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SERIALITY, FICTION, AND THE POLITICAL NARRATION OF THE PRESENT

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Seriality; political power; narration; populism; fiction

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

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

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

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

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

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

This use of fiction becomes explicit in *Freud lee el Quijote* [Freud Reads Don Quixote] (Villacañas 2017), a key work for understanding the singularity of José Luis Villacañas's relationship with narrative. There, the Cervantine novel appears as an epistemological laboratory in which the relations between imagination, truth, and modernity are put to the test. Don Quixote embodies the conflict between a promise of meaning and the resistance of reality: the heroic fantasy that responds to the trauma of the father's impotence — of the empire, of the Church — through a paranoid pursuit of omnipotence that the reality principle defeats time and again. What is decisive, however, is not the defeat but the device Cervantes invents to narrate it: humour, understood as a form of knowledge that allows the ideal and the reality principle to be held together without either cancelling the other. As Villacañas writes: “there must be no contradiction between truth, ideal, and humour. This is why it must always present reality and its deformation, seen from the hero's fantasy” (Villacañas 2017, ch. 9). Cervantes thus emerges as “a hero of moral rationalisation in times of suffering” (Villacañas 2017, ch. 8), whose health consisted in writing a work that simultaneously avoids paranoia, melancholy, and nihilism. The

lesson is profound: fiction is not a detour from knowledge, but an irreducible mode of access to the complexity of experience when direct access has been blocked. Cervantine humour, as Villacañas reads it, is an eminent case of fiction's function as a device for the production of reality: it neither consoles nor evades, but allows the truth of the ideal and the truth of defeat to be sustained together, without either cancelling the other. What Cervantes achieves through the doubling of narrator and character — maintaining exaltation and lucidity simultaneously — is precisely what cognitive science describes as the central mechanism of narrative simulation: the capacity to inhabit another's perspective without losing one's own, thereby expanding the reader's repertoire of social understanding (Mar et al. 2006). This idea also runs through *La revolución pasiva de Franco* [Franco's Passive Revolution] (Villacañas 2022), where the analysis of Francoism shows how a regime can stabilise itself not only through explicit violence but through a narration that naturalises obedience, neutralises the experience of loss, and transforms passivity into historical destiny. Villacañas describes a society split between “a life without squeamishness, given over to a no-holds-barred struggle for survival” and “an official life that was sadistic, sinister, sometimes paternalistic, always haughty, which accepted as something naturalised the violence of an insensitive apparatus, often latent but always feared” (Villacañas 2022, ch. 17). Villacañas himself turns to cinema — to Berlanga's *El verdugo* [The Executioner], “the best description of the logic of the Regime” (Villacañas 2022, ch. 17) — to show how audiovisual fiction can make visible what the official narrative of power has rendered invisible: the structural violence that subjects have internalised to the point of being unable to name it. Here, a narrative conception of power comes clearly into view: political history is not merely a succession of events but a lived plot, organised by narratives that structure perception, affect, and expectation. Political truth therefore demands a close reading of those plots, their silences, and their subjective effects. It is worth noting, in this context, that Villacañas has not only read fiction as an instrument of political knowledge but has practised it: his novels — *Cosecha helada* [Frozen Harvest] (1995), *Regreso del invierno* [Return of Winter] (2003), and *La mano del que cuenta* [The Hand of the Storyteller] (2011) — testify to a sustained conviction that fictional narrative constitutes a mode of access to historical experience that the essay, on its own, does not exhaust.

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

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

THE ARTICLES IN THIS ISSUE

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

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

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

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

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

Finally, Donstrup's article on feminist political dystopias — with *The Power* as the central case — addresses a problem that also persistently runs through Villacañas's work: that of the self-limitation of power. Donstrup reads the series as an exploration of the paradoxes that arise when power is redistributed without stable institutional mediations. The series shows how the emergence of a new sovereign capacity, even when it presents itself as emancipatory, tends to reproduce logics of domination, violence, and exceptionality. This argument engages clearly with Villacañas's warning against fantasies of political redemption. In *Populismo*, Villacañas (2015)

shows that the populist logic is structurally incompatible with institutional differentiation, because "institutions parcel out demands, fragment interests, allow for policy verification, and demand concrete accountability. All of this fractures the people" (Villacañas 2015: 64). What this implies — and what Villacañas's civic republicanism opposes to populism — is that the real political problem is not who exercises power, but how it is limited. Donstrup's analysis confirms this intuition from the side of fiction: dystopia functions as a narrative experiment that tests the limits of any politics that confuses empowerment with legitimacy. Seriality here allows the conflict to remain open, without resolving it into a reassuring moral.

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

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THE OTHER SIDE OF THE BORDER: MEDITERRANEAN ITALIAN SERIES AS GEOPOLITICAL NARRATIVES

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Mediterranean border; Italian television series; geopolitical narratives; migration representation; borderscapes

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how recent Italian television series set in the Mediterranean function as geopolitical narratives, contributing to the cultural and political redefinition of the region as a contested border-space. Drawing on frameworks from critical geopolitics, border studies, and television studies — in particular the concepts of geopolitical television, border series, and borderscapes — the study analyses three Italian productions: *Lampedusa*

— *Dall'orizzonte in poi* (2016), the *Inspector Montalbano* episode “The Other End of the Thread” (2019), and *Unwanted* (2023). Through close attention to their narrative structures, aesthetic strategies, and localisation choices, the paper argues that serial storytelling affords a distinctive capacity to dramatise the shifting imaginaries of mobility, identity, and territorial governance that define the contemporary Mediterranean. Each work stages the Mediterranean Sea simultaneously as a humanitarian space, a militarised frontier, and a borderscape in which the meanings of belonging and exclusion are continuously negotiated. The analysis foregrounds how Italian public and premium television engages with migration not only as a social issue but as a geopolitical condition, producing affective encounters with the border that shape — and are shaped by — broader public debates.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In global public discourse, the Mediterranean has shifted from an emblem of cultural encounter to one of the most symbolically charged frontiers of the twenty-first century, marked by shipwrecks, rescue operations, and expanding security infrastructures. These images have played a decisive role in reframing the region as a militarised and hyper-visible border-space, shaping political debates while permeating contemporary media production.

This paper investigates how recent television series set in the Mediterranean engage with migration, spatial politics, and the reconfiguration of territorial boundaries, arguing that they operate as geopolitical narratives that contribute to the cultural redefinition of the region. Within this framework, Mediterranean dramas centred on migration can be understood as *geopolitical television* (Saunders 2021) and *border narratives* (Gott 2023). Through localisation strategies, these series portray the Mediterranean Sea as a dynamic border – simultaneously connective and divisive – and foreground its coastline as a *borderscape* (Brambilla 2015), a lived space in which the meanings of the border are continuously negotiated.

The analysis focuses on three Italian productions – *Lampedusa – Dall’orizzonte in poi* (2016), *Inspector Montalbano* (“The Other End of the Line”, 2019), and *Unwanted* (2023) – each of which employs serial storytelling to explore tensions around mobility, identity, and territoriality. By integrating aesthetic, narrative, and geopolitical perspectives, the essay contributes to debates on Mediterranean spatial imaginaries and outlines a framework for understanding how television participates in shaping public perceptions of one of the most contested regions of the contemporary world.

2. THE GEOPOLITICAL WILL BE TELEVISED

Analysing Mediterranean television through a geopolitical lens requires clarifying what “geopolitics” means in contemporary scholarship and how television contributes to the production of geopolitical knowledge. Critical geopolitics begins from the premise that geography is not a neutral description of spatial reality but a form of knowledge that constructs, legitimises, and reveals relations of domination. It conceives geopolitics as a mode of spatial imagination – a constellation of discourses, images, and interpretative frameworks through

which global space is organised and rendered meaningful. As Ó Tuathail argues, “the geography of the world is not a product of nature but a product of histories of struggle between competing authorities over the power to organize, occupy, and administer space” (1996: 1). If “geography is about power,” then space is not an inert container but is actively produced through material practices, institutional infrastructures, and cultural representations.

Television, as a widely consumed medium, plays a central role in shaping what McFarlane and Hay call “dominant geopolitical understandings” (2003: 211). Moisi adds an affective dimension to this framework, arguing that television drama is a privileged medium through which the “emotions of the world” are articulated (2010; 2017). Whether through fiction, fantasy, or historical reconstruction, serial narratives mobilise affect as they oscillate between reimagined pasts and speculative futures – giving form to the anxieties of the present. Moisi also underscores the geopolitical force of U.S. television hegemony: as the world’s largest content exporter, the United States disseminates ideological and emotional regimes that shape global perceptions of space, conflict, and identity.

Over the past decade, the global television landscape has undergone profound transformation. Streaming platforms have redrawn the geography of audiovisual circulation and multiplied the geopolitical imaginaries available to viewers. As Saunders notes, “English-language series do not possess a monopoly on screening popular geopolitics via serial television” (2021: 1). Digital platforms have produced what Saunders and Strukov describe as “increasing porousness” (2018: 4) – a heightened flow and blending of national, regional, and geolinguistic cultures across media boundaries (Lobato 2020).

This evolving media ecology produces new tensions between the local and the global that are not only industrial but also aesthetic. The intensified attention to space in contemporary serial television may indeed signal a broader technological and aesthetic maturation, comparable to the emergence of landscape in painting (Waade 2017; Lefebvre 2007). Yet the shift cannot be attributed exclusively to streaming platforms; rather, the platforms have accelerated tendencies already present in earlier television cultures.

It is important to emphasise, however, that within this reterritorialized media framework geopolitical narratives no longer originate from a single centre but emerge through the interaction of regional and transnational dynamics. It is precisely this expanded field of production and circulation

that leads Saunders to analyse the geopolitics of television drama, and although his primary focus is Nordic noir, his framework is equally instructive for Mediterranean production. Like Nordic noir, Mediterranean serial drama acquires international visibility through on-demand platforms that allow hyper-local stories to circulate globally; and similarly, it increasingly engages with geopolitical themes that intersect with television's world-building capacities (Tischleder 2017). Through their extended temporalities and immersive geographies, such serial dramas generate what Saunders calls "a feedback loop of worldviews," (2021: 7) shaping everyday understandings of how world politics works.

A key contribution of Saunders' approach lies in his claim that "*television matters more than film* when it comes to 'common-sense' understandings of and expositions on geopolitics." This assertion stems from the medium's long-form narrative structures and its emphasis on "localism, landscapes, the lived city, and flawed, complex characters" (2021: 9). Serial formats thus enable a depth and continuity of geopolitical representation that cinema – typically confined to shorter timeframes – rarely achieves.

The centrality of long-form storytelling also underpins Michael Gott's notion of the border series. Gott argues that "television series are arguably the most prominent – and surely the most popular – form of European screen production that engage extensively with the topic of borders". With seasons spanning six to twelve episodes, and often multiple years, series possess the "depth and breadth to recount the evolving story of Europe" (Gott 2023: 164). In this sense, border series activate a "mapping impulse" in viewers (Cfr. Conley 2003; Castro 2009), reorienting them in relation to the spaces represented onscreen. Gott even suggests that border series function as a "form of map," recalling the mass-produced cartographies that shaped popular imaginaries in the nineteenth century (2023: 166).

The geopolitical function of serial storytelling therefore resides in its capacity to define soft borders, reflect anxieties surrounding hard borders, and dramatize shifting imaginaries of identity and belonging. Designed for mass audiences, series "reflect and reproduce common narratives of identity," reinforcing or challenging widely held spatial imaginaries (Gott 2023: 165).

In this sense, Mediterranean serial television has become a critical site for examining how contemporary audiovisual culture shapes the geopolitics of a region increasingly defined by conflictual and contested borders.

3. MEDITERRANEAN BORDERSCAPES IN SERIAL TELEVISION

Geopolitical narratives profoundly shape contemporary understandings of the Mediterranean and, by extension, its spatial representation in serial drama. Since the early 2000s, the region has been recast as a lethal border-zone, where thousands have died under Europe's migration regime. Highly mediated shipwrecks have exposed what is now widely described as a *liquid border*: a militarised, securitised, and racialised frontier in which mobility is differentially governed and migrant lives rendered expendable (Law 2014; Tazzioli 2015).

The so-called "migrant crisis" is itself a media construction. Initially framed through metaphors of "invasion," it later shifted toward humanitarian narratives centred on saving lives at sea (Chouliaraki and Musarò 2017). Governmental rescue practices operate in highly performative ways: the "scene of rescue" becomes a choreographed moment that feeds into a wider "border spectacle," a public staging in which "migrant 'illegality' is rendered spectacularly visible" (De Genova 2013: 1181).

Far from the "connective sea" evoked by Horden and Purcell (2000), the Mediterranean's materiality has become an instrument of enforcement, its waters extending the reach of the border regime (Zucconi 2022). This transformation underscores the border's dynamic nature – not a fixed line but a social and cultural process (Paasi 1998; Newman 2006). In this sense, the Mediterranean must be understood not as a singular frontier but as a site where borders multiply, fragment, and assume diverse forms (Cfr. Mezzadra and Neilson 2013).

At the same time, the sea as border has mobilised new political subjectivities, positioning the Mediterranean within the Global South and challenging narratives of European modernity from its peripheries (Chambers 2008). This shift has strengthened scholarly calls for a renewed conceptualisation of borders through the notion of *borderscaping* (Brambilla 2015: 28). By merging "border" with the spatial and aesthetic register of "landscape," borderscaping foregrounds the processes through which borders are produced, contested, and reimagined – including the emergence of "counter-hegemonic borderscapes" (Brambilla 2015: 20). Here, the border is reconceived not through a rigid binary of inclusion versus exclusion but as a dynamic process of *becoming* and *belonging* (Brambilla 2015: 30; Deleuze and Guattari 2008).

In the following analysis of Mediterranean-set television series on migration, we therefore treat the border not only as a narrative setting but as an object of inquiry. As the

Mediterranean Sea is increasingly reframed as a border, we adopt the concept of the *borderscape* to analyse how serial narratives configure the relationships between space, storytelling, and subjectivities. While the sea – predominantly depicted in these series – carries the traces of its contemporary transformations, coastal cities emerge as *borderscapes*: human landscapes in which the border is “mobile, perspectival, and relational” (Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2007: X)

The corpus analysed in this paper comprises episodes and complete miniseries from three Italian television productions released after 2015 – when the so-called migration crisis moved to the centre of international political and media debate. The selected works are: *Lampedusa – Dall’orizzonte in poi* (2016), a two-episode miniseries; “The Other End of the Thread” (2019), the 33rd episode of the long-running *Inspector Montalbano* (1999–2020); and *Unwanted – Ostaggi del mare* (2023), an eight-episode miniseries.

The decision to focus on Italian productions rests on several interrelated considerations. Geopolitically, Italy has become one of the principal landing points along Mediterranean maritime migration routes (Albahari 2015); its coastlines represent key sites where humanitarian rescue efforts intersect with securitarian enforcement. From an industrial standpoint, the corpus spans both public-service and private premium television: *Lampedusa* and *Inspector Montalbano* were produced and broadcast by Rai, in collaboration with companies such as Fabula Pictures and Palomar, while *Unwanted* was developed by Sky Studios – one of the main drivers of the recent renewal of Italian drama – in partnership with Indiana Production. Taken together, these programmes offer a representative cross-section of Italian serial production engaging with Mediterranean migration.

This focus also foregrounds the asymmetries that continue to shape the transnational circulation of Mediterranean media. The Tunisian series *Harga* (2021), which provides a crucial Maghrebi perspective on migration, remains largely inaccessible outside Arabic-speaking markets – particularly due to the absence of English subtitles – highlighting persistent inequalities in the global distribution of Mediterranean screen cultures despite the rhetoric of borderless streaming (Lobato 2020). For this reason, and in order to maintain a cohesive corpus grounded in a single national production context, *Harga* has not been included. A similar rationale informs the exclusion of *Eden* (Arte, 2019), a Franco-German co-production centred on European border politics: while highly relevant, its transnational industrial logic would require a different methodological framework from the one adopted here.

By delimiting the corpus to Italian productions while acknowledging these exclusions, the paper offers a focused analytical terrain for examining how Italian serial television positions itself within broader Mediterranean geopolitics and how it contributes to the shifting imaginaries of migration circulating across contemporary media landscapes.

4. LAMPEDUSA: A MEDITERRANEAN LANDSCAPE OF VOICES

As Cuttitta observes, “Lampedusa has almost become a synonym for the border” precisely because its recent history is inseparable from maritime border control operations aimed at curbing unwanted migration (2014: 197). *Lampedusa*, the TV series, underscores this connection through its insistence on location – not only through its title but also through its use of on-screen captions that situate the viewer spatially and temporally¹.

The plot is closely tied to real events: the two-episode miniseries is inspired by a 2008 rescue operation in which local fishermen collaborated with the Coast Guard to save a large group of migrants at sea (Pontecorvo 2016). The series preserves this temporal distance by structuring the narrative as a recollection voiced by its protagonist, Maresciallo Marco Serra. Introduced as a “fish out of water,” Serra arrives on the island following the death of his son and the collapse of his marriage, embodying the perspective of an outsider who slowly becomes embedded within the rhythms and solidarities of the local community.

Across the narrative, a succession of rescue operations carried out by institutional actors builds toward the final – and most spectacular – intervention, anticipated as the pivotal event that will ultimately redefine Serra’s life. Running parallel to his trajectory is Viola, the resolute director of the migrant reception centre, through whom the series articulates the ongoing “borderisation” of the island, produced through political choices like “policies, practices and discourses” (Cuttitta 2014). Through her perspective, the series maps the network of local infrastructures involved in migrant reception – including the detention centre, the church, a tourist hotel, and the city hall – revealing how the island’s everyday spaces are reshaped by the demands of migration governance.

1 The opening sequence, for instance, begins with the caption “Libyan coast, 2010” (Costa libica, 2010) and depicts a group of migrants attempting to board a boat while being violently forced aboard by smugglers.

Significantly, the series aligns institutional stances with individual characters to render them more sympathetic and morally legible. The detention centre becomes the primary site where these tensions crystallise: migrants protest the poor living conditions yet also recognise Viola's efforts on their behalf. When unrest escalates and the centre is set on fire, the church provides temporary shelter, extending the network of local solidarities activated in response to the crisis.

Divergences among locals regarding the "migrant question" are also staged publicly. For instance, when a hotel owner interrupts the priest's sermon calling for greater solidarity with migrants, his abrupt exit, met with visible disapproval from the congregation, reinforces the series' broader ethic alignment with hospitality and humanitarian concern.

In a similar way, much of the island's transformation is articulated through dialogue. The same hotel owner – who functions as an antagonist to the community's ethos – voices stereotypical anti-migrant sentiments, sarcastically praising the sailors "for bringing us our daily ration of illegals" before linking migrant arrivals to the decline in tourism: "Sooner or later you'll be ruined as well, because if the tourists don't come, who are you going to sell your fish to?" ("Hai visto che bravi i nostri marinai che ci portano la razione quotidiana di clandestini... Peccato però che quest'anno abbiamo la metà delle prenotazioni in albergo. Prima o poi finite in miseria pure voi, perché se non ci sono i turisti, a chi glielo vendi il pesce?").

By voicing these concerns, the character explicitly frames Lampedusa's shift from tourist destination to border-zone. In this respect, the series often constructs the borderscape through discourse rather than spectacle – what Higson terms a "discursive space," produced "through people talking, either in voice-over or as figures in the landscape" (1987).

This dynamic resurfaces in a later scene, after Serra is shaken by a deadly shipwreck. Seeking to console him, Viola takes him to a high vantage point overlooking the sea – the same waters from which he has recently retrieved the bodies of the drowned. "When I can't take it anymore, I come here," she says, "all this beauty is a kind of medicine" ("Quando non ce la faccio più vengo sempre qui; tutta questa bellezza è una specie di medicina"). Yet the camera remains fixed on the characters rather than revealing the vista she describes. The borderscape is thus conjured verbally rather than visually, underscoring the series' reliance on dialogue to frame the island's evolving geopolitical significance.

The sea does not present itself as a "spatial spectacle" to viewers (Toft Hansen and Waade 2017: 89). Instead, it appears primarily as a site of intervention and action. Multiple

rescues punctuate the narrative, culminating in the final operation – nearly twenty minutes long – which stands as the most elaborate sequence in the miniseries. Here, the migrant vessel carries the largest group of passengers encountered so far, and the Coast Guard, lacking adequate equipment, enlists the assistance of a local fishing boat. The rescue unfolds under torrential rain, heightening its dramatic urgency.

Director Marco Pontecorvo emphasises the logistical and aesthetic complexity of the sequence:

Perhaps the most difficult sequence was the final nighttime rescue in the pouring rain. Water cranes, extras, stunt performers, and underwater operators were in the sea until five in the morning [...] Numerous cameras had to be coordinated, along with a fishing boat, a Coast Guard vessel, and a dilapidated migrant boat, all moving during the scene (2016).

Visually, the sequence resists the "liquid scopic regime" described by Mazzara (2019: 6), in which circulating images of bodies at sea and overcrowded boats have become so ubiquitous that they risk inducing spectator detachment (Colombini and Duncan 2023). While *Lampedusa* reproduces many of these familiar visual elements, the final rescue scene distinguishes itself by emphasising prolonged duration, the materiality of water (rain and sea), and limited visibility. The narration builds tension toward a moment that requires bodily immersion and affective engagement rather than the detached observation of familiar topoi.

In the aftermath, the sea horizon once again appears perfectly calm: beach umbrellas reopen, the sun shines again, and locals gather to welcome the arriving migrants. What Serra had initially presented as a traumatic turning point is reframed as an affirmation of collective purpose. The emotional weight of the event is crystallised in the closing voice-over, which encapsulates the series' spatial poetics. Beyond the boundaries of fiction, the island persists, and to grasp its reality, Serra insists, one must: "Come to Lampedusa, see with your own eyes" ("Vieni a Lampedusa, vieni a vedere con i tuoi occhi").

5. INSPECTOR MONTALBANO'S "THE OTHER END OF THE THREAD": STAGING THE MIGRANT EVENT

The television adaptation of Camilleri's noir novels, *Inspector Montalbano*, has achieved enduring success both nationally

and internationally. Beyond the strength of Camilleri's literary material, much of the series' appeal has been attributed to the attractiveness of its setting in the fictional town of Vigàta. International audiences often engage with the series in what Forshaw (2014) describes as a "hedonistic" mode:

They savoured the warm glow imparted by the Mediterranean setting – the blue skies, a personable Latin hero tackling none-too-gritty crimes – all of which were provided by this glossily made series, in which the town of Vigàta, with its unspoilt, antique beauty (unmarred by even a scribble of graffiti), provided a sumptuous wish-we-were-there backdrop.

Compared to its Scandinavian noir counterparts, one critic describes *Montalbano* as "a breath of warm air... He taught me I could laugh at murder again, and we part on good terms" (Donaghy 2012).

These accounts raise an important question: can a series defined by humour, sunlit landscapes, and an overall comforting aesthetic meaningfully engage with political issues? Pezzotti (2023) argues that, despite its reputation as primarily escapist, *Inspector Montalbano* should also be understood as geopolitical.

Crucially, the critical force of Camilleri's crime fiction derives in part from the serial form itself (Pezzotti 2015), a structural principle already embedded in his novels. As Rushing observes, "the cognitive pleasure produced by the unfolding of a Camilleri mystery is slight; what is significant is the reader's initiation into a series of social problems ranging from the minor [...] to the major" (2007, 33–34). Through serial accumulation and repetition, the *Montalbano* universe becomes a space in which everyday injustices, political dysfunctions, and social tensions are continually revisited and reassessed. Within this framework, migration emerges as a recurrent thematic thread. The television series foregrounds questions of immigration to Italy, extending and updating the social critiques present in Camilleri's writing (Mazzucchelli 2018).

The Other End of the Thread (2019) takes up this issue explicitly. Its opening sequence immediately signals a tonal rupture. Instead of the luminous aerial shots that usually introduce Vigàta, the episode begins at night, lingering on dark waves breaking against the shore. The camera then pans from the sea to Montalbano's balcony, where the inspector receives a phone call announcing the imminent arrival of a

migrant boat. This is a marked departure from Camilleri's novel *L'altro capo del filo* (2016), which opens with a domestic exchange between Montalbano and Livia about an upcoming wedding, foregrounding the crime plot rather than the migrant story.

This shift not only reflects the political urgency of the topic; it also produces an atmospheric rupture. The gloomy landscape, the threatening soundscape of the waves, and Montalbano's unusually sombre clothing collectively break with the series' established aesthetic register (Fahlenbrach 2021). The altered opening prepares viewers for the episode's exceptional thematic focus, signalling that something out of the ordinary is unfolding – both within the diegetic world and within the conventions of the series itself.

The episode is formally divided into two parts: the first centred on the migrant storyline, and the second on the investigation into a local dressmaker's murder. The migration plot is reframed through a set of aesthetic and narrative strategies. Situations initially shaped by assumptions or clichés are subsequently recontextualised – typically through dialogue – so that their actual meaning emerges. In this way, the episode actively stages and dismantles common stereotypes surrounding the "migration crisis." The first instance appears in the second scene, when a police officer insists that a migrant who fell from the boat must be affiliated with ISIS. Montalbano promptly exposes the implausibility of the claim, countering the prejudice that underpins it. A similar dynamic unfolds when another migrant attempts to flee police checks: officers, convinced he is armed, restrain him violently, only to discover he is carrying a flute. With Montalbano's intervention, the man is revealed to be a musician attempting to return home via a clandestine route. A final case concerns the alleged sexual assault of a young girl. Here too, Montalbano challenges the assumption that migrants are responsible, arguing that their precarious condition makes such an act unlikely. The investigation ultimately reveals that the perpetrators were the smugglers themselves.

The migrant presence also reconfigures the spatial and affective geography of Vigàta. The series foregrounds the transformation of the Mediterranean into a border-space by mobilising one of its most recognisable visual markers: the postcard-like seascape framed from Montalbano's balcony. This touristic imaginary is abruptly disrupted by the realities of migration. As the inspector prepares for his habitual morning swim, the familiar, placid horizon is suddenly broken by the sight of a body drifting ashore. He then carries the young

man's corpse to the beach, where he and Livia cover it with a towel in a gesture of solemn respect.

This scene acquires additional resonance through the temporal depth afforded by the serial form (García and Nannicelli 2021). The retrieval of the body evokes François – the Tunisian orphan introduced in the inaugural episode *The Snack Thief* (1999) – whom Montalbano and Livia once considered adopting. Italian viewers are likewise invited to recall this earlier storyline: despite the passage of time, *Inspector Montalbano* remains continuously present on national television through reruns, sustaining a collective familiarity with its narrative past (Weispfenning 2003; Kompare 2006). By integrating the arrival of the migrant boat into the long arc of the series, the episode presents the event as both extraordinary and structurally familiar (Hernández García 2024).

Upon its Italian broadcast, the episode attracted over eleven million viewers and generated considerable controversy, particularly on social media (Tondo 2019). This reaction must be understood within the political climate surrounding its broadcast, which occurred shortly after the 2018 *Diciotti* incident: the Coast Guard vessel *Diciotti* rescued 190 people near Lampedusa but was prevented from docking for five days under the newly implemented “closed ports” policy. The migrants were allowed to disembark only once Interior Minister Matteo Salvini secured commitments from other European countries to take them in. In this context, the episode's timing was widely interpreted as a critique of Salvini's anti-immigration stance (Tondo 2018). As a prime-time programme on the national public broadcaster, the episode thus became a televisual event, capable of intervening in contemporary political debates and generating widespread public discussion.

6. UNWANTED: CONTESTING CONTROL OF A HETEROTOPIC SPACE AT SEA

The miniseries *Unwanted* builds on a striking premise: what happens when a luxury cruise ship rescues a migrant vessel? This tension is succinctly captured in the series' promotional poster, which reworks Massimo Sestini's celebrated photograph *Mediterranean* – winner of a World Press Photo award and included in *TIME*'s Top 10 Photos of 2014. In the poster, the overcrowded migrant boat from Sestini's original image appears even smaller when juxtaposed with the looming prow of the cruise ship.

Reconfiguring Sestini's composition in this way foregrounds the collision of two radically different forms of mobility – touristic and migratory (Nail 2015: 2; Gott 2023: 140–163). The image crystallises the series' geopolitical project into a single visual metaphor, exposing the inequalities that surface when these asymmetrical movements converge within the same maritime space.

Foucault describes the ship as “the heterotopia *par excellence*: a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, closed in on itself and at the same time given over to the infinity of the sea” (2008: 9). The cruise ship thus operates as a heterotopic microcosm: it reproduces a miniature version of society while simultaneously suspending or transforming its norms. Life on board follows its own logic – passengers cannot leave, temporal rhythms shift, and new spatial and social boundaries take shape. *Unwanted* mobilises this heterotopic “property” to both reproduce and trouble, within the enclosed space of the cruise ship, the dynamics of the Mediterranean border.

The series opens on the Libyan coast at night, as migrants prepare to cross the sea. This is immediately juxtaposed with shots of the illuminated cruise ship, its lights and music emphasising its monumental scale against the night sky. The contrast borders on emblematic: luxury and leisure are placed in direct visual opposition to precarious mobility. The captain, introduced as a grieving widower, is first shown lost in contemplation over photographs of his late wife; he is abruptly drawn out of his private sorrow by the distant sight of the migrant vessel.

Similarly, in a later scene, a woman contemplating suicide on the deck is halted by the unfolding rescue. These scenes underline – at times insistently – the disparity between the trivial concerns of some passengers and the life-and-death stakes of the migrants' crossing. Editing further amplifies this contrast: a shot of a tourist diving into a pool is intercut with a stylised image of migrants drowning, producing a jarring visual collision between diversion and peril. The rescue scene itself is rendered through spectacle (De Genova 2015). The immense size of the cruise ship creates a safe distance from which passengers watch the operation, turning them into spectators of the border regime.

The series maintains a dual perspective on migrants and tourists. Passengers – cosmopolitan travellers from across Europe, largely Italy and Germany – are characterised primarily through dialogue, especially their comments and reactions to the rescue, which echo public debates on migration. Migrants, by contrast, receive formal and narrative privilege.

Throughout the episodes, flashbacks recount the individual routes that have led them to the vessel², fostering an affective alignment with their pasts.

Within the confined space of the ship, the serial narrative unfolds through the gradual disclosure of the characters' pasts, generating a temporal structure that stretches beyond the immediate present and could, in principle, expand indefinitely³. Flashbacks deepen the moral complexity of the migrant characters – most notably Tareq, who, while concealing his identity, is revealed to have been a smuggler involved in the torture of several passengers.

The cruise ship initially provides shelter to the rescued migrants, yet simultaneously establishes a clear line of exclusion: they are confined to a restricted area and must avoid contact with the other passengers. The border regime is thus reproduced on board as a spatial and social separation. A crucial exception is Elvis, the young albino boy who speaks Italian and bears an “occidental” name; his ability to slip past security underscores the racialised dimension of border exclusion (Law 2014). Meanwhile, several European passengers express curiosity about the migrants, seeking encounters that generate new forms of relation – some solidaristic, others voyeuristic.

Most relevant to this analysis is how the border dynamic reproduced inside the ship is rendered *polydiegetic* through the series' narrative architecture. Through flashbacks, a multiplot structure, and rhythmic editing, the series constructs itself as an assemblage of intersecting storylines, so that “the viewer is witnessing a frontier that is a ‘multipolar axiological space’” (Shapiro 2015): a space in which the cultural and institutional production of the border becomes contested and negotiable.

Migrant agency becomes central when the characters discover that the ship is not heading toward Italy but back to North Africa. Led by the antiheroic figure of Tareq, the migrants seize control of the vessel and force its redirection toward Italy. The final arrival occurs during the night, and the Italian coast does not appear in its familiar balneary imaginary (Hom 2015). From the migrants' perspective, entry into Italy is reduced to a quiet bus journey⁴.

Throughout the series, the sea functions primarily as a setting: the site of encounter between the two vessels and the two modes of mobility (tourism and migration); the backdrop of the border spectacle; a recurring visual motif glimpsed through the ship's windows or in aerial establishing shots. As the border is displaced from the sea onto the ship's interior, spatial dynamics become central to the enclosed environment of the cruise and to the strongly marked mobility displayed in the migrants' flashbacks. Because the series anchors its spatial exploration in the ship's heterotopic environment and in the routes preceding it, the arrival in Italy is not elaborated through further spatial exploration.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Identifying a unified spatial sensibility in Mediterranean serial narratives – one expressed through recurring tones, moods, or atmospheres – remains a challenge. In literature, Mediterranean noir authors such as Andrea Camilleri and Jean-Claude Izzo anchor their stories in dense portrayals of real or imagined cities like Marseille, Barcelona, or the fictional Vigàta. In these works, place is not a mere backdrop but an affective and sociocultural fabric, articulated through references to cuisine, dialects, and shared cultural values that generate what Gabellieri (2022) defines as a distinctly Mediterranean locality. Television seriality, however, has struggled to transpose this literary regionalism into the audiovisual domain.

As Toft Hansen and Re observe, “the Mediterranean Noir label has not been able to extend its pragmatic effectiveness from its literary origin to the audiovisual sphere” (2023: 81). On screen, the Mediterranean is frequently rendered through an overdetermined touristic imaginary – crystalline waters, sun-saturated coastlines, picturesque towns – popularised by *Inspector Montalbano* and widely commodified in international markets. In response, showrunners increasingly turn to peripheral or visually less recognisable locations in an ef-

and across the Mediterranean – and ends precisely at the moment of arrival on the Italian shore. This conclusion has been widely criticised for its simplicity. As Chambers notes: “Seydou, induced by his Libyan captors to navigate a boat of migrants to Europe, experiences all the moral qualms of his responsibility. Despite everything, he succeeds. He is a hero, and there is a (temporary) happy ending. But we know that this is not the case. In addition to the torture in Libya, these migrants will also face near-slavery conditions in Italy. Without documents and protection, they are without rights. The European reality is invariably also a nightmare. Trapped in such mechanisms, further codified and reinforced by racism, this is certainly not a narrative that makes for easy conclusions.” (2024)

2 The flashbacks draw on the journalistic investigations of Fabrizio Gatti, whose book *Bilal* (2007) – based on his undercover journey along the migration route – provides the narrative foundation for several of these scenes.

3 This manipulation of space and time recalls narrative strategies characteristic of complex serial dramas such as *Prison Break*, *Lost*, and *Money Heist* (Mittell 2015; Maiello 2023).

4 Similarly, Matteo Garrone's *Io Capitano* (2023) concentrates on the crossing itself – following the protagonists from Senegal, through the desert, into Libya,

fort to resist cliché and reclaim a degree of authenticity. This aesthetic hesitation reflects a deeper conceptual instability: the enduring difficulty of defining the Mediterranean as a coherent region (Moulakis 2005). At the same time, the idyllic, tourist-oriented vision of the Mediterranean Sea has been progressively unsettled by the widespread circulation of images of migrant rescues in television news programmes. Over recent years, these images have flooded broadcast media, contributing to the formation of a more realistic—and politically charged—Mediterranean imaginary in the minds of viewers.

Within this framework, the Mediterranean emerges less as a cultural unity than as a geopolitical space, particularly in relation to migration. By focusing on television series that foreground the Mediterranean Sea as a border, a border-space, and a relational space, this study approaches seriality as both an aesthetic form and a geopolitical device. A notable commonality across these works is their self-contained structure: narratives unfold within a single episode or within the limited arc of a miniseries. While multi-season serials might offer a longitudinal perspective on evolving border imaginaries – as suggested by Saunders (2020) and Gott (2023) – this analysis instead approaches temporal depth comparatively. Examining works produced between 2016 and 2023 makes it possible to trace shifting televisual constructions of the Mediterranean border and to identify recurring patterns, continuities, and transformations in the representation of migration, coastal environments, and borderscapes.

These series, addressed to broad publics, contribute to the cultural shaping of the border. They dramatise encounters that take form at the threshold between characters and simultaneously construct an encounter with the viewer. Through combinations of dramatic and comic registers, they cultivate affective engagement with geopolitical subjects, prompting audiences to inhabit and emotionally register the complexities of the Mediterranean border regime.

Across its two episodes, *Lampedusa* humanises institutions and foregrounds the caregiving practices of the lampedusani. Though the series depicts tensions between xenophobic reactions and solidaristic forms of hospitality, these are ultimately mediated through a shared recognition of the human tragedy unfolding on the island.

Inspector Montalbano's “The Other End of the Thread” addresses migration even more explicitly while remaining stylistically and narratively coherent with the broader *Montalbano* universe. Here, the affordances of the serial form – the repetition of settings, motifs, and narrative rhythms – frame the arrival of migrants and its repercussions as an “event” in the

life of the coastal community. Its broadcast on Italian public television became an event in itself, enabling the series to intervene in debates on migration governance and catalyse national discussion.

Finally, *Unwanted* synthesises a tension that runs through all the works analysed: the contrast between the touristic imaginary and the border imaginary of the Mediterranean. By situating the narrative within an enclosed space rather than a recognisable Mediterranean landscape, the series abandons strategies of localisation altogether. Border dynamics become a synecdoche for the Mediterranean as a whole, foregrounding the region not through iconic geographies but through the intensities of detention, negotiation, and conflict that define its contemporary geopolitical condition.

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THE NIGHT OF POLITICS: THE INTRICATE REALISM OF *ESTERNO NOTTE*

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ABSTRACT

The series *Esterno notte*, created by Marco Bellocchio, is conceived as a continuation and expansion of his film *Buongiorno, notte*. The filmmaker uses the series format to multiply points of view and offer a more complex version of the Moro case. The article demonstrates the importance for the series of the favorable portrayal of the Christian Democrat politician that Sciascia provided through a sharp

analysis of the letters written during the kidnapping. The series also shows that the brigadists cultivated a kind of political religion that disregarded the principle of reality. In contrast to the firmness of the corrupt government of the Christian Democracy and the dogmatism of the terrorists, Bellocchio cultivates in the series an "aesthetics of cruelty" characterized by "betraying" the conventions of the historical genre. To this end, the series' creator proposes an intricate realism that does not hesitate to make use of fantasy and imagination to illuminate a historical event as dark as Moro's assassination; introduces metanarrative elements that promote the viewer's distanced and reflective judgment; and finally, demonstrates that the grotesque style is the most suitable to criticize the corrupt and abject political regime of his time.

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INTRODUCTION

The series *Esterno notte*, directed in 2022 by Marco Bellocchio, belongs to the historical genre, as it addresses the Moro case, the tragic event that has marked the recent history of the Italian State. Earlier, the filmmaker had dealt in *Il traditore* (2019) with another essential event of contemporary Italy: the maxi-trial against the Cosa Nostra. Andreotti is the “diabolical” figure present in both historical events.

Esterno notte could be considered an expanded version of the earlier 2003 film *Buongiorno, notte*, a film based on the book *Il prigioniero* by former brigadist Anna Laura Braghetti. It is inevitable to ask what the series, divided into six episodes, adds in comparison to the film. The director himself states that he returned to the Moro case because he wished to focus on those people who had no space in the film (Uzal and Bellocchio 2022: 32). The extended time provided by the series format has allowed it to present the Moro case through the perspective of other characters. The series constantly changes point of view, sometimes resembling films like *Rashomon* or *The Barefoot Contessa*, which show the same events from different perspectives. In reality, the greatest contribution of the series lies in the multiplication of viewpoints. The 2003 film focused on the interior of Moro’s house-turned-prison. For this reason, the filmmaker privileged the point of view of the Red Brigades (BR), particularly that of Chiara. To the perspective of the terrorists and the kidnapped Moro himself, the series adds the external (*esterna*) viewpoint of other historical characters who, although outside the “prison of the people,” lived through that terrible “political night (*notte*)” (Uva 2007: 75).

In each of the first five episodes, the perspective of one of the historical characters dominates: the first episode focuses on Moro’s perspective; the second on that of the interior minister, Francesco Cossiga, and his party colleagues; the third on the Pope’s perspective; the fourth on the terrorists’, especially Adriana Faranda’s; and the fifth on Nora, Moro’s wife. Finally, in the last episode, all the perspectives converge, with none prevailing over the others. This multiplication of viewpoints allows for appreciating the complexity of such a decisive historical event for contemporary Italian history.

Before *Buongiorno, notte*, Bellocchio had already addressed the issue of terrorism in earlier films. Tangentially in *Sbatti il mostro in prima pagina* (1972), but especially in *Diavolo in corpo* (1986), which is considered “the first film on post-terrorism Italy” (Uva 2007: 59), and in the documentary *Sogni infranti. Ragionamenti e deliri* (1995). In the last two

films, the director already criticizes the terrorists’ “absolute” desires and addresses the efforts of the repentant to readapt to the reality principle.

1. FROM THE WORD TO THE IMAGE: THE DENUNCIATION OF POLITICAL AND ECCLESIASTICAL POWER IN MORO’S LETTERS

Bellocchio, both in the film and the series, places great importance on the letters Moro wrote during his kidnapping because they are the documents that best express his thoughts and feelings. The emphasis placed on the words of the President of the Christian Democracy (DC) is a sign of the influence Bellocchio received from Sciascia’s book on the Moro case. It is true that the Sicilian novelist’s interpretation became the main point of support for the later sympathetic versions of the fate of the DC president (O’Leary 2007: 82, 97). Bellocchio shares with the novelist the thesis that Moro is a ghost who, like Hamlet’s father, has haunted and tormented Italians because of the injustice committed against him (Mancino 2014: 222). Neither Sciascia nor Bellocchio use Moro’s spectral presence to develop the paranoid conspiracy theory (“diatroy”), that is, the obsessive search for the forces behind the action of the brigadists (O’Leary 2007: 84–95), which, however, we do find in other films about this historical event such as *Il caso Moro* (1986) and *Piazza delle Cinque Lune* (2003).

Like Sciascia, the filmmaker addresses in the series the theme of the language used by politicians. Moro, although, as Pasolini said, the least involved in the corruption of the government and the Christian Democracy (DC), used, like the rest of his party companions, a political language designed to say nothing, or to express an ambiguous position interpretable in various ways. This language, as incomprehensible to the public as Latin, is the one Moro himself uses at the beginning of *Esterno notte* to convince the recalcitrant members of his party of the convenience of supporting the “historic compromise” (*compromesso storico*), that is, the formation of a government with the support of the communists. The character himself acknowledges to his daughter that he defended the compromise without ever pronouncing the word “communist”. This “language of incommunicability” (Sciascia 2023: 18), indirect and convoluted, although it hinders understanding, prevents open conflict. Bellocchio’s series, in its third episode, also attributes the use of ambiguous and incomprehensible language to the Pope, who, with his empty

and pompous style, cannot reach the heart of the Catholic people, much less that of terrorists who are atheists.

Moro's letters constitute a radical denunciation of the *ratio status* that justifies the sacrifice of innocents in the name of the abstract principle of legality. Moro always considered, both before and during the kidnapping, that rescue and prisoner exchange were legitimate and realistic, since the "state of necessity principle" had to prevail over the abstract law (Sciascia 2023: 60). In one of his letters, Moro lucidly expressed that the blind respect for the reason of state actually implied the introduction of the death penalty into the Italian legal system (Sciascia 2023: 86).

Aldo Moro had not changed his opinion, but the party had. In his letters he expressed surprise that the DC government had fallen into the idolatrous cult of the State (Sciascia 2023: 60). The Italian State, which, as Sciascia ironically points out (2023: 62), had coexisted for more than a century with the mafia, had been corrupted and had embezzled money for decades, now rose "strong and solemn." Moro himself exposes this paradox in one of his last letters — "Such rigor in a disorderly country like Italy!" (Sciascia 2023: 134) — and the series stages this tragic irony in the desperate sequence of the kidnappee's confession.

The letters demonstrate that Moro's disillusionment with his party and the Catholic Church, as well as his feeling of abandonment, grew stronger as the days passed. The clearest expression of Moro's disillusionment is found in the letter of April 29, in which he finally acknowledges the abject, putrid nature of a power that does not govern for the common good nor to achieve the primary purpose that, for many conservative thinkers, the State must assume (Milner 2011: 29): guaranteeing the survival of the citizens. The disillusionment with power becomes transparent in this raw excerpt from the letter: "I repeat, I do not want men of power around me. I only want by my side those who truly loved me and will continue to love me and pray for me." Sciascia (2023: 108-10) thinks in this regard that Moro loved and suffered for power, but only now recognized its perverse nature, only now used the word "power" in all its harshness, and finally abandoned the euphemisms ("State authorities," "party men") that were typical of that political language that says nothing.

Bellocchio stages this disillusionment in the aforementioned confession of Moro in the final episode of the series. The kidnapped man tells the priest that he feels an uncontrollable and recurrent feeling of hatred towards his former friends, and therefore feels the urge to shout at those "Jesuitical faces." Moro believes that among them, the worst

is Andreotti because he lacks mercy, while Cossiga has mitigating circumstances because he is bipolar and very unhappy. He ends up confessing that everything seems grotesque and deeply wrong (*sbagliato*): a law professor sentenced to death by a jury that does not recognize the State, and a government that, by refusing to negotiate, acknowledges the sentence of a terrorist band.

Moro's disillusionment is profound because it affects not only the men of political power but also the Pope. The series highlights the complex, contradictory position of Paul VI. On one hand, he wants to save his friend and even attempts the path of ransom with money, that is, with the "devil's excrement" whose "sacred mission purifies it." But on the other hand, he does not dare to break with the corrupt Italian political regime and ends up endorsing the government's firm stance. The Pope's statement, in which he urges the Red Brigades to release Moro "simply and unconditionally," ended up confirming and reinforcing the position of the Italian government, which was beginning to feel pressured by a public opinion favorable to negotiation. The third episode of the series stages the doubts and suffering of a Pope, magnificently portrayed by Toni Servillo, who does not know what language to use to persuade and move the terrorists. In a phone conversation with Curioni, the priest who helped him in the failed ransom attempt, he alludes to the search for a less solemn style that can reach the kidnappees' hearts, but he does not know how to do so. This shows that it is a power which, like the government, has distanced itself from the people. It lacks that "sentimental connection" with the people that, as Gramsci pointed out (2023: 739-40), is typical of intellectuals who understand and manage to communicate with the community. Bellocchio's Paul VI acknowledges that it is difficult to reconcile responsibility with mercy. With his final statement, he seems to choose the path of responsibility, but in reality, he sanctions the inflexible position of a corrupt government.

It is then understandable the deep disappointment Moro felt in his letters regarding the blatant contradiction of the Pope, who distanced himself with his statement from the merciful praxis of the Church: "the Holy See," Moro wrote, "renounces its humanitarian tradition and condemns me [...]. It is something horrible, unworthy of the Holy See" that prefers the "state murder" over the practice of exile or prisoner exchange conducted in many countries (Sciascia 2023: 135). The tragic aspect of the case is that the mercy he unsuccessfully sought from the State and the Vatican was instead found in his executioners. Sciascia (2023: 93) poignantly notes that "the highest point, the most Christianly elevated point,

reached by Moro's tragedy" is found in the letter from April 29, in which the kidnapped man recognizes that the person who delivered the letter from his family "had piously cut out the news of my condemnation," that is, the refusal of the Christian Democratic party to the prisoner Exchange.

Regarding the opinion that Moro had gone mad during the kidnapping, Bellocchio's series also agrees with Sciascia in that he was no different than before, even continuing to use that new language that seemed to say nothing. It is false that he was forced to become the spokesperson of the terrorist group. For Sciascia (2023: 177), the reason there was no happy ending is precisely due to the refusal of the political and journalistic power to identify the Moro of the kidnapping letters with the previous politician. However, in those letters, the kidnapped man demonstrates that he still retained his independence. He requested the same as in the past: to put the principle of life before the abstract principle of the reason of state. According to Sciascia (2023: 19), he wrote the letters freely because the prison ethics of the Red Brigades allowed it, as they knew Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* and did not want the "people's prison" to resemble the prisons of the SIM (Imperialist State of the Multinationals). The truth is that the power preferred that he was not found, since Moro's absence facilitated the approval of Andreotti's fourth government.

The series, from the second episode onward, shows in numerous sequences the betrayal of the party. It is especially the woman, Eleonora, who in two magnificent sequences complains that they want to portray her husband as crazy. First before the Pope, in the third episode. Paul VI explains to her, however, that "firmness" is only the official position, and that the literal words about Moro's madness do not express the deep views of the public powers and the press. The Pope maintains that it is a stance of prudence, diplomacy, which allows acting in secret. The second sequence takes place in the final episode and concerns the conversation she has with Zaccagnini, who reiterates that the State must remain firm and not accept the terrorists' blackmail, since negotiating means acknowledging the State's weakness. Bellocchio's Nora insists, however, that her husband's letters reflect his true thoughts, those of a Christian who always wished to negotiate.

2. **BRIGATE ROSSE, OR THE SECOND REALITY OF THE "POLITICAL RELIGIONS"**

Bellocchio also shares Sciascia's thesis (2023: 64, 82) that Moro was condemned directly by the Red Brigades and indi-

rectly by the State itself, that is, by "two halves of the same Stalinism": the violent and cruel one of the terrorist group "which kills the SIM's servants without trying them and tries their leaders"; and the "covert and subtle Stalinism" of the State which places abstract principles above the lives of its citizens. Both the State and the Red Brigades believed, to put it in the terms of the Spanish philosopher José Luis Villacañas, in the "absolute object" of the strong State, regardless of whether it was a liberal or communist State.

Sciascia not only compares the Red Brigades with the Cosa Nostra and highlights the need to understand the armed group in the Italian context, but also, as Bellocchio constantly does, wonders if the terrorists are mad. It is true that Sciascia (2023: 129) initially doubts the thesis of madness ("when madness follows a method, one should not trust it"). The function of the Red Brigades was to prevent the "historic compromise," that is, the right-wing government relying on the support of socialists and communists, but their armed actions achieved the opposite effect. The same radical left, represented by the newspaper *Lotta Continua*, warned the brigadists—through a public appeal of intellectuals left of the PCI published on April 19, 1978—of the mistake they would make if they did not release Moro. In the end, they executed him, which marked the beginning of their decline. For this reason, Sciascia (2023: 132) ends up wondering whether the destiny of the terrorist group will not be madness, "an aestheticism in which dying for the revolution has become dying with the revolution." An aestheticism or romanticism that the series *Esterno notte* identifies with the character of Valerio Morucci.

In Bellocchio's two works, the brigadists suffer, if not madness, something very similar, which we could describe with the term "second reality." This is a concept that Voegelin (2023: 259-79) uses to explain those political ideologies that distance themselves from the truth of facts and that, in certain critical situations, can become very persuasive. The Austrian philosopher mainly takes this concept from Heimito von Doderer (2009: 1266-7), from his novel *Die Dämonen. Nach der Chronik des Sektionsrates Geyrenhoff* where one of his characters, the young René, explains that "the dominant feature of our time" is "a second reality, which rises alongside the first, that of facts, resting on ideology." In his opinion, "it is a very modern situation, the clash of a first and a second reality, for which there is neither a bridge nor a common language, although concrete words may be so".

The character of *Buongiorno, notte* who identifies with Bellocchio, Enzo Passoscuro, explicitly says that the terrorists "are crazy, stupid fools." They are even worse than the

Christian Democratic politicians because “they want to imitate them.” The director has highlighted in his film and series the mirror relationship that exists between the Red Brigades and the State (O’Leary 2007: 98): not only do the former imitate the latter by establishing the people’s prison, the trial, and the death sentence, but they also share the thesis that “a priori abstraction” — the general principle — is more important than the life of the individual citizen. In a way, the brigadist agrees with what another character in the mentioned novel by Doderer (2009: 621-5) says: “what makes someone a revolutionary is generalization,” since the subject who embraces revolutionary ideology moves away from “evidence, immediacy, concreteness, the most urgent certainties, the natural relationship with friends and enemies.”

In *Sogni infranti*, the former brigadist Massimo Gidoni maintains that they were not mad, but believed in an ideology that made them “walk a meter above the ground” (Jimeno 2022: 345), disconnected from material reality. This ideology gave them the desire for an absolute object. The refusal of the world to realize their desire triggered the death drive, the destruction of that very world. In sum, the brigadists suffered from a pseudo-religious dogmatism that prevented them from recognizing any humanitarian limit. They had a theological, apocalyptic conception of political conflict. That is why they were convinced they were waging an absolute war that had to end with the total destruction of the adversary. Carl Schmitt warned against this revolutionary thinking in his writings, but in order to legitimize the political theology of the States, which, although of a different sign, was another absolutism that, like the Italian government, put the good of the State above that of its citizens (Villacañas 2008: 236-41). In *Buongiorno, notte*, the most dogmatic character and furthest from the Freudian reality principle, Mariano—who is nothing but the mask of Mario Moretti—confesses to Chiara that the absolute object of the revolution justifies everything, “even killing your own mother.”

Both the film and the series contrast two types of brigadists. The first type is adopted by the female terrorists, Chiara and Adriana, who free themselves from the “second reality” as soon as they recognize the error of executing Moro. Certainly, this is something that did not happen during the kidnapping, but Bellocchio intends with this invention to make present the repentance that would come later (O’Leary 2007: 96).

The series develops better than the film the change of opinion of the brigadist. There are three decisive moments. The first takes place in the bar sequence, where Adriana watches moved on TV the burial of the five bodyguards. The

second moment is the conversation with her lover, the terrorist Morucci, which leads her to reconsider whether it was worth giving up family life with her daughter, since the Red Brigades are immersed in a spiral of madness that could lead the group to self-immolation. Adriana reproaches her lover for daring to kill five fathers without truly believing in the triumph of the revolution. It is obvious that Adriana assumes only such a triumph justifies the crimes. Badiou (2016: 84-6) has precisely argued about the erroneous historical relationship that the left, to which the Red Brigades also belong, established between revolution and destruction. The French philosopher has recognized in recent years that the argument used by the red terrorism is false: “since history must give birth to an emancipated world, it is possible without any qualms to accept and even organize maximum destruction.” Badiou thinks, on the contrary, that all this must be corrected with a new conception of revolution “that does not pretend History to be its servant.” He also considers false the thesis that inspires the terrorist action of the Red Brigades: “negation entails affirmation” and destruction “gives birth to construction.” Finally, decisive in Adriana’s change of opinion is the sequence of the dialogue with a non-governmental intermediary, who makes it clear that Moro’s death will have the opposite effect to that desired by the brigadists. This character, invented by Bellocchio, defends the opinion that Moro is more frightening alive than dead, and that the true revolutionary act consists in freeing him.

In contrast to the evolution of the characters Chiara and Adriana, the main men in the group remain trapped in the second reality. The Moretti of the series and the Mariano of the film are the best expressions of the Red Brigades’ uncompromising Stalinism, since they believe, as we have indicated, that the revolution justifies everything. In another sequence from the last episode of the series, the terrorists debate outdoors, in a square in Rome, whether they should carry out the death sentence. Mario Moretti is inflexible and points out that the idea of freeing him is one belonging to an intellectual, a poet, which would never occur to the worker exploited on a factory assembly line. Moretti imagines an idealized proletariat that does not ask such questions: it knows it is at war and has no mercy.

Valerio Morucci, on the other hand, embodies a subjectivity different from that of Moretti. The series presents him as a kind of romantic Che Guevara, who, although willing to sacrifice his life for the proletarian cause, no longer believes that the guerrilla group can win the war to realize the communist ideal. Instead, it is enough to provoke as much

disorder as possible and kill as many fascists as possible. He resembles the protagonists of *The Wild Bunch* (1969), the Sam Peckinpah film that, in one of the series' episodes, Morucci watches at the cinema, although a police raid prevents him from seeing the ending. Morucci's position reveals a decadent romanticism incompatible with true revolutionary subjectivity (Uzal and Bellocchio 2023: 33).

Bellocchio is not original when he presents the Moro case as an expression of the Freudian theme—Oedipal-totemic—of the “death of the father.” His generation used to see terrorism as a movement that promoted liberation from the “paternal authority” of the bourgeois State (Uva 2007: 27). The psychoanalytic interpretation of the death of the father is, moreover, very present in a filmmaker like Bellocchio, who has given great importance to psychoanalysis and has even collaborated with the father of collective analysis (*analisi collettiva*), Massimo Fagioli, in some of his scripts.

It should therefore come as no surprise that Bellocchio gives great importance to the family. The filmmaker, who dedicates the film about Moro to the memory of his father and who, since his first work, *I pugni in tasca* (1965), has continuously addressed the most pathological aspects of the family and paternal authority, seems to agree with Sciascia (2023: 53-4) when he points out that in Italy everything is explained by the family. Moro appears in the film and series as the quintessential paternal figure. His sacrifice is even equated with the sacrifice of Christ, the Father of the Christians. The same terrorist in *Buongiorno, notte*, Chiara, finds herself torn between identifying Moro with her deceased father and the need that young terrorists have to kill the father and take his place in a utopian socialist state.

One of the most recurrent themes in Bellocchio's cinematography has been the criticism of the power of parents, but also of the children who want to impose themselves as parents (Pellanda and Rimini 2020: 177). Despite the younger Bellocchio's disagreement with Pasolini, the mature director of *Esterno notte* is not far from Pasolini's interpretation, who saw in the uprisings of '68 a family conflict within the bourgeoisie. Pasolini (2018: 193, 208) was convinced that the youth insurrection was not just another episode of class struggle but a “civil war” between rebellious children and their bourgeois parents, or, to be more precise, between the “young and good bourgeoisie” and the “old and evil bourgeoisie,” which could only end with yet another reform of capitalist society.

Buongiorno, notte, an “interior” film, revolves around the house converted into the “people's prison.” From the begin-

ning, the apartment appears to be a family home and the terrorist group an inverted representation of the Holy Family. Bellocchio does not hesitate to be redundant when he shows on Chiara's nightstand Marx and Engels' *The Holy Family* (Uva 2007: 75). Beyond the fact that the Red Brigades are a kind of sectarian and “holy family,” the Marxist literary classic invites us to consider that the brigadists identify with those idealists, Bruno Bauer and the Young Hegelians, who were criticized in the book for having distanced themselves from reality, for living in a “second reality.” *Esterno notte* presents the group again as a political family that replaces the biological one. Adriana, the member of the group who receives the greatest importance in the series, is a mother who renounces her motherhood, the raising of her daughter, for the revolution, and who has even had an abortion because armed struggle is incompatible with family life. It is a renunciation that she lives with displeasure, which Bellocchio shows especially in the sequences where Adriana cannot pick up her daughter from school. The girl thus becomes another victim of the armed struggle.

3. ART OF TREASON, INTRICATE REALISM, AND AESTHETICS OF CRUELTY

The women from the film and series, Chiara and Adriana, ultimately betray the absolute cause of the terrorist group, just as Tommaso Buscetta does in that other magnificent historical film by Bellocchio, *Il traditore*. The Italian director has commented in an interview that “some betrayals are just” when they represent an “identity affirmation” against collective devices that, like the sectarian family of the Red Brigades and the family of Cosa Nostra, restrict freedom (Pellanda and Rimini 2020: 175-6). Bellocchio himself acknowledges that, in his case, he betrayed the Marxist-Leninist ideology in his youth, so present in the early part of his filmography, and later the collective psychoanalysis of Massimo Fagioli. In all the mentioned cases, one betrays in order to remain autonomous, free. According to the concept provided by Artaud (2004: 566), we could say that betrayal is an act of “cruelty,” of acquiring the painful awareness that one is not free when subject to the sovereignty of an absolute object. The aesthetics of betrayal would be another name for the aesthetics of cruelty, which seeks to end all political and aesthetic theology, that is, all sovereign principle.

Bellocchio's art could be framed within a cruel aesthetics of betrayal that breaks with established rules and cinematic conventions. There are three aspects of this style or aesthet-

ics that are highly relevant in *Esterno notte*, and which appear, albeit with less purity, in other works by the filmmaker: cultivation of an intricate, profound realism that draws both on documentary material and more freely imaginative productions; use of metanarrative or metalinguistic elements to make the viewer distance themselves from the story being told and develop a critical judgment; and the use of a grotesque style in sequences where he critiques the corrupt and abject political power of his time.

3.1. Deep and intricate realism

With the series *Esterno notte*, Bellocchio provides a valuable example of intricate, deep, and complex realism because he constantly blurs the boundaries between different types of realities and images. He not only seamlessly mixes historical facts with imagined or dreamed ones, but also integrates fictional images created by the filmmaker with documentary footage of the actual historical figures. Intricate realism also allows the public history to blend with private history, as the collective community of the State becomes incomprehensible if the private and family life of the historical characters is not shown (Lasagna 2024). Moreover, only in this way can we understand the tragedy that arises from placing the public and abstract principles of the State above the singular and incomparable life of a human being.

The Italian director dives into the realm of imagination and dreams because he seeks alternative scenarios that help explain historical reality and illuminate what appearances conceal. Galli (2005: 11, Uva 2007: 77) argues that “if revolution is imagination in power, a revolutionary director must stage alternative scripts (scenarios) to historical reality.” This explains why the film and series ultimately show the scandalous image of Moro’s liberation and survival. Bellocchio himself acknowledges that he aims to achieve the greatest historical fidelity with this peculiar “aesthetics of betrayal,” which consists of representing the greatest historical falsehood: Moro’s liberation (Mancino 2014: 257, Uva 2007: 74, Aprà 2005: 220). This image constitutes “a kind of blasphemy” for those who have blind faith or trust in a political ideology or even historical science itself. Bellocchio comments that he places consecutively the imaginary sequence of the liberation and the one showing the historical truth of the execution (Mancino 2014: 257-9), one after the other, with the purpose that the viewer becomes aware that Moro’s death was not inevitable, and that he was assassinated because the two mentioned Stalinisms wanted it that way.

Bellocchio’s style, the constant mixing of real and dreamed or imagined images, serves to express the existential crisis of his characters, the painful contradictions they endure. The discomfort of the historical characters in the series (terrorists, politicians, the Pope, Moro’s family) translates into the production of images that do not correspond to historical facts but are real because they help clarify the motivations and actions of the protagonists of the tragedy. The terrorist from *Buongiorno, notte*, Chiara, lucidly acknowledges in a conversation with the brigadist Ernesto that the boundary between reality and dream disappears for individuals undergoing extreme tension. If she often looks at the kidnapped man, it is to make sure “that he is there, that it is not all a dream.” Ernesto asks Chiara if she would like everything to be a dream, and she replies that the worst thing is the uncertainty: “I don’t know. One thing or the other.”

The 2003 film, before reaching the tragic end, shows Chiara’s daydreams in which she imagines or dreams that Aldo Moro furtively walks through the apartment and curiously looks at the books on the shelves (Jimeno 2022: 330-1). In the final sequences, what Chiara’s fantasy has created is represented. The terrorist imagines—and the filmmaker shows it without those images having a different status than the images corresponding to historical facts—that she pours a drug into the brigadists’ food so that Moro can escape. After this sequence, the historical outcome is shown along with documentary footage of the funeral mass, presided over by the Pope, and with Moro’s absent corpse due to the explicit wish of the family, who no longer wanted any connection with power. Nevertheless, the film ends with a sequence that exists only in the imagination of the character and the filmmaker: Moro walking freely through the streets of Rome. O’Leary (2007: 86) believes that the imagined ending suggests, as we have already pointed out, the “continued spectral presence of Moro over the consciousness of the Italians,” the explicit manifestation of national guilt (Amabile 2023: 25).

The daydreams or imagined scenes are more varied in the series *Esterno notte*, since the points of view multiply. Daydreams or fantasy products are shown that are either diegetically elaborated by different historical characters or directly invented by the director, such as the sequence that opens the series and repeats in the last episode. Thus, Cossiga, tormented by the kidnapping of the president of his party, imagines Moro appearing to him in the second episode. The Pope, in the third episode, feels exhausted and sick and refuses to participate in the Good Friday Stations of the Cross, but at the same time imagines Moro carrying the cross

while being watched by the political class that sentenced him to death. Nora, Moro's wife, who shortly before the kidnapping confessed her marital crisis to a priest, dreams in episode 5 that Aldo returns to the bedroom and shares the marital bed again. But the terrorist's dream in episode 4 has special intensity. In a sequence with muted colors, almost appearing black and white, Adriana Faranda watches from the riverbank as the waters carry away the bodies of Moro and his escorts. Freudian psychoanalysis helps us interpret the image of a corpse dragged by the river, which in classical mythology was the place where the dead traveled to the Underworld. These striking shots, arising from the unconscious of the brigadist, express the guilt felt by the individual who tries to destroy the law and attack paternal authority.

The most important imagined scene is the one at the beginning, which we see again in the final episode. Before showing the historical truth, Bellocchio imagines a false happy ending: Moro is found alive in the trunk of the car left on Via Caetani, between the headquarters of the DC and the PCI. Then, the director shows Andreotti, Zaccagnini, and Cossiga walking through the hospital corridors where the freed president has been taken. Once in the room, Moro communicates to them what his last letters suggest: his complete break with the party. After this sequence, we return to reality and the shots showing Moro's execution take place, followed by the terrorist's call to the family to communicate the death, and the discovery of the deceased president in the trunk of a car.

The final shots of *Esterno notte* are filled with images intended to be documentary: the State funeral (a mix of documentary and fiction images), Pertini's speech in Parliament, the death of Paul VI, the arrest of Adriana Faranda, the election of Cossiga as President of the Republic, and images of Andreotti, the most corrupt of all politicians. These documentary or archival images complement the fictional images and make the body of the series an intricate one.

Unlike what happens with the imagined or dreamed scenes, which are more complex in the series, the variety of archival footage shown is greater in *Buongiorno, notte*, where we have different types of archives. On one hand, images extracted from historical documentary archives are shown, both Soviet, belonging to the Stalinist period, and from 1970s Italy, particularly from the days of the kidnapping. On the other hand, film footage is edited into the movie from the cinematic archive itself, with the purpose of illuminating the present of historical fiction with the past of cinema. Corresponding to Chiara's second dream, we see images related to the hopes raised by the Soviet revolution that belong to

Dziga Vertov's film *Three Songs of Lenin* (1934) (Jimeno 2022: 314). Later, Bellocchio compares Moro's letters with the book *Letters of Condemned to Death from the European resistance*, and to make this explicit, he inserts images from Roberto Rossellini's *Paisà* (1946), which show Nazis murdering and throwing prisoners into the sea from a ship (Jimeno 2022: 328-9). *Esterno notte* only shows from the cinematic archive a part of the ending of *The Wild Bunch*, the film with which the most romantic and decadent terrorism is identified.

3.2. Metalinguistic elements of a modern work

Metalinguistic or metanarrative elements are often indicators of artistic modernity because they make the form of the work of art visible. They primarily produce an effect of distancing and estrangement that allows the viewer to become aware of the medium of artistic expression and, at the same time, help them adopt a reflective and critical position. In the two audiovisual works dedicated to the Moro case, Bellocchio shows some of the means of representation with which he intends to approach historical truth (O'Leary 2007: 100), that is, he makes the complex, intricate body of the audiovisual work perceptible to the viewer. In the film and the series, the mentioned inclusion of archival footage interrupts the homogeneous flow of the audiovisual work and demonstrates that memory is a mixture of real and imagined recollections.

Enzo Passoscuro's screenplay also performs a metanarrative function in the 2003 film. The screenwriter character is a veiled, dark personification of Bellocchio himself, to the extent that some ill-intentioned critics have commented that this intradiegetic emissary of the author is nothing more than Bellocchio's own narcissistic self-projection (O'Leary 2007: 101). The fact is that the memoirs inspiring the film, those of the terrorist Braghetti, mention that among Moro's belongings there was a film script. It is inevitable to think that the film's sequences are already contained in Enzo Passoscuro's script (Mancino 2014: 181), whose title, *Buongiorno, notte* (taken from a verse by Emily Dickinson, which says "Good morning – midnight"), is identical to that of the movie we are watching.

The metanarrative device of the screenplay seems to respond to the reflection with which Sciascia (2023: 25) begins his book on Moro: the case appears to be taken from a novel because it demonstrates a perfection and logical coherence that is more characteristic of the literary realm than of reality. Bellocchio takes Sciascia's reflection seriously when he points

out in the film that Moro's tragedy was imagined beforehand by the screenwriter Enzo Passoscuro. Thus, we enter the field of hyperreality, a world in which literary signs precede historical reality. The very language employed by the powers responsible for the tragedy, which says nothing because it has distanced itself from otherness or from the real reference that exists outside the signs, belongs to the order of the simulacrum (Baudrillard 1978). Political power becomes a simulacrum when it no longer represents a real citizenry, a community that exists beforehand, and when, as happens with right- and left-wing populism (Villacañas 2015), its main function is not to give expression to the will of the people but to construct that very Will.

The character's screenplay contains only the imaginary part of Bellocchio's film, that is, Chiara's dreams, and not the part that recounts the historical facts. That is why Chiara tells Enzo that his "script is false from beginning to end, absurd, implausible. Imagination has never saved anyone. Reality is very different." Enzo—and it must not be forgotten that he speaks on behalf of the director—replies that "imagination is real. It is real to imagine [Bellocchio has only anticipated in time the terrorist's remorse] that among the kidnappers there is a woman who wants to save the prisoner but does not want to betray her comrades," and that "she feels horror at the murder because she no longer believes in it. She is even furious with herself for having been so blind, so stupid." Bellocchio's mentioned intricate realism implies affirming that "imagination is real," that without it historical facts remain silent, just like the documentary images themselves, which are the result of the encounter between reality and the technical apparatus. Imagination, or the act of fantasizing with alternative scenarios, leads us to relate, to combine some images with others, in order to judge historical events.

The metanarrative function, which in *Buongiorno, notte* is performed by Passoscuro's screenplay, is exercised in *Esterno notte* by the filming—at the end of episode 5 and the beginning of episode 6—of a movie that narrates Moro's kidnapping and even, before it happens, his execution. The filming images become a mirror that reveals the fictional dimension of the series we are watching. All of this is compatible with an intricate realism that, on one hand, uses images from the external world and images from the subject's inner world. On the other hand, it invites the viewer to be aware of the difference between real images and the simulacrum of the filming; in other words, it invites them to be able to separate images with an external referent from those that say nothing because they become the zero degree of otherness, as they

no longer express something prior and external to the sign. The story of the nun who confuses the filming with reality, and who awakens unfounded hopes in Moro's family, is nothing more than a *mise en abîme* of the same situation of the viewer who trusts in linguistic and visual simulacra. The "distrust of images" is one of the main lessons we can draw from Bellocchio's series.

3.3. *The use of the grotesque style to represent the abjection of power*

The series *Esterno notte* demonstrates that the grotesque is one of the most suitable styles to represent a corrupt, putrid, abject power. In particular, the series uses this style to address both the power of the DC and the pathetic and outdated power of the Vatican, everything that Pasolini included under the name *Palazzo*. It is not surprising, therefore, that due to this use of the grotesque style, Bellocchio seems a worthy heir to the author of *Salò* (1975) and *Petrolio*.

The series' director himself associates the use of "sarcasm" and "ridicule," characteristic of the grotesque style, with an anarchist critique of power (Uzal and Bellocchio 2022: 32) that seems to coincide with that of Valle-Inclán, the Spanish writer who called his grotesque tragedies "esperpentos." Cruel anarchism is not characterized by showing violent images or torn bodies, but by showing caricatured and sarcastic images of power.

Wolfgang Kayser (2010: 309) relates the grotesque to mental alienation, particularly to the intense experience of being moved by strange forces. When this happens, we resemble puppets or marionettes moved by strings, by powers we cannot control or understand, and the world becomes *unheimliche*—unsettling, eerie, sinister. For this reason, the grotesque produces disorientation and strangeness. The world also becomes absurd when we lack values to overcome crisis situations, when the institutions born to save us from existential—natural or cultural—risk become our main enemies. This inversion is demonic and fatal. It is none other than this inversion that Bellocchio expresses in his series, that of an Italy where political powers are in the hands of a corrupt elite. The world ceases to be grotesque, ceases to be perceived as absurd and meaningless, when institutions, starting with traditional powers, once again provide sufficient tools, techniques, and symbols to fight the evils that threaten human beings. The definition Kayser provides (2010: 315) of the grotesque as "the attempt to conjure and exorcise the demonic forces of our world" can be perfectly applied to Bellocchio's series.

There is a certain “aesthetic violence” and cruelty in Bellocchio’s grotesque style. We speak of “cruelty” in the sense given by Artaud, that is, in the sense already mentioned that the characters completely lack freedom. Cruel is the distanced, unconsolated contemplation of the state of degradation in which the multitude of a country lives. The grotesque style, like the metanarrative elements of the series, has a distancing effect. It implies, as Valle-Inclán said about *esperpento*, a superior (zenithal) gaze over characters who seem reduced to masks, to marionettes, without any freedom (Dougherty 1983: 176-177). The grotesque arises from the contrast between the suffering of the characters and the distanced, impassive vision of the viewer. *Esterno notte* attains in some episodes, especially the second and the third, the condition of a “grotesque tragedy.” It is true that some characters, such as the trio of DC politicians Andreotti, Cossiga, and Zaccagnini, are clearly grotesque, while others, like Aldo Moro and Adriana Faranda, are more tragic, but equally overcome by disturbing and dark circumstances.

As a conclusion, we can say that the mixture of the tragic and the grotesque to express the political and cultural crisis has been cultivated by the most insightful and committed art. This is one of the artistic forms that has best represented the cultural crisis in a time of profound corruption of institutions, such as Italy in the 1970s. A good example of a work contemporary to the events that makes use of grotesque tragedy is *Todo modo* (1976), the adaptation that Elio Petri made of Sciascia’s famous novel dedicated to the DC.

The tragedy of Moro, the betrayal by his party and the Vatican, was a civil trauma that influenced the downfall of the regime itself, which was sustained by the hegemony of the DC. However, the regime change was not the result of the revolution longed for by the left, but rather a “passive revolution” that, as happened in Spain (Villacañas 2022), gave way to neoliberal and populist policies. Bellocchio’s series helps us understand the profound truth of the Italian passive revolution. To achieve this, the filmmaker complements the work on historical memory with the creative work that involves a deep use of fantasy and imagination. In sum, *Esterno notte* stands out among other historical series for its intelligent use of the most intricate and grotesque realism, which is not incompatible with the compassion that, like any true artist of memory, it shows toward its characters.

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Films

Buongiorno, notte (2003)

Diavolo in corpo (1986)

I pugni in tasca (1965)

Il caso Moro (1986)

Il traditore (2019)

Paisà (1946)

Piazza delle Cinque Lune (2003)

Rashomon (1950)

Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma (1975)

Sbatti il mostro in prima pagina (1972)

Sogni infranti. Ragionamenti e deliri (1995)

The Barefoot Contessa (1954)

The Wild Bunch

Three Songs of Lenin (1934)

Todo modo (1976)

TV shows

Esterno notte (2022)

SERIAL TOPOLITICS. SPATIAL ATTITUDES IN GEOPOLITICAL DRAMA

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Political drama; spatiality; television aesthetics; territory; conflict

ABSTRACT

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

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

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1. INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. SPATIAL ATTITUDES OF THE NARRATIVE: TERRITORY AND CONFLICT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. SPATIAL ATTITUDES OF DISCOURSE: TOPOCRACY AND THE GAZE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5. A CLEVER POSITION OF THE CAMERA. CONCLUDING REMARKS

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

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

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

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TV Shows

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

"GENDER IS A SHELL GAME". POLITICAL IMAGINATION ON FEMINIST DYSTOPIAS

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ABSTRACT

The dystopian genre is defined as narratives portraying societies in which a substantial majority of humanity suffers slavery and/or oppression as a result of human action (Claeys, 2017). This article is situated within academic studies of dystopian fiction and analyzes, in

particular, a television series based on Naomi Alderman's novel *The Power*. Bearing the same title as the novel, the Amazon Prime series imagines a scenario in which women acquire a biological power that grants them the ability to generate electricity. This study presents a thematic analysis that identifies the dystopian tradition in which the analyzed fiction can be placed. To this end, a theoretical framework has been developed to contextualize the different dystopian typologies; these thematic categories were subsequently applied in the analysis through a qualitative narrative template. The findings indicate differences from the original novel, as the series under examination fits within the tradition of feminist critical dystopias.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Winner of the Bailey’s Women’s Prize for Fiction, *The Power* is a novel written by Naomi Alderman that imagines a scenario in which women biologically acquire a power granting them the ability to generate electricity. This power confers upon them a physical superiority that extends into the political sphere, challenging existing gender roles and reversing the axis of patriarchy. Alderman concisely explains the Power as a latent chromosomal advantage accidentally produced by chemical agents, thereby blurring the traditional masculine–feminine power binary. However, this is not a plot in which all women can kill all men (Miller, 2020). Thus, *The Power* is not solely about physical domination; its ramifications are explored in political terms, opening debates about human behavior, sociopolitical context, and resistance against oppression.

It follows that there are two ways for the nature and use of human power to change. One is that an order might issue from the palace, a command unto the people saying ‘It is thus.’ But the other, the more certain, the more inevitable, is that those thousand points of light should each send a new message. When the people change, the palace cannot hold. (Alderman 2018, p. 45)

Regarding the author, her biography is relevant to understanding the personal and academic influences reflected in her work. Naomi Alderman is a novelist born in 1974 in London, daughter of Geoffrey Alderman, a British historian specializing in the Jewish community in nineteenth- and twentieth-century England. She studied at South Hampstead High School and later at Lincoln College, Oxford, where she completed studies in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics, before moving to the United States for work-related reasons. It was during her time in North America that she began to engage with feminism, and since then she has actively supported women’s rights—a commitment that is strongly reflected in her literary production. Her best-known work, *The Power*, is said to be inspired by the fourth wave of feminism and by her relationship with Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood, internationally renowned for her dystopian novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* (Banerjee et al. 2022).

This article focuses on the recent adaptation of *The Power* by Amazon Prime, a series that currently consists of a nine-episode first season. Before undertaking the analysis, we will outline the theoretical foundations that define the genre of the series: dystopia.

2. ESCENARIOS ALTERNATIVOS: LA DISTOPÍA COMO GÉNERO

Traditionally, dystopia (and utopia) has been categorized as a subgenre of science fiction (Barceló 1990, Fitting 2009, Suvin 2016). Isaac Asimov (1975) defined science fiction as the branch of literature concerned with human reactions to changes in science and technology. Utopias and dystopias, however, are fictions concerned with the improvement or deterioration of sociopolitical circumstances; thus, although utopian and dystopian works may contain elements of science fiction, they are not limited to those elements (Suvin 2003, Claeys 2017). Utopias and dystopias are sociopolitical genres (Suvin 2016), distinguished by their plausibility and strong political charge (Claeys 2017), for “they address political themes critically and creatively, telling us what is wrong with the now and how it might be improved” (Sargisson 2011: 32). Roemer (2011) describes utopian and dystopian texts as spaces that invite readers to vicariously experience new political situations.

Aligned with this, utopias (and dystopias) share a key element with science fiction: the *novum* (Moylan 2000a), referring to the essential feature of an imagined world that makes the fictional environment different from, yet familiar to, the empirical world of the reader (Suvin 2000). Within speculative fiction—which encompasses dystopia, utopia, and science fiction, among others—the present is transformed into the past of a future yet to come, enabling “a structurally unique method for apprehending the present as history” (Jameson 2006: 288). The power of the *novum*, in the case of dystopia, lies in reconciling the principle of reality with the principle of hope (Suvin 2000). Thus, Moylan (2000a) contends that the potential of dystopian and utopian texts resides in their capacity to resist the mythological and ideological closure of texts, connecting reality with hope.

The definition and characterization of utopias and dystopias has sparked extensive academic debate, given that what is considered socially desirable or disastrous may vary according to sociocultural context and differing ideological positions (Claeys 2010). For instance, while utopia may refer to an ideal society, what constitutes such a society remains contested (Greene 2011). Given the longer historical trajectory of the utopian tradition (Moylan 2000), it is useful to begin by outlining the concept of utopia. Levitas defines utopia as “the expression of desire for a better way of living” (2011: 53). Uhlenbruch (2015) adds that a crucial aspect of utopia is the imaginative representation of a radically altered situa-

tion extrapolated from issues arising in the novelist's reality. Jameson (2010) concurs, describing utopia as a practice of mentally reconfiguring contemporary society. Suvin (2016) offers one of the most recognized definitions of the genre:

Utopia is the verbal construction of a particular quasi-human community where sociopolitical institutions, norms, and individual relationships are organized according to a more perfect principle than in the author's community, this construction being based on estrangement arising out of an alternative historical hypothesis (2016: 63)

According to Sargisson (2011), as hermeneutic texts, utopian (and dystopian) works are politically useful because they constitute spaces where alternative solutions to present-day problems can be imagined: "The negative criticizes while the positive creates or imagines something new" (2011: 41–42). The dystopian impulse is thus closely aligned with the utopian one: both extrapolate from contemporary reality to enable readers to experience an alternative world, either as endorsement (utopia) or warning (dystopia) (Uhlenbruch 2015: 129).

Sheperd (2013) argues that our cognitive frameworks are produced through the stories we tell ourselves and others; from these stories, we derive ideas and ideals about the world and our position in it. As Sargisson (2011) and Levitas (2011) note, this is linked to political ideologies, which, like utopian texts, help us orient our aspirations toward the future: "socialism contains utopias of egalitarianism and liberalism seeks various (economic, social, and political) utopias of freedom. This aspect of utopianism (and this aspect of ideology) brings hope to politics: the hope and desire that things can be different" (2011: 42). Consequently, there are utopias—and dystopias—rooted in diverse ideological perspectives, such as far-right, socialist, or feminist frameworks (Levitas 2011, Rosenfeld 2020). In essence, utopia depicts a society in which the correct political and ideological decisions have been made, resulting in a free and prosperous social order, whereas dystopia represents its antithesis (Claeys 2013a).

Although the concept of dystopia is often attributed to John Stuart Mill (1868), the term appeared earlier, in a letter to the editor published in *The Gentleman's Magazine* in September 1748, where it was used to describe an inverted, negative version of utopia in a poem praising Chesterfield's administration in Ireland and warning of sociopolitical disorder following his departure (Budakov 2010). Dystopian fiction imagines an uncertain future extrapolated from con-

temporary events: "dystopian narratives are also historically aware, responding to present conditions and informed by knowledge of historical events and traumas" (Stock 2019, p. 2). As politicized narratives, they function rhetorically to help readers think through political issues of their time: "grounded in anxieties of their present, these politically engaged narratives mobilise knowledge of historic events and traumas to speculate upon consequences of current trends and actions for the future" (2019: 3). According to Rosenfeld (2021), the values negated by dystopias are the humanist axioms of reason and debate.

For Moylan (2000b), the most important feature of dystopia lies in its capacity to encourage reflection on the causes of social harm: "Crucial to dystopian vision in all its manifestations is this ability to register the impact of an unseen and unexamined social system on the everyday lives [of individuals]" (2010: xiii). Dystopian narratives are products of the traumas of the twentieth century: "exploitation, repression, state violence, war, genocide, disease, famine, ecocide, depression, debt, and the steady depletion of humanity through the buying and selling of everyday life provided more than enough fertile ground for this fictive underside of the utopian imagination" (Moylan 2000: xi). Dystopia emerges as the result of human errors (Tower Sargent 2013), yet despite their often bleak depictions of the future, dystopias are fundamentally didactic and moralizing. Stock (2019) argues that dystopias, as politically committed narratives, "mobilise knowledge of historic events and traumas to speculate upon consequences of current trends and actions for the future" (2019: 3). The future society presented in dystopias is depicted as plausible: the genre seeks to frighten readers into understanding that the future depends on moral, social, and civic responsibility (Viera: 2010).

Having outlined the origins and main characteristics of dystopias, it is useful to group the different existing typologies. First, it is important to distinguish between dystopian works and works with dystopian settings. While the former propose scenarios in which sociopolitical relationships prevail, the latter merely take place in apocalyptic environments but do not delve into human relations and therefore cannot be considered dystopias per se (Rosenfeld 2020). Regarding dystopian narratives, Moylan (2000) proposes a series of questions that help determine the typology:

How do the narrative and counter-narrative of the text play out in the iconic and discrete registers of the text? How does the text negotiate the differ-

ence between an open or a closed strategy? How does the text contend with the difference between epical and mythic form and substance? How is the text informed by a novum or a pseudo-novum? Where does the assemblage of textual work place the dystopia along the continuum of militant or utopian pessimism versus resigned or anti-utopian pessimism? How, then, does the dystopia situate itself in the contest between history and the end-of-history, between utopia and anti-utopia? (2000: 157).

Drawing on Moylan (2000), dystopian narratives can be classified into:

- Classical dystopia (characterized by militant pessimism and open endings),
- Anti-utopia (defined by cynicism and despair and rejecting utopian ideals),
- Pseudo-dystopia (marked by resigned pessimism and closed endings).

In classical dystopias, militant pessimism preserves a utopian horizon that keeps hope alive. Thus, one may distinguish between:

- Open dystopias, which preserve a utopian impulse within an otherwise pessimistic narrative, and
- Closed dystopias, which suppress the textual ambiguity of dystopian narratives in favor of an absolutist stance that negates utopian possibility.
- Anti-utopias, for their part, question or ridicule utopian values. As Suvin (2021) argues, anti-utopias are written not to warn against the existing status quo, as dystopias do, but rather to warn against utopian aspirations themselves. Similarly, Blaim defines anti-utopia as: "a function or social use of a dystopian text explicitly or implicitly questioning/opposing particular utopian solutions or utopianism in general" (2022: 45).

To illustrate these distinctions, Moylan (2000) notes that dystopian narratives of revolt—or the potential for revolt—express militant pessimism that amplifies utopian possibilities (dystopia). By contrast, pseudo-dystopias tend to favor linear plots in which revolts are decisively crushed, leaving no residue of dissent or opposition within society. Beginning in the 1980s, new typologies emerged, such as critical dystopias and anti-critical dystopias.

- Critical dystopias negotiate generic dystopian pessimism with an open, militant, utopian stance that breaks through the hegemonic enclosure of the fictional world and explicitly resists the anti-utopian

temptation inherent to dystopian narratives (Moylan 2000: 195).

- Anti-critical dystopias, by contrast, remain closer to pseudo-dystopias: texts that more readily remain in the camp of nihilistic or resigned expressions that may appear to challenge the current social situation but in fact end up reproducing it by ideologically inoculating viewers and readers against any form of anger or action, enclosing them within the very social realities they disparagingly expose (Moylan 2000: 196).

According to Baccolini (2000), classical dystopias locate hope outside the text in their warning function, whereas critical dystopias place hope within the text by preserving the characters' capacity for choice. The elements that enable resistance in critical dystopias include language and its re-appropriation, memory, and critical historical consciousness (Baccolini 2013). As Moylan (2000) explains, one crucial outcome of linguistic reappropriation by rebels and nonconformists is the reconstruction of empowering memory:

Whereas the hegemonic order restricts memory to nostalgia for a fictive Golden Age that embodies the ideological attributes of its own system, the dystopian protagonist often reclaims a suppressed and subterranean memory that is forward-looking in its enabling force (2000: 149).

Critical dystopias emerging in the 1980s and 1990s thus negotiate pessimism with a militant utopian stance that breaks through the hegemonic enclosure of the dystopian world while self-reflexively rejecting the anti-utopian temptation. One paradigmatic example is *The Handmaid's Tale*, which recounts the experiences of Offred, a "handmaid" enslaved and periodically raped to bear children for a fundamentalist couple. Although Moylan (2000) classifies Atwood's novel as a transitional narrative between classical and critical dystopia, authors such as Baccolini (2000) and Cavalcanti (2022) situate it firmly within critical dystopia due to its narrative strategies. Baccolini (2000) identifies several common traits of critical dystopia: coexistence of utopian and dystopian elements within the narrative; cognitive explanation of historical evils and of resistance to them; high degree of textual self-reflexivity (genre-awareness through linguistic emphasis and intertextuality); activation of a utopian function in relation to the reader's critical response, leading to political positioning (with emphasis on issues such as gender, class consciousness, and race).

Building on the previous theoretical distinctions, the following major classifications have been proposed by Moylan (2000), Tower Sargent (1994), and Balasopoulos (2006):

- Utopian Satire: A non-existent society located in a specific time and place, where the predominant function is the satirical critique of the author's contemporary society (Tower Sargent 1994).
- Anti-Utopias: Works that criticize the utopian impulse, utopias themselves, and their authors (Tower Sargent 1994). Anti-utopias warn that the application of utopian ideals may lead to totalitarianism (Uhlenbruch 2015). If utopia represents hope and utopian satire embodies distrust, anti-utopia is rooted in disbelief (Viera 2010). Balasopoulos (2006) distinguishes five categories of anti-utopias:
 - Satirical Anti-Utopias: Mild critiques exposing utopias as unrealistic.
 - Dogmatic Anti-Utopias: Narratives in which the implementation of a utopian project leads to undesirable outcomes; these works do not ridicule utopian aspirations but warn against their execution.
 - Dogmatic Anti-Utopias in Non-Fiction: Political theory texts exposing the inherent flaws of utopian projects.
 - Anticipatory Anti-Utopias: Narratives suggesting that the reader's contemporary world is already a utopia, implying that criticism of it would be dangerous.
 - Critical Anti-Utopias: Works that oppose the extreme ideals associated with utopias, such as the erasure of all antagonism.
- Dystopia (Balasopoulos 2006): Dystopia has historically been associated with the idea of hell brought to earth, transforming the world into a space where the will of the majority has been eroded (Claeys 2013, 2017). Sargent defines dystopia as a detailed depiction of a society situated in a specific time and place. Balasopoulos (2006) identifies five dystopian categories:
 - Dystopias of Tragic Failure: Narratives in which utopian schemes fail despite their noble premises. Causes of failure may include human nature, ideological contradictions, or the persistence of antagonisms. These narratives do not discredit utopia and often offer closure to the utopian project.
 - Authoritarian Repression Dystopia: Texts where the State acquires an authoritarian character, becoming the source of societal evil. Unlike anti-utopias, these narratives do not depict the failure of a utopian project.
 - Catastrophic Contingency Dystopias: Stories in which societal collapse is triggered by an external threat: alien invasion, meteor impact, unexpected biological mutation, etc. While these narratives may contain critiques or satires of the State or social institutions, they do not hold them responsible for the catastrophe.
 - Nihilistic Dystopias: Narratives portraying societies governed by multinational corporations, marked by social decay and technological bureaucratization. Although their critique of the existing social order may be inconsistent, they are considered strong dystopias.
 - Critical Dystopias: Narratives that present utopian enclaves connected to and in conflict with non-utopian parent societies (Moylan 1980). Their ambiguous, open endings preserve the utopian impulse within the text. By rejecting the traditional submission of the individual at the narrative's end, critical dystopias create a space for contestation and opposition for those whose class, gender, race, sexuality, or other positions are not empowered by hegemonic domination (Gordin, Tilley and Prakash 2010). Critical dystopias maintain hope for an unrealized utopia, showing readers a path that must begin in the present through a dialectical process that they themselves must initiate (Fortunati 2013).

Other Utopian and Dystopian Variants

- Critical Utopia: A central concern in critical utopias is the awareness of the limitations of the utopian tradition. These narratives reject utopia as a closed project while preserving it as a dream. Critical utopias focus on the persistence of difference and imperfection within utopian society itself and therefore offer more recognizable and dynamic alternatives (Tower Sargent 2013).
- Defective Utopia: A work that initially appears to depict a good society but gradually reveals foundational flaws that invite critical questioning.

3. OBJECTIVES

After presenting the theoretical foundations that support this article, we now outline the general and specific objectives guiding the research. First, the overarching purpose is situated within the study of the dystopian genre and can be stated as follows:

O1. To examine the dystopian typology in which the television series *The Power* is situated.

In addition, the review of the academic literature on dystopian fiction has uncovered a relevant question: several scholars have detected thematic differences in the genre when it is written by women. Accordingly, we propose the following research question:

RQ1. Does the series under study display distinctive characteristics associated with feminism?

4. METHODOLOGY

To address the proposed objectives, a qualitative methodology was selected, consisting of a thematic and ideological analysis of the series under study. For this purpose, the analytical template incorporates specialized literature on the study of characters (particularly Casetti and Di Chio 2010, Chatman 2013) and various manuals on political ideologies to identify feminist ideologemes present in the narrative (Heywood 2017, Balanguer 2019, among others). The classification of ideologemes used here has already been applied in previous research examining political ideologies in mass culture (e.g., Pineda, Fernández-Gómez and Huici 2018). With reference to feminism, examples include works such as Rebollo-Bueno (2021), Sánchez-Gutiérrez and Barragán-Romero (2022), and Donstrup (2024).

In addition, specific variables of the dystopian genre were incorporated into the qualitative analysis grid. Beyond the authors referenced in the theoretical framework—such as Balasopoulos (2006) and Tower Sargent (1997)—the thematic categories included were drawn from *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (Thomas Moylan 2001), *The Dystopian Imagination in Contemporary Spanish Literature and Film* (Diana Q. Palardy 2018), *Dystopian Visions and Utopian Anticipations: Terry Bisson’s Pirates of the Universe as Critical Dystopia* (Peter G. Stillman 2001), and *Handmaids, Tributes and Careers: Dystopian Females’ Roles and Goals* (edited by Myrna Santos 2018).

The table below summarizes the variables considered in the analysis template:

Feminism	Temática distópica
Patriarchy	Precariousness
Sorority	Corruption
Myth of Romantic Love	Exploitation
	Environmental degradation
	Imperialism
	Militarization
	Economic austerity
	Totalitarianism
	Authoritarianism

TABLE 1 SOURCE: AUTHOR’S OWN ELABORATION.

5. RESULTS

The Power is a series that explores the question: What would happen if, in some way, the social and physical imbalance of power between women and men were altered? The series offers a possible answer by granting women an electrical energy within their bodies, allowing them to electrocute others in various ways. However, power entails responsibility, and the protagonists are aware of this, using it primarily as a defensive resource against sexual aggression or explicit violence. Moreover, this power requires training; it is not an ability that can simply be switched on and off, and it is exhausting, as shown by the series’ protagonists.

In this way, *The Power* presents a shifting narrative told through the stories of four characters—three women and one man—creating four interconnected plotlines. Before beginning the analysis, we introduce a brief overview of the series’ protagonists.

Roxy is the first woman to realize she has the Power when, at fourteen, she witnesses her mother’s murder at the hands of hitmen. After the event, she becomes an increasingly influential figure within her father’s criminal organization, as he uses her as a weapon against his enemies. Unlike her brothers, Roxy is intelligent and rises quickly within the family hierarchy. She does not waste time on petty revenge or disputes that preoccupy the men and openly challenges her father. Above all, Roxy seeks justice for her mother’s murder.

Tunde first witnesses the Power when he sees a girl strike back at a man who is harassing her in a supermarket. When

Tunde's girlfriend uses the Power during sex, he is fascinated, but he does not feel compelled to experience it again. Although he harbors some fear, he becomes acutely aware of the repression women face and becomes the first photo-journalist to record and disseminate evidence of a widespread female rebellion against male oppression. He attempts to document everything faithfully, without distortion, listening closely to the protagonists of the unfolding events. His meticulous commitment to reporting—rather than seeking power or personal favor—allows him to survive, evade entrapment, and avoid detection in an increasingly unjust and terrifying world. A woman in rebellion tells Tunde: "Now they will know that they are the ones who should not walk out of their houses alone at night. They are the ones who should be afraid." [6x01].

Margot is a politician in Seattle who is outraged by the incompetence of an arrogant mayor who publicly targets her on multiple occasions, even subjecting her to routine tests to detect the Power as part of an electoral stunt. Although her daughter transferred the Power to her, Margot agrees to the tests knowing she can pass them, having trained to conceal her ability. Her campaign promise is to help young women control their new condition by allocating funds for training camps where they can learn to use their gift responsibly and safely. In contrast, the mayor wishes to restrict the Power, positioning himself as the candidate who represents men concerned about this reversal of roles. In the novel, Margot begins forming an army; in the series, this trajectory begins to emerge at the end of the first season. Early on, she is the one who decides to publicly reveal the truth about women's transformation:

Because everyone's trying to suppress this truth, this new evolution—it's a serious change that's affecting people, young females specifically, all around the world, with a knock-on effect of affecting everybody, society at large. And nobody is telling the truth about it. [2x01]

Allie is an African American orphan who leaves her last foster home after killing her adoptive father, a pedophile rapist, and finds refuge in a girls' home run by nuns. She quickly rises within this environment, forging her own hierarchy, because Allie can do more than control neural pathways: she can heal psychological and physical injuries. Her healing "miracles" and the Voice in her head lead her to create a worldwide movement of female disciples. Allie's new religion, dedicated

to "the Goddess," brings forth the feminine dimension that has been suppressed by global theologies. Mother Eve says:

God loves all of us, and She wants us to know that She has merely changed Her garment. She is beyond female and male. She is beyond human understanding. But She calls your attention to that which you have forgotten. Jews: look to Miriam, not Moses. Muslims: look to Fatima, not Muhammad. Buddhists: remember Tara, the mother of liberation. Christians: pray to Mary for your salvation.

Although the four characters' stories are presented separately, they share one common thread: the profound impact that power has had on their private lives and environments. The themes explored and the consequences of the new power acquired by women suggest a strong relationship with feminist concerns, as feminism is defined as:

a theory, a social movement, and an emancipatory practice that fundamentally seeks to free women from the gendered impositions that determine what space they occupy, under what conditions they work, what they should study, how they should be, feel, desire, move, love, etc. By questioning the sex-gender system, all people gain greater freedom of movement (Moreno Balaguer 2019: 10)

The Power grants women physical superiority, which leads to a reconfiguration of gender roles. Rather than becoming dissociated, gender expectations invert, and men's lack of superiority often results in their punishment for transgressions. Many examples appear throughout the series: in an Arab context, a revolt erupts after a girl is beaten for failing to hide her Power; Allie electrocutes her adoptive father; and two Ukrainian sisters, Tatiana and Zoia, experience empowerment after long histories of exploitation and oppression. Tatiana, formerly an Olympic-level competitor, is sold by her mother to a high-ranking minister who becomes infatuated with her. As an adult, she learns to comply with her husband's desires—now the country's president. Zoia, on the other hand, is trapped in a human-trafficking network, forced into prostitution and confined under conditions of slavery. Their pasts and presents illustrate how poverty and inequality shaped their divergent paths but led to the same outcome: both became prisoners of similar men. Observing Zoia and Tatiana acquire the Power becomes a moment of liberation, particularly

because the viewer now understands how transformative this ability would have been during their childhoods. This dynamic reflects the logic of Alderman's novel, in which she describes a pervasive hunter-prey dynamic:

There is a part in each of us which holds fast to the old truth: either you are the hunter or you are the prey. Learn which you are. Act accordingly. Your life depends upon it. Gender is a shell game... Tap on it and it's hollow. Look under the shells: it's not there (Alderman 2018: 76).

The series opens with a voice-over by Margot Cleary-Lopez, looking into a mirror as future scenes unfold. She speaks of a near future in which women rule instead of men, in which God is imagined in women's image, and in which women no longer have to be afraid. She notes that to reach that world, everything had to be burned down, and that every revolution begins with a spark. This idea is reinforced in another scene where Allie converses with the inner light: "No point running, girl, I'm in your head... You can feel it, can't you? The Power. A better future is in your hands."

Throughout the episodes, society adapts to the new situation while counterforces attempt to limit women's abilities, like political movements that emerge seeking to sterilize women to prevent them from developing the Power. Due to the many storylines in the novel and the series' recent release, Amazon's adaptation focuses primarily on pre-Power inequalities and the process of adjustment, rather than on how society ultimately stabilizes in the new order. As a result, the first season ends with a political debate that foreshadows future developments: Margot electrocutes her political opponent live on air after his smear tactics, inaugurating a new era in the use of power.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In the theoretical framework, we noted that dystopian fiction imagines an uncertain future extrapolated from contemporary events: "dystopian narratives are also historically aware, responding to present conditions and informed by knowledge of historical events and traumas" (Stock 2019: 2). These politically charged narratives function as rhetorical structures that help readers think through the political issues of their time: "grounded in anxieties of their present, these politically engaged narratives mobilise knowledge of

historic events and traumas to speculate upon consequences of current trends and actions for the future" (2019: 3). This foundation underpins the dystopian series *The Power*, which imagines a world in which women acquire greater physical superiority, creating an imbalance within gender roles assigned by the patriarchal system. Alderman's narrative emphasizes this shift:

You have been taught that you are unclean, that you are not holy, that your body is impure and could never harbour the divine. You have been taught to despise everything you are and to long only to be a man. But you have been taught lies (Alderman 2018: 23).

Based on the classifications of Balasopoulos (2006) and Tower Sargent (1994), the series *The Power* presents the characteristics of a critical dystopia, as the first season's conclusion suggests that the patriarchal dystopian paradigm has been fractured and that hope for a more egalitarian world remains. Moylan (2000) argues that narratives depicting revolt—or the potential for revolt—express militant pessimism that serves to amplify utopian possibilities. Such revolutions are widely present in the series.

However, because the series was cancelled after its first season, it remains uncertain whether the emerging order will result in peaceful equilibrium, a utopian matriarchy, or a new system of oppression dominated by women. In this regard, the violent uprising portrayed in the series contrasts with Russ's (1980) conception of classical feminist utopias, which she characterizes as non-urban, classless, communal, and relatively peaceful spaces (1980: 14). For Russ, feminist utopias view male supremacy as the root cause of violence and emphasize the necessity of female bonding, community organization, and non-hierarchical social models. The elimination of men—or, more broadly, the elimination of sexualized power differentials—symbolizes the rejection of domination itself (Pearson 1977: 51).

Ultimately, the series *The Power* belongs to the subgenre of role-reversal feminist dystopian fiction, defined as depictions of societies in which women are granted attributes typically reserved for men—economic, political, and sexual dominance (LeFanu 1989). This demonstrates the political utility of speculative fiction, where feminist theory and praxis interweave to articulate alternative viewpoints capable of imagining pathways toward gender equality (Oziewicz 2017). The role-reversal feminist subgenre has thus served as a tool

to imagine fictitious societies in which gender ceases to function as a structural axis of power.

However, regarding Alderman’s novel—on which the series is based—scholars have argued that it reverses contemporary gendered violence while leaving intact a binary structure of domination. Yebra (2018) argues that the novel achieves a radical inversion through a literal transfer of power from men to women. Yet this inversion does not necessarily make the novel feminist, as Rebollo-Bueno (2021) points out in her analysis. Following this line, Mondragón Paredes (2022) argues that *The Power* does not eliminate differences in gender roles but merely reverses them in women’s favor. These inversions allow the narrative to satirize the most blatant aspects of women’s oppression by constructing explicit parallels between the fictional world and contemporary patriarchy (LeFanu 1989: 43).

Structurally, Mondragón Paredes notes, the novel mirrors misogynist literature that depicted women as unfit to wield power, suggesting that women should not, cannot, and must not hold authority (Russ 1980: 2). Sarah LeFanu similarly argues that such role reversals rarely support feminist goals because their dichotomous structure reduces gendered power relations to two possibilities: one group dominating or regaining dominance over the other; or an attempt to reach balance, which often ignores the complex historical realities of sexual inequality (1989: 45). Nonetheless, Mondragón Paredes (2022) contends that despite the conceptual limitations of the subgenre, role reversal remains essential in this novel to question gender as the basis of social organization.

Miller (2020) also highlights the narrative’s cautionary emphasis on the danger of replicating existing paradigms. She argues that although a female superpower may offer a temporary escape from reality, it is neither inherently optimistic nor inherently feminist. Yet, like Mondragón Paredes (2022), she connects Alderman’s narrative to mythical archetypes associated with femininity—particularly the monstrous-feminine and hypersexualized female figures. In contrast, the television adaptation presents moral dilemmas that suggest a different dynamic: most protagonists are reluctant to use their power or use it only in self-defense. They attempt to alleviate the fear their power provokes in men by exercising self-restraint. Nevertheless, the repression and threats they face lead to a revolution whose outcome remains uncertain due to the series’ cancellation.

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FICTION, SERIES, AND CREATIVITY: A CONVERSATION

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KEYWORDS

Television series; psychoanalysis and fiction; narration and monstration; ego ideal and narcissism; serialized temporality

ABSTRACT

The article presents an edited transcription of a scholarly dialogue held on March 9, 2026, at the Campus de Gandía of the Universitat Politècnica de València, within the research project “Aesthetics, Cognition, and Social Impact of Contemporary Series” (CIAICO/2024). The conversation

brings together philosophers José Luis Villacañas Berlanga and Antonio Rivera García in a wide-ranging discussion on the cultural, psychoanalytic, and aesthetic dimensions of contemporary serialized fiction. Starting from the thesis that television series represent the narrative perfection of cinema — rather than its degradation — the dialogue explores the role of series as a modern form of ethical and temporal pedagogy, heir to the nineteenth-century novel. Key themes include the opposition between narration and monstration in film history, the legacy of the avant-gardes and the high/low culture divide, the Freudian concepts of the ego ideal and narcissism as frameworks for understanding the evolution from the heroic characters of classical cinema to the more human protagonists of contemporary series, and the political implications of identification as theorized by Laclau. The conversation also addresses the problem of explicitness in Spanish fiction, the neuroscientific theory of narrative simulation (Oatley), and the family as the fundamental institution of human experience. Together, these threads articulate a defense of the creative, emancipatory potential of serialized fiction when it treats the viewer as an active, adult subject.

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1. INTRODUCTION

On March 9, 2026, we had the privilege of welcoming José Luis Villacañas Berlanga and Antonio Rivera García to the Campus de Gandía of the Universitat Politècnica de València, within the framework of the research project «*Aesthetics, Cognition, and Social Impact of Contemporary Series*» (CIAICO/2024). Both are full professors at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid. Villacañas is one of Europe's most prolific and original intellectuals, the author of more than sixty books spanning the history of Spanish philosophy to contemporary political theory; Rivera García is a specialist in political philosophy and art theory, with a particular dedication to cinema. The session, initially addressed to second-year students in Audiovisual Communication, was conceived as a space for open dialogue on fiction, series, and creativity. What follows is the edited transcription of the conversation they held after Villacañas's opening remarks, whose main arguments I summarize below.

Villacañas began with a provocative thesis: series are not a degradation of cinema but rather its perfection. If cinema is, as he maintains, “the greatest of the arts” — an art that draws on all others, from cave painting to theater, opera, and the novel — series represent the phase in which filmic expression achieves the narrative complexity previously available only in the novel. To illustrate this transition, he cited two works that, in his view, anticipated contemporary series: the television adaptation of Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (1982), which was already produced in a short version for theaters and an extended version in episodes, and Bergman's *Fanny and Alexander* (1982), whose long version constitutes, according to Villacañas, a complete testimony of a historical era — something only serial extension can aspire to.

From there, Villacañas developed what was the central axis of his presentation: the idea that series have become “the pedagogy of the world.” Just as nineteenth-century British literature functioned as a fundamental ethical institution — the one that shaped moral character, established the human type, and configured subjectivity — series have assumed that function in our time, with a decisive difference: they are the last media form capable of offering an organized temporality. In contrast to social media, which fracture temporality and short-circuit all mediation by reducing the subject to a merely reactive capacity, series require the viewer to connect elements distant in time and construct meaningfulness across an extended duration. Villacañas was emphatic on this point: having meaningful temporality is the condition of creativity.

This line of argument led him to Freud, who occupied a central place in his presentation. For Villacañas, reading Freud is an essential prerequisite for writing creative series, because it allows one to technify — to make reflexive — the mechanisms of the unconscious that operate in the slip, the joke, the dream: the language through which series connect with what the viewer does not yet know about themselves. To understand is to enjoy, he affirmed, and the enjoyment of understanding is recursive: each detail understood potentiates further understanding, so that a good series generates an “infinite commentary.” The communication achieved by the best series is not direct or coercive — here Villacañas invoked Kierkegaard — but indirect: it must be internalized from the viewer's sense of freedom; the viewer must feel free while producing what they wish to internalize.

Salvador, the recent Netflix series, served as his counterexample. Villacañas considered it representative of a recurring problem in Spanish fiction: treating the viewer as if they were incapable of constructing meaningfulness on their own. He criticized its invasive explicitness — in the script, in the dialogue, in the redundant repetition of visually established information — its adoption of the language of public discourse, and its direct pedagogy that, paradoxically, annuls the ethical efficacy it claims to pursue. “Do not be explicit, never be explicit,” he recommended to the students. “There is no Spanish series that could not be improved by cutting fifty percent of the dialogue.”

The dialogue reproduced below proceeds from these premises. Antonio Rivera García responded to Villacañas by broadening the framework toward the tension between narration and monstration, the legacy of the avant-gardes, the problem of high and low culture, and the notion of classicity as the production of experience. In the subsequent discussion, a student's question about the evolution from the heroic character of classical cinema to the human character of contemporary series gave rise to a joint reflection by Villacañas and Rivera on the ego ideal, narcissism, Marcuse's and Lasch's Freudian readings, and Laclau's theory of democratic leadership, in which cinema, psychoanalysis, and political theory intertwine in a way that we believe justifies the publication of this exchange.

2. DIALOGUE

Antonio Rivera García: Thank you very much, Héctor, for inviting me to converse with my friend and mentor José Luis Villacañas. The truth is that, as he said at the end, speaking

about what one does not know is what the philosopher has done from the very beginning: we speak about what we do not know; when we know something, it is no longer worth talking about in pursuit of truth or a shared opinion. For a long time, I have always wished that friends who are not specialists in this subject area would reflect on cinema, or on audiovisual productions, because sometimes an erudite reflection can be less productive, less illuminating, than one by someone who has read Kierkegaard and Freud. [*Addressing Villacañas*] So I have taken everything you said very seriously.

I took notes and I will try to say something about what you have presented, which is of great importance to me. Especially important is the end of your talk, which constitutes an appeal to an active viewer, a viewer who has come of age and is not treated as a child — as, however, the aesthetics of advertising treats us, an aesthetics that has largely invaded many audiovisual products.

Narration and Monstration: Ozu, Deleuze, the Avant-Gardes

I will try to follow the thread of your presentation. Let us begin with the thesis that series represent a perfection of cinema. While true with regard to the best series, it is also highly debatable. They could be so, yes, if we admitted that cinema is exclusively, or fundamentally, narration. But cinema is not only narration.

A good example of what I mean is Yasujiro Ozu. Deleuze, in his book *The Time-Image*, spoke of Ozu's invention of pure images and sounds — images that separate from the narrated story; that is, he invents empty landscapes and still lifes that constitute an interruption of narrative flow. They are certainly narrative films, but in them we find those dazzling moments when narrative time comes to a halt. That sequence mentioned by José Luis showing the two elderly spouses, in *Tokyo Story* (1953), gazing toward the horizon, constitutes a static moment within the film: the action has stopped. The sequence has meaning insofar as it breaks with narrative time, with the story understood as the set of characters' actions. But, fundamentally, the static moment only has meaningfulness through its contrast with the narrated actions.

Although what remains above all in our memory are the pure images that so fascinated the French philosopher, Ozu's stories are banal and he repeats them constantly. The Japanese director himself underscored the banality of his craft when he used to say that he made films like a tofu seller who always prepares the same recipe. Ozu's films are far

from that utopian film in which narration would have been eliminated, leaving only a sum of shots showing either empty landscapes and interiors or compositions of objects and still lifes. The Japanese filmmaker's films are a testimony to the opposition between narrating and showing, and I believe that the beauty of his films lies precisely in this real opposition.

All of this relates to an essential contrast we find from the very origin of film history — one that takes place, for instance, between D. W. Griffith and Erich von Stroheim. Griffith perfects narration because he succeeds in making the transition from one shot to another invisible, while Stroheim is so exaggerated in what he shows that it becomes difficult not to be aware of the transitions between shots. Only then, when narration seems to enter into crisis, does the viewer acquire a special lucidity that elevates them to the level of the creator. I believe that art, especially after the avant-gardes, can hardly be an adult art if it does not have something metalinguistic about it, if it does not allow the viewer, as Benjamin expresses in his celebrated essay "The Author as Producer," to acquire awareness of the mechanisms of creation. The best series inherit all of these elements from cinema. They are those that do not merely propose to narrate, but also to show the world and the difference between it and the art that represents it.

High Culture, Popular Culture, and the Avant-Garde

The democratic and metalinguistic character of contemporary art is related to what you mentioned, José Luis, about the distinction between high and low culture — a distinction that troubles me greatly. It is true that we admire Gramsci, and he provides a good starting point when he critiques that distinction, but Gramsci is insufficient because he had no sensitivity toward the avant-gardes; his taste was nineteenth-century. For him, art was fundamentally narration. This strikes me as outdated, but I share his aesthetic ideal, which consisted in abolishing the profoundly antidemocratic and elitist separation between a high-culture art and a low-culture one. Walter Benjamin, who was sensitive to cinema — as can be seen in his celebrated essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* — observed that there are disruptive, avant-garde, and metalinguistic mechanisms that were rejected by the public when it came to the supposedly superior arts, but were accepted, even by subaltern classes without any contact with university culture, when it came to cinema. With all of this, I want to oppose the thesis of Ortega in *The Dehumanization of Art*, who saw in the avant-gardes, in the most contempo-

rary art opposed to the Romantic taste for narration, an art made for élites and profoundly antipopular.

Godard said in this regard, in his *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, in a melancholic vein because he reflects on “what cinema could have been” and ultimately was not, that it could have been a more democratic art if it had had a more active, creative public. Benjamin’s “The Author as Producer” suggests this once again: art in the age of the avant-gardes was democratic because it wished to abolish the absolute barrier between the author, the creator, and the viewer. And you [addressing Villacañas], at bottom, were saying this earlier: for a work to be creative, the viewer must be creative as well.

This is the opposite path to that followed by series and cinema contaminated by the aesthetics of advertising. I recall Baudrillard in this regard; in his texts from 1968, he said that advertising occupies the place of the mother: it makes everything easy for us, even desires on our behalf; it tells us, in short, what we should think and, above all, desire. It seems to me that the critique of this advertising aesthetics is related to your critique of series that are too explicit, too pedagogical, that treat us as minors. We must always leave room for the viewer’s creativity.

Classicity as Experience

Your defense of the creativity of series contains a genuine praise of classical cinema: beginning with the meaningful temporality of John Ford. But cinema is contradictory and complex because it emerges at the same time as the avant-gardes appear in other arts, and because it receives their influence. It is true that as soon as the studio system is established in the United States and the Soviet Union — what Noël Burch called the institutional mode of representation — a very classical narration, perhaps excessively classical, would prevail. Debord, in one of his Situationist writings, even said that cinema had become in just a few years the oldest and least innovative art, and that the only filmmaker who was on a par with what was being done in other arts was Alain Resnais.

The problem of the triumph of the classical in cinema, at a time when other arts had already abandoned that path, becomes evident when we draw on Rancière’s analysis of art history — that is, when we start from his division into various regimes of art. Classical cinema, or the very series that bring cinematic narrativity to perfection, would correspond to what the French philosopher calls the mimetic regime of art, which can be traced back to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, where it is stated for the first time that great narrators construct stories,

narratives, more coherent than History itself. You yourself, in your latest book, *Senderos que se bifurcan* [*Forking Paths*], insofar as you aim to offer a narration of History, are compelled to do something of the sort — but you certainly introduce avant-garde elements, a temporality open to different possibilities, that already belong to the aesthetic regime of art, to a regime where temporality becomes more complex and enters into crisis...

José Luis Villacañas Berlanga: But here I would advocate for a broad sense of “classical,” because for me the classical is temporality... and it is true that there are many temporalities: it need not be an explicit or successive temporality, but it must be one in some form. It cannot be a temporality built from interrupted elements. *Solaris* has a temporality: of course, the protagonist comes and goes in a way that is completely striking and strange to us, but it adheres to a temporality. Why? Because in the end the child emerges before the father, and this is filmic temporality: to be understood, to be constructed, your temporality must emerge. The viewer is creative when their temporality is creative, when they are able to bring layers of their existence, their experience, into play. For me, this is the essential word: classicity is a work that produces experience. I am very much reminded here of Benjamin: what is happening to us, that we no longer have experiences? Why the destruction of experience? Classicity is that which produces experience.

Antonio Rivera García: Yes, you are right, but there are other temporalities, and there are also magnificent series and films that address the crisis of experience. There is no shortage of audiovisual stories in which absolutely nothing happens, in which what is shown is waiting without hope, the very rupture of linear time...

Freud and the Family as the Nucleus of Experience

Another aspect of your presentation that I would like to highlight is the importance you grant to Freud. You cited the great series *Fanny and Alexander* (1982), which is the story of a family... at bottom, almost all great series narrate family stories. Even in the best political series, the theme of the family reappears, since the ruler often occupies the function of the father. Horror films and series, which almost always tell stories concerning a family, draw on Freud and his essay *Das Unheimliche* — on the familiar that has ceased to be so and has turned into its opposite... Let us recall that, during

the writing of the screenplay for *The Shining* (1980), Kubrick was reading and drawing inspiration from Freud's essay on the uncanny...

José Luis Villacañas Berlanga: This is the real problem, Antonio: humanity has not configured an institution capable of producing experience other than the family. Period. It does not matter how we understand it... if that germ of experience that is the family does not exist, it is impossible for there to be experience afterward. And this is a good description of what is happening to us.

Antonio Rivera García: Freud is very suggestive... for the time being we will stop here... Thank you very much for this dialogue, which we now open up to respond to any question that sparks your curiosity.

DISCUSSION

Héctor J. Pérez López: If you like, I'll begin — I want to introduce a small supplement. For me, one of the authors who has most impacted my thinking about what series can do inside our heads — I study series, I research them, I teach a fourth-year course in which we make narrative maps of series — is a Canadian author I fell in love with when I saw him give a talk at a conference in the United States. He is a neuroscientist, a scientist, but he gave a talk about Dante.

Keith Oatley has a theory according to which, when we watch fiction, what our mind does is simulate. We undergo a simulation, and his primary approach is that we simulate socially — it is a social simulation. He is a scientist who has mapped our entire evolution as human beings, in which the key to our survival has consisted in becoming social beings, in sharing the same story over millions of years.

When José Luis referred to God and series, I thought the following: according to Oatley's thesis, as viewers we actually simulate many times the lives we have never had. When we place ourselves in the position of a character whose life we could never have, that character can probably teach us things, in the sense that it teaches us to know ourselves, because what we feel when we follow the situation of a character entirely distant from our own life are emotions and feelings that can help us better understand what we carry inside.

By the way, José Luis — have you seen *Riot Police* [*Antidisturbios*]?

José Luis Villacañas Berlanga: Yes, that one is good — that Spanish series really is good. Its success lies in the fact that its main character is a true force of character, and he transmits that character to everyone around him. This man, heavysset, permanently on the verge of a heart attack, compels everyone around him to be different. They all know that when he is present, they must be more rigorous. That capacity to radiate austerity, authenticity — it was truly formidable in that series.

Antonio Rivera García: In connection with what you said, Héctor, I think the act of simulating can be related to the old question of the viewer's identification with the characters. It is true that, especially from the 1960s onward, cinema was greatly influenced by Brecht, and that, rather than fostering identification, distanciation was considered more important. However, already in this new century, Kaja Silverman — who is also the co-author, with Harun Farocki, of a book on Godard — has written a work, *The Threshold of the Visible World*, in which she ends up offering a great praise of heteropathic identification — that is, identification that, in contrast to the habitual or classical kind based on external similarities, leads us to approach individuals who are very different from ourselves. Audiovisual productions, films and series, can achieve, for example, that a white, bourgeois man identifies with a Black, proletarian woman. That viewer is then compelled to make a genuine effort: to put themselves in the place of someone who is very different from themselves and to try to understand them. This proves that identification need not always be alienating; it can also be emancipatory.

José Luis Villacañas Berlanga: At bottom, this is something very Freudian: the function of art consists in allowing us to desire without shame things that in normal life we would not allow ourselves to desire. All psychic mechanisms reduce to two: identification and projection. And art, cinema, is an extraordinary power for both, because it plays with something that, as the last line of *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) says, is electively akin to the unconscious — to the stuff that dreams are made of.

What is the filmic image? This is what I understood from Antonio's magnificent book, *The Cruelty of Images* [*La crueldad de las imágenes*]. The filmic image is not the propagandistic or advertising image, because it is realistic — realistic in the sense that we also construct our own dreams with it — and it must be connected with our real desire, not with

the sweetened desire that advertising gives us, which does not want us to be the source of desire but to be itself the origin of desire.

Well, I invite you to watch a Norwegian series — it is not only the Americans and the British who make good series — that is available on Filmin. It is called *A Better Man* [*En bedre mann*]. I invite you to watch it. It is a strange series, but you have to endure the opening, which is a bit tough because it mainly shows a repellent character. But then you will see an actor who transforms and who plays, wonderfully, three different roles... all in just four episodes.

From the Ideal Hero to the Human Character

Student: In relation to what you said earlier — that cinema is ultimately a consequence of earlier arts — could it be that series are related to the novel, to the chapter structure?

José Luis Villacañas Berlanga: Yes, yes. I forgot about that. Antonio mentions it often... And series are not only related to the novel's division into chapters; we can also speak of the influence of opera on cinema. When one watches Fritz Lang's early works — *Die Nibelungen* (1924), for example — we have the impression of being before an opera: with each change of sequence we are placed in a new scenic frame, within which the action takes place. It is truly operatic.

Insofar as cinema and series contain narration, there must be parts, divisions. Even a film as completely abstract as *Berlin: Symphony of a Metropolis* (1927) is divided into movements: first movement, second movement... As soon as there is temporality, there must be some kind of fracture and some kind of order, of montage. It does not matter whether it is by tableaux, by movements, by chapters.

The division into parts is also very relevant in relation to the study of cultural consumption. In the case of series, it is essential to understand that a substitution of popular habits has taken place. When people of my generation read a novel in bed at the end of the day, everything was designed so that you could get sleepy while reading a chapter. Now cultural consumption habits have changed: before going to bed, we frequently watch a series until we get sleepy. That is why there are twenty-five-minute series, because some people fall asleep before the forty minutes that standard series usually run. These consumption habits are habits that order temporality, that order the vital rhythm. We are temporal beings; we need this kind of thing: rhythm, habits, fractures, passing

from one thing to another. Nothing rests the psyche more than passing from one thing to another.

All of this means that we are dealing with an extraordinarily powerful industry, one that needs to incorporate not only psychologists but also sociologists, advertisers, and so on. And that is why we can say, as Antonio said earlier, that the best series constitute a “cardiogram” of society, in the sense that they are the result of the gaze of many professions organically integrated. And I believe this is the key to the failures of Spanish series: they are not conceived in an organic way, but as an inorganic set of sequences. These are, evidently, two entirely different modes of representation.

The Ego Ideal, Narcissism, and the Evolution of the Character

Student: You spoke about identification with characters and how we invest a certain part of our humanity in those characters, who, moreover, allow us to discover things about ourselves we did not know. But you also mentioned John Ford, and for me Ford's characters — and not only Ford's, but also those of Hawks or Wyler, for instance — are not characters you identify with, but rather ones you admire. The characters played by John Wayne or Gary Cooper do not exist in real life: they are ideal characters. This is a constant of classical cinema: they are ideals you aspire to be, but not so much characters you can identify with. What I wanted to ask you is this: what do you think accounts for this shift from nearly heroic characters, proper to the modern epic that is the western, to the much more human characters of today, in whom we can actually see part of who we are?

José Luis Villacañas Berlanga: That is very interesting. I recalled Ford because Antonio was saying that often the director's cut does not need to be longer. Ford used to say that in reality the producer had a better sense of what the edit should be and that he agreed with many of the cuts made.

Your question is an abyssal one, and I will try to respond as concisely as I can. Perhaps Antonio has a different perspective, but my impression — more than an impression — is that this is clearly related to an evolution proper to modern society, one whose fundamental theorist is an author who strikes me as extraordinarily important for understanding the entire evolution of culture: Christopher Lasch and *The Culture of Narcissism*.

This evolution is fundamentally conditioned by the abandonment of superego instances, the abandonment of ideal

instances. What Freud called the superego — that set of elements that must take root unconsciously within us for the production of affect — has largely disappeared. Classical cinema was still a cinema that shaped the superego, that configured the central element of every superego: an “ego ideal.”

The “ego ideal,” in Freudian terms, is designed to produce something that looks like the same thing but is not: the “ideal of the ego.” Classical cinema produced an “ideal of the ego” to which we were bound in an extraordinarily affective way and which necessarily configured both what we identified with and what we understood as our representative.

Frank Capra’s entire body of work is filled with this configuration of an “ideal of the ego” built upon “ego ideals,” but which at bottom aspires to configure a democratic society. This strikes me as very important: insofar as all viewers end up sharing a communal structure of values configured by those ideals, that structure can then be represented by political structures. Cinema, in this sense, had a fundamental political pedagogy of identification with the great American nation, with the great American epic. We are not talking about just any era: that cinema arose from the New Deal; we are talking about the period in which the United States built its democracy.

All of this enters into crisis from May 1968 onward, from Marcuse’s book *Eros and Civilization*, where, against the Freud who had shown the dangers of this dimension, Marcuse begins to speak of the productivity of Narcissus — Orpheus and Narcissus. From that point on, all manner of ideals are deconstructed, because Narcissus blesses his own thoughts, his own experiences, not because they are good or ideal, but because they are his. In this sense, contemporary art contains elements of narcissism: elements that lead to blessing everyday life, blessing the life we are, and that neutralize all superego, ideal structures.

Now, as with everything, if you break the equilibrium on the side of the ideal superego, you get depression, anguish at not living up to ideals. If you break it on the side of narcissism, you lose structures of equilibrium and narcissism can recursively develop and become a pathology. In fact, today, analysts whose work involves therapy hardly encounter the neuroses produced by the ego ideal anymore; instead, they mostly deal with narcissistic pathologies.

And this is what advertising knows, what social media knows. For these new psychic needs they have built powerfully narcissistic techniques that foster paraphrenia: words are confused with reality, and a psychic system is built that is closed upon itself, open to no criticism, in which you only let

in what you already are. And, of course, no ideals — because ideals are what we are not.

Laclau, the Democratic Leader, and Classical Cinema

Antonio Rivera García: It is a great theme. I share José Luis’s analysis of the “ideal of the ego.” Allow me to return briefly to the question of the supposedly impossible identification with the characters of classical cinema by Ford, Hawks, and others. Despite the fact that we may feel very distant from the hero of the western and the epic of cinema, I think classical cinema would have failed if it had not managed to make the viewer identify in some way with such characters. Let us think, by contrast, of *Ivan the Terrible*, the magnificent work Eisenstein created in the 1940s: it is true that it is impossible to identify with Ivan the Terrible. Stalin can identify with the tsar, but we cannot. You will agree that Tsar Ivan is very different from the sheriff played by Gary Cooper in *High Noon* (1952).

In relation to this subject, I must recall what Laclau writes in his book *On Populist Reason* about the figure of the leader. The book begins by analyzing, with the help of Freud’s *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, the theme of identification and the “ideal of the ego.” The brothers — that is, the governed — do not identify with the ruler, but among themselves, since they share the love they feel for the father. This would be the case of Russian viewers in the 1940s, who could not identify with Ivan, with the tsar who was the counterpart of Stalin, but rather with one another through the love they felt for the Soviet leader.

Laclau, as a good reader of Freud, is not content with that answer, however, and continues asking whether the possibility of a democratic leader exists, and if so, what such a democratic leader would look like. Freud himself suggests the answer: it would be democratic if the brothers also identified, in some way — though not completely — with the father. Such a circumstance is only possible if the brothers’ ego still retains something of its earlier narcissistic self-contentment. Analogously, classical cinema allowed identification with the heroes of fiction because it fostered a balanced relationship between the superego dimension and the narcissistic dimension of the viewer. Classicism always implies an equilibrium or harmony of this kind.

I am convinced that classical cinema — and hence its contrast with Eisenstein’s film *Ivan the Terrible*, which is wonderful but with which the public cannot empathize — had great popular success because the viewer did not feel inferior: they

could, to a certain extent, identify with the Gary Cooper of *High Noon*. Even greater was their identification with that American hero staged by the director José Luis referred to earlier: Frank Capra. So, ultimately, the democratic hero par excellence of classical American cinema, with whom anyone could identify, was another of those heroic characters, those democratic leaders, played by Gary Cooper: John Doe [*Juan Nadie*].

Héctor J. Pérez López: We will stop here, as the students need to go to class. Before we take a break, we want to thank you both very much for coming and for this dialogue.



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