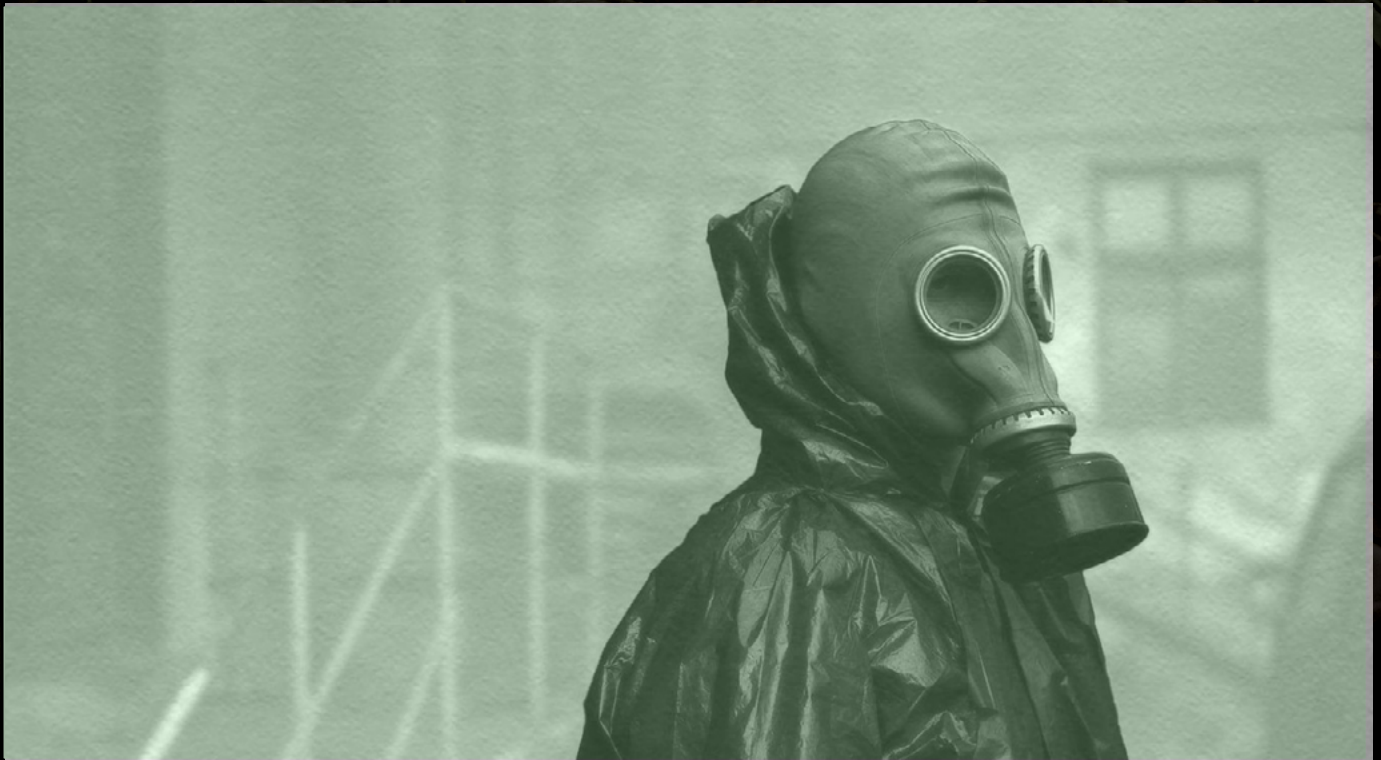


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# SERIES

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## **NARRATIVES / AESTHETICS / CRITICISM**

---

- 05      **CHERNOBYL, CHORNOBYL AND ANTHROPOCENTRIC NARRATIVE**  
BRETT MILLS
- 17      **TEXTUAL AGENCY: QUENTIN SKINNER AND POPULAR MEDIA**  
MIKKEL JENSEN
- 29      **THE DAY MAY COME WHEN YOU WON'T BE QUALITY TV – *THE WALKING DEAD* AND VIEWERS' ENGAGEMENT**  
OLIVER KROENER
- 43      **CREATIVITY AND POWER: A SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL MULTIMODAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE CO-CONSTRUCTED MULTIMODAL CREATIVITY-POWER RELATION IN *HOUSE M.D.***  
LOCKY LAW
- 57      **THE MECHA THAT THEREFORE WE ARE (NOT): AN ECO-PHENOMENOLOGICAL READING OF *NEON GENESIS EVANGELION***  
GIUSEPPE GATTI

## **PRODUCTION / MARKET / STRATEGIES**

---

- 77      **THE KIM WALL MURDER SERIALIZED: ETHICS & AESTHETICS IN HIGH-PROFILE TRUE CRIME**  
LINGE STEGGER GEMZØE

## **CULTURE / RECEPTION / CONSUMPTION**

---

- 91      **LA FICTION DOC IN ONDA SUL CANALE FRANCESE TF1. ANALISI DI UN EVENTO MEDIATICO**  
FABIEN LANDRON
- 107      **EMOTION: THE COMMANDER OF THE REMOTE CONTROL? A PSYCHOPHYSIOLOGICAL APPROACH TO PREDICT DECLINE IN TV RATINGS**  
LENE HEISELBERG, MORTEN THOMSEN, RENS VLIEGENTHART





# CHERNOBYL, CHORNOBYL AND ANTHROPOCENTRIC NARRATIVE

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## KEYWORDS

Chernobyl; animal studies; television drama; anthropocentrism; species.

## ABSTRACT

This article examines the representation of animals in the drama series *Chernobyl* (HBO, 2019). In doing so it evidences anthropocentric narrative; that is, story-telling

in which the prioritisation of the human and human-centred matters are normalised. Drawing on specific examples from the programme, it shows how animals are used as representational resources enabling the series' human-centred narrative to be told, in particular focusing on the depiction of the death of animals, and the use of animals as metaphor. The article draws on approaches arising from the 'animal turn', which aims to decentre human-ness as the only form of experience and to critique speciesist hierarchies. *Chernobyl* is a useful case study for such an analysis precisely because the historical event it depicts is one that had, and continues to have, significant consequences for non-human beings.

## 1. "STORIES CAN BE WEAPONISED": THE CAT IN THE APARTMENT

The first shot of the five-part drama series *Chernobyl* (2019) is of a domestic cat reclining contentedly on a sofa in a living room. The narrative then follows the cat as it later moves to under a kitchen table in another room, watching the human who is also present in the home. The human puts food out for the cat, and there follows shots of the cat eating its meal. The final shot of this sequence, immediately before the programme's title card, is of the cat back under the kitchen table, this time engaged in grooming. In all, the cat is depicted as having a comfortable and fulfilled domestic life, fully catered for in terms of shelter, warmth and food.

Yet while this opening scene follows this linear narrative of the cat, the programme's main interest is not really the animal itself. For alongside this series of events is the story of the human who fed the cat and who shares the feline's home. This is Valery Legasov (Jared Harris), and he is shown to be recording what appears to be a confession, or an exhortation, into a tape recorder, then hiding the resulting tapes behind a grating in a wall outside his apartment, before returning to his kitchen and hanging himself. Over this, we hear some of what Legasov is recording:

What is the cost of lies? It's not that we'll mistake them for the truth. The real danger is if we hear enough lies then we no longer recognise the truth at all. What can we do then? What else is left but to abandon even the hope of truth and content ourselves instead with stories?

Against this more dramatic sequence of events the cat's activities may appear insignificant. Indeed, narratively the cat's purpose is to function as a mundane counterpoint to Legasov's decision to end his life, symbolising a domestic everydayness against which a suicide is more shocking. So while this opening scene functions to introduce the programme's audience to Legasov, who goes on to be the main character in the series, the cat, unnamed, is never seen again.

Legasov's recording indicates that he is interested in the ways in which we 'content ourselves [...] with stories'. His interest arises from what the rest of *Chernobyl* will go on to depict; his attempts, as a chemist, to cling to scientific truth in the face of an all-powerful state keen to tell lies to its populace in order to maintain its dominance. *Chernobyl* repeatedly returns to the question; how do events get turned into stories, and what are

the consequences of the stories that are told? Craig Mazin, the programme's creator and writer, has outlined how this question was the fundamental motivation for his making of the series:

[I]t is a story about the cost of lies. This is the first line of the whole show and this is the theme that we are going to continue with as people watch these episodes; that when people choose to lie, and when people choose to believe the lie, and when everyone engages in a very kind of passive conspiracy to promote the lie over the truth, we can get away with it for a very long time but the truth just doesn't care. [...] Stories are sometimes very good ways of conveying interesting truths and facts but, just as simply, stories can be weaponised against us to teach us and tell us anything (*The Chernobyl Podcast*, "1:23:45" [1.01]).

Mazin goes on to joke about the irony of his using a narrative form – the television drama series – to critique narrative itself, and signals that this contradiction was his motivation for taking part in the *Chernobyl Podcast* series that accompanied the television programme's broadcast.<sup>1</sup> Thus the podcast is a space in which he can outline "what we do [in the programme] that is very accurate to history, what we do that is a little bit sideways to it, and what we do to compress or change" (*The Chernobyl Podcast*, "1:23:45"). In doing so Mazin acknowledges how this version of events is itself a story, and one that – because of the conventions of television narrative and episodic broadcasting – requires components such as recurring characters, cliff-hangers, and a recognisable beginning, middle and end. *Chernobyl*, then, does not aim to fundamentally critique and reject forms of storytelling but, via the congruence of its key themes and the material discussed in the podcast, instead holds up for examination the power that authorship of narrative entails.

To return to the cat: what about that story? This article examines how *Chernobyl* constructs the events it depicts predominantly in human terms, as if the historical moment it recounts affected, and has ongoing significance for, only humans. In doing so the series draws on and recreates anthropocentric narrative conventions that are dominant

1 *The Chernobyl Podcast* is a five-part series in which Craig Mazin is interviewed about his creative decisions by the radio presenter Peter Sagal. Each podcast episode was released immediately after the broadcast of the television episode it discussed, meaning that audiences were invited to engage with Mazin's discussion as part of their ongoing consumption of *Chernobyl*. See Warner Media Press Releases (2019).

in human-centred culture, and which therefore permeate television's storytelling practices. While such a critique is applicable to the vast majority of narratives, *Chernobyl* is a particular example for two reasons. Firstly, as noted above, the programme is itself about the ways in which events become stories and thus might be expected to be attuned to the power structures inherent in storytelling. Secondly – and related to the first – the marginalisation of animals from this narrative is a significant act of exclusion precisely because the real-world event depicted is one that had, and continues to have, far-reaching consequences for non-human beings. However, while *Chernobyl* might be an acute example, it can also be seen as indicative of television's normalised anthropocentric storytelling practices. As such there is an alternative story that could be told here, and it is one that takes into account the “long-term impact on ecosystems” (Savchenko 1995: 31) of the events depicted. To understand the historical moment that *Chernobyl* mines for its story as something solely – or even predominantly – of consequence for humans is, in Mazin's words, to ‘weaponise’ the past. And so just as the cat Legasov shares his apartment with soon gets forgotten, so is *Chernobyl* a persistent forgetting of the non-human beings central to the story it tells.

## 2. CHERNOBYL AND CHORNOBYL<sup>2</sup>

*Chernobyl* tells the story of what is usually referred to as ‘the Chernobyl nuclear power plant accident’, ‘the Chernobyl accident’, ‘the Chernobyl disaster’ or simply ‘Chernobyl’. On 26 April 1986, during a safety test, the number four reactor at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in Ukraine exploded (see Medvedev 1991, Plochy 2018). This led to airborne radioactive material being released into the atmosphere for nine days, which was carried by winds across large swathes of Europe. The nearby town of Pripyat, where many of the plant's workers lived, was evacuated. A 10-kilometre exclusion zone was put in place around the plant which still stands to this day, now extended to 30 kilometres. Overall, “The accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in 1986 was

the most severe in the history of the nuclear power industry” (International Atomic Energy Agency n.d.).

Or, that's one way to tell the story. Scientific discourses have dominated the narrativisation of the events at Chernobyl, becoming so normalised as to be virtually unquestionable. This is partly because the event is tied up in “the ideological importance of science and technology to notions of civilization and progress” (Harper 2001: 119) that constituted part of the East-West battleground during the Cold War. But it is also emblematic of the “orthodoxy” of science, in which scientific epistemologies are so dominant that it is possible to posit we live in “the age of science” (Williams 2015: 1). This has led to criticisms of “scientism” or “scientistic” prejudice, in which science functions as a “tyranny” in terms of making sense of the world (Hayek 1942: 269, 268, 271). Despite this, this thing called ‘science’ is the dominant way in which the event called ‘Chernobyl’ is made sense of, with ‘official’ accounts being undertaken by scientists and validated by scientific epistemologies.

Resisting this, there are battles over how to tell the story that is usually called ‘Chernobyl’, and it “has become the metaphor for the failure of one-dimensional explanatory attempts” (Kuprina 2016: 3). So, Svetlana Alexievich's book *Chernobyl Prayer* (1997/2016) aims to memorialise those who died during the event through elision of the present and the past, thus rejecting a straightforwardly linear way of making sense of it. Johanna Lindbladh's study of Ukrainian, Belarussian and Russian films that depict ‘Chernobyl’ unearth positive narratives of “rebirth [...] on a personal [rather than societal or political] level, intimately connected to the characters' discovery of profound existential, moral and religious values” (2019: 240). Krista M. Harper finds that memorial events in Hungary serve as a “demonstration of transnational citizenship and environmental solidarity” (2001: 122). And the possibilities of ‘Chernobyl's’ meanings are shaped by the technologies and knowledge being used to tell the story; Daniel Bürkner shows that photography's inability to depict the non-visual matter of radiation has resulted in an ‘aesthetics of invisibility’ (2014), while Melanie Arndt reminds us that “Even today [...] not all the technical, physical, biological, medical, and psychological consequences of the reactor explosion have been understood, simply because of their enormous complexity” (2012: 2).

What ‘Chernobyl’ means is up for debate, and *Chernobyl* is part of that debate. Mazin states he agreed to participate in the *Chernobyl Podcast* precisely to engage in that debate, and to discuss how *Chernobyl* constructs its version of events.

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2 ‘Chernobyl’ is the Russian spelling of the place that, in Ukrainian, is ‘Chornobyl’. As the accident took place while Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union ‘Chernobyl’ was the spelling that reporting of the event spread around the world even though for Ukrainians this was incorrect. The Russian spelling is used here where source material referred to uses it, such as in the title of the programme under discussion; otherwise the Ukrainian spelling is used.

For example, the series largely depicts Legasov as a lone voice urging the Soviet state to come to terms with the organisational structures that led to the explosion. In this he is supported by Ulana Khomyuk (Emily Watson) a nuclear physicist who is one of the first people to become aware of the spread of radiation across Ukraine. Khomyuk is an entirely fictional construct. As a caption at the end of the programme's final episode states, she was created "to represent [...] and to honor" the "dozens of scientists who worked tirelessly alongside him [Legasov]" and who "were subject to denunciation, imprisonment and arrest" ("Vichnaya Pamyat" [1.05]). The decision to turn scores of scientists into a single character conforms to a narrative logic in which viewers are offered recognisable, returning characters through which the story is told. Similarly, the decision to place Legasov as the key character through which audiences encounter other characters, and whose struggles function as the beginning and end points of the narrative, constructs *Chernobyl* as a particular kind of story.

These battles over the 'truth' of what happened remain, though, anthropocentric. Absent from these narratives are animals, and the impacts the explosion and resultant irradiation of large swathes of the environment had upon beings that are not human. While scientific work has more recently examined the long-term effects of radiation on the wild animals that now live in the exclusion zone, it is significant that "There are no early census data [about animals] from Chernobyl just after the accident" (Møller et al. 2013: 78). Yet 'Chernobyl' has become extremely significant in thinking about human-animal relations in the former Soviet Union and other countries, particularly in terms of environmentalism (see Gould 1990: 80-99, Marples 1991 and Plokhly 2018: 285-299). The exclusion zone has become an inadvertent wildlife preserve which "regardless of potential radiation effects on individual animals, [...] supports an abundant mammal community" (Deryabina et al. 2015: R284). Some data suggests many animals are more abundant since 'Chernobyl' for one simple reason; "humans have evacuated the contamination zone" (Baker and Chesser 2000: 1231). The longer-term narrative of the event called 'Chernobyl' is then one with significant animal and animal-related consequences, such that as a story it can be written as a "natural history" (Mycio 2005).

*Chernobyl* is a useful case study for demonstrating the ways in which narratives of such events are made anthropocentric. As will be shown below, animals appear in lots of places in the series, and are often key to a number of significant narrative moments. But *Chernobyl* has no interest in animals

as animals; they exist within the story solely for the purpose of furthering the anthropocentric narrative. Once their narrative use is fulfilled they disappear, with the cat in Legasov's apartment an early example. *Chernobyl*, then, contributes to an understanding of 'the Chernobyl accident' congruent with that which informed policy-makers' decisions at the time, scientific analysis then and since, and other stories told about what happened. By this process thousands of animals affected by radiation – and other events that happened at the time – are written out of the story known as 'Chernobyl'.

### 3. ANTHROPOCENTRIC NARRATIVE

*Chernobyl* is emblematic of a dominant form of story-telling that I am calling 'anthropocentric narrative'. Such narrative has a number of dimensions:

- First, it centres on humans and human-ness as predominant narrative agents, around which all aspects of story circulate. Events within such narratives are presented as meaningful and significant only because of their relationship with humans and human-ness. This might evidence human agency, such as when human actions propel the story forward; or it might evidence human response, such as via reaction shots.
- Secondly, anthropocentric narrative offers the human world as an unquestioned and normalised locus of activity. Importantly, it does so via the exclusion of other possible ways of responding to, and making sense of, the world, such as that of non-humans.
- Thirdly – and as a consequence of the first two components – it ideologically prioritises human needs and desires over those of other beings, by the simple but powerful act of the exclusion of alternatives.
- Finally, anthropocentric narrative interpellates human audiences via the simple act of presenting human-ness as the entry point for comprehension and understanding, and its anthropocentrism logically follows from its exclusion of other modes of comprehension. Humans live in an anthropocentric world; anthropocentric narrative is therefore an unsurprising consequence of centuries of prioritisation of the human.

It is important to note that anthropocentric narrative can occur even when what is being depicted is not human. For example, natural history documentaries have been criticised for how they narrativise animal behaviour within human ideologies such as "the nuclear family, or the values of hard

work” (Bousé 2000: 18). This means anthropocentric narrative employs animals as representational resources for human-centred purposes. For example, while the opening shot of *Chernobyl* may be of a cat, the programme’s narrative does not situate the cat’s needs, consciousness, or engagement with the world as significant, instead using the animal as nothing more than a counterpoint to the tale of the human Legasov. As such animals are routinely trapped within anthropocentric narrative structures, and as the examples below from *Chernobyl* will show, this renders matters such as animal death as nothing more than literal meat for human-centred storytelling.

In situating the representation of animals in media texts such as *Chernobyl* as important, this article is aligned with the ‘animal turn’. Rejecting simplistic speciesist epistemologies, approaches arising from the animal turn are engaged “with such questions as nonhuman agency, the relations between subject and object, inter-species structures of feeling, emotion and affect, [and] the function of animal metaphor” (McDonnell 2013: 6), amongst other things. Fundamental to such analytical approaches is an acknowledgment of the power embedded in the use of the word ‘animal’ itself, for “The animal is a word, it is an appellation that men [sic] have instituted, a name they have given themselves the right and the authority to give to the living other” (Derrida 2008: 23). Beings are made into things human cultures call ‘animals’, and a consequence of that process is the reinforcement of a hierarchized human-animal divide. Troubling that divide necessitates “creatural ties across the species boundary” (Herman 2016: 3) which reject “the culturally normal fantasy of human exceptionalism” (Haraway 2008: 11).

While the animal turn has often focussed on the real-world experiences of real-world animals, how animals are constructed representationally matters too. For the analysis of audio-visual culture such as television and film this requires an engagement with questions such as,

[H]ow do we look at animals? How does the moving image shape those acts of looking? Is this relation only ever one of capture and appropriation, thereby reiterating dominant structures of inequality between humans and animals? Might the moving image engender other, more equitable forms of relation? How might moving images resist or refuse the objectification or anthropomorphisation of the animal and instead work to unravel hierarchies of looking and distributions of power? How might the various dimensions of moving image practice en-

gender alternative modes of cross-species contact and attend to existential and perceptual worlds that extend beyond the human? (Lawrence and McMahon 2015: 2).

For *Chernobyl* this matters because “the way in which we portray animal representation has a crucial bearing on how we portray the place of animals in history” (Burt 2001: 204). That said, the aim here is not to ask a reductive question such as whether *Chernobyl* tells the truth about the animals it depicts. For a start, “the ethical potential of animal films cannot necessarily be mapped onto their truth value” (Burt 2002: 165). But it is also because – as outlined above – the nature of the truth that is up for grabs by the programme is itself a matter of significant debate. Rather, *Chernobyl* is a programme that, like many dramas based on historical events, is characterised by its “seriousness” (Rosenthal 1999: 4), which situates the series as a reasonable, well-researched presentation of its topic that can be understood as having a significant relationship with a consensual truth. Mazin’s contributions on the *Chernobyl Podcast* attest to this, wherein he legitimises the series’ many fictionalisations by their contribution to the seriousness of the project. This seriousness, though, is itself defined by its attention to the human, in which the horrors shown are connoted as meaningful and significant precisely because they impact humans.

The animal turn matters for Television Studies too as the field functions as a set of practices which has overwhelmingly and persistently prioritised the human and human concerns. In terms of narrative, this means analyses of television’s storytelling consistently aligns itself with the anthropocentric reading position offered by such texts. When Jason Mittell examines and celebrates the complexity of a programme such as *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008) this is predicated on that series’ foregrounding of “human drama”, “human costs”, and “human decency” (Mittell 2015: 329, 331, 348). Jonathan Bignell notes “human nature” and “human figures” are fundamental to television’s forms of realism, whereby a narrative “addresses its viewers as the same kind of rational and psychologically consistent individual” (Bignell 2013: 216), assuming a species-based equivalence. Where Television Studies has engaged with non-human representation it has, ironically, done so in order to explore what it is to be human, for example Roberta Pearson’s (2013) work on aliens and androids in *Star Trek* (NBC, 1966-1969) or Henry Jenkins’s (2011) discussion of zombies in *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010-). Absent here are animals, and volumes giving overviews and sum-

maries of Television Studies as a field – such as Robert C. Allen and Annette Hill's *The Television Studies Reader* (2004), Ethen Thompson and Jason Mittell's edited volume *How to Watch Television* (2013), and the multiple editions of Horace Newcomb's *Television: The Critical View* (2006) – completely ignore animals in the extensive sections they devote to representation.

This analysis of *Chernobyl*, then, aims to render animals visible as matters of consideration within television narratives. It serves to trouble the anthropocentric interpellation offered by the programme and so readily adopted by much analytical thinking, arguing that such reading unthinkingly reasserts human-animal power hierarchies. *Chernobyl* here functions as a synecdoche of how television tells its stories, and while there are specific inflections that render its anthropocentrism in particular ways, this analysis is offered as an entry point to the larger matter of anthropocentric storytelling evident within television as a whole.

#### 4. "OH, IT'S BEAUTIFUL": THE ANIMAL AS SYMBOL

In *Chernobyl*'s final episode ("Vichnaya Pamyat") Legasov is giving evidence at the trial examining the explosion's causes. During a break in the proceedings he sits outside the courtroom with Boris Shcherbina (Stellan Skarsgård), Vice-Chairman of the Soviet Union Council of Ministers and the person who has overseen the response to the events at Chornobyl. The previous four episodes have depicted the growing working relationship of Legasov and Shcherbina, beginning with the latter's dismissal of the former's expertise and leading to a mutual respect that enables the clear-up operation to be successful. Because of the amount of time they have spent in the vicinity of the explosion they are aware that they are likely to have been irradiated. During the trial Shcherbina has been coughing. Now, outside with Legasov, he shows him the blood-stained handkerchief he has been coughing into. Shcherbina tells Legasov his prognosis suggests he has only a year to live. He worries that his life has been pointless, prompting Legasov to reassure him that the success of the clear-up operation was dependent upon his actions. As Shcherbina listens he looks down and sees a tiny green caterpillar walking across his trouser leg. He puts his finger out to it, and the caterpillar crawls onto it. Shcherbina looks at the caterpillar intently, and says, "Oh, it's beautiful".

This is an important moment of narrative characterisation that almost certainly never happened; Legasov was not even present at the trial at which the scene is set (Nicholson 2019). It serves to depict the sacrifices the characters have made in order to deal with the problems caused by state incompetence, and the mutual respect that has grown between them. It is the first point at which they vocalise their admiration for one another, and it is the first time Shcherbina has been shown as requiring external validation. And in his adoration of the caterpillar it is also the first time Shcherbina has been portrayed as anything other than entirely focused on the job at hand. How *Chernobyl* decides to depict that moment is through Shcherbina's interaction with an animal; a caterpillar. A small, almost insignificant thing, it represents beauty that Shcherbina can only now see – or now only give himself permission to see – as his life draws to an end. But a caterpillar also symbolises hope and the continuance of the world that Shcherbina has helped save, given it is the larval stage of what will, in time, become a butterfly. It needs to be this specific animal; a worm, or a bee, or a rat would not have the same meaning. That *Chernobyl* chooses an animal as a resource through which it can depict the feelings of its human characters is a trope that recurs throughout the series, and it is one which draws on the convention of the employment of non-human beings as symbols in anthropocentric narratives.

Animals have been used persistently as metaphors for human characteristics and human cultures throughout history and across a wide range of societies (see Bell and Nass 2015, Bettelheim 1976, Green 1992, Urton 1985, Werness 2004). While this has sometimes indicated intersectionality between the oppression of animals and humans (such as in work on Marxism or feminism; see Timofeeva 2016, Adams 2010/1990) on the whole the animal-ness of the non-humans employed in such symbolism is absent. Humans "use animals to perform identity" (Cuneo 2014: 3) with those animals often "chosen for this supreme symbolic function" (Willis 1974: 128). The reduction of animals to symbols is a form of representational violence for two reasons. Firstly, it depicts animals as worthy of representation only inasmuch as they are able to contribute to an understanding of the human, with a concomitant absence where such use is not possible. Secondly, it normalises anthropocentric representational forms that themselves render the animal as meaningless outside of human experience. Like the cat in Legasov's apartment, the caterpillar on Shcherbina's hand disappears from the narrative as soon as its symbolic purpose is com-



plete. It is also a generic caterpillar, functioning to symbolise that which caterpillars can be called on to mean. It is not a specific caterpillar, an individual being, whose particularity the programme has any interest in. To employ an animal as a symbol is to engage in a process that renders an individual as nothing more than his/her/their species, with the process of species-ing animals turning beings into nothing other than their taxonomy. Critiquing the obfuscations caused by species-based categorisations, Carol Kaesuk Yoon notes that “The living world is, every minute, right before our eyes, and we are missing it all” (2009: 21).

But then, it's only a caterpillar. Who cares? What matters here is that while the employment of the caterpillar enables *Chernobyl* to communicate the sacrifice made by Shcherbina, the programme has no comparable interest in depicting the consequences of radiation for non-humans. Yet butterflies are one of the animal groups significantly affected by radiation with recorded declines in their population evident after nuclear accidents (Møller et al. 2013). *Chernobyl* invites sympathy for the death of a single human; it is largely uninterested in the deaths of scores of other beings. This can be shown in those sequences where animals dead as a result of the accident are depicted, where they too serve a symbolic and narrative function. For example, by the end of the first episode of *Chernobyl* (“1:23:45” [1.01]) while the accident has taken place, the Soviet state has refused to communicate to the public about what has happened. The final sequence of the episode shows a large plume of black smoke rising from the site of the explosion, and drifting relentlessly towards the town of Prip'yat. It is a bright sunny day, and the town's inhabitants are going about their routine business. Children are shown walking to school, and the camera pans to their feet. As the last child passes the frame, a bird crashes to the ground from the sky, flapping powerlessly, and slowly dying. It symbolises the inexorable movement of the radiation from the power plant to the residential area, and the fact that the bird is unnoticed is a portent of the ignorance the town's citizens are being kept in. It's alignment with the legs of the schoolchildren blithely making their way to their studies offers a reading where it is the children that matter, not the bird. And, as it is the final shot of the episode it functions as a cliff-hanger, inviting audiences to have concern for those children and the other human inhabitants of Prip'yat. As such this bird is nothing other than a narrative tool, symbolising that which future episodes of the programme will depict. There is nothing in the sequence that indicates audiences are invited to have

concern for the bird, or birds more generally; instead it is simply an omen. And in doing so *Chernobyl* renders the impact of irradiation on birds (Møller, Bonisoli-Alquati and Mousseau 2013: 52-59) as narratively significant only inasmuch as it helps indicate the threat to humans, with the story of the accident's impact upon birds anthropocentrically out of its scope.

*Chernobyl*'s construction of animals as worthy or representation only at points at which they are resources for anthropocentric storytelling is evident in how the programme outlines the consequences of the accident. The final episode (“Vichnaya Pamyat”) ends with multiple captions, outlining what happened to the characters after the events depicted, and acknowledging some of the ways the programme reshaped history in order to conform to narrative conventions. It ends with the caption, “In memory of all who suffered and sacrificed”. Yet this ‘all’ has been constructed throughout the preceding captions as only encapsulating humans. There is no acknowledgement at any point of the consequences of irradiation for beings other than humans, or for the environment across Europe that was affected. One caption states, “We will never know the actual human cost of Chernobyl. Most estimates range from 4,000 to 93,000 deaths”. There is no subsequent caption outlining animal deaths (even though some have been depicted in the series in earlier episodes). While this caption has indicated that it is ‘human cost’ that is being communicated, anthropocentric norms mean that earlier captions can merely assume that the human-only focus will be inferred. For example, one caption states, “Following the explosion, there was a dramatic spike in cancer rates across Ukraine and Belarus. The highest increase was among children”. What is meant here – but unsaid – is ‘a dramatic spike in human cancer rates’, rendering invisible the evidence of cancers among a range of non-human beings as a result of radiation (Zimmerman and Galetti 2015: 1-21). Similarly, a caption overlaid onto shots of abandoned Prip'yat state that “Approximately 300,000 people were displaced from their homes. They were told this was temporary. It is still forbidden to return”. As such this image of the inadvertently successful nature reserve that has flourished since the accident is reshaped by the caption as significant only because it symbolises the displacement of the human population. That the removal of humans has resulted in a significant boom in animal life is ignored by the series; the caption's references to ‘displaced’ and ‘homes’ shapes this event as one that should be read as traumatic for humans.



## 5. "THE HAPPINESS OF ALL MANKIND": KILLING ANIMALS

The pre-title sequence of episode four of *Chernobyl* ("The Happiness of All Mankind" [1.04]) shows an old woman milking a cow in a barn. A soldier is present too, and he is there to evacuate her. It is clear this is taking place in the exclusion zone and the soldier is removing everyone who lives in the area. As he tells her repeatedly that she must move she continues milking, ignoring him. The soldier tells her the area is not safe. She responds that she is 82 and this has been her lifelong home, having survived previous tumultuous events such as the Russian revolution, famines, and world wars. It is clear she has no intention of moving. The soldier picks up the bucket of cow's milk and pours it onto the floor. The woman takes it back, and starts milking again. The soldier takes his gun out of his holster, and tells the woman, "This is your last warning". She continues milking. There is the sound of a gunshot. The cow falls to the ground. Dribbles of milk fall from her udders, and flies land on her eye. The soldier says, "It's time to go".

This is not the only time *Chernobyl* depicts the killing of an animal as part of its narrative. Given it is a story about the threat to life that is 'Chernobyl', and the significant effort expended in order to mitigate that threat, the programme depicts surprisingly little actual human death. Yet anthropocentric narratives – such as *Chernobyl* – employ the death of animals for storytelling purposes. The scene with the cow, for example, functions to evidence the disruptions to everyday routine that were caused by the explosion. Where the old woman makes clear that a succession of historical events have engulfed her home but been unable to displace her, 'Chernobyl' succeeds in making her move. And the way in which this sequence is shot makes it clear we are invited to find the woman's displacement as more narratively significant than the death of the cow. As the soldier takes out his gun the audience is invited to assume that it is the woman who will be threatened with death. We do not see the shot but simply hear it, with the falling to the ground of the cow a surprise reveal that serves to indicate the woman is safe. As Sagal says to Mazin in the *Chernobyl Podcast*, "It's a great little fake" (*The Chernobyl Podcast*, "The Happiness of All Mankind" [1.04]). A clear species-based hierarchy is offered here by the narrative; audiences should be relatively unconcerned about the cow's death given that it enables the woman to live. Records show soldiers did kill many farm animals during the evacuation, but this was because they were

irradiated and thus any of their produce – such as milk – was deemed dangerous (Medvedev 1991: 189-190). But some farm animals were also evacuated because human evacuees simply refused to leave them behind; 86,000 cattle were put on trucks and driven from the exclusion zone (Plokhly 2018: 199-200, Mould 2000: 108). What could be a story about human-animal relations and the interdependence of beings is anthropocentrically narrativised in *Chernobyl* as a solely human event in which animal representation is employed for the purposes of depicting human struggle. This cow's death has significance only inasmuch as it enables the story of the old woman to be told.

This sequence is discussed in considerable detail by Mazin and Sagal on the *Chernobyl Podcast* ("The Happiness of All Mankind"). Yet their conversation evidences the discourses within which debates about animal representation take place. Sagal jokes, "We need to reassure everybody, as the ASPCA likes to say – 'no animals were harmed in the making of this episode'".<sup>3</sup> They then go on to discuss that the cow seen falling over is a fake one built especially for the programme. Significant here is the tone Mazin and Sagal adopt for this discussion, for they giggle throughout in marked contrast to the sombre, thoughtful mode they overwhelmingly adopt. Sagal says, "It is hilarious to think, it's like, 'Cut! Bring in the stunt cow'. And they roll in the cow on wheels, I imagine, like something out of Monty Python". Mazin agrees, acknowledging the absurdity of being on set, "In the middle of a field wheeling in the fake cow". As they joke about this, Mazin suddenly becomes extremely serious when he then moves on to discuss the old woman, and how she represents the struggles of many people trying to survive in the Soviet Union. Just as the sequence in *Chernobyl* hierarchises human trauma over that of other beings, so Mazin and Sagal's levity renders the representation of animals as little more than a laughing matter.

Western human cultures have a complex relationship with animal death, as both a factual matter within the real world and within representation. For a start, one of the ways in which humans strive to evidence their difference from other beings is in their knowledge of, and preparation for death, with the assumption that, on the contrary, "animals are incapable of a proper death" (Lippit 2002: 11) because of their ignorance of the temporal context of life. Given industrial

3 The ASPCA is the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. It is likely that what Sagal intends to refer to here is American Humane, as this is the organisation that oversees the 'Hollywood Humane Initiative' which monitors the treatment of animals in media production.

farming methods, animal death is a necessary component of many nation states, yet those cultures typically engage in a “cultivation of indifference” (Johnston and Probyn-Rapsey 2013: xvi) to slaughter that renders the scale of such death largely invisible. This means “only human beings can be murdered”; where humans kill other beings other terms, with the function of “making beings killable” (Haraway 2008: 78, 80), are used. Furthermore, distinctions are made between different kinds of animal; “we humans have historically carried around a veritable bestiary in head of animal totems, classifying each species according to a sliding scale of killability (dogs at one end, sharks on the other, to give only one cultural example)” (Pettman 2011: 61).

But while societies might engage in processes aimed at rendering invisible swathes of animal death in the real world, it has long been a common representational matter in mass media. For example, Tom Gunning categorises the pleasures on offer from the short film *Electrocuting an Elephant* (Edwin S. Porter or Jacob Blair Smith, 1903) as reliant on audiences being invited to wonder at the “technologically advanced death” (1995: 122) inflicted on a seemingly invincible body such as that of an elephant. Similar death-related spectacle can be seen in wildlife documentaries, whose fetishization of moments of animal predation and hunting render invisible the majority of most animals’ behaviour (Mills 2017: 99-103). Rosemary-Claire Collard argues that “Film’s historical and contemporary exploitative and invasive treatment of wild animal bodies” normalises “violent species hierarchies” (2016: 473, 477) that categorise animal death as less significant and less meaningful than the demise of humans. Taken together these analyses posit the depiction of animal death in audio-visual matter as a resource able to be used in human cultures to both deny the actual matter of animal death in real life (especially given much of that death is caused by human activity) but also to reassert the significance of human death (especially in relation to the demise of other beings). The representation of animal death is thus a component of anthropocentric narratives, able to be drawn on in symbolic ways that reassert the notion that only human-centric stories are worthy of being told.

This is evident in the major narrative in *Chernobyl*’s fourth episode (“The Happiness of All Mankind” [1.04]). Pavel Gremov (Barry Keoghan) is a Ukrainian civilian drafted in to help with the clear-up operation. He is assigned to work with Bacho (Fares Fares) a Georgian soldier and veteran of the Soviet-Afghan war and the largely uncommunicative Garo (Alexej Manvelov), an Armenian soldier. Pavel is shown

arriving at an army camp by bus, looking out in confusion at the activities going on around him, and as such he is immediately constructed as an innocent outsider through whose experiences the audience are invited to make sense of what will unfold. Bacho tells Pavel the three of them will engage in animal control, entering the abandoned town of Pripyat and shooting all the pet dogs that were left behind during the evacuation. As Bacho says,

Yeah, they’re radioactive, so they have to go. But it’s not hard - they’re mostly pets. They’re happy to see you. They run right up to you. Bang. We load the bodies on the truck, dump them in the pit, bury them in concrete, then we drink. As much vodka as you want. Plus a thousand roubles. Let’s go get you a gun.

Bacho’s matter-of-fact description of the work to be done contrasts with Pavel’s overwhelmed reactions, as he is introduced to a world he was previously ignorant of. *Chernobyl*’s depiction of the subsequent pet-killing draws on historical records of the massacre which meant that “the abandoned streets of Pripyat were strewn with the corpses of many different kinds of dog” (Medvedev 1991: 188-189).

So, Pavel, Bacho and Garo are shown arriving in abandoned streets, and Bacho tells Pavel he has only two rules: firstly, that Pavel shouldn’t point his gun at him; secondly that he must not let the dogs suffer. As they walk towards the unoccupied houses Bacho whistles, and the sounds of dogs reacting receptively to his presence is heard via barks and the noise of animals running through fields to reach them. Bacho and Garo start shooting the dogs, but the programme does not show their deaths. Instead the camera remains in close-up on Pavel’s face, as he stands unable to move, witnessing the slaughter taking place in front of him. Bacho reprimands Pavel for his inaction, and so Pavel heads towards some buildings in the opposite direction, the sounds of gunfire continuing to ring out. At the entrance to a building Pavel sees a dog, and clearly reluctant to shoot, he waves his rifle, encouraging the dog to flee. But the dog instead stands and looks at him, not scared but interested. There is a moment, and then the dog makes a small bark, and, almost as an unthinking reaction, Pavel fires. Then the dog is heard whining, and as Pavel moves nearer, it is clear the animal has been wounded, but not fatally. Pavel leans over the dog, and looks like he’s about to say something. But then another shot is heard, and the dog’s whining ceases, and it is revealed Bacho has deliv-

ered the fatal shot. Bacho storms up to Pavel and says, “Don’t let them suffer”. He then walks off telling Pavel to bring the dog’s corpse to the truck. There’s another close-up on Pavel’s face, as the sounds of dogs barking and shots firing continue.

Significant throughout this sequence, and the rest of this narrative that continues for much of this episode, is that the actual moments of the deaths of the dogs are absent from the screen. While dogs’ corpses are sometimes in frame, these are always at a distance and incidental to the action taking place in the foreground. While the dog that Pavel shoots is depicted while alive but injured, the animal disappears from representation once dead. As such *Chernobyl*’s representational strategies depict the horror of what is taking place while negotiating the boundaries of what human audiences might find acceptable. Discussing this on the *Chernobyl Podcast*, Mazin says, “People probably think I’ve abused them with this episode” (“The Happiness of All Mankind”). He goes on to discuss a scene that was drawn from historical record and was shot, but which in the end was not included for broadcast. This involves the subsequent dumping of dogs’ corpses into a pit, which are then covered in concrete in order to prevent radiation leakage. In the broadcast version all of the dogs are dead, but the deleted scene showed that one dog was mistakenly still conscious. Wanting to ensure the animal wasn’t buried alive in the concrete, Bacho searches for ammunition, but the three liquidators realise they have run out of bullets. They thus have no option but to pour the concrete onto the living dog alongside the corpses. Mazin justifies excluding this scene:

You don’t want to cross a line where you feel like you’re excited about upsetting people, because we’re not. You know, once we kind of got out of Pavel’s head... I mostly want people to watch this and feel what Pavel feels (*The Chernobyl Podcast*, “The Happiness of All Mankind”).

Mazin here makes clear that his aim in this narrative is not to encourage concern for the hundreds of slaughtered dogs, but instead for audiences to ‘feel what Pavel feels’. The anthropocentric nature of the narrative here aligns with how pets such as dogs are entrapped within human-centred understandings of the function and purpose of animals. Yi-Fu Tuan notes that what “produces” the pet is a combination of “dominance” and “affection” (1984: 2). While humans clearly have affection for the animals they categorise as ‘pets’, “The dangers for contemporary dogs are real” (McHugh 2004: 9).

Most indicative of this is humans’ insistence on their ability to decide when animals such as pets can die, usually via the process human cultures sanitise through terms such as ‘putting to sleep’. Pets are “expendable individuals that can be killed en masse at human will – or even whim” (Palmer 2006: 171). Pavel’s narrative is one in which he comes to realise the truth of this fact, and it explores the impact upon him not only as he accepts this, but also as he becomes part of the process that engages in death on this scale. Yet *Chernobyl* indicates no interest in the implications of this for the animals themselves. None of the dogs are named, none appear outside of the moment of their slaughter. While for audiences seeing a process by which animals are killed is undoubtedly difficult to view, the programme prioritises empathy with Pavel’s comparable horror rather than engagement with the dogs whose deaths propel the story. On offer is a form of audience-character human kinship central to anthropocentric narrative, with animals reduced to representational resources depicted only inasmuch as they enable the human-centred story to be told.

Later in the episode Pavel, Bacho and Garo are having their lunch break, sitting outside some abandoned buildings, eating sausage and drinking vodka. Garo reads out what is written on a banner hanging forlornly off an abandoned nearby community centre; ‘The happiness of all mankind’. Sagal reflects on the phrase that, “Certain lies have to be shouted” (*Chernobyl Podcast* “The Happiness of All Mankind”). This sequence underscores the key theme Mazin asserts is *Chernobyl*’s purpose; to highlight how societies lie to themselves, and the difficulties individuals face when standing up those lies. The story of Pavel serves to demonstrate not only how people are ensnared within the stories nations tell about themselves, but also how through repetition those aspects that might at first seem unconscionable become routine. After all, Pavel is later shown much more methodically scouring the abandoned town for animals to kill, and in his final scene he is shown with Bacho and Garo walking home in the dusk, now clearly one of them.

*Chernobyl* aims to skewer the empty sloganeering of phrases such as ‘the happiness of all mankind’, yet its critique merely troubles this particular use of this phrase, rather than the fundamental notion it encapsulates. Just as human cultures routinely put to death billions of animals per year, so *Chernobyl* representationally puts to death multiple dogs, all in the service of telling a story anthropocentric in its focus. Like the cat in Legasov’s apartment, and the cow in the old woman’s barn, these animals appear in the programme only

inasmuch as they are necessary to tell the human-centred story. The programme makes a distinction between the significance it places upon different kinds of death, in which the mere threat to life for humans is offered as a narrative concern, while the actual death of animals is depicted fleetingly and is seen as meaningful only where it impacts upon humans. The most fundamental structuring principles of the notion of ‘the happiness of all mankind’ is the assumption that mankind’s happiness is of more significance than that of other beings. To reshape a historical moment of human-animal interaction resulting in the deaths of hundreds of dogs into a story in which only the impacts upon humans matter is anthropocentric storytelling in which animals are narrative resources and nothing more.

## 6. “THE COST OF LIES”: ANTHROPOCENTRIC NARRATIVE

To outline *Chernobyl*’s anthropocentric narrative is not to suggest that it is singular or particular in this discourse. The potency of the animal turn is one that responds to the normalisation of anthropocentrism, and a television series such as *Chernobyl* is merely indicative of the human-centred nature of much storytelling. Yet there is also a piquancy here, given the event called ‘Chernobyl’ is one within which thousands of animals were, and continue to be, enmeshed. Anthropocentric narrative isn’t therefore merely a prioritising of the human experience, it is also a denial of non-human alternatives, and a normalisation of the former through the very disavowal of the latter. Dominic Pettman defines human cultures as predicated on an all-powerful error, which “is to mistake the perception of our reflection for reality” (2011: 21). As a drama committed to seriousness *Chernobyl* offers up a realist tale legitimised by the science it draws on for evidence, with Mazin’s contributions on the *Chernobyl* Podcast reinforcing this. In disavowing the multiple ways in which ‘Chernobyl’ has been understood by a variety of approaches the programme partakes in the dominant anthropocentric ‘error’.

Television Studies, too, engages in this error. Aligning itself with the human-centric conventions of storytelling, it makes sense of the texts it explores through a human lens. When Jason Mittell reveals his recurring analytical question is “how does this text work?” (2015: 4), the right answer is always likely to be, ‘anthropocentrically’. Including animals within analytical frameworks has significant implications for

the study of television and its storytelling, by making explicit the processes by which a human viewing position is offered and adopted. What does it mean to tell a story, if that story is not about, or for, humans? What are the implications for animals of human cultures’ propensity to form narratives with humans as their site of understanding, especially when – as with *Chernobyl* – what is being narrativised is of immediate concern to a wide range of beings?

It is possible to imagine plenty of alternative versions of *Chernobyl* that could have been made. These could have traced the consequences of the accident on non-humans, whether these are pets massacred in the clear-up operation, or wildlife currently living in the exclusion zone. Approaches under the animal turn have sought to engage in mapping more permeable species boundaries’ by “locating narrative as a zone of integration” (McHugh 2011: 2). This is seen to be important given the consequences of human actions on non-human beings, where industrialised meat production, mass extinctions and habitat loss are results of institutionalised and normalised anthropocentrism. Acknowledging and critiquing anthropocentric narrative matters then, not because of some reductive goal of defining a definitive historical truth than can be called ‘Chernobyl’; it matters because stories which say that only humans matter are ones that help enable social power structures under which non-humans suffer. Mazin states that his primary motivation for making *Chernobyl* was to examine the cost of lies, but his topic – summarised in the series’ opening line – may perhaps be more productively re-framed: what is the cost *for animals* of lies *told by humans*?

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# TEXTUAL AGENCY: QUENTIN SKINNER AND POPULAR MEDIA

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## ABSTRACT

This paper makes a case for how scholarship on popular film and television can potentially be inspired by the

methodological writings of intellectual historian Quentin Skinner. While Skinner's approach is canonical in the field of intellectual history, his thoughts on textual analysis have rarely been applied to material other than philosophical treatises and that article shows that Skinner's thoughts on texts are applicable to studying television serials. The paper further suggests that intellectual historian Mikkel Thorup's work is useful for pondering the challenges of contextualist readings of television serials and that Skinner and Thorup's work provide useful ways of analyzing how politically charged television serials like those of David Simon take issue with discursive and social realities in an American context.

Much of the wealth of scholarship on David Simon's *The Wire* speaks to how it engages with social and political realities in contemporary America (e.g. Williams 2014, Lavik 2014, Corkin 2017). One example is how the serial's fourth season introduces a storyline about how the lives of four middle-school boys from West Baltimore are shaped by poverty, sexual abuse, parents with drug addictions, severe bullying, and social marginalization. With tacit reference to this storyline, writer-producer George Pelecanos later said that *The Wire* rebutted a discourse concerning the lack of upward social mobility in America's inner cities:

We answered the scurrilous claim and lie I've heard all my life, "Why can't those kids just work hard and get out of the ghetto?" We showed people why things are the way they are in an East Coast urban environment like that. Achieving that alone was something major and made me proud to be involved (Pelecanos in HBO 2017).

Noting how a specific element in the text functions as response to a real-world phenomenon ("answered the scurrilous claim"), Pelecanos envisions *The Wire* as one interlocutor situated in larger socio-political discussions on American urbanity. But how are we to understand a television serial in this way: as an interlocutor in dialogue with its context? I suggest that Quentin Skinner's theoretical reflections on textual agency are particularly well suited to studying this phenomenon. To this end, I will show how Skinner's ideas can contribute to discussions about how to study the way cultural texts like film and television serials engage in socio-cultural discussions.

Quentin Skinner argues that one cannot uncover the historical identity of texts without seeing what they were doing at the time of publication. You cannot tell if texts "are satirizing, repudiating, ridiculing, ignoring, accepting other points of view" (Skinner in Pallares-Burke 2002: 219) if you read them without heeding their contexts. Just as Pelecanos argues that *The Wire* engaged with victim-blaming discourse in the U.S., Skinner argues that we should find out how texts engage(d) with social realities or other texts. Sometimes this task is almost a given, such as in the cases of parodies and pastiches, where the text is always related to another text in a very direct manner. But Skinner implores us to find out how any text, say, reproduces a prevalent trope, because in that case we find out how that text navigates within a discursive field. The advantage of using Skinner's approach to studying

popular media texts is that it is eminently able to encompass both an attention to texts and their contexts and the relationships and interactions between the two.

To illustrate how Skinner's approach is a useful one for studying popular media I will outline how it can productively connect close textual analyses of David Simon's television serials with social-historical matters such as deindustrialization, residential segregation, gentrification, the war on drugs, and dehumanization of inner-city drug addicts.

Born in 1960, Simon worked from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s as a journalist in Baltimore before becoming a writer and producer of television serials. Working his way up on NBC's *Homicide: Life on the Street* in the 1990s, Simon has since 2000 been a leading producer and writer on seven different HBO productions: *The Corner* (2000), *The Wire* (2002-2008), *Generation Kill* (2008), *Treme* (2010-13), *Show Me a Hero* (2015), *The Deuce* (2017-19), and *The Plot Against America* (2020). This makes him a very successful writer-producer<sup>1</sup> in the television industry despite the fact that his productions have never achieved the stellar ratings of shows like *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007) or AMC's *The Walking Dead* (2010-).

## 1. THE HISTORICAL IDENTITY OF TEXTS

Central to Skinner's approach is an effort to understand texts in the discourses they engaged in at the original time of writing and/or publication. His ambition is to uncover the argumentative position that a text had in a specific era's discursive landscape. This ambition makes Skinner dismiss what literary studies scholars often refer to as close reading, i.e. to focus on the text without considering its context (Skinner 1969: 3-6). Skinner argues that we must contextualize texts in order to understand their 'direction' and their original argumentative purpose. He consequently distinguishes between understanding what a text *means* and what it *does*.

Making a case for the latter reading protocol, Skinner argues that while close reading can uncover a textualist (i.e. acontextual) understanding of a text's *meaning*, it is only by situating a, say, television series in its context that we can uncover what Skinner calls its "historical identity" (in

1 David Simon is a showrunner, which is not an official title like "executive producer" or "creator." Being a showrunner means that he is both a lead writer and a lead producer on the serials he works on. He both has central creative duties as well along with his considerable administrative tasks. This also means that he has a decisive say in creating his television serials (Lavik 2015).

Koikkalainen and Syrjämäki 2002: 51). To Skinner, the term “historical identity” is the antithesis to what we may call its thematic or textual identity that we can uncover through close reading. The historical identity of a text is only visible by situating it in its original discursive context(s) and then identifying what role it played in that context. This is Skinner’s idea of texts *doing* things.

It is this central claim that enables us to study how David Simon’s television serials in a manner that is attentive to their polemical engagement with contemporary American culture. All of Simon’s serials feature an ‘argumentative direction’ in that they engage with specific interlocutors and certain issues; they are not just statements about the American city, Simon’s central topic (Jensen 2020). They are better seen as utterances that reach out into the world and try to engage with it in specific ways. The content of Simon’s serials thus motivates a reading protocol attuned to such textual agency, which demonstrates why Quentin Skinner is relevant for studying popular media.

*Treme* takes issue with Katrina and the problematic aftermath of the hurricane and devotes long storylines to exploring issues of cultural belonging and the rehousing of exiled New Orleanians. *Show Me a Hero* eschews the way that many films traditionally depict the civil rights movement. Such films usually locate the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s in the South,<sup>2</sup> which comes at the expense telling a long civil rights narrative which historians such as Jacqueline Dowd Hall, Thomas Sugrue, and Stephen Tuck are advocates for (Hall 2005, Sugrue 2009, Tuck 2012, Jensen 2018b). Simon’s productions engage rather openly with these issues and my point is that these serials’ argumentative direction only becomes visible when we read them in context.

## 2. TEXTS DO THINGS

Inspired by British historian R.G. Collingwood’s empirical work, Skinner theorizes “that we should try to recover the questions to which the texts we study can be construed as answers” (Skinner 2002: 47). To understand one of Simon’s serials in Skinner’s perspective, then, means to look beyond

2 The last few episodes of the PBS documentary series *Eyes on the Prize* (1987-1990) is a notable exception to this rule. While the first episodes chronicle the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the murder of Emmitt Till, the Little Rock Crisis, and the sit-in movement and much more, its last episodes take the narrative all the way up to the Boston Busing Crisis in the 1970s-1980s and the 1983 election of Harold Washington as the Mayor of Chicago.

its textual boundaries and see that serial as a response to other people’s utterances or as a response to specific social realities. In this sense, the serial comes to appear as an ‘answer’ to the questions that its context ‘asked’ at the point in time when the serial was produced. Drawing on Collingwood and Peter Laslett’s historical research, Skinner articulates his methodology through the vocabulary of speech act theory as developed by J.L. Austin in *How to Do Things with Words*. Austin coined the term “performative,” which, to him, refers to a kind of speech “in which to say something is to do something” (1975: 94).

One of Skinner’s most clear examples about how to distinguish between what utterances *mean* and what they *do* is the statement: “The ice is very thin over there” (Skinner 1988: 273). The *meaning* of this sentence is to provide information about the quality of an area of ice on a lake, but what this sentence *does* is to warn people, who otherwise might hurt themselves by falling through the ice. The first understanding is rather static while the second way of deciphering the utterance also considers how the utterance reaches out into the world and tries to affect people. This dynamic of *textual agency* is a productive way of examining Simon’s serials. They depict with intricate nuance the American city, but they do so in a way that is not only interested in describing — i.e. pointing out ‘where the ice is thin,’ — but also in *rebutting*, *rearticulating*, and *redressing* dominant discourses about, say, the state of the city and other topics.

Skinner stresses this *performative* function of language in the sense that an utterance does not only have a *semantic content* but also has a function in that it represents an *action*; it is aimed at *doing* something. Skinner refers to Wittgenstein’s notion that “words are also deeds” (Skinner 2002: 4) to argue that philosophical works — his main area of expertise — do not ‘just’ articulate political ideas, but that they *do* things in their cultural context. Intellectual historian Ben Rogers explains how Skinner’s early work “established that Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, published in 1651, which defended the authority of de facto government, was, in part, a contribution to the controversy over the legitimacy of the newly formed English Commonwealth” (Rogers 1990: 266). This is one of the ways that Skinner demonstrates that while his research focuses mainly on sophisticated works of political philosophy, his readings do not center only on the philosophical content of these works: he is always interested in uncovering the historical identity of the text in question.

According to Rogers, Skinner’s approach makes it possible to see dimensions in texts that are “usually obscured by those

textualist critics who insist on treating the classical works as if they addressed a problematic that existed outside history” (Rogers 1990: 266). This point about seeing more layers in a text when putting it into context surely applies to all forms of contextualization. Skinner’s contribution lies in showing how a philosophical work like *Leviathan* engaged in a then-current political debate about a very concrete political fact: the formation of the ultimately short-lived Commonwealth of England in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century. *Leviathan*, then, is not ‘just a text.’ It is an *attack* aimed at specific interlocutors. Like Pelecanos argues that *The Wire* was a reply to a victim-blaming discourse in the U.S., Skinner argues that we are wise to try a find out how a text can be said to engage with social realities or other texts.

But though Skinner was inspired very much by Collingwood and Laslett’s historical research, it is often his inspiration from — and discussions of — speech act theory that has drawn much criticism. Several scholars have taken issue with the fact that Skinner extends the concept of speech acts to encompass all intellectual activities, including texts.<sup>3</sup> I, however, do not find that it is its philosophical grounding in speech act theory that qualifies Skinner’s approach. Indeed, I find that Skinner’s methodological approach of looking at texts as acts is valid without the theoretical baggage from speech act theory and it seems perhaps more productive to see Skinner’s engagement with speech act theory more as being inspirational; this terminology helped him articulate his argument about textual agency. Austin simply provided Skinner with a vocabulary that enabled him to articulate his ideas about textual agency in the 1960s and 1970s, but the productivity and usefulness of his ideas do not depend on his use of Austin.

The usefulness of his approach is evidenced through how he alongside the rest of Cambridge School of intellectual history — e.g. John Pocock and John Dunn — have been part of the most important trend within the field of intellectual history since the early 1980s as well as the fact that their methodologies have inspired a wealth of interesting scholarship (Thorup 2012: 182). By examining texts that openly engage in cultural debates, Skinner’s approach has proven fruitful in that it opens up a discussion of how texts *engage in debate* with their cultural surroundings. This offers a rigorous way of avoiding the reductionism that can arise from the idea that

texts merely *reflect* their cultural surroundings (Thorup 2013: 98). The Skinnerian approach avoids reducing texts to have that very passive role in culture.

Indeed, it makes little sense to see David Simon’s serials as reflections of general trends in American culture. The ideas his serials express have certainly found sympathetic ears but to consider his serials to be reflections of larger cultural trends would be to miss the aspects about these serials that are most interesting. These serials are all produced by creative contributors within a specific company, HBO, that is interested in producing such content. Not the mere by-product of 21<sup>st</sup> century American cultural trends.

### 3. INTENTIONS

Any effort of adapting Skinner, however, is wise to note the criticism his approach has faced. When he argues that a text *does* something he touches on the issue of intentionality and here he has been criticized for trying to get ‘into the heads’ of the philosophers he studies. Critics have claimed that Skinner has tried to uncover what past philosophers *thought* instead of focusing on the words on the page. These critics rightfully argue that the former is impossible (Lassen and Thorup 2009: 30),<sup>4</sup> but that point does not mean that their intentions are not relevant. It is merely a theoretical and methodological objection that reminds us that there are some limitations to how we can study people’s intentions.

Political scientist Mark Bevir, however, has pinpointed how Skinner goes about studying intentions. Bevir makes the important point of distinguishing between texts as “intentions-in-doing” and as “intentions-to-do” (1992: 295). This is to say that Skinner’s approach does not try to uncover what the intention is *behind* an act (or a text). Skinner seeks to decipher an intention by looking at the act itself (the text) in relation to its context, which in the case of David Simon’s series means looking to paratexts such as interviews, lectures, and DVD bonus features in order to qualify what Simon aims to say with his serials.

Skinner writes that “intentions and meanings, whether with respect to actions or utterances, are a public matter, and are to be understood not by trying to get into the heads of past actors but simply by observing the forms of life with-

3 Skinner clarifies that when he says “texts” he has “in mind the widest possible sense of that term, so that buildings, pieces of music and paintings, as much as works of literature and philosophy, are all texts to be read” (in Pallares-Burke 2002: 232).

4 For Skinner’s reply to his critics regarding the issue of intentionality, see Chapter 5 of *Visions of Politics – Volume 1: Regarding Method*, “Motives, intentions and interpretation” (Skinner 2002).

in which they act” (in Koikkalainen and Syrjämäki 2002: 46). This delimitation avoids the philosophical pitfalls of trying to look ‘into the heads’ of writers. Intellectual historians Mikkel Thorup and Frank Beck Lassen use John F. Kennedy’s famous 1963 “Ich bin ein Berliner” speech to clarify this point. Did Kennedy label himself as a sweet piece of pastry (a Berliner) or did he utter a public declaration of solidarity with the people of Berlin who at that point had lived enclosed by the Berlin Wall for almost two years? Skinner’s position is clear. By looking at the context of Kennedy’s speech it only makes sense to understand Kennedy’s objective as a declaration of solidarity with Berlin (Lassen and Thorup 2009, 31-2). This way of looking to context to establish what Bevir terms an “intention-in-doing” thus qualifies Skinner’s position on intentionality. In studying David Simon’s television serials, this calls for examining their form, content, and context in order to decipher the politics embedded in the texts.

Skinner’s contextualist strategy entails positioning the writer in her contemporary culture, which then was the starting point for her writings to her contemporaries. In his classic *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*,<sup>5</sup> Skinner argues that a writer is first an *observer* of her culture and that that culture confronts the writer with certain issues that she then *addresses*: “I take it that political life itself sets the main problems for the political theorist, causing a certain range of issues to appear problematic, and a corresponding range of questions to become the leading subjects of debate” (Skinner 1978: xi). In this view, texts are not understood as ahistorical standpoints on certain issues, but rather *responses* to the questions that seemed pressing at the time of writing.<sup>6</sup> In the 1990s, Simon wrote two books of journalism — *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets* (1991) and *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood* (1997, co-written with Ed Burns) — and it seems clear that his experiences with researching and writing these two books and his thirteen years as a crime reporter for the *Baltimore Sun* inform the political drive that runs through especially both *The Corner* and *The*

*Wire*. The “range of issues” which from that perspective “appear problematic” are issues like the war on drugs, residential segregation, and the loss of manufacturing jobs. This lived experience in Baltimore is then the background that causes “a corresponding range of questions to become the leading subjects of debate.” But while the general aim and strength of contextualization is to uncover in texts elements that otherwise are difficult and understand, Mikkel Thorup stresses the difficulties inherent in this endeavor. A methodological guiding light for him is the principle of “textual primacy”.

#### 4. TEXT AND CONTEXT

To Thorup, textual primacy simply refers to how some scholarly interests focus on textual analysis while other interests zoom in on more structural matters such as deindustrialization (Bluestone and Harrison 1982) or industrial changes in television production (Lotz 2007). Thorup uses this concept to distinguish between different *Erkenntnisinteressen*<sup>7</sup> in historical studies. He argues that while social history is interested in action, intellectual history is interested in meaning (Thorup 2012: 183).<sup>8</sup> The former is interested in the atextual matters of real life and the latter is interested in text.<sup>9</sup> This point would almost be too basic to mention, were it not for an inherent methodological challenge of contextualist reading: the almost Janus-headed form of attention that looks simultaneously at both the *text itself* and *context* at the same time.

This is the challenge of maintaining a strict analytical focus. Thorup argues that for researchers who embrace the principle of textual primacy it is “essential not to let the *Erkenntnisinteresse* slide from text to context”.<sup>10</sup> Context

5 According to historian Maria Pallares-Burke, this work established Skinner “as a compulsory reference in the historiography of political ideas” (2002: 212).

6 This argument extends from Skinner’s belief that there are no “perennial problems,” i.e. problems that are relevant for all time: “there are only individual answers to individual questions” (Skinner 1969: 50). This view aligns very much with the reading protocol Jane Tompkins has championed within literary studies. She sees “literary texts not as works of art embodying enduring themes in complex forms, but as attempts to redefine the social order” (1985: xi). Employing a central concept in her theorization of literature’s social function, she argues that novels perform “a certain kind of *cultural work* within a specific historical situation” (1985: 200. Emphasis added).

7 This old Habermasian term is most commonly translated as ‘cognitive interest’ which, however, comes with too much semantic slippage and connotative baggage for it to be useful for my purposes. ‘Epistemological interest’ would maybe be a closer translation but I nonetheless opt for the original German word.

8 While Thorup’s distinction finely sets up different *Erkenntnisinteressen* of social and intellectual history, it eschews the fact that a core feature of social history is its interest in societal structures. To historian Knud Knudsen, both the French *Annales* school and the German tradition of social history seek out links to sociology in order to move away from a focus on actions and events to instead uncover the structural dimensions in society (Knudsen 2004: 45-7). While Thorup’s aphoristic distinction is helpful in pinpointing a core feature of intellectual history, its view of social history is somewhat reductive.

9 Social history can be seen as the relevant context for studying a specific text or phenomenon. But social history can only be called context when *we use it* as the context for studying something else, e.g. a text.

10 All translations from Danish to English are my own.



must remain an auxiliary component that facilitates a better understanding of something else, namely the text (Thorup 2013: 100). In terms of studying Simon's serials, then, this challenge has to do with how the contextual matters of television history or the topics that the serials speak to — e.g. gentrification or the war on drugs — do not 'overpower' the primary analytical interest in understanding Simon's serials. Thorup conceptualizes this as "the schizophrenia of contextualization." Contextualist readings, Thorup argues,

[...] are always interested in explaining the individual case — this text, this concept, this dogma, this truth — but [...] it has to go outside the individual case in order to explain it. At the same time, it cannot reduce the individual case to an indifferent subset of a whole. It is this schizophrenia that explains the frustration of contextualization, but which also explains the temptation to either declare the wholly universal or the wholly particular as the whole [object of study] and thereby strip away context (Thorup 2013: 79-80).

As Thorup suggests, a fallacy in contextual readings arises if the critic — inadvertently it seems (otherwise it would not be contextualist analysis in any sense) — *only* pays attention to the text. In that case, the critic runs the risk of losing sight of the cultural landscape that the text in questions exists within, and one would therefore not be able to identify the full range of the text's communicative potential. What was supposed to be a contextual reading ends up being an acontextual close reading, and without contextualization one cannot see how a text fits into a cultural landscape.

Simon's miniseries *Show Me a Hero* depicts the real-life story of an ambitious young politician, Nick Wasisko (Oscar Isaac), who in the 1980s and 1990s ended up fighting to make the city of Yonkers, New York comply with a federal court decision to desegregate the city's public housing by building low-income housing units in the more affluent eastside of the city (Belkin [1999] 2015). The creators wanted to create a "musical identity" for the character and ended up using 12 different Bruce Springsteen songs in the miniseries (Miller 2015). Springsteen's long career of singing songs about troubled working-class characters and his public image thus comes to connect to the Wasisko character. However, this appreciation of what *Show Me a Hero* achieves by using Springsteen's music depends on connecting the miniseries with an understanding of Springsteen and his image. This

cultural knowledge is important in terms of deciphering the textual intricacies of the miniseries in relation to what it tries to communicate. At the heart of this approach, then, lies the historian's challenge: the task of figuring out how a text fits into a certain context — and, to add the Skinnerian ambition, to identify what that text *does* in its context.

*The Corner* makes for a good example here. This miniseries rejects conservative discourses about inner-city problems but it does not conform to dominant trends in liberal discourse about inner cities (Jensen 2018a). Sociologist William Julius Wilson argues that there is a long-running tendency in liberal discourse in the U.S. that evades discussing the role that culture plays in creating and perpetuating untoward social realities in impoverished areas. This reluctance stems from a fear of potentially playing into a discourse of victim-blaming (Wilson 1997: xxviii). While *The Corner* is certainly more left-leaning than conservative,<sup>11</sup> it does not shy away from problematizing some of the cultural issues that conservatives tend to emphasize more than many liberals traditionally do.

This way of positioning *The Corner* in a discussion about inner-city problems depends on an awareness of the discourses that Wilson describes; without that insight it would be very difficult to identify how *The Corner* navigates within these discourses about inner-city problems in the U.S. Just like some texts come to take on different semantic levels if a viewer picks up on specific intertextual references, so too does such contextualization add to our understanding of the text. Things that are invisible to some viewers become visible only in the light of specific contextual knowledge. Skinner's focus on texts that do things enables us to uncover how *The Corner* engages in cultural dialogue.

## 5. TYPES OF CONTEXT

As mentioned, Thorup's concept of the schizophrenia of contextualization reminds us that both (1) an understanding of the text itself as well as (2) an understanding of the background(s) from which the text emerged are prerequisites for contextualist readings. This raises the challenge of determining what kind of context we position these texts in. While the insistence on seeing texts as doing things clarifies Skinner's ideas about the relationship between texts and their contexts, there remains the issue of qualifying the different kinds of contexts that texts can engage with. Thorup argues

11 David Simon labels himself a Democratic Socialist (Baldwin 2013).

that texts can be situated in four different types of context: an individual one, a situational one, a linguistic one, and a social-historical one (Thorup 2013: 86-96). This typology outlines the different scenarios in which we can study texts' argumentative agency. Indeed, one can study David Simon's television serials in all four contexts.

A focus on the individual context is what film studies scholars usually refer to as the *auteur* approach (Grant 2008) or what television scholars may call the *showrunner* approach (Jensen 2017). This form of contextualization focuses on seeing a specific text (e.g. a film or a television serial) in the context of a range of texts created by the same person(s). In this perspective, layers emerge in the specific text that would maybe not come to appear significant had one not read that particular text in relation to other texts. In other words, *Show Me a Hero* looks different in the context of, say, *The Corner* and *The Wire*. It makes a difference whether or not one reads a specific text in relation to this "individual context".

American Studies scholar George Lipsitz's reading of *The Wire* offers one example of how stressing the individual context can shape our understanding of an individual text. Lipsitz is generally very sympathetic to *The Wire*, but he nonetheless criticizes the fact that it does not dramatize the historical reasons why Baltimore became residentially segregated. That social reality is merely a part of how it depicts the city (Lipsitz 2011: 103-5). In this perspective, *Show Me a Hero* adds an important dimension to Simon's depiction of the American city: this miniseries zooms in on the struggles connected to residential segregation and thus attends to what Lipsitz considered to be one of the *The Wire*'s blind spots (Jensen 2018b). This is the kind of perspective the individual context can contribute with: we understand these two serials in a different way when we see them in this individual context.

The situational context is the local context in which a text was produced. In the case of studying television serials this would often entail a focus on the production and/or reception of a serial. This emphasis would, for instance, call for examining autographic and allographic paratexts<sup>12</sup> surrounding Simon's serials. Many of *Show Me a Hero*'s paratexts are articles and interviews published in August and September

2015 when that miniseries was first broadcast on HBO. This illustrates how these paratexts — despite their political content — are supposed to promote the miniseries for HBO. Journalistic commentary also falls under the category of the situational context, like how *New York Times* journalist Ginia Bellafante's commented how *Show Me a Hero* arrived "at a particularly relevant moment [in] the national conversation about race and criminal-justice reform prompted by the loss of so many black lives at the hands of white law enforcers" (Bellafante 2015). Such material is surely relevant in placing *Show Me a Hero* in its situational context. This context is very local and often bound to a specific point in time. The third category is much broader.

Thorup's term *linguistic context*, however, is unfortunate for discussing how Skinner and Thorup's ideas may be translated to studying popular media. This term refers to Skinner's focus on the way linguistic contexts can help us understand past writers' political vocabulary by seeing how a writer used an era's dominant rhetorical norms to reevaluate a political standpoint. Skinner writes that "if we succeed in identifying this [linguistic] context with sufficient accuracy, we can eventually hope to read off what the speaker or writer in whom we are interested was doing in saying what he or she said" (Skinner 1988: 275). This sort of comment extends from the fact that Skinner's source material is philosophical texts from the early modern period like Hobbes' *Leviathan*. To reference Hans-Georg Gadamer's notion of horizons, Hobbes' context is so much foreign land to us that it is a task in itself to become conversant in the linguistic norms of that past era. That linguistic competence, then, becomes a prerequisite for studying 17<sup>th</sup> century writing.

In terms of studying Simon's serials, however, it is perhaps better to call this category *discursive context* as that category includes not only written language but also the context of contemporary complex serials. This televisual mode of expression is the discursive context that provides Simon with the storytelling affordances he uses to tell his stories (Mittell 2015, Dunleavy 2017). The term discursive context is more open and more appropriate for discussing several forms of texts (e.g. interviews and articles) that are not only linguistic but often audiovisual (the serials themselves as well as interviews and other forms of promotional material). Indeed, to situate Simon's serials within HBO's production culture and recent developments within American television drama is only one form of discursive contextualization (Mittell 2012). Another way of understanding Simon's serials in their discursive context is to examine their use of intertextuality.

12 Gérard Genette distinguishes between autographic and allographic paratexts. The former are paratexts that are produced by the same person(s) who created the main text. In the case of, say, *Treme* this would be an interview Simon gave in which he speaks about that serial (e.g. Mason 2010, Beiser 2011). Allographic paratexts, on the other hand, are reviews, blog entries, essays, etc. by critics, fans, etc. In other words, paratexts that were not created by David Simon or other people who helped make *Treme* (Genette 1997: 8-9).



Simon's latest multi-season serial, *The Deuce* (2017-2019),<sup>13</sup> is riddled with references to classic films like Jack Conway's 1935 adaptation of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, Michael Curtiz' *Mildred Pierce* (1945), Boris Sagal's *The Omega Man* (1971), and Gerard Damiano's *Deep Throat* (1972) (*The Deuce*, 1.01, 1.03, 1.08). Indeed, while all of Simon's serials stress the reality of what they depict,<sup>14</sup> they also engage openly in intertextual dialogues with different texts, especially with American films (Lavik 2012; Jensen 2018a). Skinner labels his approach as being "pro-intertextualist" (in Pallares-Burke 2002: 236), yet a purely intertextualist focus on, say, *The Wire* would only emphasize how the serial relates to other *discursive* points of reference. In this line of inquiry one finds Charlotte Brunsdon's monograph *Television Cities* (2018). She argues that "Just as *The Wire* owes debts to network television, so too does its Baltimore draw on previous Baltimores," (2018: 22), which reflects how she is interested in seeing connections between *The Wire* and other *depictions* of Baltimore. This is *The Wire* situated in a discursive context.

In a similar manner, we may note how *The Corner* engages in intertextual dialogue with Martin Luther King's 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech, *Boyz n The Hood* (1991), and *Schindler's List* (1993), and how *The Wire* engages with the tradition of revisionist westerns (Lavik 2012). In a similar manner, *Treme* negotiates different narratives of jazz history (George 2012). When Simon's serials are so heavily intertextual, this discursive context is surely important in terms of understanding how these serials engage with specific interlocutors or texts in American cultural history. But it is also important in terms of understanding the strategies they employ to take issue with specific social problems in the U.S.

However, Thorup further argues that, unlike Skinner's focus on linguistic contexts, historian Ellen Wood has opted for incorporating Skinner's approach to analyze texts in their social-historical context, which is Thorup's fourth and final category of possible contexts (Thorup 2013: 85). Wood argues that:

To understand what political theorists are saying requires knowing what questions they are trying to answer, and those questions confront them not simply as philosophical abstractions but as specific problems posed by specific historical conditions, in the context of specific practical activities, social

relations, pressing issues, grievances and conflicts (Wood 2008: 3-4).

Wood's mention of "knowing what questions [political treatises] are trying to answer" reveals her Skinnerian inspiration, but her mention of social relations, conflicts, and "specific historical conditions" reveals her inclination towards social-historical contextualization. Her way of contrasting "philosophical abstractions" with "specific problems posed by specific historical conditions" points to how the content of a work is a response to a social reality that is both textual *and* non-textual. To explain this with the sub-disciplines of historical studies, Wood argues that a text's context need not be identified within the confines of intellectual history, but that a relevant context can also be social history. This would mean paying attention to issues like housing, employment issues, and schools, which are central in the case of David Simon's productions.

While political treatises, literary works, or television serials may treat different issues at an advanced level of abstraction, Wood argues that the background for such abstract discussions is partially founded in the, maybe rather pedestrian, observations a writer makes and the grievances she has with what she sees. This connects to how social history is interested in writing history-from-below and in examining the living conditions of the masses (Knudsen 2004). In this sense, the Skinnerian position — with Wood's broadened scope — stresses both the discursive and the *social* context in which a text is produced.

During his years as a crime reporter at *The Baltimore Sun*, Simon engaged with a social reality that would be an inspiration for both *The Corner* and *The Wire*. In 1995, he wrote the article "The Metal Men" that chronicles how a few drug addicts went through vacant houses in Baltimore in order to collect scrap metal to sell to get money for drugs (Simon 1995). Elements of this story resemble both Gary McCullough (T.K. Carter) of *The Corner* and *The Wire*'s Bubbles' (Andre Royo) metal scavenging. Both serials reference this social-historical reality very directly. In line with the mode of realism that it embraces so strongly, *The Wire* insists that it points to something outside of itself. It points to a social, non-textual reality, and this fact motivates that we understand Simon's serials in this social context.

Ed Burns and David Simon's journalistic book *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood* portrayed the lives of people in an impoverished urban area, and reading this account of their experiences is a poignant reminder of

13 George Pelecanos was the co-creator of *The Deuce*.

14 See Lavik 2014 for more on *The Wire*'s relationship with realism.

the importance of distinguishing between whether we examine television serials in their *discursive* contexts or their *social* contexts. To view it in this way, “The Metal Men” is testament to what Simon experienced in the 1990s as a reporter and, to quote Skinner, this slice of “political life itself” sets a problem for Simon and thus causes a “certain range of issues to appear problematic, and a corresponding range of questions to become the leading subjects of debate.” So though television scholar Erlend Lavik shows how *The Wire* makes important intertextual references to the western genre (Lavik 2012: 64), which can open up for a (Skinnerian) understanding of *The Wire*’s engagement with American culture through intertextualist analysis, the importance of the social-historical reality of U.S. urban issues opens for an understanding of the real world issues that Simon’s serials tackle.

## 6. SKINNER AND POPULAR MEDIA

In recent years, literary theorist Rita Felski has argued that critical approaches to literary and media texts have come to overemphasize the hermeneutics of suspicion. This reading protocol looks with suspicion at art works in order to counter their untoward cultural significance: “The critic probes for meanings inaccessible to authors as well as ordinary readers, and exposes the text’s complicity in social conditions that it seeks to deny or disavow” (Felski 2011: 574). Skinner’s reading protocol runs counter to this tradition. Skinner’s approach is one that reads *with* the grain and not *against* the grain of the text as is the case with the hermeneutics of suspicion. However, Felski has also taken issue with contextualization itself, claiming that “context [...] will invariably trump the claims of the individual text, knowing it far better than it can ever know itself” (Felski 2011: 574).

Felski is surely right in pointing out how contextualization always entails some form of reductionism. Because when you choose to see a text in one specific context, you are also highlighting some of the elements in the text that speak to that context. Had you chosen another context for your contextualist reading you would be highlighting other textual elements of the text you are interested in examining. But while Felski is critical both of the hermeneutics of suspicion as well as being critical of contextualization, Skinner’s approach is fruitful for readings that do not emphasize suspicious reading but which do put a premium on contextualization. Contextualization, as I have outlined it here, does not claim to know a text “far better than it can ever know itself.”

That is not what contextualization entails in the Skinnerian tradition, and I believe that Skinner’s approach is eminently suitable for scholars who want to maintain a contextualist interest but who do not want to emphasize suspicious styles of interpretation.

For those scholars who study the relationship between audiovisual texts and their contexts much inspiration is to be gained from Skinner’s style of intellectual history. A productive part of Skinner’s work is that it both leaves room for close reading and the consideration of textual minutiae, while also qualifying *how* texts can be said to engage with their contexts. It is thus open to considering both what we may call the aesthetic aspects of a text at the same time that it puts a premium on uncovering its politics in an effort to establish a text’s historical identity.

My outline of Skinner’s ideas here focuses on the way texts engage with social-historical issues like gentrification (*Treme*) and social marginalization (*The Wire*). I have shown how this approach’s focus on establishing texts’ historical identity is relevant for studying popular media texts and I have outlined some of the issues that require attention in such contextualist approaches. But there may even be perspectives to glean for scholars with a greater interest in texts’ aesthetic identity.

Lavik argues that one of *The Wire*’s accomplishments lies in how dialogic — in a Bakhtinian sense — the series is, especially compared to many other American television series (Lavik 2014: 152-174). *The Wire*’s way of depicting the American city gives voice to different and contradictory points of view. Season three gives voice to both Major Howard ‘Bunny’ (Robert Wisdom) Colvin’s and the Deacon’s (Melvin Williams) distinctly different takes on Colvin’s attempt to establish Hamsterdam. Though *The Wire* in general showcases some of the potential positive aspects the Hamsterdam project, the episode “Back Burners” (*The Wire*, 3.07) shows Bubbles going through this area at night where we see the troubling aspects of concentrating many social ills in a small area.

*The Wire* thus does not only ‘make a case for’ the Hamsterdam project. Such a Bakhtinian focus on the aesthetic identity of a text may also be approached from a Skinnerian angle: which texts is it that *The Wire* implicitly criticizes when it shows a social world where we do not only see a crime committed and the perpetrator caught and put before a judge? What monologic texts is it that *The Wire* implicitly criticizes through its dialogic form? Choosing to focus on either a text’s historical identity or its aesthetic identity is not a matter of

one over the other but rather of which perspective takes prominence.

For these many reasons, I believe that Skinner's ideas offer a relevant, suitable, and nuanced approach for studying how politically engaged works of popular media engage with their ideational and societal contexts. I therefore believe that it will prove fruitful to incorporate Skinnerian textual analysis into the toolbox of studying popular media texts.

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# THE DAY MAY COME WHEN YOU WON'T BE QUALITY TV— *THE WALKING DEAD* AND VIEWER ENGAGEMENT

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## KEYWORDS

Quality TV; viewer engagement; *The Walking Dead*;  
aesthetics; narration.

## ABSTRACT

*The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010-) suffered its steepest episode-to-episode decline in viewership following its season seven premiere in October 2016. This article argues that *The Walking Dead*'s decline in viewership is partially due to the show's failure to adhere to viewer expectations

of quality TV. Referring to previous studies on quality TV (Cardwell 2007, Mittell 2006), this article defines some of the key textual signifiers of this meta-genre (aesthetics, narration, complex characters) and discusses them in relation to viewer engagement. After establishing that viewers turn to quality TV for a "cognitively and affectively challenging entertainment experience" (Schlütz 2016a), the article investigates to what extent *The Walking Dead* meets viewer expectations of quality TV. Through examining the online discourse on *The Walking Dead* in relation to a close-textual analysis of the programme, this article finds that later episodes of *The Walking Dead* have caused frustration among many viewers since they do not provide them with the types of cognitive and affective engagement they expect from quality TV.



*The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010-2022) suffered its steepest episode-to-episode decline in viewership following its season seven premiere in October 2016. Between the airing of episodes 7.01 and 7.02, the US viewership of the hit zombie drama dropped from 17 to 12.5 million viewers<sup>1</sup>. In 2016, a heated debate regarding the show's quality had already been ongoing for years (Bishop and Statt 2016a, Stuever 2016). However, following the season seven premiere, which featured the gruesome deaths of two beloved characters, this debate further escalated. Not only did the steep decline in viewership indicate that many viewers had reached their limit, but the popular culture blog *The Verge* (Bishop and Statt 2016b) decided to stop covering the show and other media outlets such as *The Guardian* (Holland 2016) and *Collider* (Cotter 2016) actively encouraged viewers to stop watching *The Walking Dead*. Following its critically-acclaimed first season, the critical reception of *The Walking Dead* has turned increasingly negative over the course of its ten-season run. In contrast, the viewer reception has been more mixed. There are those viewers who side with critics who argue that *The Walking Dead* has turned 'bad', but there are also viewers who still defend the show. In the context of this article, it is particularly noteworthy that, in their negative reviews of *The Walking Dead*, viewers often refer to the programme's lack of quality. For example, one viewer summarises their decision to quit *The Walking Dead* as follows:

This show is written by talentless morons who have taken original printed source material and turned it into a blue-chip soap opera, replete with terrible acting, one-dimensional characters and a meandering, directionless narrative that looks like it's been developed by a group of drunk undergraduate students.<sup>2</sup>

This negative viewer review of *The Walking Dead* suggests that a programme's perceived level of quality is a key component of how viewers engage with contemporary television drama. While a number of studies (Mittell 2015, Schlütz 2016a) have already investigated quality TV, there has not been much

research undertaken that explores if a programme, once it has been designated quality TV, can ever lose this status and what this potential loss of status might mean for viewer engagement. This article argues that *The Walking Dead*'s inability to adhere to viewer expectations of quality TV is a crucial factor in the increasingly negative reception of the show.

After discussing some of the key characteristics of quality TV (e.g. aesthetics, narration, characters), this article contrasts a textual analysis of *The Walking Dead*'s pilot episode with a textual analysis of the show's season seven premiere and discusses the findings of these analyses in the context of the episodes' reception. I want to specify that I am not simply arguing that *The Walking Dead* has turned into 'bad' television—although on a subjective level I tend to agree with this statement. Instead, this article regards quality TV as a meta-genre (Cardwell 2005, Schlütz 2016a) with distinct textual characteristics and examines what repercussions it has for viewer engagement if a programme does not live up to the expectations that are tied to this categorisation. By providing new insights into how viewers react if a quality TV drama fails to equip viewers with the added symbolic value that the consumption of quality TV promises, this article contributes to the larger scholarly discourse on quality TV and social distinction (Schlütz et al. 2018).

## 1. METHODOLOGY

This article employs a methodological approach that combines a number of qualitative (e.g. textual analysis) and quantitative (e.g. netnography) research methods. The argument this article makes is primarily based on theoretical approaches to quality TV, a close-textual analysis of *The Walking Dead*, and an analysis of viewer responses to the show. The two episodes that are discussed at length in this article have primarily been chosen because they exemplify how the reception of *The Walking Dead* has changed over the years. By collecting and analysing online reactions to *The Walking Dead*, this article follows a methodological approach that Kozinets (2015) has defined as "netnography". Similar to methodological approaches from sociology and anthropology, netnography aims to study culture and community, but does so within an online environment (Kozinets 2015: 6). Netnography exists somewhere between big data analysis and the close readings of discourse analysis (Kozinets 2015: 4), but is less obtrusive than more traditional audience research methods (e.g. personal interview, surveys). It should be noted that this article only considers a limited

1 "The Walking Dead: Season Seven Ratings." *TV Series Finale*, 4 April 2017. <https://tvseriesfinale.com/tv-show/walking-dead-season-seven-ratings/> (last accessed 28-02-21).

2 "It bites: why I'm giving up on The Walking Dead." *The Guardian*, 29 November 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2016/nov/29/the-walking-dead-why-im-giving-up-on-the-zombie-apocalypse> (last accessed 11-02-21).



number of viewer responses—most of which have been gathered on popular culture websites, television blogs, and social media platforms. However, the viewer responses that are cited in this article are not to be regarded as empirical evidence for *The Walking Dead's* decline in quality. Rather, they are meant to underline that there is a correlation between *The Walking Dead's* increasingly negative reception and the show's inability to meet viewer expectations of quality TV. It should also be noted that examining the reception of *The Walking Dead* in relation to its status as quality TV is only one potential way to theorise viewer engagement with this programme. As previous studies have shown, the show's comic-book origins and its status as a transmedia storytelling (Hassler-Forest 2014), as well as its depiction of race (Rendell 2019) are other key factors of *The Walking Dead's* reception.

## 2. QUALITY TELEVISION AND VIEWER ENGAGEMENT

Over the course of the last two decades, American television dramas such as *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999–2007), *The Wire* (HBO, 2002–2008) and *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008–2013) have generated substantial scholarly attention. These dramas have become synonymous with a type of programme that scholars refer to as “quality television” (McCabe and Akass 2007). In the context of academia, the term quality TV does not necessarily indicate whether a programme is ‘good’ or ‘bad’, but has become a generic category that refers to a wide range of programmes that share distinct textual and extra-textual traits (Cardwell 2007). Paradoxically, this means that quality TV can be either good or bad just as ordinary TV can be good or bad (Brundson 1990). The term quality TV was first coined in the mid-1970s by US television critics who used it to refer to dramas such as *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981–1987) and *St. Elsewhere* (NBC, 1982–1988). However, initial definitions of quality TV were somewhat elusive—“people just seemed to know it when they saw it” (Thompson 1996: 12). Within academia, it was primarily established that quality TV appeals to a sophisticated audience and operates differently than other programmes with regard to its form and content (Feuer 1984, Schlütz 2016a: 97, Thompson 1996). In the post-network era (Lotz 2014), which saw the premieres of various high-profile dramas that represented a new type of quality TV, the term was re-evaluated. Schlütz (2016a) offers a concise definition of what quality TV means in the “third golden age of television” (Martin 2013: 9) that we currently live in:

Serial quality TV is complex in terms of storytelling, cast, narrative ambiguity, and intertextuality. Due to realistic execution, controversial subjects, and ambiguous characters quality series appear authentic. Moreover, they stand out because of a signature style composed of high production values, distinctive visual style, and techniques fostering reflexivity. Quality TV addresses a special, highly autonomous audience segment. As a meta-genre it supports selection, frames comprehension, and channels interpretation. Quality serial television offers a cognitively and affectively challenging entertainment experience with added symbolic value (Schlütz 2016a: 101).

This definition highlights the inherent complexity of quality TV and makes clear that this quality TV can be studied from various perspectives (see Martin 2013, Mittell 2015, Lotz 2014, Scott 2013). In contrast to existing studies on quality TV, this article is primarily interested in exploring the ways in which a quality TV programme can fail to provide its viewers with “cognitively and affectively challenging entertainment experience” (Schlütz 2016a: 101) and how this failure can impact the symbolic added that quality TV affords to its viewers (Bourdieu 1985: 728–31, Newman and Levine 2012, Schlütz et al. 2018)

One of the principal ways in which quality TV engages its viewers on a cognitive level is its storytelling. Many quality TV dramas have adopted a storytelling mode that Mittell (2006, 2015) defines as “narrative complexity”. This storytelling mode, which can be regarded as a merger between episodic and serial narration (Mittell 2015: 18), pushes the operational aesthetic of the narration to the foreground. Taking their inspiration from “mind-game” (Elsaesser 2009) films, “narratively complex programs invite temporary disorientation and confusion, allowing viewers to build up their comprehension skills through long-term viewing and active engagement” (Mittell 2006: 37). The active engagement required by quality TV programmes is regarded as a source of pleasure for the audience. For example, Schlütz (2016b: 200) compares the pleasure that viewers gain from deciphering the narrative of a complex quality TV drama with the thrill of discovery offered by other forms of intellectual entertainment such as chess, Sudoku, or crossword puzzles. Similarly, Mittell identifies “the desire to be both actively engaged in the story and successfully surprised through storytelling manipulations” (2006: 38) as one of the key appeals of complex

television narratives. At the same time, deciphering a complex television narrative is also an investment that, at some point, has to lead to a return in the form of a preferred or satisfying narrative outcome—otherwise viewers might lose interest (Schlütz 2016b: 201, Tan 1996: 100). Many contemporary quality TV dramas have embraced narrative complexity (e.g. *Mad Men*, AMC, 2007-2015; *Westworld*, HBO, 2016-; *Twin Peaks: The Return*, Showtime, 2017). Thus, this storytelling mode does not only function as a distinct source of pleasure for the audience, but has become one of the main textual markers of quality TV.

Quality TV programmes are further defined by a distinct audio-visual style that emphasises the visual “more than what is assumed to be typical for television” (Mills 2013: 58). While the “signature style” (Schlütz 2016a: 103) of quality TV has been somewhat shaped by the aesthetics of various critically-acclaimed HBO dramas (e.g. *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Deadwood*) that premiered during the post-network era, it is also the result an evolution of the television production process (Nelson 1997: 11). Cardwell defines the “signature style” (Schlütz 2016a: 103) of quality TV as follows:

American quality television programmes tend to exhibit high production values, naturalistic performance styles, recognised and esteemed actors, a sense of visual style created through careful, even innovative camerawork and editing, and a sense of aural style created through the judicious use of appropriate, even original music (Cardwell 2007: 26).

This definition makes clear that the aesthetics of quality TV do not simply translate to high production values or spectacular imagery. Instead, they might be best thought of as complex. For example, Gorton (2009) has shown that the editing and sound design of a quality TV programme can influence the viewer's emotional engagement significantly—for example, a scene that is completely devoid of sound may encourage viewers to “enter in [their] own dialogue” (Gorton 2009: 118). Thus, the signature style of quality TV encourages affective engagement, but it also leaves viewers space to navigate what their emotional response might look like. Cardwell (2005) similarly indicates that the audio-visual style of quality TV not always works towards a moment of intense emotion. Instead, “there is a continual ‘pulling back’ from a clearly defined emotional release” (Cardwell 2005: 184). These studies suggest that quality TV dramas are informed by a sense of aesthetic complexity that is atypical for other

melodramatic forms since, instead of encouraging a specific emotional response, they set the parameters for various potential affective responses to occur. At this point, it might be necessary to clarify that I am not attempting to devalue melodrama as a mode of storytelling and agree with studies (Mittell 2015) which argue that quality TV dramas are essentially melodramas. As such, one of their main goals is to elicit affective responses in the viewer that will provide them with a sense of emotional catharsis. This means what primarily distinguishes quality TV dramas from other melodramatic television formats (e.g. soap opera, reality TV) is *how* they elicit emotional responses in the audience. For example, the aesthetics (e.g., editing, framing, cinematography) of reality TV are often arranged to elicit specific emotions (e.g. happiness, sadness) whereas quality TV dramas are characterised by a sense of aesthetic complexity that leaves viewers with more room to formulate their own affective responses.

In addition to its complex storytelling and distinct style, quality TV has become known for its “complex” (Mittell 2015: 118) characters—typically meaning those who exist in a moral grey area. Of course, morally-ambiguous characters were not invented by quality TV, however, a large number of quality TV dramas (e.g. *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Breaking Bad*) are either led by antihero protagonists or prominently feature morally-ambiguous characters. In contrast to characters who act ‘good’ (e.g. traditional heroes), which makes it easy to sympathise with them, morally-ambiguous characters pose a challenge to the audience when it comes to viewer engagement. Of course, some viewers might still sympathise with a character like Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini, *The Sopranos*) despite his amoral behaviour (Carroll 2004, Smith 2011), but ultimately our relationship with morally ambiguous television characters might be best defined as fascination or interest (Smith 2011, Schlütz 2016b: 207). Vaage (2015: 6) regards narrative alignment, which refers to how closely a narrative is channelled through or aligned with a character (Smith 1995), as the key factor in the audience's relationship with antiheroes or villainous characters. Alignment does not automatically lead to sympathy (Vaage 2015: 6), but it can add to our fascination with a character. For example, learning more about the motivations of a morally flawed character might increase our interest in that character, but it still does not require us to sympathise with her (Mittell 2015: 163). Ultimately then, while viewers might not be able to ‘solve’ their engagement with a morally ambiguous character, it provides the sort of pleasurable cognitive and affective challenge that viewers expect from quality TV.

### 3. DAYS GONE BYE: THE WALKING DEAD AS QUALITY TV

*The Walking Dead* first premiered on AMC in October of 2010. At the time, the basic cable network AMC was in the midst of re-branding itself as a quality TV network similar to HBO. *Breaking Bad* and *Mad Men*, which went on to become two of the most critically acclaimed quality television dramas of all time, were integral to AMC's effort to re-brand itself as a quality TV network (Hassler-Forest 2014). When it first premiered, *The Walking Dead* was positioned as another quality TV drama that followed in the footsteps of AMC's previous successes. *The Walking Dead* is adapted from Robert Kirkman's popular comic-book series of the same name. Both the comic book and television programme are centred around sheriff Rick Grimes and follow a group of people who, after a viral outbreak has turned a large part of the population into zombies, struggle for survival. The popularity of *The Walking Dead* comics meant that AMC could rely on a built-in fan base, but it also meant that the producers had to meet the expectations of genre fans and

quality TV viewers. The marketing of the show's first season emphasises AMC's aim to establish the show as quality genre TV. The producers signalled their commitment to quality by hiring Frank Darabont as a showrunner. As the director of the critically acclaimed Stephen King adaptations *The Green Mile* (1999), *The Mist* (2007), and *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), which still maintains the all-time highest user rating on the Internet Movie Database<sup>3</sup>, Darabont had already proven his ability to elevate source material that originates from the horror genre. Admittedly, Darabont adapted some of King's most well-received literary works. Yet these works were still associated with a genre that is commonly regarded as low-brow. During the post-network era, so-called 'showrunners', who typically take on the role of head writer, have become crucial extra-textual markers for quality. For example, David Chase (*The Sopranos*), Damon Lindelof (*Lost*, ABC, 2004-2010; *The Leftovers*, HBO, 2014-2017; *Watchmen*, HBO, 2019), and Phoebe Waller-Bridge (*Fleabag*, BBC, 2016-2019;

3 "The Shawshank Redemption (1994)—User Reviews." *IMDb*. [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0111161/?ref\\_=nv\\_sr\\_srsrg\\_0](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0111161/?ref_=nv_sr_srsrg_0) (last accessed 14-05-21).



FIG. 1. THE FIRST SHOT OF RICK GRIMES IN THE PILOT EPISODE OF *THE WALKING DEAD*. IMAGE CREDIT: AMC.





FIG. 2. RICK FEELS CONFLICTED AS HE IS ABOUT TO SHOOT THE ZOMBIE GIRL AT THE BEGINNING OF “DAYS GONE BYE”. IMAGE CREDIT: AMC.

*Killing Eve*, BBC America, 2018-) stand for the single artistic vision behind the programmes they are associated with while also raising their cultural value (Hassler-Forest 2014: 95-96, Pearson 2007: 243). In the context of this article, the hiring of Darabont is primarily noteworthy because it oriented *The Walking Dead* within the tradition of author-led quality TV.

Perhaps more than any other episode of the show, the pilot, which became AMC's highest-watched premiere at the time<sup>4</sup>, cemented *The Walking Dead's* quality TV ambitions on an aesthetic, narrative, and character level. “Days Gone Bye” (1.01) begins with an establishing shot of two crossroads in a rural area that is enclosed by a forest. From the distance, a police car approaches as the camera pans over to reveal another car that has been flipped upside-down. The camera slowly zooms out as the patrol car parks in the foreground next to a large truck that is lying sideways next to the road. The first cut occurs when a police officer, whom we later in the episode learn to be the show's main protagonist Rick

4 “AMC Original Series ‘The Walking Dead’ Earns Highest 18-49 Delivery for Any Cable Series Premiere for 2010.” *The Futon Critic*, 1 November 2010. <http://www.thefutoncritic.com/ratings/2010/11/01/amc-original-series-the-walking-dead-garners-highest-18-49-delivery-for-any-cable-series-premiere-for-2010-424510/20101101amc01/> (last accessed 28-02-21).

Grimes (Andrew Lincoln), exits his car and slowly walks past the wreckage with a gasoline canister in his hand.

Aside from Rick's approaching car and the chirping of birds, the scene is completely devoid of diegetic sound. Rick makes his way down a hill and eventually arrives at a gas station, but is greeted by a sign that reads “No Gas”. As Rick is about to turn back, the sound of slow, dragging footsteps begins to mix in with the diegetic noises of wind, birds, and crickets. Rick leans down next to the car to locate where the footsteps are coming from. Here, the episode cuts to Rick's POV, showing us a pair of feet in dirty bunny slippers walking slowly across the concrete. Rick looks on as the person kneels down and picks up a white teddy bear from the road. The editing of the sequence now slowly accelerates, and the scene switches back and forth between shots of Rick and the person holding the teddy bear—a little girl in a bathrobe

with long blonde hair (Addy Miller) who has her back turned to the camera. Eventually, the little girl turns to the camera and is revealed to be a zombie with a bloody, mangled face. Rick's facial expression changes from concern to shock as the zombie girl begins to run towards him. Rick nervously pulls his gun from his holster and shoots the zombie in the head. At this point, the sequence briefly switches to slow motion while the—now lifeless—body of the zombie girl and the teddy bear she was still holding drop to the ground and blood gushes out of the gunshot wound on her forehead. The sequence ends with a close-up of Rick, visibly shaken, trembling as he lowers his gun, his eyes shifting frantically.

The opening sequence of “Days Gone Bye” ultimately does not shy away from rendering Rick's killing of the zombie girl in all of its gory detail, but the sequence has not been designed as a tense or thrilling horror set-piece—thus, it establishes the show as quality TV while simultaneously adhering to *The Walking Dead's* genre roots. The slow editing, the absence of music, the sparse use of diegetic sound, and the frequent close-ups of Rick's concerned face create a contemplative and melancholic atmosphere. The sequence's deliberate use of sound is undeniably striking and invites the sort of aesthetic appreciation that is commonly associated with qual-

ity TV. More specifically, the sequence's sparse use of sound means that every sound we do hear is accentuated—from the chirping of crickets to the gurgling noises of the zombie, and the echoing sound of a gunshot. The sequence's frequent use of extended shots, the limited number of cuts, and the use of handheld camera are evocative of auteur-driven art cinema and invite viewers to take pleasure in the episode's aesthetic sophistication. When looking at reviews of the episode, it becomes clear that the episode's stylistic flourishes did not go unnoticed. For example, one viewer (Pretentiouslliterate) remarks that they were “flooded by the pilot's artistry” whereas another viewer (hanshotfirst1138) notes that it was “one of the most cinematic pieces of TV [they'd] ever seen” (comments to Murray 2017). The discussed sequence does feature an emotional climax (Gorton 2009), namely Rick's shooting of the zombie, but it leaves this act of violence open for interpretation. A likely affective response to the zombie child's death might be shock or disgust, but “Days Gone Bye” complicates such a response by cutting to a lingering medium close-up of Rick, giving viewers time to contemplate their own feelings about Rick's actions.

The pre-credit sequence of the episode is a cold open—a narrative teaser that is designed to peak the audience's interest (Coulthard 2010, Logan 2013). One key aspect of cold opens is that they are deliberately disorienting in order to engage viewers on a cognitive level. In this particular case, viewers are thrown right into *The Walking Dead's* narrative world and must quickly catch up with the show. It initially seems as if Rick is a policeman investigating a traffic accident in a rural area, but we quickly learn that the situation is more serious. One of our first clues is the fact that Rick is carrying a gasoline canister, prompting us to ask why he would need gas so desperately that he would carry an empty canister with him. Of course, the sequence ultimately reveals that Rick is moving through a post-apocalyptic world in which the dead have come back to life, but it does so by slowly adding narrative puzzle pieces (e.g. wrecked cars, dead bodies, abandoned gas station, zombie girl) that the viewer must piece together.

The cold open is a good example of how “Days Gone Bye” uses narrative complexity on micro-level, but the episode also employs narrative complexity on a macro-level. The plot of “Days Gone Bye” is not complex, but the arrangement of its narrative information is. From the cold open, which is followed by the opening credits, the episode cuts to a scene in which Rick and his partner Shane (Jon Bernthal) eat together in their patrol car while casually talking about their families. The placement of this scene within the episode is

disorienting—the tone and content signal that it must have taken place before the zombie outbreak, but there are no temporal markers to orient viewers. In a later sequence, the episode again deliberately disorients viewers, who learn at the same time as Rick that the zombie outbreak must have occurred while he was in a coma. We never learn how long Rick has been in a coma; we only get a sense of how much time has passed in the form of a time-lapse shot of a flower bouquet decaying on the table next to Rick's hospital bed. After this, the plot of the episode unfolds mostly in linear fashion, with Rick searching for his family in Atlanta and the events of the cold open finally falling into place. When Rick's patrol car runs out of gas, the episode cuts to a shot of him walking towards a farmhouse with the same gas canister in his hand that appears in the episode's cold open. The exact timeline of events remains unclear, but this shot indicates that Rick's encounter with the zombie must have occurred somewhere around the same time. As is typical for the first episode of a serialised story, the pilot poses more questions than it answers. Yet it also offers many of the narrative pleasures that are distinct for quality TV, mainly by pushing the operational aesthetics of the narration to the foreground. The episode's frequent time jumps encourage viewers to not only relate to the story that is being told, but also to marvel at *how* it is told (Mittell 2006: 36). Furthermore, by the end of the episode, viewers have been given enough information to re-arrange the events of this episode chronologically which provides them with the satisfaction of deciphering a narrative puzzle.

In contrast to other quality TV dramas, *The Walking Dead* does not feature an antihero protagonist. Instead, “Days Gone Bye” introduces Rick Grimes as an honourable family man, even going so far as to have Morgan (Lennie James), another survivor, refer to Rick as “a good man”. Essentially, Rick represents a traditional hero figure, but the episode introduces the sort of character-based moral complexity that viewers expect from quality TV by suggesting that he might struggle to hold on to his humanity as the apocalypse progresses. The scene that perhaps best summarises the sort of moral challenges that Rick will have to overcome over the course of the series occurs about three-quarters into the pilot episode. As he is preparing to leave for Atlanta to search for his family, Rick encounters a legless female zombie. For a moment, Rick watches on, then he tells her he is sorry that “this” has happened to her and kills her out of mercy. Rick's mercy killing of the female zombie is in line with the episode's depiction of him as an honourable person, but it also adds a layer of complexity to his characterisation since it indicates



FIG. 3. AFTER KILLING ABRAHAM, NEGAN DECIDES THAT GLENN WILL BE HIS NEXT VICTIM. IMAGE CREDIT: GENE PAGE/AMC.

that Rick might have to adjust his conception of what is considered morally 'good' behaviour over the course of the series. The reception of this episode underlines that viewers interpreted this scene as an indicator of the show's quality and appreciated the moral complexity it introduced to the show's universe. For example, viewers described the scene as "powerful" (El Pato), praised it for its ability to elicit "sympathy for the dead" (I and 1), and expressed hopes that Rick's empathy for the zombies would become a central theme of the show (happy jack)<sup>5</sup>.

#### 4. THE DAY MAY COME WHERE YOU WON'T BE...QUALITY TV

With its critically acclaimed pilot episode, *The Walking Dead* immediately established itself as a quality genre drama. However, as early as season two, the show began to be criticised for its gratuitous depictions of violence, repetitive and predictable plotting, and one-dimensional characters. In addition, during the production of season two, AMC fired Frank Darabont over disputes of the show's production budget that later turned into a lengthy lawsuit (Masters 2011). Darabont's departure has contributed to the public perception of *The*

*Walking Dead's* decline in quality. As one reviewer (Mr. Pryce) states: "Darabont's vision was what was real and vital about the show, and it's been coasting on the fumes of his ideas ever since. He managed to imbue the show with some emotion and intelligence" (comment to Murray 2017). The fact that, at the time of this writing, the show has gone through four different showrunners (Frank Darabont, Glen Mazzara, Scott Gimple, Angela Kang) only adds to the impression that *The Walking Dead* does not fit in with the popular conception of quality TV as the product of a singular authorial vision.

Season seven of *The Walking Dead* picks up right where season six left off: a group of survivors, led by Rick, has been caught by a hostile group who call themselves the Saviors. They are led by the villainous but charismatic Negan (Jeffrey Dean Morgan), who announces that Rick and his friends must now answer to him. With Rick and his group bound and on their knees in a circle around him, Negan announces that he will use his barbed-wire-wrapped baseball-bat, "Lucille", to kill one group member as punishment for causing problems for the Saviors in past confrontations. "The Day Will Come When You Won't Be" (7.01) is light on plot, instead focusing on the relationship between Rick and Negan, and the question of who Negan will kill. The episode begins with an extended sequence in which Negan takes Rick in an RV to a remote location and plays a sadistic game with him to assert his dominance. This aesthetic arrangement of this sequence, which

5 Comments to Pierce 2010.



one viewer (Mini Me) describes as “a gimmicky prelude”<sup>6</sup> to the episode’s two major character deaths, already provides a stark contrast to the stylistic integrity of the show’s pilot. Whereas “Days Gone Bye” frequently provides viewers with the space to navigate their own feelings about Rick and his actions, “The Day Will Come When You Won’t Be” uses an abundance of audio-visual markers (e.g. melancholy string music, black and white still images) to highlight Rick’s hopelessness, thus depriving the sequence of all subtlety.

The episode eventually cuts from Rick lying in despair on the top of the RV to a flashback sequence that reveals that Negan has used “Lucille” to kill Abraham (Michael Cudlitz) and Glenn (Steven Yeun), two of the series’ main characters. Abraham’s death is already gratuitously violent, but the subsequent killing of Glenn, a fan-favourite character who has been on the show since episode two, is even more extreme: in gory detail we see Glenn’s skull cave in and his left eye pop out as Negan bludgeons his head. With blood dripping down his face, Glenn, who is barely able to speak as a result of his head injury, professes his love for his wife Maggie (Lauren Cohan). It then cuts to a medium-wide shot of Negan repeatedly beating Glenn as an obscene amount of blood sprays everywhere while the noises of the baseball-bat hitting Glenn’s flesh fill the soundtrack. This is interspersed with close-up reaction shots of Rick and other main characters, who are either crying or watching on in horror.

While many viewers were simply shocked by the extreme violence that is on display in this scene, other viewers were offended by the depiction of Glenn and Abraham’s death because they regarded it as an indicator of the show’s decline in quality. As one viewer (anniemar 2016) states: “I am capable of understanding the weight of the deaths without needing to see their brains and skulls bashed in, without the emotional manipulation throughout the entire episode” (comment to Handlen 2016).

The episode ends with a sequence in which, after Negan and the Savivors have left, Rick’s group comes together to carry away what is left of their dead friends’ bodies. This sequence is accompanied by melancholy piano music and a booming voiceover from Negan, who explains that, in the post-apocalyptic world of *The Walking Dead*, no one gets to “grow old together” or enjoy “Sunday dinners” with their family anymore. This is followed by a brightly lit dream sequence



FIG. 4. MAGGIE REACTS TO THE BRUTAL MURDER OF GLENN. IMAGE CREDIT: GENE PAGE/AMC.

in which all of the main characters—including Abraham and Glenn—are enjoying a family dinner together outside. The camera pans across the table in slow motion and ends on the smiling faces of Abraham and Glenn, the latter of which is holding his soon-to-be born baby in his lap.

This scene is emblematic for how the season seven premiere employs an abundance of stylistic cues to dictate specific affective responses such as shock, disgust, and sadness in the viewer. Instead of giving viewers the chance to navigate their own feelings about the deaths of Abraham and Glenn, this scene guides the audience’s emotional engagement in a heavy-handed manner that clashed with viewer expectations of how the show should elicit an emotional response in the audience. For example, one viewer (TheStrange) notes that

6 <https://www.indiewire.com/2016/10/the-walking-dead-review-season-7-premiere-negan-killed-spoilers-recap-1201739537/comment-page-1/#comments> (last accessed 20-05-21).



FIG. 5. THE DREAM SEQUENCE IN WHICH RICK'S GROUP OF SURVIVORS ARE ENJOYING A SUNDAY DINNER TOGETHER. IMAGE CREDIT: GENE PAGE/AMC.

the Sunday dinner scene was “so cheesy that it should be a Cheetos flavour” while another viewer (gavin.greenwalt) states that the episode “exploited the worst of serial drama tricks and gags to juice up an empty shell” (comments to Bishop and Statt 2016).

Complex television narration invites viewers to “enjoy the machine’s results while also marvelling at how it works” (Mittell 2006: 38). “The Day Will Come When You Won’t Be” manages to surprise viewers, but does not inspire them to marvel at its storytelling since the episode’s reason for telling its story out of chronological order will be immediately obvious to most viewers. The plot of this episode is built around one central mystery: the identity of Negan’s victim. Thus, to keep viewers interested, the episode conceals this information for as long as possible. The fact that Negan ultimately does not kill one, but two main characters is a well-executed narrative surprise. However, this reveal functions more like a cliffhanger rather than providing viewers with the cognitively challenging experience they expect from quality TV. As one viewer (Rennbj4 2016) puts it: “The audience’s ‘payoff’ for this episode was seeing which beloved character would die.

What a lazy storytelling tactic, and a slap in the face to those watching”. While they are shocking, the deaths of Abraham and Glenn do not encourage viewers to reconsider past narrative events or marvel at *The Walking Dead’s* sophisticated storytelling since the plot had not been building up to their deaths. Unlike character deaths on other quality TV dramas (e.g. *Game of Thrones*), Glenn’s death was “not organic writing, or a slow-building tragedy, or even an attempt to mimic the painful suddenness of real life catastrophe” (Handlen 2016), but an obvious effort to shock viewers.

Aside from being disconnected from the programme’s serial narrative framework, the character deaths in this episode highlight *The Walking Dead’s* inability to create the sort of complex characters that viewers expect from quality TV. As *The AV Club’s* Zack Handlen puts it:

The only reason Glenn’s death meant more than Abraham’s is that Glenn has been around longer. He was a nice guy (and Steven Yeun did a fine job with the little he was given), but I’d be hard pressed to say much more about him. He earned our loyalty with longevity and not much else (Handlen 2016).

This reviewer argues that the aforementioned character deaths in the season seven premiere might primarily affect viewers as a result of their long-term engagement with these characters. Previous studies (Blanchet and Vaage 2012) confirm that viewers are more likely to sympathise with characters they have been aligned with for an extended period of time. However, feeling sympathetic towards a character is not the same as being fascinated by a character—which is what viewers expect from quality TV. As previously noted, moral ambiguity is a key ingredient for creating complex and fascinating television characters. And while *The Walking*

7 <https://www.vulture.com/2016/10/walking-dead-empty-violence.html#com-ments> (last accessed 21-05-21).



*Dead* has continually flirted with the idea of moral ambiguity, most of its main characters lack the moral complexities of characters such as Tony Soprano or Walter White. Although Rick Grimes is not an antihero, earlier episodes of *The Walking Dead* indicate that Rick's morals might become compromised over the course of the series. However, by the beginning of season seven, Rick's character development is primarily defined by stagnation and repetition. As critics and disgruntled viewers of *The Walking Dead* have noted, Rick seems to repeatedly go through the same cycle of character development: Rick's group moves to a new location, Rick is faced with a threat that seemingly requires him to act in a way that is morally questionable, but ultimately finds a solution that does not compromise his morals. The season seven premiere represents yet another beginning of this character cycles. Negan commands Rick to cut off his son's (Chandler Riggs) arm in order to protect the rest of the group, but stops him at the last second after he has been convinced that Rick would have followed through. Initially Rick promises to kill Negan for what he has done to him and the rest of the group, but after fighting the Saviors for two seasons, Rick changes his mind and imprisons Negan instead. This character cycle ensures that Rick's morals remain intact, which makes him a sympathetic, but not necessarily fascinating character.

Whereas Rick lacks the interior complexity of other protagonists of quality TV dramas as a result of his predictably honourable behaviour, the villains of *The Walking Dead* suffer from the opposite problem: their behaviour is frequently so morally reprehensible that it fails to inspire fascination. Hassler-Forest (2014) argues that the television version of the Governor (David Morrissey), one of *The Walking Dead's* major villains, offers a variation on "the more black-and-white morality surrounding the character in the comic" (2014: 102-3) to appeal to the tastes of quality TV audiences, but I am not convinced that the character possesses the allure or interior complexity of characters like Dexter Morgan (Michael C. Hall) or Tony Soprano. One of the main differences between these antihero characters and the villains of *The Walking Dead* is that they are the main protagonists of their respective programmes. Thus, the narrative of these programmes is closely aligned with them, which adds to the viewer's fascination with them. In addition, much of the pleasure of engaging with a complex character like Tony Soprano originates from his paradoxical nature: he is a liar, cheater, and a murderer, but he is also an anxious, vulnerable family man (Carroll 2004, Smith 2011), which makes it difficult for the audience to ever complete their moral evaluation of him. In other words,

Tony Soprano is a narrative enigma that cannot be solved. In contrast, although *The Walking Dead* tries to complicate the audience's relationship with the Governor and Negan by shedding light on their motivations ("Live Bait", 4.06; "What Comes After", 9.05), their moral transgressions always outweigh their redeeming qualities. Negan is introduced as a sadistic, totalitarian sociopath who takes pleasure in beating people to death with a barbed-wire baseball-bat, while the Governor keeps the heads of his zombie victims as trophies in jars in his basement, frequently murders and tortures innocent people (including his own henchmen), and at one point even attempts to sexually assault one of the show's main characters. The moral transgressions of these characters are so frequent and so extreme that it always remains easy for viewers to categorise them as 'evil,' even when *The Walking Dead* tries to complicate their immoral behaviour with backstories that reveal that these characters have not always been morally corrupt. As a result, engaging with these characters does not provide viewers with a cognitive challenge.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This article has argued that *The Walking Dead's* inability to adhere to viewer expectations of quality TV is a key factor in the increasingly negative reception of the show. My close-textual analysis of *The Walking Dead's* pilot episode showed that the series initially established itself as a quality TV drama through its stylistic integrity, its complex narration, and its multidimensional characters. In contrast, my analysis of the season seven premiere revealed a lack of complexity with regard to its aesthetics, narration, and characters that clashes with academic definitions of quality TV. Thus, this article has shown that the sense of betrayal or disappointment that many viewers felt towards later seasons of *The Walking Dead* is closely-related to its initial categorisation as quality TV. Thus, rather than reacting negatively to the show because they felt that it had turned from 'good' to 'bad' television, viewers reacted negatively to it because they did not recognise it as quality TV. As one viewer (Billybob) puts it:

It's like if you get a tub of ice cream, and it says on the label that it's cookie dough. So you take a scoop and enjoy the delicious cookie dough. But then the next time you eat it, it's nothing but vanilla—you can't find any lumps of delicious cookie dough. And you can still enjoy it, because vanilla ice cream is

fine enough I guess, but with every mouthful you find yourself thinking: But I wanted cookie dough (comment to Murray 2017).

It should be noted that just because its season seven premiere arguably does not adhere to academic definitions of quality TV, does not mean that *The Walking Dead* can never be quality TV again—in fact, seasons nine and ten of the show have had a much more positive reception than season seven. Part of this new-found appreciation of *The Walking Dead* seems to be the result of the show's efforts to meet viewer expectations of quality TV which, together with the findings of this article, indicates that the status of quality TV should perhaps not be assigned to a programme permanently. Without undertaking more empirical research on this subject, it would be too simplistic to argue that, if a programme does not meet viewer expectations of quality TV, viewers might lose interest in it. Yet the findings of this article still suggest that the symbolic value that the consumption of quality TV promises its viewers impacts their affective response towards contemporary television drama more directly than previously assumed.

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# CREATIVITY AND POWER: A SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL MULTIMODAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE CO-CONSTRUCTED MULTIMODAL CREATIVITY-POWER RELATION IN *HOUSE M.D.*

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## KEYWORDS

Creativity; power; SFMDA; medical drama; House.

## ABSTRACT

Multimodal creativity in popular culture is an area with great potentials for linguistics research, yet the number of analytical frameworks and demonstrations available is very limited. This article adapted a systemic functional multimodal discourse analysis approach to the investigation of the co-constructed multimodal creativity-and-power relation in the American TV medical 'dramedy' *House M.D.* Using a combination of Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) systemic functional theory, Bednarek's (2010)

multimodal analysis and Law's (2020a, 2020b, 2020d) analytical framework for creativity in multimodal texts (AFCMT), the dialogues and videos from two selected scenes were analysed. The analysis was conducted with respect to the interpersonal meanings (i.e., tenor values and speech function), *mise-en-scène*, nonverbal behaviour and performance at moments of co-constructed verbal repetition/pattern-forming creativity production. This study has found that power equality is construed verbally using pattern-forming creativity and that interpersonal meanings (denoted by tenor values consisting of power, contact and affective involvement) are construed nonverbally through spatial movement and various combinations of facial expression, head movement and body movement. It has also shown that hand/arm gestures and some *mise-en-scène* elements (e.g., set design, lighting, space, costume, or auditory soundtrack) are unlikely to be correlated to the production of pattern-forming creativity in *House M.D.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Creativity, in applied linguistics, is the manipulation of semi-otic resources to form or reform patterns and create meaning in the process (for a detailed description of creativity, see Carter 2004 and Law 2021). Multimodal creativity is a mode of creativity that is realised “through configuring and reconfiguring relationships between words, images, sound, and movement in original and recycled texts” (Maybin 2015: 37). This mode of creativity in TV drama (and other forms of popular media as a matter of fact) is a research scope that has often been overlooked by linguists. Some possible reasons include:

1. the traditional preference towards literary texts (Law 2015, Vo and Carter 2010);
2. the lack of interest in exploring non-literary texts and genres in popular culture (Law 2020a; Norton and Vanderheyden 2004; Pennycook 2007; Richardson 2010b);
3. the belief that spoken discourse as data is more ‘real’ than scripted telecinematic discourse (Bednarek 2010, Bignell and Lacey 2005);
4. the absence of agreement on a universal definition of creativity (Carter 2004, Sawyer 2006);
5. the paucity of (multimodal) frameworks for the analysis of linguistic creativity (Law 2019b, 2020d, 2021);
6. the scarcity of methodological guidelines and reliable statistical values (e.g., cut-off values) for automatic extraction of linguistic creativity from big data (Law 2019a, 2020c);
7. and as a result of all these, low impact from related publications, which leads to further decrease in related output.

Realising “the urgent need [...] for a treatment of fictional cinema and television from various linguistic perspectives” (Piazza et al. 2011: 2), several linguists have carried out various investigations on some well-known TV dramas. Chamber (2003) looks at the political discourse through close analysis of the dialogues in one particular episode of *The West Wing* (NBC, 1999-2006). Brock (2004) analyses humorous communications in the *Monty Python’s Flying Circus* (BBC1, 1969-1973; BBC1, 1974) scripts and suggests the viability of dual-script analysis. Buber (2006) performs a conversation analysis of dialogues of the American television drama *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004) to understand the characters’ relationship perceived by the audience. Quaglio (2008), using Biber’s multidimensional methodology (Biber 1988) and functional

analysis tools, compares a corpus of the American situation comedy *Friends* (NBC, 1994-2004) with the American English Conversation subcorpus of the Longman Grammar Corpus to determine the sitcom’s suitability as a teaching resource for the English as a second language learners. Bednarek (2010) provides a comprehensive analysis of the fictional television series *Gilmore Girls* (The WB/The CW, 2000-2007) and offers an insightful identity characterisation through corpus linguistics and multimodal discourse analysis in parallel. Richardson (2010b), Culpeper (2005) and Culpeper et al. (2003) discuss the impoliteness of Dr. Gregory House in *House M.D.* (Fox, 2004-2012) in qualitative terms. However, it is not until recent years that the study of creative language in TV drama makes a significant methodological advancement. Working with *House M.D.* dialogues and videos, Law (2018) establishes statistical cut-off values for the semi-automatic extraction of linguistic creativity using corpus linguistics methods (Law 2015, 2019a, 2020c) and proposes frameworks for the analysis of multimodal creativity based on a systemic functional linguistics (SFL) approach (Law 2019b, 2020b, 2020d, 2021).

By adopting a range of qualitative and quantitative approaches, these researchers have successfully produced significant linguistic insights. Their attempts have demonstrated that TV drama is not only a rich resource waiting to be explored, but also a unique form of “mediated” text rich in language and culture (Richardson 2010a: 177), or what literary agent Steven Axelrod considers as “the true heir to great literature” (Lavery 2012).

The present study aims to provide qualitative evidence to support Law’s (2021) quantitative findings of a possible negative correlation between co-constructed/pattern-forming creativity production and power difference among characters of *House M.D.* Using a systemic functional multimodal discourse analysis (SFMDA) approach, this study analyses the multimodal creativity in dialogues and videos to reveal the construal of power by actors/characters.

The multimodal creativity emphasised in this study occurs at the moments of repetition in co-constructed common talk (Tannen 2007, Carter 2004). In popular TV dramas such as *House M.D.*, the consistent use of verbal repetition by a character is a character trait – also known as a motif – and is central to the viewers’ familiarisation and identification of characters (Bordwell and Thompson 2008). Verbal repetition/co-constructed creative language belongs to the category of pattern-forming creativity, which is one of the two types of linguistic creativity in everyday common talk hypothesised by Carter (2004). Pattern-forming creativity refers to “creativity

via conformity to language rules rather than breaking them, creating convergence, symmetry and greater mutuality between interlocutors”, whereas pattern-reforming creativity is the “creativity by displacement of fixedness, reforming and re-shaping patterns of language” (Vo and Carter 2010: 303). The former type is the focus of this multimodal creativity study.

This article is structured as follows. Section two briefly introduces the TV drama *House M.D.* and provides reasons to support a linguistic study of the series. Section three describes the theories involved in the methods of analysis. Section four analyses two selected scenes using the proposed analytical frameworks and discusses findings. Finally, section five concludes this article by summarising the results and suggesting directions for future research.

## 2. THE ‘DRAMEDY’ *HOUSE M.D.*

*House M.D.* is an American television medical ‘dramedy’ aired on the FOX Network from 16 November 2004 to 21 May 2012 (Wikia n.d.). The eight-season-177-episode series was created by David Shore, who won the Primetime Emmy Award 2005’s Outstanding Writing for a Drama Series with *House M.D.*, and brought to life by British actor Hugh Laurie, whose performance in *House M.D.* has twice crowned him winner of the Golden Globe’s Best Performance by an Actor in a Television Series – Drama in 2006 and 2007<sup>1</sup>.

The series is based on the premise (which is also the title of the pilot): “Everybody lies” (Werts 2009), a motto inscribed deep in the mind of Dr. Gregory House (Hugh Laurie), a pain medication-dependent, arrogant, misanthropic, genius diagnostician who heads an innovative Department of Diagnostic Medicine at the fictional Princeton-Plainsboro Teaching Hospital (PPTH) in New Jersey (Jauhar 2005; Jensen 2005, 2007).

Unlike most TV medical dramas in English, *House M.D.* places much emphasis on the diagnostic process (Gonzalez 2009). Taking around “maybe one in twenty cases” a week (“Lockdown”, 6.17; Valentine 2011), House shows a strong resemblance to Sherlock Holmes in his reluctance to accept cases he considers uninteresting (Wild 2005)<sup>2</sup>. Such routine behaviour makes earning House’s acceptance of a case

a highly linguistically-creative negotiated process, ranging from the use of false pretences to striking deals with former university classmate/House’s boss/hospital administrator/Dean of Medicine, Dr. Lisa Cuddy (Lisa Edelstein). Supporting House is a team of “overqualified doctors” consisting of Dr. Robert Chase (Jesse Spencer), Dr. Allison Cameron (Jennifer Morrison), and the new hire Dr. Eric Foreman (Omar Epps) (1.01). House’s team is mainly responsible for giving House creative ideas to solve his medical puzzles (Gibson 2008) during differential diagnosis (also known as DDX in the series) and treating his patients with mysterious illnesses.

*House M.D.* is a TV drama that offers benefits in multiple dimensions. Firstly, it is written with creativity and language quality very much worth exploring and exploiting. Gale Tattersall, director of photography of *House M.D.* and the series’ twice-nominee of the American Society of Cinematographers Award’s Outstanding Achievement in Cinematography in Regular Series in 2007 and 2009<sup>3</sup>, commented in an interview (Olson 2010):

I think the writing is so superior to a lot of other television shows and also more to the point I think the scriptwriting is usually much more polished than anything you see in 70% of the movies these days, the writing is fantastic!... It has been a constant challenge and I absolutely loved it! (9:20-9:52).

Such comment is in line with Richardson’s (2010a: 194):

On the formal side, a possibility exists that dramatic dialogue, approached in the right way, might provide access to patterns of language behavior not (yet) discovered or fully explored in naturally occurring spontaneous interaction – might, indeed, be manifesting its creativity by expressively displaying those patterns. The fake banter exchanges in House [...] are an instance of this.

These comments from professional cinematographer and linguist suggest that *House M.D.* is indeed a valuable resource for the study of linguistic creativity.

Secondly, the main character Dr. Gregory House has been an inspiration for many publications from medical science (Sanders 2009; Holtz 2006, 2011), medical humanities (Goodier and Arrington 2007), philosophy (Jacoby and Irwin

1 “House M.D. - Awards - IMDb.” IMDb. [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0412142/awards?ref\\_=tt\\_awd](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0412142/awards?ref_=tt_awd) (last accessed 07-07-14).

2 See also: “House and Holmes parallels - Radio Times, January 2006.” *Radio Times*, January 2006. <http://web.archive.org/web/20100705103940/http://www.radiotimes.com/content/show-features/house/house-and-holmes-parallels/> (last accessed 07-07-14).

3 “House M.D. - Awards - IMDb.” IMDb. [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0412142/awards?ref\\_=tt\\_awd](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0412142/awards?ref_=tt_awd) (last accessed 07-07-14).

2008), psychology (Clyman 2009, Jamieson 2011, Cascio and Martin 2011, Whitbourne 2012, Li and Csikszentmihalyi 2014) and media studies (Jackman and Laurie 2010, Holtz 2011, Hockley and Gardner 2011), thereby playing a critical role in the construction of popular memory (Bignell and Lacey 2005) and in academia. This study of *House's* creativity adds to the body of knowledge of *House M.D.*, bridges the existing work on *House* from the aforementioned disciplines, and provides a key reference for future multimodal studies of creative language in telecinematic discourse.

Lastly, *House M.D.* is a unique creative instance in the modern television history of medical dramedy (Li and Csikszentmihalyi 2014) because it takes a completely different approach to conventional medical dramedies such as *ER* (1994-2009) and *Grey's Anatomy* (ABC, 2005-) by building the show around one single central character (*House M.D.*, "Swan Song", 8.22A). This provides unity, stability and longitudinality in the creativeness of its repertoire.

### 3. METHODS

Using the Creativity-In-Register Cube Framework (CIRCF) in a quantitative analysis of *House M.D.* dialogues, Law (2021) established a possible correlation between pattern-forming creativity and a high equality of power between characters in the TV drama. The SFMDA of co-constructed multimodal creativity in *House M.D.* adapted in this study is based on the SFL theory by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), multimodal analysis by Bednarek (2010) and Analytical Framework for Creativity in Multimodal Texts (AFCMT) by Law (2020a, 2020b, 2020d). It focuses on interpersonal meaning (i.e., speech function and tenor), mise-en-scène, nonverbal behaviour and performance at moments of pattern-forming creativity production.

The focus on interpersonal meaning was motivated by Tannen (2007: 101), who argues that repetition in conversation – the main form of pattern-forming creativity in this study – contributes to interpersonal meaning-making:

Repetition in conversation can be relatively automatic, and that its automaticity contributes to its functions in production, comprehension, connection, and interaction. These dimensions operate simultaneously to create coherence in discourse and interpersonal involvement in interaction. Repetition is a resource by which conversational-

ists together create a discourse, a relationship, and a world. It is the central linguistic meaning-making strategy, a limitless resource for individual creativity and interpersonal involvement.

The choice of speech function and tenor was suggested by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014: 34):

When we consider the correlations between tenor values and terms in interpersonal systems, we should really focus on interpersonal semantic systems such as SPEECH FUNCTION in the first instance... Thus combinations of tenor values relating to (a) status and (b) contact correlate with different semantic strategies open to speakers for demanding goods-&-services of their listeners – for commanding their listeners.

In SFL, any context can be characterised under three domains: tenor, field and mode (Halliday 1978, Halliday and Matthiessen 2014, Matthiessen and Halliday 1997). Halliday and Matthiessen (2014: 33-4) define tenor as:

[...] who is taking part in the situation: (i) the roles played by those taking part in the socio-semiotic activity – (1) institutional roles, (2) status roles (power, either equal or unequal), (3) contact roles (familiarity, ranging from strangers to intimates) and (4) sociometric roles (affect[ive involvement], either neutral or charged, positively or negatively); and (ii) the values that the interactants imbue the domain with (either neutral or loaded, positively or negatively).

Another important dimension is the metafunction (see Fig. 1). Metafunction refers to the different modes of meaning construed by the grammar (Matthiessen and Halliday 1997). There are three *metafunctions* – interpersonal, ideational, and textual, which are "three kinds of meaning that are embodied in human language as a whole, forming the basis of the semantic organization of all natural languages" (Halliday 1985: 53) operating "simultaneously in the semantics of every language" (Joret and Remael 1998: 159). The interpersonal metafunction is defined as the resource for "meaning as a form of action: the speaker or writer doing something to the listener or reader by means of language" (Halliday 1985: 53). It is "both interactive and personal"

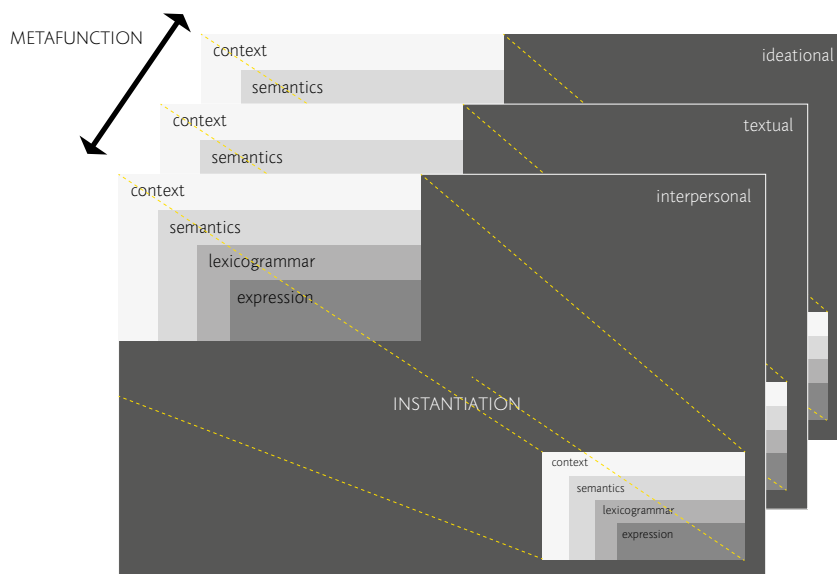


FIG. 1. METAFUNCTION (ADAPTED FROM HALLIDAY & MATTHIESSEN 2014: 31)

(Halliday and Matthiessen 2014: 30). Speech function is an interpersonal semantic system (i.e., tenor-related) that focuses on exchange patterns.

Within the semantic system of speech function, there are two roles in exchange and two types of commodity exchanged. The two roles in exchange are *giving* and *demanding*. The two types of commodity exchanged are *goods-&-services* and *information*. These two roles in exchange and two types of commodity exchanged produce four combinations of initiations: giving goods-&-services functions as an offer, giving information functions as a statement; demanding goods-&-services functions as a command, demanding information functions as a question, as shown in Table 1.

role in exchange	Commodity exchanged	
	(a) Goods-&-services	(b) Information
(i) giving	'offer'	'statement'
(ii) demanding	'command'	'question'

TABLE 1. GIVING OR DEMANDING, GOODS-&-SERVICES OR INFORMATION (HALLIDAY AND MATTHIESSEN 2014: 136)

Bednarek’s (2010) approach to multimodal analysis was adopted because of its ease of application and comprehensibility of results. Salient video frames from two selected scenes, namely ‘Treating patients’ and ‘Little part’, were analysed in terms of i) the *mise-en-scène*, and ii) the actors’ nonverbal behaviour and performance. The benefit of this approach is that each telecinematic element of the *mise-en-scène* (e.g., settings, props, costumes, codes of dress, movement, spatial relations, placement of objects and sound), and the actors’ nonverbal behaviour and performance (e.g., appearance, gestures, facial expressions, postures, proxemics) can be analysed independently and then formatively. Bednarek (2010: 141) demonstrates the multimodal analysis to show expressive character identities using the unannotated video source from TV drama *Gilmore Girls*, and argues that “a manual study of one scene... enables in-depth analysis of a large number of selected expressive resources in a small amount of data”. The approach is also relatively straightforward and therefore accessible to audience who are not in the field of linguistics.

In addition, instances of pattern-forming creativity are categorised using the AFCMT (Law 2020a, 2020b, 2020d). The AFCMT groups pattern-forming creativity in terms of the explicitness of the formula of creativity construction and the way references are made.

Types of creativity	Formula of creativity construction	Reference style	
		Exo-referenced	Endo-referenced
Pattern-forming	Implicit	An external reference is used but not explicitly cited; the target audience is not explicitly informed how the repetition is co-constructed. The target's knowledge of the creative process is thus assumed. (Assumed)	A reference is taken from preceding 'text' and reused; the target audience is not explicitly informed how the repetition is co-constructed. The target's knowledge of the creative process is thus assumed. (Assumed)
	Explicit	An external reference is used and is explicitly cited; the target audience is explicitly informed how the repetition is co-constructed. The creative process is thus made known to the target. (Known)	A reference is taken from preceding 'text' and reused; the target audience is explicitly informed how the repetition is co-constructed. The creative process is thus made known to the target. (Known)

TABLE 2. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR CREATIVITY IN MULTIMODAL TEXTS (AFCMT), ADAPTED FROM LAW (2020A, 2020B, 2020D)

Because this study is interested in the correlation between co-constructed multimodal creativity and power (status role), the qualitative analysis of multimodality in two selected scenes of *House M.D.* focuses on tenor (i.e., contact/familiarity, and affective involvement), and speech function of the interpersonal metafunction (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014, Lam and Webster 2009).

#### 4. SFMDA

The selected examples involve conversations between House and supporting characters who are both new to House (such as Foreman in example 1) and familiar with House (such as

Cameron and Chase in example 1 and Cuddy in example 2) at the time the respective episodes were aired. This allows contact and affective involvement to be measurable while keeping the effect of power on pattern-forming creativity in the picture. Example 1 is taken from a 54-second scene in “Pilot: Everybody Lies” (1.01) between 05:33 and 06:27, hereafter referred as the ‘Treating patients’ scene, in which House has huge power difference over three other doctors in his team, namely Cameron, Chase and Foreman. Example 2 is the ‘Little part’ scene taken from a 57-second scene in “Ugly” (4.07) between 04:10 and 05:07, in which Cuddy has a higher power than House in terms of job ranking, but House and Cuddy are also friends since med schools “Known Unknowns” (6.07), which may be translated to high contact and high affective involvement.

#### 4.1.Example 1 ‘Treating patients’ scene







FIG. 2. SCREENSHOTS OF A PART OF THE 'TREATING PATIENTS' SCENE

Shot No.	Turn	Speaker	Script	Speech function	Pattern-forming creativity type (in bold text)
<i>[Cut to House looking through an MRI of Rebecca's head.]</i>					
0a to 0b	1	Foreman	<i>It's a lesion.</i>	Statement (give info)	
0b to 2a	2	House	<i>And the big green thing in the middle of the bigger blue thing on a map is an island. I was hoping for something a bit more creative.</i>	Statement (give info) Statement (give info)	
2b to 2c	3	Foreman	<i>Shouldn't we be speaking to the patient before we start diagnosing?</i>	Question (demand info)	
3a to 3b	4	House	<i>Is she a doctor?</i>	Question (demand info)	
4	5	Foreman	<i>No, but...</i>	Statement (give info)	
4 to 5	6	House	<i>Everybody lies.</i>	Statement (give info)	
6a to 6b	7	Cameron	<i>Dr. House doesn't like dealing with patients.</i>	Statement (give info)	
6b to 6c	8	Foreman	<i>Isn't treating patients why we became doctors?</i>	Question (demand info)	
7a to 7c	9	House	<i>No, <b>treating illnesses is why we became doctors, treating patients is what makes most doctors miserable.</b></i>	Statement (give info)	Explicit and endo-referenced
7c to 9a	10	Foreman	<i>So you're trying to eliminate the humanity from the practice of medicine.</i>	Statement (give info)	
9a to 11	11	House	<i>If we don't talk to them they can't lie to us, and we can't lie to them. Humanity is overrated. I don't think it's a tumor.</i>	Statement (give info) Statement (give info) Statement (give info)	
11 to 12b	12	Foreman	<i><b>First year of medical school</b> if you hear hoof beats you think 'horses' not 'zebras'?</i>	Statement (give info)	
13 to 18	13	House	<i>Are you in <b>first year of medical school</b>? No. First of all, there's nothing on the CAT scan. Second of all, if this is a <b>horse</b> then the kindly family doctor in Trenton makes the obvious diagnosis and it never gets near this office...</i>	Question (demand info) Statement (give info) Statement (give info)	Explicit and endo-referenced

TABLE 3. TRANSCRIPT OF A PART OF THE 'TREATING PATIENTS' SCENE

Table 3 shows a 54-second transcript of the ‘Treating patients’ scene with a selection of salient frames (Fig. 2). Prior to the ‘Treating patients’ scene, the episode begins with a 29-year-old female kindergarten teacher suddenly losing the ability to speak and seizing while teaching. A month had past since the seizure, Dr. James Wilson (Robert Sean Leonard) – House’s one true friend/head of the Department of Oncology who shares the same initials “Dr. J. W., M.D.” as Holmes’s confidant, Dr. John Watson (“Swan Song”; Abrams 2009) – attempted to persuade House to take the case. He told House that the patient was his cousin and she had been suffering from progressive deterioration of mental status. Protein markers of the three most prevalent brain cancers were tested negative, and unresponsive to radiation treatment. House suspected that Wilson was lying about the patient being his cousin but took the case anyway because Wilson said that the “three overqualified doctors” working for House were “getting bored”. These three doctors were Chase, Cameron and Foreman.

#### 4.1.1. Tenor relations and speech function

As the boss of three doctors, House has a higher power granted by his job status than Chase, Cameron and Foreman. Affective involvement and contact are difficult to measure but can be estimated via the speakers’ attitude in conversation and the amount of time each doctor has been working for House prior to this scene respectively. Chase has worked for House for around two years and Cameron for about six months whereas Foreman is very new to the team prior to this episode.

‘Treating patients’ is a scene at House’s office in which he states his belief and shares his work philosophy mainly with Foreman, the new doctor. The conversation mainly involves their exchange of information (i.e., six turns each) using two speech functions: statement (give information) and questions (demand information). The abundance of declarative statements and interrogatives, and the absence of imperatives reveal a high equality of power between the two. Also, despite the original difference in job positions and thus the difference in power between House and Foreman by default, Foreman has not used modal Finite (modal verb such as *could* or *would*) to convey politeness. His use of yes/no-interrogatives in turns 3, 8 and 12 are evidence of verbal challenges to House’s work philosophy. This suggests a high equality of power between them despite the low affective involvement and low contact.

Because the pair does not see a high power difference between one another, the discourse is able to proceed with near equal opportunity. Although House’s pattern-forming creativity – both instances explicit and endo-referenced in turns 9 and 13 – seems to put him in a more powerful position, this is only made possible because House chooses to permit such exchange of information during DDX. This argument is supported by Cuddy, who told House that, “You need someone to bounce ideas off of. You need a team” (“Alone”, 4.01). House does not fear the development of conflict in his office, as he believes that “[c]onflict breeds creativity” (“Unfaithful”, 5.15). This example shows that the driving force behind House’s pattern-forming creativity is not the difference in power, but rather the equality of power. This also suggests that a high equality of power between interlocutors is a likely trigger for House’s pattern-forming creativity.

#### 4.1.2. Multimodality: *Mise-en-scène*

The scene begins with an MRI image of the sagittal view of Rebecca’s head (Shot 0a) before the shot took a long focal point to reveal the frontal view of House’s face (Shot 0b). When House turns to his left (Shot 0c) House is revealed to be in his office (Shot 1a). In Shot 8, a rectangular glass desk can be seen in front of Foreman and Cameron placed perpendicular to the wall on the left of House’s desk (Shot 16a). Two visitor’s chairs are placed in front of House’s desk and one for House’s himself. Having three doctors working for House discussing a medical case in his office construes power and status.

This episode is shot using an orange lens filter and therefore it is difficult to see actual colours of the character’s costumes. A 45-years old stubble-bearded, short curly-haired House wears a dark colour shirt, a pair of dark trousers and an even darker blazer. He walks with a cane in his right hand. Chase, Cameron, and Foreman all wear staff name tags on the left pocket of their blazers but only Chase does not wear a white coat.

There are limited spatial movements in this scene. House walks with his cane from the lightbox (Shot 1a) to standing in front of the cabinet behind his desk (Shot 9b). Cameron and Foreman move from standing behind the visitor’s chairs (Shot 2a) to sitting down on those chairs (Shot 8). Chase moves from standing near House’s table (Shot 3a) to standing in front of the film lightbox (Shot 18). These spatial movements are highly mobile, suggesting a high degree of freedom for employees at the employer’s office, a venue of status and

authority. This freedom suggests high equality of power in the tenor relation between House and his team members (see Gailits et al. 2019, Gottman 1984, Guarneros 2017, Sheller 2018 on the relations between freedom of movement and power).

A suspenseful background music with watch-ticking sounds begins in turn 11 when House is saying: “I don’t think it is a tumor”. The music continues past turn 13 which marks the end of the debate on work philosophy and into DDX about the patient’s illness. The music appears to mark the change of topic as well as to build up the excitements for the DDX. It does not appear to have any correlations with tenor values such as power, contact and affective involvement.

Overall, the ownership of a personal office like House and the absence of one for his team create a difference in status and power, yet the three employees have the freedom of movement within House’s office. Therefore, despite the power possessed by House over his three subordinates, he promotes power equality among his staff. This adds support to the argument that the equality of power is a major force driving behind House’s pattern-forming creativity production. Interpersonal meaning, specifically the equality of power, is construed by spatial movement in this scene.

#### 4.1.3. Multimodality: Nonverbal behaviour and performance

Hand, arm and leg gestural movements are noticeable in this example despite having shots captured at eye-level using close-up and medium shots. Apart from House’s walking with cane (Shot 1b), Chase and Foreman use hand and arm gestures to construe the degree of freedom they enjoy inside House’s office. During the DDX, Chase crosses his arms while thinking in Shot 7a and puts his hands in trouser pockets in Shot 18, while Foreman crosses his legs with his hands over his right kneecap in Shot 8. These postures construe a high level of comfort from Chase and Foreman, which in turn construes a high equality of power before House. It is worth noting that gestural movements by the creator are absent at the moments of pattern-forming creativity production, indicating that gestural movement is not the main semiotic resource for construing meanings in pattern-forming creativity.

Because pattern-forming creativity has a relatively long duration of production, there is time for more than one facial expression and/or head movement to appear on screen. This makes correlating a specific motion to the production of pattern-forming creativity more complex and less reliable.

Turn	Speaker	Speech	Facial expression	Head movement	Body movement
9	House	No, <i>treating illnesses</i>	Eyes close, eyebrows raise		Leans forward
		<i>is why we became doctors,</i> <i>treating patients is</i>	Frowns, looks down to the floor	Head tilts downwards	
		<i>what makes most doctors</i>	Eyebrows raises		Returns to up-right position
		<i>Miserable.</i>	(Supposedly) looks at Foreman at eye-level, lips shut tightly	Head raises	
		<i>If we don't talk</i>	Looks down to the floor	Head tilts downwards, slightly to the right Short and quick headshakes	
11	House	<i>they can't lie to us,</i>	(Supposedly) looks at Foreman at eye-level	Head raises	Stationary
		<i>and we can't lie to them.</i>	Looks slightly upwards, presumably at the MRI films	Head turns to right	
13	House	<i>Are you in</i>	Looks at Foreman	Head maintains 45° from central position, three small successive nods matching the words in speech	Stationary
		<i>first year medical school?</i>		Head maintains 45° from central position	

TABLE 4. NONVERBAL BEHAVIOUR OF HOUSE AT MOMENTS OF PATTERN-FORMING CREATIVITY PRODUCTION

The multimodal transcription in Table 4 reveals no visible correlation between pattern-forming creativity and nonverbal behaviour such as facial expression, head movement and body movement. Instead, the nonverbal behaviour often corresponds directly to the content of the speech, such as House’s ‘lips shut tightly’ when saying “miserable”, or House (the Reactor) performing three small successive nods when saying “Are you in” while looking at Foreman (the Phenomenon) – establishing a vector of reactional process between the two (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006). In other words, the paralinguage converges with linguistic meaning

in this example (see Martin et al. 2013, Painter et al. 2013 on the notion of ‘convergent coupling’) which is construed via the use of pattern-forming creativity.

Overall, in this example of House conversing with his subordinates, the equality of power is construed verbally using pattern-forming creativity, which in turn is construed nonverbally through various paralinguistic combinations of facial expression, head movement and body movement. In the next example, the use of pattern-forming creativity by House as a subordinate in a conversation with his boss Cuddy is analysed.

#### 4.2. Example 2 ‘Little part’ scene







FIG. 3. SCREENSHOTS OF THE 'LITTLE PART' SCENE

Shot No.	Turn	Speaker	Script	Speech function	Pattern-forming creativity type (in bold text)
[CUDDY'S OFFICE - House keeps his back to the door. Cuddy goes on the attack.]					
0a to 1c	1	Cuddy	You think I LIKE the cameras? (stalks across the room) You think I want the whole world watching <b>you check out my ass and question my wardrobe?</b>	Question (demand info) Question (demand info)	
1c to 1f	2	House	(unrepentant) Would it be better if I <b>checked out your wardrobe and questioned your ass?</b>	Question (demand info)	Explicit and endo-referenced
2a	3	Cuddy	(behind her desk) <b>A little part of me...</b>		
3a to 3b	4	House	There is <b>no little part of you.</b>	Statement (give info)	Explicit and endo-referenced
4a to 6	5	Cuddy	(persevering) ...thought that maybe you would see what great PR this could be for the hospital, and not <b>make ME force YOU to act like a human being.</b>	Statement (give info)	
7a to 9b	6	House	<b>You using force on me</b> is... intriguing. (glances outside her office) On the other hand, cameras make people act. <b>Sometimes like human beings, sometimes just weird, sometimes they wear open-tipped bras.</b>	Statement (give info) Statement (give info)	Explicit and endo-referenced Explicit and endo-referenced
10 to 11c	7	Cuddy	It's cold in here.	Statement (give info)	
[House takes a split second to reclaim his brain from his breeches.]					
11d to 11g	8	House	Less obvious point is that I need my team (glances again at the crew) to be unafraid of the metaphorical fart.	Statement (give info)	
12a to 15d	9	Cuddy	That production company is covering all the medical costs for this kid. So, either you let them continue filming... or the kid goes home with the same face.	Statement (give info) Statement (give info)	
[Cuddy sits, triumphant. House glances back at the crew once more, then, having no suitable rejoinder, beats a swift retreat.]					

TABLE 5. TRANSCRIPT OF A PART OF THE 'LITTLE PART' SCENE

Table 5 shows a 57-second transcript of the ‘Little part’ scene in “Ugly” (4.07) with a selection of salient frames (Fig. 3). Prior to the ‘Little part’ scene, the episode begins with a documentary film crew filming a teenage patient named Kenny Cyrus with a major facial deformity called frontonasal encephalocele. He was undergoing a facial surgery led by Chase when Kenny suddenly went into an unexplained cardiac arrest. In the same scene prior to the dialogue in Table 5, Chase explained to Cuddy and House in Cuddy’s office while the documentary crew was filming the entire process in black and white. House tricked the film crew to walk out of the office and then he shut the door from behind, leaving himself and Cuddy in her office.

#### 4.2.1. Tenor relations and speech function

Despite having his paychecks signed by Cuddy (1.01), House does not fear negotiating with his boss, as evident by his claim, “I spent half my life negotiating with that woman.” (“Adverse Events”, 5.03). House’s power granted by his job position may be lower than Cuddy’s, but his friendship with Cuddy over the years [i.e., they went to the college together in Michigan (“Brave Heart”, 6.06) during which House was “already a legend” (“Humpty Dumpty”, 2.03) means their level of contact is very high, and his affective involvement with Cuddy is higher than any normal boss-employee relationship.

Because there is little power difference between House and Cuddy, the discourse proceeds mainly through exchanges of information. Cuddy begins by asking House two yes/no-interrogative rhetorical questions while House picks up the expressions “check out my ass” and “question my wardrobe” and created the first instance of co-constructed/pattern-forming creativity (explicit and endo-referenced) as a response. Since all three interrogatives are rhetorical questions, they are intended to act as statements to express an opinion or to make a point, rather than to demand for information (Burton 2007). They function as arguments “with which an audience can readily identify with, and which are predicated on the values and commonsense understandings shared by a speaker and his/her audience” (Augoustinos et al. 2002:135).

Subsequent instances of pattern-forming creativity (also explicit and endo-referenced) further illustrate the narrow difference in power between House and Cuddy. Even though Cuddy uses rhetorical questions and forceful attitude markers such as “make ME force YOU”, “to act like a human being”, House is able to issue ‘comebacks’ via repeating and building upon her rhetorical questions and word choices (cf. Poynton 1985 on how

power is realised in language through the lack of reciprocity). The difference in power between Cuddy and House still exists, but that is construed to a higher degree through nonverbal behaviour and performance rather than verbal.

#### 4.2.2. Multimodality: *Mise-en-scène*

This part of the scene happens inside a well-lit office of the Dean of Medicine with Cuddy and House being the only interlocutors in the selected dialogue. The documentary film crew can be seen through the glass on the office doors but they are not involved in this conversation. 48-years-old stubble-bearded, curly-haired House wears a dark purple T-shirt with visible print under an American blue buttoned shirt, a pair of dark trousers and a black blazer. He walks with a cane in his right hand. 42-years-old Cuddy has long wavy hair, wears a pendant and a pair of hoop earrings, black V-neck blouse, a red skirt with a black belt. She clips her staff name tag on her belt in front slightly towards the left.

There are limited spatial movements in this scene. House walks with his cane from the doors towards Cuddy’s desk (Shot 1d) and returns to the doors after the negotiation ends (Shot 15d). Cuddy, on the other hand, moves into House’s private space (see Hall 1963, 1966, for interpersonal distances of man) in Shot 0a and 0b before walking to her seat behind her desk where she does her negotiation with House. The first part of Cuddy’s movement into House’s private space conveys a significant degree of affective involvement, contact and power. It conveys intimacy and familiarity because it is not her norm to be talking to any employees within their private space (see Hall 1963, 1966). The second part of movement to her seat conveys power, because speaking to her employee in her own Dean of Medicine’s office from behind her desk – an area permitted to no one but her – is a statement of authority.

There is an absence of background music in this part of the scene, providing evidence that background music is not a key semiotic resource for construing pattern-forming creativity.

Overall, the *mise-en-scène* suggests that Cuddy has higher power over House and House does not attempt to breach her power. Instead, House makes use of his high contact and affective involvement, as well as verbal pattern-forming creativity and nonverbal behaviour to achieve power equality with Cuddy in his negotiation. Therefore, interpersonal meanings such as power, contact and affective involvement are construed by pattern-forming creativity and spatial movement respectively in this scene.



4.2.3. Multimodality: Nonverbal behaviour and performance

Hand and arm gestural movements are near absent in this scene. This part of the scene is mostly shot using close-up shots, medium-close up shots, medium shots and combinations of the above with over-the-shoulder shots. House is taller than Cuddy, which is likely the reason for the difference in the height of the shots. Shots of House’s face are filmed from Cuddy’s upper arm level while shots of Cuddy’s face are filmed at Cuddy’s eye level, thus eliminating most of the hand and arm movements from below the shoulders.

Cuddy uses her body language to construe her power over House. From standing face-to-face in parallel with House in Shot 0a to standing even closer to House at 45° angle with her left shoulder leaned slightly forward and her head slightly raised while talking to him, Cuddy’s body language construes power despite her inferiority in height. Towards the end of the negotiation in Shot 14c, while House remains standing, Cuddy ends her speech with raised eyebrows and chin, widened eyes looking and smirking at House while sitting down on her chair, resting her back on the backrest and crossing her legs. This conveys a high level of confidence and power, or “triumphant” using the wording from the script.

Turn	Speaker	Speech	Facial expression	Head movement	Body movement
2	House		Downturned mouth corners, eyebrows raise		
		<i>Would it be better if I checked out your wardrobe</i>	Frowns, looks down to the floor	Head tilts downwards	
		<i>and questioned your ass?</i>	Looks at Cuddy	Head raises	Upright, Stationary
			Chin raises slightly upwards	Head turns slightly to the right	
4	House	<i>There is no little part of you</i>	Frowns, eyes squint	Head turns to his right and tilts backwards	Upright, Stationary
		<i>You using force on me is... intriguing.</i>	Big eye stare at Cuddy	Head turns to look at Cuddy and shakes two times	
			Frowns at Cuddy	Head turns and holds slightly to the left	
6	House	<i>On the other hand, cameras make people act.</i>	Eyes look upwards to ceiling	Head tilts slightly towards the right	Upright, Stationary
			Left eyebrow raises	Turns to face Cuddy, Soft nod	
		<i>Sometimes like human beings, sometimes just weird, sometimes they wear open-tipped bras.</i>	Big eye stare, eyebrows raise quickly and returns to normal position, eyes close	Head returns to normal position	
			(not invisible in shot)	Turn to his right to look behind him	
		Looks at Cuddy	Returns to original position	Returns to original position with slight lean on his right	
		(not invisible in shot)	(not invisible in shot)	(not invisible in shot)	
		Eyes focused on Cuddy’s chest	Head tilts slightly backwards		
		Eyes focused on Cuddy’s chest, eyebrows raise	Head turns slightly to his right		

TABLE 6. NONVERBAL BEHAVIOUR OF HOUSE AT MOMENTS OF PATTERN-FORMING CREATIVITY PRODUCTION

The multimodal transcription in Table 6 shows no visible correlation between pattern-forming creativity production and nonverbal behaviour such as facial expression, head movement and body movement. Instead, like in example 1, such behaviour corresponds directly to the meanings of words. For example, House looks at Cuddy when House is saying “make people act” in Table 6 with the purpose to include Cuddy into the reference of “people”, or House turns his head to look at Cuddy and shakes his head twice when he is saying “no” in “There is no little part of you.” This convergence of the paralanguage and linguistic meanings is possible because House is not being deceptive in this scene (cf. Ekman and Friesen 1969, Taylor 2014).

All in all, in this example, interpersonal meanings such as power, contact and affective involvement are construed verbally using pattern-forming creativity, and nonverbally through various combinations of facial expression, head movement and body movement. This example further supports the argument that a high equality of power between interlocutors is a likely trigger for House’s pattern-forming creativity (see Law 2021).

## 5. CONCLUSION

The study has aimed to provide qualitative evidence to support a negative correlation between co-constructed/pattern-forming creativity production and power difference among characters of *House M.D.* Using the SFMDA of co-constructed multimodal creativity in two selected scenes of *House M.D.* – ‘Treating patients’ (i.e., DDX scene in House’s office), and ‘Little part’ (i.e., private chat scene in Cuddy’s office), it has found that House’s pattern-forming creativity (of the explicit, endo-referenced type, in the form of interrogatives or statements) appears to be triggered by the high equality of power (i.e., a negative correlation with power) between interlocutors. In other words, power (equality) is construed verbally through the use of pattern-forming creativity, thus confirming Law’s (2021) quantitative findings.

This study has also revealed that interpersonal meanings, denoted by tenor values consisting of power, contact and affective involvement, are construed nonverbally through spatial movement and various combinations of facial expression, head movement and body movement. It has shown that hand/arm gestures are unlikely to be a key semiotic resource to the delivery of pattern-forming creativity. Also, there is no strong evidence for a correlation between the production of pattern-forming creativ-

ity and mise-en-scène elements in *House M.D.* (i.e., set design, lighting, space, costume or auditory soundtrack). This phenomenon has been observed by McElhaney:

While not citing Minnelli’s work, David Bordwell has drawn attention to the general decline in this type of complex ensemble staging in contemporary cinema (especially American). We are now living in a period of “intensified continuity,” dominated by rapid cutting, free-ranging camera movements, and extensive use of close-ups. The nature of how performances are filmed, edited, and ultimately experienced has shifted: The face becomes the ultimate bearer of meaning, with gesture and bodily movements increasingly restricted through the alternation of “stand and deliver” scenes (in which the actors are confined to largely fixed positions) with “walk and talk” scenes (in which a moving camera rapidly follows actors as they “spit out exposition on the fly”) (Bordwell [2002]: 25). While Bordwell does not note this, the shift in terms of how actors are filmed that he is describing has been part of an ongoing process over the last three decades (McElhaney 2009: 328).

One limitation of this study is that the selected examples only include House’s pattern-forming creativity production and not that of other characters. Future studies may compare patterns of creativity production of House with other characters in this or other series. Such research along the line of linguistic-multimodal creativity can further contribute to the body of scientific knowledge in *House M.D.*, which may be applicable to other TV dramas or genres of telecinematics. Analysing phonology of characters’ speech may also unveil other interesting realisational relationships between linguistic/multimodal creativity and power (see Halliday and Greaves 2008; Halliday and Matthiessen 2014 on how meaning is construed phonologically). Furthermore, since the imitation of the reality on television by “convincingly ‘real’ pseudo-human beings” (Pearson 2007: 47) performing “carefully crafted dialogue” (Bubel 2006, Bednarek 2010: 21) may impact viewers’ perception of realism or naturalness over an extended period of time (Perritano 2011),<sup>4</sup> this and future

4 See also: “4 Ways TV Changes How We Talk | What the Stuff?.” *HowStuffWorks*, 20 February 2015. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q\\_M2ejzjLhs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q_M2ejzjLhs) (last accessed 28-06-17).

research may be useful for longitudinal comparative studies on similarities/differences in dramatised conversations (e.g. dramatised healthcare; see Matthiessen and Law 2019) and spoken American English in the real world (see Law 2015).

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*Sex and the City* (1998-2004)  
*The West Wing* (1999-2006)

# THE MECHA THAT THEREFORE WE ARE (NOT): AN ECO-PHENOMENOLOGICAL READING OF *NEON GENESIS EVANGELION*<sup>1</sup>

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Anime; enactivism; presence; ecophenomenology; narrative ecosystem.

## ABSTRACT

In the late 1960s, Japanese animation inaugurated a prolific science fiction strand which addressed the topic of mediated experience. In a context of transnational reception and consumption of anime, the “robotic” subgenre (particularly the one that will be called “mecha” in the 1980s, i.e., narratives of giant robots piloted by a human within) occupies a strategic place. By highlighting the

peculiar synergy between themes, forms of storytelling and “out-of-joint” consumption, the Japanese robotic animation series thematized and popularized content and perspectives on mediated experience that I define as “eco-phenomenological”: “phenomenological” because (i) it reevaluates the quality of the subjective experience in its historical and biocultural context; “ecological” because (ii) it look at the environment as an intelligent system; and (iii) it proposed a multidisciplinary approach between the human sciences and the life sciences.

The article proposes an analysis of the forms of narration and reception of the anime series *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995-1996), in its ability to have intercepted, synthesized and internationally popularized in an innovative and almost unparalleled way, the complexity of the eco-phenomenological perspective. Views and epistemological approaches at the center of the contemporary scientific and cultural debate will be reconstructed, discussed and analyzed through the concepts of body, mind, environment and presence which are promoted in the *Evangelion* series.

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## 1. PRINCIPLES OF SUPER ROBOT SERIALITY

In the late 1960s, Japanese animation inaugurated a prolific science fiction strand which addressed the topic of mediated experience. Inspired by Japanese science fiction prose (Nakamura 2007) and especially by the artwork of various successful manga, the “anime boom” (Clements and McCarthy 2015) spawned fictional worlds which dealt with the social, cultural and cognitive consequences of a uchronic and hyper-technological reality in constant tension among the nostalgia for the lost innocence and the hope for a salvific future, the return to nature and the dominion of technology, the new renaissance and a transhumanist dream, as an allegory of the paradigmatic shift faced by the post-war Japanese society (Levi 1996, Azuma 2009, Napier 2007, Bolton, Csicsery-Ronay and Tatsumi 2007, Nacci 2016):

The rise of Japanese economic power in the 1970s and its economic decline in the United States led to an ambivalent fascination with Japanese attitudes toward development—the synthesis of robotic industrialization, neofeudal corporate culture, and the enthusiastic acceptance of new communication and simulation technologies in daily life. As Japanese investment and market share leaped worldwide, the future appeared to be saturated with Japanese elements, a Western perception distilled in *Blade Runner*’s enormously influential image of a futuristic Los Angeles that resembled Tokyo. Ridley Scott’s 1982 film was the forerunner of japonaiserie in cyberpunk novels like William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (1984) and *Idoru* (1996), which took an adrenalized dreamscape Japan as their model for the future (Bolton, Csicsery-Ronay and Tatsumi 2007: ix).

While the cyberpunk imaginary was being saturated “with Japanese elements”, major anime films like *Akira* (Katsuhiro Otomo, 1988) and series such as *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (TV Tokyo, 1995-1996) broke through and anchored the anime genre in the Western pop culture (Napier 2005, Pellitteri 2011, Steinberg 2012, Bolton 2018). So, Japan not only exported “imaginary media” to the West, but also real technologies that revolutionized global modalities of sound, audiovisual, and computer consumption, such as the Walkman and a variety of home video recording systems produced by Sony and Matsushita (Bordwell and Thompson 2010: 427-

28), without mentioning video game systems by Sega and Nintendo (Wolf 2007).

In this context of transnational reception and consumption, the “robotic” subgenre (particularly the one that will be called “mecha” in the 1980s, i.e., narratives of giant robots piloted by a human within) occupies a strategic place in the visual tradition of the post-war Japanese science fiction (Schodt 1988: 73-90, Napier 2007: 87, Nacci 2016: 13). On the one hand, because the narrative seriality of the “Super-robot” genre of the 1960s and 1970s helps initiate transnational consumption and collection of “multiple associated media products” (Lamarre 2009: xiii-xiv) as well as forms of “media mix” (Steinberg 2012) including movies, series, video games, manga, and toy robots, which drive the emergence of true “media franchises” within a now globalized “anime ecology” (Lamarre 2018). On the other hand, as Hiroki Azuma notes, it is the anime system itself that, since the 1970s, has educated authors and viewers/fans to privilege a form of storytelling and consumption based on an “animal drive” towards the accumulation and the exchange of information on the model of the “database” (Azuma 2009). Such is a characteristic that eventually became globally embedded in the transmedia (Manovich 2001, Jenkins 2006, Bolter 2019) and serial (Mittell 2015, Brembilla and De Pascalis 2018) forms of storytelling of the new millennium.

Drawing from Matt Hills’ (2002) characteristics of “cult text” (authorship, deferred narration, and hyperdiegesis), Brian Ruh attributes the longstanding transnational circulation of some Japanese “media cults” to the paratextual, deferred, and transmedia nature inherent to the anime visual storytelling (Ruh 2013: 1-3). Within this framework, Ruh uses as a case study the transnational reception of the *Neon Genesis Evangelion* franchise (*Shin Seiki Evangerion*, lit. “New Century Evangelion”, henceforth *Evangelion*) as an example of transmedia storytelling consciously constructed to activate “cult” dynamics of consumption beyond the Japanese national market.

## 2. NEON GENESIS EVANGELION: A “SERIAL SINGULARITY”

Produced by Gainax studio, *Evangelion* is in fact one of the most acclaimed transmedia sagas of all time, which notably began with a single season TV anime series in 1995. The series was a peculiarity in the Japanese serial tradition, seen as “violating” certain narrative clichés and renewing its aesthetic and consumption paradigms (Azuma 1996, Woznicki 1998, Napier 2007).

*Evangelion's* fictional universe is set in 2015, after a violent cataclysm at the dawn of the new millennium (the Second Impact) caused the melting of the polar ice cap and a change in the Earth's tilt. The climate change caused by the rising waters triggers a series of nuclear conflicts that leads to the death of three billion people. In the city of Neo-Tokyo-3, where people now live in a never-ending Japanese summer, the saga tells the story of giant anthropomorphic mechas (the "Evas") and their pilots (the "childrens") who, under the leadership of a special department of the UN (the "Nerv"), fight to defend human civilization from the attack of the Angels: gigantic and mysterious shape-shifting entities to which it is attributed the cause of the Second Impact. Shinji, the fourteen-year-old protagonist of the saga, is the pilot of the Eva Unit 01, while his other peers, Rei and Asuka, are in command of the models 00 and 02. While the Nerv finds itself serially resisting the attacks of the Angels, a secret organization called Seele is designing the destiny of humankind by following an occult "Project for the Perfection of Man".

The *Evangelion* TV series, created by Hideaki Anno in his second work for Gainax after the good reception of *Nadia: The Secret of Blue Water* (NHK, 1990-1991) and aired on TV Tokyo, presents two main singularities. The first one is its unquestionable originality when compared to any previous manga character (as was the case for most robotic anime). Secondly, the Evas' design proposed a hybrid between two traditional mecha models: that of the "Super-robot", unique and sometimes sentient machines with supernatural powers and mutant abilities, inaugurated by *Mazinger Z* (Fuji TV, 1972-1974) and continued until 1980 with series such as *Steel Jeeg* (NET, 1975-1976) and *Future Robot Daltanious* (Tokyo Channel 12, 1978-1980); and that of the "Real-robot", a unit with a certain technological verisimilitude and mass-produced for military purposes, inaugurated by the *Mobile Suite Gundam* series (Nagoya TV, 1979-1980) and continued with *Patlabor* (Nippon TV, 1989-1990) and *Evangelion* (Nacci 2016).

This ambivalence is also reflected in the incongruent scansion of the narrative arc of the series, which represents the "founding" product of the franchise. If in its first part, the *Evangelion* series follows the classic structure of self-contained episodes (with the arrival, the clash and the annihilation of the monster through the "final blow" typical of the Super-robot strand); in the second part, the episodes progressively thin out into fragmented and unstructured forms of narration.

Instead of increasing the number of episodes or seasons, as one would expect from a semantically dense and narrative-complex series like this, Gainax produced only 26 episodes

as opposed to the previous Japanese standard made of 51. The result is a spurious storytelling, but rich in ellipses, flashbacks, dreams, cryptic dialogues, plot twists and visual remixes (difficult to reassemble even after repeated viewings), and further problematized by the ambiguous nature of the Evas: neither mecha, nor demons, but the prototype of a "new species" that will take the place of the humans according to the eugenic plans of the Seele. The series' semiotic strategy aimed at the "forensic fandom" (Jenkins 2006), confirmed by the inclusion in the last two episodes of some fandom stills of Rei that director Hideaki Anno incorporated in the season finale (Azuma 2009: 95). The stratagem, together with the collage of images taken from other episodes, composed a double episode with a "surrealist" cut that, more than a narrative conclusion, represents a raid in the unconscious of the protagonist Shinji. Violating the schemes of the great classic or cathartic narration, *Evangelion* proposes an open ending where "the problems cannot be tied up so carefully" and without the "return with the elixir" (Vogler 1992: 150), consciously launching the sprint for the multiplication of alternative endings through the two films *Neon Genesis Evangelion: Death & Rebirth* (Hideaki Anno, Masayuki and Kazuya Tsurumaki, 1997) and *The End of Evangelion* (Anno and Tsurumaki, 1997).

According to Susan Napier, the media specificity of the *Evangelion* series consists in having combined narrative and visual inconsistencies with equally "problematic" themes and concepts (such as the relationship with technological mediation) through a "striking visual style, largely architectonic, in which space, shape, and color play off each other to produce in the viewer a sensation that is disorienting and exhilarating at the same time" (2007: 108).

More recently, Ilaria De Pascalis has defined as "out-of-joint" a similar type of serial storytelling, emphasizing how a specific category of post-1980s TV series is characterized by "the importance given to visual spectacularization, to the intensification of emotions through the use of sensationalist formulas, as well as to sensory and affective pleasure, [...] in favor of an 'out-of-joint', fragmented and dislocated temporality [...] primarily aimed at questioning a traditional form of subjectivity" (De Pascalis 2019: 665). To analyze such a complex serial universe, De Pascalis proposes a "design-inspired" methodology which aims to (i) highlight distinctive puzzling passages within a series and (ii) to look at them as "scalar models" or "fractal units" for mapping out the (dis)organization of the whole narrative universe (2019: 661-63).

By assuming the peculiar synergy between themes, forms of "out-of-joint" storytelling and consumption typical of the

Japanese robotic animation, I will employ De Pascalis' methodology to analyze the narrative and thematic singularity of the *Evangelion* TV series. If, a few years after the television launch, reconstructing a linear narrative was impossible, nor separating an "official" story from the "derivative" ones (Azuma 2009: 95, Ruh 2013), yet the first and only *Evangelion's* TV series of 1995-1996 represents a paradigmatic "scale model" of the whole media system in terms of topics, modes of narration and consumption. As I argue, this anime series is foundational to the transnational reception of the entire *Evangelion* media franchise, but it also represents an insightful case of contemporary "out-of-joint" seriality in terms of topics and storyworlding.

In particular, by innovating traditional structures of Japanese robot seriality, *Evangelion* has thematized and popularized content and perspectives on mediated experience that I define as "eco-phenomenological": "phenomenological" because (i) it reevaluates the quality of the subjective experience in its historical and biocultural context; "ecological" because (ii) it looks at the environment as an intelligent system; and (iii) it proposed a multidisciplinary approach between the human sciences and the life sciences. Therefore, my analysis will focus on some distinctive features of the character design and recurring passages in the episodes, in

order to map out an eco-phenomenological reading of the whole series, and to shed light on its transmedia circulation and reception.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. THE POSTBIOTIC BODY

What is striking about *Evangelion's* mechas is their distinct animalistic character design. Starting from the initial suggestions of Anno, the designers Ikuto Yamashita and Yoshiyuki Sadamoto thought of the Eva as a paradoxical anthropomorphic insectoid, equipped with mechanical "extensions" incorporated within a biological structure composed of internal organs, blood vessels, muscle fibers, epidermis, teeth and eyes. The character design of the Eva, still a singularity in the panorama of the mecha aesthetics, recalls on the one hand the technological imagery of the second European industrial revolution, already present in the cinematography of Hayao Miyazaki and later in Anno's *Nadia*. On the other hand, it refers to the demons of Japanese folklore, and is openly inspired by the "poetics of contamination" between man, animal and technique of Go Nagai's *Devilman* saga (NET, 1972-1973) and *Ideon* (Tokyo Channel 12, 1980) (Misté 2018: 355). By looking at the morphology of Eva-01 (Fig. 1), one can grasp the biomimetic attitude behind its design. Animal

characteristics and peculiarities are in fact integrated in robotic technology and interfaced with the human pilot's sensorimotor apparatus, presenting us the Eva-children system as a real "postbiotic" hero. This term, used by the philosopher of mind Thomas Metzinger, defines those cases where the distinction between natural and artificial elements makes little sense. As a matter of fact, it addresses systems "which are neither exclusively biologi-

2 The information on the technical-scientific bases and the design of the Eva that follows is taken from the vision of the series and the accurate reconstructions of fandom sites including [www.evangelion.fandom.com](http://www.evangelion.fandom.com). For the interest and constituency of research, I will not consider other possible readings of *Evangelion* (epic, esoteric, postmodern, gender-oriented, etc.) that are at the center of an endless fandom and, only in part, academic literature. An updated academic bibliography of *Evangelion* edited by the staff of "Anime and Manga Studies" is available at <https://www.animemangastudies.com/2019/06/28/neon-genesis-evangelion-a-bibliography-of-english-language-scholarship/> (last accessed 26-02-21). For an updated review of the relationship between academic and fandom anime literature, see Pellitteri (2019).

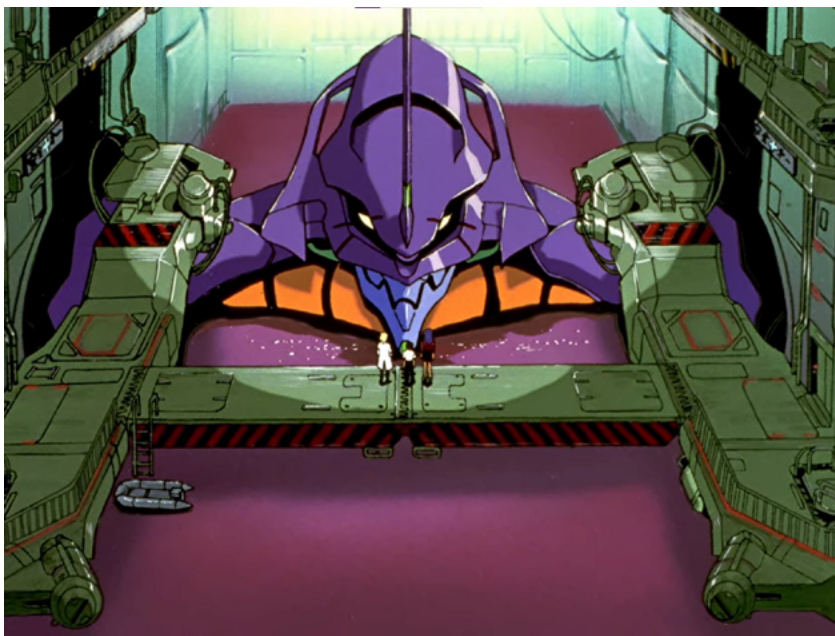


FIG. 1. THE FIRST ENCOUNTER BETWEEN SHINJI AND EVA-01. IN THE 1995-1996 SERIES, THE ESTIMATED HEIGHT OF AN EVA IS APPROXIMATELY 40 FEET.



cal nor exclusively artificial”, and among which we can include those robots that “use artificial control structures implemented through a fully biological substrate (e.g., in hybrid bio-robotics)- that is, human-created ‘software’ running on naturally evolved ‘hardware’ if you will” (2013: 3n5).

The carapace of the Eva-01, with its minimal and androgynous lines, bright colors and facial inexpressiveness (more similar to a praying mantis than to a warm-blooded humanoid), contrasts with the embodied experience of Shinji inside it, who finds himself “inhabiting”, rather than piloting, a body-device that retroacts on his sensorium sending painful feedbacks and triggering real phenomena of post-traumatic stress.

While in other groundbreaking robot series, like *Mobile Suite Gundam*, the diegetic and technical backgrounds underlying the mechas were introduced in the first episode by a voice over narration, in *Evangelion’s* opening these data seem deliberately deferred and puzzled. In “Angel Attack” (1.01), Shinji is just presented as the new candidate pilot of the Nerv and is escorted by Misato to a subterranean military base where the Eva-01 appears to him as a gigantic robotic half-figure immersed in a purple liquid. “A face? A giant robot!”, exclaims Shinji, who seeks for more info at Nerv’s guidebook. “You won’t find this in the orientation book”, replies Nerv’s head scientist Ritsuko, “This is the ultimate multipurpose decisive combat weapons system created by man. The *artificial human* Evangelion. Unit 01 of the series. Built in complete secrecy, this is mankind’s very last trump card”. The impossibility of Shinji to know the very nature of the Eva “series” and his role within the “military plot” directed by the Nerv seems to allegorize the spectator’s serial experience of *Evangelion*: not (and never) fully aware of the details of the storyworld, but nonetheless fascinated with its narrative and thematic complexity.

The recurring image of Shinji who, after a fierce battle inside the Eva, wakes up unharmed in a hospital bed, showing himself debilitated in body and memory, can also be read as a guideline for the forensic serial spectator who has to move back and forth through the episodes to make sense of the storyworld. Moreover, this portrait of Shinji’s body contrasts with that of the Eva who presents organic protrusions, wounds and, unlike the child, is unable to communicate its mental states but seems to share with him a common state of intimacy.

As this visual tension may allude to that between narrative and “animalistic drive” envisioned by Azuma, it also thematized the encounter with the animal senses by means of technology. By retrieving imaginaries from the previous series

*Raideen The Brave* (Nihon Educational Television, 1975-1976), *Evangelion* articulates the animal-technology bond through two conceptual metaphors: the cyborg-body and the postbiotic contamination. Those are speculative allegories that, in equal measure, fed the criticism to the “techno-science” approach proposed in those same years by Donna Haraway ([1985]1990, 1997). In fact, Haraway’s cyborg-feminist theory promoted a vision of the relationship between nature, culture and technology as a *continuum*, inspired by sci-fi imagery but inspiring in turn new imagery. Proof of this is the “role” dedicated to the American philosopher within the cyberpunk franchise of *Ghost in the Shell* (1989-), which in 2004 featured “Dr. Haraway” among the characters of the second animated film of the saga *Ghost in the Shell 2 - Innocence* (2004). More recently, Haraway has returned to the subject, borrowing the concept of “holobiont” from biology to reflect on the endemically symbiotic nature and open to contamination of organized systems. Haraway writes, “my use of *holobiont* does not designate host + symbionts because all of the players are symbionts to each other, in diverse kinds of relationalities and with varying degrees of openness to attachments and assemblages with other holobionts” (2016: 60).

Haraway’s model of the holobiont recalls that of the *Eva-children* system. This is why, starting from an apparently unbalanced relationship where the Eva prefigures the host and the child the “parasite” within it, it shows different degrees of relationality and mutual attachment that, as we will see, often lead the two “symbionts” to intertwine and merge into an indistinguishable and protean unity.

While the holobiontic nature of the body-cyborg is expressed through the open relationship between the Eva and the children, the contaminated and contaminating nature of *Evangelion’s* postbiotic organisms emerges particularly in the episodes recounting the attack of two “invisible” Angels: Iruel in “Lilliputian Hitcher” (1.13) and Bardiel in “Ambivalence” (1.18).

In episode 1.13, Iruel appears in the form of a rust on the walls of the operative base, and then implants itself in the Nerv supercomputer. This invisible bacterium, rapidly evolving from an organic virus to a computer virus, launches the self-destruction program of the base. In order to defeat it, Dr. Ritsuko stimulates the Angel (further evolved into a self-programmable “intelligent circuit”) to complete the infection of the entire computer system so as to fulfill its drive to “apoptosis” (in biology, the form of programmed cell death).

In this narrative arc we can see a reference to the theme of self-induced apocalypse anticipated in *Akira*, continued in the

series *Serial Experiments Lain* (TV Tokyo, 1998) and *Paranoia Agent* (Wowow, 2004), and exposed in the various “endings” of *Evangelion*. The episode thematizes how the relationship of intimacy between postbiotic assemblages turns out to be anything but tending to homeostatic balance or mutual benefit. On the contrary, as Haraway postulates it by echoing the studies of biologist Lynn Margulis, symbiogenesis is a process that creates surprising changes and “problems” for self-organizing units (Haraway 2016: 92). Not coincidentally and according to Margulis’ studies reported by Haraway, it is believed that it was bacteria and archaeobacteria that *enacted* the first forms of *symbiogenesis*, structuring themselves as “complex individualities” or “string figures” that provide the biological and theoretical model for forms of “extended synthesis” between ecologies and technologies, affect and

performance, in the sphere of the human and the non-human (Haraway 2016: 61-63).

Similarly, in episode 1.18, the new Unit-03 is infected by another Angel-bacteria. During a test session, the Unit-03 suddenly breaks contact with the base and the children, revealing mycelium-like filaments on its back and opening huge blood-red jaws. During the fight in the open field, the creature (now identified as Enemy Angel) is able to extend its limbs like a reptile and disarticulate its carapace like an insect. This ability allows it to immobilize the 00 and secrete an irritating pink fluid in an attempt to innervate its “ganglia” (Fig. 2).

In order to defeat it, the Eva-01 will manifest against the will of his children the same animal characteristics, reaching a state of “increased” presence that recalls, to some extent,

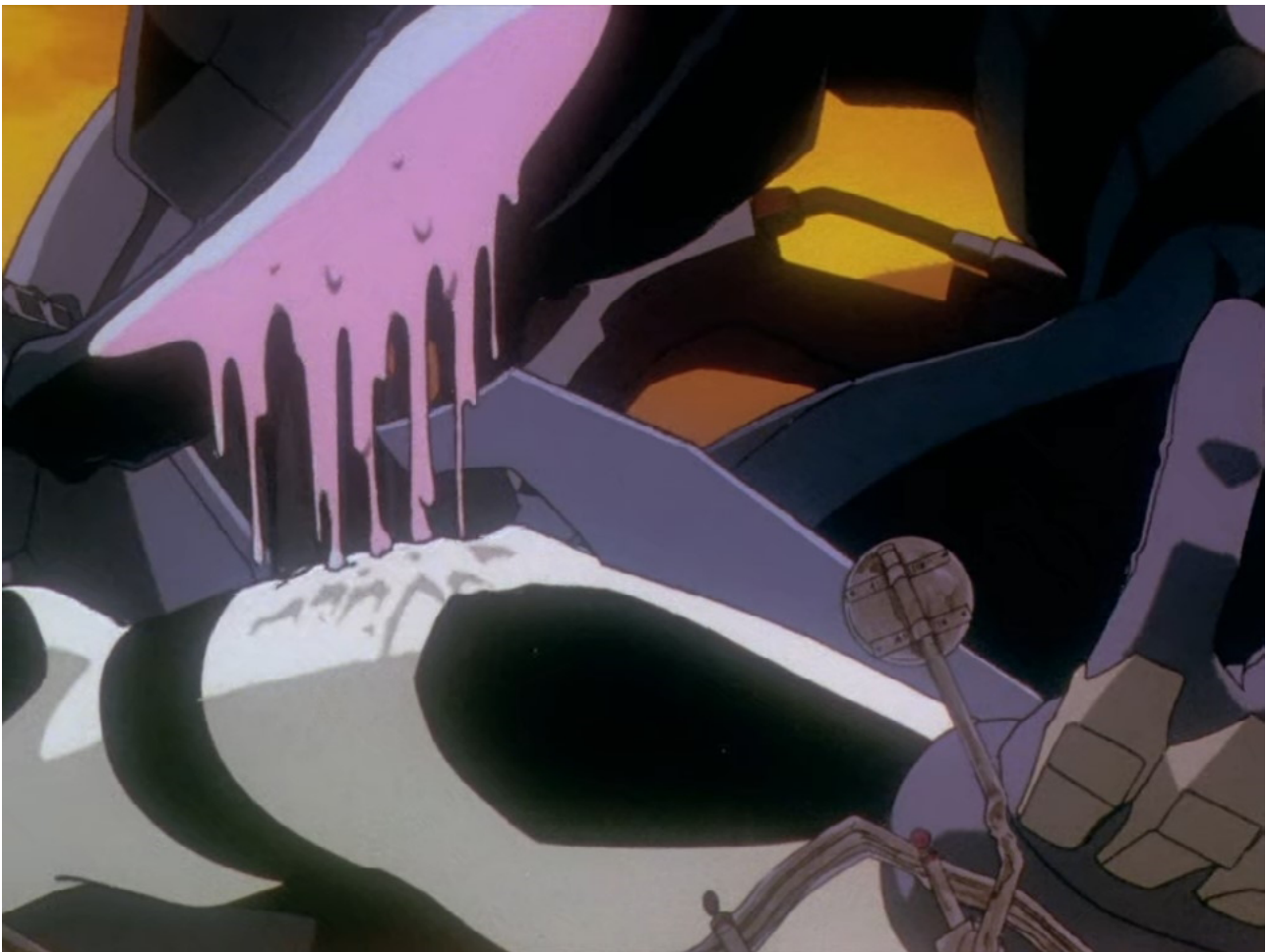


FIG. 2. A FRAME TAKEN FROM THE EPISODE “AMBIVALENCE” (1.18). EVA-03, POSSESSED BY THE ANGEL BARDIEL, DRIPS A CORROSIVE LIQUID ON THE IMMOBILIZED ARM OF EVA-00.

what in 1997 cyberpsychologist Frank Biocca will call “hyper-presence”, on which we will focus in the sixth section.

These two episodes are decisive in showing the postbiotic and *sympoietic* richness of the visible and invisible bodies that populate *Evangelion*, unhinging the Cartesian metaphor of the “ghost in the machine” (Ryle 1949, Dennett 1991), rooted in the “traditional” imaginary of mecha, where, very schematically, the pilot evokes the conscious “mind” and the robot the performing “body”. This is where the unmediated experience of real life is contrasted with the virtual or artificial experience mediated by robotics.

This is a vision of the body that, in the contaminated and contaminable characters of *Evangelion*, is certainly anti-Cartesian, but it no longer strives to “justify” the transitions between the biological and computer worlds (as in the case of Iruel and Bardiel’s infections) or between the host and the symbiont (as in the Eva-children relationship), by presenting bodies that are “naturally” embodied in their postbiotic *continuum*.

The pivotal concept of the embodied theories developed in the 1990s is that experience of the world necessarily involves the sensorimotor system’s understanding of the relationships between possible actions and the resulting sensory changes. It follows that “having” a body with eyes and hands in the frontal area, for observing and manipulating objects, has determined the evolution of specific “anthropomorphic” mechanisms of reasoning and language in human beings (Lakoff and Johnson 1999). This is the meaning of the words of the newcomer Asuka (the Unit-02 pilot of German nationality) when, in the episode “Asuka Strikes!” (1.08), she is forced to share her piloting capsules with Shinji: “I told you not to think in your own language!”, she shouts at her peer when she can’t synchronize with the Eva.

Notably it is only in the eighth episode (one third of the entire series) that we get a sense about the language-based connection underlying the Eva-children system which – backwardly – shed light to the sibylline definition of Eva-01 as an “artificial human” proposed in the first episode. Eva and the children seem able to synchronize by sharing a common language and body morphology, suggesting that cognition implies possessing a body, thus different bodies develop different cognitive processes. Especially, the progress of the symbiotic intimacy between Eva-01 and Shinji seems to strengthen along with the episodes and their “abandonment of the anime-like narrative” made of happy endings and savoir stories (Azuma 1996). This progression towards narrative and corporeal complexity makes *Evangelion* an effective model of a “postbiotic series” as well. States of “me-ness” alternating

with deep, problematic and sometimes painful experiences of “we-ness” undergone by the fictional characters *mirror* those of the occasional viewers and fans, who try to decipher the cult media alone or together with the community of fans.

#### 4. THE EMBODIED MIND

To ensure this complex postbiotic relation, the Evas possess sophisticated technical specifications. Each Unit is in fact equipped with an internal capsule called the Entry Plug in which the children, once on board, can innervate their bodies and minds with the Eva’s, establishing, according to the authors, a neural connection between the A10 regions of the ventral tegmental area (VTA). In this area “the cells [are] soaked in dopamine, certain emotions are processed here; such as the thoughts of two lovers or of a parent and child. And it is the synchronization of the threads and bundles of A10 that splice pilot and Eva together; to become one entity, to fight. In other words, the power of love drives this weapon of mass destruction” (Sadamoto 1997). In cognitive terms, *Evangelion* imagines a neural interconnection device between the human sensorimotor apparatus and that of a giant cyborg. The result is a reciprocal increase in sensory capabilities and a distribution and/or extension of perception-action-reasoning processes outside of one’s own “brain”. Studies and experiments on cortical neuroplasticity applied to the use of sensory substitution devices in the medical field (Bach-Y-Rita et al. 1969, Bach-Y-Rita 2003) or avant-garde forms of cyborg art such as that of Stelarc (Smith 2005), already in the years of the first airing of *Evangelion* had provided more than enough evidence to show how the human being was biologically predisposed to integrate technology not simply at the “prosthetic” level but to “intertwine” it with the deep structures of the psycho-cognitive apparatus (Clark 2003, Parisi 2019). An idea underlying the so-called “extended mind” hypothesis (Chalmers and Clark 1998), which would become one of the four foundations of the contemporary *enactivist* approach to the study of cognition (Gallagher 2017).

But the statement of Sadamoto, which appeared as a comment on the first volume of the spin-off manga of *Evangelion*, also confirms the attention of the authors towards the “affective” turn of the new cognitive sciences. Just in the same years, Jan Panksepp indicated in the midbrain (the oldest part of the central nervous system shared by humans with vertebrates) the presence of seven innate emotional systems that regulate the foundations of mammalian agentivity (Panksepp

1998). Similarly to Haraway, but from an analytical perspective, Andy Clark also used the metaphor of the “cyborg” to define the plastic relation between mind, body, and technology that, in the course of human biocultural evolution, has made us true “bio-technological symbionts” (Clark 2003: 59-88). His hypothesis that the mind can extend beyond the body by integrating extra-neural devices and circuitry (from the “white cane” used by visually impaired people to the most recent “virtual assistants”), suggests a vision of the cognitive mind as “naturally” mediated by the proactive and biunivocal relationship with the body and environments (real, virtual and imaginary). This perspective is embodied in the extended circuitry established between the Eva and the child, connected through a sort of amniotic fluid, called “LCL”, in which the pilot, once within the Unit, is completely immersed. A relationship of bio-chemical and umbilical nature, related to the topics of abjection and the “monstrous feminine” (Kristeva 1982), which is revealed in the course of the series and goes back to another *topos* of the super robotic strand of the Seventies (Nacci 2016: 156-157). In fact, another “revelation” made during the episodes, is that a maternal consciousness lives inside the Evas, for they can establish an emotional feedback loop only with young motherless teens (as in the case of Shinji, Rei and Asuka). The LCL is the only “medium” for human-machine interconnection that, at the expense of “conventional” cockpits, rather advances an eco-phenomenological conception of medium as “a playground within which experience, mediated or non-mediated, is made possible through the co-dependence between perceptual and environmental dispositions” (Gatti 2019:110) and imagines in audiovisual terms the human-machine relationship as the building of “affective niches” in the wake of the mother-infant relationship (Carocci 2020).

The medium imagined in the *Evangelion*'s world does not just achieve a radical form of mental extension but also recalls what neuroscientist William Hirstein has referred to as “mindmelding”. Hirstein has in fact hypothesized that being able to connect in some way the prefrontal lobe of brain A (responsible for unconscious cognitive functions) with the posterior cortex of brain B (responsible for conscious executive processes), could allow the agentivity A to experience the consciousness of B (Hirstein 2012). This would seem to be the neural interconnection strategy allowing Shinji not only to feel and control the Eva's body, but also to receive painful sensory feedbacks whenever the mecha is hit or damaged.

Ever since the first battle with the Angel Sechiel in “Angel Attack” (1.01), the process of mediating with the Eva is in-

deed problematic, intermittent, and very painful. Thus, when Sechiel crushes the Eva-01's right limb, Shinji instinctively grabs his own human arm, which he feels shot through with an agonizing jolt of pain. “Take it easy!” – says the tactical base over the radio link – “You feel pain but it is not grabbing your real arm”. The paradox of a mind perceiving real sensations through a fake body is not only another great cyberpunk *topos*, but has provided the basis for neuroscientific experiments that have brought to light the “phantasmal” interplay between mind and body.

Vilayanur Ramachandran (2003) studied neuroplasticity in patients affected by perceptual deficits such as prosopagnosia (a neuronal disorder that prevents face recognition) or in people who had undergone the amputation of a limb, offering interesting neuro-phenomenological case studies on the phenomenon of phantom limbs, blind vision and synesthesia. As a result, these cases consist in an exemplary demonstration of how high degrees of neural re-mapping are possible even in adulthood. In particular, by simultaneously stimulating a part of a subject's body and an artificial reproduction of it (a rubber hand, but also a VR version of the same), if the subjects focus their visual attentions on the phantom limb, after a few seconds they will experience the strange sensation that their real limbs are actually the phantom ones. By employing robotics and VR technology to make more accurate and radical experiments, scientists have additionally demonstrated that the body is a phantasmal construction of the mind, but that through the same principle states of out-of-body experience or body-swap can be easily elicited even without the aid of brain-machine interfaces (De Oliveira et al 2016). This attitude of “embodied transcendence” peculiar to mental neuroplasticity is thematized by the painful interfacing between Eva and children, and visualized in *Evangelion* through the numerous juxtapositions between the face of Eva and that of the pilot. Through the use of cross-fades, the director evokes a dimension of emotional and intentional superimposition, while recoloring the faces with hyper-saturated and sometimes psychedelic colors suggests states of estrangement and mental transcendence (Fig. 3).

In other cases, it is instead the LCL as an interface or “post-digital membrane” (Pepperell and Punt 2000) that is used by director Anno as a color filter to be applied to the children's bodies so as to emphasize their mental mediation with the Evas. By resuming the study of the “electronic presence” in the filmic experience elaborated by Vivian Sobchack (1990), Bolton analyzes how the superimposition of semi-transparent interfaces or head-up displays on the face



of the protagonists is a typical strategy of sci-fi anime aesthetics linked to the endemic and problematic mediation at the base of postmodern subjectivity (Bolton 2007). As Bolton argues, while characters see and act through a “transparent” interface with their robot or device, we, as spectators, can observe the mediation from the outside, glimpsing the data and digital images of the HUDs superimposed on the pilots’ faces (Bolton 2007: 134-135). This is a paradoxical “third-person subjective camera” that *Evangelion*’s visual and narrative lexicon also makes use of by showing numerous semi-transparent interfaces to connote the hypermediation of the characters, but still using as many fades and space-time ellipses to develop forms of hyperdiegesis.

But the Eva-children media experience is completed (and complicated) by a third “external” element, represented by a trio of bio-computers (called “Magi”) corresponding to three aspects of the personality of the scientist Naoko Agaki (late designer of the computer system), later revealed by Ritsuko in episode 1.13. The Magis composed the AI that monitors, stabilizes, and adjusts the Eva-children’s neural interfacing *on-the-fly* in order to reduce feedback delays; a function Grush (2004) called “emulator circuitry” in robotics jargon. Data from the emulation of the Magi is expressed either on the translucent displays of the children (as in the cases mentioned by Bolton), and also on the giant “holoscreens” of the Nerv’s operating base.

Here, through a “synchronization rate” expressed in percentage, the Nerv tactical staff coordinated by two women, Major Misato and Dr. Ritsuko, can monitor the degree of “transparency” of the Eva-children mediation and stay in radio contact with the pilots to inform them of what is happening inside and outside the Eva. In addition to monitoring other vital parameters, the base is able to limit neural feedbacks and force direct control of the Eva through the “Dummy System”, a kind of autopilot that excludes the intervention of the child. It is only when the rate of synchronization reaches or exceeds 100% that a true form of “mental fusion” is established, a state which goes beyond even the “mindmelding” theorized by Hirstein.



FIG. 3. FRAME TAKEN FROM THE EPISODE “THE BEAST” (1.02). THE FACE OF EVA-01 (PRESUMABLY UNCONSCIOUS) FADES INTO THE “PSYCHEDELIC” FACE OF SHINJI, WHO AWAKENS THE EVA BY OPENING HIS EYES WIDE.

It is relevant to note how the theme of postbiotic fusion is linked to forms of narrative diradiation and confusion that intensify as the relationship between Shinji and the Eva-01 becomes more complex and the boundary between reality and virtuality, intention and action, *me-ness* and *we-ness* becomes indistinguishable. An example of such can be seen in the sequence of “Weaving a story: oral stage” (1.20), in which Mitzuko, Rei and Asuka ask Shinji’s mind to join them, while the boy’s body, after reaching a 400% synchronicity rate, was absorbed within the LCL of the Unit-01 and undergoes a real out-of-body-experience: “Do you want to become one with me? One in body and soul. It will be a very, very pleasant thing, you’ll see”, repeat the three women within a cross-montage that echoes the aesthetics of Fig. 3 and leads to Shinji’s unexpected “expulsion” from the core/uterus of the Unit-01: once again, he revives unharmed. This unexpected outcome has induced some fans to interpret the irrational and animalistic behavior of Evas (labelled as “berserk mode”) as a manifestation of a maternal soul which takes control of the Eva in order to save their children.<sup>3</sup> Other fandom speculation regards the

<sup>3</sup> See [https://evangelion.fandom.com/wiki/Yui\\_Ikari#Yui\\_as\\_Unit-01](https://evangelion.fandom.com/wiki/Yui_Ikari#Yui_as_Unit-01) (last accessed 15-04-21).



very nature of Rei Ayanami (which in episode 1.23 is discovered to be a clone) and the ultimate “meaning” of the season finale (does Shinji really save the humankind or it’s just a compensative dream? Or even something else?). What is relevant is the capacity of a 24-episode TV series ended in 1996 to have instantiated one of the most long-standing “endlessly deferred narrative” (Hills 2002: 101) of contemporary media ecology. With this term Hills refers to the serial praxis of postponing narrative solutions, encouraging fans to scrutinize episodes and other transmedia contents for clues. A serial phenomenon only comparable with *Twin Peaks* (ABC, 1990-1991; Showtime, 2017) which analogously ended its *complex soap opera* after 27 years from its first airing. In his analysis of David Lynch’s successful serial gamification of Laura Palmer’s mystery, Smith concludes “a television/transmedia producer should incorporate strategic gaps into a core narrative and reserve these gaps to be filled in or better understood through narrative extensions” (2009: 51). Analogously, while “database consumption” of the *Evangelion* series has led to the creation of “real” *Evangelion*’s databases and wiki pages which are far from being de-structured,<sup>4</sup> the 2008 announced (and long-awaited) *Evangelion: Final* has been released in Japanese theatres on March 8 2021 with the title *Evangelion: 3.0+1.0 Thrice Upon a Time* (Hideaki Anno, Kazuya Tsurumaki, Katsuichi Nakayama and Mahiro Maeda). Notably, this ultimate “gap filler” comes after 25 years from its first ending.

## 5. THE SYMPOIETIC ENVIRONMENT

As anticipated, in the same years in which the first Evas were imagined and animated, cognitive science became more aware of the experience of the subject located in a biocultural environment. “Outdated” concepts such as *Umwelt* (world-environment), in the meaning given by the ethologist Jacob Von Uexküll ([1934] 2010), revived in authors such as James Gibson for theorizing an ecological perspective

4 In 2007 Gainax Studio embarked on another film saga entitled “Rebuild of Evangelion” consisting of three animated feature films and which should have ended by 2015 with a fourth and final episode that, after numerous postponements, (the last of which due to the Covid-19 emergency) was released in 2021. Pending the epilogue of the saga, in February 2015 the animated 3D short film *Evangelion: Another Impact* (directed by Hideaki Anno himself) was distributed online. The objective was to capture the great transnational interest still underway towards the saga by recalling some images and situation of the 1995-1996 series. In particular, the 3-D Eva protagonist of the short film, among other quotations, resembles an analogous “state of confusion” showed during the activation tests of Eva-00 in the 1995-1996 series.



FIG. 4. FRAME TAKEN FROM THE EPISODE “THE BEAST” (1.02). EVA-01 (RIGHT) PENETRATES WITH ITS HANDS INSIDE THE ANGEL’S A.T. FIELD, AN ICONIC SCENE THAT HAS BECOME THE THEME OF NUMEROUS ACTION FIGURES AND ILLUSTRATIONS.

on perception. It was no longer a “private” experience, but a real perceptual system distributed and embedded in the environment (Gibson 1979: 111). In summary, the so-called “Umwelt theory” is based on the assumption that the subjective experience of a creature is co-dependent on the invitations to perception and action provided by the surrounding environment (*affordances*), thus creating a subjective “bubble” that becomes precisely the creature’s *world-environment* where it perceives and acts accordingly. This is the reason why different species can inhabit the same space, but not the same *Umwelt*. In order to intersect these worlds, a medium is needed. For instance, the spider’s web connects the world of the arachnid with that of the fly: the web is elastic enough to imprison the fly and strong enough to serve as a stepping-stone to the spider’s attack, thus forming a shared and “open” *Umwelt* (Agamben 2004: 42).

These are theories that have revived AI studies and built the theoretical basis for the construction of real proactive robots (Nolfi 1998, Clark and Grush 1999) capable of “dealing with unpredictable events in an environment or niche without recourse to an external designer” (Haselager 2007: 64), and which we find anticipated in the character design of the Evas.

Resembling an insect’s carapace, the outer armor of each Unit is characterized by a specific morphology and colors. Moreover, the Evas can release a kind of luminescent aura called “Absolute Terror Field” (A.T. Field), meaning the

“absolute” power of the mind extension in the world as well as the “terrifying” mental barrier which defines the Self from the Other. Basically the A.T. Field is a force field that can become a weapon, a defense shield, or an elastic membrane that is able to intersect (and pierce) the opponent’s force field. The visualization of the A.T. Field as a kind of luminous spider’s web (Fig. 4) offers an effective representation of the *Umwelt* as a circle of perception-action extended beyond the physical limits of the body as well as an intersubjective *medium* among different *Umwelten* or, as Metzinger hypothesizes, a tool for building new and more shared ones. In fact, according to the German philosopher, a consequence of the progressive use of humanoid AI in virtual reality environments could lead to the birth of a *Lebenswelt*, a “natural” inter-subjective perception of *togetherness* that would emerge in AIs from their relationship with the human and non-human avatars that inhabit these environments (Metzinger 2018: 14).

In our case, it would be plausible to imagine that the agencies of the Evas and the Magi, in their neural circuitry with the children and the tactical base, could “naturally” perceive themselves as part of a *Lebenswelt* determined by the coexistence of more *Umwelten* in the same self-organized system.

At this point, however, it is worth remembering that in *Evangelion* this struggle between complex environments is located within a larger ecosystem that, as anticipated, has been compromised as a result of a catastrophic climate change. On the one hand, we find the never-ending summer: with the chirping of the cicadas that punctuates the sound carpet of the whole series, and the static long shots that transmit its atmosphere of cognitive and narrative thinning. An example of this is Shinji’s 48-second long still frame at the train station while he is undecided whether to stop piloting the Unit-01 or return to Misato waiting for him (Fig. 5).<sup>5</sup>

5 The poetics of the “still image” is one of the salient features of the direction of *Evangelion*. Other images of this kind, which have become cult in the fan community, are the fixed 53-second shot of Rei and Ayanami inside the elevator in the episode “At Least, Be Human” (1.22) and the still image preceding the death of the Angel-children Kaworu by the hands of Eva-01 in episode “The Final Messenger” (1.24).

On the other hand, we discover a militarily advanced Neo-Tokyo 3, able to model its topography through a system of “retractable skyscrapers”: to save the population, but even to offer shelter, weapons or access routes to the Evas which, from the tactical base located in the underground, emerge on the surface in case of Angels’ attack.

The Forum of the Athenian City as a “subjectivity device” (Deleuze [1989] 2007: 20), or the modern metropolis as a “hyper-device” for the citizen-spectator (Hansen 1991), was questioned at the turn of the new millennium in the face of an urban structure. It was modelled on the “decentralization of points of presence” and suited for a subjective experience defined as “nodular” but regulated at the rate of access, prophylaxis, default options and *mobile* device algorithms (Mitchell 2003: 144).

The very environment of Neo-Tokyo 3 therefore appears as a hyper-connected and sympoietic ecosystem, but with a medieval lifestyle: perched within the retractable walls of a perennial state of emergency. When Shinji and his companions do not socialize in the school’s disciplinary device, they walk through the deserted streets of a sultry and demotivating endless summer that portrays the characters devoid of depth and crushed on the ground.



FIG. 5. THE 48-SECOND STILL FRAME OF THE EPISODE “SHAPE OF HEART, SHAPE OF HUMAN” (1.20) DEPICTING SHINJI (TOP) AND MISATO (BOTTOM) WHILE A SPEAKER ANNOUNCES THE ARRIVAL OF THE TRAIN.



FIG. 6. CHARACTER DESIGNS OF NINE ANGELS FEATURED IN THE *EVANGELION* SERIES OF 1995-1996. IMAGE TAKEN FROM THE ARTBOOK *NEON GENESIS EVANGELION ARTBOOK (NEWTYPE 100% COLLECTION)*, EDITED BY YOSHIYUKI SADAMOTO (KODOKAWA SHOTEN, 1997).

In the episode “A Human work” (1.07), in which the human responsibility of the Second Impact is revealed, another still image shows the sunken ruins of the old Tokyo, while Misato, flying over the water desert, exclaims: “It’s hard to think that this was the great metropolis called the city of cherry blossoms”. After the Anthropocene, the era of exploitation of the Earth by human beings, *Evangelion’s* intersubjective and multispecies environment has the merit of having also problematized the advent of that new subterranean, fungiform and “compostable” era, renamed “Chthulucene” by Haraway (2016: 51-57). This is a term composed of the Greek roots *kh-ton* (“earth”) and *kainos* (meaning “now” or “new”) to indicate a space-time where one “stays with the trouble” of an Earth now damaged and wounded by the Anthropocene and populated by “Chthonic” creatures (“as replete with tentacles, feel-

ers, digits, cords, whiptails, spider legs, and very unruly hair”). Furthermore, Haraway concludes that monotheistic societies have traditionally tried to exterminate all chthonic creatures (Haraway 2016: 2). The character design of the mysterious and gargantuan Angels against which the Evas struggle (Fig. 4) seems to embody the model of the Chthonic creature to which, as we will see, even the Eva in certain circumstances seem to adhere. More in general, it completes the picture of an open, complex and at times mysterious ecosystem, which makes *Evangelion* still today a precious table of philosophical and scientific confrontation of eco-phenomenological perspectives.

## 6. THE ENHANCED PRESENCE

“It’s safer than a wildly dangerous weapon that can go out of control and go on a rampage at the drop of a hat, I’d say. Weapon that can’t be controlled is utter nonsense... It’s like hysterical women.” These are the manager’s words of a competing corporation to the women at the head of the Nerv base who rightly defend the animal and affective component that moves the Eva.

His short-sightedness can be found in reality, too. The manufacturing of the first military robots like *BigDog* by Boston Dynamics in 2004 was in fact inspired by supposed animal characteristics. By designing a military dog-robot as a quadruped machine, military industries would to some extent “compensate” humans from ethical and moral responsibilities in their warfare by addressing military operations to an inhuman agency (Braidotti 2014: 133-134).

That of mechanics animalization and animal mechanization is another distinctive path of the techno-science of the twentieth century. “Animals – and their ability for instinctive, almost telepathic communication – question the primacy of human language and consciousness as an optimal mode of communication”, asserts Akira Mizuta Lippitt (2000: 2), according to whom the figure of the animal, disappeared from the modern metropolitan environment, is progressively re-located in the visual media system, including Japanese animation works.

The marked and uncontrolled animality of the Eva is certainly a metaphor for this problematic tension between an openness to new forms of consciousness, self-awareness and philosophically “animalistic” and cognitively “altered” presence. Yet, it also concerns their exploitation for military, economic and eminently anthropocentric purposes. Precisely,



it was the particular sense of echo-location - the ability of some animals to orient themselves and locate external bodies based on the echo of ultrasounds they themselves emitted - combined with an all-anthropocentric vision (White 2013). These features led the USSR and the United States to train dolphins for military use during the Cold War.

In particular, the manager's criticism refers to the Eva's ability to exclude control of the pilot and tactical base, acting independently and revealing powerful, as well as uncontrolled, wildly animal skills. This is a state of altered presence that the Nerv calls "berserk" (*bousou*, literally "out of control" but also "fugitive"), during which the Eva's carapace deforms and disarticulates, showing truly bestial traits, fighting skills and emotions.

While in past tradition some super-robots could transform into animals by reassembling their mechanical components (*Raideen*, *Voltron*, etc.), in the Eva animalization this process bursts as a phenomenon of abject metamorphosis: nauseating and repulsive, but also adrenaline-pumping and visually attractive. An alteration of the psycho-physical state that *children* within the Eva seem to live, by going into a state of trance or becoming "possessed" by its animal fury. It is no coincidence that among the innate emotional systems indicated by Panksepp, "rage" is "aroused by frustrations and attempts to curtail animals' freedom of action [...] The RAGE system invigorates aggressive behaviors when animals are irritated or restrained and also helps animals defend themselves by arousing FEAR in their opponents" (Panksepp 2011: 1799). A system common to humans and mammals that, according to Panksepp, can be inhibited (by blocking some neurotransmitters or administering opioids) and that is linked to the development of "high-level" psychological states such as irritability, resentment and anger.

Similarly, in *Evangelion* the berserk mode can manifest spontaneously during borderline situations of stress and psycho-physical coercion, or it can be induced by the tactical base by activating the Dummy System (as is the case in the aforementioned scene of Bardiel's attack on episode 1.18). More generally, the series shows a vast sample of berserk situations, winking at the cinematic "body

horror" (Williams 1991) and dynamizing the shots with copious jets of blood, secretions and dismemberments (Fig. 6).

This *recursive remix* of this canonical situation is certainly one of the main features of the series and provides another "scale model" for the franchise. In fact, the berserked Evas become iconic images in the *Evangelion* ecology, and, as within the episodes of the series, has been remixed throughout different media (films, manga, action figures, etc.).

Among the various scenes showing the Evas in *berserk mode*, I am going to focus on that of the episode "Introjection" (1.19). These will later be remixed in the films *Death and Rebirth* (1997) and *Evangelion 2.0 You Can (Not) Advance* (Anno, Masayuki and Tsurumaki, 2009), which provide several endings, reverberating "forensic" and hyperdiegetic fascinations within the entire media franchise too. The three versions resemble the same starting situation: during the fight against the angel Zeruel, the Eva-01 has its left arm cut and, when apparently shot to death, it deactivates the neural bond with the *children*, remaining helpless under the slashes of the enemy. In the series, the director shows Shinji disconnected from the Eva who, within the Entry plug, begs the Unit-01 to wake up. After a few seconds of waiting, as Zeruel is about to violate the capsule by inflicting the *coup de grace* on Shinji, the Eva's eyes suddenly light up.



FIG. 7. FRAME TAKEN FROM THE EPISODE "AMBIVALENCE" (1.18). THE EVA-01 IN BERSERK MODE DISMEMBERS THE BODY OF THE EVA-03 POSSESSED BY THE BACTERIUM ANGEL.



FIG. 8. FRAME TAKEN FROM THE EPISODE “INTROJECTION” (1.19). THE EVA-01 IN BERSERK MODE TAKES ON AN ANIMAL-LIKE CONNOTATION.

After pushing the enemy away, the Unit-01 opens its jaws and throws a frightening roar to the sky. Quickly regenerating the severed limb, the Eva attacks and kills the opponent by devouring its energy core (a kind of pineal cell located in the center of the chest, called the “S2 engine”). While in the episode “The Beast” (1.02), the battle of *Eva-children* in berserk mode is told through a series of flashbacks of Shinji in the aftermath of his awakening in the hospital. In episode 1.19, we witness the metamorphosis “in real time”, where the Eva recalls the posture and verses of a mammoth gorilla-cyborg (Fig. 7).

Here, as in the 1997 film version, only at the end of the battle do we discover that Shinji’s body has been absorbed by that of the Eva which, after devouring the Angel, frees it-

self from part of its carapace (“A constricting armor”, Ritsuko admits), revealing organic parts hitherto unknown even to characters and spectators. An experience, that of berserk, that cyberpsychology would define as a state of “hyperpresence” to indicate the ability that a highly immersive medium (such as some virtual and mixed reality environments) has to “create a greater intimacy than face-to-face communication” (Biocca 1997). In this case, it is the intimacy between Eva and *children*, which, from an initial effect of immediacy and communicative intimacy, defined in jargon “social presence” (Lombard and Ditton 1997: 3), passes to a state of co-presence or *togetherness* that merges each other’s intentionality. A phenomenon, I would say, that is similar to the notion of *Lebenswelt* evoked by Meztinger.



If feeling present and located in a specific body (*embodiment*) is the basis of the sense of self, according to more recent studies, forms of “distributed embodiment” between the body of a human user and a robotic or virtual avatar can alter and expand the processes of presence with possibilities and results still to be discovered in the social, therapeutic and communication field (Riva, Waterworth and Murray 2014).

However, in *Evangelion's* world, the alteration of senses (*altered embodiment*), the illusion of non-robotic mediation (*expanded embodiment*) and the *hyper-intimacy* achieved between Eva and children during the *berserk* mode (*distributed embodiment*) produces a schizophrenic fragmentation of Shinji's sense of self which, from episode 1.16, corresponds to a fragmentation of the diegetic time and space. According to John and Eva Lindh Waterworth, “If the technology is integrated with the self, we attend to and feel present in an external mediated reality in which the mediated nature of the world is invisible” (2014: 42). It is therefore conceivable that Shinji's alteration or loss of consciousness corresponds to a degree of transparency (i.e., “synchronization” in Nerv jargon) that fuses the human self with the bionic self of the Eva, thus creating an unprecedented form of cognitively richer and more complex *postbiotic presence*, than the concepts of mind-melding and hyperpresence have presupposed. The question arises as to whether even the agentivity of the Eva feels an opposite “inside-of-the-body” experience, that is, whether it is perceived as an autonomous singularity or senses the disturbing feeling that its actions are driven by an external agency, or even, whether its presence fluctuates from one strata to another and it is aware of it. The same dilemma could arise in respect of the audience experience: are we watching an extremely well designed (yet still) mecha anime series, or this is just the *rabbit hole* for entering in a puzzling, avant-pop and ultimately “postbiotic” media ecosystem? The “curse of Eva” – a side effect of piloting Evas which prevent pilots from aging – could be intended as a “figurative side effect” of *Evangelion's* out-of-joint and deferred seriality. Even after decades, in fact, the hard-core fans demand for an all-encompassing explanation of *Evangelion* remains unrealised.<sup>6</sup>

6 It could be suffice to say that in Italy (considered as one of the most relevant anime's western market) an *Evangelion's* guide titled *Evangelion for Dummies (Plug)* (Tedeschi and Brignola 2020) has been recently published. The book's introduction claims: “The Nerds aren't afraid of anyone. Not even Hideaki Anno! Two fans stood in a basement and shot *Neon Genesis Evangelion* an unquantifiable number of times. And afterwards they thought of writing a book. To explain *Evangelion!*”. For a multi-disciplinary discussion of the “Italian anime boom” see Pellitteri (2014).

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

By proposing a “fractal” analysis of the *Evangelion* series by highlighting some distinctive features of the episodes and character design, I have analyzed how the series intercepted, thematized and popularized an eco-phenomenological approach to reality that, at the turn of the new millennium, developed among the human and cognitive sciences. The remix of themes and forms of the “mecha” serial genre effectively hooks up with the fandom ecosystem, triggering a long-standing, transnational and deferred narrative about its own “ending” and the complexity of contemporary mediated experience. In doing so, the *Evangelion* series has intercepted and helped to spread within the pop and fan culture groundbreaking eco-phenomenological themes and perspective.

Within the episodes the notion of body is conceived as a place of postbiotic encounter and sympoiesis among species, and depository of an “intimacy between strangers” that is constitutive of the biocultural evolution. The character's mind, embodied and anti-Cartesian, is capable of altering, extending, merging and transcending the biological body through technological mediation. The *Evangelion's* environment is proposed as an intelligent and contaminated system, populated by chthonic creatures and multiple species, politically contended between the Anthropocene and the Chthulucene. And finally, the series articulates a compelling vision of “presence” as an endemically mediated and volatile experience which nowadays is at the center of the ethical debate on the “human enhancement” (Kaspersky Lab 2020) and on the possible “artificial suffering” of *near-to-future* sentient robots designed by humans (Metzinger 2013).

By recalling and, at times suggesting, postbiotic and sympoietic scenarios of the world to come through a sophisticated visual and serial strategy based on endlessly deferred narrative and a complex character design, *Evangelion* has the merit of having synthesized, in an innovative and probably unparalleled form, the complexity of the eco-phenomenological approach *to* and *within* the Japanese serial animation and partially underestimated in the Western one.

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*Twin Peaks* (1990-1991; 2017)  
*Voltron* (1984-1985)

# THE KIM WALL MURDER SERIALIZED: ETHICS & AESTHETICS IN HIGH-PROFILE TRUE CRIME

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## KEYWORDS

True crime; meta-communication; series; *The Investigation*;  
media ethics.

## ABSTRACT

This article investigates the dramaturgical, aesthetic and ethical implications of making television on the back of

a high-profile, internationally appealing and very recent murder case: the Kim Wall murder. During a trip in his self-made submarine, Peter Madsen, a known amateur space rocket and submarine builder, abused and murdered Kim Wall, a young Swedish journalist, who was supposed to do an interview with him. Less than three years later, a range of true crime productions had been made about the case, and this article analyses three of them. Preliminary findings suggest that meta-communication is highly important in high-profile true crime productions such as these, and that creators have to walk a thin line.



This article investigates the dramaturgical, aesthetic and ethical implications of making television on the back of a high-profile, internationally prominent and very recent murder case: the Kim Wall murder. During a trip in his self-made submarine, Peter Madsen, a known amateur space rocket and submarine builder, abused and murdered Kim Wall, a young Swedish journalist, who was supposed to do an interview with him. Less than three years later, a range of true crime productions had been made about the case, and this article analyses three of them. Preliminary findings suggest that meta-communication<sup>1</sup> is highly important in high-profile true crime productions such as these, and that creators have to walk a thin line. One production has not yet reached audiences' screens on account of critical media attention (*Into the Deep*, Netflix, 2020), another may have miscalculated social media feedback (*The Secret Recordings*, Discovery, 2020) while a third, despite initial reluctance in the media and the sensitive nature of the case, has seemingly fared well with critics and audiences (*The Investigation*, TV 2, 2020). The article illustrates how the murderer is depicted in very different ways – from occupying centre stage to being avoided at all costs – and how this affects the dramaturgy and ultimately the perceived ethics of the series. It also discusses the complicated interaction with the murderer, the press and the friends and relatives of the victim that productions such as these have to engage in, whether they want to or not. Drawing on theoretical frameworks of the true crime genre as well as the historical film, the article ultimately identifies four parameters of critical importance in true crime productions based on high-profile, recent events (Punnett 2018, Christensen 2020b, Robert Burgoyne 2008).

Thornley advocates methodological pluralism when studying adaptations of true events (2018: 4). Inspired by this, this article uses textual analysis coupled with key production interviews as well as contexts such as ratings, reviews and user comments on social media, striving towards a multi-stranded approach. These different approaches supplement each other and thus contribute to a better understanding of the dialectic between ethics and aesthetic choices in high-profile true crime. The production interviews are performed with producers and scriptwriters, or, as Caldwell would have it, with people 'above the line'. These people have a great share in their productions, and they are essentially doing me

a favour by talking to me, which may limit the boldness of my questions and the critical self-scrutiny in their answers (Caldwell 2008, Bruun 2014). This methodological circumstance is addressed by maintaining a critical distance when analysing the interviews.

## 1. THE TRUE CRIME GENRE

At the time of this writing, true crime as a genre has been academically accounted for on several occasions. A recent, exhaustive description of the genre, as it appears both historically and on contemporary television screens, is Punnett's *Toward a Theory of True Crime Narratives* (2018). According to Punnett, historically, Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966) made it "respectable" to read about a gory crime (2018: 2). The fact that Punnett would put respectable into quotation marks points to the fact that the respectability of the genre is still disputed, and in some ways, this dispute holds centre stage for the analysis in this article. Respectable or not, the genre has had an audience even before 1966, for example in the form of American true crime magazines from 1920s and forward. As both Punnett and Granild point out, a revitalisation of the genre arguably took place starting with the podcast series *Serial* (WBEZ, 2014-) and was quickly followed by television streaming hits *The Jinx: The Life and Deaths of Robert Durst* (HBO, 2015) and *Making a Murderer* (Netflix, 2015-2018) (Punnett 2018: 2, Granild 2020: 140).

Punnett initially explains that "there is no over-arching theory that determines what is and what is not true crime" (2018: 2) but goes on to define it as "an occasionally controversial multi-platform storytelling genre that is most often associated with murder narratives and shares some common ancestral heritage with journalism, but always has been driven by different impulses." (2018: 3). Punnett recognises the vagueness of such a definition. Inspired by the theories of Bakhtin, Derrida, and Barthes, and through detailed analysis of 12 cases, he therefore goes on to establish eight different codes that together form his theory of true crime narratives. I shall go into these codes in some detail, because they shall later serve as tools in my analysis. Of these codes, the teleology – whether the facts of the story are truthful and accurate or not – always needs to be determined first, because if they are not, it is not true crime. The rest of the codes are:

- Justice: whether seeking justice is a primary occupation of the narrative or not.
- Subversive: whether the text seeks to subvert status

1 In this article, meta-communication is used as an umbrella term for all communication happening outside of the media text: marketing, communication with the press, dialogue with participants, etc.

quo or not.

- Crusader: whether the text calls for social reformation/change or not.
- Geographic: the impact of locality on the narrative.
- Forensic: the level of “visual portrayal of crime narratives, detailed description of crime scenes, autopsies, and scientific methods of crime detection.” (2018: 98).
- Vocative: the level of subjective, advocacy-positioning in the narrative (as opposed to an authorial listing of facts).
- Folkloric: the level of instructive fairy-tale embedded in the narrative, which may bend the truth a little.

Some of the codes overlap. Punnett is aware of this, but meaningfully justifies the existence of each code.

Christensen explores the differences between crime fiction and the true crime genre (2020b). He points to a range of similarities but argues that in crime fiction, the investigator is almost always depicted as having a troubled personal life, which is rare in true crime. Also, he states that the documentary form is a typical trait of the true crime genre. Following Eitzen (2018), Christensen highlights the sensationalist aspects of the true crime genre, illustrating how sensationalism can both be regarded as a parasitical marketing mechanism and as a justifiable tool in a call to action in cases of injustice.

The spectacular and high-profile nature of the Kim Wall murder deserves a bit more attention. The fact that it happened in a submarine is curious, but the gruesome character of the murder also makes it stand out. Madsen dismembered Wall in the submarine, spread her body parts in the ocean and flooded the submarine. Coupled with his inventive and adaptive lies about the crime, he ultimately made the investigation and solving of the crime difficult, expensive and time consuming. News media quickly caught scent of the spectacular nature of the murder, resulting in rigorous press coverage by Danish, Swedish and international media from August 11 2017, the day the submarine went missing, to April 25 2018, the day Peter Madsen was convicted of murder. This level of contemporality and media attention is atypical of cases investigated in recent true crime productions. Comparatively, *Serial* started out investigating a murder committed 16 years prior. The murders in *The Jinx* were committed 14, 15 and 33 years before the show was broadcast, and *Making a Murderer* revolved around a 30-year-old murder case. None of these murders had the same level of spectacular gruesomeness as the Kim Wall murder. *Serial*, *The Jinx* and *Making a Murderer* certainly had to consider questions of ethics, morality and tastefulness. Also, the time that had passed since the crimes

was in a sense adding to the urgency of the series, because maybe an innocent man had been incarcerated all these years, or maybe a guilty man had been escaping justice for decades. Nevertheless, none of these series had to walk as fine a line in terms of ethics as the series based on the Kim Wall murder.

## 2. THE SECRET RECORDINGS: KILLER ON CENTRE STAGE

*The Secret Recordings* (*De hemmelige optagelser med Peter Madsen*) is a five-episode true crime documentary built around 20 hours of telephone interviews with Peter Madsen performed by Kristian Linnemann, the journalist behind the series. It was aired on Discovery+, the Discovery network's streaming platform, a streaming service focusing on reality and true crime. The premise of the documentary is laid out by Linnemann in the beginning of the show:

There's still unanswered questions. Why did Kim Wall have to die? How much of the murder was planned? And why didn't PM confess? [...] What made Peter Madsen abandon his rocket building project and commit a murder as gruesome as this? What pushed him over the edge? (*The Secret Recordings*, 1.01).

Thus, the premise is built around the fact that Peter Madsen never confessed to committing the murder. During the trial, the prosecution successfully proved both the murder and the motive, even if Peter Madsen never admitted to doing it. In a sense, then, the series questions the work done by the prosecution or at least feels that the question of motive can be elaborated upon. The dramaturgy in the series mainly revolves around Linnemann presenting two experts, one psychiatrist and one former special police investigator, with excerpts from his talks with Madsen, and their analysis and reactions to this. Seen from a journalistic point of view, *The Secret Recording's* key *raison d'être* is the fact that Madsen in the series for the first time confesses to committing the murder. According to Tine Røgind Quist, producer on the series, the confession and the chance to explore and analyse the psychology of a ruthless killer were of public interest, justifying the series.<sup>2</sup>

2 Interview with Tine Røgind Quist conducted by the author, February 8, 2021.



FIG. 1. *THE SECRET RECORDINGS*, 1.01, 00:02:02; SLOW ZOOM ON PICTURE OF THE KILLER.

*The Secret Recordings* focuses on Peter Madsen, the murderer, with archived footage of him appearing time and again, often accompanied by disconcerting strings, slow zoom on a picture of him and sometimes a jump-scare use of sudden, high-pitched sound, in line with what Christensen has identified as sensationalist aspects of true crime (2020b).

The editing is built around set-ups, payoffs and cliffhangers. For example, the series will play an excerpt from the interviews with Madsen in which he poses a question, and then it cuts to something different, temporarily leaving the answer in the wind, setting up a cliffhanger. As the series is primarily built on a string of phone interviews, the camera often lacks an obvious motive. It dwells on Linnemann and the experts listening to the sound bites, trying to capture their reactions. Pictures of a sound recorder or still images of Madsen are also often used. The aesthetics and sound in the series use a great deal of tools from reality television and hence are much in line with other series highlighted on Discovery's online interface, the network branding itself on crime, reality and sports.

Seen through the lens of Punnett's true crime theory, *The Secret Recordings* primarily engages with the *forensic* and *folk-*

*loric* codes. The forensic level is seemingly important, as the series brands itself on the scientific, psychological dissemination and portrait of Madsen. However, the *folkloric* code is ultimately dominant – it is indeed an instructive fairy tale about a monster, and, implicitly, a warning to stay away from monsters such as Madsen. Despite the implicit warnings, Kim Wall is not depicted as careless for going into the submarine, but the point of nearly all scenes is that Madsen is a manipulative, egomaniacal, deliberate and perverted killer.

The programme embraces the tabloid press coverage of the case by using a journalist from a tabloid newspaper who covered the case as an expert and source of information. Also, there is no public cooperation with the Wall family. The series discusses ethical perspectives in the last episode by having Linnemann ask the experts if they think anything good came out of his talks with Madsen, briefly initiating a discussion as to whether or not the recordings and the show can be justified. While the experts condone the show, of course, and point to the series' contribution to profiling murderers, one of them recognises that some people will think the show inappropriate. *The Secret Recordings* was poorly reviewed in the press (Jakobsen 2020, Eistrup 2020), and it was read as

controversial by some. The production is widely critiqued by users on Discovery's official Facebook page. Popular comments include: "Stop giving that loser attention and airtime!"; and "Respect for the victim's family isn't really Discovery+'s thing, is it".<sup>3</sup> The reality television aesthetics and dramaturgy were presumably read as insensitive and sensationalist in so recent and gruesome a case as this. The very idea of granting a known and convicted killer time with a microphone is disputed. I shall develop and further discuss this response in the section on meta-communication in true crime below. According to Lena Bøgild, Discovery's PR & Communication director, the show generated a reasonable amount of traffic to Discovery's streaming service and lured in new subscribers.<sup>4</sup> Just like Netflix, Discovery does not share audience ratings on its streaming service.

### 3. ANTI-SENSATIONALIST TRUE CRIME?

*The Investigation* (*Efterforskningen*) adopts a different approach, documented in the following. It is a six-part miniseries based on the Kim Wall murder, made by Miso Film for TV2, Denmark, which is the highest rated television network in Denmark. The series was directed by Tobias Lindholm, who has previous experience with crime serials through his work directing episodes of *Mindhunter* (Netflix 2017-2019), and it features well-known Danish actors such as Pilou Asbæk (*Game of Thrones*, HBO, 2011-2019; *Borgen*, DR1, 2010-2013) and Søren Malling (*A Hijacking*, Tobias Lindholm, 2012; *Forbrydelsen*, DR1, 2007-2012).

*The Investigation* is a fictionalised, dramatized version of the investigation of the Kim Wall murder centred on Jens Møller, the lead investigator in the case. It follows the investigation through the initial uncertainties – was it a murder or an accident? – but quickly focuses on the time-consuming job of finding enough reliable evidence to ensure a conviction, in this case by having divers scouring the seas for body parts for months and months and coroners carefully examine the body parts found. The dramatized form makes it markedly different from the journalistic-driven documentary style of true crime that we see in *The Secret Recording*, *Into the Deep*, *The Jinx* and *Making a Murderer*, and the form clashes with Christensen's definition of true crime (2020b). Still,

the true crime *teleology* of the series is indisputable (Punnett 2018:98): *The Investigation* sticks very closely to the actual events, save for a few minor points, to which I shall return. Accordingly, I argue that it fits within the genre, albeit just barely.

In *The Jinx* and *Making a Murderer*, the premise is a critique of society (Granild 2020). The point of *The Jinx* is that if you have got money and powerful friends, it does not matter what you have done. Rich people in the US can get away with anything, even murder, due to a broken justice system and incompetent police. Similarly, *Serial* and *Making a Murderer* illustrate how allegedly innocent people are convicted in the US, also criticizing the justice system and police investigations. In many ways, *The Investigation* is the opposite. At the core of it, *The Investigation* is a praise to the police officers, lawyers, coroners, and divers who worked tirelessly to build the case against Peter Madsen, the now convicted murderer. If it were not for the thousands of hours put into making the case against him, which undoubtedly has cost Danish society a vast amount of money, he would probably have received a much milder sentence. This point – the sheer amount of work put into the case – is also the main new piece of information the series shares with the viewers, unlike the types of true crime series that seek to bring extraordinary new pieces of evidence to light. The serial form compliments the focus on the workload. Entire episodes are dedicated to depicting a lot of work, often resulting in only little progress.

*The Investigation* makes a number of choices that can be interpreted as an ambition to present the most sober and least sensationalist account of the murder case possible. The most daring of these is arguably the choice to not show the murderer, or even mention his name, at any point during the series. He only exists through his actions, and he only speaks through others. Contrarily, Kim Wall's accomplishments, goals and ideals are emphasised, primarily narrated through her parents. Though *The Investigation* clearly tries to have Kim Wall be more than just a victim, the primary focus is on the regular people who worked tirelessly to make the case against the murderer, and especially lead investigator Jens Møller. The camera follows him through most of the episodes, and the audience learn the facts of the case chronologically as he learns them. He is also the only character the audience sees in private settings having dinners with his wife and failing his daughter on account of the heavy workload from the case.

The series implicitly criticizes the press coverage of the murder, seeing things from the lead investigators perspective: Throughout the series he is continually contacted and often

3 Discovery on Facebook 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/discoveryplusDK/posts/1733288273503215> (last accessed 14-06-21).

4 Interview with Lene Bøgild conducted by the author, February 8, 2021.





FIG. 2. *THE INVESTIGATION*: MIMICKING CAMERA ANGLE IN COMPUTER GAMES.

interrupted by reporters. In the final episode, Jens comments: “In Denmark, 50 murders are committed every year. [...] It’s the lowest amount ever. It just doesn’t feel that way, because we hear about all of them”. Jakob Buch-Jepsen, the lead prosecutor, retorts with a twist on the famous Nietzsche-quote about gazing into the abyss: “Perhaps it’s like this: The more civilised we get, the more we need to gaze into the darkness”. Peter Bose, producer on the show, confirmed that he saw the series going in a different direction than the sensationalist press coverage:

We felt that it was an important story to tell. Especially seen in the light of the way in which the story had been told in the press: *Breaking news* again and again. It was almost like everybody was looking to the ocean, scouting for the submarine. It was crazy.<sup>5</sup>

As if to underline the sober intentions, *The Investigation* is dedicated to the memory of Kim Wall, and the epilogue promotes the Kim Wall Memorial Fund, an organisation funding female journalists who want to tell stories about subcultures

with “the undercurrents of a rebellion” (Kim Wall Memorial Fund 2020). This last point also hints at the fact that the series established full cooperation with Kim Wall’s parents (Johansen 2020)<sup>6</sup>. Finally, *The Investigation* employs a mostly sombre use of aesthetics and sound. *The Investigation* has a realist style with a great many scenes kept without any score, and others accompanied by mostly discrete strings. The series’ aesthetics emphasise identification with especially Jens Møller, but also at times Kim Wall’s parents. It does so by use of handheld camera positioned behind the person, mimicking the camera’s position and movements in video games such as *Call of Duty* (Activision, 2003-) or *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004-), which seek to establish identification between the user and the in-game avatar.

*The Investigation* primarily engages with Punnett’s justice, geographical and forensic codes. The show is heavily invested in seeking justice. Even though the audience is presumably acutely aware that Peter Madsen ends up getting convicted, the way towards the conviction is the primary dramaturgical engine in the series. This includes the meticulous gathering of evidence, the endless hours scouring the ocean for body parts and the dismantling of the killer’s lies. The *geography*

5 Interview with Peter Bose conducted by the author, January 4, 2021.

6 Interview with Peter Bose conducted by the author, January 4, 2021.



in the series is crucial, as the Øresund region's distinct aesthetics are highlighted, and the exact geographical properties of Øresund – the depth, current, and size of the strait – play key roles in the unfolding of the investigation. On the one hand, the *forensic* code permeates the core of the narrative with the finding and detailed analysis of body parts as well as reading of coroner's reports and dialogue with coroners as corner stones. On the other hand, the gory details are deemphasised. The camera mostly avoids the victim's body parts, and both the forensic details of the case as well as the sexual dominance and snuff movie-inspired motive of the crime are discussed in a professional way. Just as in *The Secret Recordings*, Kim Wall is not depicted as careless for going into the submarine with a man she did not know. On the contrary, *The Investigation* is a voice for Kim Wall's parents, who condoned her choices and who have founded a trust for other adventurous female journalists.

*The Investigation* generally sticks very closely to the facts of the case, which could perhaps be expected in a case as recent and sensitive as this one. Peter Bose commented: "We checked *all* the facts. We had a team go through everything. We had lawyers check any legal aspects. [...] Everybody thinks they know the details of the case. If you get it wrong, you risk upsetting a lot of people".<sup>7</sup> This is well known – fictions based on facts are often criticised for inconsistencies and "errors", which a historical production such as *1864* (DR1, 2014) exemplifies (Hedling 2016). However, *The Investigation* does bend the truth a little in a number of ways:

1. In line with a great many other film and television series scripts, *The Investigation* depicts a positive development in its main character (Mittell 2015). Jens Møller goes from workaholic, obsessive detective, estranged from his pregnant daughter, to caring family man at the end of the series. Peter Bose admitted that this development is a dramaturgical choice and that it is a creative interpretation of the truth. In reality, Møller was surely over-worked and under pressure from the case, but his conflict and falling out with his pregnant daughter is not factual.<sup>8</sup>
2. The Maibritt-character, a policewoman working for Jens Møller, was really a man. Bose says the choice to change the gender was made to give the show

a more diverse cast.<sup>9</sup> Such a choice illustrates that *The Investigation*, like many a historical film, is a product of the time it was made (Burgoyne 2008:10): Matters of representation are arguably emphasised in a great many countries in 2020, including Denmark (Ladegaard 2020).

Thus, Bose and Lindholm invest considerable time and resources into getting certain things right while knowingly bending the truth under the guise of creative freedom in other areas. Notably, the areas in which they felt comfortable bending the truth were related to character development and identification with the police officers. They were not related to the murder, the timeline of the investigation, nor the trial. They must have felt that the television series genre called for personal development – as Christensen (and many others) point out, the investigator with trouble in his or her personal sphere is a typical crime fiction genre trope (2020b). Bose and Lindholm must also have felt that changing the gender of a key investigator would make the series appeal to a broader audience – and that nobody would care about these changes, which turned out to be a correct assessment. The controversial aspect of the production was not these inconsistencies with the truth. It was the very existence of the series. This shall be explored in the following.

#### 4. META-COMMUNICATION IN TRUE CRIME

In true crime productions focusing on relatively recent events, there is high level of meta-communication involved, including communication with the victim's family and friends, communication with witnesses and key informants as well as very careful considerations when it comes to both the press and social media. This is evident from bumpy roads all productions about the Kim Wall murder have had to travel, and how in some cases the attention around the productions has led to changes in marketing strategies and sometimes even changes in and postponements of certain productions.

A prime example of this is *Into the Deep* (Emma Sullivan, 2020), the Netflix documentary about the case. Much like *The Investigation*, *Into the Deep* claimed to have good intentions, focusing not on the murderer but instead on the group of volunteers he managed to recruit for his various rocket building and submarine projects, and whom he ef-

7 Interview with Peter Bose conducted by the author, January 4, 2021.

8 Interview with Peter Bose conducted by the author, January 4, 2021.

9 Interview with Peter Bose conducted by the author, January 4, 2021.

fectively spellbound and deceived. Despite screening at the Sundance Festival in early 2020 to some level of critical acclaim (Jørgensen 2020), by early 2021 *Into the Deep* had not reached Netflix users' screens yet. This was because of a conflict between the production and Anja Olsen, one of Madsen's volunteers, who had developed second thoughts about her participation in the documentary, claiming that she was mentally fragile, and that the release of the documentary would traumatise her further (Christensen 2020a). Sullivan, the director, initially refused to remove the parts with Olsen from the documentary, instead insisting that Olsen saw the documentary to see its good intentions, also offering to pay for a psychologist. This prompted Olsen to speak out in the press, accusing Sullivan and the production team of cynical abuse of her and other participants in the production. This move made Sullivan remove Olsen from the film, which, at the time of this writing, is being further edited. The review from the screening at the Sundance Festival emphasises the shocking nature of one of the scenes with Olsen, in which Peter Madsen holds a sharp object inches from her eye and jokes about lobotomising her (Jørgensen 2020). Whether Sullivan manages to produce a poignant version without Olsen remains to be seen. In other words, *Into the Deep* failed in maintaining good relations with key participants, capsizing the production.

*The Secret Recordings* also ran into problems with meta-communication. Not with participants wanting out, but with users on social media and reviews in the press. The production is widely critiqued by users on Discovery's official Facebook page. As mentioned, critical comments on social media attacked the idea of giving Madsen airtime and suggested that Discovery was being disrespectful of the victim's family. The latter of these two types of comments could presumably have been avoided if the Wall family had publicly endorsed the series, as they did with *The Investigation*, but the comment about giving Madsen airtime touches upon the core of the series and could never be accommodated without changing the show's premise. Looking back at Christensen's discussion about sensationalism in true crime, *The Secret Recordings* may also have suffered from the fact that it is sensationalist without seeking to correct an injustice (Christensen 2020b). Madsen has been convicted with the longest sentence possible. No further justice can be obtained, unless one adopts the perspective that there is justice or solace in Madsen's confession. Notably, the production team behind the series did try to limit Madsen's airtime on anything but the murder. The 20 hours of phone interviews had resulted in his thoughts on a

variety of subjects, and most of this content was cut from the final production.<sup>10</sup>

A great deal of the comments on social media were presumably posted by people who had not seen the production, as they are posted on the day of the release of the series, and they do not comment upon the specific contents of the series. Rather, they take issue with the series' core premises: That a confession by Peter Madsen is newsworthy, that there is more to be said about the motive of the crime, and that profiling such a devious killer is in the public interest. The critique on social media found its way into several critical reviews of the series (Eistrup 2020, Jakobsen 2020). However, whether Discovery is truly concerned by comments such as these, or critical reviews for that matter, is an open question. As discussed by Jensen (2012), some television networks brand themselves on being the 'cheeky', young and daring alternatives to the safe and conservative channels that often dominate national television systems. That strategy would fit Discovery's brand and position in the Danish media system quite well.

As discussed, *The Investigation* made multiple attempts to present the most sober and least sensationalist account of the murder case possible. The production had a clear strategy with regards to the press: Make a short initial press release with focus on the sober aspects of the production and then avoid all contact with the press and interviews until the release on television, believing that the series would speak for itself.<sup>11</sup> It also had a public endorsement from and clear cooperation with the Wall family, with the parents appearing on set and the family dog even featuring as itself in the series (Johansen 2020). Despite all these precautions, the series encountered a problem very similar to that of *Into the Deep*. Ole Stobbe, Kim Wall's boyfriend, initially worked with the producers and the director. He felt forced into cooperation because he was told that the series would air whether he liked it or not, and while he should not expect much influence on the project, this was his chance to let his version of the story be a part of the final result (Stobbe 2019). Stobbe backed out of the project at some point in the process. Like Olsen, he also spoke out in the press. He explicitly criticized *The Investigation* and later repeated his critique on social media.<sup>12</sup> However, unlike Olsen, Stobbe merely questioned the

10 Interview with Kristian Linnemann conducted by the author, January 15, 2021. Interview with Tine Røgind Quist conducted by the author, February 8, 2021.

11 Interview with Peter Bose conducted by the author, January 4, 2021.

12 Ole Stobbe on Facebook 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/olestobbe> (last accessed 14-06-21)

morals and ethics of basing entertainment on such recent traumatic events. He never claimed that the series was putting him on the verge of an emotional breakdown, and his participation was not a cornerstone in the production. Stobbe's point of view was backed up by voices within the entertainment industry such as Katrine Wiedemann, a prominent Danish theatre and movie director (Wiedemann 2020). *The Investigation* stuck to the strategy of not addressing critique before the release and limited Stobbe's participation in the series to a bare minimum. After the series had been released, the production team opened up for contact with the press and interviews. Tobias Lindholm, the director, has defended the production, claiming that it is primarily a positive and necessary story about the things that work in society and Kim Wall as a person, and that he was persuaded by Kim Wall's parents and Jens Møller, the lead investigator on the case, to direct it (Johansen 2020). As discussed, *The Investigation* did well with the audience and most critics, and it has sold well internationally.<sup>13</sup>

These accounts illustrate that metacommunication is crucial in high profile true crime productions about recent events. *Into the Deep* made miscalculations in their interaction with participants, which led to problems in the reception. *The Secret Recordings* endured harsh criticism by social media users and in reviews in the press. Even *The Investigation*, with its clear press strategy and anti-sensationalist aesthetics and contents, could not escape being perceived as sensationalist true crime by some. Even before it was aired, critics have called it entertainment based on trauma (Stobbe 2019, Wiedemann 2020). However, *The Investigation's* approach to both meta-communication and the production itself prevailed.

Summarily, the following lessons can be learned about high profile true crime productions based on recent events:

1. Public endorsement from key members in the victim's family is key.
2. Productions need to tread carefully and think closely on the way they communicate with participants, friends and family members of the victim.
3. Productions need a clear press strategy. My findings indicate that keeping contact with the press to a minimum before release may be a good strategy.
4. The framing of the killer is of critical importance. Even attempts to demonise the killer can be interpreted as giving him or her unwarranted attention. In this

study, deliberately avoiding the killer seemingly proved beneficial with the wider audience, though a case can be made for smaller networks to pursue more daring strategies, embracing a 'cheeky' image and going against the mainstream channels. It is a delicate balance.

The production team behind *The Investigation* was not blind to the advantages of basing a show on well-known IP.<sup>14</sup> And interestingly, sensationalism is normally a key ingredient in true crime productions (Christensen 2020b). With the Kim Wall murder, however, things were arguably different. The case in itself may have been so spectacular and gruesome that it did not need any added sensationalism – on the contrary, the sensationalist aspects of the case had to be toned down in the productions about the case for them to be accepted by the mainstream audience.

In his work on historical Hollywood films, Robert Burgoyne frames historical films as *reenactments* of the past (Burgoyne 2008: 7). Following Burgoyne's line of thought, the reenactment entails a level of *rethinking* the historical event. In the productions this article has analysed, it is a reenactment of a very disturbing event. In the cases of *Into the Deep* and *The Secret Recordings*, the disturbing mind of the killer is *witnessed again*, and it is rethought as even more deliberate, cynical and disturbed than viewers could have imagined. But in the case of *The Investigation*, the rethinking emphasises the victim and the heroes who solved the case, and it greatly deemphasises the killer. That exact rethinking of the Kim Wall murder may have been one of very few welcome ways to present this very delicate source material to a wider audience.

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# LA FICTION *DOC* IN ONDA SUL CANALE FRANCESE TF1: ANALISI DI UN EVENTO MEDIATICO

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## KEYWORDS

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## ABSTRACT

Tra il 6 gennaio e il 24 febbraio 2021, TF1, primo canale privato della Francia e primo canale d'Europa in termini di ascolti, programma la serie televisiva italiana *Doc* ogni mercoledì sera in prima serata, con due episodi a settimana. Evento rarissimo in Francia, una fiction Rai popolare, che è anche un medical drama non americano dall'italianità sottile, trova il suo pubblico e riesce a mantenerlo fedele durante le otto settimane di trasmissione: attraverso diverse questioni metodologiche suggerite dal vasto campo dei cultural/television/media studies, con l'analisi dei contenuti e delle condizioni di diffusione, ricezione e circolazione transnazionale di *Doc*, l'articolo propone una lettura di un evento mediatico nel panorama audiovisivo francese per cercare di capire se la programmazione della

serie televisiva su TF1 ci permette di credere in prospettive positive per le future produzioni transalpine sugli schermi francesi, al di fuori delle piattaforme – tradizionali o nuove – di SVOD o canali di nicchia.

Between January 6th and February 24th, 2021, TF1, France's first private channel and Europe's first channel in terms of ratings, broadcasts the Italian television series *Doc* every Wednesday evening in prime time, with two episodes per week. A very rare event in France, a popular RAI drama, which is also a non-American medical drama with a subtle italian flavour, finds its audience and manages to keep them interested throughout the eight weeks of broadcasting: through different methodological issues suggested by the vast field of cultural/television/media studies, with the analysis of the contents and conditions of diffusion, reception and transnational circulation of *Doc*, the article proposes an reading of a media event in the French audiovisual panorama to try to understand if the programming of the Italian TV series on TF1 allows us to believe in positive perspectives for future transalpine productions on French screens, outside the platforms – traditional or new – of SVOD or niche channels.

## 1. DOC, UN EVENTO NEL PALINSESTO DI TF1

Sin dai primi giorni di gennaio 2021, in un periodo incerto segnato da una pandemia globale, TF1, il principale canale televisivo privato francese e il primo canale privato europeo in termini di ascolti, fa la scommessa di inserire nel suo palinsesto diverse novità in prima serata. Se TF1 punta soprattutto sulla fiction francese, che quasi sempre garantisce uno share alto<sup>1</sup>, le serie europee sono, negli ultimi anni, assenti nel palinsesto serale di TF1, per via di una tradizionale bipolarizzazione della programmazione delle serie televisive in prime time, tra *national fiction* e *US fiction* (De Bens e de Smaele 2001: 57). All'inizio del 2021, il prime time di TF1 è dedicato a programmi pregiati destinati a tutta la famiglia (Barra 2015: 54-5). Si alterna, a seconda dei giorni, tra la fiction francese del lunedì e del giovedì, il divertimento familiare del venerdì e del sabato, il film della domenica sera, *l'empilement* (Barthes 2012: 136) di quattro episodi della serie americana *S.W.A.T.* (CBS, 2017-) il martedì sera. Il mercoledì sera, per le prime otto settimane del 2021, TF1 fa una scommessa audace, con la programmazione di una serie europea né francese né francofona: la sezione "fiction, serie, cinema" di TF1 decide di proporre l'intera prima stagione della serie RAI italiana *Doc – Nelle tue mani* (2020-), ribattezzata *Doc* per il pubblico francese: è stato mantenuto solo il nome breve *Doc*, facile da pronunciare e significativo a livello internazionale. I sedici episodi, trasmessi in Italia in due tempi nella primavera e nell'autunno del 2020 su Rai 1, occupano lo spazio serale del mercoledì con due episodi a settimana alle 21.05 o 10 e alle 22.05 o 10; sono disponibili – dopo la diffusione su TF1 – sulle due piattaforme di rebroadcasting del canale (il servizio di replay MyTF1 e la recente piattaforma SVOD Salto). L'evento mediatico a cui facciamo riferimento in questo articolo non risiede nella programmazione di una nuova serie televisiva – i *medical drama*, del resto, conoscono un grande successo in Francia – bensì nella messa in onda, in una fascia strategica come la prima serata, di una serie italiana il cui successo non era garantito. La scelta, da parte di TF1, potrebbe sembrare rischiosa, poiché ci sono pochi esempi di serie italiane mandate in onda su canali *mainstream* negli ultimi anni, nonostante "[l]a recente, ampia circolazione di film e fiction italiane nel mondo, così come la ripartenza di una produzione tele-

visiva italiana già pensata pure per i mercati stranieri" (Barra 2020: 33) e l'ormai affermata "*European television fiction renaissance*" (Barra e Scaglioni 2020b: 1). Con questo studio, cercheremo dunque di capire se (e come) la programmazione di *Doc* in prima serata su TF1 nel 2021 può essere considerata un evento mediatico nel panorama audiovisivo francese, con un approccio multidisciplinare che seguirà diversi percorsi suggeriti dalle ricerche in corso nell'ampio campo dei *cultural, television e media studies*, più specificamente dagli studi svolti sulla circolazione transnazionale dei prodotti audiovisivi e la questione delle *national mediations*. Intendiamo così decifrare i contenuti specifici di questo prodotto audiovisivo nonché le problematiche indotte dalle condizioni (temporali, culturali) di programmazione e di ricezione (*audience e social media*) presso un pubblico di massa, "ampio, familiare e transgenerazionale" (Luçon 2021) come quello su cui punta TF1.

## 2. DOC NEL PANORAMA DELLE SERIE ITALIANE MESSE IN ONDA IN FRANCIA

Nel panorama delle serie prodotte o coprodotte (secondo un modello transnazionale europeo) in e dall'Italia, diversi tipi di prodotti vengono proposti sulla scena internazionale; contribuiscono al "fenomeno di progressiva, inedita 'internazionalizzazione' del 'made in Italy' audiovisivo" (Scaglioni 2020: 18). Possiamo dividerli in due grandi gruppi. Il primo è quello delle serie che seguono il modello delle cosiddette serie televisive europee *premium* (Barra e Scaglioni 2020b: 1), le quali si distinguono con la dimensione internazionale e il successo critico, grazie a un'estetica, un format e una promozione originali. Questi prodotti dall'ambizione transnazionale (Barra e Scaglioni 2020a: 14) hanno un sapore internazionale, quasi un accento americano (Tosseri 2016) nonostante i contenuti *local* italiani. Il successo delle piattaforme SVOD come Netflix ha favorito questa propensione a scoprire serie non americane, tra cui serie italiane pensate per un pubblico internazionale, grazie ad un modello multiforme basato sull'autore<sup>2</sup>, la ricorrenza di alcune figure e situazioni stereotipate. Per esempio, la criminalità spettacolarizzata ispirata ai film in *Romanzo criminale* (Michele Placido, 2005), *Gomorra* (Sky Italia, 2008) e *Suburra* (Netflix, 2015), l'evocazione di una Storia miticizzata in *Medici* (Rai, 2016-2019) o una visione dell'Italia che richiama l'estetica neorealista in

1 Le ultime serie televisive originali di TF1 come *La promesse* (2021) e *HPI* (2021-) hanno ottenuto un grandissimo successo in termini di ascolti, confermando così l'attrazione del pubblico francese verso le produzioni *local*.

2 La fama di Paolo Sorrentino, per esempio, per *The Young Pope* (Sky Atlantic, HBO e Canal+, 2016) e *The New Pope* (Sky Atlantic, HBO e Canal+, 2020).

*L'amica geniale* (HBO, 2018 ; Rai, 2020-). Le serie tv italiane premium sono e/o sono state mandate in onda dal canale di pay-TV Canal+ (la prima stagione di *Romanzo criminale*, 2008-2011<sup>3</sup> ; *Gomorra*; *L'amica geniale* ; *The Young Pope* e *The New Pope*<sup>4</sup>), da piattaforme SVOD come Netflix (*Suburra*, (2017-2020 ; *Curon*, 2020- ; *Il processo*, 2019 ; *Luna nera*, 2020- ; *Baby*, 2018-2020 ; *Carlo et Malik*, 2018-<sup>5</sup> ; *Summertime – Tre metri sopra il cielo*, 2020- ; *Zero*, 2021- ; *Fedeltà*, 2021-), OCS (*Devils*, 2020- ; *Maltese*, 2017 ; la trilogia storica *1992, 1993 e 1994* , 2015-2019); *Medici*<sup>6</sup>). Alcuni canali pubblici hanno scommesso su prodotti a priori di nicchia come *Il miracolo* (2018) su Arte.TV<sup>7</sup>.

Dall'altro lato, i prodotti audiovisivi della *mainstream fiction* e concepiti anzitutto per il mercato italiano conoscono raramente l'export verso i mercati stranieri (Barra e Scaglioni 2020c: 146). Così, se le piattaforme SVOD hanno permesso una democratizzazione delle serie italiane che possono essere considerate di nicchia, confidenziali o a volte difficilmente accessibili a un pubblico francese o francofono, i grandi canali hanno tratto solo una piccolissima parte dell'ampia produzione italiana, per lo più limitata a prodotti molto mirati, a volte addirittura caricaturali, che possono mettere in discussione le questioni legate all'autorappresentazione dell'Italia attraverso i suoi prodotti audiovisivi (Benvenuti et al. 2020: 5). Il canale pubblico France 3 manda in onda, in modo irregolare, alcuni episodi della serie italiana *Il Commissario Montalbano* (Rai, 1999-), in una versione doppiata. Dalla Sicilia a Gubbio, l'altro esempio di serie italiana noir e popolare dall'aspetto folklorizzante è *Don Matteo* (Rai, 2000-) (Scrolavezza 2020). Eppure è curioso vedere che *Don Matteo* non ha mai avuto una rilevanza nazionale in Francia. Infatti solo la prima stagione è stata trasmessa su TF1 nel 2001, con il titolo *Don Matteo, un sacré détective* (Don Matteo, un formidabile investigatore)<sup>8</sup>. Altri episodi sono stati mandati in onda da NRJ12 dal 2009 e poi, dal 2017, dal canale regionale France 3 Corse dal 2017, come un'espressione (tra altri programmi) di un palinsesto voltato verso il Mediterraneo.

3 La seconda stagione andò in onda nel 2011 sulla defunta TPS Star.

4 Canal+ è coproduttore con HBO e Sky Atlantic.

5 Solo la prima stagione è disponibile su Netflix.

6 Solo la terza stagione è ora disponibile in SVOD su OCS e il suo partner MyCanal.

7 Il canale Arte dovrebbe mandare in onda la nuova miniserie dell'autore Niccolò Ammaniti, *Anna* (Sky Italia, 2021).

8 Qui e nelle altre citazioni dal francese all'italiano e dall'italiano al francese la traduzione è mia.

Il successo della diffusione di alcune serie televisive premium in Francia forse spiega la scelta dei canali pubblici di mandare in onda l'adattamento per il piccolo schermo della saga letteraria di Elena Ferrante, *L'amica geniale*: dopo Canal+, è stato il canale pubblico e gratuito France 2 a mandare in onda nell'estate del 2020 gli otto episodi della prima stagione, il mercoledì in prima serata (e in versione francese). Anche *Maltese* (Rai, 2017), la miniserie di genere giallo con Kim Rossi Stuart, è stata trasmessa nel 2018 da France 3.

Questa panoramica delle principali produzioni televisive italiane mandate in onda in Francia rivela una profusione di temi, generi, scelte estetiche e territori diversi. Italiana, italo-fila, di lingua italiana o dai contenuti legati all'Italia, la serialità italiana ha consentito, grazie ad un'accessibilità e un successo sempre maggiori, di far conoscere diversi aspetti del Bel Paese. L'identità presupposta di queste serie è parte del loro successo internazionale: veri e propri elementi del "brand Italia" (Benvenuti et al. 2020: 4), offrono ciò che un pubblico si aspetta da una visione dell'Italia, che sia tinta di mafia e malavita, o che corrisponda ad un *italian way of life*.

In questo contesto, la presenza di una serie come *Doc* nel palinsesto di TF1 può sorprendere. Il canale fa parte di un gruppo mediale la cui missione è offrire servizi televisivi, dalla produzione di contenuti alla diffusione tramite il suo canale principale o le altre emittenti della Televisione Terrestre e di cui è proprietario (TF1, TMC, LCI, TFX e TF1 Séries Films), a cui si aggiungono altri canali di pay-TV (TV Breizh, Histoire TV, Ushuaïa TV e Serieclub). Occupa nel panorama audiovisivo francese una posizione di leader unica in Europa. La sua programmazione è per lo più orientata verso programmi popolari, in grado di soddisfare diverse fasce di pubblico, tra informazione e intrattenimento. Le serie televisive rappresentano gran parte della sua programmazione. Tuttavia, nel gennaio 2021, è la prima volta che il più grande canale televisivo europeo manda in onda una serie italiana. Per capire meglio questa scelta – audace – da parte di TF1, dobbiamo guardare all'identità stessa di questa serie dall'italianità sottile.

### 3. DOC, MEDICAL DRAMA, SERIE ITALIANA O SERIE DI SUCCESSO?

Presentata dai media francesi come un nuovo medical drama (Rapilly 2021), la sua nazionalità è talvolta sottolineata (Gazzano 2021), così come il successo ottenuto in Italia quando è andata in onda per la prima volta (Chuc 2021). Ma è

probabilmente il riferimento alla “storia vera”, usata come argomento di marketing dall'emittente così come dal press kit, che rende la serie *Doc* specifica e la differenzia (davvero?) dalle altre serie a tema ospedaliero presentate con regolarità sul canale. In Francia la prima serie medica di successo, *Urgences* (ER, NBC, 1994-2009), è stata trasmessa su France 2 nel 1996, segnando un prima-dopo e un apprezzamento critico e di pubblico del medical drama, quando la televisione americana, il più grande fornitore mondiale di serie mediche, propone questo tipo di prodotti fin dagli anni Cinquanta (Winckler 2006: 25-7). TF1 ha approfittato della popolarità di questo genere seriale (Fauquert 2020) offrendo ai suoi spettatori diversi prodotti la cui azione si svolge negli ospedali, il più delle volte americani: *Grey's Anatomy* (ABC, 2006-), *House* (Fox, 2004-2012), *The Good Doctor* (ABC, 2017-), *New Amsterdam* (NBC, 2018-), *Chicago Med* (NBC, 2015-), *The Resident* (Fox, 2018-), sono tutti titoli che il pubblico ha potuto vedere su TF1 e sono la prova che il principale canale francese scommette periodicamente, senza correre rischi, su questo genere a sé stante.

Questi prodotti, che presentano tuttavia una visione distorta e stereotipata dell'ambiente ospedaliero e medico (Tytell 2012), appassionano una parte importante degli spettatori francesi. Nel suo rapporto annuale 2021, TF1, attraverso il suo sito per i professionisti dei media TF1 Pro, indica che la serie *The Resident* è in cima alla classifica delle serie straniere più viste, con 5,8 milioni di spettatori e una performance marcata tra il pubblico femminile (le FRDA-50a ossia le “donne responsabili degli acquisti sotto i 50 anni” che

rappresentano il target commerciale più ambito dagli annunciatori), mentre gli altri grandi marchi continuano a registrare buone percentuali di successo, come mostrato nella tabella sottostante (Fig. 1):

In confronto, la produzione audiovisiva francese offre pochissimi esempi di serie mediche Made in France: due stagioni di *Hippocrate* (2018-) su Canal+; quattro stagioni della sitcom *H* (1998-2002) su Canal+ (ora disponibile su Netflix); il remake francese della serie spagnola *Polseres vermelles* (2011-2013), *Les bracelets rouges* di cui tre stagioni sono state trasmesse su TF1, il lunedì sera, tra il 2018 e il 2020. Quest'ultima serie resta probabilmente l'unico esempio europeo di serie medica di successo capace di essere esportata; un successo da temperare, però, perché sono proprio i remake locali ad aver conquistato il favore del pubblico in prima serata, sia su TF1 con *Les bracelets rouges* (2018-) che in Italia, su Rai 1, con *Braccialetti rossi* (2014-2016).

Nel 2019, un giornalista del sito francese Allociné notava che “le serie francesi soffrono ancora (e sempre) di una certa diffidenza naturale, di quella che immagina che, qualunque sia il genere, siamo necessariamente meno bravi degli americani” (Nicolas 2019). Gli autori francesi, secondo il giornalista, non direbbero le stesse cose dei loro concorrenti statunitensi. E l'osservazione può forse essere applicata, in modo più ampio, agli autori europei. Si confermerebbe quindi l'idea che, per distinguersi, una serie europea che vuole inserirsi nel mercato delle serie mediche dominato dalla produzione americana, deve introdurre delle caratteristiche specifiche. Questa è, in ogni caso, l'angolazione scelta da TF1 nella strategia di comunicazione messa in atto a partire dalle vacanze di Natale 2020: in una campagna promozionale piuttosto sostenuta durante le vacanze di Natale (attraverso, per esempio, un trailer/spot pubblicitario di 48 secondi), *Doc* è stato presentato come una novità e quindi un evento. Il riferimento alla storia vera e all'incredibile destino del dottor Pierdante Piccioni (aka Andrea Fanti nella serie, il cui soprannome Doc gli viene attribuito da un paziente dell'episodio 1.02), serve qui a stabilire l'originalità della serie e a provocare, già a priori, l'empatia degli spettatori.

I mass media francesi hanno ampiamente riportato il trauma vissuto dal dottor Piccioni che, in seguito a un incidente, ha dimenticato dodici anni della sua vita, prima di reimpara-

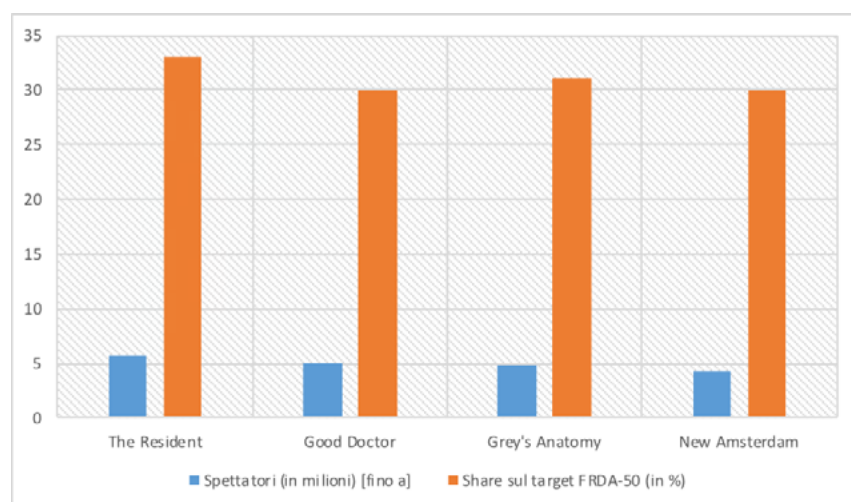


FIG. 1. DATI DI ASCOLTO SU ALCUNE SERIE MEDICHE MANDATE IN ONDA DA TF1 NEL 2020.<sup>9</sup>



re a vivere ed esercitare la sua professione, diventando, secondo lui, un medico e una persona migliore: per la stampa, *Doc* è una serie incredibile ma vera<sup>10</sup>, ispirata a fatti reali<sup>11</sup>; i giornalisti raccontano il destino del Dottor Piccioni<sup>12</sup>. Il suo racconto autobiografico, scritto insieme al giornalista e scrittore Pierangelo Sapegno e intitolato *Meno dodici* (2016), ha ispirato la sceneggiatura della serie<sup>13</sup>. Il banner sulla copertina del libro, ristampato da Mondadori, si riferisce esplicitamente al successo della serie in Italia<sup>14</sup>. Questa è una argomentazione usata in Francia per spiegare la programmazione della serie su TF1: gli ascolti record oltralpe, con una media del 30% di share e più di 8 milioni di spettatori, fanno di *Doc* una delle fiction più viste in Italia (Mazzei 2020); una “serie dei record” il cui successo è stato ampiamente riportato dalla stampa italiana (Fumarola 2020) e la promessa di una distribuzione internazionale in Spagna, Portogallo, Francia, Inghilterra e persino negli Stati Uniti dove Sony Pictures International ne svilupperà un adattamento americano (Vivarelli 2020). Infine, la strategia di comunicazione attuata da TF1 ha messo in evidenza l’attore principale, Luca Argentero, finora sconosciuto al grande pubblico in Francia nonostante una carriera molto avanzata in Italia, sul piccolo e grande schermo, dalla casa del *Grande Fratello* nel 2003<sup>15</sup> al cinema<sup>16</sup>; i commenti in francese<sup>17</sup> letti su Twitter evocano “il sorriso del Dottor Fanti”, “un attore magnificamente splendido”, un “Luca Argentero

troppo bello”, confermando così la tendenza frequente tra gli spettatori di serie tv ad affezionarsi sia al personaggio che all’interprete, in un’interazione tra spazio diegetico e spazio mediatico (Jullier e Laborde 2015: 111), tra mondi reali e finzionali (Chalvon-Demersay 2011: 200).

#### 4. UN MIX DI CONTENUTI CODIFICATI E DI ITALIANITÀ SOTTILE

Per non disorientare lo spettatore e conformarsi alle sue aspettative in termini di serie mediche, gli autori della serie hanno integrato con cura tutti i codici richiesti dal genere, diventato con gli anni un nuovo oggetto culturale a sé stante (Molénat 2012: 1). Così, troviamo l’idea di un grande ospedale urbano (il fittizio Policlinico Ambrosiano<sup>18</sup>), pulito e moderno, con colori (bianco, blu, grigio) che ricordano la scenografia di altre serie mediche. Qui viene ricreato un microcosmo gerarchico tradizionale: medici di ruolo, tirocinanti, infermieri, pazienti, parenti dei pazienti, ecc. Questi personaggi, le cui vicende si incrociano nel corso degli episodi, permettono alle storie di alternarsi o, piuttosto, di sovrapporsi, tra la trama principale e la messa a fuoco dei destini individuali, più o meno anonimi a seconda delle situazioni: grazie all’uso dei personaggi secondari, gli autori definiscono meglio gli eroi di queste fiction e ne costruiscono lo spessore psicologico e i tratti di personalità. Questo schema è classico nelle serie dello stesso genere, dove i personaggi evolvono in un mondo che è allo stesso tempo alle prese con la realtà (spesso vengono evocati eventi plausibili e/o attuali, come lo sfruttamento della migrazione tra Africa e Italia nell’episodio 1.08) e talvolta totalmente artificiale. Sono tutti tratti caratteristici che si fondano sulla definizione stessa del medical drama che si riferisce sia all’ambientazione e ai personaggi che ai registri narrativi (Rocchi 2019: 71) che mischiano storie sentimentali tra i protagonisti e argomenti legati alla salute (malattie come l’endometriosi nell’episodio 1.05 o la bulimia di Carolina Fanti, figlia dell’ex primario; problemi fisici come il trapianto di protesi mammarie a basso costo nell’episodio 1.07 o l’amputazione necessaria della gamba di un adolescente).

Anche i personaggi sembrano conformarsi ai tipi poco ambigui ricorrenti nelle serie mediche. Andrea Fanti, antipatico nel primo episodio (prima del suo incidente) ma il miglior medico dell’ospedale, ricorda il Doctor House o il Conrad Hawkins di *The Resident*; padre esemplare, divorato dai sensi

9 I dati sono quelli annunciati da TF1 Pro nel suo rapporto pubblicato il 30 dicembre 2020: <https://tf1pro.com/press-kit/articles/2020/553/audience-series-etran-geres-2020-249604> (ultimo accesso 17-05-21).

10 <https://www.leparisien.fr/culture-loisirs/series/doc-sur-tf1-une-serie-incroyable-mais-vraie-06-01-2021-8417504.php> (ultimo accesso 17-05-21).

11 <https://www.voici.fr/news-people/actu-people/doc-tf1-est-inspire-de-faits-reels-ce-qui-est-vraiment-arrive-a-pierdante-piccioni-694296> (ultimo accesso 17-05-21).

12 <https://www.public.fr/News/Doc-la-nouvelle-serie-TF1-inspiree-de-faits-reels-qui-est-il-vraiment-arrive-Pierdante-Piccioni-1664003> (ultimo accesso 17-05-21).

13 Il rapporto con la storia vera è tuttavia ambiguo perché una scritta in sovrapposizione alla fine di ogni episodio nega in qualche modo l’idea di autenticità, affermando che “[i] nomi, gli eventi e i personaggi di questa serie sono fittizi, frutto della libera espressione artistica degli autori. Di conseguenza, qualsiasi riferimento a fatti, luoghi e personaggi esistenti sarebbe puramente casuale”.

14 Ad oggi, non è prevista alcuna pubblicazione francese del libro, nonostante la richiesta di diversi utenti su Twitter.

15 È là che il pubblico italiano ha conosciuto Luca Argentero, arrivato terzo nel famoso reality prodotto da Endemol.

16 La sua carriera cinematografica ha acquisito uno spessore notevole, tra film d’autore (*Io, Leonardo* di Jesus Garces Lambert nel 2019) e intrattenimento più popolare (*Vacanze ai Caraibi* di Neri Parenti nel 2015 o *Un boss in salotto* di Luca Miniero nel 2014).

17 La traduzione dei commenti è mia.

18 Il set dell’ospedale è in realtà quello degli studi Lux di Formello, vicino a Roma.

di colpa dopo la morte del figlio Mattia, cerca, dopo l'operazione, di rimettere in piedi la famiglia; la serie si basa in gran parte sulla personalità del personaggio centrale che è acrimonioso e troppo professionale ma si trasforma in un uomo simpatico, la cui umanità provoca l'empatia degli spettatori. Al suo fianco ci sono le due donne della sua vita attorno alle quali si gioca la trama romantica (l'ex moglie Agnese Tiberi, direttrice dell'ospedale, e la sua collega più vicina e amante dimenticata, Giulia Giordano); ci sono anche sua figlia Carolina, alla quale cerca di avvicinarsi, i suoi colleghi e amici con funzioni diverse nel policlinico (l'infermiera simpatica Teresa Maraldi, lo psichiatra Enrico Sandri, ecc.), i giovani specializzandi (Alba Patrizi, Elisa Russo, Riccardo Bonvegna, Gabriel Kidane) che rappresentano l'inesperienza, la gerarchia dei ruoli tra capi medici e allievi, le nozioni di formazione e progressione. Accanto ai personaggi positivi non potevano mancare i cattivi: Marco Sardoni, nuovo primario e principale concorrente fin dall'inizio, responsabile di un errore medico all'insaputa di tutti, e la fidanzata, rappresentante di un laboratorio farmaceutico che fornisce farmaci all'ospedale milanese; entrambi cercano di eliminare il dottor Fanti, spingendolo a dimettersi o avvelenandolo.

Neppure la narrazione si allontana dal solito schema: la ricerca della giustizia per riportare il dottor Fanti al suo posto nella gerarchia ospedaliera, vittima di un uomo armato che scompare dopo il primo episodio per riapparire solo nell'episodio 1.11; storie d'amore; l'emozione di fronte alla morte di un figlio o di una famiglia da ricostruire; la nozione di segreto, con risposte distillate nel corso degli episodi. La singolarità della serie sta soprattutto nella premessa che riempie, in filigrana, tutti gli episodi della prima stagione: l'amnesia parziale di Andrea Fanti, che interroga direttamente lo spettatore e la cui empatia funziona pienamente.

Il numero elevato di episodi (sedici, in linea con gli standard delle serie mediche americane) e la durata di ogni singolo episodio, attorno ai 55 minuti, più lungo di un episodio di *Grey's Anatomy* o di *The Resident* ma conforme alla durata dei modelli di *complex TV* e della *premium fiction* europea (Holdaway et al. 2020: 38), può portare a un certo rallentamento del ritmo dal quinto episodio in poi, con situazioni tipiche dei medical drama (il rapporto con i pazienti, le relazioni segrete o presunte, gli errori medici). La messa in scena, efficace, permette un'equilibrata alternanza di momenti drammatici e di scene più leggere, persino comiche, per sciogliere la tensione. La comicità è dovuta soprattutto all'assenza di questi dodici anni nella vita del personaggio Fanti, che scopre cose scontate, come ad esempio, nell'episodio 1.03, il

monopattino, la vendita di prodotti a base di cannabis, nuovi quartieri di Milano o, come nell'episodio 1.04, la scoperta della morte di David Bowie. La costruzione degli episodi segue generalmente il seguente schema (ad eccezione di alcuni episodi basati sui ricordi e che servono la trama principale, come l'analessi dell'episodio 1.06 che ripercorre la vicenda dello specializzando Riccardo, dieci anni prima): un'introduzione, spesso in un luogo diverso dall'ospedale, presenta uno o più personaggi la cui patologia sarà al centro di un singolo episodio; la trama principale segue il suo corso, a volte modificata da nuovi elementi portati all'attenzione dello spettatore. La continuità è così mantenuta pur variando il contenuto di ogni singolo episodio per tenere lo spettatore in suspense.

La musica ha un posto speciale come in altre serie mediche tra cui *Grey's Anatomy* in cui le canzoni pop hanno per funzione la "risoluzione" narrativa e armonica (Jullier e Laborde 2015: 115). La serie si avvale, infatti, di una colonna sonora originale composta principalmente da Tony Brundo, del laboratorio GoodLab Music fondato da Paolo Buonvino, autore di numerose colonne sonore per il cinema e la televisione. La voce sui pezzi cantati – ballate pop inserite in momenti drammatici e che ricordano le canzoni malinconiche presenti in molti episodi della serie modello *Grey's Anatomy* – è quella del giovane cantante catanese Nico Bruno. I testi delle canzoni come la title track "I'll find you in the dark" (negli episodi 1.01, 1.11, 1.13-16 e, in versione remix, nell'episodio 1.09), "Changed at all" (episodi 1.03, 1.05, 1.08-10, 1.13-16) e "Need you right now" (episodi 1.4, 1.6, 1.8, 1.10-15) sono esclusivamente inglesi, garantendo così probabilmente la portata di un progetto di richiamo internazionale o concepito con in mente la circolazione transnazionale (Barra e Scaglioni 2020a: 26). L'unico brano in italiano, *Briciole* (creato espressamente per la serie, composto da Tony Brundo e interpretato da MC Invisible nell'episodio 1.07) è in stile trap; una parte, rappata, viene ripresa dal personaggio di Fanti per divertire la figlia ed è doppiata nella versione francese. Questo inserimento dell'italiano mantiene la dimensione locale ma con un sapore internazionale basato tra altri elementi sulle canzoni pop in lingua inglese, un intento conforme al fenomeno più ampio della Rinascita della serialità televisiva europea (Barra e Scaglioni 2020b: 4).

L'italianità del resto è poco presente nella serie. Infatti, si limita ad alcuni luoghi che lo spettatore profano non è in grado di identificare. L'azione si svolge a Milano, di cui si vedono alcuni scorci (lo skyline milanese, Piazza Gae Aulenti, il Bosco Verticale, Corso Como, le torri di CityLife, l'Arco della Pace, il Castello Sforzesco, il trittico Duomo-Galleria-Teatro Alla Scala, i Navigli): questi luoghi non si riferiscono neces-

sariamente ad una cartolina dell'Italia solitamente percepita all'estero; Milano non è famosa come Roma; il capoluogo lombardo è, tra le grandi città italiane, forse quella più europea; appare più come un'anonima grande città d'Europa, degli Stati Uniti o del Canada. L'effetto cartolina si limita all'evocazione del ricordo indelebile (nonostante l'amnesia parziale) del sugo alla carbonara preparato dalla cuoca della clinica. L'italianità si ritrova anche nei nomi dei personaggi ma la maggior parte di essi sono francesizzati nella versione francese doppiata: Agnese diventa Agnès, Andrea diventa Andrea, Giulia diventa Julia, ecc. Lo spettatore francese si ritrova così davanti a un inevitabile fenomeno di francesizzazione che può riguardare i termini, i concetti, i riferimenti culturali che non possono essere mantenuti identici, il che porta ad una lettura parziale o modificata del testo originale, senza alterarne la ricezione. Questo esempio di *national mediation* mostra la necessità dell'azione che influenza sia la forma che il significato del testo e la sua ricezione e il suo successo (o fallimento), per adattare efficacemente il prodotto (Barra 2009: 510). Davanti alla persistenza delle differenze locali in un campo mediale globalizzato, è necessario adattare il discorso nell'ambito di una diffusione transnazionale, per una serie televisiva intesa come "prodotto globale" (Kuipers 2015: 986). Così, la versione doppiata in francese e offerta al pubblico del mercoledì sera non incoraggia l'italianità: pochi spettatori francesi conoscono Lucio Dalla, Pino Daniele o Orietta Berti, citati nell'episodio 1.04 e sostituiti, nella VF (i sottotitoli della VOSTFR conservano i nomi originali), dai più internazionali Whitney Houston, Prince e Aldo Maccione. Qui si nota ancora la necessità di creare una versione alterata, modificata per non interferire con la comprensione di un pubblico locale che non conosce alcuni codici della cultura italiana, nonostante la vicinanza geografica, culturale e linguistica tra due Paesi vicini. Nello stesso modo, nell'episodio 1.12, dopo l'incidente ferroviario, l'informazione viene scritta sul banner di un presunto canale televisivo italiano in francese: le cose devono sembrare francesi, più che comprensibili dai Francesi (Kuipers 2015: 1006). La serie *Doc* viene proposta automaticamente in versione francese su TF1, con voci e una cadenza classici del doppiaggio delle serie americane e quindi un effetto poco spiazzante per il pubblico; le box collegate a Internet permettono ormai di liberarsi dal doppiaggio e di vedere la serie in VOSTFR in diretta<sup>19</sup>. La Francia usa quasi sempre il doppiaggio per la televisione mainstream (Kuipers

2015: 997) mentre i sottotitoli si rivolgono ad un pubblico di nicchia (Kuipers 2015: 1007): la VF garantirebbe, in un certo senso, come un "francese-bis", un indicatore sonoro di identità, una certa familiarità del contenuto televisivo che, così, non scandalizzerebbe lo spettatore (Kokoreff 1989: 22).

Come è stato scritto, l'identità della serie *Doc* è, in un certo senso, mobile: italiana ma non troppo, in linea con l'idea che ha uno spettatore di una serie medica classica, possiede i requisiti per sedurre il pubblico di TF1. Del resto, su Twitter, gli utenti meno attenti non si sono accorti che si tratta di una serie italiana mentre altri lodano la qualità di una serie che regge perfettamente il confronto con i modelli americani. Ecco alcuni commenti tradotti dal francese: "pensavo che fosse una serie americana ma è una serie italiana"; "la serie italiana *Doc* (nelle tua mani) non ha niente da invidiare alle serie americane. #top"; "ho capito solo adesso che la serie di svolge in Italia ed è una serie italiana"<sup>20</sup>; "ah ma *Doc* è una serie italiana e non me lo dice nessuno??".

*Doc* sarebbe dunque un prodotto transnazionale dal carattere *local* molto relativo. L'italianità poco evidente (quasi la non-italianità) della serie televisiva potrebbe dunque, forse, spiegare il successo della serie in Francia; o, comunque, il motivo della sua programmazione su un importante canale televisivo in prime time.

## 5. UNA SCOMMESSA RISCHIOSA... E VINCENTE!

Prima della diffusione in Francia, *Doc* ha ottenuto un grandissimo successo in Italia e l'acquisto del programma da parte di emittenti internazionali prometteva risultati soddisfacenti. Però è noto che il successo in un contesto culturale non garantisce il successo in un altro contesto (Bielby e Harrington 2020: 15). La scommessa di programmare *Doc* in prima serata per otto mercoledì era quindi rischiosa per TF1. Inizialmente, TF1 ha scelto di annunciare la programmazione di due episodi a settimana, dal 6 al 27 gennaio 2021, facendo temere una trasmissione parziale della prima stagione, come in Italia; tuttavia, il 27 gennaio, quasi a metà della stagione, dichiarò che l'intera stagione 1, ovvero 16 episodi, sarebbe stata trasmessa fino al 24 febbraio<sup>21</sup>. Con questa scelta di trasmettere due episodi a settimana, TF1 ristabilisce l'idea

19 Il dispositivo riprende la funzione proposta dalle piattaforme SVOD e/o dai siti di streaming che offrono un facile accesso alla lingua originale della serie.

20 Commento pubblicato il 27 gennaio, nella quarta settimana di diffusione.

21 L'informazione è stata confermata dall'account Twitter ufficiale di TF1Pro il 02 febbraio 2021.

di un incontro settimanale con le situazioni, i luoghi e i personaggi di una serie, pur permettendo un accesso limitato all'intera serie sui suoi canali replay e SVOD: infatti, gli episodi disponibili sia sul servizio replay MyTF1 che su quello di SVOD Salto sono sempre repliche degli episodi già trasmessi sul canale madre<sup>22</sup>; era quasi impossibile per il pubblico medio francese accedere a tutta la serie, anche in versione originale pura, perché il sito di RaiPlay blocca l'accesso agli utenti al di fuori del territorio italiano.

La programmazione di una serie in prima serata corrisponde comunque all'identità di TF1 che manda in onda numerosi prodotti della serialità televisiva, statunitensi e francesi, sul suo canale principale. Diverse serie US vengono spesso trasmesse dopo la mezzanotte oltre alle serie, sia francesi che straniere, programmate durante il giorno. La scelta di inserire *Doc* in uno spazio ambito come quello di mercoledì sera era senz'altro destinata ad ottenere un consenso pubblico importante, o perlomeno a identificare dei target commerciali, al fine di attirare gli investitori e vendere loro degli spazi pubblicitari. È però curioso osservare che il primissimo episodio trasmesso non è stato interrotto dalla pubblicità. Due ipotesi possono essere evocate: è stato un modo per catturare l'attenzione dello spettatore oppure un espediente che ricorda la trasmissione su piattaforme SVOD, dove la pubblicità è assente. TF1, in compenso, ha imposto due interruzioni di pubblicità nel secondo episodio, la stessa sera. In seguito, TF1 inserirà sistematicamente una interruzione durante il primo episodio, e due nel secondo episodio della serata. A questo si aggiunge la partnership annunciata discretamente e sovrapposta all'inizio di ogni episodio, con il sito web medico acquistato da TF1 nel 2018, Doctissimo (<https://www.doctissimo.fr/>).

L'analisi dello share<sup>23</sup> rivela diversi elementi interessanti. Va sottolineato che la serie è stata trasmessa in Francia durante un periodo di coprifuoco (dalle 18 alle 6 del mattino) decretato dal governo all'inizio del 2021 per contrastare la CoVid-19, per tutta la durata della programmazione della serie, favorendo necessariamente la presenza dei francesi davanti agli schermi televisivi. La partenza della serie è stata buona, così come lo share registrato ogni mercoledì con il passare delle settimane. I mass media specializzati notano

buoni risultati<sup>24</sup>, con un'audience media di circa 4,4 milioni di spettatori per il primo episodio (questa stessa media si erode, ovviamente, tra il primo e il secondo episodio). Un successo, quindi, ma che deve essere messo in prospettiva. In effetti, la serie TF1 per quattro volte è superata, in termini di numero di spettatori, da France 2, che punta su film tv francesi e inediti il mercoledì sera. Così, nella seconda settimana, c'è stata una leggera erosione degli spettatori: TF1 ha perso la sua posizione di leader di fronte ad un episodio inedito della serie francese di France 2, *Disparition inquiétante* (2019-). Nella terza settimana, è di nuovo il canale pubblico a vincere, con la trasmissione del film francese *Le goût des autres* (Agnès Jaoui, 2000) dopo il decesso dell'attore francese Jean-Pierre Bacri. Nella settimana 4, un nuovo episodio di *Disparition inquiétante* dà ancora una volta a France 2 la leadership sui canali concorrenti. La fiction francese offre di nuovo a France 2 grandi ascolti con il film tv *La fille dans les bois* (Marie-Hélène Copti, 2020), che si classifica numero 1 con il 19,4% di share contro il 17,3% di TF1 il 3 febbraio 2021. Dal punto di vista degli ascolti, dunque, TF1 sembra perdere il vantaggio sul suo rivale storico France 2. Ma questa apparente debolezza deve essere rivalutata alla luce di alcuni elementi. In effetti, la serie *Doc* si avvale di ascolti stabili, superiori ai 4 milioni di telespettatori ogni mercoledì sera, in linea con lo share delle altre serie mediche programmate ulteriormente. Il pool di spettatori è quindi fedele e si mantiene a lungo termine (la performance è discreta poiché è difficile riagganciare nuovi spettatori con il passare delle settimane, quando la trama è già in fase avanzata). Gli episodi sono accessibili in replay, il che permette ai telespettatori di guardare un programma trasmesso su un altro canale pur potendo recuperare uno o più episodi nella fascia oraria da loro scelta: è così che TF1 Pro annuncia su Twitter, nel gennaio 2021, di aver ottenuto 800.000 spettatori in più su un periodo di sette giorni dopo la diffusione del primo episodio di *Doc*, il cui pubblico ha poi raggiunto 5,2 milioni di spettatori. Ma l'orgoglio più grande vantato da TF1 è effettivamente il successo ottenuto con il target delle FRDA-50a, con una cifra sempre alta su entrambi gli episodi ogni settimana. Le seguenti tabelle (Fig. 2, Fig. 3, Fig. 4) indicano i dati di ascolto per le otto settimane di diffusione di *Doc*.

22 Solo i primi cinque minuti dell'episodio inedito successivo sono offerti agli spettatori sui siti di trasmissione in differita di TF1.

23 I dati vengono da informazioni incrociate tra quattro gruppi media di riferimento (Ozap-Pure Médias, TF1 Pro, TVprogramme.fr e Le film français) che si basano sulle informazioni comunicate da Médiamétrie.

24 "Audiences TV : la nouvelle série italienne 'Doc' en tête sur TF1" (*Le Parisien*, 7 gennaio 2020); "Audiences TV : La série médicale 'Doc' réussit ses débuts sur TF1" (*Écran Total*, 7 gennaio 2020); "Audiences TV : TF1 en tête avec sa série 'Doc'" (*Le Parisien*, 18 febbraio 2020).



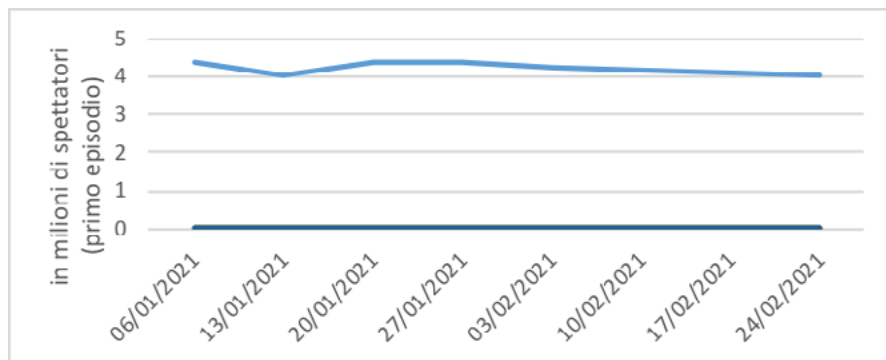


FIG. 2. DATI DI ASCOLTO PER LE OTTO SERATE DI DIFFUSIONE DELLA PRIMA STAGIONE DI *DOC* IN FRANCIA.

Data	Posizione nella classifica in termini di share
06/01/2021	1
13/01/2021	2
20/01/2021	2
27/01/2021	2
03/02/2021	2
10/02/2021	1
17/02/2021	1
24/02/2021	1

FIG. 3. CLASSIFICA DI TF1 IN TERMINI DI ASCOLTI CON IL PRIMO EPISODIO DI *DOC* (SU DUE ANDATI IN ONDA OGNI MERCOLEDÌ).

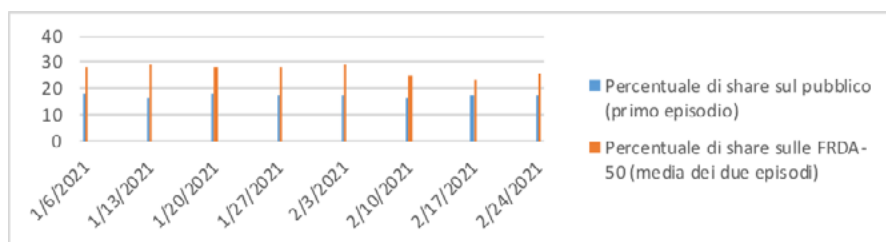


FIG. 4. PERCENTUALE DI SHARE SUL PUBBLICO E SULLE FRDA-50.

La programmazione di *Doc* si è dunque rivelata, per TF1, una scommessa vincente in termini, soprattutto, di numeri alti ottenuti presso il target commerciale prioritario per un'emittente privata.

## 6. UN PRIMO TENTATIVO DA RIPETERE?

TF1, in quanto broadcaster, ha dunque vinto la sfida della programmazione, per la prima volta, di una serie italiana in prime time, nell'ambito casella del mercoledì sera. Ma, al termine della nostra analisi, non sembra che la scommessa sia stata così rischiosa per TF1. Infatti, per quanto riguarda i contenuti e la francesizzazione di alcuni elementi originariamente *local*, *Doc* non è così sconcertante per un pubblico francese: soddisfa i criteri che hanno contribuito alla sua programmazione in prima serata sul principale canale televisivo francese, in quanto variazione del concetto di medical drama, con i suoi "invarianti" e qualche "variabile indipendente" (Kokoreff 1989: 32) subito corretta dalla necessaria "*national mediation*" indotta dal crescente volume di contenuti che circolano tra i diversi paesi, dalle dinamiche della distribuzione e dalle peculiarità dei diversi mercati televisivi (Antoniazzi e Barra 2020: 249). *Doc* è insieme un prodotto *local* e transnazionale, conformemente alla serialità europea contemporanea che propone alcuni tratti globalizzanti e alcuni molto locali per adattarsi al mercato internazionale (Barra e Scaglioni 2020a: 29).

Il successo di *Doc* in Francia potrebbe portare alla diffusione di altri prodotti seriali italiani su canali *mainstream*, per conquistare nuove fasce di pubblico detto 'di massa' rispetto agli amanti di prodotti audiovisivi italiani che sono gli spettatori di canali forse più confidenziali come le pay-TV o le piattaforme SVOD.

Recentemente, è stata annunciata la seconda stagione di *Doc* in Italia.<sup>25</sup> TF1 non ha ancora comunicato sull'eventuale programmazione di *Doc 2* o di un'altra serie italiana. Eppure Xavier Gandon, direttore dei canali televisivi e digitali del gruppo TF1, comunicava su Twitter, il 14 gennaio 2021, la sua felicità davanti al successo della "loro" nuova serie italiana *Doc* e "il suo orgoglio nel promuovere il meglio della creazione audiovisiva europea". È forse ancora presto per evocare un futuro per la fiction targata Rai in Francia. Ma un interrogativo sul futuro delle serie italiane in Francia può comunque essere legittimamente suggerito, nel contesto del "Rinascimento" della serialità televisiva europea. TF1 continua a creare l'evento con serie francesi e nuovi acquisti del gruppo nel catalogo internazionale, oltre alle ultime stagioni di grandi licenze come *Grey's Anatomy*, *The Good Doctor*, *Criminal Minds* (CBS, 2005-2020). Forse punterà di nuovo sul volto di Luca Argentero, rivelazione per il pubblico francese e ormai promesso a una carriera internazionale, come Alessandro Borghi, che è più conosciuto fuori dall'Italia per i suoi ruoli in *Suburra – la serie* e *Devils* che per la sua carriera cinematografica. L'ex-gieffino fa parte del cast della serie internazionale *Sandokan* (2021-), insieme all'attore turco Can Yaman, reso famoso dalla soap-opera *Daydreamer – Le ali del sogno* (*Erkenci Kuş*, Star TV, 2018-2019) andata in onda in Italia su Canale 5 ma inedita in Francia. Prodotta da Lux Vide, la serie dovrebbe essere pronta per il prossimo inverno.

A questo punto, dunque, la programmazione di *Doc* in quanto medical drama italiano di successo appare come una scommessa più vincente che folle. È da considerare comunque come un'evoluzione positiva segnata dal desiderio di diversificare l'offerta in termini di serialità televisiva, in un periodo fecondo per la creazione e la circolazione dei prodotti seriali italiani e, in modo più ampio, europei.

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- 1992 (2015)  
1993 (2017)  
1994 (2019)  
*L'amica geniale* (2018-)  
*Anna* (2021)  
*Baby* (2018-2020)  
*Braccialetti rossi* (2014-2016)  
*Les bracelets rouges* (2018-)  
*Carlo et Malik [Nero a metà]* (2018-)  
*La casa de papel* (2017-)  
*Chicago Med* (2015-)  
*Il Commissario Montalbano* (1999-)  
*Criminal Minds* (2005-2020)  
*Curon* (2020-)  
*Devils - Diavoli* (2020-)  
*Disparition inquiétante* (2019-)  
*Doc – Nelle tue mani* (2020-)  
*Don Matteo* (2000-)  
*ER* (1994-2009)  
*Erkenci Kuş* (2018-2019)  
*La faute à Rousseau* (2021)  
*Fedeltà* (2021-)  
*La fille dans les bois* (2020)  
*Gomorra* (2008)  
*Gomorra* (serie) (2014-)  
*Good Doctor* (2017-)  
*Le goût des autres* (2000)  
*Grey's Anatomy* (2006-)  
*H* (1998-2002)  
*Hippocrate* (2018-)  
*House* (2004-2012)  
*Io, Leonardo* (2019)  
*Je te promets* (2021-)  
*Luna nera* (2020-)  
*Maltese* (2017)  
*Les Médicis: Maîtres de Florence [Medici: Masters of Florence]*  
(2016-2019)  
*Meno dodici* (2016)  
*Il miracolo* (2018)  
*Nero a metà* (2018-)  
*New Amsterdam* (2018-)  
*The New Pope* (2020)  
*Polseres vermelles* (2011-2013)  
*Il processo* (2019)  
*La promesse* (2020)  
*The Resident* (2018-)  
*Romanzo criminale* (2005)  
*Romanzo criminale* (serie) (2008-2011)  
*Sandokan* (2021-)  
*Section de recherches* (2006-)  
*Suburra* (2015)  
*Suburra – La serie* (2017-2020)  
*Summertime – Tre metri sopra il cielo* (2020-)  
*S.W.A.T.* (2017-)  
*This is us* (2016-)  
*Tre metri sopra il cielo* (2004)  
*Un boss in salotto* (2014)  
*Vacanze ai caraibi* (2015)  
*The Young Pope* (2016)  
*Zero* (2021-)



# EMOTION: THE COMMANDER OF THE REMOTE CONTROL? A PSYCHOPHYSIOLOGICAL APPROACH TO UNDERSTAND VARIATION DECLINE IN TV RATINGS

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## ABSTRACT

Emotional arousal has long been thought vital for maintaining viewers in long-form serial fictions, but

the dynamic nature of audience emotional arousal has made it difficult to examine and relate to viewer ratings and channel hopping. This study provides a method for comparing moments of affect with TV viewer ratings during exposure and explores the role of arousal for TV ratings, applying an innovative mixed-method strategy, combining TV ratings and psychophysiological measurements, SCL (Skin Conductance Level). This is applied to measure audience-responses to the Danish public service fiction series Bankerot (Bankrupt, DR1, 2014-2015). While we expect a positive correlation between emotional arousal and levels of TV ratings based upon previous findings, our results show the opposite: increase in arousal leads to significant decline in TV ratings, indicating the potential of this approach to help improve theory in future studies.

## 1. LONG-FORM SERIAL FICTIONS AND MOMENTS OF AFFECT

Satisfying viewer ratings are crucial for TV broadcasters, regardless of whether they are commercial or public – aiming to attract advertising and subscribers, or aiming to maintain a public-service role in a democracy and to sustain the population's willingness to pay a license fee. One way of achieving satisfying viewer ratings is by offering long-form serial fictions of high quality, since they occupy top positions in ratings, possibly due to viewers' emotional engagement with the narrative (Bignell 2012). Today's long-form serial fictions demand a high level of commitment from viewers over many hours and their multilayered composition also demands close attention. To obtain this high level of commitment and engagement in long-form serial fictions, emotional engagement with the narrative is key (Gorton 2009). Within TV studies, the research interest has typically been centered around what texts signify and much less around texts exerting an affective impact on the viewers who encounter them (Gorton 2009). Given the abundance of emotional long-form serial fictions available and given the theories of affect well developed in, for example, film studies, it is surprising that television, a medium long associated with intimacy and emotional excess, has so long been left on the sidelines of debates on affect in visual media (Gorton 2009). Recent studies have focused on an 'emotional turn' in relation to television drama series, for example *Emotions in contemporary TV series* (Martínez and González 2016). In this book and in the study of emotion in television in general, the tendency has been to turn to models within film studies to theorize emotion. Film studies scholars' work has been influential in allowing television scholars to think about how emotion may play a role in television viewing as well. However, there are considerable differences between the two, and neglecting those often leads to problematic comparisons between the two media (Gorton 2017). Television is not simply a child of the film industry, since television's antecedents are also firmly rooted in radio and theatre. Because of this, theoretical models that are designed to think about a 2-hour narrative do not perfectly translate to long-running television series (Gorton 2017). Thus, we refrain from turning to research conducted by film scholars to get an understanding of the role of emotion in long-form serial fictions, but instead rely on research on emotion within the area of television studies itself. In this endeavor, Nelson's (2016) work exploring the idea of a specific 'affective viewing' experience afforded by

complex TV in the form of the 'high-end', niche-marketed, series-serials of TV is highly relevant. Nelson explains how TV fictions have developed remarkably over the past twenty years, and that both the programs made and the conceptual frameworks for understanding TV fictions have shifted almost beyond recognition. He underlines the importance of emotions in long-form TV fiction, when he argues that it is "moments of affect" (Nelson 2016: 29) that attract and engage the viewers, and not so much the linear narrative drive and whodunit element. He defines a moment of affect in long-form serial television viewing as: "an unusually intensive encounter in a process of dynamic interplay between feeling and cognition mobilized by textual complexity and a concern with being in the world, in both the context of the fiction and the viewing context" (Nelson 2016: 30). Nelson uses a scene from *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007-2015) as an example:

The overt success of those at the core of the incident (a successful advertising pitch, for example) may be suffused with a sense of the disappointment of another character, who has been excluded, thwarted or overlooked in career terms, or in romance. Together, these mixes of thoughts and feelings as experienced constitute, what I signify by "moments of affect", of which there are many in *Mad Men* (Nelson 2016: 46).

He argues that it is during the affective moments, viewers get hooked and engaged in the storyline and the characters, and what makes the viewers come back to watch more episodes. Nelson continues to argue that 'moments of affect' constitute a significant structuring principle to sustain engagement in long-form serials. This assumption has so far remained untested, however, since it has not been possible to empirically study it without measuring emotional responses during exposure.

## 2. EMOTIONS, EMOTIONAL AROUSAL AND LONG-FORM SERIAL FICTIONS

To examine moments of affect in TV series, this paper suggests integrating an approach from cognitive psychology where affect has long been empirically examined. Within this field, there is a consensus to separate affect into components of emotions and mood (Gazzaniga et al. 2014: 427), where mood is considered longer lasting, whereas emotions

are generally caused by a specific event and are often more intense. Emotions can be divided into three parts: the autonomic or physical reaction to – in this case – the TV series; change in behavior; and the feeling or conscious awareness of the emotion (Breedlove and Watson 2013: 471). Furthermore, emotional responses are usually viewed as either discrete (e.g. joy, sadness) or dimensional, where emotions are divided into an arousal and valence component. The latter model has, in recent years, received much empirical support. In general, arousal is regarded as a vital component for the emotional experience, and studies have found arousal to affect attention (Citron 2012), memory (Lang et al. 1999) and decision-making (Gazzaniga et al. 2014). Since arousal is a fundamental element in evoking feelings and in changing behavior, we also consider it a fundamental element in eliciting moments of affect in response to long-form serial fictions.

While arousal in the following sections is described as emotion, it is important to note that this study is limited to only one aspect of emotion, the physical reaction of arousal, and while other aspects (such as the cognitive or subjective, conscious feeling) are important and all modifies the emotional experience, this approach makes it possible to capture changes in the physical reaction to emotions on a moment-to-moment basis and as such allows us to compare variation in arousal to viewer ratings.

Although the role of arousal has not – to the authors' knowledge – been examined in relation to ratings for TV series in particular, arousal has been studied in relation to other areas within television studies. For example, how arousal intensifies responses to TV commercials (Lang 1990), how arousal influences learning after exposure to high-arousing TV content (Zillmann 1991), and how arousal influence the allocation of processing resources to arousing TV messages (Lang et al. 1999). In theory, emotional arousal is a vital element in maintaining viewer interest, which thereby also provides satisfying TV ratings. However, we know little of its role in actual decision making such as tuning away from a TV-series, presumably because there has been a lack of suitable methods for measuring this.

### 3. THE ROLE OF EMOTION IN DECISION-MAKING AND TRANSPORTATION

Decision-making is likely to be an important part of the potential correlation between emotions and TV viewer ratings: before we make a decision – such as to continue watching

the TV series, or to look for other alternatives on other TV channels, or to turn off the screen altogether – we first compute the value of each of the options (e.g. the benefits of the TV series the viewer is currently watching) and make a comparison of the different values (e.g. content from other competing TV channels). The aim is to choose the option that will maximize value compared to the costs required to obtain that reward, e.g. to obtain the likelihood of highest possible reward (Gazzaniga et al. 2014). In our case, this means that, before deciding on what to watch, the viewer searches for the viewing option which will feel satisfying and rewarding. But the decision-making process is not a once-off activity. It is an ongoing process that allows for revision along the way. Consequently, it does not stop when the viewer has chosen a TV program to watch – it continues during watching, and therefore, the viewer constantly evaluates whether the TV program still feels satisfying and rewarding. If not, there is always something else to watch on other TV channels, and with the advent of streaming platforms this paradox of choice has increased. In decision-making, reward often refers to dopamine release, and this means that succeeding in making the right TV content choice is associated with great well-being. Decision-making has been found to be influenced by a range of internal variables, such as mood and motivation (this includes emotions), and external variables (such as costs). Studies show that emotions can indeed increase the perception of reward and thus motivate decisions in terms of avoidance or engagement behavior (Gazzaniga et al. 2014, Eysenck and Keane 2015). In other words, while increase in arousal may lead to engagement behavior when watching TV series, arousal can also lead to avoidance behavior. The question is when emotional responses will increase or decrease emotional engagement and make the viewer stay tuned. According to the theory of moments of affect, events which elicit high levels of arousal will increase narrative engagement and hence engagement behavior, but according to narrative transportation theory this process also depends on the degree of narrative transportation.

Narrative transportation in TV is the degree to which a viewer becomes engaged with the storyline. It is a phenomenon whereby viewers feel so involved in a storyline that it can influence their attitudes and behavior, even after they have finished watching (Green and Brock 2000). According to literature on narrative transportation, viewers who are drawn into a story will identify with story characters and imagine events, and subsequently, viewers are

transported into the narrative world (Green & Brock 2000). Narratologists advocate that narrative transportation involves attentional focus, emotional response, working memory and imagination (Green and Brock 2002, Buselle and Bilandzic 2008).

Much research on narrative transportation focuses on the fit between story object and story plot rather than the fit between story object and the viewer (Gordon, Ciorciari & van Laer, 2018), and thus, there is limited knowledge of how viewers respond to different story objects in narrative transportation. As Appel and Malečkar (2012: 26) observe, “what is still lacking [...] are answers to the question of how transportation affects persuasion”, in our case persuasion to continue viewing a long form TV series. Gordon, Ciorciari and van Laer (2018) underline that it is close to impossible to find an answer to Appel and Malečkar’s question, since the contemporary understanding of narrative transportation relies on consumer self-reports of knowledge, attitudes and behaviors, with associated issues of bias (this is described in further detail in the following section). Narrative researchers recognize this problem, as they acknowledge that many of the constructs associated with reflection and interpretation in narrative persuasion occur outside human awareness, and it is therefore difficult to measure them using self-report methods (Moyer-Gusé 2008). The approach suggested by this paper may provide a way forward.

#### 4. METHODS PREFERRED IN AUDIENCE RESEARCH WITHIN TELEVISION STUDIES

The primary challenge in conducting audience research on long-form serial fictions is to understand both the emotional and the rational experiences that occur in the encounter between a respondent and a fiction series. In order to do this, much television audience research has prioritized giving voice to the users of television in order to explore the meaning and uses of the content within in the context of people’s everyday lives (Radway 1984, Jensen 2002). However, the interest in context and opinion formation has come to overshadow the interest television audience researchers have in the moment of reception (Alasuutari 1999). In television audience research, the preferred research method has often been an interview conducted after the TV experience has ended (Kanjó et al. 2015, Phan and Sripada 2013), in which respondents are given the opportunity to discuss and reflect on the experience. This backward-looking strategy is applied

in both qualitative and quantitative methods (Myttom et al. 2016). Most contemporary reception research within television studies aligns itself with a cultural studies approach, and qualitative ethnographic methods have dominated the methodological frameworks (Zaborowski and Dhaenens 2016). Other methodological approaches remain rarer, even though laboratory experiments have been conducted since the first part of the 20th century, including for example The Payne Fund Studies (1928-33) (Jowett et al. 1996). Typically, these approaches monitor and measure galvanic skin response, heart rate, and respiration variances in people while they are watching certain kinds of content, often violent media stimuli (Cline et al. 1973, Osborn and Endsley 1971).

To sum up, emotional arousal may play a large role in viewer ratings. However, traditional methods are unlikely to capture the dynamic and changing emotional states during exposure, capturing only the conscious experience after the TV series has been seen. Therefore, the aim of this study is to apply an innovative mixed-methods strategy examining whether a combination of traditional methods (TV audience ratings) and psychophysical methods measuring emotional arousal on a minute-by-minute basis is able to solve this fundamental challenge, potentially providing a deeper understanding of the role of emotions and moments of affect in TV series.

#### 5. METHOD

As mentioned above, television studies have relied heavily on self-reports when studying emotional experiences, but self-reports might be held in doubt because respondents cannot remember all the different emotions they experienced during a screening of a TV program, or they might misrepresent their feelings due to self-representation (Picard and Daily 2005). Another approach is applying psychophysiological measurements which provide the ability to measure the responses of the respondent dynamically, without interrupting respondents as self-reports do (Soleymani et al. 2008). The majority of studies that examine emotional responses to media content using psychophysiological measures are based on the dimensional model mentioned earlier. In this study, we limit ourselves to studying only the intensity of the experienced emotion (arousal) and not valence, because emotional arousal has been found to be “a critical factor contributing to the emotional enhancement



effect for many types of information” (Kensinger 2004: 242), because it is processed in the brain region amygdala which evaluate and orchestrate emotional responses and select stimuli for enhanced processing. Valence seems to rely on other regions on the brain, and while it may be able to increase processing relative to neutral stimuli, it seems likely to play a minor role than arousal (Kensinger 2004). Skin conductance (also known as electrodermal activity) has long been used to measure emotional arousal, also in media research. Emotional arousing stimuli activate the sympathetic nervous system, which leads to increased sweating in the skin through the eccrine sweat glands. These are mainly located around the hands and feet. Sweating is a potent conductor for current; thus, when one electrode applies a small current that is captured by another, it is possible to measure skin conductance. The measurable variation in skin conductance occurs approximately one to four seconds after the eliciting event. If participants are in a room with constant temperature and humidity, increased skin conductance is thought to be a convincing measure of increased emotional arousal (Potter and Bolls 2011). Furthermore, it provides two advantages over self-reports: it can capture emotional arousal on a subconscious level, and it provides a moment-to-moment measure of arousal.

While self-reports are usually able to capture highly arousing scenes, skin conductance also captures periods of rise and decline and periods of low arousal with little variation, which has been termed ‘flatliners’ (for instance if participants are bored) (Heiselberg 2016). Skin conductance has been used to study structural aspects such as editing pace and cuts (e.g. Lang et al. 2000).

## 5.1 Experimental setup and procedure

The data collection took place in a lab with three workstations consisting of a 17-inch laptop with quality headphones, external keyboard and mouse. The laptops were fitted with Tobii X2-30 Eye Tracker Compact Edition and a varioLAB-mini for measuring skin conductance. The lab is without windows, air-conditioned, without distracting interior and to avoid disturbance between participants a small intersecting wall was set up between workstations. A research protocol was followed to eliminate known sources of bias. Before arriving at The Danish Broadcasting Corporation (DR), respondents were asked not to wear heavy make-up around the eye region. The respondents had, furthermore, been screened for pacemaker and eye diseases. Upon arrival at DR, an effort

was made to create a relaxed atmosphere and respondents had time to settle, so any prior stress or arousal was reduced. Water but no coffee, tea or snacks was offered until after the measurements. Respondents were also asked to wash their hands and not use moisturising lotion after washing. Mobile phones were turned off or set to flight mode in order not to disturb or interfere with the measurements. The electrodes were placed approximately one minute before skin conductance recording began. The respondents were provided with verbal instructions and a short instruction on screen was shown. After the introduction, a baseline measurement was recorded by showing a series of pictures representing low- and high-arousal stimuli of positive and negative valence. To minimise arousal after the series of baseline pictures a five-second black screen was inserted between the baseline and the stimulus material *Bankerot*, as previous experiments have shown that respondents are aroused at the beginning of a screening because of the unusual context. During the data collection the researchers left the lab, but respondents were observed via cameras, and could thus raise their hand if in need of any help.

## 5.2 Measuring physiological arousal

Skin conductance was measured during screening using a varioLAB-mini. Two electrodes (Ag/AgCl, ø24mm, pre-gelled adhesive tape) are placed two to three cm apart on the palmar area of the hand with a Velcro-band to further secure them during measurements, and the skin conductance signal is increased using an amplifier (Covidien/Kendal H124SG). Data collection was managed through the use of the software Biometric Software suite (Dr. Hornecker Software-Entwicklung und IT-Dienstleistungen, Version 2.0) and Tobii Studio (Version 3.3.1).

Skin conductance is traditionally divided into tonic (slow changes) and phasic (quick changes) arousal; however, emotionally engaging television fiction series typically have several structural aspects present at the same time, for example sound, picture and editing, and therefore, skin conductance responses are also expected to be overlapping. Because of the likely interaction between these for long-lasting emotional stimuli such as a fiction series, we chose to measure the total aggregated level of skin conductance for all respondents over time, indicating both their emotional response to the stimuli and their relative increase/decrease in arousal. In other words, rather than measuring fast changes in arousal (phasic), we primarily capture participant mood changes,

as the longer lasting emotions (e.g. character and narrative engagement) are more important for viewer engagement in long form TV serial-fictions compared to shorter lasting emotions (e.g. responses to unexpected events such as gun-shot). In addition, viewer ratings are measured on a minute-to-minute-basis as described below, and therefore, it allows for a direct comparison between arousal and viewer ratings which are also measured as an average for each minute.

### 5.3 Viewer ratings

TNS Gallup measures TV viewing in TV owning households in Denmark using its TV Meter on behalf of DR among other Danish broadcasters. Gallup TV Meter equipment logs all TV viewing in 1000 selected households corresponding to 2200 individuals. The viewing habits of these individuals are logged around the clock on an ongoing basis. Data on viewer habits – who watches which channels and when – are transmitted daily to TNS Gallup. Overall, viewer ratings can be determined as the audience share or rating (Bignell 2012). Because we are interested in the emotional influence on viewer ratings rather than the competition between programs, this study will focus on the latter. Viewers' conscious and subconscious motives for changing channels may be manifold. For instance, commercial breaks on other TV channels may explain a short rise and fall in ratings, viewers may change to another channel if they have planned to watch a specific program, or they may merely “zap” in search of an interesting program to watch. In general, an increase in viewer ratings while a TV series is aired cannot be caused by the program content itself, but by viewers opting out of other programs on competing channels. As such, we are mainly interested in examining viewers leaving the TV series by turning off the TV or switching channel (viewer dropouts). However, ratings for viewer dropouts are based on a very small subset of the sample when it is based on a minute-by-minute change. This means that the estimated viewer dropouts are uncertain. Therefore, we have chosen to focus on overall viewer ratings measured per minute. Because DR is a public service broadcaster there are no commercial breaks, and in general, viewer ratings for Thursdays in 2014 from 8.30 p.m. to 9.23 p.m. (i.e., when the first two seasons of *Bankerot* were aired) show a general increase in viewers for DR1 in average. To account for viewers leaving the program because of zapping, for example due to commercial breaks on other channels, we only included viewer

ratings for viewers who viewed five consecutive minutes of *Bankerot*.

### 5.4 Analysis of skin conductance data

The data correction, processing and analysis consisted of four steps. First, the data was normalized. As each respondent has different baseline levels of skin-conductance, it is conventional to correct for individual differences (Braithwaite and Watson 2015). As this study aims to analyse variations in skin conductance levels and not absolute values a different approach was taken. The skin conductance-data of each respondent was normalised to unity before mean skin conductance level values were calculated across the sample. This ensures correct relativistic comparison of skin conductance level variations between respondents. Second, to assess the effects of emotional arousal on the number of viewers, we applied an OLS regression model, where we pooled the two episodes, creating a single time series with episode 1.02 following episode 1.01. We accounted for the time series nature of our data. Since viewership is only available at a minute-unit level, we aggregated the arousal data to a minute level and used average scores for each minute. Third, preliminary analyses using Dickey-Fuller tests demonstrated that the dependent variable (number of viewers in 1000s) was non-stationary and thus needed to be differenced. Differencing also removes autocorrelation in the residuals. For the analysis, it means we estimate effects on changes in viewership. Formally, we test the alternative (non-directional) hypothesis that emotional arousal affects viewer ratings against the null hypothesis that there is no effect. We added the episode (dummy variable with second episode as reference category) as an additional control variable.

Fourth, since the effects of arousal may be delayed (e.g. considering alternative options, making the decision and behavioral response such as finding the remote), we checked the cross-correlation function for lags 0-3 to select the most appropriate delay (i.e. demonstrates the largest effect size). For both episodes, using a lag of two minute (t-2) turns out to yield the largest effects. This means that we look at the effect of arousal two minutes earlier on changes in viewer ratings.

### 5.5 Stimulus material: *Bankerot*

The Danish fiction series *Bankerot* is categorized as a drama/comedy and was directed by Henrik Ruben Genz, Annette K. Olesen and Mikkel Serup. It tells the story about a former

cook, Dean, and a former wine connoisseur, Martin, who try to restore a restaurant to solve their problems: Dean owes money to criminals after being released from jail for committing insurance fraud (he started a fire at an earlier restaurant). Martin, on the other hand, risks losing custody of his son. His wife died years earlier in a traffic accident that left his son mute and Martin increasingly apathetic. Because Martin is unable to get a grip on his life, a school psychologist from his son's school fears he is not able to take care of his son and, by starting a restaurant, Martin will prove to the psychologists that he can take care of them both. Martin's father is the most obvious investor for the restoration of the restaurant, but their relationship is terrible, and Martin has not seen him since the death of his wife. *Bankerot* features two seasons of eight episodes, where the first two episodes (which will be examined in this study) were aired in primetime on the 16th of October 2014 from 8.30 p.m. to 9.23 p.m. on the Danish TV station DR1. The viewer rating for *Bankerot* was 539,626 for the first episode, and 575,116 for the second episode based on a sample of minimum 1000 viewers. The last episode in the first season was aired six weeks later and received estimated 283,577 ratings. As mentioned, because DR is a public service broadcaster there were no commercial breaks during *Bankerot*. As stated to the authors by DR, the target audience of *Bankerot* is Danes 15 years of age or above.

## 5.6 Respondents

This study included 40 respondents (25 were female) recruited via e-mail and later phone from DR Panelet, a panel of 10,000 Danes run by the Audience Research Department at DR. Respondents were excluded if they reported having watched *Bankerot* before. Average age is 51.3, ranging from 21 to 71 years (reflecting the age of the target audience of *Bankerot* as described by DR). Respondents received a gift certificate of 100 DKK for their participation. Self-report data from one respondent was excluded due to cognitive difficulties, and three skin conductance datasets were excluded from further analysis due to technical problems, leaving data from 36 participants for further analysis.

## 6. RESULTS

Results consist of two elements: skin conductance data from the screening of respondents watching *Bankerot*; and viewer ratings from when *Bankerot* was originally aired.

### 6.1 Skin Conductance data

#### Level of skin conductance for episode 1

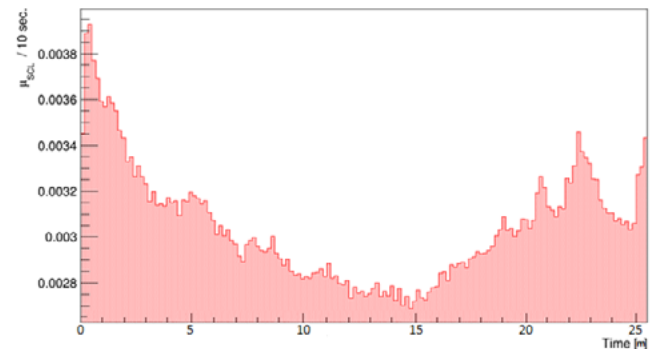


FIG. 1. RESPONDENTS' SKIN CONDUCTANCE, WHILE THEY WATCHED EPISODE 1.01 OF *BANKEROT*, DISPLAYED IN TEN-SECOND BINS. ARROWS INDICATE PEAKS.

#### Level of skin conductance for episode two

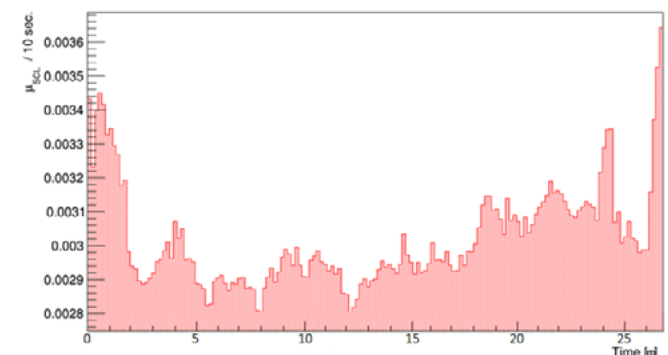


FIG. 2. RESPONDENTS' LEVELS OF SKIN CONDUCTANCE, WHILE THEY WATCHED EPISODE 1.02 OF *BANKEROT*, DISPLAYED IN TEN-SECOND BINS. ARROWS INDICATE PEAKS.

As shown in Fig. 1, episode 1.01 begins with a relatively long-lasting decline in arousal followed by a flatline sequence (low levels of arousal with little variation) and a rise toward the climax of this episode. This suggests that this episode did not elicit high levels of emotional arousal for respondents apart from the very beginning of the episode and – in part – towards the end. The early peak in arousal is likely to be caused by the unusual context around the respondent rather than by the narrative: Previous experiments in DR have shown

a similar trend of such early peaks in arousal, most likely because the respondents are not familiar with the surroundings. Because we are unable to control for whether arousal is due to the novelty of the settings or stimuli, we will conduct additional analyses to check whether the observations for the first three minutes of episode 1.01 change the results.

Episode 1.02 has, as shown in Fig. 2, very small fluctuations in arousal until the seventeenth minute. Towards the end, a build-up towards the climax is seen as both an increase in total skin conductance and larger peaks in skin conductance.

## 6.2 Viewer ratings

To be able to compare levels of arousal with viewer ratings, we now turn an analysis of ratings for the first two episodes of *Bankerot*. Viewer ratings are displayed in Fig. 3 and Fig. 4. To eliminate “zappers” (i.e., TV audiences changing channels many times within short intervals), we only include viewers who watched these episodes for five minutes consecutive (see Viewer ratings for specifics), and to increase comparability with skin conductance data, they are displayed in minutes (starting from zero). Note that rises in viewer ratings cannot directly be compared to rise in arousal because viewers have not seen the episode before tuning in. Indirectly, a rise in arousal may cause viewers not to tune away, thus affecting a rise in viewer ratings; however, this is not examined in this study.

### Viewer ratings for episode 1.01



FIG. 3. ESTIMATED VIEWER RATINGS OF EPISODE 1.01, WHEN IT WAS AIRED IN PRIMETIME IN 2014. TO BE INCLUDED, VIEWERS HAD TO HAVE WATCHED FIVE CONSECUTIVE MINUTES.

### Viewer ratings for episode 1.02

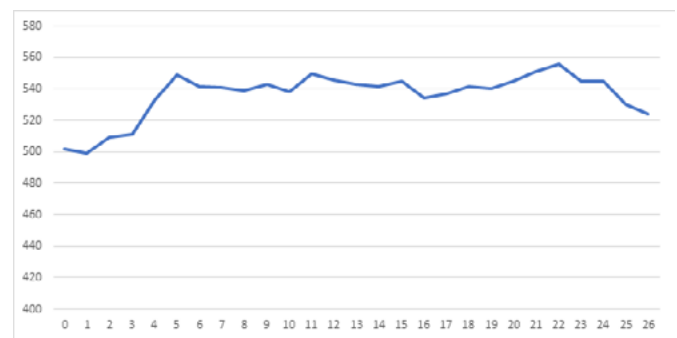


FIG. 4. ESTIMATED VIEWER RATINGS OF EPISODE 1.02, WHEN IT WAS AIRED IN PRIMETIME IN 2014. TO BE INCLUDED, VIEWERS HAD TO HAVE WATCHED FIVE CONSECUTIVE MINUTES.

## 6.3 Predicting decrease in TV-ratings based on arousal

As noted earlier, skin conductance and TV-ratings are correlated using a regression analysis. In the regression analysis it is explored whether arousal as an independent variable can predict viewer behavior. In other words, we investigate if arousal decrease, increase and/or flatline are likely to effect viewer ratings, and how. Table 1 report the results of the regression analysis predicting viewership based on arousal.

	Change in viewership (in 1000s)			
	B	SE	p value	b
arousal ( <i>t</i> -2)	-13138.0*	6414.4	.046	-.28
episode (2=reference)	4.30+	2.51	.093	-.24
Constant	44.68*	19.56	.027	

$R^2$  .13  
 Note. N=49, +  $p < .10$ , \*  $p < .05$ .

TABLE 1. PREDICTING CHANGE IN VIEWERSHIP.

We find that increased arousal yields less viewers. The result is significant (p-value .046), and this is remarkable, given the low number of observations. A .0001 increase, which is quite common, yields 1314 less viewers. On average, the change in viewership was slightly higher in the first episode compared to the second one ( $B=4.30$ ,  $SE=2.51$ ,  $p=.093$ ). We thus reject the null-hypotheses of no relationship between

arousal and viewership. Overall, the model predicts 13 percent of the variance in the change of viewership was caused by changes in arousal. While this leaves a lot of the changes in viewership unexplained, we consider it a substantial result. It is hard to predict viewership, let alone minute-to-minute changes therein and that our simple model accounts for a more than negligible part of the variance is noteworthy.

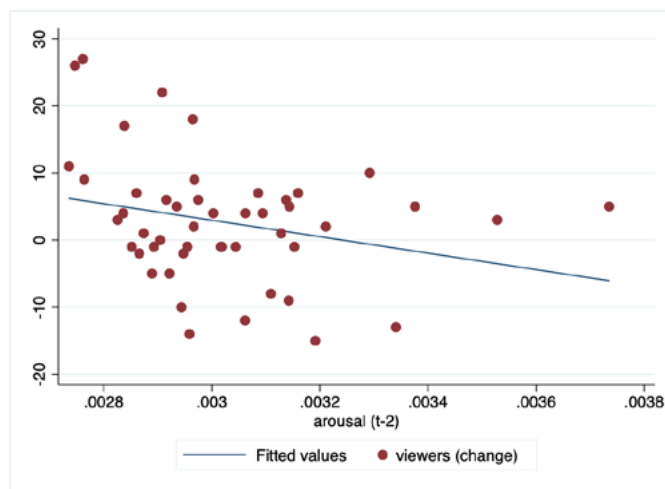


FIG. 5. REGRESSION GRAPH.

Fig. 5 provides a graphical depiction of our regression model. It reveals the absence of large outliers. Other requirements and assumptions of a regression analysis are also met: autocorrelation is absent in the residuals (Ljung-Box Q-test over 4 lags is 9.18,  $p=.06$ , failing to reject the null-hypothesis of no autocorrelation in residuals), as is heteroskedasticity (Breusch-Pagan test is .36,  $p=.55$ , confirming the null-hypothesis of constant variance). Furthermore, Fig. 6 reveals that the residuals are roughly normally distributed, which is again confirmed by the joint Skewness/Kurtosis test ( $\chi^2=.78$ ,  $p=.68$ , failing to reject the null-hypothesis of normality).

We see an effect for all three lags we considered (e.g. increase in arousal causes decrease in viewer ratings in the following minutes), but the effect is largest two minutes after the increase. As mentioned, the early peak in episode one which lasts approximately three minutes might be caused due to the unusual circumstances in the lab setting and could bias the results. As such, we re-ran the analysis without the first three minutes and found that effect is even stronger when the first three minutes are neglected.

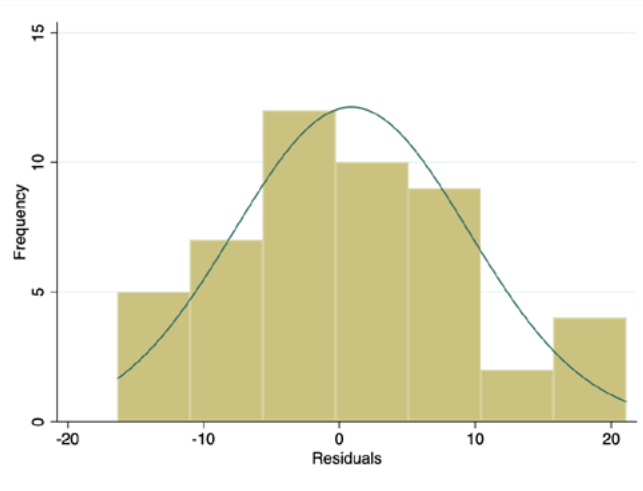


FIG. 6. DISTRIBUTION OF RESIDUALS.

To summarize, literature within TV studies indicates that moments of affect are vital to maintain viewer engagement, however we did not find evidence of such. In fact, the result of the regression analysis shows the opposite: After a period with an increase in arousal, we see a decrease in viewer rating, and the strongest effect occurs two minutes after an increase in arousal.

## 7. DISCUSSION

This explorative study examines the relationship between emotional arousal and viewer ratings in TV long form serial fictions. To accomplish this, we provide an innovative mixed-method strategy, combining TV ratings and psychophysiological measurements, SCL (Skin Conductance Level) measuring emotional arousal on a minute-by-minute basis. Traditional self-report methods are not capturing the dynamic emotional states during TV exposure and, besides, they capture only the conscious experience. Our mixed-methods strategy solves this fundamental challenge and provides a deeper understanding of the relation between arousal and TV ratings.

The mixed-methods approach was applied to the Danish fiction series *Bankerot*. Results showed that, after a period with an increase in arousal, there is a decrease in viewer ratings, and the strongest effect occurs two minutes after the arousal peak. This result seems to contradict the literature on TV series and emotions and highlights the complex role of arousal. A possible explanation for this result is that deci-



sion-making involving emotional responses can cause both engagement and avoidance behavior, and in our case, it is most likely that the result is caused by the latter. The question is why. Here we turn to the theory of narrative transportation. If a TV series succeeds in narratively transporting a viewer by eliciting emotional responses, then engaging behavior is increased. However, the question is whether a poor fit between viewer needs and preferences and the story object are also able to elicit emotional responses, for example due to frustration of plot holes or character flaws. If so, it may prevent narrative transportation and thus decrease engaging behavior. While high levels of arousal are likely to reflect engaging behavior for the TV series, periods of low arousal in *Bankerot* indicate low engaging behavior, and consequently the viewer is distracted by internal stimuli (such as boring mood or low motivation) which can lead to either avoidance-behavior from this TV series or motivated-behavior for seeking other opportunities if the TV series does not live up to expectations or does not fulfill one's current emotional needs. This can cause increase in arousal, leading to fall in viewer ratings. Here we focus on the internal variable, since skin conductance is recording in a lab without distractions. The point is that a TV series' ability to transport the audience should – if successful – lead to a good fit between the viewer and the story object and hence, to engaging behavior. On the other hand, if the TV series provides a poor fit, the TV series triggers a negative emotional reaction, and this increases the probability of switching channels or turning off the TV.

In terms of the findings, important limitations should be considered, including: 1) a limited sample size is studied (we hope to replicate this study on a larger scale with multiple TV series to generalize the findings across TV series and populations in future studies); 2) this study did not examine the whole emotional experience (i.e., the cognitive component and the valence dimension) but only the intensity of the experienced emotions (arousal), since highly arousing events have been linked to better attention and memory amongst other similar events. In future studies, we recommend examining how differences in emotional valence (i.e., whether the audience's emotional response is positive or negative) may affect reception, and other components such as culture or human interaction could be included as well. Our hope is to pave the way for future research which goes in the same direction, and which could potentially become a powerful tool in predicting fall in TV ratings. This would be of the greatest value to the TV industry in developing new long-form serial fictions.

## 8. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study is not to generalize the findings, but merely to explore the potential of an approach investigating the connection between TV ratings and psychophysiological measures of arousal. Typically, television studies rely heavily on self-reports when studying emotional experiences, but self-reports are biased due to respondent's misremembering emotions and to social desirability response bias (Picard and Daily, 2005). To avoid these biases, this explorative study has successfully provided an innovative mixed-methods design for comparing moments of affect with TV ratings during exposure by combining TV ratings and psychophysiological measurements of arousal (SCL).

The results from *Bankerot* show the complexity of emotions and arousal, adding to our understanding of the path between a TV series' narrative, the emotional reaction and the behavioral response. This does not only hold academic value but may also be a powerful tool in predicting TV ratings in applied media research. In this study, we chose to focus on emotional arousal, but other psychophysiological measures also hold interesting potential when combined with TV ratings to measure valence (such as facial EMG), motivational behavior (EEG) and attention (eye-tracking). For example, combining measuring arousal and valence may also reveal the degree to which positive and negative emotions may enhance or decrease narrative transportation.

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