bartsch (2010: 76) that enjoyment and appreciation do cooccur. In addition, the sub-dimensions of the entertainment experiences are positively related to each other reflecting the extremely positive overall assessment of the show.

RQ2c connects the perception of the series as being aesthetically valuable as well as violent with the entertainment experience (How does the overall entertainment experience relate to the perception of violence and aesthetic value, respectively?). Correlational analyses showed that an aesthetic appeal was positively and strongly related to the entertainment experience as a whole (*r*(874)=.52, *p*=.000) with slight variations in the sub-dimensions (enjoyment: .46, appreciation: .41, suspense: .36, artistic value: .52). The perception of violence, on the other hand, had a negative association with the overall experience (*r*(874)=-.10, *p*=.004) as well as with the sub-dimensions except suspense (enjoyment: -.16, appreciation: -.07, suspense: n.s., artistic value: -.10). This was even true for respondents with an affinity for media violence as a partial correlation (where the item “I like violent TV series” was held constant) showed (*r*(874)=-.09, *p*=.007). A partial correlation determines the relationship between two variables while the effects of a third variable is held constant (here affinity for violence), thereby making sure that it is not this variable that causes the relationship.

6. DISCUSSION

This paper’s starting point was García’s (2019b) observation of the paradoxical pleasure of art-horror series like *Hannibal* where seemingly natural aversion is transformed into aesthetic delight. In theoretical terms this can be explained by Strohl’s (2012) notion of strong hedonic ambivalence. He argues that atomic experiences (individual sensations like recoiling due to a jump scare) interrelate and synergize into complex ones (cumulative experiences like watching a movie). While atomic experiences might be negative in valence, complex ones based thereon can still be experienced as positive. This basic idea is mirrored by the concept of meta-emotions in media psychology (Bartsch 2008; Oliver and Bartsch 2010). In entertainment research, a meta-emotion is the outcome of a retrospective monitoring process in which emotions that arise during media exposure are reflected upon, appraised, and responded to. More often than not, the valence of this emotion is positive or at least mixed (Hemenover and Schimmack 2007; Oliver and Hartmann 2010). Meta-emotions can also be elicited directly by the media content (Bartsch 2008), for instance by the aesthetized depiction of gruesome acts of violence. Positive meta-emotions are not limited to enjoyment, however. Rather, they are multidimensional and comprise (at least) the hedonic affect of enjoyment, an eudaimonic affect of appreciation, suspense and, in some cases, artistic valuation (Oliver and Bartsch 2011; Oliver et al. 2021). The entertainment experience of a quality TV series like *Hannibal* is thus prone to elicit fun and suspense but also artistic appreciation and meaningfulness.

Building on these theoretical underpinnings, we designed an empirical study. It dealt with the complex quality TV series *Hannibal* (NBC 2013–2015) as research object (Abbott 2018; Schlütz 2015). It can be argued that because of its depicting paradoxical content (art-horror) and cueing meta-emotions (by way of aestheticizing violence), the show is an apt example to work with (García 2019b; Ndalianis 2015; Ziomek 2018).

The empirical study addressed two broad research questions that dealt with the perception and experience of *Hannibal*. To answer them, 876 German *Hannibal* fans were surveyed. The standardized interview comprised questions on the assessment of the series (its quality TV status, perceived aesthetic value and violent content) and on the multidimensional entertainment experience (suspense, enjoyment, appreciation, and artistic value). Results showed that respondents overwhelmingly assessed *Hannibal* as displaying all components of a quality TV series (that is narrative complexity, authenticity, controversial content, multi-layered characters, and distinctive style). They also rated it as highly aesthetically appealing as well as quite violent. These aspects (perceived aesthetic value and violent content) were correlated negatively, meaning that a more positive aesthetic judgement went along with a diminished perception of depicted violence, and vice versa. This could be interpreted as a sign that the aesthetization worked in that it sanitized the gore and made it more bearable or even appealing for some viewers.

The study further showed that *Hannibal* elicited a complex entertainment experience including enjoyment and appreciation as well as suspense and artistic valuation. This

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supports Strohl's (2012) concept of strong hedonic ambivalence in complex experiences, as well as the notion of positive meta-emotions as the outcome of a retrospective monitoring process in which emotions that arise during exposure are reflected upon, appraised, and responded to. It is also in line with theory, in that a show containing violence can also evoke meaningful thoughts and feelings, i.e. appreciation (Bartsch and Mares 2014). In the same vein, Korsmeyer (2008: 374) argues that disgust is a death alluding emotion and therefore prone to provoking meaningful thoughts (like pondering the nature of existence or the vulnerability of material nature). Furthermore, a more favourable aesthetic judgement of *Hannibal* goes along with a better evaluation of the entertainment experience, while a stronger perception of the show's violence is associated with a more negative assessment of the experience. This result also applied to respondents who had a general affinity for media violence. One explanation of these findings might be that the depicted violence is tolerated rather than particularly enjoyed by fans of *Hannibal*, even hard-boiled ones. This is in line with outcomes from Weaver and Wilson (2009: 457) who showed that viewers preferred non-violent versions of quality series to violent ones, even if they had an affinity for violence. Thus, violence might not be enjoyable because of some inherent or aesthetic appeal. Perhaps, the authors argued, "when shows feature quality story and character development, violent content may distract viewers and diminish the viewing experience" (Weaver and Wilson 2009: 458). An alternative explanation would be in line with Bartsch's (2008) argument that the direct communication of meta-emotions can induce enjoyment if the primary emotional content has a negative hedonic valence. In the case of *Hannibal*, the aesthetized depiction of violence might serve this purpose of masking the negative aspects and supporting – or rather not getting in the way of – being entertained by the show.

LIMITATIONS

Despite the conclusive results of our study, we have to discuss several limitations. First and foremost, it must be acknowledged that the empirical study did not deal directly with disgust as a basic emotion but rather with the paradoxical relationship between aversive media content and positive experiences. Further studies should examine the specifics of this emotion in relation to aesthetic as well as entertaining experiences in more detail. Furthermore, such a complex theoretical concept can hardly be implemented empirically to a satisfactory extent. In particular a standardized survey (with a convenience sample of German fans, moreover) aiming at aggregated data is more of an approximation than a complete test of the model. Additionally, it might be worthwhile to use more complex measures of aesthetic emotions better fitted to quality TV series in the future (e.g., Schindler et al. 2017; Tarvainen, Westman, and Oittinen 2015). Another limiting aspect with regard to method is that all retrospective measurements are problematic because they are too far removed from the viewing experience. To remedy this, in-situ methods would be helpful (Naab, Karnowski, and Schlütz 2019). The fact, however, that the empirical results supported the theoretical ideas rather well, suggests that the study has its merits. Having said that, aesthetic judgement and aesthetic emotions are much more complex concepts than modelled here (cf. Leder et al. 2004; Leder and Nadal 2014; Menninghaus et al. 2019). As the study was but a first approach to including non-narrative aspects with regard to experiencing entertainment, this was good enough for now. Further research, however, should include aspects from Leder et al. conceptualization of the aesthetic experience like context, pre-classification and expertise. Another important aspect in this regard is textual interpretation. It might be a fruitful path to conduct qualitative or mixed-method studies to explore sense-making processes of paradox content in order to better understand individual readings (cf. Reinhard and Dervin 2012). Such interpretive studies could also examine the quality of aversive responses in more detail to better distinguish disgust, aversion, and revulsion (to name but a few possible notions).

CONCLUSION

With regard to *Hannibal* and the paradox of disgust, García (2019b: 564) argues that in presenting the disgusting as beautiful, viewers are forced "to question the limits of aesthetic enjoyment, and potentially allow for a more 'complex' experience". This study showed empirically that viewers indeed experienced the show in a positive, albeit multidimensional way. Besides hedonic enjoyment and suspense they also found meaningfulness and artistic value in it. The perceived violence, however, – no matter how beautifully it was depicted – seemed to have been tolerated rather than enjoyed or appreciated.

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If we concede that there is an enduring relationship between TV messages and viewers' conceptions of social reality (Hermann, Morgan, and Shanahan 2021) and that narrative entertainment in particular has persuasive effects (Oschatz and Marker 2020; Ratcliff and Sun 2020), it is probable that violent media content affects not only the entertainment experience (Weaver 2011) but also society as a whole, be it for good or bad (Eitzen 2013). Bearing this in mind, in terms of violent media content less might be more – not only to enhance viewing pleasure but also to lessen the potential for harmful effects (cf. Weaver and Wilson 2009). If shows were even more cherished by the audience when they abstained from depicting gruesome violence, this should at least be taken under consideration by producers; particularly, as long as we do not know for certain how this type of content affects viewers in the long term. Alternatively,

> producers could profitably focus on meaning-making and eudaimonic appreciation as a strategy for increasing audience appeal, rather than escalating the level of blood and gore per se. … Perhaps, depictions of violence that are perceived as moving and thought-provoking can foster empathy with victims, admiration for acts of courage, and moral beauty in the face of violence, or self-reflection with regard to violent impulses. (Bartsch and Mares 2014: 973).

Making violence meaningful instead of beautiful might be the way to go.

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APPENDIX

Quality TV
Hannibal has ...
(Scale from 1 'do not agree at all' to 7 'agree completely')

	M	SD	n
a complex plot	5.8	1.2	
realistic execution*	4.4	1.7	
controversial subjects	5.9	1.2	
ambiguous characters	6.3	1.0	
a signature style	6.4	1.0	
Index (without flagged item due to insufficient reliability)	6.1	0.8	876
Cronbach's Alpha (without flagged item)		.725	

TABLE A1. *MEASURES AND DESCRIPTIVE VALUES QUALITY TV*

	M	SD	n
pleasing – displeasing*	4.5	1.7	
dressy – casual*	6.3	1.0	
tasteful – tasteless*	5.7	1.5	
complex – simple*	5.7	1.3	
quite – loud*	5.7	1.3	
liked it – disliked it*	6.0	1.3	
plain – flamboyant	5.9	1.3	
lively – dull*	5.2	1.3	
ugly – beautiful	5.5	1.4	
stylish – in bad style*	6.5	0.8	
interesting – boring*	6.3	0.9	
sophisticated – uninspired*	6.5	0.8	
aesthetic – unaesthetic*	6.3	1.2	
high contrast – flat*	5.7	1.2	
Index (flagged items reversed)	5.8	0.7	876
Cronbach's Alpha (flagged items reversed)		.816	

TABLE A2. *MEASURES AND DESCRIPTIVE VALUES AESTHETIC VALUE*

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Perceived Violent Content
(Scale from 1 'left item' to 7 'right item')

	M	SD	n
scary – soothing*	4.6	1.6	
violent – peaceful*	3.8	1,7	
gloomy – cheerful*	5.0	1.5	
brutal – harmless*	4.3	1.5	
merciful – cruel	4.9	1.4	
aggressive – even-tempered*	3.0	1.5	
Index (flagged items reversed)	4.3	1.0	876
Cronbach's Alpha (flagged items reversed)		.775	

TABLE A3. *MEASURES AND DESCRIPTIVE VALUES VIOLENT CONTENT*

Entertainment Experience
(Scale from 1 'do not agree at all' to 7 'agree completely')

	M	SD	n
It was fun for me to watch this series.	6.1	1.3	
I had a good time watching this series.	5.8	1.4	
The series was entertaining.	6.0	1.3	
Index enjoyment	6.0	1.2	876
Cronbach's Alpha		.89	
I found this series to be very meaningful.	4.4	2.0	
I was moved by this series.	5.2	1.6	
The series was thought provoking.	4.8	1.8	
Index appreciation	4.8	1.5	876
Cronbach's Alpha		.82	
I was at the edge of my seat while watching this series.	5.3	1.5	
This was a heart-pounding kind of series.	4.9	1.7	
The series was suspenseful.	5.8	1.4	
Index suspense	5.3	1.3	876
Cronbach's Alpha		.83	
I found the series artistically valuable.	6.0	1.3	
I found this series aesthetically strong.	6.3	1.2	
This series is a cinematic masterpiece.	5.9	1.3	
Index artistic value	6.0	1.1	876
Cronbach's Alpha		.86	
Index overall entertainment experience	5.6	1.1	876
Cronbach's Alpha		.92	

TABLE A4. *MEASURES AND DESCRIPTIVE VALUES ENTERTAINMENT EXPERIENCE*

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