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*Background photograph, "Elizabeth, Philip, Charles and Anne." October 1957. Library and Archives Canada

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NARRATIVE / AESTHETICS / CRITICISM

- 05** **THE MONARCHY AS ELIZABETH'S DOPPELGÄNGER IN
THE CROWN SERIES**
MARTA FRAGO PÉREZ & MARIA RINCON-YOHN
- 17** **NARRATIVE COMPLEXITY AND MEDIA LITERACY:
A THEORETICAL-METHODOLOGICAL PROPOSAL FOR
THE ANALYSIS OF FICTIONAL TELEVISION SERIES**
DAIANA SIGILIANO & GABRIELA BORGES
- 33** **AGAINST FACTS, DREAMS. THE FABULATION IN
QUEEN CHARLOTTE: A BRIDGERTON STORY**
BRUNO SOUZA LEAL & ANA PAULA GOULART RIBEIRO

THE MONARCHY AS ELIZABETH'S DOPPELGÄNGER IN *THE CROWN* SERIES

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the character of Elizabeth II in the series *The Crown* in relation to the myth of the double or doppelgänger through the series' narrative text. It

examines the first three seasons of the series and identifies three stages of doppelgängerism through which the character of the Queen passes from her accession to the throne in 1947 to the 25th anniversary of her coronation in 1977. We contend that, through this narrative device, the series transcends the individual and connects her to a broader vision encompassing the concept of the monarchy. To this end, the series presents "the Crown" as a character with its own identity, closely intertwined with that of the Queen, functioning as her double. From the internal division it causes within the Queen and the resulting identity struggles, a powerful reflection emerges on the coexistence of monarchy and modernity. From this perspective, both the structure of the series and the development of its characters acquire greater significance.

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1. INTRODUCTION: BACKGROUND AND REFERENCES

In November 2016, Netflix released the first season of *The Crown*, the popular series about the life and reign of Queen Elizabeth II. Seven years later, in December 2023, *The Crown* came to an end, with more than 60 episodes offering a total of around 60 hours of television over the course of six seasons. The series, which covers a period of nearly six decades (from 1947 to 2005), has been well received by critics and audiences alike, in addition to garnering numerous awards¹.

The historical biography genre has found in the lives of female monarchs a particularly compelling subject. Over time, cinema and television have immortalised figures such as Cleopatra VII of Egypt, Christina of Sweden, Joanna of Castille, Marie Antoinette, Mary Stuart, Catherine the Great, Queen Victoria, Elizabeth I, and, more recently, Elizabeth II. Biopics about female sovereigns have experienced a resurgence in recent decades, undergoing significant transformation as their character's lives are reinterpreted through contemporary perspectives that incorporate notions of gender, agency, and leadership (Ford and Mitchell 2009; Busni 2024).

The Crown is no exception to this phenomenon and has sparked a growing interest among scholars. The approaches are diverse: contextual analyses such as Lacey's (2017); narrative-rhetorical readings (Braga 2020, 2021); and with a more analytical approach (Pierini 2022; Pasetti 2022; Di Borgo 2023; Busni 2024). Taken together, these contributions highlight the complexity of the series and the rich layers of meaning it contains.

Our study, by focusing on *The Crown* as a work of fiction and on its internal narrative structure, deliberately sets aside—despite their relevance—certain aspects, such as the intricate relationship between historical fact and narrative fiction, the conventions it embraces as a female biopic² (including the relationship between leading actresses, their corps, and the characters), or its classification as a contemporary heritage drama³. Nor do we analyse *The Crown* as part of

the so-called complex television phenomenon (Mittell 2015), or dwell on its audiovisual codes in any detail.

Series creator and showrunner Peter Morgan has from the outset insisted that *The Crown* is a work of fiction, a dramatisation based on a true story.⁴ It would be fair to describe it as rather more like a painting than a photograph, closer to Shakespeare's historical dramas than to the news reported by the media since Queen Elizabeth II's coronation (Lajta-Novak and Huber 2015: 1-15). As a series belonging to the historical-biographical genre, its purpose is to introduce the people in question into the pantheon of mythology and demonstrate why they merit inclusion therein (Bingham 2010:10) Accordingly, this article analyses *The Crown* strictly as a fictional series. We maintain that it is based on the doppelgänger or the double myth⁵, as a universal motif of split identity. This myth guides the whole series, but manifests most clearly in the first three seasons, as it is these that pivot around the central character of Queen Elizabeth II, who is the real focus of our analysis.

Over the course of the 30 episodes that comprise the first three seasons, the protagonist is depicted as split into two halves. One half is Elizabeth Windsor (the ordinary woman), while the second is created with her proclamation as Queen (her alter ego). These two selves and the tension they create in the character facilitates the development of a storyline that is primarily psychological, tracing the character's gradual transformation from the moment of the initial internal split in the first season to the stabilising of her personality in the third. It is also argued here that this identity crisis unfolds in three stages, each one associated with a season, culminating in Elizabeth's full identification with the Crown.

This duality or internal struggle in the character of Elizabeth has been pointed out by various authors, although none refer explicitly to the doppelgänger motif nor examine it through detailed narrative analysis (Braga 2020, 2021; Pierini 2022, Pasetti 2022, Tutan 2023, Pozzo di Borgo 2023, Busni 2024). Paolo Braga, for example, argues that each episode explores the irreconcilable conflict 'between Elizabeth

1 The Rotten Tomatoes website gives the series a critics' rating of 86%, while Metacritic gives it a score of 80 points (see https://www.rottentomatoes.com/tv/the_crown and <https://www.metacritic.com/tv/the-crown/>). The IMDb platform indicates that *The Crown* has received 141 awards and 334 nominations to date, including BAFTAs, Golden Globes and Primetime Emmy awards (see https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4786824/awards/?ref=tt_awd).

2 On this particular point, the works of Custen (1992) and Bingham (2010) are especially relevant.

3 It introduces new characteristics to the 1980s heritage film, as described by

Monk (2011) and Vidal (2012).

4 The series originates both from the stage play *The Audience*, also written by Peter Morgan (whose main contribution lies in the conversations Queen Elizabeth II holds with successive Prime Ministers throughout the series), and from *The Queen* (Frears, 2006), in which Morgan, as screenwriter, fictionalised Queen Elizabeth II for the first time.

5 Although some authors distinguish between these two terms (suggesting that the double is a more general concept of which 'doppelgänger' is a specific subcategory), in this study they are used interchangeably.

the wife, mother and sister, and Elizabeth the Queen' (2020: 230). For Braga, this conflict between the two dimensions of the character forms the very heart of the series and highlights a crucial theme: the challenging—if not impossible—reconciliation between the realms of desire and duty (2021: 186). Tutan similarly asserts the opposition between love and duty that Elizabeth must constantly wrestle with (2023: 81). Pozzo di Borgo delves further into this question, exploring them in terms of the concepts of freedom and duty in the existentialism of Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. The monarch in *The Crown*, he explains, has to struggle with two freedoms (her own and the monarchy's) to be able to truly exercise them. This idea is summed up in the internal dichotomy between 'who I am' and 'what I am' (2023: 340-1). Generally speaking, as Gyori points out, this idea of a division between the private image and the public image of the ruler is common in more recent stories about British monarchs, often portrayed from a psychological perspective (2014: 192-4).

Our research delves into the historical and narrative roots of this duality in the portrayal of monarchs. Historically, the origin lies in the mediaeval and modern conception of the power of the crown, known as the theory of 'the king's two bodies' (Kantorowicz 1957). This states that by divine right, the king has two bodies: a 'body natural' and a 'body politic', the latter being the more important of the two. The first refers to the mortal, human quality of the king as a man, while the second is a symbolic body that represents the timeless, eternal nature of the monarchy. The 'body natural' is prone to human frailties such as sickness and death, and it is therefore vulnerable. Conversely, the 'body politic' is deemed continuous and immutable, representing the idea of royalty as an institution. In other words, the king is at once an individual with personal limitations and an embodiment of the State or Kingdom over which he reigns (Kantorowicz 1957: 3-6). It was precisely this conception of two separate bodies that made it possible for Mary I to ascend to the English throne in 1553 as the first female sovereign in the country's history. In 1558, Elizabeth I became the second. The monarch's symbolic body allowed this because it was split from the body of a woman, who would otherwise have been considered unfit to reign by reason of her sex. While the theory of the king's two bodies has been secularised in our era, it continues to sustain the idea that royal power has a symbolic component that transcends the individual ruler.

Narratively, this theory perfectly fits with the universal myth of the double or doppelgänger, which has its roots in antiquity and has survived in numerous art forms, includ-

ing painting, literature and cinema, through the ages to the present day. As Živković (2000) and Danišová (2023) have explained, the splitting of a single character into two distinct personalities already existed in legends and magic tales of classical antiquity. Despite having evolved in accordance with the cultural codes of each era, it remains as a basic narrative archetype. Bargalló will even say that it is a structural element of all Western literature (1994: 11). In essence, it is associated with the theme of identity, whereby 'one and the same individual can exist in two discrete embodiments' in the same fictional world (Dolezel 1985: 96). Primarily, it is an expression of the duality experienced by every human being between identity and alterity, manifesting the profoundly deep-rooted need we have to explore the self and reflect on our own identity (Danišová 2023: 96).

2. THE DOPPELGÄNGER MOTIF AND THE CROWN

Particularly in *The Crown*, as a work of fiction, the internal division of the Queen's character fits into a category of the doppelgänger that Herrero Cecilia has defined as 'internal subjective double'.⁶ This consists of the split character experiencing a fragmentation of the self into two opposing entities. It implies "the disintegration of the unifying consciousness of the individual self, both as a subject (in relation to the self) and as an object (in relation to others)" (2011: 26). This could be applied to the ballerina dissociating her role in the play from her own persona in *Black Swan* (2010), or to the superheroes adopting two different identities (Superman, Spiderman, etc.). In the case of *The Crown* series, decoupling is due to the 'weight of the Crown', the duty to identify and act as Queen. Elizabeth the woman and Elizabeth the queen share the same outward appearance but exist separately on the internal level, where different needs, intentions, goals and obligations come into conflict in what can be defined simply as the aforementioned opposition between desire and duty. Thus, the crown in the show is not merely a symbol of the monarchy but a character in its own right. In particular, it becomes a leading character, split off from the person crowned as monarch, constituting her *alter ego*.

6 The subjective double may be 'external', where the self is split into a different being external to the individual identified with the character; this kind of double can be found in novels such as Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Double* or Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

This hypothesis is further reinforced by looking at the filmography of the series' screenwriter and showrunner Peter Morgan. He uses two-way conflicts based on universal narrative motifs in many of his works. In an interview published in 2015 (Lajta-Novak and Huber: 1-15), Morgan acknowledges that his script for *The Deal* (dir. Stephen Frears 2003) creates a conflict between Gordon Brown and Tony Blair based on the foundational motif of the Cain and Abel story. Another example he mentions is his script for *Frost/Nixon* (dir. Ron Howard 2008), which features a clear conflict between the journalist David Frost and former US president Richard Nixon. In this case, the source is another Biblical story: David and Goliath. A third example he refers to is the script for *Rush* (dir. Ron Howard 2013), which uses a universal narrative of rivalry to depict the conflict between the Formula 1 champions Niki Lauda and James Hunt.

In *The Crown*, the use of the doppelgänger motif allowed Morgan to explore another two-way conflict, except that in this case the battle is waged within a single character. Morgan seems to follow the double or doppelgänger dramatic path pointed out by Živković. According to the latter, the dramatic tension experienced by the split cannot be resolved until one of the two parts of the person takes possession of the other, either by dominating it or destroying it. The two parts may alternatively be integrated into a single person, thereby bringing an end to the division between them. In short, the split personality triggers a kind of war between duality and unity because "the double pursues the subject as his second self and makes him feel as himself and the other at the same time" (2000: 122).

In order to illustrate these dynamics, the next section offers a detailed analysis of the development of the doppelgänger motif in the first three seasons of the series. Methodologically, the procedure has been as follows. The scripts (or transcripts, when necessary) were searched for the words 'Crown', 'Monarchy', 'King', and 'Queen', identifying over 50 references. These references enabled the identification of key scenes in each script, from which the three narrative phases of the doppelgänger motif were examined. In Season 1, the initial split between Elizabeth Windsor (the woman) and Elizabeth Regina (the Queen); in Season 2, the struggle between the two halves, almost to the point of the disappearance of the original self; and finally, in Season 3, the stabilisation of her identity as Queen, with the harmonious integration of her personal life. This last stage of Elizabeth's doppelgänger experience will establish her attitude and behaviour in the following seasons of the series (although this question is beyond the scope of this article).

5. THE CROWN AND THE INDIVIDUAL WOMAN

5.1. The weight of the Crown

The conflict of the doppelgänger is symbolically represented in *The Crown* right from the opening credits, comprising a series of detail shots of a crown being forged. The liquid gold spreads out through the lines of a mould, solidifying until it takes its final form: a heavy crown designed to rest on a monarch's head. The soundtrack that accompanies this image, composed by Hans Zimmer, introduces a melody that combines a dramatic tone with a regal touch. It is interesting to note that Zimmer took inspiration for this opening theme from the aria "What power art thou, who from below" from Henry Purcell's opera *King Arthur* (Sire 2017; Wise 2017), creating a connection with British mythology that adds to the expressiveness of the image. Although they are not heard in Zimmer's composition, the lyrics to the aria establish some suggestive associations with the series. "What Power art thou, Who from below, Hast made me rise, Unwillingly and slow, From beds of everlasting snow!" These are the words of the Cold Genius in Purcell's opera, protesting against the demands of the supernatural Cupid. On a symbolic level, the human character faced with the prospect of assuming the throne makes a similar complaint. The responsibility it demands exceeds the bounds of her nature. This evokes the classical theme of the weight of the crown, found in so many historical dramas of Elizabethan theatre: "Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown", remarks King Henry in the second part of Shakespeare's *Henry IV* (Act III, Scene 1).

In *The Crown*, the theme of the weight of the crown is also present, interwoven with the doppelgänger motif. This weight rests mainly but not solely on the Queen. Other characters appearing in the series also bear the burden of having to protect the monarchy and refrain from actions or decisions that might tarnish it: The Duke of Windsor (the former King Edward IV, Elizabeth's uncle), Margaret (Elizabeth's younger sister), Philip (Elizabeth's husband), and young Prince Charles (Elizabeth's first-born son) in the final episodes of Season 3. Within their own roles in the series, these characters establish contrasts or symmetries with the Queen and suffer because of her divided identity, thereby contributing to the doppelgänger theme in connection with the Crown.

These first three seasons cover a period from the Queen's early adulthood through to maturity (from the ages of 21 to

51). Over this thirty-year period, Elizabeth's doppelgänger experience evolves through three stages, as described below.

5.2. Stage One. The Split

The split itself occurs in Season 1, which is the season that has been the subject of the most scholarly research. It covers the period from 1947 to 1955 (from the ages of 21 to 29 in the Queen's life). In the first episode and the beginning of the second, Elizabeth still has a single, integrated identity. Scenes depicting her wedding to Philip, with whom she is clearly in love, her close relationship with her father, King George VI, the birth of her first two children, and happy moments at the beginning of a tour with her husband to different countries of the Commonwealth all serve to reveal her stable personality. Only her father's illness foreshadows an impending rupture of this equilibrium. That moment comes in the last part of "Hyde Park Corner" (1.02), when she receives the news of her father the King's death while she is still on tour in Africa. On her return to England, as she gets ready to get off the plane, she reads a letter from her grandmother, Queen Mary:

(...) And while you mourn your father, you must also mourn someone else. Elizabeth Mountbatten. For she has now been replaced by another person, Elizabeth Regina. The two Elizabeths will frequently be in conflict with one another. The fact is, the Crown must win. Must always win.⁷

Queen Mary's advice here expresses a key theme of the story and echoes throughout the series. It also foreshadows the emergence of Elizabeth's doppelgänger, which appears explicitly in a scene almost immediately afterwards. In mourning dress, Elizabeth leaves the room where she has said her last farewell to her father, holding back the tears and exhibiting the composure expected of a monarch. She is now Elizabeth Regina. In the hallway, Queen Mary appears as a black veiled figure, mourning not just her son but also Elizabeth as she walks solemnly before her.

In "Windsor" (1.03), the conflict between the two Elizabeths begins to take dramatic effect. She must learn how to reign, but to do so means giving up the life she has had up until this moment. An example of the resulting tension in her identity can be found in the conversation she has with Prime Minister Winston Churchill. Elizabeth insists that as a

married woman, she will continue to use her married name (Mountbatten) after her coronation, and she will continue living at Clarendon House to keep Philip happy. "Yes, I am Queen, but I am also a woman. And a wife," she explains to Churchill. "I want to be in a successful marriage. I would argue, stability under this roof might even be in the national interest". Despite her desire to be a good wife, Elizabeth ends up giving in, on Churchill's advice, deciding she cannot prioritise her personal life over the Crown. Thus, Queen Mary's warning that "the Crown must win" begins to become a reality.

Another example of the split can be found in the same episode, when Elizabeth asks her uncle, the Duke of Windsor, to explain to her why he abdicated. If he had not given up the throne, she would never have become Queen: "You don't think I would have preferred to grow up out of the spotlight? Away from Court? Away from the scrutiny and the visibility. A simple life. A happier life. As a wife, mother. An ordinary English countrywoman". ("Windsor" 1.03)

These two moments (with Churchill and with her uncle) express the aforementioned conflict between desire and duty. As Elizabeth experiences the splitting of her identity when she is a young adult, in this first stage the doppelgänger narrative also functions as a coming-of-age story. As Braga explains (2020: 230), Elizabeth takes a learning pathway "from adult to leader" with a high personal cost, as she is shaped into a new identity. Two other characters, both aligned with Elizabeth Regina, will be the main ones responsible for imprinting the features in her that will determine her role as monarch: Queen Mary and Winston Churchill. Both can be described as "the voice of duty". These mentors are reflection characters,⁸ mirroring what Elizabeth is called upon to be as Queen.

Queen Mary is the embodiment of royal tradition. In "Act of God" (1.04), she will remind her granddaughter that her role as queen is a sacred mission, as the monarchy is "A calling from God. That is why you are crowned in an abbey, not a government building". She will also instruct the young monarch in the need to be impartial and politically neutral at all times: "To do nothing is the hardest job of all. And it will take every ounce of energy you have. To be impartial is not natural, not human (...)." Elizabeth will then reply: "Well, that's fine for the sovereign. But where does it leave me?"

7 All underlining in the quotes has been added for emphasis.

8 A reflection character (or mirror character) is one who is most closely aligned with the protagonist – the best friend, partner, mentor, spouse, etc., whose primary function is to help the protagonist achieve the outer motivation and to urge them toward transformation. See Tabb, Michael. 2019. *Prewriting your Screenplay*. New York: Routledge.

Meanwhile, Churchill guides Elizabeth in the proper use of the royal prerogative.⁹ In “Smoke and Mirrors” (1.05), Churchill questions Elizabeth when Philip tries to change the coronation ritual, explaining that the monarch must make the decision after responsible consideration of what the institution means:

This isn't a business. It's the Crown. And one has to ask oneself... What is the purpose of the Crown? What is the purpose of the Monarchy? Does the Crown bend to the will of the people to be audited and accountable? Or should it remain above temporal matters? (...) The decision is yours to make, we will take our lead from you.

In this first season, the respect that the Queen has for these two mentor characters is obvious. At the same time, she has close relationships with other characters who place demands on her as a woman, wife, sister, niece, etc., who embody the voice of love and desire in opposition to her duties as monarch. The most important of these characters are her husband Philip and her sister Margaret. Both these characters act as foils¹⁰ to Elizabeth Regina, while reminding her of her original identity as Elizabeth Windsor. Philip, as the Queen's consort, must protect and support her, but he also wants to find his own place in the marriage. His demands intensify the conflict between Elizabeth's two personalities, as is made clear in two key scenes. The first is in “Smoke and Mirrors” (1.05), when, after learning that ritual requires him to kneel before his wife on the day of the coronation, he requests a change to the ceremony so that he need not submit to something he finds humiliating. When Elizabeth—on Churchill's advice—denies his request and insists that he must kneel before the Crown like everybody else, he rebukes her, suggesting that she has two identities and doesn't know which

one is the real Elizabeth: “Are you my wife or my Queen?” Besides, in the second scene of “Gloriana” (1.10), Philip opposes her decision to forbid Margaret's marriage to Townsend. He cannot understand how his wife can act so coldly. Their conversation on the subject once again triggers the conflict between Elizabeth's two halves:

PHILIP: *Well, in the name of the people that live with you and love you, might I suggest not being Head of the Church for a minute. Or Head of State, or Head of the Commonwealth of Nations, or the Army, or the Navy, or the Government, or the Fount of Justice, or the whole damn circus, frankly.*

ELIZABETH: *And be what?*

PHILIP: *A living, breathing thing, a woman. A sister. A daughter. A wife.*

Margaret is the character in the series whose personality is the most diametrically opposed to Elizabeth's. While the Queen is restrained, Margaret is brazen; while the Queen is level-headed, Margaret is rash; while the Queen is disciplined, Margaret is rebellious. Added to this clash of personalities is the authority that Elizabeth Regina has over Margaret, who must submit to that authority if she wants to preserve her relationship with the Crown. When Margaret announces to her sister that she wants to marry Captain Peter Townsend, Elizabeth is faced with a war between her two halves. On one side, as Queen and Head of the Church of England, she cannot consent to her sister's marriage to a divorced man. On the other hand, as her sister, she wants to hear Margaret's reasons and to allow her the freedom to choose. Thus, in “Gelignite” (1.06) she asks her sister to wait a year before making the decision, and in the meantime she sends Townsend away. Later, in “Gloriana” (1.10), she corners her sister with her final decision:

I was prepared to go through it all and support you, as a sister. Because I'd given you my word. But... (...) But I realised... as Queen... that I have no choice. I cannot allow you to marry Peter and remain part of this family. That is my decision.

Margaret chooses to end her engagement to Townsend in favour of the Crown, but the decision opens up a rift be-

9 The royal prerogative or royal powers assumed by the monarch of the United Kingdom include aspects such as convening, proroguing or dissolving Parliament, enacting laws proposed by Parliament, appointing and dismissing ministers and private advisors (on the advice of the Prime Minister), and declaring war, as well as other domestic matters. In foreign affairs, the monarch has the power to negotiate or ratify international treaties, alliances and agreements, to appoint high commissioners and ambassadors, to issue passports, etc. The monarch is also the fount of justice and honour and the head of the Anglican Church. See Bogdanor, V. 1995. *The Monarchy and the Constitution*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

10 A foil character (or contrast character) is a character whose actions and traits contrast with those of another character—often the protagonist. See Glatch, Sean. “What is a foil character? Exploring contrast in character development.” Writers.com. August 2, 2022.

tween the sisters that will continue to grow in the subsequent seasons.

Finally, there is the Duke of Windsor (David), a complex character (part reflection character and part foil) who serves to remind both Elizabeth and the spectator of the doppelgänger motif. As a reflection character, David understands the implications of the Crown and defends its existence even though he himself has renounced it: "But there is also the other great love of my life... The Crown," he confesses to Elizabeth in "Gloriana" (1.10). Also in "Smoke and Mirrors" (1.05), while watching Elizabeth's coronation, David explains to his party guests the meaning of the ritual of anointing the monarch with sacred oil at the ceremony: "Pull away the veil and what are you left with? An ordinary young woman of modest ability and little imagination. But wrap her up like this, anoint her with oil, and hey, *presto*, what do you have? A goddess."

On the other hand, in his role as a foil character, David will be the one who best expresses Elizabeth's split identity. As monarch, he once had the same experience, although in his case it was his original identity that destroyed the *alter ego*, i.e., the monarch. In "Gloriana" (1.10), he is sympathetic when his niece tells him of her mixed feelings over his sister Margaret's relationship with Captain Townsend. At the same time, he gives her the following warning, making explicit reference to the myth of the double:

And I imagine you find yourself in a difficult position now. Split down the middle. One half is sister. One half is Queen. (...) A strange, hybrid creature. Like a sphinx or Gamayun. As I am Ganesha or Minotaur. We are half-people. Ripped from the pages of some bizarre mythology, the two sides within us, human and crown, engaged in a fearful civil war, which never ends. (...) I understand the agony you feel and I am here to tell you, it will never leave you. I will always be half-King. My tragedy is that... I have no Kingdom. You have it. And you must protect it.

The Duke of Windsor's description of "two sides within us, human and crown, engaged in a fearful civil war" sums up the identity crisis that Elizabeth has been wrestling with throughout the first season. In the final scene of "Gloriana", which is the last of the first season, we find the point the protagonist has reached in that crisis, with the introduction of a new stage of the split that will unfold in the second sea-

son. Elizabeth is no longer a young woman coming of age. She has become a Monarch with a personality of her own. In the scene, a photographer is preparing her for a picture that will become her official portrait as Queen. Wearing the crown, sash and royal jewels, she listens with serious attention to the photographer as he speaks: "All hail, sage Lady, whom a grateful Isle hath blessed. Not moving, not breathing. Our very own goddess. Glorious Gloriana. Forgetting Elizabeth Windsor now. Now only Elizabeth Regina. Yes." Elizabeth's efforts to comprehend her *alter ego* have led her to identify increasingly with Elizabeth Regina, which from this point on will be her dominant side.

5.3. Stage Two. Elizabeth Regina vs. Elizabeth Windsor

In the second season, Elizabeth Regina will continue to displace Elizabeth Windsor, increasing the tension between "who I am" and "what I am". This season covers the period from 1956 to 1964 (from the ages of 30 to 38 in Elizabeth's life), in what could be described as her early adulthood. She now feels more comfortable in her role as monarch and less certain in her private life. Tensions mark her efforts to harmonise her duty as Queen with her roles as wife, mother, sister, etc. The dominant tone of her behaviour as monarch is rigidity.

The two mentor characters from the first season, Churchill and Queen Mary, are now gone. Elizabeth has learned what she needed to learn to fulfil her role as Queen. In numerous situations in this second season, Elizabeth Regina exercises many of the royal powers at her disposal, generally with successful outcomes. For example, she has to deal with international issues such as the Suez Canal crisis, which would trigger a war during Anthony Eden's term as prime minister. The clarity with which she expresses her disagreement with the poor decisions made on this issue strengthens Elizabeth's status as monarch ("Misadventure" 2.01, "Lisbon" 2.03). Another event highlighted in the series is Elizabeth's trip to Ghana, as head of the Commonwealth, to stem the growing Soviet influence in the country. It is a mission that she accomplishes successfully, despite the risk it entails ("Dear Mrs. Kennedy" 2.08). She also intervenes in the negotiation and ratification of the 'special relationship' between Britain and the United States, which will yield benefits in the future ("Beryl" 2.04). In domestic affairs, the series shows Elizabeth accepting Eden's resignation and confirming Macmillan's appointment in his place ("Lisbon" 2.03). Later, when Macmillan himself

proposes to resign she will ask him to wait, invoking her royal prerogative ("Mystery Man" 2.10). Another of her successful interventions is her rejection of the appointment of her uncle (the Duke of Windsor) as British ambassador to France after discovering his past sympathy and collaboration with the Hitler regime ("Vergangenheit" 2.06). Although each of these situations entails a conflict, the Monarch's deliberation and sound judgement effectively expands the power of Elizabeth Regina at the expense of Elizabeth Windsor.

However, intertwined with these issues are situations pertaining to Elizabeth's private life. In these situations, the series' foil characters become ongoing reminders of her split identity in this season. They call up Elizabeth the wife, mother, sister or niece, and call out her lack of humanity when she puts the Crown first in her decisions. As Elizabeth becomes an increasingly successful monarch, the crises and failures in her personal life begin to pile up. Her husband, for example, complains that she has pushed him into the background. Philip feels as if he were living in a 'prison', and he is constantly being 'infantilized' by the palace staff ("Misadventure" 2.01). During the second season of the series, Elizabeth has to deal with a crisis in her marriage, epitomised in Philip's wild behaviour and alleged infidelity during his five-month royal tour after attending the Olympic Games in Melbourne. Philip will finally accept the rules of the game, although he will also confide in his friend Mike, his companion in debauchery: 'There is no room for mistakes. There is no room for scandal. There is no room for humanity' ("Lisbon" 2.03). In the same episode, Elizabeth's dual identity is made visible once more when Philip returns to London. In front of the photographers and their cameras, she tries her best to save the Crown, feigning a normal relationship with Philip in an orchestrated performance; however, in the privacy of the palace she reproaches him and asks him to put the welfare of the Monarchy above his personal desires, even telling him to name price for this submission.

With her sister, Margaret, Elizabeth also suffers the consequences of the inflexible decisions she has made as Queen. Having become aware that Margaret is drinking too much, Elizabeth tries to warn her to restrain herself. Margaret's reply is a bitter pill for the Queen to swallow: '[I drink more] because I am unhappier than I used to be. And why is that? Because I am still unmarried. And why is that? Because you denied me my perfect match.' Elizabeth responds to this with reference to her two identities: 'That's not fair. As your sister, I would have been perfectly happy for you to marry Peter. (...) It was the Crown that forbade it.' ("Misadventure" 2.01).

Elizabeth's response here makes it clear that she is well aware of her doppelgänger, and she blames it for her duplicity.

In addition to Elizabeth's troubled relationships with these two characters, there is also tension with her uncle, the Duke of Windsor. As noted above, David has requested a posting as British Ambassador to France. However, some compromising papers exposing his sympathy and even collaboration with the Hitler regime compel Elizabeth Regina to deny his request. Her uncle reproaches her: 'Who has done more damage to the Monarchy? Me, with my wilfulness, or you lot, with your inhumanity?' ("Vergangenheit" 2.06).

In this way, over the course of the second season, which mixes storylines depicting her actions both as a monarch and as a person, Elizabeth shifts from a clearly defined "position A" to a "position B" that is made especially clear at the end of the season. In 'position A', Elizabeth still identified herself as Elizabeth Windsor, a woman struggling with the *alter ego* of her role as monarch, which was gradually displacing her. In 'position B', we find an Elizabeth who increasingly identifies as Elizabeth Regina, but who is facing a crisis with her original identity. In "Paterfamilias" (2.09), there is a conversation between the Queen and Philip that serves as an example of this shift. The two are arguing about the education of their first-born son Charles, who is being bullied at the Scottish school he is attending. Elizabeth wants to bring him home, while Philip is opposed to the idea. "But Charles is the future of the Crown," reasons Elizabeth. "And in the Name of the Crown and as his mother, I have decided to take him home, to Eton, to Windsor, where he belongs." Philip retorts: "You can't always fall back on the Crown." But Elizabeth declares: "Oh, yes, I can. And I will."

Elizabeth's internal division thus continues and will not end until, as Živković puts it, one of the two parts takes possession of the other, either by dominating it or destroying it. Season 2 concludes with the birth of Elizabeth's fourth and final child and a photography session to take an official portrait of the Royal Family. At this point, the Queen enters mature adulthood.

5.4. Stage Three: Towards an integrated Elizabeth Regina

The final embodiment of the doppelgänger motif in the character of Elizabeth is presented in Season 3, when she enters the final stage of her identity crisis. This season covers a period of 13 years, from 1964 to 1977 (from the ages of 37 to 51 in Elizabeth's life, the latter year also being the

25th anniversary of her coronation). Over the ten episodes of this season, the protagonist will shift towards a “position C”, where her identity crisis will stabilise and her-self-as-monarch will win out over her original self, while integrating a part of that self to achieve a degree of balance. Of course, she will continue to confront compromising situations in her personal life, but these will no longer cause conflict between the two identities. And at the same time, another character will take over from Elizabeth as representative of the doppelgänger motif: Charles, the heir to the throne, who comes of age in this season and rebels against the constraints that the Crown imposes upon him. Clashes between Mother/Queen and Son/Crown Prince become a recurring feature of the last few episodes of this season. These thorny conversations touch on the question of the future of the Crown (‘the Hollow Crown’ in Shakespearean terms). This season thus constitutes a transition for the doppelgänger myth, as while Elizabeth’s identity conflict comes to an end, it is passed onto her son Charles, who will continue to struggle with it in the following seasons.

There are two types of scenes that illustrate this transition. The first type consists of scenes that underscore the idea that Elizabeth’s doppelgänger (the Crown) has won the battle and now rules over her original self. The second type comprises scenes that suggest that Elizabeth’s human side (her individual personality traits and frailties) are still present in her new, unified self.

Scenes of the first type of course include Elizabeth’s actions and triumphs as a monarch. However, the most interesting of these scenes involve her relationships with family members and confidants. For example, in a scene in “Olding” (3.01), Elizabeth comforts Winston Churchill on his deathbed and acknowledges that it was with his help that she came to accept that she is, first and foremost, the Queen. “You were my guardian angel, the roof over my head, the spine on my back, the iron in my heart. You were the compass that steered and directed me”. Another example can be found in “Margaretology” (3.02), in which Elizabeth orders her sister, Margaret, to attend a dinner at the White House on behalf of the Crown, taking advantage of the trip she has made to the US with her husband, Tony. In her letter she makes explicit reference to her role as queen, leaving aside their family relationship: “(...) I have asked you this once as a sister, and now I must command it as your Queen (...). And I would urge you, for once, to play things by the book”. However, Elizabeth Regina’s dominance over Elizabeth Windsor is revealed most clearly in her relationship with the Crown Prince. In “Tywysog Cymru” (3.06), after Charles has come back from Wales and

from receiving his investiture as Prince of Wales, the Queen welcomes him coldly and treats him more as an heir than as a son. She admonishes him for having offered personal opinions and feelings in his speech in Welsh: “We have all made sacrifices and suppressed who we are. Some portion of our natural selves is always lost.” Her son argues: “That is a choice,” but Elizabeth corrects him: “It is not a choice. It is a duty (...)” In the conversation that follows, Elizabeth’s identification with the Crown (her dominant side) is accentuated all the more through the negative reaction of Charles, whose identity is only just beginning to be split in two.

CHARLES: *But doing that is perhaps not as easy for me as it is for you.*

ELIZABETH II: *Why?*

CHARLES: *Because I... have a beating heart. A character. A mind and a will of my own. I am not just a symbol. I can lead not just by wearing a uniform, or by cutting a ribbon, but by showing people who I am. Mummy, I have a voice.*

ELIZABETH: *Let me let you into a secret. No one wants to hear it.*

CHARLES: *Are you talking about the country... or my own family?*

ELIZABETH: *No one.*

(“Tywysog Cymru” 3.06)

Scenes of the second type present Elizabeth as a queen, but also as a woman approaching middle age who is suffering a typical mid-life crisis. Her fragile feelings are signalled in “Olding” (3.01), when she reacts to a set of new postage stamps bearing her image, brought to her for her approval. Her private secretary explains that the image is intended to reflect “Her Majesty’s transition from young woman to (...) mother of four and a settled sovereign.” Elizabeth’s reaction, with references to her physical appearance, suggests that she is in a period of personal reassessment and self-acceptance. It is precisely this psychological condition that will lead her to the aforementioned unification of her split identities. Various episodes in this season contain scenes showing Elizabeth looking back on her life and taking stock, pondering the loss or constraint of her personal self since her coronation. An

example of this can be found in “Aberfan” (3.03), when she reflects on her ability to feel emotion and empathy, analysing her initial reaction to a massive human tragedy. A fatal accident has occurred in Aberfan, a mining town in southern Wales, where an avalanche of coal slurry destroyed a school full of children. Elizabeth Regina rejects the idea of visiting the site of the disaster, insisting that the standard procedure is to offer her condolences in a letter. However, on advice from the Prime Minister, she changes her mind and travels to Aberfan, initially for the purpose of silencing public criticism. While there, she pretends to weep. Later, she will confess to the Prime Minister that her tears in Aberfan were merely a premeditated act, and that in fact ever since she was a child she has been incapable of crying. But afterwards, when she is on her own, we see real tears on her face, as her human side reveals itself. This image portrays her struggle to integrate and recover her human self.

The second significant scene is in “Bubbikins” (3.04), in which a documentary on the everyday lives of the Royal Family is being made with the aim of bringing the monarchy closer to the people. For Elizabeth, the filming represents a quest for balance between the ritual and mystery of Elizabeth Regina and the normal humanity of Elizabeth Windsor. However, as Prime Minister Wilson remarks in a conversation with her, what the people really look for in the Royals is “an ideal” that involves a certain degree of mystery and protocol. Elizabeth herself then understands that the symbolic side of the monarchy is “not there to keep us apart. It is there to keep us alive.”

Later, “Coup” (3.05) features another event that prompts her to reassess her married life. While travelling in the United States, her old friend Porchey takes her to various ranches to learn about new methods of training racehorses. She enjoys these days enormously and they prompt her to reflect on the life she might have had if she hadn’t become Queen: “Owning horses; breeding horses, racing horses (...) I actually think it’s what I was born to do,” she confesses at a dinner with Porchey. And she concludes: “On days like today... in places like this, in company like this... you get a glimpse of what it all might have been like. The unlive life... and how much happier it might have made me.” However, back at the palace, Elizabeth will show with her actions that Philip comes first, and that the life she has as Queen is the life she wants to live.

But the scene that perhaps most clearly shows that Elizabeth’s doppelgänger experience is coming to an end is her final meeting with her Uncle David, the Duke of Windsor, in “Dangling Man” (3.08). He is dying, and Elizabeth visits him

in Paris for the first time in many years. He asks her to forgive him for his abdication, and she responds by expressing her gratitude to him:

What you did, your abdication of the Throne, did change my life. Forever. But I want you to know it’s not always a curse. And I haven’t always been cross with you. That there are days... in fact, more and more the older I get... when I consider it to be a blessing. I’ve even on occasion found myself... wanting to thank you.

In summary, the conflict between Elizabeth’s two identities thus comes to an end in this third season. She is above all the Queen of the United Kingdom, although she also manages a degree of coexistence and integration between the two parts of her split self.

6. CONCLUSION

This article has sought to show that the central character of the first three seasons of the series *The Crown* suffers an identity crisis that evokes the myth of the double or doppelgänger. When her father dies and she inherits the throne, her identity is split into two halves: Elizabeth Regina (the Queen) and Elizabeth Windsor (the woman). Her doppelgänger, the Crown, evolves over three stages, each one associated with one of the three seasons. At first, in Season 1, Elizabeth is a young woman who struggles against the duties as a monarch that separate her from her husband, her sister, or her children. However, her mastery of her role as Queen grows in Season 2, and Elizabeth Regina thus gradually displaces Elizabeth Windsor, despite reminders from those close to her that she is becoming dehumanised. In Season 3, it has become clear that Elizabeth’s doppelgänger has won and now dominates her personality. This does not mean that Elizabeth Windsor has disappeared or been destroyed altogether, as certain elements of her personality have been integrated into her new identity. With the unified self of Elizabeth Regina, the doppelgänger motif no longer applies to this character. However, the same motif effectively becomes the main conflict of another character: her son Charles. This explains why in the following seasons (4, 5 and 6) the focus of attention will shift towards the Prince of Wales and the characters who interact with him most (Elizabeth, Camilla, Diana, his sister Anne, his children, etc.). The doppelgänger will thus continue

to be an ongoing theme in *The Crown*. By using this myth as a chief source of conflict, Peter Morgan seems to be identifying the monarchy with the shadow, the *alter ego*, a menacing figure that puts the various protagonists of the series on their guard. The institution of the monarchy might thus be classified as an antagonist in the story, although further research is needed to support such an assertion.

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TV Shows

The Crown (2016-2019)

Films

Black Swan (2010)

Frost/Nixon (2008)

Rush (2013)

The Deal (2003)

The Queen (2006)

NARRATIVE COMPLEXITY AND MEDIA LITERACY: A THEORETICAL-METHODOLOGICAL PROPOSAL FOR THE ANALYSIS OF FICTIONAL TELEVISION SERIES

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a theoretical and methodological proposition developed to study serial narrative complexity, as defined by Mittell (2015), based on media literacy research, covering audiovisual production and consumption processes. In this context, the aim is to analyse how

narrative complexity stimulates critical understanding and promotes the creative production of interacting viewers in social television. For this discussion, the proposal has been applied to the analysis of the fictional universe of the series *Euphoria* (2019 – HBO) and the backchannel that was generated on X during the screening of the episodes of the second season. It concludes that the series encourages careful reading by building a media repertoire based on the rules of the fictional universe and then inserting these recurrences into new interpretive online contexts. On the social network X, interacting viewers analyse plot nuances, identify narrative, aesthetic and stylistic patterns, and re-signify the story highlighting their media literacy skills.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since the late 1990s, studies of fictional US television series have highlighted the process of complexification of the plots. According to Johnson (2006), Lotz (2007), Jost (2016), Pucci Jr. (2016), and Mittell (2015, 2024), technological, creative and market processes triggered these new modes of narrative, style and engagement. Discussions of the characteristics of these new shows converge on three central points: the construction and fruition of narrative arcs of varying amplitude (Johnson 2006, Lotz 2007), the hybridisation of genres and formats (Jost 2016, Pucci Jr 2016), and the creation of dynamic and changeable characters (Nelson 2006).

Since the Network Era, American television shows have been structured based on two narrative models: episodic, composed of arc units that are articulated and concluded in a single episode; and serial, composed of transversal arcs that are interwoven as episodes unfold to constitute a season (Lotz 2007). However, what is observed in contemporary shows is the blending of these narrative types. As Johnson (2006) postulates, the distinction between episodic and serial narratives is becoming increasingly blurred, and plots are exploring new variations and connections between arcs.

Contemporary serial fictional narratives also tend to overlap different formats and genres. This hybridisation includes not only aspects such as the use of comic characters in drama shows and vice versa, but also the blending of styles such as fiction and documentary, the use of narrators, testimonies facing the camera, and the materiality of the camera at the centre of the diegesis (Silva 2015). Finally, discussions within the framework of fictional television series address the popularity of characters whose trajectories are marked by ambiguity. According to Jost (2016), the protagonists of these shows are characters with mutable identities who react to the environment in which they are placed, distancing themselves from the heroic archetype. The author also points out that in addition to greater diversity of representation (racial, social and gender), themes such as relative morality and Machiavellian intelligence are beginning to be incorporated into stories through the figure of the anti-hero.

However, the development of narrative structures, the hybridisation of genres and formats, and the ambiguity of characters have resulted in more dynamic and complex narratives. As Mittell (2015: 36) asserts, this narrative model demands an active and attentive process of understanding from the audience in order to decode both complex stories and the storytelling models offered by contemporary tele-

vision. Although it reached its full expression in *Twin Peaks* (ABC/Showtime, 1990–1991/2018), narrative complexity is rooted in productions from the late 1970s and early 1980s, such as *Dallas* (CBS, 1978–1991) and *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981–1987). However, it's important to note that even with the diffusion and popularization of this narrative model, the US TV programming schedule and streaming services are still predominantly occupied by conventional forms (Mittell 2015).

Narrative complexity is characterised by the employment of narrative special effects, guided by constant climaxes and plot twists, which compel the viewer to reconsider their understanding of the narrative at any given moment (Mittell 2015). Another aspect of narrative complexity is the utilisation of storytelling resources, such as fantasy sequences, chronological alterations, and multiple points of view. However, as Mittell (2015) suggests, all of these resources are marked by the absence of flashing arrows. This absence of conventional narrative markers, such as flashbacks or plot summaries, can lead to a lack of clarity or orientation for the viewer.

In the context of social networks, these platforms not only facilitate modes of creation, participation, collaboration, and distribution but also play a crucial role in the perpetuation of the intricacies of fictional universes (Jost 2016). This phenomenon, known as “the propagation of repercussions”, can be understood as a process by which networks spread the consequences of events, altering the way viewers experience and interpret the narrative. In this context, the concept of social TV emerges, referring to the practice of sharing content through social media and second-screen applications that are synchronised with the television program's flow. This phenomenon, as Proulx and Shepatin (2012) and Sigiliano (2024) argue, fits within the broader scope of serial fiction. The content shared by interacting viewers on X, the central platform of this phenomenon, not only reflects plot events but also contributes to the enrichment and expansion of the fictional universe. These interactions facilitate novel appropriations, subversions, and amplifications of the ‘water-cooler’ phenomenon, in addition to the resignification of shared experiences and the consolidation of the concept of social bond (Sigiliano 2024). The integration of engagement actions from all US-based channels is also a salient feature, with posts stimulating appointment television and exploring new facets of the story.

As will be expanded later, aspects relating to the production of complex narratives and the discussion of content in a

social TV environment present a clear dialogue with media literacy. Despite epistemological amplitude, media literacy studies converge into the combination of knowledge and political, social, and cultural practices that enable citizens to think critically about media.

Social networks facilitate modes of creation, participation, collaboration, and distribution that help to sustain the complexity of fictional universes¹. Thus, even with the complexification of shows, platforms propagate repercussions, transforming reception in terms of depth (Jost 2016; Brembilla; De Pascalis 2018). It is in this context that social TV, referring to the sharing of content through social media and second-screen apps synchronous to the television flow, inserts itself in the scope of serial fiction (Proulx and Shepatin 2012, Sigiliano 2024). Content posted by interacting viewers² on X, the central platform of this phenomenon, not only echoes plot events but deepens the fictional universe. They allow for new appropriations, subversions, and amplifications of the water-cooler, in addition to resignifying shared experience and strengthening the concept of social bond (Sigiliano 2024). The phenomenon also integrates engagement actions from all US-based channels, as posts stimulate appointment television and explore new facets of the story.

Highfield et al. (2008) and Iapalucci & Rocchi (2025) affirm that the strong adherence to X in the social TV phenomenon is not by chance: “Twitter has always been the obvious platform for social TV. It’s public, it’s concise, and it’s easy to organize posts around a topic using hashtags” (Wolk, 2015, p. 65). However, Iapalucci et al. (2025, p. 47) highlight that “[...] future research may encounter challenges owing to recent alterations in Twitter’s (now: X) policies, the predominant social medium utilized for the analysis of TV seriality.”

The aspects highlighted by the authors can be observed in the main features of X’s informational architecture. The social interaction on the microblogging platform is based on an always-on temporality that enables the instant sharing of information — only the now matters. According to Iapalucci et al. (2025), this instant temporality is a central feature of the social network and causes posts to spread rapidly through the timeline. Another characteristic of its informational architecture that contributes to making microblogging the central platform of social TV is the focus of social interaction. Unlike

social networks such as Facebook or the defunct Orkut, on microblogging platforms, social interactions are not limited to family, professional, or friendship ties, shifting the user’s focus to the content being produced. In this way, “The live-tweeting community, then, allowed viewers to still feel that they were watching the show with others. Interestingly, these feelings of connectedness with others were still experienced by live-tweeters even if no one acknowledged their tweets” (Schirra et al., 2014, p. 2449).

X’s mode of social interaction contributes to the plurality and expansion of the backchannel: when accessing the microblogging platform, viewers can interact and react to what’s on air with interlocutors beyond their personal contacts, without relying on pre-existing relationships. In this sense, X’s informational architecture reinforces not only the temporality of social TV but also amplifies the conversation around the programming schedule (Harrington et al., 2013; Antelmi et al., 2019).

As expanded later, aspects relating to the production of complex narratives and the discussion of the content in a social TV environment present a clear dialogue with media literacy. Despite epistemological amplitude, media literacy studies converge into the combination of knowledge and political, social, and cultural practices that enable citizens to think critically about media (Buckingham 2003, Livingstone 2007, Borges *et al.* 2022). Buckingham (2003) and Borges *et al.* (2022) state that the epistemological plurality of the field of media literacy studies allows the concept to be constantly updated according to the media context in which it is situated. According to the authors, media literacy can be studied in relation to different languages and expressive media, such as television, radio, cinema, the press, and more recently, digital technologies. In this paper, we adopt Livingstone’s definition (2007: 27), according to whom media literacy is “[...] the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create messages across a variety of contexts”.

The approximation between media literacy and contemporary TV series is materialized in two axes: production and consumption. The narrative complexity of these programmes requires viewers to engage closely with the content to comprehend the intricate fictional universes they present (Johnson 2006, Mittell 2015, Pucci Jr 2016). As Johnson says (2006: 64) “[...] part of the pleasure in these modern television narratives comes from the cognitive labor you are forced to do filling in the details”. This assertion is further supported by Pucci Jr’s (2016: 352) claim that “[...] we might say that con-

1 When referring to fictional universes, we consider the serialized fictional television narrative and also the story developments in other media and formats.

2 Interacting viewers are the audience interacting (propagating, retweeting, making content, responding to polls etc.) with the fictional universe (Sigiliano 2024).

fluent evidence suggests television could have a significant role in terms of learning”.

The concept of consumption, particularly in relation to the social TV phenomenon, underscores the creative production of the audience in the backchannel³. When sharing their impressions on X synchronously with episodes airing, interacting viewers explore cognitive abilities through the repercussions of on-air content, the expansion of plot developments, and the resignification of the story. In the backchannel, collaborative networks are formed, engineering collective construction in the process of producing meaning.

Therefore, this paper aims to propose a framework for analysing the creation, circulation and consumption of complex US narratives, with particular reference to media literacy studies. The framework will be applied in an analysis of *Euphoria*, exploring the fictional universe of the second season and comments posted on X in real time, in order to provide a more detailed understanding of the interaction between viewers and the creative production of the show. The choice of the empirical object is justified by a set of characteristics present in the show's narrative. The first point relates to the profile of HBO's serialized fictional productions and its transmedia strategies. According to Leverette et al. (2008), the network's storylines are marked by dense fictional universes and pioneering approaches in the fields of transmedia storytelling and social TV. The second point concerns the number of episodes broadcast and the timeframe in which they aired. A season of a fictional serial narrative produced for broadcast television in the United States typically consists of 24 episodes, aired over at least six months. However, this distribution model is incompatible with the methodological approach of backchannel monitoring, extraction, and coding adopted in this study, as data collection must be carried out synchronously with the airing of the program in order to avoid significant information loss. In this regard, a season composed of eight episodes enables the application of the protocol within a feasible timeframe. Finally, *Euphoria* is guided by narrative and aesthetic elements that align with the concept of narrative complexity proposed by Mittell (2015). Since its premiere in 2019, the show's intricate plot has engaged a large number of interactive viewers, while addressing the conflicts and traumas experienced by a group of students and exploring issues such as substance abuse, prejudice, diversity, sexism, among others.

3 Secondary channel for content sharing formed during a show's airtime.

2. NARRATIVE COMPLEXITY AND MEDIA LITERACY: A THEORETICAL-METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The dialogue between the field of media literacy and US TV series has been approached from a brief standpoint in the works of Livingstone and Lunt (1994), Livingstone (2007), , Jenkins *et al.* (2009) and Mittell (2015). The authors establish a correlation between new modes of production in contemporary times and serial fiction; however, analyses are directed towards case studies conducted in classrooms, with a focus on children's programming. In the context of work oriented towards consumption and reception, while examining distinct media literacy methodological approaches and epistemological frameworks, Johnson (2006), Jost (2016) and Pucci Jr. (2016) assert that, in addition to new modes of creation, production and distribution, serialised fictional post-network-television narratives are characterised by a shift in the process of meaning-making within the fictional universe.

The authors further posit that contemporary series comprise content (verbal, visual and narrative elements) that demands viewers' cognitive effort, thereby highlighting a shift in the process of meaning-making. This integration of various points of the fictional universe, including transmedia, is a salient feature of these series. In this regard, Scolari (2016) asserts that transmedia actions demand a range of abilities from viewers, such as curation, content management, context analysis and correlation, among others. In essence, the audience must assimilate and interpret the multifaceted layers of a transmedia narrative, which are dispersed across diverse platforms.

Convergence culture, as posited by Jenkins *et al.* (2009), has the potential to broaden the discourse on media literacy. The contemporary connectivity environment fosters new communicative practices, including social interactive abilities in collaborative platforms, such as the concurrent execution of tasks, distributed cognition, collective intelligence, and transmedia navigation.

The authors further posit that the contemporary environment characterised by connectivity is conducive to the emergence of novel communicative practices, which are related to the development of social interactive abilities in collaborative platforms. These novel practices include the conduction of simultaneous tasks, distributed cognition, collective intelligence and transmedia navigation. The points brought up by Jenkins *et al.* (2009) can be observed in the context of social TV. In addition to the technological aspect, the audience must

understand second-screen environments, devices, and X's informational architecture to access, browse, share and create content. The hybrid nature of social TV also engenders new sociability possibilities around the program schedule.

The formation of momentary communities in the back-channel expands the watercooler, establishing various ways of sharing ideas and expressions. This network conversational established by social TV makes the interacting viewer assume their interacting role, propagating and echoing the show that was airing at the time. Even though they are fleeting, only assembled while the show is on air, momentary communities create content that not only echoes the scenes, but also explore new perspectives.

The analysis of the fictional universe and the backchannel, as part of the proposed theoretical-methodological framework, is organized through reading keys encompassing three dimensions each, starting from the basic elements of that context and progressing to the insertion of the cognitive repertoire into new structures. (FIG. 1).

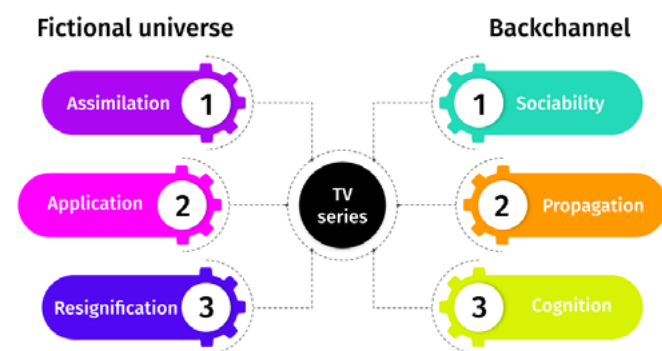


FIGURE 1 - DIAGRAM OF THE THEORETICAL-METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK (SOURCE: AUTHORS' ELABORATION, 2025).

The reading key for the fictional universe is composed of three dimensions: assimilation, application and resignification. The aim of this study is to discuss how the fictional universe promotes the development of media literacy, i.e. how the aspects of a complex TV series traverse three moments: the introduction of the fictional universe's rule; this rule working throughout the episodes; and the insertion of the rule in a new context (FIG. 2).

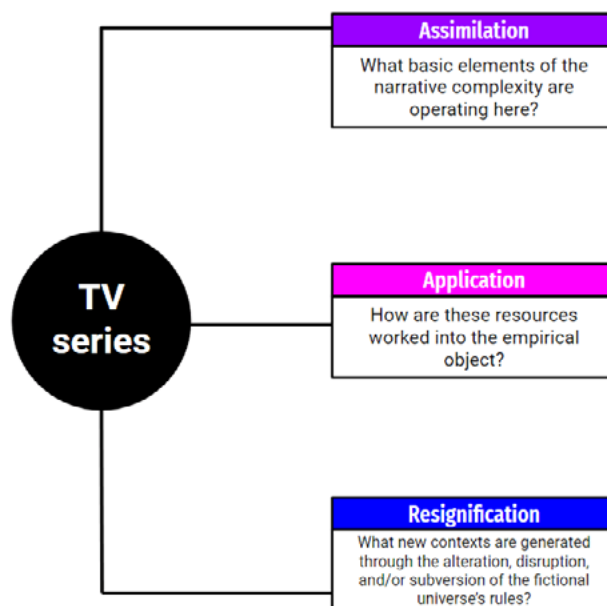


FIGURE 2 – READING KEYS FOR THE FICTIONAL UNIVERSE. (SOURCE: AUTHORS' ELABORATION, 2025)

The assimilation dimension refers to the ability of the show to present elements related to narrative complexity, comprising aspects associated with aesthetics, stylistics and narrative, which form the basis for defining the points that will actually recur in the plot (FIG. 3). As previously indicated, narrative complexity is derived from four core elements: narratological fruition, temporal displacement, tridimensional characters, and the use of ironic, self-referencing components. Narratological fruition constitutes the basic level of narrative complexity and is configured through the parallel development of micronarratives (episodic) and macronarratives (serialized), establishing a balance between self-contained arcs that conclude at the end of each episode and those that unfold across entire seasons. By shifting between episodic and serialized formats, the series broadens its thematic and generic scope, resulting in a unique stylistic hybridity. This aesthetic multiplicity is especially evident in the episodic structure of the narrative, incorporating various formats and allowing secondary characters to assume central roles at specific moments. Temporal displacement is one of the main pillars of the televisual storytelling poetics proposed by Mittell (2015). In narrative complexity, a single episode may present multiple temporalities, intertwining present, past, and future, as well as parallel realities and alternative versions of the fictional universe. The third point concerns the characters. According to Mittell (2015), they are de-

veloped gradually and fragmentarily, leading the audience to establish a parasocial relationship. The author also highlights the rise of anti-heroes within narrative complexity, both in drama and comedy. In other words, the universe surrounding anti-heroes is tenuous and contradictory, requiring viewers to constantly interpret the characters' motivations, actions, and vulnerabilities in order to identify and make sense of the paratext. Finally, Mittell (2015) argues that complex narratives feature metalinguistic (or self-referential) and ironic elements. According to the author, these devices reinforce the rules of the fictional universe while also generating new interpretive layers within the story. In this context, the plot explores ironic self-reflexivity, referencing its own paratext.

In this regard, the initial phase of analysis will focus on the empirical object to identify the presence of these elements. It is noteworthy that a plot's complexity does not necessitate the manifestation of all the fundamental characteristics delineated by Mittell (2015). *Game of Thrones* (2011 - 2019, HBO), a series that, while guided by this narratological model, does not exhibit characteristics of self-referencing or ironic elements, nor does it engage with self-reference and self-deprecation. In essence, assimilation functions as a foundational principle, shaping aspects that recur in the show and are reinforced, deepened and/or expanded through transmedia strategies.

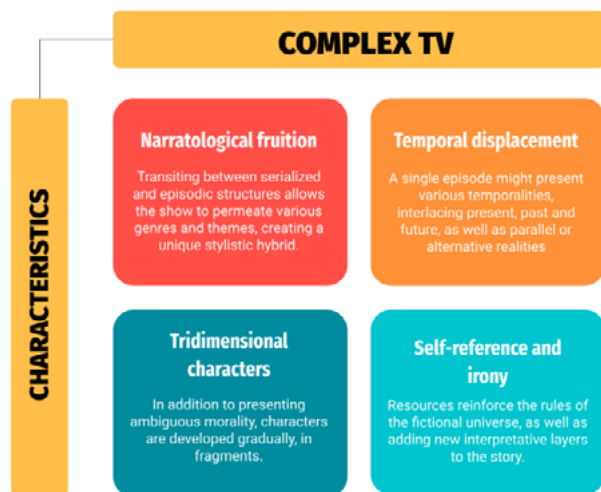


FIGURE 3 – ELEMENTS THAT COMPRISES THE ASSIMILATION DIMENSION ARE DRAWN FROM THE CHARACTERISTICS OF NARRATIVE COMPLEXITY. (SOURCE: AUTHORS' ELABORATION, 2025)

Following the identification of the fundamental elements of narrative complexity that operate in the empirical object, the subsequent dimension will address the manner in which these resources are integrated into it. The application dimension, therefore, encompasses the recurrent elements of the story, reflecting on the guiding principles for the construction and delineation of the specific fictional universe's rules. It is imperative that these rules are emphasized not only in the pilot but throughout the entire season. The third and final dimension encompasses the insertion of these recurring elements in new interpretative contexts, altering, disrupting and/or subverting these rules, even if temporarily.

The backchannel reading key is guided by three dimensions: sociability, propagation and cognition (FIG. 4), and intends to discuss how media literacy is operating in the creative production of interacting viewers on social TV.

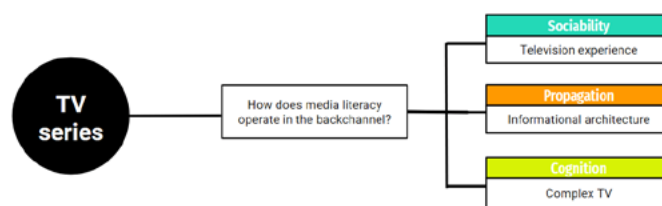


FIGURE 4 – BACKCHANNEL READING KEYS. (SOURCE: AUTHORS' ELABORATION, 2025).

Sociability refers to the ability of the audience to express themselves and to share their impressions simultaneously with a show's broadcast. In this way, the dimension is focused on the television experience, covering the water-cooler appropriations, subversions and amplifications in the shared experience and the social bond in the context of social TV.

Propagation refers to the ability to use characteristics of X's informational architecture to expand the reach of content published on the backchannel. This dimension can be observed in the adoption of indexation, the use of multimodal resources, the textual limitation of tweets, the creation of threads, the formation of collaborative networks from asymmetric connections, and so on. The third and final dimension encompasses the discussion of complex narratives, which demand cognitive strategies connected to attention management, polysemic reading, long-term memory, and the parasocial relationship to the show's characters.

3. *EUPHORIA*: CRITICAL UNDERSTANDING AND CREATIVE PRODUCTION

Following the definition of the reading keys and their respective dimensions, the theoretical-methodological framework will be applied to analyse the second season of the series *Euphoria*. The programme, created by Sam Levinson, focuses on Rue, a teenage girl grappling with substance abuse following the death of her father, while concurrently delving into the intricacies of the lives of a group of high school students, shedding light on their individual struggles and vulnerabilities. Comprising eight episodes, the second season of *Euphoria* aired in January and February 2022. It also includes transmedia actions carried out by HBO and HBO Brasil during the season's broadcast. The monitoring of these strategies encompassed 22 general and specific X, Facebook, YouTube and TikTok pages, amounting to a total of 1,226 publications, in addition to the two websites that constitute HBO's domain and HBO Brasil's Spotify profile. The analysis of the fictional universe is anchored in three dimensions: assimilation, application and resignification. The objective of this study is to demonstrate, based on the previously discussed concepts, how the second season contributed to the development of media literacy. The assimilation dimension encompasses the show's capacity to present elements pertaining to narrative complexity, thereby establishing a foundation to comprehend the story's recurring aspects. *Euphoria*'s fictional universe comprises resources that play a significant role in understanding the plot, which were methodically introduced to viewers throughout both seasons and special episodes. Mittell's (2015) four points, i.e. narratological fruition, temporal displacement, tridimensional characters, and the use of self-referencing, ironic resources, operate in the HBO show (FIG. 5).

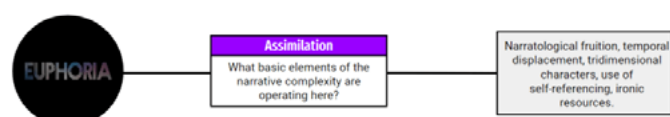


FIGURE 5 – SYSTEMATIZATION OF THE ASSIMILATION DIMENSION. (SOURCE: AUTHORS' ELABORATION, 2025).

Following the identification of the fundamental components of narrative complexity that operate within the show, the subsequent stage of the analysis focuses on the application of these resources in the fictional universe of *Euphoria* (FIG. 6). In other words, the objective is to ascertain how the characteristics of this narratological model manifest themselves in the second season of the show.

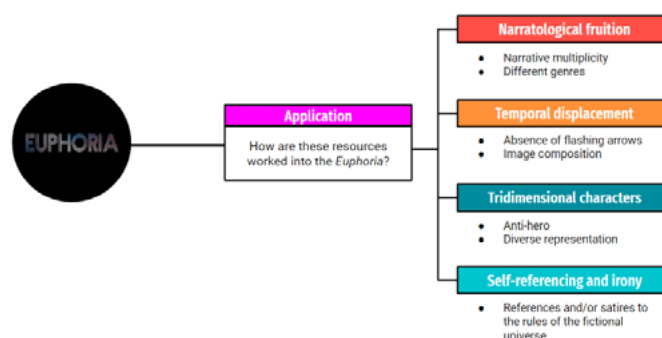


FIGURE 6 - SYSTEMATIZATION OF THE APPLICATION DIMENSION.(SOURCE: AUTHORS' ELABORATION, 2025).

Narratological fruition integrates the manner in which the show explores narrative multiplicity, whether by interweaving various arcs within the same sequence and/or evoking macro-narratives that connect disparate episodes. This phenomenon is exemplified in the episode entitled *Stand Still Like the Hummingbird*, wherein the conflict between Rue and Jules is intricately interwoven with dialogues from the first season finale and the special *Fuck Anyone Who's Not a Sea Blob*. In the same episode, the scene in which the protagonist goes to Lexie's house explores narrative multiplicity through the interweaving of plots related to Rue's escape, Cassie and Nate's discovery of infidelity, and Lexie's discomfort.

This narrative complexity is further enhanced by the show's navigation across different genres. This is evident in specific sequences, such as the opening of *You Who Cannot See, Think of Those Who Can* (S02E04), where Rue and Jules draw on various pop cultural references, including animation, paintings and film. This phenomenon is also evident in various other scenes, such as the second season's final two episodes, entitled *The Theater and Its Double* and *All My Life, My Heart Has Yearned for a Thing I Cannot Name*, respectively. In these episodes, a significant portion of the narrative is dedicated to the exploration of theatrical language, as depicted

by the production of *Our Life* on stage at East Highland High School.

In the second season of the television programme *Euphoria*, temporal displacement is characterised by the absence of the conventional ‘flashing arrows’ technique. Instead, changes in chronology and in-universe diegesis are signaled by the granularity of image composition. In the opening episode of the second season, entitled *Trying to Get to Heaven Before They Close the Door*, for instance, in addition to the introductory flashback, the episode explores three distinct moments during the New Year’s party: the arrival of guests, the altercation between Fezco and Nate, and the journey to Laurie’s residence. However, the sequence of events is not explicitly conveyed through graphic elements such as “5 hours earlier” or “10 hours later”. In this sense, chronological linearity is highlighted through editing, necessitating audience attention and subsequent organisation of facts through hypothetico-deductive reasoning, thereby filling in informational gaps.

The characters in *Euphoria* are three-dimensional, thus reinforcing the rise of the antihero in contemporary television series. In addition to being guided by their ambiguous morals, some of the show’s characters also represent minority and marginalized social groups, thereby expanding the series’ diversity. In the sequences featuring Rue in *Ruminations: Big and Little Bullies* and *Stand Still Like the Hummingbird*, the character’s psychological and emotional complexity gradually unfolds in accordance with the narrative’s progression, deviating from a simplistic interpretation based on archetypal oppositions. This complexity is exemplified by Rue’s approach to navigating the story’s conflicts and contradictions. This approach enables the exploration of themes such as adolescence, opioid addiction and neurological disorders through a multifaceted and profound lens, fostering parasocial relationships with viewers by evoking empathy and emotion.

In addition to the depiction of a diverse range of identities, body types and sexualities, the character of Rue, a Black, bisexual woman, challenges stereotypes through the manner in which her narrative arcs are developed in the show. In scenes focusing on Rue and Jules in *Trying to Get to Heaven Before They Close the Door*, *You Who Cannot See, Think of Those Who Can*, and *Stand Still Like the Hummingbird*, the narrative does not reduce the characters to their gender identity and expression. The couple challenges conventional standards by exploring other issues common to adolescents, extending beyond the confines of the LGBTQIA+ experience.

The use of irony and self-reference, akin to other facets of narrative intricacy, is a hallmark of *Euphoria*’s fictional universe. Consequently, plot elements are perpetually reinforced and referenced across various points, compelling viewers to engage in polysemic interpretation of the show. The series employs a multifaceted array of levels of complexity. These range from straightforward references to framing devices that recur throughout the series, such as in *All My Life, My Heart Has Yearned for a Thing I Cannot Name*, where we observe Fezco and Rue in a hallway, to an “alternate” version of the para-text depicted in *The Theater and Its Double*, evident in the sequences of the “Our Life” performance. In the season finale, Lexie’s play recreates various important moments of the series, where meaning-making involves an understanding of the “original”, Rue’s ambiguous telling, and Lexie’s version of it, bringing more density to self-reference.

The show also finds irony in Rue’s ambiguous morals, reflected not only in the relationship the character has with her family and friends, but also in the manner in which she recounts the events of the story. The manner in which the series satirises the protagonist’s Machiavellian intelligence can be observed in her rendition of Bobby Darin’s *Call Me Irresponsible* in *Ruminations: Big and Little Bullies*, where the character engages in a light-hearted jest about her own irresponsible and unreliable nature. The series not only highlights the protagonist’s moral contradictions, but also explores humour by showing Rue, under the influence of drugs, singing and dancing to the verses, “Call me irresponsible, call me unreliable, throw in undependable, too”

The third dimension is that of resignification, which involves the insertion of these elements of narrative complexity into new narrative, aesthetic and/or stylistic contexts. This involves the alteration, disruption and/or subversion of the fictional universe rules, even if only briefly. Rue’s narration is a recurring element since *Euphoria*’s pilot, and the first information is that she is an unreliable narrator, indicating to the audience that her perspective on facts is dubious. This establishes a foundation for the viewer to recognise that not all of the protagonist’s actions are accurate. Throughout the first season, Rue’s voice functions as a contextual marker, illuminating the character’s past, which is consistently introduced at the commencement of each episode, and her internal emotional landscape and inconsistencies.

The incongruity between Rue’s version of events and the fictional universe’s rules, as illustrated in the special episode *Trouble Don’t Last Always - Part 1: Rue*, becomes evident when the character references the plot of the first season’s fifth

episode, *03 Bonnie and Clyde*. In this episode, Rue discusses with Ali the idea of getting matching tattoos, but ultimately deciding against it. This statement is in direct contrast to the scene in *03 Bonnie and Clyde*, which depicts the two characters in Ash's tattoo studio without any explicit indication that it is a fantasy sequence. Through the correlation of different episodes, viewers are able to confirm that Rue is indeed an unreliable narrator.

However, in the second season finale, this fictional universe rule is changed, acquiring new interpretative layers and reverberating in other stylistic, aesthetic and narrative recurrences in *Euphoria*. In the episode entitled *All My Life, My Heart Has Yearned for a Thing I Cannot Name*, the final sequence is narrated in a verbal tense that has not been previously heard in the show. For the first time, the protagonist refers to the events in the past as if she is already in the future. This shift prompts a close reading of the show, fostering the audience's ability to establish a correlation between the cause (A) and the effect (B) of the fictional universe. The audience must identify the new verbal tense, evaluate its impact on previously aired narrative arcs, and discern its influence on subsequent episodes (FIG. 7).

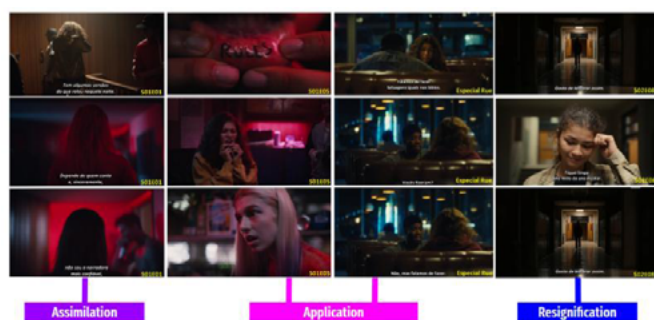


FIGURE 7 – DIMENSIONS OF THE FICTIONAL UNIVERSE
 READING KEY IN RUE'S RECURRING NARRATION⁴ (SOURCE:
 AUTHORS' ELABORATION, 2025)

4 Translation – left, top to bottom: There's a couple versions of what happened that night. / It all depends on who you ask, and to be honest, / I'm not always the most reliable narrator. / Assimilation. Middle, bottom: Application. Middle-right, top to bottom: We talked about getting matching tattoos on the inside of our lips. / Did you? / No, but we, we talked about it. Right, top to bottom: I'd like to remember it that way. / I stayed clean to the rest of the school year. / I'd like to remember it that way. Resignification.

The modification of the fictional universe rule has also been demonstrated to engender new meaning-making in other recurrences, which can be observed, for example, in temporal displacement and cinematography. Until this point, the chronological changes in *Euphoria* were limited to the past and present, with the show exploring one character's flashback at the start of each episode, thereby deepening their characterisation, and the rest of the story unfolding in the present. Consequently, the fictional universe was comprised of two chronological lines: 1) past, and 2) present. However, with the alteration in Rue's narration, a new temporality – 3) future – is introduced into the fictional universe, thereby expanding the possibilities of plot events and extensions.

In order to analyse the backchannel, the protocol for data monitoring, extraction and codification developed in the *Observatório da Qualidade no Audiovisual* [Audiovisual Quality Observatory] was adopted (Borges *et al.*, 2022). This protocol is structured in three stages: filtering parameters; monitoring and extraction; and codification and visualization. The first stage consisted of limiting the backchannel filtering parameters extracted from X's Streaming API. In the second stage, the monitoring and extraction of *Euphoria*'s backchannel was conducted, encompassing all second-season episodes. The extraction of tweets was facilitated by Python, complemented by prompts from the Pandas, Tweepy, and NLTK packages and libraries. Given the substantial volume of tweets and the objective of acquiring a more pertinent sample for the discussions proposed in this paper, it was deemed necessary to clean up the data prior to its codification. The filtering process, guided by six categories pertaining to the level of tweet elaboration as structured in NLP, was undertaken with the aid of Python, in conjunction with prompts and libraries. Following the filtering of the 3,675,000 original tweets, the final sample comprised 508,000 tweets. In the third and final stage, the data was individually identified, described and categorised in the Atlas.ti software. Given the substantial volume and intricacy of the tweets, the codification process was meticulously structured into two stages: macro-codification and micro-codification. Initially, in macro-codification, a central theme was assigned to categorize the posts, and subsequently, in micro-codification, categorization was based on the specificity of each post (TAB. 1). Subsequently, conversational contexts⁵ were systematically delineated in mind maps.

5 Conversational context refers to the sets of tweets identified during the macro-coding and micro-coding stages. In general, the term is used to describe data sets that share the same theme, whether broad or specific.

Codification Table

S02E01 <i>Trying to Get to Heaven Before They Close the Door</i>	
Macro-codification	24 conversational contexts
Micro-codification	36 conversational contexts
S02E02 <i>Out of Touch</i>	
Macro-codification	27 conversational contexts
Micro-codification	32 conversational contexts
S02E03 <i>Ruminations: Big and Little Bullies</i>	
Macro-codification	24 conversational contexts
Micro-codification	40 conversational contexts
S02E04 <i>You Who Cannot See, Think of Those Who Can</i>	
Macro-codification	22 conversational contexts
Micro-codification	33 conversational contexts
S02E05 <i>Stand Still Like the Hummingbird</i>	
Macro-codification	26 conversational contexts
Micro-codification	37 conversational contexts
S02E06 <i>A Thousand Little Trees of Blood</i>	
Macro-codification	24 conversational contexts
Micro-codification	40 conversational contexts
S02E03 <i>The Theater and Its Double</i>	
Macro-codification	25 conversational contexts
Micro-codification	39 conversational contexts
S02E08 <i>All My Life, My Heart Has Yearned for a Thing I Cannot Name</i>	
Macro-codification	26 conversational contexts
Micro-codification	44 conversational contexts

TABLE 1 - CONVERSATIONAL CONTEXTS IDENTIFIED IN THE BACKCHANNEL (SOURCE: AUTHORS' ELABORATION, 2025).

The backchannel reading key comprises three dimensions: sociability, propagation and cognition. The dimension of sociability focuses on the television experience and refers to the ability of interacting viewers to express themselves and share their impressions simultaneously with the airing of a show. This dimension can be observed in the watching rituals of *Euphoria* interacting with viewers, as evidenced by their tweets sharing their expectations and preparation to follow the show. This phenomenon, which was evident in all eight episodes, manifested as a recurrent theme in the discourse, centring on the viewing ritual. This ritual involved the audience's routine, with the consumption of food while watching the show being a notable aspect. The use of multimodal resources, such as videos and images of snacks prepared for the occasion, further enriched the discourse. Some of these images even alluded to the show's visual identity, as depicted in Figure 8.

The performance aspect of social media and the need to participate in the momentary community formed around the watching ritual also generated a series of falsified content on the backchannel. Manipulated images published by interacting viewers presented elements inserted on editing software to mimic the shared experience. Thus, we could observe manipulated images, with the addition of a still from the show overlaid on a TV, and the silhouette of people watching the week's episode together, etc (FIG. 8).

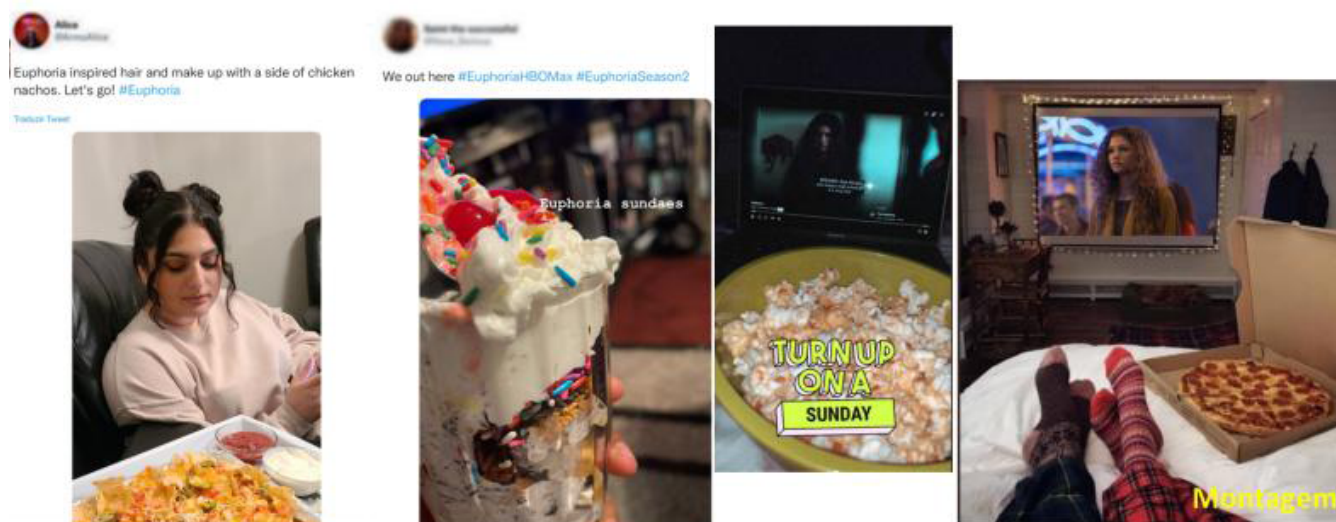


FIGURE 8 – IN THE FIRST THREE IMAGES, THE TWEETS EXPLORE THE ATTENDANCE PROTOCOL BY SHARING THE PREPARATIONS SURROUNDING APPOINTMENT TELEVISION. IN THE FOURTH TWEET, THE INTERACTING VIEWER POSTS A MONTAGE MIMICKING ELEMENTS CHARACTERISTIC OF THE ATTENDANCE RITUAL (SOURCE: X, 2022).

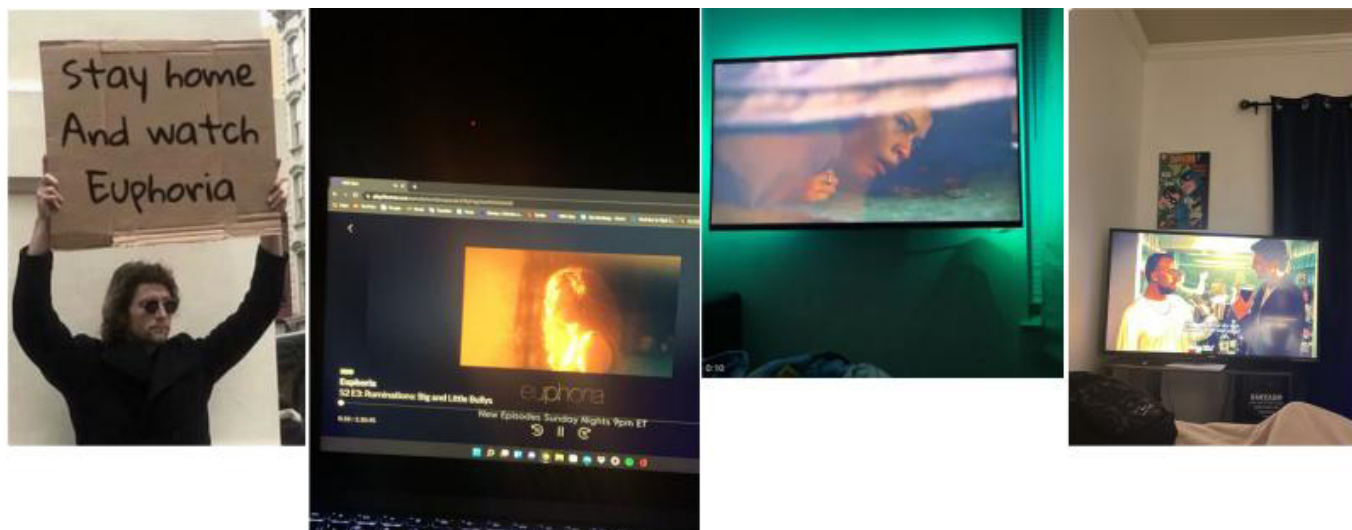


FIGURE 9 – TO SHARE #EUPHORIADAY, THE AUDIENCE PUBLISHED EDITED IMAGES. WE ALSO IDENTIFIED IMAGES OF TELEVISION SCREENS AND MOBILE DEVICES SHOWING THE TV SERIES (SOURCE: X, 2022).

During the broadcast of these episodes, some interactive viewers adopted the hashtag #EuphoriaDay, thereby reinforcing the social bond that had been established in the backchannel. The specific hashtag aimed to encourage viewers to watch the show from the comfort of their own homes on Sunday evenings. In addition, viewers created images featuring the #EuphoriaDay slogan to promote the campaign on X. Furthermore, within referent conversational contexts, the audience exhibited a desire to legitimize appointment television by sharing images that demonstrated their engagement with the show at the specific time it was being broadcast. Posts highlighted the interface of TV screens and mobile devices exhibiting the initial sequences of the day's episode (FIG. 9).

Given that the content is distributed by subscription, whether to the cable channel or the streaming service, the concept of appointment television was initially a means of distinguishing interacting viewers. However, the anxiety surrounding the show ultimately led to an internal dispute among subscribers, pitting interacting viewers who accessed the show through cable TV against those watching on streaming (HBO Max). In this context, the access and availability of the day's episode became a point of contention between the audience. HBO Max's technical difficulties, for example, were ridiculed by cable subscribers, and the speed with which the episode was made available on streaming, a few seconds before it started on television, was extolled by interacting viewers who subscribed to the platform.

The propagation dimension refers to the ability to engage aspects of X's informational architecture to widen the reach of the backchannel publications, including resources such as hashtags, multimodal resources, threads, and collaborative networks based on asymmetrical connections. General indexes used by interacting viewers were derived from engagement actions created by HBO to market the second season. In the context of social TV, the resource helps identify relevant tweets in the timeline's uninterrupted flow and to group information together. Adopting the hashtags proposed by HBO thus contributed to propagating the publication on the backchannel, as well as to facilitating the formation of collaborative networks. By including #Euphoria and/or #EuphoriaHBO in their tweets, the audience indicated the discussion's theme, allowing the content to spread through symmetric and asymmetrical connections.

While specific indexes directed at characters, narrative arcs and episode titles were not part of HBO's engagement strategy, interacting viewers adopted the resource occasionally. Specific hashtags such as #Zendaya and #Rules were used in most codified conversational contexts to segment the audience's creative output, such as memes and edits. These hashtags served to direct the content, thereby creating a form of informational hierarchy that covered both the overarching theme (#Euphoria) and the specific aspect of that theme that was being explored in each tweet (#Zendaya, #Rules, etc.).



FIGURE 10 – IMAGES ARE USED TO ANALYZE *EUPHORIA*'S FICTIONAL UNIVERSE⁶ (SOURCE: X, 2022).

Collaborative networks originate in the backchannel with a singular tweet and evolve in accordance with the mentions appended by other interacting viewers to the initial post. In the context of narrative complexity, networks are formed around the show-typical analysis of narrative, aesthetic and stylistic elements, such as an absence of flashing arrows, intertextuality and character tridimensionality. While these networks emerge spontaneously in the timeline through symmetric and asymmetric connections, it is evident that the audience employs certain strategies to accentuate and systematise their impressions of the episode. To this end, interacting viewers establish threads to encourage the formation of collaborative networks, which, in addition to comprising a variety of tweets and the general *Euphoria* index, typically feature a cover image. The initial post in this thread typically included the episode's number and some of its promotional images, providing contextual information about the thematic bias of the thread and facilitating its swift identification within the backchannel. The second-season backchannel featured a variety of multimodal resources, encompassing different conversational contexts and languages. Among the most frequently explored formats by interacting viewers were images, videos, and GIFs. Pictures were observed in the production of memes and in the discussion of narrative, aesthetic, and stylistic aspects. Memes employed the use of *Euphoria* screen grabs to subvert conventional story arcs, thereby introducing hitherto unexplored layers of interpretation to the paratext and popular images in the digital cultural milieu. The creation of memes through the utilisation of frames from the HBO

show exhibited two notable characteristics. Firstly, the publication of images occurred without the intervention of editing software. Secondly, the manipulation of images resulted in a reinterpretation of the scene's original signification.

The use of images was also observed in adopting the multimodal resource in discussing narrative, aesthetic and stylistic aspects. Interacting viewers explored the show's images to highlight elements of narrative complexity, such as narrative multiplicity, when publishing stills from various plots, indicating their correlation; image composition, analysing scene granularity to identify intertextual references; and changes in fictional universe rules, contrasting frames from the first and second seasons (FIG. 10). When unable to capture and publish high-quality images of the scenes, the audience also took pictures of TV and mobile device screens to share their theories and projections. In addition to contributing to interacting viewers' analysis and arguments on X, the multimodal resource functioned as a narrative guide, indicating to the audience important aspects in reading and comprehending *Euphoria*.

The third dimension refers to the discussion of complex narratives, which demand cognitive strategies from interacting viewers. These strategies are aimed at attention manage-

6 Translation – first tweet: first fezco fucking nate up and then ashtay fucking cal jacobson up, luckily I chose to love the right drug dealers. #EuphoriaHBOMax #Euphoria. Second tweet: Derek liked Cal back, an example of that is that when Cal says he liked Marsha, he looks at her with pure HATE, and when Cal kisses him in the bar, he giggles and kisses him back. He didn't want to fuck Marsha, but Cal! #Euphoria #EuphoriaHBO.

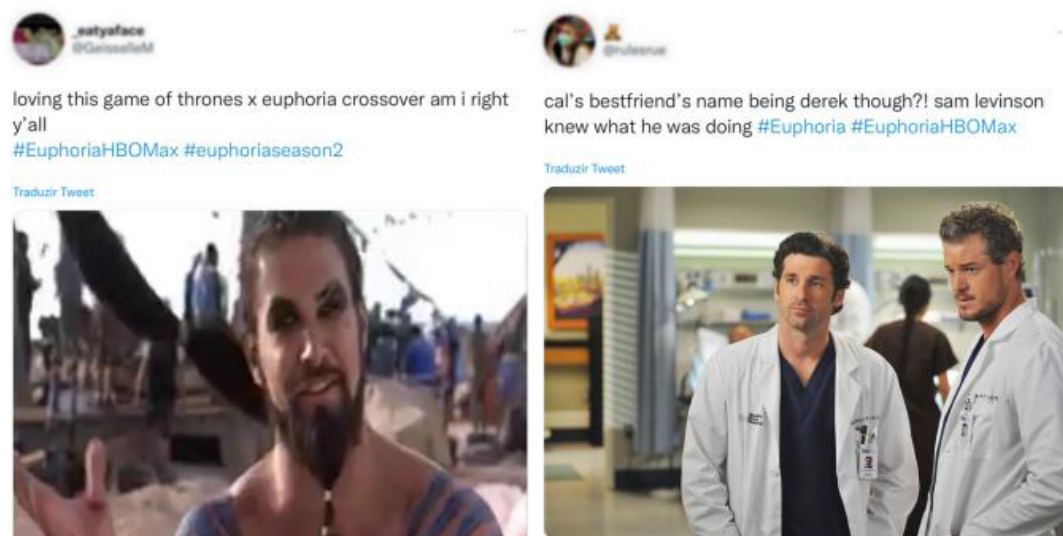


FIGURE 11 – INTERTEXTUALITY INSERTED IN *EUPHORIA* IS SHARED BY THE AUDIENCE (SOURCE: X, 2022).

ment, polysemic reading, long-term memory and parasocial relationships with the characters. However, it is important to note that these cognitive processes are not exclusive; i.e. what defines backchannel identification are its more latent characterisation.

Attention management is a key concept in analysing the discussions surrounding *Euphoria*'s image composition. The granularity of the image was echoed by the audience based on two recurrences. The first of these relates to visual elements that have a narrative function, the identification of which contributes to understanding the fictional universe. This point can be observed in a variety of conversational contexts, ranging from clear changes in the imagery composition, such as the alteration of Jules' photograph and visual identity, to the detailing of the minimum unit, which demands a more refined analysis from the audience, such as the use of burgundy to represent Rue's father. The second recurrence is guided by the artistic function of facultative perception, which exerts no direct influence on the progression of the story. Despite not interfering in the understanding of the plot, the participation of the artist Labrinth, for example, engendered new interpretative layers in the backchannel, reinforcing the importance that the singer has for the series' metatext.

Polysemic reading is a term used to describe the process of identifying intertextual resources, whether intentionally or not, that are inserted into the fictional universe and the correlation between episodes airing (mothership) and its associated content in transmedia actions. In the context of *Euphoria*, external elements that are purposefully introduced

in the plot are immediately recognised by interacting viewers. The utilisation of multimodal resources, notably X's GIF repository, enabled the audience to identify the intertextual elements within the present scene, highlighting figures such as the activist Malcolm X and the singer Rihanna.

Within the context of serialised fiction, two characters garnered significant attention from the backchannel's interactive audience: Khal Drogo, from *Game of Thrones*, and Derek, from *Grey's Anatomy* (2005–present, ABC) (FIG. 11). The scene referencing the Dothraki leader was guided by flashing arrows, making explicit the allusion to George R. R. Martin's fictional universe through characterisation and mise en scène. The *Grey's Anatomy*'s intertextual reference, on the other hand, was presented between the lines. Derek is the name of the best friend for whom Callie fell in love as a teenager. Nate's father is portrayed by Eric Dane, whose most famous role was as Dr. Mark Sloan in Shonda Rhimes's show. In *Grey's Anatomy*, Sloan's best friend is also called Derek. Therefore, through the homonym, the audience correlated both fictional universes, pointing out their intertextuality.

This cognitive process was also activated in the interrelationship between the mothership and the transmedia actions created by HBO throughout the second season. The content disseminated on social networks, particularly on the broadcaster's YouTube channel, was adopted by interacting viewers on the backchannel to reinforce theories and interpretations concerning the narrative, in addition to contributing to the projection of future plotlines.

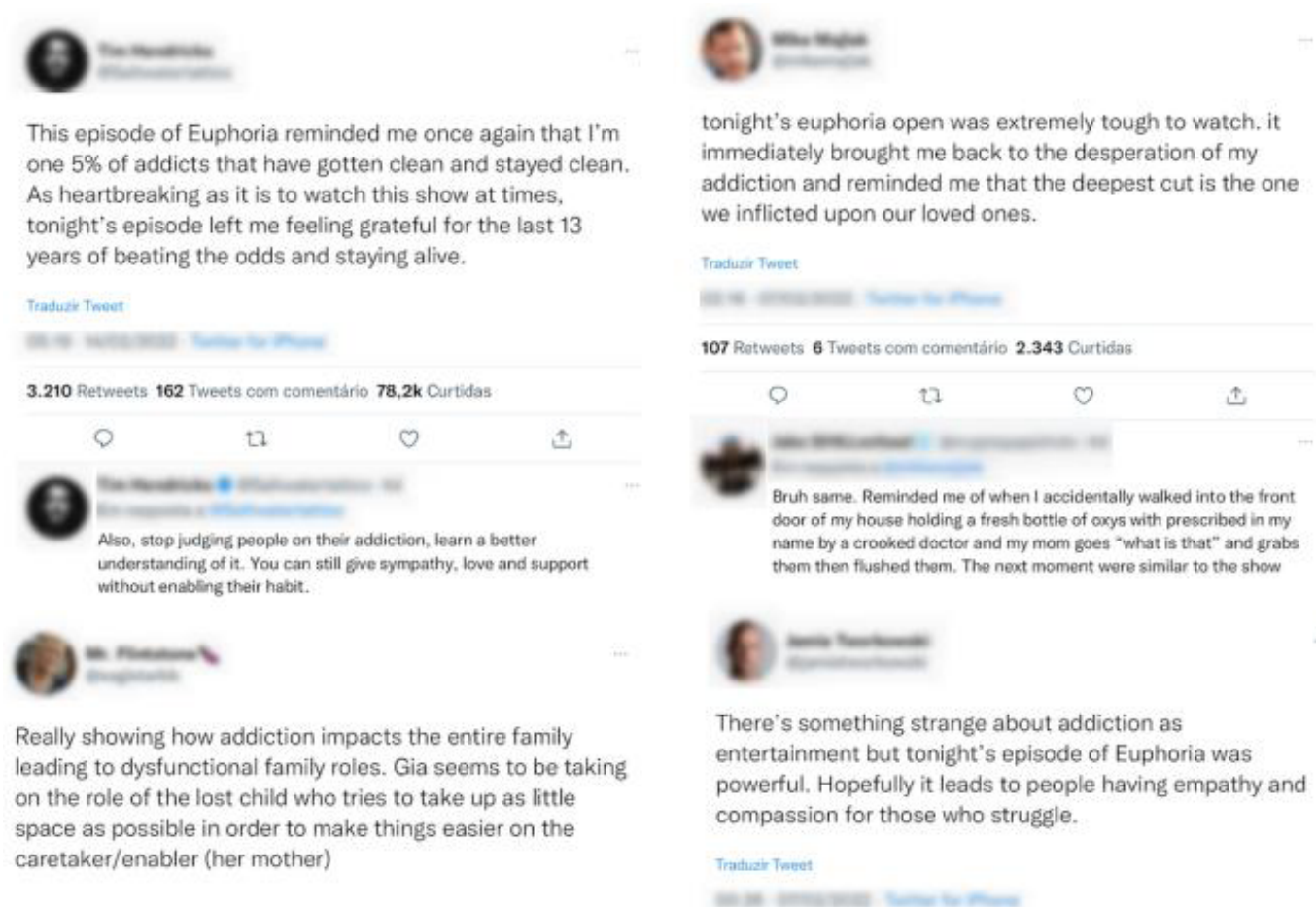


FIGURE 12 – INTERACTING VIEWERS REFLECT ON ADDICTION (SOURCE: X, 2022).

As explored in the episodes of *Euphoria* | Enter *Euphoria*, the testimonials by actress Hunter Schafer, showrunner Sam Levinson, and costume designer Heidi Bivens, for instance, serve as the basis for discourses surrounding Jules's progression in the second season. These tweets detailed aspects such as the character's new colour palette, her infidelity with Elliot, her decision to inform Leslie Bennett that her daughter was using drugs, and the character's distancing from gender-normative roles. These tweets served as a curation of actions, connecting audience comments about the scene on air with excerpts from *euphoria* | enter *euphoria*.

The long-term memory cognitive process can be observed in conversational contexts connected to narrative multiplicity, where, using multimodal resources, the audience interconnected narrative arcs from different episodes. As previously analyzed, Rue and Ali's fight, in *Ruminations: Big and*

Little Bullies, and Rue and Jules's fight, in *Stand Still Like the Hummingbird*, for example, demanded a cognitive effort to recall and connect plots from episodes featured in the first season and the specials produced during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, these scenes do not present flashing arrows indicating how past events interfere with present attitudes and arguments. Interacting viewers not only recognized their connection but also recalled relevant scenes in the image and video, indicating the point of contact between different episodes. Tweets functioned as a form of narrative guidance, addressing the informational lacunae inherent in the screenwriters' work. While the show did not explicitly instruct the audience on the interconnection between the arcs, the audience itself forged these connections in the backchannel.

Finally, the parasocial relationship with characters manifested in conversational contexts concerning discussions

on anti-heroes and the societal issues explored in the programme. As highlighted in the analysis of the fictional universe reading key, *Euphoria*'s characters exhibit moral ambiguity, creating a sense of disconnection among viewers who may not align their interpretation with a simplistic good-versus-evil perspective. This phenomenon can be observed, for instance, in tweets concerning Rue's narrative arc. As the plot progressed and the protagonist's story became increasingly complex and contradictory, the audience's understanding expanded and deepened. Consequently, the audience was prompted to interpret Rue's narrative through nuance and complexity, as opposed to a simplistic moral framework. Consequently, tweets during her scenes highlighted the challenges associated with addiction and adolescence, rather than offering a simplistic, dichotomous interpretation of the protagonist's actions. The para-social relationship cognitive demand was also observed in the identification and empathy evoked by Rue's narrative arc. In the conversational contexts codified in the backchannel, the audience shared personal and family stories about addiction (FIG. 12). Even those who did not have a personal connection to the issue found themselves affected by the experiences of Rue, and reflected on the risks associated with opioid consumption and the perceived inadequacy of the health system.

The social themes addressed in *Euphoria*, such as teenage pregnancy, drug addiction, bullying, psychological disorders, abusive relationships and prejudice, promote the spontaneous pedagogy of fiction. In other words, the dramatisations of these social issues lead to the formation of momentary communities around the discussions and reflections fostered by the series, broadening the way in which interacting viewers perceive and understand the society in which they are inserted. Furthermore, spontaneous pedagogy of fiction promoted through para-social relationships also includes analyses of how minority groups are represented in the fictional universe. For instance, the narrative arc of Jules was a subject of discussion in various conversational contexts, codified in the backchannel. In this sense, the discourse in the backchannel highlighted the significance of the character's complexity, beyond the confines of her gender identity and presentation, as exemplified in the opening sequence of the episode *You Who Cannot See, Think of Those Who Can*. Interacting viewers underscored the pivotal role of the HBO show in consistently associating Jules's figure with women's roles, thereby challenging stereotypes surrounding the sexualization and marginalization of trans individuals in serialized fiction.

4. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The application of the theoretical-methodological approach reveals how the second season of the series fosters the development of media literacy and how these skills are at play in the backchannel, thus encompassing both production and consumption. By presenting characteristics of narrative complexity, as proposed by Mittell (2015), which encourage a close and polysemic reading by the audience, media literacy is at play in both the episodes and the transmedia strategies of *Euphoria*'s second season. In terms of consumption, media literacy can be observed in the audience's understanding of the informational architecture of X, as they explore its affordances, enabling the circulation and sharing of content, as well as the networked conversation generated on the platform, which reinforces, expands, and re-signifies *Euphoria*'s fictional universe.

The analysis of the fictional universe reading key demonstrates how *Euphoria*'s second season fosters the development of abilities related to media literacy. On the basis of the dimensions of assimilation, application and re-signification, we have observed the way in which the characteristic elements of narrative complexity are introduced, developed and re-signified in the fictional universe. The story first presents the audience with the rules of the plot, then explores these narrative, aesthetic and stylistic recurrences in different episodes, and finally alters, breaks and/or subverts these points. As a result, interacting viewers can employ this key to reading the fictional universe developed since the pilot in other contexts of the series.

On the other hand, the analysis of the backchannel reading keys refers to the dimensions of sociability, propagation and cognition, which encompasses the development of media literacy from understanding the Twitter informational architecture to the cognitive demands stimulated by narrative complexity. Interacting viewers' critical and creative abilities are at play in different cognitive strategies, fostering not only the spontaneous pedagogy of fiction, but also informal learning in the collaborative networks of the backchannel.

In further developments of this research, the aim is to refine this theoretical-methodological framework to understand other complex narratives. The analyses of these series will be included in the repository of the Audiovisual Quality Observatory, which is a pedagogical platform for discussion and training on media literacy in Brazil.

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TV Series

Game of Thrones (2011–2019)
Hill Street Blues (1981–1987)
Dallas (1978–1991)
Euphoria (2019–present)
Twin Peaks (1990–1991; 2017)
Grey's Anatomy (2005–present)

AGAINST FACTS, DREAMS. THE FABULATION IN QUEEN CHARLOTTE: A BRIDGERTON STORY

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ABSTRACT

In the present article, we propose an analysis of the Queen Charlotte series: a Bridgerton story (Netflix, 2023). Much of the critical reception of the work, produced and scripted

by Shonda Rhimes, addressed the fact that its narrative was based on historical facts about British royalty and explored the public's curiosity regarding what was real or fictional in the story. One of the most discussed issues – and which caused a lot of controversy – concerns Queen Charlotte's racial identity. Was the idea of attributing the series' leading role of a Western monarch to a black personality just poetic freedom or a decision based on evidence that the queen was of African descent? Rather than entering into this controversy, we are interested in reflecting on this fabular gesture, this movement that resituates the past at the same time as it provokes the present and acts to outline possible futures. In the path around this central theme, we seek to characterize the narrative world constructed in the series, based on the Bakhtinian notion of chronotope, to reflect on this fabulation, in our view an act of counterfactual historical imagination.

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1. INTRODUCTION

"This is the story of Queen Charlotte of Bridgerton. It's not a history lesson, it's fiction inspired by fact. All the liberties taken by the author are quite intentional." This warning appears before the opening images of *Queen Charlotte: A Bridgerton Story*, a six-part series produced and scripted by Shonda Rhimes for Netflix and released worldwide in May, 2023. Anchored in the success of the two seasons of *Bridgerton*, a series by the same producer, based on the books of the same name by Julia Quinn, *Queen Charlotte* is set five decades before its predecessor. The narrative is divided into two periods of time. The first and main one focuses on Charlotte's (India Amarteifio) arrival and adjustment to the British throne, as well as her love story with King George (Corey Mylchreest). The second timeline, which is the same as *Bridgerton*'s, portrays the older Queen (played by Gouda Roscheuvel) and her efforts to ensure that her children give her grandchildren and guarantee her line of succession.

Bridgerton's spin-off is integrated into Netflix's presence in global markets. Despite the fact *Queen Charlotte* is linked to *Bridgerton*, an adaptation of an U.S. novel, and that it tells its version of real characters of the British monarchy, it was not made for those audiences only. As put by Jenner (2018), Netflix films and series are textually thought to have a transnational, decentered audience. Or as Mateo-Perez, Lacalle, and Rocha (2022) put out, streaming audiences, such as Netflix, are, at the same time, massive and fragmented (considering not only segments such as LGBT communities but also bearing local, cultural peculiarities). This is seen for instance in Netflix strategies for Latin America, which is considered, as Rocha, Arantes and Silva (2021) note, a "homogeneous area" (in spite of its "internal differences") that demands, however, specific modes of communication and marketing. Thus, "...its international catalog system can also be studied in relation to legacy media studies questions—questions about cross-border media flows, global/ local dynamics, and audiovisual diversity" (Lobato, 2017, p. 252). Having this scenario in mind, we are not interested, in this article, in researching or focusing on local reception of narratives such as *Queen Charlotte*. Our goal is different: to address the imaginative challenges that the series presents in relation to the past and the present, which are linked, in our opinion, to the broad appeal of romance dramas and the racial debate provoked by Shonda Rhimes' production.

The critical and audience reception of *Queen Charlotte: A Bridgerton Story* has been very positive. The series premiered

in first place in 91 countries¹ and, in May 2023, entered the list of Netflix's² top ten most watched English-language series. In general, the production has been highly rated. In Rotten Tomatoes, checked on October 2025, it had 94% positive views³. In the UK, the series was considered a "gorgeous triumph" by The Guardian⁴. In Peru, as having moments of genius⁵. For Variety, "Queen Charlotte is the best 'Bridgerton' yet"⁶. In Brazil, it was considered "great"⁷, the "biggest hit" of the *Bridgerton* series⁸ and even better than it⁹.

Most of the texts addressed the fact that the play was based on historical facts about British royalty and explored the public's curiosity about what was real or fictional in the story. One of the most discussed issues - and which caused a lot of controversy - concerned racial issues, such as Queen Charlotte's racial identity, the "great experiment" (as the plot names it), and the interracial love between the queen and her husband. In Brazil, this debate generated headlines such as "Queen Charlotte: what is true and what is fiction in the *Bridgerton* spin-off?"¹⁰ and "7 truths and lies about *Queen Charlotte: A Bridgerton Story*"¹¹. U.S. Vox considered the interracial love a problem in the series, stating the weak evidence of Queen Charlotte's blackness¹². *Time* magazine observes that Shonda Rhimes' joint "...doesn't shy away from making race an integral part of multiple story lines, addressing everything from colorism to segregation and integration. But (...) there's definitely a liberal blurring of the lines be-

1 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queen_Charlotte:_A_Bridgerton_Story

2 <https://www.netflix.com/tudum/top10/tv?week=2023-05-07>

3 https://www.rottentomatoes.com/tv/queen_charlotte_a_bridgerton_story/s01

4 <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2023/may/04/queen-charlotte-a-bridgerton-story-review-a-ravishing-romp-packed-prequel>

5 https://elcomercio.pe/saltar-intro/netflix/series/reina-charlotte-una-historia-de-bridgerton-un-versus-de-opiniones-sobre-la-serie-de-netflix-criticas-review-india-amarteifio-corey-mylchreest-noticia/#google_vignette

6 <https://variety.com/2023/tv/tv-reviews/queen-charlotte-review-bridgerton-prequel-1235602760/>

7 <https://www.omelete.com.br/series-tv/criticas/rainha-charlotte-bridgerton-critica>

8 <https://www.chippu.com.br/criticas/rainha-charlotte-maior-acerto-bridgerton-critica-netflix>

9 <https://cinepop.com.br/critica-rainha-charlotte-spin-off-de-bridgerton-e-ainda-melhor-que-a-serie-original-412591/>

10 <https://www.omelete.com.br/series-tv/rainha-charlotte-bridgerton-real-ficcao>

11 <https://www.techtudo.com.br/listas/2023/05/7-verdades-e-mentiras-sobre-rainha-charlotte-uma-historia-bridgerton-streaming.ghml>

12 <https://www.vox.com/culture/23712625/queen-charlotte-bridgerton-netflix-real-history>

tween history and fantasy in the series”¹³. Portuguese newspaper Público asked if it has ever existed “a Queen Charlotte”, and answers: “Yes, and she had Portuguese ancestors”¹⁴

Sophie Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, who reigned over the British Empire for almost 60 years, was born in a small province in Germany. She was 17 when she arrived in England for her wedding to King George, whom she met at the altar. According to Brazilian Uol, “Charlotte was said to be a descendant of King Afonso III of Portugal and one of his mistresses, known as Madragana, who was Moorish or Mozarabic (Iberian Christians who adopted the Arabic language and culture)”¹⁵ (translated from the original text in Portuguese). Some historians, such as Mario de Valdes y Cocom, a specialist in the African diaspora, have reported finding strong evidence that she was a direct descendant of a black branch of the Portuguese royal house. In period paintings, such as those by the artist Allan Ramsay, the monarch is portrayed as a white woman, but her facial features are black and her hair is curly.¹⁶ In addition, Valdes found a document in which the royal doctor describes her as “small and crooked, with a real mulatto face”. One minister is also said to have written that her nose was very wide and her lips very thick.¹⁷ Valdes’ thesis, however, according to Uol¹⁸, is contested by many other specialists, who have found no conclusive evidence of Charlotte’s racial origin. There is a historical debate as to whether she was, therefore, black or of African descent, even though she has been portrayed with light skin on different screens. In the series, however, there is no doubt: Charlotte is played by two black actresses, deepening a provocative choice present in *Bridgerton* and linked to Shonda Rhimes’ political activism.

Bridgerton is inspired by Julia Quinn’s nine period novels, released between 2000 and 2013. Quinn’s books can be seen as an updated version of popular romance novels as those of Georgette Hayes and her regency books, and Barbara Cartland, a specialist in love stories set in the past, in an ide-



FIGURE 1: IN THE PAINTING BY ALLAN RAMSAY, QUEEN CHARLOTTE IS DEPICTED AS WHITE, BUT HER HAIR IS CURLY AND THERE IS EVIDENCE OF BLACK FEATURES ON HER FACE.¹⁸



FIGURE 2: INDIA AMARTEIFIO AS QUEEN CHARLOTTE IN THE NETFLIX SERIES. NATURAL, ABUNDANT HAIR, INTENTIONALLY MADE PROMINENT.¹⁹

alized British aristocracy of the 18th and 19th centuries. In all these cases, despite their many variations, the narratives are led by women who face obstacles related to the fulfillment of romantic love.

Despite being set in the early 19th century, *Bridgerton*, as produced by Shonda Rhimes, featured black characters occupying different social strata, including the most prominent spaces at court. Queen Charlotte herself, as we have seen, is a black woman, as is the protagonist, the Duke of Hastings

13 <https://time.com/6277014/queen-charlotte-netflix-true-story-behind/>

14 <https://www.publico.pt/2024/05/20/impar/noticia/bridgerton-existiu-rainha-charlotte-carlota-sim-ascendencia-portuguesa-2091089>

15 <https://gizmodo.uol.com.br/rainha-charlotte-quem-foi-a-monarca-que-inspirou-o-spin-off-de-bridgerton/>

16 <https://www.omelete.com.br/series-tv/rainha-charlotte-bridgerton-real-ficcao#25>, acessado em 12/02/2024.

17 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2018/05/15/meghan-markle-queen-charlotte-and-the-wedding-of-britains-first-mixed-race-royal/>, accessed on 11/02/2024.

18 <https://gizmodo.uol.com.br/rainha-charlotte-quem-foi-a-monarca-que-inspirou-o-spin-off-de-bridgerton/>

19 Image: <https://gizmodo.uol.com.br/rainha-charlotte-quem-foi-a-monarca-que-inspirou-o-spin-off-de-bridgerton/>

20 Image: <https://veja.abril.com.br/coluna/e-tudo-historia/a-figura-real-por-tras-de-rainha-charlotte-nova-serie-bridgerton>



FIGURE 3: BRIDGERTON IS AN ADAPTATION OF THE BOOKS BY JULIA QUINN, REPRESENTATIVE OF A GENRE OF PERIOD ROMANCE THAT BECAME VERY POPULAR WORLDWIDE FROM THE 1970S TO THE 1990S AND WHICH HAD BARBARA CARTLAND AS ONE OF ITS MOST RECOGNIZED AUTHORS.

(Regé-Jean Page), and various other members of high society. The series was a popular success, but received criticism for being set in a kind of post-racism era. Shonda Rhimes' aesthetic and political choice in *Bridgerton*, intensified in *Queen Charlotte*, is linked to the trajectory of the producer and screenwriter. From the success of *Grey's Anatomy*, a series created in 2005 and still running, Rhimes has become known for creating works starring strong and complex black women, such as *Scandal* (2012-2018) and *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014-2020) (Alves and Souza, 2021; Calhoun, 2025; Rocchi and Farinacci, 2020; Weinstein, 2024; Nbinjama and Nikoala, 2024).

For Rocchi and Farinacci, who endeavour a qualitative and quantitative methodology to analyse three Rhime's series (*How to get away with murder*, *Scandal* and *Grey's Anatomy*),

Rhimes delivers numerous post-feminist, strong, independent, and complex female characters that persist through the various seasons. In regard to race, the corpus displays a colour-blind representation of the characters. Although racial issues are mostly neutralized, the corpus is dotted with episodes that specifically deal with issues of racial inequality and are relegated mostly to the past. (2020, p.31)

Rocchi and Farinacci noted that the female presence in Rhimes' production is effective and defies some old dichotomies regarding women, such as powerful/feminine, intelligent/sensuous, and resolute/elegant. However, they point out that these characters are usually "post-feminist singletons" and, in regards to race, Rhimes doesn't break with the tendency of "commodifying racial differences is reducing the Black female body and culture into consumable goods in American media" (2020, p.37). This assumption, however, is not taken for granted by all critics and scholars. As we will further see, there is more ambiguity, not to say complexity, in how Rhimes presents race and female characters.

Analysing two Rhimes' speeches, but also taking into account some of her productions, Adelinda Nbinjama and Sisanda Nikoala present a different perspective. According to them, Rhimes is conscious of what it means being a highly successful black woman in the entertainment industry, and she is an "ally" to Black feminism in a "post-structural world". This is so, because, as Nbinjama and Nokoala put it, "...there's some progression towards gendered and racial diversification within Rhimes' series", since their narratives highlight "...multiple intersectional female characters, allowing the expression of various female portrayals". Most importantly, Rhimes "...ability to engage her fans and audiences via online platforms

widens her ability to reach broader audiences from various intersectional backgrounds". (2024, p.166).

As Calhoun notes, while media criticism celebrates Rhimes' racial diversity, scholars are more "ambivalent", situating her castings and narratives "...within ideologies of colour-blindness and post-racism that erase the realities of continuing oppression" (2025, p.5). For Khoo (2025, p.3), Rhimes' productions are often "...critiqued practice of colourblind casting, that is, employing diverse casts without directly addressing their ethnoracial differences". Although "colorblind" seems to be a key-term for *Bridgerton* and *Queen Charlotte* (Khoo, 2025; Sporic, 2022; Hanus, 2024; Harris and Sanders, 2023, among others), other expressions, such as "quasi-color consciousness" (Lynn, 2024), and "color-evasive" (Khoo, 2025), are also associated to *Bridgerton* and *Queen Charlotte*. Despite their differences, they all point out that, in Emma Lynn's words, "...the series ignores race as an important part of characters' lives, distances itself from history, and mischaracterizes love as a cure for racial discrimination". (2024, p.312). Or, as Khoo observes:

It is possible to frame the lack of discussion around race in *Bridgerton* as a marker of progress; that is, that in a post-racial world there is no longer any need to discuss issues of race. However, this silence (or silencing) also removes any opportunity to explicitly challenge racism as it continues to exist both in front of, and behind, the camera. In a period drama like *Bridgerton*, this practice can result in an implausible story world, where a marginalized or oppressed race can take on positions in society that they would historically never have access to. For audiences, this can create a utopic world of fantasy and escapism, but it also elides more serious issues of racism (2025, pp.4/5)

The political implications of Rhimes' choices are not, as we see, to neglect and mark also their distance to historical accuracy. As Kulak (2022, pp. 178/179) reminds us

As for the Regency era, the known population of black people were very small in the cities of the mainland, even in London (Myers, 1996, pp. 7-8; Panayi, 2010, p. 20; Walvin, 1986, p. 47). Although slave trade was prohibited by the sign of King George III, slavery had not been completely abolished yet. The incidents especially beginning in the mid-eighteenth century in which black people run away from their

masters and thereby forced authorities to become free were still continuing (Walvin, 1986, pp. 62-63). Thus, a small free black community was expanding under the shadow of apparent racial discrimination. But there are two factors to think that this community were disadvantageous in terms of population growth: the black population was mostly men, and racial discrimination made marrying black and white people almost impossible (Edwards & Walvin, 1983, pp. 20); after the Slave Trade Act 1807, the entrance of black people to the mainland began to be prevented. When thinking these factors with the other aspects of racial discrimination, it is not hard to imagine the poor living conditions of the black community of those days (Edwards & Walvin, 1983, pp. 26-27; Panayi, 2010, pp. 20-; Walvin, 1986, pp. 64-66).

About *Queen Charlotte: a Bridgerton story*, Rhimes, in an interview published on May 10, 2023, claimed that she did a lot of research on the monarch and that the deviations she made were purposeful to bring light to the racial issue, which is erased from most historical narratives. She says:

I'm fascinated by the need many people have to fight the theory that she [Charlotte] had a darker skin tone. The question really is: why is a black queen so bothersome? So, we chose to embrace this idea and show all the beauty of a black woman, such as her natural and abundant hair on stage (in Portuguese in the original).²¹

As we can see, Rhimes consciously takes a historical uncertainty, which is not very well known, as a theme to provocatively address the past and, especially, the present. Using as tools both the creative freedom provided by a fictional work, and the popularity of historical and "sappy" narratives, as well as the context of audience phenomena such as the series *Downton Abby* (2010-2015) and *The Crown* (2016-2023), Rhimes materializes a possible world in *Queen Charlotte*, one whose controversy becomes, in our view, both the starting point and the end point. Consciously delving into the choice she makes in *Bridgerton*, Rhimes knew the controversy she would create and how, besides attracting an audience, this would be another element in the discussion about racism.

21 Footnote missing: <https://veja.abril.com.br/coluna/em-cartaz/rainha-charlotte-a-ousada-novaserie-de-shonda-rhimes-na-netflix>, accessed on 12/02/2024.

The strength of a black western queen, with striking curly hair, an independent and strong spirit, not only tells of a story that “could” or “might” (perhaps “should”) have been, as it also claims today other possibilities of being, beyond the prejudices in vogue, whether aristocratic or not.

In the present article, rather than getting into the controversy of whether or not Rhimes could have given herself “such” poetic license in relation to the story, we are interested in reflecting on this fabular gesture, that resituates the past, at the same time as it provocatively addresses the present, and outlines possible futures. It seems to us that this fabulation is not the same as others, which seek to restore the stories of people who have been erased, marginalized or relegated to oblivion by colonial dynamics and the history of the conquerors, even though it is based, like them, on a solid ethical and political purpose. In the path around this central theme, we seek to characterize the narrative world constructed in the series, based on the Bakhtinian notion of chronotope, in order to reflect on this fabulation. In our view, it is an act of counterfactual historical imagination.

2. IN WHICH TIME AND IN WHICH WORLD IS THIS QUEEN CHARLOTTE OF BRIDGERTON?

The notion of chronotope was formulated by Mikhail Bakhtin in his essay, “The Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel”, around the 1930s, and has been referred to in different studies, whether dedicated to cinema, literature or other narratives (Stam, 1989; Haynes, 1993; Machado, 1995; Bemong *et al*, 2010; among others), with more or less verve or inventiveness. In Bakhtin, the chronotope is linked to studies of literary genres and the original essay, in which the term is developed, is dedicated, in its various pages, to characterizing the spatio-temporal articulations in the classical Greek drama, in the chivalric novel, among others. Chronotope is, first and foremost, an analytical category which allows us to reach essential aspects of the narratively constructed world in different works. As Bakhtin (2018, p. 11) defines it, the chronotope refers to the “essential interconnection of the relations of space and time as an artistically assimilated form in literature”. The notion, therefore, considers that in artistic-literary creation

...there is a fusion of the indications of space and time into an apprehended and concrete whole. Here,

time thickens and takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; space intensifies and is incorporated into the movements of time, plot and history. The signs of time are revealed in space, and space is apprehended and measured by time.” (Bakhtin, 2018, p.12)

As we can see, a chronotope refers to the ways in which temporal and spatial relations are effectively constructed and configured in a given story or discourse. It’s not a question, then, of checking how a historical experience considered to be real is “transported” or “represented” in a narrative, but rather, almost in the opposite direction, of observing how a discourse, a work or text, constructs, composes, articulates, in its own way, its own times and spaces. In this sense, Ribeiro and Sacramento (2023, p.93/94) observe:

If the first insight of Bakhtin’s concept of chronotope is the irreducible relationship of time and space as semiotic constructs (i.e., socially significant), the second is that these semiotically mediated spatiotemporal orders configure our perception and experience and, therefore, not only the subjective sensation of space and time, but also the concrete field where human action is imagined to be possible.

Thus, to investigate a particular chronotope is to reflect on how spatio-temporal relationships were imagined and configured in a particular story. The assumption, as we can see, is that, on the one hand, “time” and “space” are not uniform, absolute categories that are experienced in the same way by individuals, groups and cultures; and, on the other hand, that each narrative, each discourse, each genre is a construction that, dialogically, creates and shapes space-time relations in a particular way, establishing what later came to be called the “possible world”. What is particularly interesting in Bakhtin’s chronotope is that space and time are not approached separately, but seen intertwined in peculiar ways in each genre and each narrative. This is essential, if we are to understand the universe in which the characters of *Queen Charlotte of Bridgerton* lives. For us, the series’ possible world has strong and important similarities to Bakhtin’s characterization of the idyllic chronotope.

In his studies on chronotopes in European literature, Bakhtin (2018) pays attention to the tensions between the novel, as it appeared in the 18th and 19th centuries, and the idyll, which was very present in folk narratives. It is inferred,

from the reflections of the Russian thinker, that the literature of this time is built in tension with this idyllic chronotope, in its many variations, often pointing to its destruction or unfeasibility in modern societies (as would be the case, for example, in narratives by Stendhal, Flaubert and Balzac). According to Bakhtin, the idyllic chronotope has some basic characteristics that are common to all its variations. The first of these is the particular relationship between time and space, in which there is “the fixation, the organic aggregation of life and its events to a place”, which is then constituted as a “spatial microcosm”, “delimited and self-sufficient”, which “has no major connections with other places, with the rest of the world” (2018, p.194).

In addition to this unity of place, the idyll is also characterized by the narrative’s restricted attention to “the few basic realities of life”, such as love, birth, death, marriage, work, food, drink etc. This means that, according to Bakhtin (2018, p.198), “the idyll does not know everyday life”. Finally, the third element of the idyll in folk narratives is the unity of life with the rhythm of nature, integrating human events with natural phenomena. In this case, however, Bakhtin observes that it becomes almost metaphorical in Romanesque narratives, and only a part of it “remains real”. In the narratives about love, in the amorous idyll, these basic elements find “their weakest expression”, according to the Russian thinker. “The social conventionalism, the complications and the possibility of separation in private everyday life,” he says, “are contrasted with the absolutely conventional simplicity of life in the heart of nature: this same life is reduced to a totally sublimated love” (2018, p.195). For Bakhtin, this “weakness” of the amorous idyll is what allows it to be integrated into different narratives and even be mixed with other idyllic variations.

Some of the basic features of the idyll chronotope are found in *Queen Charlotte*, despite the fact its main characters were real in the past. The historical character Sophie Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz was born in 1744 and, in 1761, married the then English monarch, King George III. In the series, however, this historical accuracy is not an anchor for the narrative, and may be seen as quite unimportant. As Aucar and Bon (2023) note, *Queen Charlotte*’s costume design attempted to be faithful to Georgian times, but also incorporated some contemporary references. According to Aucar and Bon, “[t]he anachronism of certain plays shows that fiction only corresponds to a historical period, but can be considered a narrative set back in time, with a palimpsest of temporal layers that mobilize a variety of languages” (2023, p.360). Thus, the draped, embroidered and heavily wo-

ven dresses, wigs, ceremonies, dances, carriages and men’s costumes refer not only to what was worn in the 18th century in England, but pay respect to what an implied audience considers what would be a representation of the “period”, of the “past”, of the “aristocracy” and of the “royalty”, with a little help of a more contemporary fashion elements.

A decisive feature in this suspension of historical time in the series is its soundtrack, which makes more explicit the dialogue with a contemporary audience and the narrative distance to the historical past. Led by Kris Bowers, who also acts in *Bridgerton*, *Queen Charlotte* brings together original compositions and contemporary pop songs in arrangements that feature violins and harpsichords, and emulate European classical music of the 17th and 18th centuries. Among the songs are “Halo”, popularized by Beyoncé, in episode 1; “If I ain’t got you”, by Alicia Keys, in episode 3; “Deja vu”, also by Beyoncé, in ep.4; “Nobody gets me”, by SZA, and “I will always love you”, popularized by Whitney Houston, both in ep.6. All the songs, certainly not by chance, are known for their recordings by black American singers. By using these versions, the series undoubtedly draws on the repertoire of contemporary audiences, introducing yet another element of connection with those who watch it.

All the pop songs that appear in the series talk about emotional relationships and, in particular, are a frame for and comment on the different phases of Charlotte and George’s relationship, from their first falling in love (“Halo”) to the reinforcement of their commitment (“I will always love you”, in the sixth and final episode). In episode 1, for example, “Halo” appears after Charlotte and George’s wedding and accompanies them until the moment he takes her to the castle where they will live. The lyrics of the song, although not sung in the series, are known by contemporary audiences and are a declaration of love, in which the lyrical voice tells the loved one that their emotional walls are crumbling, because she is “everything I need and more, it’s written all over your face”, justifying the passion in the phrase repeated several times, including in the chorus “baby, I can see your halo”. In the last episode, in a dance scene in which Charlotte supports George in a moment of crisis, SZA’s song has as its refrain the verse - which gives it its name - that says “nobody gets me [but], you do, you do”.

The reaction to this use of pop songs was very positive, to the extent that two albums were released with the series’ soundtrack, one with the original works and the other with just the covers. From the point of view of the diegetic world of *Queen Charlotte - a Bridgerton story*, these songs are “out of date”, if we take the historical time as reference. However,

the way the songs are presented, that have great resemblance to the music of “the past”, doesn’t seem to simply deny the historical past. It seems, as we have seen in the costume design, that *Queen Charlotte* arranges temporalities in a complex, layered way, in order to build a chronotope with mixed and misplaced references.

Alongside costumes and music, other narrative aspects help us see that *Queen Charlotte* builds its own spatiotemporal experience, which is based not in the historical time, but in the peculiar temporalities and spatialities of love and bonding. We don’t know precisely how long it would take to get from one place to another inside the palaces, for example. It doesn’t really matter, just as it’s unnecessary to indicate the distance and time of the journey between Buckingham and Kew palaces, where much of the story takes place. Although the use of spatial and temporal ellipses is intrinsic to all narratives, especially audiovisual ones, in *Queen Charlotte* this resource produces specific effects related to the construction of its own chronotope. The important thing for the narrative is whether the Queen and the King in particular, but also other characters, are together or apart.

In fact, an essential element of the love relationship between Charlotte and George is marked by the various movements of physical closeness and distancing, which constitute and characterize the construction of the emotional-sexual bonds of solidarity and trust between them. From the point of view of the series, the moments when George isolates himself at Kew, or doesn’t sleep in the same bedroom as Charlotte, are equivalent in the configuration of the torment that the two characters face in building the bonds between them. We don’t know, from the narrative, how long this or that moment of isolation or distance lasts, just as the journey between one space and another depends not on speed or a mathematical temporality, but on the mental and emotional processes experienced by the characters.

One of the moments of this isolation in the series coincides with Charlotte’s first pregnancy. After an episode of madness, George, already aware of the beginning of the pregnancy with the future king, retreats to Kew, and we follow Charlotte, also alone, dealing with the information about her husband’s mental condition. We don’t see the days, weeks or months during which George is subjected to brutal and inhumane treatment, while Charlotte feels the development of the future baby. But we do follow his efforts to heal and return to her, and Charlotte’s process of accepting reality, which includes recognizing herself as Queen. The series chooses to elicit chronological markers in order to highlight Charlotte’s

personal process of maturing, in which she recognizes and values her love for George and also recognizes her role as monarch. In the same way, we don’t know exactly when, historically, Charlotte’s mature narrative takes place. We do know that it’s after the Bridgertons’ second marriage, and then we see the rapprochement between Lady Violette (Ruth Gemmell) and Lady Danbury (Adjoa Andoh) and, especially, the Queen’s efforts to continue her lineage. This, as we see in the last episode, is based once again on her commitment and her love for her husband.

If the historical and chronological times are placed in the background, the spaces narrated in the series highlight the loneliness of the characters and the limits imposed on them by their social roles. These spaces are almost always isolated: we don’t know where they are, either in relation to adjacent places or to each other. Most of the actions and sequences take place indoors or are confined by high walls, even in gardens or squares. At most, they take place on the entrance stairs of these buildings, when the characters move toward them, or on the way out, heading toward a carriage and another building. The lighting reinforces the atmosphere of loneliness, anguish and enclosure.

One major exception is when Lady Danbury (in her youth, played by Arsema Thomas) begins to settle into her daily life, after being widowed. At this point, she walks through meadows and fields, the boundaries of which she herself is unaware. In any case, these and the other narrated spaces, whether palaces, rooms or carriages, have only a very tenuous link - if any - with their historical referents. They, like the temporal relationships, are more strongly linked to the symbolic places that influence and guide the characters’ actions. In this sense, they present themselves as an element of the visibility of emotional and existential landscapes.

The chronotope constructed in *Queen Charlotte: A Bridgerton Story* deliberately withdraws from historical times and spaces in order to highlight the processes of maturation and construction of autonomy and protagonism of the characters, especially the women. It’s time for them to take charge of their bodies, their affections and their social roles. This is true for the young Charlotte and also for the Queen, and for the Ladies Bridgerton and Danbury, on the other narrative level. In all cases, we see female characters who, through strength of character and temperament, learn to deal intelligently with the circumstances, rules, conventions and social limitations imposed on them. Charlotte, Violette Bridgerton and Agatha Danbury, therefore, have something in common: the energy to fulfill their desires, affections and positions.



FIGURE 4: THE ISOLATED ENVIRONMENTS, CLOSED OR LIMITED BY WALLS AND HIGH CEILINGS, REFER IN A TENUOUS WAY TO A PRECISE HISTORICAL TIME, BUT SHOW INTENSELY THE LONELINESS OF THE CHARACTERS, THEIR EMOTIONAL AND EXISTENTIAL CONDITIONS.

Bakhtin's reflections on the chronotope, including the idyll, do not intend to constitute "ideal types" or "a-historical forms" but, rather, in the opposite direction, to verify their diversity and variations in the vast literary production that he investigates. Thus, no contemporary narrative will be fully adequate or compatible with the chronotopes identified by him, which does not prevent dialogues and articulations. In this sense, we can see that *Queen Charlotte* simultaneously absorbs and displaces some elements of the idyll. On the one hand, the setting of the space, constructed as a closed microcosm, is easily verifiable in the series and is highlighted, as we pointed out, by the choice of walled environments. In the same way, the whole narrative of the series can be understood as the effort to make the marriage of Charlotte and George a reality, and to build bonds of complicity and trust between them.

As the older Queen's narrative plan shows, even births (of children and grandchildren) are presented as an expected outcome of this central event. On the other hand, the love story between King and Queen does not effectively oppose social conventionalism to natural love, which is far from being merely sublimated. The marital bond between the protagonists of the series, while competing for space in the midst of social rituals and conventions, presents itself as an essential element that gives meaning and even viability to their status as monarchs. This deep and companionable love is also carnal. Charlotte and George have moments of surrender, pleasure and sharing in the sexual act, which precede and support the actual emotional closeness between the two. In this sense, in *Queen Charlotte*, sex is not opposed to the idyll and the deconstruction of everyday life that it establishes, but is also



FIGURE 5: IN THEIR CLOSED MICROCOSM, CHARLOTTE AND GEORGE GRADUALLY TRANSFORM THEIR SEXUAL ENCOUNTERS, INITIALLY AN OBLIGATION THAT THEY MUST FULFILL EVERY OTHER DAY IN ORDER TO GUARANTEE AN HEIR TO THE THRONE, INTO MOMENTS OF SURRENDER AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF TRUST AND COMPLICITY.

integrated into the idealized world and based on the strength of passions and natural events.

By absorbing some features of the idyllic chronotope, *Queen Charlotte* affirms once again that it does not aim to have realistic commitments or be an archive of information about periods and characters. History is used, in the opposite direction, for the construction of a particular chronotope, with recognizable idyllic aspects, which highlights themes, positions, and attitudes that can engage with different historical realities. In this sense, assuming itself to be a work of fiction, the series establishes space-time relations that can be taken as “uchronias” (non-time) and even “utopias” (in its etymological sense of “non-place”). After all, the series exercises historical and mnemonic imagination, not in the sense of trying to recall or recover something as it occurred, but, rather, indirectly to put both the past and the present, as well as the future, under tension. This fictional, political-imaginative action dialogues with other, current efforts that take fabulation as a way of problematizing the narrative of the story. Its relations to historical time and action seems to be, then, counterfactual, offering a contrast through the propositional power of the images and stories it weaves.

3. A COUNTERFACTUAL FABULATION

Counterfactual thinking deals with “what if”, with imagining what could have been or what might happen. Thus, asking what would have happened if Napoleon had not been defeated at Waterloo, or if the guerrillas had won the fight against the civil-military dictatorship in Brazil, are typical counterfactual fabulations, just as imagining what the world will be like in 50 years if, for example, the trade agreement between Mercosur and the European Union is realized.

Deluermoz and Singaravelou observe that, although contested, counterfactual thinking has always been present in historical studies and has gained particular strength from the second half of the 20th century, when it reached other fields and acquired a diversity “never before seen” in different cultural productions. French historians understand that this “explosion” results from a series of factors, such as the supposed “end of ideologies,” the “modifications in the relationship between reality and fiction,” and “feelings of uncertainty in a globalized world” (2018, p. 313). Referring to the work of the historian, the researchers assert, without hesitation, the vitality of counterfactual thinking. They state that, for those who study history, counterfactual thinking proves to

be “a timely attitude in a social world surrounded by plural and unfinished determinations, a world in which the historian has a role to play, recalling first and foremost that history is still possible” (Deluermoz and Singaravelou, 2018, p. 313).

If we substitute “historian” with “screenwriter”, Deluermoz and Singaravelou’s call for counterfactual thinking might prove even more powerful: it is a way of responding to plural and unfinished realities and, especially, of affirming that both history and stories are open relationships, full of possibilities. In this sense, the fabulations crafted in *Queen Charlotte*, by composing an idyllic and uchronian chronotope, make explicit both their defiance of the past (what could have, or perhaps should have, happened) and, especially, a provocative response to the present, aimed at opening up possible futures. The “betrayal” of history, in this case, is a stance relative to the past as well as a gesture encouraging change and the production of more plural and inclusive narratives.

Arsema Thomas, the actress who plays the young Lady Agatha, spoke to the press about her joy in being part of a period production without portraying the tragedies experienced by Black people, such as slavery. “Everything that is historical for us relates to trauma,” she said. “So, seeing a series like this, with non-white people empowered and having space to provoke change, is very important.”²² Golda Rosheuvel, who plays the older Queen Charlotte in *Bridgerton* and in the series’ spin-off, expressed a similar sentiment: “To be able to create the space where you can have a black queen in Netflix’s most-watched period drama, to be able to break boundaries to make room for black and brown people to be part of a lavish, sexy, scandalous, and beautiful representation of life²³.”

In *Queen Charlotte*, the coronation of a non-white woman leads Princess Augusta (Michelle Fairley), the King’s mother, to coordinate the so-called “great experiment” with Parliament, which involves distributing noble titles to the Black elite of the country. The goal is to diversify the court to make the queen feel more comfortable and to avoid potential rejection of her person. In this way, wealthy men from the colonies, such as Lord Danbury (Cyril Nri), achieve a higher social status and begin attending London high-society events. However, the process does not unfold smoothly, without conflict. Its success is only ensured through the intervention of the young Agatha Danbury and the actions of Queen Charlotte herself.

22 <https://elle.com.br/cultura/rainha-charlotte-mostra-o-passado-de-bridgerton>

23 <https://rollingstone.com.br/noticia/golda-rosheuvel-de-bridgerton-sente-se-privilegiada-por-interpretar-rainha-negra-portas-se-abriram-para-pessoas-nao-brancas/>

This social experiment never actually happened. It is purely a fictional device that Shonda Rhimes uses as poetic license to bring more representation into the series and introduce the debate over the racial issue into the storyline, a topic absent in the first two seasons of *Bridgerton*. In fact, the conflicts in *Queen Charlotte* serve as an explanation of the origin of the racial diversity presented in the preceding series. Unlike *Bridgerton*, *Queen Charlotte* addresses explicitly the debate around whiteness and racism. India Amarteifio's character is the target of discrimination when her ethnicity takes center stage in certain situations. In the first episode, when Princess Augusta meets her for the first time before the wedding, she scrutinizes Charlotte in detail, observing her physical structure and skin, even asking her to show her teeth. Her conclusion is that the young woman would serve well for the purpose of providing the King with children. Beyond the pompous setting, the scene is notably similar to those shown

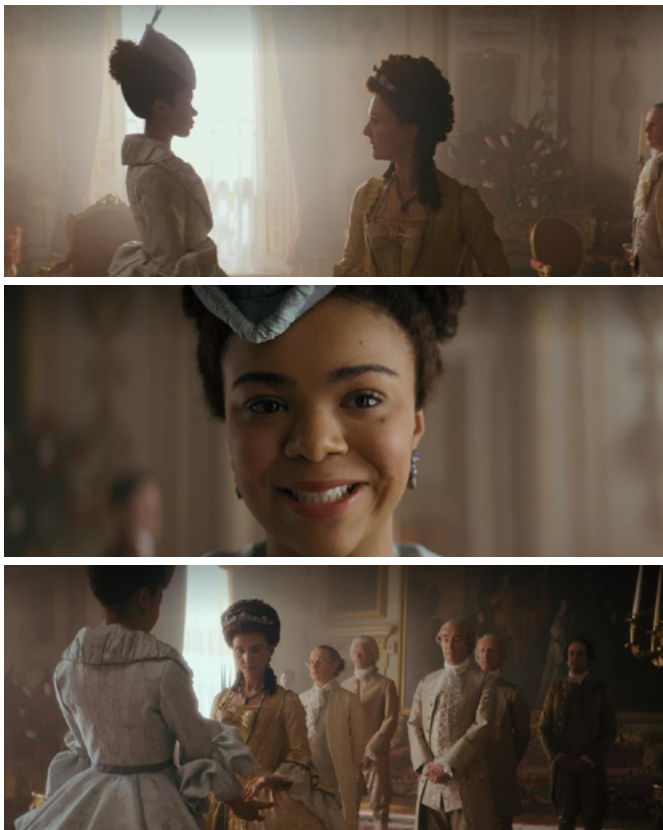


FIGURE 6: THE SEQUENCE SHOWS PRINCESS AUGUSTA, BEFORE THE WEDDING, EXAMINING CHARLOTTE'S PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS IN DETAIL, EVEN HER TEETH.

in films, soap operas, and series where wealthy people examine enslaved Black individuals, evaluating their bodies for potential purchase. Following this scene, in a meeting with the prime minister and other members of Parliament, the King's mother complains that the girl's skin is too dark and that this could be a problem: "They will comment". The cancellation of the union is even considered, but the idea is abandoned as there are only six hours until the ceremony.

Another moment occurs when the official painting of the royal wedding is being made. Upon noticing that her skin is lighter on the canvas, Charlotte complains to the painter Allan Ramsay and requests that a dark color be used. However, her request is contested by Princess Augusta, who argues that the queen should be depicted with a lighter tone so that she "shines". In addition to the racial issue, *Queen Charlotte* addresses a series of other topics that are part of the contemporary political agenda, such as the condition of women under patriarchy (especially through the character of Lady Danbury), the relationship between people of the same sex and gender (through the royal butlers, Brimsley and Reynolds), and the sexuality of older women (through Lady Violette's dilemmas).



FIGURE 7: CHARLOTTE ASKS THAT ALLAN RAMSAY PAINT HER SKIN DARKER, BUT HER REQUEST IS CONTESTED BY PRINCESS AUGUSTA.

Such themes are certainly "displaced" from the historical reality of the 18th century. Not that it would be possible faithfully to reconstruct what happened in the lives of people from that time. As historians Quentin Deluermoz and Pierre Singaravelou (2018, p.15) observe, history is knowledge of the past "produced from preserved remains and the questions of the present". In this sense, it seeks and produces not an absolute truth, but always a "situated truth". The past, referenced by historical knowledge, is always in constant construction, shaped by the present, social contexts, and concrete circumstances of human interaction. It is con-

tinually revised to accommodate the future, which is open and in constant development. It is imagination that enables us to establish continuities in our experiences over time and creatively transforms the past into a source for considering possible transitions between the present and the future.

For Hayden White (2019), historical imagination is the ability of historians to construct narratives of the past, which are not simply objective representations of facts, but rather constructions involving choices, plot patterns, rhetorical tropes, and ideologies. He argues that the craft of historiography is intrinsically literary, as historians organize events, create a narrative structure, and shape historical discourse through language. Historical imagination, therefore, is the intellectual process of giving shape and meaning to a past that, in itself, cannot be directly accessed, but rather reconstructed through writing.

Based on different theoretical premises, Collingwood (1981) had already drawn attention to the vital role of imagination in the production of historical knowledge. The author also describes imagination as the intellectual process through which the past is actively reconstructed. The historian uses sources as a starting point, but historical imagination is what allows him to go beyond them, recreating the internal connections between events and the reasoning behind actions.

These ideas were fundamental to the development of the concept of critical fabulation, proposed by Saidiya Hartman (2022). According to the author, it is a method that combines historical research with imagination to fill the gaps in archives about marginalized lives, especially those of Black people.

Despite operating in a fundamentally different register, which is that of fiction and fantasy, Shonda Rhimes' mnemonic gestures have some points in common with Saidiya Hartman's proposal. The American author and researcher has a project that is clearly political, just like the creator of *Queen Charlotte*. She refuses to inscribe the lives of Black people, enslaved or formerly enslaved, from the perspective of subjection. She advocates fabulation as a critical gesture capable of understanding the feelings of those who have been denied a place in institutionally recognized archives. Her proposal is to portray these individuals as agents of their own stories.

Hartman begins the book *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* with "A Note on Method," in which she discusses her choice to narrate intimate stories, relegated to oblivion and never considered outside a slavery-based framework.

In this spirit, I pushed the limits of legal records and documents, speculated on what might have been,

imagined things whispered in dark rooms, and expanded moments of confinement, escape, and possibility, moments when the vision and dreams of rebellion seemed possible. (Hartman, 2022, p. 12-13)

Her method, the critical fabulation, with clear references to the category developed by the Russian formalists, is a work that starts from historical documentation and, through literary language, gives shape to possible lives. Hartman recreates, with rich detail, real characters whose stories were reduced and crystallized in official records, where their existence was marked by subordination. In Hartman's work, fabulation serves the history—not the one told by the oppressors, but the one constructed to confront the dehumanization promoted by racist and colonial thought. Critical fabulation, then, can be seen as part of a policy of the right to the time and to the history.

In the case of *Queen Charlotte*, the fabulation functions in a different way, on another level. Two important scenes, at the end of the fifth episode of the series, are particularly significant in this sense. Throughout the episode, we follow Charlotte, who is pregnant and unhappy, lonely and without news of George who, without her knowing it, is undergoing brutal treatments in an attempt to cure his illness. To escape this situation, Charlotte thinks about fleeing England and returning to her homeland. At one point, she seeks out Lady Danbury at her home, asking for help to flee. There, they engage in a dialogue in which her friend advises her: "We are women. And the men who hold our fates in their hands hardly imagine that we have desires, dreams of our own. If we want to live the life we desire, we must make them understand. Our bravery, our willpower will be their proof."

It is not, as we can see, about resistance, rebellion, revolution, or moving toward breaking or challenging social rules but, rather, about finding paths to autonomy and fulfillment from within those rules. This understanding of the path to take is decisive for the following scene, when, returning to Buckingham accompanied by her brother, Adolphus, Charlotte says to him as she begins to ascend the palace stairs: "You sold me to be the Queen of England. I will be the Queen of England". She then goes to meet George at Kew, facing his madness head-on and dismissing the royal doctor, "playing the game" to which she has been subjected to from the start.

There is another important difference between Saidiya Hartman's theoretical-methodological approach and Shonda Rhimes' aesthetic-political project. Hartman highlights agen-

cy and grants dignity to subordinate subjects, within the very conditions of their subordination. Rhimes does not. The idyllic aspects of the series, as we have noted, serve as a shield from the complexity and reality of everyday life, reducing them (along with the characters and the story itself) to basic and idealized events. More importantly, it is crucial to observe that the empowerment of the characters happens through their adherence to elite values—in the case of *Queen Charlotte*, to the values of the English aristocracy and royalty. This is an important difference. The critique of racism and the moral order in the series does not unfold into any kind of structural questioning of the prevailing order, the status quo. Not even the British colonial system is called into question. In the story, the presence of a black queen and the racial diversity of the court do not threaten the economic system or the privileges of the English ruling classes.

4. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

For Calhoun (2025), *Queen Charlotte* presents a “sociological view” of racism, since it is interested in how it functions within institutions and structures of power. In this sense, according to the author, “race is necessarily enacted by people, but individual characters in *Queen Charlotte* find that they are engaging in power struggles, not identity conflicts” (2025, p.7). This seems correct when the analysis focuses only on the possible world created by the series. However, if the perspective is broadened and attention is paid to the conscious narrative strategies developed by Rhimes, on the one hand, and the debate that *Queen Charlotte* provoked, on the other, it is necessary to consider other aspects and implications.

The fabulation present in Rhimes’ narrative have some positive aspects in presenting a more complex black female protagonist, whose individualistic, adaptive features. However, it leaves the foundations of racism and colonization out of sight. The movement is, therefore, ambivalent and ambiguous. If the characters are entangled in power struggles, they do so as a way of survival, to achieve their emotional, affective, institutional goals and, thus, to be more in control of their destiny and actions. However, the focus is on the individual capacity to deal with those power struggles, not to the order of things itself.

This is what enables Calhoun (2025) to identify Queen Charlotte’s fictional trajectory to the one of Rhimes in her career. According the American researcher, *Queen Charlotte* is an

coming-of-age story with undeniable echoes of Rhimes’s own ascent through the television industry: A woman comes into position of power within a storied institution, learns to fulfil a new role with substantial responsibilities, and finds herself responsible not only for herself but for the progress of all people of colour (2025, p.2)

Similarities can be surely found, particularly in the loneliness of Charlotte in the British monarchy, which is compared to Rhimes’ experience in the entertainment industry, since both are, to recover an expression used by Calhoun, *F.O.D.*, which means First, Only, and Different. However, the projection of a fictional character over a real persona needs, as Calhoun herself recognizes, a debate about authorship which is complex and demanding. It also requires a more defying investigation, which involves a confrontation with the conceptual, empirical, and cultural (at least) blurred lines between fiction and reality.

In establishing its distance to historical reality and concerns, *Queen Charlotte* builds a world for its own. Its ground on the features of such popular genre as the romance novels undoubtedly helps in its appeal and reception. As some of the Heyes and Cartland’s heroines, Charlotte is, in the series, fighting for her happiness, but, as Calhoun sharply noted, it doesn’t mean to “live happily ever after”, since her beloved George suffers from an incurable illness. This deviation from the genre - which, for Calhoun, reinforces the authorial voice of Rhimes - makes more explicit its originality. Moreover, it stresses that *Queen Charlotte* is an imaginative construct that is thought to dialogue critically with the present, the past, and, for extension, with the future. We must like or dislike it, agree or not with some of its aspects and strategies, but, since we decide to inhabit its world it is inevitable to put these temporal aspects in question.

Cultural and aesthetic experiences involving fabulation and historical imagination are many and varied. However, in any case, it is always an active process, something that is done in an engaged and creative way. When we turn to the past, we do not merely activate a repertoire of images at our disposal; we engage in a process that can be emotional, as explored in melodramatic fiction, but is also intellectual and ethical-political. Fabulations such as *Queen Charlotte: A Bridgerton Story*, in their strength, limitations, and contradictions, are powerful examples of what has been done and of how much more can still be produced in this field.

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