

GLOBAL TV SERIES AND THE POLITICAL IMAGINATION

EDITED BY

Anastasia Krutikova
& Tatsiana Zhurauliova



TV-PHILOSOPHY

EXETER

Global TV Series
and the Political
Imagination

TV-Philosophy

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Since the turn of the century, we have been living through a golden age of TV. Addicted to platforms, we are increasingly reliant on TV's capacity to entertain and inform. Does this mark a radical change in our human experience? As yet, its aesthetic potential for visualising ethical issues and its capacity for enabling democratic empowerment have not been scrutinized, nor its power for confronting cultural and social upheavals.

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Global TV Series and the Political Imagination

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ANASTASIA KRUTIKOVA
AND TATSIANA ZHURAULOVA

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Introduction

TV Series in the Age of Global Digital Distribution

Anastasia Krutikova and Tatsiana Zhurauliova

Global TV Series and the Political Imagination is motivated by a two-fold question: how do specific cultural and national contexts shape the content of TV series, and how do these series, in turn, affect both local and global political imaginations? It seeks to explore the deeper political dimensions embedded in televisual fictions, arguing that TV series are not mere entertainment or a reflection of a pre-existing reality, but are complex cultural artefacts that can shape political and social discourses at both local and global levels, providing common reference points that populate everyday conversations and deliberations.

The volume addresses an important gap in current scholarship on television series and their impact within a rapidly globalizing media environment. While much of the existing research focuses on either Hollywood productions and their global impact or on localized perspectives, little attention has been given to the comparative analysis of television series that arise from different political and cultural contexts. Bringing together case studies from Europe, Africa, and Asia, as well as Central and South America, this volume examines the intersecting yet diverse regional and local perspectives that shape TV series production and reception. The volume builds upon Ramon Lobato's conceptualization of the global geography of online television distribution, which highlights the dual logic of contemporary television: shared global content distribution channels, often dominated by US and anglophone series, exist alongside an expanding array of local offerings that are tailored for and aimed at specific markets. These local creations, however, are not merely confined to their domestic audiences; they are increasingly consumed beyond national borders, contributing to the complex web of cultural exchange and the formation of a global political imaginary.¹ *Global TV Series and the Political Imagination* emphasizes this dual dynamic, exploring how local conditions affect the political imaginaries embedded in TV series, while also considering how these series contribute to global conversations about politics, identity,

and power relationships. The international scope of the volume, both in terms of case studies and scholarly voices, responds to the dynamic developments in the global landscape of television fiction and seeks to decentre the anglo-phone dominance in television studies in order to foreground the importance of diverse national perspectives.

Political Imagination and Popular Culture

As suggested by the title of this volume, the notion of ‘political imagination’ is central to our project and to our conceptualization of the role that TV series play in the processes through which societies form, sustain, and transform themselves. Yet both of these terms, ‘political’ and ‘imagination’, elude straightforward definition and merit a closer examination.

In recent scholarship, the concept of ‘imagination’ is often discussed in relation to, and sometimes in opposition to, the term ‘imaginary’. Unlike imagination, which is usually understood as an individual creative faculty, the concept of ‘imaginary’ encompasses the shared meanings and practices that sustain a society. For Charles Taylor, the imaginary serves as the source of the ‘common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy’.² This understanding of imaginary certainly applies to political television series that present their viewers with a particular vision of the political universe, contributing to shared conceptualizations of the political and thus either legitimizing or challenging a specific political order. But is that the limit of what political TV series can do?

In his foundational work on social imagination, Cornelius Castoriadis similarly distinguishes between imagination and imaginary. For Castoriadis, no society can exist without the imaginary significations that both ‘institute’ and are ‘instituted’ by it; ‘the radical instituting social imaginary’—which he defines elsewhere as ‘the field of social-historical creation’³—produces ‘forms which [...] are significations and institutions (each of those being impossible without the other)’.⁴ Castoriadis refers to social imaginary and its significations as ‘magma’—as noted by Paula Diehl in her analysis of temporality in political imaginary, the term is particularly evocative in its likening of the dichotomy between the ‘instituting’ and the ‘instituted’ to the shifting between the molten and the solidified.⁵

At the same time, Castoriadis also highlights the dynamic nature of the relationship between the collective imaginary and the individual imagination, as well as the latter’s transformative potential: ‘It is only insofar as the radical imagination of the psyche seeps through the successive layers of the social armor, which cover and penetrate it up to an unfathomable limit-point, and which constitute the individual, that the singular human being can have, in return, an independent action on society.’⁶ While the agency of the individual imagination is severely limited by the ‘instituted heteronomy’, it serves as both the source of and the product of autonomy that an individual might possess, or acquire, within a society under a particular set of social-historical conditions:

‘the formation of a reflective and deliberative instance, that is, of true subjectivity, frees the radical imagination of the singular human being as source of creation and alteration and allows this being to attain an effective freedom.’⁷

In this respect, in Castoriadis’s conceptualization, imagination is proximate to politics: he distinguishes between the political, as the expression of explicit power, and politics that he defines as ‘the explicit collective activity which aims at being lucid (reflective and deliberate) and whose object is the institution of society as such’.⁸ It is through these qualities of reflexivity and deliberation that Castoriadis’s concepts of radical imagination and politics inform the notion of ‘political imagination’ at the heart of this volume.

While television series, as well as popular culture more broadly, can be understood as an expression of a particular socio-historical moment, and thus an expression of both the ‘instituted’ and ‘instituting’ imaginary, this volume argues for the capacity of TV series, as a medium and a cultural form, to act at the level of imagination, capable not only of shedding light on these instituting powers, but also contributing to their deliberation and alteration—thus inevitably entering the realm of politics. Television series, as serialized fiction, serve as a site where the socially shaped imaginary encounters the subjective imagination of creators and viewers. This interaction highlights the flexible, unfixed quality inherent in fiction—a space where established political imaginaries can be challenged, reimagined, or reaffirmed.

In his work on the ethics of TV series, philosopher Piergiorgio Donatelli defends the concept of imagination as a ‘dense and richly articulated human response which is not supervised from the outset as to what is important, serious, strange, curious, or superficial, petty, and obtuse’.⁹ Understood in this way, imagination has the potential of ‘bringing life back to us in its indefinite ramification, in the detail that opens up scenarios and in the texture of existence’.¹⁰ In other words, imagination offers a unique space of reflection and deliberation that is somewhat independent from social and moral constraints. Donatelli in particular highlights the capacity of TV series to ‘require the viewer to establish a complex life with them, with their characters, plots and the world they display’.¹¹ TV series are complex cultural artefacts that draw us into their fictional worlds, fostering a unique kind of relationship (attachment, affection, familiarity) with the characters that develops over time, sometimes over seasons that span years not only in characters’ but also in the audience’s lives.

Similar to other forms of popular culture, TV series can serve as a source of continuous education, including moral and ethical education, that goes beyond the mere subject matter. Writing about Hollywood comedies from the 1930s and 1940s, philosopher Stanley Cavell highlights their capacity to empower the audience, to renew and enrich their understanding of the world and of themselves:

to take an interest in an object is to take an interest in one’s experience of the object, so that to examine and defend my interest in

these films is to examine and defend my interest in my own experience, in the moments and passages of my life I have spent with them.¹²

The originality of Cavell's approach to popular culture is especially striking when positioned against established critiques of the culture industry and the spectacular economy, exemplified most notably by the writings of Theodor Adorno and Guy Debord. While acknowledging the unprecedented influence of television in contemporary society, Adorno, for example, warns about its power to maintain the status quo, as 'the repetitiveness, the selfsameness, and the ubiquity of modern mass culture tend to make for automatized reactions and to weaken the forces of individual resistance'.¹³ Discussing examples of American TV series from the 1950s, Adorno criticizes television for its reliance on formulaic narrative structures, stereotypes, and 'pseudo-realism' as a means to satisfying audience expectations, while also ensuring conformity to what he sees as 'totalitarian creeds'. While this analysis captures some of the characteristics of mid-twentieth-century television series, it needs to be revised in relation to contemporary television fiction, which has undergone dramatic changes in recent decades.¹⁴

Writing in the 1980s, Cavell might have been similarly ambivalent when it came to television;¹⁵ nonetheless, his work on ordinary language philosophy, as well as on Hollywood cinema in particular, has informed a fundamental shift in the thinking about TV series as a source of moral and ethical education.¹⁶

This volume builds on these theoretical frameworks, approaching TV series as a dynamic cultural form that operates within and between the realms of the 'instituted' and the 'instituting' imaginary, capable of both reinforcing and transforming social and political norms. By bridging the concepts of politics and imagination, we highlight the capacity of TV series to function as both a reflection and a critique of existing political orders. This dual role enables them to play an active part in the formation of a political imagination in which fiction not only reflects reality but also reimagines and, sometimes, even transforms it.

Politics in TV Series

Perhaps the most immediate examples that come to mind when we think about the political imagination in television series are those that take viewers behind the scenes of the sites of political power, be they the typically imposing cabinets of presidential palaces or prime ministers' offices, the corridors of national parliaments, or the headquarters of electoral campaigns and political parties. Similar to other workplace dramas that offer a glimpse into the realities of a particular profession, these series introduce viewers to the inner workings of the political universe, its key players, and the intricacies of their relationships with each other and with the wider society. A vibrant tradition

of political serial fiction emerged on British television in the 1960s, where political themes were prominently featured in both comedy and drama formats.¹⁷ However, it is the political series produced in the United States over the last two decades that have proved particularly influential worldwide, both in terms of attracting a wide global audience and influencing writing and production practices in other countries. Series such as *The West Wing* (NBC, 1999–2006) and *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013–2018) are widely regarded as hallmarks of twenty-first-century political television fiction, and have directly or indirectly inspired many of the series discussed in this volume.¹⁸ We can find echoes of these US series in the depiction of the conflict between idealistic and cynical visions of politics among the parliamentary assistants and representatives in South Korean series *Chief of Staff*, which aired in 2019 (Thévenet, this volume); or over four seasons of *Borgen*, which spanned a decade and followed the individual trajectory of Birgitte Nyborg, a woman in power faced with a series of complex moral choices (Campion, this volume); or in the demoralizing (dis)function of the political establishment faced by Volodymyr Zelensky as he tries to educate his fellow politicians in the fundamental principles of democracy in *Servant of the People* (de Saint Maurice, this volume).

While such TV series primarily represent and reflect on nationally defined political imaginaries, they tend to take the perspective of the ruling elite, presenting the point of view of the select few who govern the country, and reflect many of the paradoxes of the political universe: always in the spotlight and under constant scrutiny, highly publicized and yet impenetrable and opaque, largely out of reach of citizens, often mythologized, unknown, or misunderstood by the public. Arguably, it is this mystery and pathos, the supposedly ‘extraordinary’ and dramatic quality of the political, that constitutes the attraction and pleasure of the political series. Yet their imaginaries are also deeply rooted in the political reality of societies in which they emerge, and are often resolutely critical of it—to use Castoriadis’s terms, they are both ‘instituted’ and ‘instituting’.¹⁹ Their effect can also extend beyond representation to provide opportunities for reflection and deliberation, extending the politics from the subject matter to the mode of operation: engaging critically with the policies and practices that threaten democratic societies, such as lack of accountability and transparency or public disillusionment with political institutions, exploring and exposing the mechanisms of populist rhetoric and disinformation, and so on. The best examples of political series present their audiences with the complex moral dilemmas faced by individual political actors in their professional universe, thus providing an important resource for political and moral education.²⁰

One particular type of political series, which might be described as ‘security series’, deserves special mention. In the wake of 9/11, the spy genre, which had been prominent during the Cold War era, regained popularity in the form of security series set against the backdrop of the ‘war on terror’ rhetoric

promoted by the Bush administration.²¹ These series are characterized not only by a new aesthetic and narrative logic, but above all by a new, security-oriented vision of the world order that they project, as well as a reconceptualization of the figure of the national enemy and the notion of security. In a particularly acute way, they bring to the fore the intractable contradiction between state security and individual rights, between the secrecy inherent in all intelligence work and transparency as a fundamental democratic principle.

Here again, it is US productions that paved the way for the development of the genre and contributed to its popularity around the world, with *24* (Fox, 2001–2010) and *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011–2020) as emblematic examples, followed by highly original security series produced in other countries, such as the British *Spooks* (BBC One, BBC Three, 2002–2011) and *The Undeclared War* (Channel 4, Peacock, 2022), the French *The Bureau* (Canal+, 2015–2020), the Swedish *Caliphate* (SVT1, 2020), and so on. The Israeli TV series industry has also been among the leading innovators in diversifying the conventions of the security genre, creating such original shows as *Prisoners of War* (Channel 2, 2010–2012), *Fauda* (Yes Oh, 2015–), *False Flag* (Channel 2, 2015–), and, more recently, *Tehran* (Kan 11, 2020–). Despite engaging with the specific and unique local experience of terrorism and regional geopolitical instability, Israeli series have been exceptionally successful in exporting their cultural products and concepts abroad, especially in the form of adaptations (for example, *Homeland* being a US adaptation of *Prisoners of War*).

Such series, which locate their storylines in the realm of the security services, the army, and the police, have their own distinctive imagery that ensures their consistent success with audiences. Mostly thrillers, with dynamic and usually fast-paced narratives, they are both engaging and entertaining. Compared to other political series that deal with the inner workings and day-to-day life within public institutions, security series foreground secrecy, offering their viewers a glimpse into a world that exists and operates by definition outside the public eye, serving a society from which it is paradoxically hidden. This aspect of the security series adds another layer of complexity to the question of the relationship between political fiction and realism.²²

Within the genre of political television fiction, security series are distinguished by a certain ambiguity with regard to their impact and the imaginary they offer viewers. Established in 2020 and spearheaded by philosopher Sandra Laugier, the ERC DEMOSERIES research project, dedicated to the systematic analysis of security series, has demonstrated that this genre has potential to empower audiences, offering motivation for getting to know and understand the ideological and historical contexts behind enemy actions and providing—sometimes the only available—analysis of evolving and diversifying threats, or even serve as a form of therapy in the aftermath of terrorist attacks.²³

However, as suggested by three case studies presented in this volume (see Deroure for Egypt, Poyraz for Turkey, Krutikova and Zhurauliova for Russia, this volume), security series also have the power to dehumanize the enemy and to promote nationalist and populist discourses based on reductive and harmful definitions of 'us' versus 'them'. It is no coincidence that while political dramas tend to flourish in democracies, spy and, more recently, security series have found much easier access to TV screens in a variety of political regimes. With their focus on geopolitics, these series tend to promote a political vision of the world centred on multiple and diverse threats, interest groups and games of influence that unfold on a global scale, emphasizing the role of the individual actors in politics and encouraging conspiratorial modes of thinking. This makes them a particularly attractive genre that can be used for ideological and populist purposes, whether to sacralize the security services, exploit citizens' emotions (such as national pride), or normalize deeply undemocratic practices of violence or mass surveillance.²⁴

In both democratic and non-democratic regimes, security series have historically contributed to the communication campaigns of state security services seeking to improve and control their public image.²⁵ This frequent collaboration with state services puts series producers in an ambiguous position, rendering them vulnerable to manipulation and raising the question of the proximity between these fictions and propaganda. This tension between the educational and instrumentalizing potential makes the security series a particularly compelling subject of analysis and public discussion.

Political imaginaries are by no means limited to idealistic or cynical representations of political dramas, nor to conspiracy and secrecy-driven worldviews inspired by the security series. The profound and continuing changes in the distribution and consumption of television content around the world, brought about by technological advances, have encouraged the development of new forms of fiction that cross genres and introduce more complex and subversive narratives, as well as multinational productions (see Smith, this volume). Most of the chapters in this volume discuss the political dimension of TV series in a variety of genres, from techno-thrillers to soap operas to medieval fantasies—often in the least expected settings, but certainly in no less compelling ways. It is often there that we find alternative imaginaries of politics, in some ways much more realistic and familiar, often nourished and driven by ordinary experience. By looking at the 'twists and turns of everyday life', as Philippe Corcuff characterizes it in his discussion of the French procedural *Spiral* (this volume), these series offer radically alternative frameworks for analysing the challenges posed to contemporary societies by war (Lilti, Katz and Park, this volume), environmental and technological catastrophe (Sala, this volume), deepening social divisions (Diallo, this volume), or disillusionment with the political establishment (Go, Souandaj, Cai and Dunn, this volume). They also offer tools for *doing* politics, in Castoriadis's sense—through reflection and deliberation (Allouche, Laugier, this volume).

Book Structure

In the volume, the tension between the passive and active reflection, between ‘instituted’ and ‘instituting’ capacity of TV series goes hand in hand with the dichotomy between the categories of global versus local. By examining how TV series engage with social issues, power dynamics, and ideological perspectives within a wide range of specific national contexts, the chapters that follow highlight both local specificities and the overarching trends in the production and consumption of TV series around the world. These nuanced analyses offer a multiplicity of perspectives and methodological positions that together allow for a consideration of the complex and reciprocal relationship between televisual fiction and politics.

The first section of the volume, entitled ‘Political and Moral Education through TV Series’, brings together analyses of specific TV series from different regions that offer distinct and, at the same time, convergent, perspectives on the relationship between TV series and politics. Focusing on a wide range of themes such as inevitabilities and limits of moral compromise in politics, the construction and evolution of national ideologies, mythologies, and collective memory, or the essence of democracy, together the chapters in the section offer a compelling argument for political and moral education through TV series.

Philippe Corcuff’s chapter discusses the ethical and political implications of the French TV series *Engrenages* (*Spiral*) by drawing connections between the series’ *noir* themes and philosophical writings by Machiavelli, Wittgenstein, Merleau-Ponty, and Cavell. The analysis focuses on the tension between morality and politics, particularly in relation to the dissonance between the means and ends of action, and how this tension is translated into everyday decisions. By emphasizing the complexities of real-world actions over abstract moral frameworks, *Spiral* encourages the consideration of the ‘politics of the ordinary’—a new kind of utopia devoid of radicalism and absolute ideals, yet faithful to the pursuit of the collective good.

Similarly, Stéphane Thévenet’s analysis of the Korean series *Chief of Staff* raises the question of whether the ends always justify the means: the series’ protagonists—political aids and representatives at the National Assembly—strive to ‘change the world’, but in their quest they have to constantly weight the costs of their decisions and actions. At the same time, the chapter offers an insightful discussion of the ways in which this political series generates a ‘reality effect’, drawing on real-life political and social issues, not only to draw the audience’s attention, but also to foster discussion, reflection, and potentially affect political discourse as a result. This examination of verisimilitude in TV series provides an analytical lens for understanding the place and impact of political fiction in South Korean society.

Ayelet Lilti’s analysis furthers the discussion of the role of fictional narratives in society by examining them alongside other mechanisms that constitute and maintain the collective self. Focusing on two youth-centred Israeli series,

Our Boys and *Unknowns*, the chapter addresses the ways in which these contemporary works make reference to specific biblical narratives (such as 'The Binding of Isaac'), thus participating in the ongoing debate about Jewish identity. In particular, the chapter argues for the importance of the figure of 'the boy', understood as a political entity and as a site for the projection of both the mythic tropes of the past and the anxieties of an uncertain future.

In response to the popular success of the US series *Games of Thrones* and the lasting cultural resonance of the French comedy *Kaamelott*, Sylvie Allouche analyses the latter to address the apparent paradox: why is medieval fantasy so popular with audiences living under democratic regimes? The chapter raises the question of whether this fascination reveals a regressive yearning for more primal forms of authority, where leadership is established through violence and force. At the same time, Allouche highlights democratic undertones in *Kaamelott's* representation of King Arthur's rule, pointing to his responsiveness to the people and his efforts to establish a meritocratic and representative system within the Knights of the Round Table. Through dialogue with the analyses of the series by historian Florian Besson and philosopher Thibaut de Saint Maurice, Allouche argues that *Kaamelott* and other such series can serve as a reflective space for contemplating democratic principles, even when they parody or critique them.

Adrienne Sala's chapter also examines the fundamental pillars of democratic society when confronted with a crisis. Her analysis focuses on the Japanese series *The Days*, which depicts the immediate aftermath of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant accident following the Great East Japan earthquake and tsunami that struck Japan on 11 March 2011. The series highlights the experiences and crucial role of frontline workers in mitigating the disaster, while also revealing the inadequacies and failures of the government response. Sala explains how the events depicted in *The Days* make sense within Japanese work culture and ethics, and highlights how the series frames the collective memory of the disaster, encouraging viewers to reflect on individual and collective responsibility, as well as 'the importance of citizen vigilance in democratic societies' (p. 80).

The second section of the volume, 'Mobilization of Televisual Fictions by Political Regimes', brings together chapters that elucidate the diverse ways in which television series are employed for political communication by political actors and regimes. While each chapter focuses on different aspects of such instrumentalization, they collectively illustrate the intricate and intimate interconnections between TV series and reality, as well as the recent past. These series do not merely convey a political message to the public; they also seek to influence public memory and to establish a moral community. By offering a simplified binary view of the world and a clear dichotomy between good and evil, friend and enemy (which is often ubiquitous), they exemplify contemporary propaganda that also informs the political imagination and warrants critical examination rather than simple dismissal. Moreover, as these chapters show, once released, TV series, whether created as propaganda or

not, are received in ways that are often beyond the control of the political authority, thus acquiring a subversive potential.

Anastasia Krutikova and Tatsiana Zhurauliova discuss Russian spy series, entitled *Sleepers*, which was released in 2017, amid a growing state pressure on media and entertainment content. *Sleepers* engages with the national historical narrative, framing a conflict between two presumably opposing visions of society and politics, ascribed in the series to the Soviet era and the Yeltsin years in power. The series situates the current regime in direct continuity with the former, by blurring the lines between reality and fiction. On the one hand, it reintroduces Soviet-era tropes and incorporates Soviet-specific symbolic cues into the contemporary narrative. On the other hand, the plot and release of the series are strategically aligned with real political events, affecting the series' reception.

Similarly, in her analysis of the spy series *Teşkilat*, Solène Poyraz situates the series in the context of the turn towards authoritarianism of the political regime in Turkey that have occurred over the recent decade. *Teşkilat* serves as an example of a security series embedded within a broader state communication strategy, designed to promote the national security apparatus, advance nationalist and militarist values, and foster a vision of social order that is fundamentally anti-democratic. Moreover, it provides a rationale for the use of violence against political opposition and interventionist foreign policy, based on a specific interpretation of Turkish history and identity.

Sixtine Deroure develops the idea of the complex relationship between reality and fiction further with reference to the Egyptian security series *al-Ikhtiyar*, a notable example of what the author describes as 'a fiction of authority' (p. 118). This case study appears to epitomize the techniques commonly employed in political television series for integrating reality into fiction—including the utilization of historical documents in the opening credits, the interweaving of news footage and media images with fictional representations within the episodes, the portrayal of real individuals, the incorporation of testimonies, or expert advice from security services. Furthermore, the chapter examines the manner in which the TV series enters the domain of public memory, influencing and even supplanting collective memories of recent events, effectively blurring the lines between fiction and reality and endorsing the official historical narrative.

Shenshen Cai and Emily Dunn introduce the particular context of China, defined by the coexistence of Communist Party rule and a market economy, to demonstrate how a popular television drama, *The Knockout*, assists the authoritarian state in containing social discontent with corruption and inequality, whitewashing the party's public image, and creating new social myths and ideologies. However, while the series functions as a conduit for state-sponsored propaganda, it also demonstrates the potential, albeit limited, for engagement with social reality and social critique.

Drawing on the example of a democratic society and open electoral competition, Antonio Souandaj offers another compelling analysis of the explicit

appropriation of television series by political actors through the symbolic use of Brazilian soap operas. His chapter elucidates the role of television fiction in the construction of political identities and sheds light on the complex interactions between the political and media fields in the struggle for power by analysing the electoral use of two soap operas by Jair Bolsonaro and Lula da Silva. Souandaj identifies the distinctive function of television series in supplying a collective symbolic and semiological foundation, along with a specific discursive repertoire, to convey a political or moral message to the public, thereby integrating seemingly apolitical series into the fabric of political activity.

The third part of the volume deals explicitly with the realm of the 'ordinary', and gathers chapters reflecting on visions of politics that emerge from the community and everyday life of ordinary citizens. Considered from this perspective, television series emerge as a means for unpacking social and political problems and fostering dialogue between citizens, acting as sites of shared deliberation and discussion that support democratic forms of life.

This section opens with a comparative analysis of two popular sitcoms from Israel and South Korea by Yuval Katz and Sojeong Park, who suggest that these television series may be viewed as cultural forums that can help to reimagine peace by situating discussions of war within the context of everyday life. The authors examine the ways in which humour and romantic comedies can subvert state ideologies and stereotypes, reinforce social critique, and dismantle cultural barriers, thereby offering an alternative analytical perspective on the deeply rooted and complex conflicts that define the lives of nations, whether forced to live together or forced to live apart.

Staying with the genre of comedy, Othniel Go employs the popular Ivorian sitcom *My Family* as a case study to examine the common perceptions of politics in a society plagued by corruption and inequality, wherein the political establishment is highly alienated from the people and unaware of the society's problems and needs. Go also discusses the impact of digitalization on the liberalization of local TV series production, which has created new avenues for citizens to challenge their elites.

Similarly, Thibaut de Saint Maurice draws upon the Ukrainian sitcom *Servant of the People* to illustrate how a television series can be a source of social critique, while simultaneously exerting a tangible impact on the real world. The author argues that the series extends the boundaries of reality by educating viewers about the possibilities and alternatives available to them in the political field, and even contributes to the emergence of a novel political reality. *Servant of the People* also provides an illustrative case study of how a TV series, initially conceived as a shared resource for moral and political education for the local audience, can subsequently gain a second life when re-broadcast or exported, emphasizing the impact of the series' reception by viewers on its meaning, which often extends beyond the initial intentions of its creators.

In the concluding chapter of the section, Alexandre Diallo's analysis centres on urban communities in East London, as seen through the lens of the

celebrated crime drama *Top Boy*, which represents a pioneering approach to the portrayal of crime, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity on British television. Highlighting the diversity within modern democratic societies, the series offers a textured representation of intersectionality and the cumulative effects of various forms of discrimination on an individual's life. As Diallo argues, such series facilitate 'greater empathy and understanding' (p. 211) of the socio-economic struggles and injustices confronting marginalized groups—including those based on social, racial, sexual, or gender identity—which are frequently stereotyped or erased from media and political discourse.

The final section of the volume, 'TV Series and Soft Power', examines how contemporary TV series reflect and respond to the increasingly globalized networks of digital distribution, resulting in works that merge local traditions of televisual fiction with global formats. Bringing together case studies from different regions—from the Middle East, Mexico, Denmark, and North America—these chapters explore how series negotiate the relationship between local political agendas and global issues such as gender equality, new threats posed by rapidly evolving technologies, or the global climate crisis. The chapters also explore the hybrid nature of contemporary TV production, looking at how these series navigate the balance between cultural specificity and global appeal. Ultimately, the section highlights the potential of TV series to shape both local and global political discourses, influence societal values, and project soft power across borders.

Analysing the techno-thriller *The Platform*, Thomas Richard's chapter explores the idea of 'hybridity' of TV series produced in the United Arab Emirates in connection to the region's evolving social, political, and media landscape. It examines the ways in which the series combines local television traditions with Western formats, lending it a distinctly 'glocal' character, while also addressing such regionally and globally relevant themes as the continuing jihadi threat, the transparency of information (with allusions to the Wikileaks case) and its role in countering terrorist threats, and profound changes in gender roles and representations of women in Middle Eastern societies. Finally, the chapter emphasizes the series' open-ended, non-didactic approach to controversial topics, positioning it as a resource for social and political reflection.

In his chapter, Paul Julian Smith also highlights the 'hybridity' of contemporary television series, comparing two Mexican political thrillers, *Ingobernable* and *El Candidato*, produced for Netflix and Amazon Prime respectively, and reflecting on the series' international production contexts paired with a local political subject matter. The chapter explores how the political and media landscape in Mexico, particularly under President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, influenced the production and reception of these series, considering the ways in which they serve as platforms for political commentary.

Benjamin Campion's chapter discusses the nine-year gap between the third and fourth seasons of the Danish series *Borgen*, reflecting on how the final season is influenced by the collaboration with Netflix and the changes in the global political landscape. Entitled *Borgen: Power & Glory* to distinguish

it from the original series, the final season centres on the discovery of oil in Greenland and engages with a set of issues that are both regional (such as the legacy and ongoing impact of Danish colonialism) and global (including global climate crisis and the rise of political populism). While the fourth season continues to explore the series' earlier concern with the tension between idealism and political pragmatism, the chapter argues that the global reach and tone of *Borgen's* final season also marks a shift towards a more cynical portrayal of politics and political decision-making processes.

In the closing chapter of the volume, Sandra Laugier focuses on the developments in feminist TV series in the USA since 2017, in the wake of the *#MeToo* movement. The chapter analyses the growing number of recent series that engage with the questions of gender, race, class, and intersectional identities, challenging regressive social norms through their innovative narratives and active, assertive, and complex female protagonists. Resonating with the contemporary US political and cultural context, these series also have a significant global impact, fostering feminist discourse and contributing to the internationalization of movements like *#MeToo*. Approaching TV series as a popular and highly resonant cultural form, the chapter argues for their capacity to transform societies and to lead the way towards equality.

Global TV Series and the Political Imagination features work by scholars from a wide range of linguistic, academic, and disciplinary backgrounds, bridging anglophone television studies and a wider intellectual community, highlighting a diversity of perspectives and methodological positions. The examples of television series discussed in this volume also come from different political, geographical, and cultural areas. They might differ in terms of their audiences: some reach mainly local audiences, while others are distributed worldwide and run for several seasons; some offer truly innovative representations that have a lasting impact on industry practices despite the lack of immediate popular acclaim, while others, even if often less original in content, capture hearts and minds of millions and become truly popular with audiences across generations. This diversity, however, testifies to the power of the television series as a cultural form, regardless of where it is created, to address complex and important, often globally relevant, political themes in locally and culturally meaningful ways.

Notes

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- 2 Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Duke University Press, 2004), p. 23, doi:10.2307/j.ctv11hpgvt.
- 3 Cornelius Castoriadis, 'Power, Politics, Autonomy', in *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*, ed. by David Ames Curtis (Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 146.
- 4 Cornelius Castoriadis, 'Radical Imagination and the Social Instituting Imaginary', in *Rethinking Imagination*, ed. by Gillian Robinson and John F. Rundell (Routledge, 1994), doi:10.4324/9781315003528, p. 138.

- 5 Paula Diehl, 'Temporality and the Political Imaginary in the Dynamics of Political Representation', *Social Epistemology*, 33.5 (2019), pp. 410–21, doi:10.1080/02691728.2019.1652865.
- 6 Castoriadis, 'Power, Politics, Autonomy', p. 146.
- 7 Ibid., p. 165.
- 8 Ibid., p. 160.
- 9 Piergiorgio Donatelli, 'An Ethics of TV Series', *Iride*, 35.96 (May–August 2022), p. 271.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid., pp. 275–76.
- 12 Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 7.
- 13 Theodor Adorno, 'How to Look at Television', *The Quarterly of Film Radio and Television*, 8.3 (Spring 1954), p. 216.
- 14 For in-depth discussions of the dramatic transformation in contemporary TV series, see Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York University Press, 2015) and Martin Shuster, *New Television: The Aesthetics and Politics of a Genre* (University of Chicago Press, 2017).
- 15 Stanley Cavell, 'The Fact of Television', *Daedalus*, 111.4 (Fall 1982), pp. 75–96.
- 16 See, for example, *Television with Stanley Cavell in Mind*, ed. by David LaRocca and Sandra Laugier (University of Exeter Press, 2023), as well as other volumes in the University of Exeter Press 'TV-Philosophy' collection.
- 17 Liesbet van Zoonen and Dominic Wring, 'Trends in Political Television Fiction in the UK: Themes, Characters and Narratives, 1965–2009', *Media, Culture & Society*, 34.3 (2012), pp. 263–79, doi:10.1177/0163443711433663.
- 18 See, for example, *The West Wing: The American Presidency as Television Drama*, ed. by Peter Rollins and John E. O'Connor (Syracuse University Press, 2003).
- 19 Jean-Pierre Esquenazi, 'Séries télévisées et "réalités" : les imaginaires sériels à la poursuite du réel', in *Décoder les séries télévisées*, ed. by Sarah Sepulchre (De Boeck Supérieur, 2017), pp. 209–28.
- 20 Sandra Laugier, *TV-Philosophy in Action: The Ethics and Politics of TV Series* (University of Exeter Press, 2023).
- 21 See Sylvie Allouche and Sandra Laugier, 'Présentation', in *24 heures chrono, naissance du genre sécuritaire?*, ed. by Sylvie Allouche (Vrin, 2021), doi:10.53984/philoseries01209.
- 22 On realism in spy fiction, see Pauline Blistène, 'The Bureau and the Realism of Spy Fiction', *Open Philosophy*, 5 (2022), pp. 231–49, doi:10.1515/opphil-2020-0178.
- 23 *24 heures chrono, naissance du genre sécuritaire?*, ed. by Sylvie Allouche (Vrin, 2021), doi:10.53984/philoseries01209.
- 24 On the anti-terrorist discourse in the post-9/11 security series in the USA, see Stacy Takacs, *Terrorism TV: Popular Entertainment in Post-9/11* (University Press of Kansas, 2012); Jack Holland, 'Constructing Counter-Terrorism (in *Homeland*, *24* and *The West Wing*)', in *Fictional Television and American Politics: From 9/11 to Donald Trump* (Manchester University Press, 2019), pp. 113–31, doi:10.7765/9781526134226.00013.
- 25 See Blistène, 'The Bureau and the Realism of Spy Fiction'. Also, Tricia Jenkins, *The CIA in Hollywood: How the Agency Shapes Film and Television* (University of Texas Press, 2012); Wesley Britton, *Spy Television* (Praeger, 2004).

PART I

POLITICAL AND MORAL
EDUCATION THROUGH
TV SERIES

Chapter 1

Engrenages: Machiavellian Ethics and Politics for an Unpredictable and Turbulent World in a French Crime Series

Philippe Corcuff

Introduction: Television Series and the ‘Knowledge Games’ of Moral Philosophy and Political Theory

This chapter will examine the French crime series *Engrenages* (literally translated as ‘Gears’ but distributed under the title *Spiral* in English-speaking countries), created by Alexandra Clerf for the Canal+ television channel. It ran for eight seasons between 2005 and 2020. *Spiral* has been one of the most widely broadcast and recognized French series globally: by 2015, it had been sold to ninety countries and received the International Emmy Award for Best Drama Series.¹ We will focus on the relationship between two police officers, Captain Laure Berthaud (portrayed by Caroline Proust) and Lieutenant Gilles Escoffier, also known as ‘Gilou’ (portrayed by Thierry Godard). Laure Berthaud oversees a group of investigators from the *Direction régionale de la police judiciaire de la Préfecture de police de Paris* (DPJ), while Gilou is a member of this group. Over time, their professional relationship becomes intertwined with friendship and romance. The series has already been analysed from a gender studies perspective by social psychologist Pascale Molinier.² This chapter will focus on the ethical complications arising from the dynamics of the relationship between these two characters and their possible political implications.

Our analysis is situated within a broader epistemological and methodological framework, which encompasses a transdisciplinary dialogue between philosophy, social science, and television series, and particularly draws on moral philosophy and political theory. As defined by Monique Canto-Sperber, moral philosophy refers to ‘the historical and conceptual dimension of moral reflection’, whereas ethics pertains to ‘the most concrete aspects’ of moral reflection.³ Political theory is a branch of political science that brings into

dialogue and tension the knowledge generated by political sociology on the question of 'what is' and an exploration of 'what should be' and/or 'what could be' that is specific to political philosophy, as Jean Leca postulated in his important text.⁴ In the Wittgensteinian tradition, television series are considered as 'language games', and moral philosophy and political theory as 'knowledge games'. For Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'the term "language game" is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of a language is part of an activity, or of a form of life'.⁵ This approach has the advantage of treating cultural forms in a non-idealistic way with regard to their inclusion in types of practice (such as 'an activity' or 'a form of life'), without implying sociological determinism. The biologist Henri Atlan has utilized this concept of 'language games' to develop the notion of 'knowledge games', i.e. 'language games' that are primarily oriented towards knowledge.⁶ Moral philosophy and political theory can be regarded as such 'knowledge games'. We are thus concerned here with the interplay between *Spiral*, as part of the 'language game' of TV series, and tools borrowed from the 'knowledge games' of moral philosophy and political theory. However, the meaning encoded in the 'language game' of a television series will not correspond precisely to that conveyed in the 'knowledge game' of moral philosophy, even when the same terms are used. Indeed, the transition from one to the other entails shifts in meaning, associated with shifts in usage, and thus requires translation.

With regard to moral philosophy and political theory, and the transitions between these two 'games of knowledge', we will propose a particular interpretation of Nicolas Machiavelli's classic work, *The Prince*.⁷ This interpretation, inspired by that of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, preserves in a Florentine the moral components related to the pursuit of the political common good, excluding interpretations in terms of 'immorality' and 'cynicism', yet maintaining the confrontation with historical unpredictability.⁸ This reading engages with a *Machiavellian* concern, placing morality and politics in tension, in contrast to the conventional discourse on 'Machiavellianism'.⁹ From an ethical standpoint, Machiavellian questioning understood in this way can be associated with the concept of 'consequentialism' in contemporary moral philosophy, which 'evaluates a choice by examining its consequences'.¹⁰ However, the Machiavellian thread extends beyond the traditional framework of consequentialism on three key points. Firstly, it places uncertainty at the heart of moral reasoning in the confrontation with the vagaries of history. Secondly, the examination of consequences may never be established definitively (a certain positive consequence in the short term may contribute to a negative consequence in the medium term). Thirdly, morality is directly linked to political action in the form of tensions that highlight misalignments between means and ends of action.

With regard to moral philosophy, this analytical framework will be enriched by Stanley Cavell's reflections on 'the uncanniness of the ordinary', which will provide a resource for reintegrating moral questions into the course of everyday life, with particular attention to its unsettling and frightening dimensions.¹¹

The Hybridity between the French Soap Opera and the American-inspired Crime Series

In France, television serials were originally referred to as *feuilletons* (soap operas).¹² This genre can be traced back to the tradition of *roman-feuilleton*, a form of serialized fiction that developed in France from 1836 onwards by such literary personalities as Eugène Sue, Honoré de Balzac, Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas, and George Sand.¹³ These were novels published in instalments in newspapers. Television soap operas constituted a significant proportion of the French television programming, which was long subject to a state monopoly, initially established by the RTF network (*Radio-télévision française*, 1949–1964). It was subsequently replaced by the ORTF (*Office de radiodiffusion-télévision française*, 1964–1974), and then followed by several public broadcasting companies that have been in operation since 1975. The period of exclusively public broadcasting came to an end in 1984 with the creation of Canal+, the first private television channel. The police drama has been a constant feature of the French audiovisual production that has historically been largely dominated by the state.

There are two main approaches to police dramas in French television soap operas. The first is an investigation based around an enigma, exemplified by the series *Les cinq dernières minutes* (*The Last Five Minutes*, 1958–1996) and *Les enquêtes du commissaire Maigret* (*The Investigations of Inspector Maigret*, 1967–1990). The second approach is historical adventure series, including *Vidocq* (1967) and *Les nouvelles aventures de Vidocq* (*The New Adventures of Vidocq*, 1971–1973), as well as *Les brigades du tigre* (*The Tiger Brigades*, 1974–1983). *Spiral* continues this tradition of police dramas and television soap operas, combined with another literary tradition originating from across the Atlantic: the American *roman noir*.

The term *roman noir* is French, but it refers to a branch of American crime literature (detective novels) originally known in the United States as ‘hard-boiled fiction’.¹⁴ This genre that developed in the United States from the 1920s takes its name from the ‘*Série noire*’ collection, created in France in 1945 by Marcel Duhamel at Gallimard, which initially published translations of many English-language novels.¹⁵ In French, ‘*noir*’ describes the dark side of human existence, and the tragedy of it, especially through the encounter with criminal violence. It couldn’t be translated as ‘black’, which, in the American context, suggested relations between different racial groups. It was not until the 1980s that American critics began to speak of *noir fiction*, retaining the French adjective. The *roman noir*, as a literary genre, is therefore the result, in the words of Benoît Tadié, of a ‘transatlantic dialogue’.¹⁶

In contrast to the more conservative European mystery novel, the American *roman noir* is often more radical in its critique of the social and political order, which cannot be remedied at the end of the story solely by the authority of the modern nation-state by solving the mystery as in the cases of the English *Sherlock Holmes* (by Arthur Conan Doyle) or the Franco-Belgian *Maigret*

(by Georges Simenon).¹⁷ This is because the world is perceived to be structurally unjust and corrupt, including the agents of the state who exercise its authority (politicians, the judiciary, the police, and so on).¹⁸ The *noir* genre eventually expanded into film *noir* and then *noir* television series.¹⁹ *Spiral* combines the elements of the French television mystery series (there are indeed many enigmas for the police officers to solve throughout the seasons, in the form of investigations, similar to the *Maigret* series) and the dark, even tragic, tones of the *noir* genre in its portrayal of criminal violence.

Spiral and Ethical Complications

The investigative logic of television crime dramas, characterized by mystery and suspense, ensures that viewers remain engaged with a familiar narrative dynamic. On this basis, the *noir* component of *Spiral* allows for the exploration of darker themes, particularly those pertaining to moral issues. The everyday life of a police officer, characterized by a complex interplay between professional ethics and human weakness, is replete with questions, wrong choices, and moral adjustments. However, the series does not present an absolute moral ideal, but one that is upheld and misused in the situation, at the level of human beings and their interactions. Morality is then immersed in history, as seen by Merleau-Ponty, at the crossroads of Machiavelli and Marx, in a 'mixed milieu, neither things nor people, in which intentions are attenuated, transformed, withered, but sometimes reappear and become exacerbated, intertwined, multiplied by each other [...] composed of criminal intentions or virtuous intentions and, for the rest, of acceptances that are valid as acts'.²⁰ In *Spiral*, the intentions of Gilou and Laure are intertwined, exacerbated, or multiplied by each other.

Gilou

The character of Gilou appears as borderline on several occasions in the series. The depiction of problematic areas in the relationship between criminals and police officers is a common narrative device in the *noir* genre. In the first season, Gilou uses the services of an informant, a prostitute and drug addict with whom he becomes romantically involved, which eventually gets him into trouble. In the very first episode of the series, while on duty, watching a building entrance from his car and waiting for a suspect to show up, he uses some cocaine she gave him earlier and ends up missing his suspect (S1E1). Professional negligence! As their tumultuous relationship develops, Gilou, in debt from their drug use together, is led down a path of corruption: a pimp and drug dealer waives his debt and supplies him with more drugs in exchange for future services (S1E3). Meanwhile, Gilou, increasingly under the influence of drugs, illegally threatens a witness (S1E6), prompting an investigation into his actions by the IGS (*Inspection générale des services*). Laure covers for him and, together with other colleagues, organizes him a rehab.

But the story does not end there. In the seventh episode, we see Gilou in his car in a deserted car park, discreetly sharing confidential information about his investigation with the pimp (S1E7). When he declines the drugs in exchange, the man blackmails him by threatening his prostitute friend, then places the drugs in Gilou's pocket and leaves. When he learns that the pimp has become a wanted murderer, Gilou is tormented by doubt and considers suicide. However, he ultimately decides not to act on this impulse. He takes drugs again then, and this time it is not only cocaine, but, in a suicidal gesture, he also injects himself with a syringe. He overdoses; he is then resuscitated. In this sequence of actions, he is caught up in a kind of spiral or (titular) gears that threaten to destroy him. It is not gears in a strictly technical sense, but gears as a metaphor, which combines the unpredictability of events with the necessary sequence of the mechanism's cogs, in a way that is unusual for mechanical reasoning. Individuals retain some room for manoeuvre within this vicious circle, in exactly the manner Machiavelli envisaged: for him, the unpredictable and often overwhelming circumstances of *fortuna* (understood as circumstances beyond human control that can sometimes become overwhelming) meet with the fragile barriers of *virtù* (the human capacity to counter unfavourable circumstances or seize favourable opportunities). After recovering, Gilou tells Laure: 'I'm a shit. I'm the worst kind of shit' and confesses to her about the pimp. On the run, the killer is accidentally killed by a car. The case is shelved... for a while.

In the first episode of the fourth season, Gilou begins to frequent a nightclub run by two criminals, the Sarahoui brothers, with the help of Nabil, his former informant, recently released from prison. Gilou is going through a particularly tough phase in his life: he is struggling to find somewhere to live and he is emotionally alone. In the second episode, the Sarahoui brothers ask him for help in getting permission to extend the opening hours of their nightclub, hinting that in return they might be able to provide him with information on local criminal gangs. To arrange this and recruit the brothers as informants, Gilou turns to his friend at the *Préfecture de Police* in Paris, but ultimately fails as the brothers appear to be under investigation. In Episode 3, the Sarahouis provide Gilou with some useful information about a jewellery shop robbery, with Nabil acting as their intermediary. However, Nabil abuses his position to steal 30,000 euros from the Sarahouis, presumably as a pay-off to Gilou for the prefecture's approval. Upon the Sarahouis' subsequent violent confrontation with Gilou regarding the money (S4E7), the latter is understandably taken aback. Blackmailed, Gilou finally agrees to give the Sarahouis what they want—his service weapon.

In order to protect both his job as a policeman and his personal integrity, Gilou is once again forced to break with the law he is sworn to uphold and with his professional ethics. Not out of 'Machiavellianism' in the sense of immoralism, but on the contrary, out of a moral concern that could be described as *Machiavellian*, justifying the use of non-moral means. In Episode 8, the Sarahouis kill Nabil with Gilou's gun. They use bullets which

bear traces of his DNA and keep the shells as evidence against him. Once again, we observe the destructive spiral that threatens to engulf Gilou. But it can be stopped: a colleague, Amina, helps him to break into Sarahoui's house and recover the shells... This is yet another criminal act that allows Gilou's honour to be restored, in which the unpredictability and insecurity that it creates for the actors involved play a decisive role.

The wheel of *fortuna* can turn in different directions, pushing people further into trouble or, on the contrary, opening doors of escape. And yet, here too, the vagaries of history, with all its traps and twists, go hand in hand with the *virtù* of human beings. Merleau-Ponty proposed the notion of *adversité* (adversity) to capture the ambivalence between what escapes us and what at the same time gives us a ground for action. The burden that falls on us first: 'When our initiatives get stuck in the clay of the body, in the clay of language, or in the clay of this disproportionate world that is given to us to finish.'²¹ Gilou seems to be falling into a trap again and again, going to the very edge of the irreparable, in keeping with the tragic component of the *noir* genre. For Merleau-Ponty, however, adversity, like Machiavelli's *fortuna*, does not mean fatalism: 'our operations of freedom cannot be separated from the background against which they are exercised and which from time to time slips away, eludes our grasp.'²² That's why he's cautiously optimistic: 'What seems to me to be characteristic of man is that, *in* this situation, he can still achieve something.'²³

Merleau-Ponty wrote in particular about the adversity of artists such as the painter Paul Cézanne. Gilou, Laure, and their police colleagues are dragged into more ordinary twists and turns. And it is ordinary social links that consolidate the possibilities of escape from the danger of being submerged under historical contingencies: the friendship and the uncertain and conflicting romantic relationship with Laure, the support of his colleagues, Amina and the others. Subjective imbalances can be anchored in the docks of everyday intersubjectivity. Everyday life is both the site of regularly reactivated scepticism and the site of resistance to sceptical misguidance, which, contrary to what a certain philosophical tradition suggests, is not primarily a problem of knowledge. It was in Wittgenstein that Cavell found his inspiration: 'Wittgenstein's insight is that the ordinary has, and alone has, the power to move the ordinary, to leave the human habitat habitable.'²⁴ Cavell adds that it is in the confrontation with 'the uncanniness of the ordinary' that 'the world must be regained every day'.²⁵ As much for Gilou as for Laure...

Laure

Laure similarly gets caught up in a series of disturbances throughout the series. In the second season, she is forced to use a telescopic baton against a young man who assaults her during a police search—an incident she lies about to IGS when he reports it. Judge Wagner puts her under investigation for 'deliberate acts of violence' before saying: 'And I'll be honest with you:

I don't think there's any place for people like you in the national police force' (S2E2). In Laure's case, however, the unauthorized use of a baton to defend herself and lying about it do not seem to be guided by immorality: they reflect a tension at the very core of the police moral system, i.e. the use of immoral means, considered to be benign, in order to continue a policing activity aimed at countering and repairing the violence of the world. But this tension affects Laure and feeds her existential doubts. As she once tells Gilou: 'You see, I thought it was good to be a cop. But now Wagner looked at me as if I were the problem. [...] Look Gilou, I'm 34, I've got no boyfriend, no kids, what the hell am I doing? I mean, what's the point?' (S2E3). On another occasion, one evening after a difficult day at work (involving the murder of two young people), we see Laure sitting in a car with a psychologist:

This is usually my job. I know what to do and it is easy to do it. I don't ask myself this question. But now I don't understand. I'm at a loss. Maybe I'm the one asking... [she begins to cry, searching for words and gasping for breath] I think I want impossible things. I don't understand anymore... We're all walking in the dark. Don't you think? (S2E5)

Scepticism finds its way into Laure's ordinary life. But with 'the malady of scepticism',²⁶ 'scepticism's threat of world-consuming doubt',²⁷ the ordinary is both the site of the problem and the site of the possible solution, which consists of a 'reconstruction or resettlement of everyday'.²⁸ Laure will briefly escape the darkness, and the second season, after the uncertainties of the suspense, will finally end well for her and her colleagues, albeit in partial and fragile victories against criminal violence. As her professional universe is re-established, her self-confidence also begins to recover. In this process, which leads from moments of chaos to moments of reconstruction, morality is both abused and defended by *fortuna* that slips through the fingers or, conversely, regains the upper hand.

Laure's tragedy is further complicated when, in Episode 12 of the third season, she confronts a serial killer of women who is going for another victim. With tears in her eyes, she hesitates before shooting him at close range, even though he is unsuspecting and unarmed. When her colleagues arrive at the scene, they place a gun next to the serial killer's body to support the self-defence scenario that led to the shooting. Twice Laure tells them: 'I couldn't do it any other way.' Later, with sadness in her eyes, she tells Gilou: 'I couldn't wait, it was stronger than me.' To this Gilou replies: 'We all do things we can't help.' In the face of horror, she was overcome with such an overwhelming sense of despair that she was driven to murder. In the extraordinary moments of ordinary life, *fortuna* can sweep away everything in its path, even the most sacred moral barriers (the 'Thou shalt not kill' principle). Laure's sense of morality has not disappeared, but it has been paralysed.

Unlike Clint Eastwood's character in the *Dirty Harry* series, she's not proud of it: it's her vulnerability, not a strength.

Laure's distress also stems from her difficulties in balancing her professional and personal life. Her obsession with her police work, a mission in a quasi-religious sense, prevents her from bringing up the child she gave birth to, which she kept without truly wanting it. At the end of the twelfth episode of the sixth season, she goes to the hospital to pick up her baby daughter after a medical emergency, along with Gilou, with whom she has decided to settle down to raise the child and who is waiting for her in the car. But in the end, she doesn't have the courage to hold her child and flees in dismay, far away from her daughter and from Gilou. This scene beautifully captures Cavell's idea of 'surrealism of the ordinary':²⁹ 'the ordinary is extraordinary' and 'the extraordinary is ordinary'.³⁰ At the beginning of the seventh season, we see Laure in a rehabilitation centre for police officers, on sick leave for depression.

'The uncanniness of the ordinary' does not disappear completely, and reclaiming the world remains a task that occasionally reappears, sometimes touching on the depths of distress that the *noir* genre underlines and amplifies from a narrative point of view compared to our ordinary lives, as if under the effect of a magnifying glass. In this case, the mother's emotional paralysis in relation to her baby and the guilt it provokes deepens the character's moral turmoil, leading to a sense of emptiness and the subsequent need to seek a medical solution to the problem. *Fortuna* has many faces: it is the birth of a child that will affect Laure most profoundly, leaving her without *virtù* for some time.

The Political Impact of *Spiral*

By moving back and forth between the 'language game' of television series and the 'knowledge game' of moral philosophy and political theory, between the series *Spiral* on the one hand and the contributions of Machiavelli, Merleau-Ponty, and Cavell on the other, from the point of view of moral questions and tensions, we can discern political benchmarks for action in human societies and their possible transformations. We will consider only two dimensions here: that of the political translation of the moral dissonance between the means and the ends of an action, and that of a politics of the ordinary.

To save themselves, or simply because they were overwhelmed by circumstances unfolding against a certain moral background, Laure and Gilou had to get their hands dirty and make moral compromises, abandoning moral absolutes while maintaining a certain moral compass. Machiavelli was one of the first to think in terms of a moral concern in politics, based on the unavoidable dissonance between the means and the ends of an action. There is no magic solution or definitive guarantee of avoiding ethical questions in any given situation, and we cannot always escape tensions between means and ends. In his political reflections, Max Weber understood this, following a Machiavellian view: 'And no ethics in the world can say when and to what

extent the morally good end “sanctifies” morally dangerous incidental means and consequences.³¹ Which does not mean that ‘the end justifies the means’, a phrase attributed to Machiavelli but absent from his writings, as observed by the historian Patrick Boucheron.³² Machiavelli has left us with this dilemma, with which we are all occasionally confronted, like Laure and Gilou. This is what connects the ethics of concern to the politics of fragility.³³

The insurmountable nature of historical unpredictability and human frailty, grasped by Machiavelli and Merleau-Ponty, is yet another invitation to abandon once and for all moral and political absolutes, or what Cavell describes as ‘empty quests for the absolute’.³⁴ As the turbulent narrative of *Spiral* unfolds, Laure and Gilou diverge from absolute ideals, yet they retain their moral compass. Jérôme Melançon offers a masterful commentary on Merleau-Ponty:

Human coexistence, then, is all about adversity and ambiguity, which make it difficult to understand the situation and its possibilities, counteracting our intentions and appealing to them at the same time. In it, action is the confrontation with the tragic, in other words with something that does not depend on us but still forces us to act and take sides, without ever being in control of the consequences of our actions or the way we will be understood.³⁵

This rupture with the politics of the absolute resonates with Wittgenstein’s and Cavell’s insistence on a return to the ordinary. Wittgenstein calls this ordinary, as opposed to the metaphysical or logical abstractions, ‘rough ground’:

We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need friction. Back to the rough ground!³⁶

And there have been so many times when Laure and Gilou have hit ‘rough ground’ and almost stayed behind, but they have always bounced back to keep going. A politics of the ordinary would be a politics of intimacy that is hurt in the twists and turns of everyday life, of doubts that overwhelm, even of momentary disgust with life, but also of ordinary conviviality that reassures, even helps to hold on, of laughter that dispels gloomy thoughts, of dignity that reaffirms, of new hopes that emerge, of small victories and projects that inspire. For Merleau-Ponty, the tragic and the utopian appear together as possibility in the same immanence:

The human world is an open or unfinished system, and the same fundamental contingency that threatens it with disharmony also protects it from the inevitability of disorder and forbids us to despair of it.³⁷

Utopia and tragedy, the ‘utopian moment’ and the awareness of ‘the depth of human restiveness’,³⁸ are at tension in Cavell’s work, lending melancholy tones to our lives. The final scene of the last episode of *Spiral* (S8E10) expresses this melancholy of tension. Laure and Gilou, who are no longer police officers, reunite in Paris and leave together, smiling at each other. The camera records them from the front. They may be leaving for a new life, but they are doing so with the trials and tribulations of the past still melancholically haunting them. It is not the turmoil of passionate love that unites them in this new beginning, but a tenderness learned from the trials of time, in a search for serenity that has a touch of an ordinary-like utopia. It is a more pragmatic kind of utopia, which has lost the arrogance of rhetorical radicalism because of the hardships of life, but which has not abandoned the pursuit of happiness. This image of two heroes moving towards a possible better future could also be that of new paths for transforming contemporary urban communities on a collective scale. A new kind of politics, in which the radical and the pragmatic are inseparable and ever in tension.

Notes

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- 3 Monique Canto-Sperber, ‘Avant-propos’, in *Dictionnaire d’éthique et de philosophie morale*, ed. by Monique Canto-Sperber (PUF, 1996), p. VI.
- 4 Jean Leca, ‘La théorie politique’, in *Traité de science politique*, tome 1, ed. by Madeleine Grawitz and Jean Leca (PUF, 1985), pp. 47–174.
- 5 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* [1936–1949] (Basil Blackwell, 1958), Part I, § 23, p. 11.
- 6 Henri Atlan, *À tort ou à raison. Intercritique de la science et du mythe* (Seuil, 1986), pp. 271–93.
- 7 Nicolas Machiavelli, *Le Prince* (written in 1513, first posthumous edition in 1532), trans. by Jean-Louis Fournel and Jean-Claude Zancarini (PUF, 2000).
- 8 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, ‘Note sur Machiavel’ (1949), in *Signes* (Gallimard, 1987), pp. 267–83.
- 9 On the perspective of political theory, see Philippe Corcuff, ‘Merleau-Ponty ou l’analyse politique au défi de l’inquiétude machiavélique’, *Les Études philosophiques*, 57 (2001), pp. 203–17. On the model used in the sociology of public action, see Philippe Corcuff and Max Sanier, ‘Politique publique et action stratégique en contexte de décentralisation. Aperçus d’un processus décisionnel “après la bataille”’, *Annales. Histoire, Sciences sociales*, 55.4 (2000), pp. 845–69.
- 10 Philip Pettit, ‘Conséquentialisme’, in *Dictionnaire d’éthique et de philosophie morale*, ed. by Monique Canto-Sperber (PUF, 1996), p. 313.
- 11 Stanley Cavell, ‘The Uncanniness of the Ordinary’, in *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (The University Press of Chicago, 1988), pp. 153–78.
- 12 Ziemniak, *Exception française*.

- 13 Sabine Chalvon-Demersay, *Le troisième souffle. Parentés et sexualités dans les adaptations télévisées* (Presses des Mines, 2021), p. 26.
- 14 On the history of the American *noir* novel, see Benoît Tadié, *Front criminel. Une histoire du polar américain de 1919 à nos jours* (PUF, 2018).
- 15 Franck Lhomeau, 'La Série Noire de Marcel Duhamel 1945–1977', in *C'est l'histoire de la Série Noire. 1945–2015*, ed. by Franck Lhomeau and Alban Cerisier (Gallimard, 2015), pp. 16–104.
- 16 Tadié, 'La Série Noire et le roman noir américain', pp. 106–116.
- 17 On the 'original European detective story' (in its dual avatar as the English Sherlock Holmes and the Franco-Belgian Maigret) as a prism for analysing the beginnings of capitalism, the nation-state, and their relations, see Luc Boltanski, *Énigmes et complots. Une enquête à propos d'enquêtes* (Gallimard, 2012).
- 18 Philippe Corcuff, *Polars, philosophie et critique sociale* (Textuel, 2013).
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- 20 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Les Aventures de la dialectique* (1955) (Gallimard, 2000), p. 175.
- 21 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'L'homme et l'adversité' (12 September 1951), in *Signes*, p. 304.
- 22 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'L'homme et l'adversité' (15 and 22 September 1951) in *Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier et autres dialogues, 1946–1959* (Verdier, 2016), p. 63.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 67.
- 24 Stanley Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (The University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 47.
- 25 Cavell, 'The Uncanniness of the Ordinary', p. 172.
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 176.
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- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 154.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 167.
- 31 Max Weber, 'La profession et la vocation d'homme politique' (1919) in *Le savant et le politique*, trans. Catherine Colliot-Thélène (La Découverte/Poche, 2003), p. 193.
- 32 Patrick Boucheron, *Un été avec Machiavel* (Éditions des Équateurs/France Inter, 2017), pp. 105–08.
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- 34 Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (2004) (Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 5.
- 35 Jérôme Melançon, *La politique dans l'adversité. Merleau-Ponty aux marges de la philosophie* (MetisPresses, 2018), p. 122.
- 36 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Part I, & 107, p. 46.
- 37 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanisme et terreur. Essai sur le problème communiste* (1947) (Gallimard, 1980), p. 309.
- 38 Cavell, *Cities of Words*, pp. 18 and 5.

Chapter 2

Reshaping Political Drama: Verisimilitude in South Korean Series *Chief of Staff*

Stéphane Thévenet

The Republic of Korea, more commonly known as South Korea, has enjoyed a democratic regime since the early 1990s.¹ This young democracy has been tested on numerous occasions, including the 1997 financial crisis and the impeachment and removal from office of the president PARK Geun-hye in March 2017 following a large-scale peaceful citizen mobilization, and the 2024 declaration of martial law by president YOON Suk-yeol, which was lifted a few hours later by a vote of the National Assembly and led to an impeachment trial.² Despite these various social and political schisms, as well as the region's high geopolitical tensions, South Korea has proved its resilience. Its economic success is widely recognized, and it has also become a major force on the international stage with its cultural products, particularly its television series.

Korean dramas, or *k-dramas*, have achieved unprecedented international acclaim. Although the development of the Korean media industry over the past decade has led to an increasing diversification of genres, the sentimental genre remains the most widely produced and consumed both domestically and internationally. Yet, amidst the prolific output and the constant search for topics that can attract and engage viewers, political themes are not completely absent. They appear here and there, in the background, most often in productions where they are least expected. The political genre as such, previously largely overlooked, has only recently gained prominence, likely influenced by its popularity in the West.

The objective of this chapter is to examine the development of the political genre in South Korean televisual drama through the analysis of a political series that differentiates itself from previous productions in a number of ways, including its pedagogical potential and its capacity to encourage viewers to reflect on South Korean society. We will first present an overview of the evolving relationship between politics and South Korean television from its beginnings to the present day, followed by a discussion of the rise and

evolution of political series. The second part of the chapter will focus on the analysis of a specific series that can be defined as ‘political’, *Chief of Staff*.³ The series is the product of a somewhat unique production and broadcasting context, with its two seasons aired within a very short timeframe.⁴ Produced and broadcast before the 2020 general elections, the series, primarily set in the offices and corridors of the National Assembly, could initially be dismissed as a Korean version of *The West Wing*. Instead, *Chief of Staff* should be seen as a compelling example of the power of what scholars Antoine Faure and Emmanuel Taïeb have termed as ‘narrative aesthetics’: ‘when forms, formats and staging—in other words, all aesthetic choices—condition the telling of a story’.⁵ The series presents a particularly intriguing object of study given that, at the time of this chapter’s writing in the spring of 2024, South Korea was heading for a general election with stakes similar to those evoked in *Chief of Staff*.

The Political Subject in TV Series Production

With its origins dating back to the turbulent times of the First Republic of Korea (1948–1960), South Korean television was for a long time largely controlled by the state. Particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, it served as a propaganda tool in line with three priorities: national security, anti-communism, and the development of the country. As television sets became more and more widely available in homes, the state control over content tightened, culminating in the second half of the 1970s in mandatory programming that prioritized education, culture, and information during prime time. Television dramas, in particular, were used to disseminate the values promoted by the military regime. Notably, beginning in 1971, the programme *KBS Stage* that broadcast series in an anthology format was aptly renamed *Stage for People’s Education*, and then *New Village Stage*.⁶ It is also a well-documented aspect of Korean television history that the daily soap opera *The Flowery Landscape of the Eight Korean Provinces*⁷ extolled the benefits of the rural development policies initiated by the general-turned-president, PARK Chung-hee.⁸

During the 1980s, the military regime and its corollary, the stranglehold on the media, persisted despite the assassination of General Park. With the advent of colour television, entertainment became the order of the day. Societal issues could only be addressed when they served the government’s purposes. For example, in 1983, when the popular daily soap opera *Countryside’s Journal*⁹ mentioned the controversial issue of rising onion prices, its broadcast was temporarily suspended.¹⁰

The most emblematic instance of this ambivalent relationship between politics and televisual ‘fiction’ is undeniably the so-called ‘true stories’ (*silhwa*), which were prevalent throughout the 1970s and 1980s. These programmes aimed to use real events to convey a political message. During the peak of anti-communism in Korea, programming schedules were filled with these ‘*ban-gong deurama*’ (literally ‘anti-communist dramas’). They were presented

as 're-enactments' of crimes, attacks, and the dismantling of espionage networks, filling the role of detective series.

Politics, as such, was rarely represented in televisual fiction. It was not until the 1980s that television series began to discuss 'recent' events and to feature political figures.

The First 'Political' Series

One of the very first political series was undoubtedly *Republic*, which ran for several 'seasons'.¹¹ Directed by GO Seok-man and aired in 1981 on MBC,¹² one of the two main national broadcasters at the time, the series deals with the various successive 'republics' of South Korea. The first instalment, 'The First Republic', focuses on, as the title suggests, the first South Korean Republic, namely the years between the founding of the Republic of Korea (1948) and the exile of its first president, Syngman Rhee, in 1960. The subsequent period, that of General Park's seizure of power, was still difficult to portray despite the passage of twenty years. The series was cancelled after the twenty-ninth episode, although ten more were planned. Viewers had to wait seven years, and for the beginnings of democratization, to see the sequel on screen, and then several more years for each new instalment to be produced and broadcast.¹³

From the outset, the 'documentary' nature of this fiction is emphasized. This is evident in the use of archive footage in the credits, the use of the real names of the protagonists, the search for resemblance between the actors and the personalities portrayed, the voiceover narration with a very characteristic tone, and the addition of contextual elements, such as place, date, and names of the protagonists, through subtitles.¹⁴

It can be argued that certain cultural figures have been instrumental in the emergence and development of the political genre. Among these is director GO Seok-man, who directed not only three of the five *Republic* series but also two other political series from the 1990s: *Korea Gate*¹⁵ and *The Three Kim Era*,¹⁶ which were also conceived as documentary fiction. As with *Republic*, the titles of the series make explicit reference to well-known people or events in South Korean history. The first one deals with an American political scandal involving several South Korean politicians in 1976. The second series looks back at an important political period marked by three politicians sharing the same surname: KIM Dae-jung, KIM Yong-sam, and KIM Jong-pil. The latter series is even more closely aligned with reality than its predecessors: it begins with the footage of President KIM Dae-jung's inauguration ceremony, which took place only three days before the series aired!

For a long time, the depiction of politics in television drama took the form, or rather the tone, of a documentary series.¹⁷ Similar to historical dramas, which focused on the reconstruction of historical events and facts over narrative liberty within a given historical context, so-called political

series (*jeongchi deurama*) distinguished themselves from other productions by emphasizing their ‘non-fictionality’.¹⁸ This aspect is explicitly stated by the authors, the channels, and the promotional and regulatory bodies through different means such as notes of intent, project presentations, and typologies used in reviews.¹⁹ Even today, this characterization persists in the first lines of the definition of political drama on Korean Wikipedia pages. It was not until the late 2000s and early 2010s that the focus shifted from a ‘documentary’ to a fictional approach, allowing for the creation of increasingly engaging and innovative content.

Politics After All

What has happened in the meantime? The gradual democratization of Korean society throughout the 1990s brought about a positive change. Television was partially freed from the stringent control of the authorities. The advent of new technologies—such as the development of cable television and the emergence of satellite television—and the increasing openness of the country further contributed to overcoming outdated reflexes. The narrative freedom afforded by fiction no longer provoked fear.

This is exemplified by *Sandglass*, a series that could be described as both ‘political’ and ‘historical’, not only because it deals with politics and contemporary history, but also because it has been politically influential and has had a profound and lasting impact on the history of South Korean television. Broadcast in 1995 on the new commercial channel SBS in and around Seoul,²⁰ *Sandglass* follows the lives of three young people from the late 1970s to the early 1990s, focusing primarily on their experiences during the Gwangju Uprising in May 1980, which was violently suppressed by the authorities. The twenty-four-episode series redefined the genre of television drama, offering a highly realistic portrayal of a turbulent period that had not previously been explored in television fiction. The impact of the series was heightened by the fact that it was broadcast less than one year before the trial of two former presidents, CHUN Doo-hwan and ROH Tae-woo, who were responsible for the bloody suppression of this democratic movement. A remarkable achievement of its creators, including director KIM Jong-hak, was the inclusion of rare archive footage from the period, well known across Korea, in sequences depicting the violence in Gwangju, presented without explanations, subtitles, or any other reference material.²¹ Unlike other ‘political series’ (some of which were broadcast at the same time as *Sandglass*), which styled themselves as docudramas by using authentic elements to gain legitimacy and approval from the authorities, *Sandglass* positioned itself as purely fictional, yet managed to emotionally engage and unite an entire people through the realism of its narrative.²²

However, the most compelling examples of the representation of social issues can be found in fiction that at first appears to be far removed from politics. In 1996, for example, the series *Lovers* caused a stir in Korean politics

and society.²³ Depicting a love story between a man and a woman, both married with children, at a time when adultery was criminalized,²⁴ the series was the subject of fierce debate because it was seen as offering an overly idealized and aestheticized vision of this type of relationship.²⁵ In fact, for the first time, the female protagonist's point of view was not that of the deceived woman (as in many melodramas of the 1970s and 1980s), but that of the woman who, although married, was herself in a relationship with a married man. Although the remorse of the two 'wrongdoers' was clearly shown, the relationship (which remained very prudish on screen) represented an aestheticization of female adultery in the eyes of some viewers and was therefore condemned. In fact, the series ended with the separation of the two lovers.

Another emblematic example of an audiovisual production with a strong social and political dimension is *Yellow Handkerchief*,²⁶ a daily soap opera broadcast on KBS 1 in the early evening (access prime time) in 2003. The series dealt with the supremacy accorded to men by the 'Household Head system' (*Hojuje*), shown through the story of the female protagonist whose child was taken away because the biological father had left her for another woman. *Yellow Handkerchief* was aired two years before the practice was declared unconstitutional;²⁷ it is one among a number of dramas produced around the same time that addressed this theme, with plots focused on single mothers.²⁸

Such socially oriented dramas were not solely focused on advancing women's rights, as the last two examples might suggest. Some of these productions have also played a role, at the least, in initiating or reviving democratic conversations among audiences, leading to debates that were subsequently relayed in the media and online forums, and even influencing the passage of legislation.

Misaeng: Incomplete Life is certainly the most notable example of such a production.²⁹ Based on an online comic strip (webtoon), the series depicts the daily lives of temporary employees in a large trading company. While the backdrop of a service company was a common feature of televisual fiction in the 1990s and 2000s, the narrative tension in these works was primarily based on the romantic developments among the main characters within this professional environment. Accordingly, although themes of poor working conditions and power struggles occasionally appeared in some episodes, they were usually used to heighten the atmosphere and dramatize the plot. In *Misaeng*, however, the treatment of these professional realities is markedly different. The series was created and set in the 2010s, a period during which South Korea was beginning to see the consequences of legislation aimed at reducing the working week (South Korea has one of the highest average annual working hours among the OECD countries). *Misaeng* delves into the sacrifices and bullying endured by employees, and as a result, it garnered widespread approval and support from many Koreans who could relate to the hostile work environment depicted in the series.³⁰ The social impact of

the drama was significant, leading to public discussions and the eventual passage of a law aimed at improving the working conditions of contract employees shortly after it aired.³¹ The legislation has been colloquially referred to as the 'Jang Geurae Law' after the series' main protagonist.

These are just a few of the best-known examples, as the wide range of Korean series produced since the 1990s offers many more topics for discussion.

Political Series Since the 2010s

As in other local television markets, such as France, the international success of recent US political series (*The West Wing*, *House of Cards*, and so on) has probably contributed to the resurgence of this genre, despite its previously marginal status.³² However, the specificity of the socio-cultural and media context in South Korea should not be overlooked in relation to this trend. The period from the late 2000s to the early 2010s saw the creation of generalist cable channels, with four such channels launched in 2011. At the same time, OCN and TvN, two already established thematic cable channels, gained in popularity.³³ Their success spurred emulation within the industry, leading to the introduction of new genres and further expansion of the boundaries of televisual fiction. In terms of the social impact of the media, the maturation of South Korean democracy was also influenced by the development of broadband internet and connectivity devices. The second half of the 2010s, a period that culminated with the broadcast of the series discussed below, also witnessed a certain desacralization of the presidential function following the impeachment of President PARK Geun-hye and the revelation of related scandals.

Major political series of the 2010s include *City Hall*, *Big Things (Daemul)*, *President*, and *Assembly*.³⁴ Unlike the political dramas of the 1980s and 1990s, these series feature entirely fictional characters and present plots that are contemporary to the viewer. *City Hall*³⁵ tells the story of a low-ranking civil servant who finds himself running for mayor in the municipal election of a big city. In 2010, both *President*³⁶ and *Big Thing*³⁷ featured presidential characters, with *Big Thing* having the important distinction of being the first to portray a female president of South Korea (in reality, the first female president of South Korea was elected in 2012). In 2015, *Assembly*,³⁸ which aired on KBS2, was among the first series to showcase political figures outside of the executive branch. The series is set in the National Assembly, and was filmed in the actual government building. The series' realism was further enhanced by its screenwriter's first-hand experience as a political aide to a member of the Assembly. Finally, *Designated Survivor: 60 days*³⁹ (a remake of the US series *Designated Survivor*⁴⁰) opens with images of the National Assembly building destroyed in a terrorist attack. It premiered on TvN in the summer of 2019, less than a year before the general election, as did the series *Chief of Staff*, the focus of this analysis.

South Korean Political Context

Given the political significance of the *Chief of Staff* series, we propose to outline a few key points about South Korean politics before delving into an analysis of the series. South Korea is governed by a presidential system, and its political landscape is characterized by strong bipolarization: although the presence of multiple parties in the National Assembly is often emphasized, in reality, deputies not affiliated with one of the two major blocks have very little chance of being elected.⁴¹ Power typically oscillates between two antagonistic forces, commonly referred to as ‘conservative’ and ‘progressive’.

This polarization is reinforced by the media, especially the press, which remains largely dominated by conservative forces. Although new media platforms on the internet have promoted pluralism, they are not immune to the pitfalls of the modern world, including the proliferation of fake news. The media, with its ubiquitous presence, engages in aggressive reporting, constantly seeking scandals and scoops, despite the threat of libel suits. The latter mainly benefit the elites who wield economic and cultural power, while the application of the National Security Law varies depending on the government in power, further complicating the media landscape.

Additionally, there exists a fairly entrenched state corporatism, a legacy of decades of strong collusion between economic and political powers. This practice dates back to the 1960s and 1970s, a crucial period when Korea had to rebuild after the civil war that broke out just a few years after the end of decades-long Japanese colonization. Although this corporatism has diminished significantly in recent decades, it has also led to fairly persistent corrupt practices. Real estate speculation is widespread, affecting not only the upper economic classes but also the middle classes, which are faced with high levels of household debt.

Finally, this corporatism takes the form of collusion between the authorities and the criminal justice system. Many Koreans denounce the excessive powers of prosecutors, who are appointed by the Minister of Justice, including the power to indict.⁴² An attempt to reform the Prosecutor’s Office, which was widely supported by the public, was abandoned shortly before the release of *Chief of Staff*.⁴³

‘*Chief of Staff*, the People Who Change the World’: An Ambitious Korean Political Series?

Chief of Staff portrays members of the National Assembly and their parliamentary assistants as they engage in struggles to retain or gain power. All characters in the series belong to the same party, the ruling Taehan Party, which is portrayed as relatively progressive. However, they represent different factions that frequently clash with each other. To achieve their aims, they must sometimes renounce some of their principles, adopt their opponents’ tactics, or even form alliances with the opposition. The main protagonists

are driven by a strong political ambition to transform Korean society and to 'change the world'.

The series was broadcast during a pivotal period in South Korean political life: a year before the first general elections that followed the removal of President PARK Geun-hye and the election of President MOON Jae-in. MOON's election marked the return to power of the progressive camp after two successive terms of conservative leadership.⁴⁴ Such a transition period is of particular significance in Korea because of the strong bipolarity in politics: the legislative elections present an opportunity to secure or maintain a majority for the new president, thus naturally intensifying political tensions.⁴⁵

Therefore, in the summer of 2019, less than a year before the April 2020 elections, the broadcast of a series centred on the nation's legislators and their advisers was not something that could go unnoticed. The notably brief interval between the two seasons—just a few months, in a country where this kind of serialized broadcasting is almost non-existent—is indicative of a deliberate effort to capitalize on the particular political climate and to raise public awareness of the importance of the upcoming elections.⁴⁶

The series' project, as outlined on the official website, explicitly states the ambition of the drama: to publicize the roles and responsibilities of parliamentary assistants and, more broadly, the work conducted behind the scenes at the National Assembly. The series represents a wide range of activities, from preparing speeches, organizing press conferences, and drafting legislation to resolving local disputes. It also highlights the multifaceted challenges faced by staff, including difficult choices, accountability, betrayals, and moral dilemmas. As the drama's official website states, 'Under the lights of the National Assembly, which never go out, there are the parliamentary aides who, alongside the representatives, make the world go round.'⁴⁷

Indeed, it soon becomes evident that the representatives are also the focus of this series. Throughout, it is made clear that while the assistance of parliamentary aides is indispensable and that they can manipulate the levers of power in their own ways, it is ultimately the representatives who dictate the political choices. The centrality of the legislative institution, highlighted both visually and rhetorically, leaves no doubt as to the scope of the series.

The National Assembly is prominently featured throughout the two seasons. From the opening credits to the various wide shots (either day or night) that open a scene, viewers are often shown images of the National Assembly's iconic building.⁴⁸ However, the institution is also represented by its insignia and its badges, which appear in close-up during the credits, and above all by the words of the characters. From the first episode, when JANG Tae-jun, who works for representative SONG, collects the latter's badge, to the frequent mentions of the 'badge' that the characters either wear or aspire to, the badge emerges as a symbol of their political ambitions. These ambitions are not only personal, but also national: as revealed over the course of the series, 'to change the world' means the will to eradicate the corruption that plagues society.

The series—including both seasons—can be summarized by the political rise and struggles of the main character, JANG Tae-jun, who goes from being a parliamentary aide (first season) to becoming a representative (second season).⁴⁹ Therefore, the subtitle ‘people who make the world move’ seems to more aptly refer to the representatives than to their aides (*bojwagwan*), and the association between the badge and the will—or perhaps the ability—to ‘change the world’ is in fact that of JANG Tae-jun, as well as his friend LEE Seong-min, who is already a representative.

In a particularly emblematic scene, which is repeated several times throughout the first season, JANG Tae-jun and LEE Seong-min are in front of the National Assembly at night, slightly drunk, loudly proclaiming their ambition:

Tae-jun: Both you and I, should get elected as an assemblyman
with a badge on our chest and walk in there triumphantly!
A fair, corruption-free nation! A country where all of its people
can prosper! Let’s work together to create such a world!
Seong-min: Yes! Like you said, let’s make a change in this world!
Together: Let’s make a change! (*three times*). (S1E5)

This will to ‘change the world’ is articulated in various situations by several characters who share the same ambition, but it is JANG Tae-jun, the central character of the story, who is the primary bearer of this aspiration, as made evident by the *mise-en-scène*. He is the guiding force of the narrative, present from the opening scenes to the final moments of the series, and it is his inner voice (the voiceover) that provides the moral foundation for the story.

The first season opens with an interview featuring JANG Tae-jun, interspersed with shots of him going about his daily life (such as his morning jog). This serves as a pretext for a voiceover prologue that allows the viewer to enter the inner world of the main character. This unsettling mode of address is heightened by Jang’s direct gaze into the camera during the interview, which creates the effect of a confession.

Throughout the series—both the first and second seasons—the regular use of the character’s voiceover invites the viewer to share his fears, troubles, regrets, and above all his hesitation, between irreproachable conduct and more pragmatic, borderline legal behaviour. This character’s legibility is further enhanced by the evolution of his antagonists.

As a parliamentary aide, JANG Tae-jun is in daily contact with the most immoral of all the people he works for: SONG Hui-seob,⁵⁰ a power-hungry politician, who rises from being a member of parliament to Minister of Justice. SONG has no qualms about using any means necessary, including immoral tactics, to ascend to higher office. With the help of JANG Tae-jun and the support of wealthy businessmen, he becomes the leader of the Taehan Party (S1E1) and later the Minister of Justice (S2E1), eventually setting his sights on becoming the future President of the Republic—which is made explicit

from the first episode of the second season. As a member of the ‘Sam-il Group’, which includes the country’s top businessmen, as well as prosecutors and politicians, he is implicated in a major corruption scandal that JANG Tae-jun and his girlfriend, KANG Seon-yeong, relentlessly work to uncover.⁵¹ Immoral, cynical, manipulative, angry, and violent, SONG Hui-seob truly epitomizes the dark side of politics. In some respects, his character resembles Frank Underwood,⁵² particularly in scenes involving eating, where SONG Hui-seob is particularly voracious—devouring meat, seafood, and so on, while using metaphors revolving around food and the slaughter of animals to illustrate his political philosophy.⁵³ During a lunch with core members of the ‘Sam-il Group’, his remarks carry a threatening tone: ‘Minister, I’ve seen a lot of people get their jaws dislocated while trying to slaughter a cow because they didn’t do it right. So be careful’ (S1E3). Speaking about his rebellious political partner, JANG Tae-jun, SONG Hui-seob is similarly ominous:

There’s this stupid ox that won’t listen to its owner... do you know what we do with an ox that won’t do as it’s told? (*SONG Hui-seob grabs one of his chopsticks, sticks it furiously into a piece of meat in front of him, and lifts it up*). You put a nose ring on the ox and drag it around. That way, it won’t go astray. (S1E4)

At the other end of the moral spectrum is LEE Seong-min, who serves as a model of a virtuous and irreproachable politician. He is a close friend and former associate of JANG Tae-jun, and the two often engage in spirited discussions about the methods of advancing their common cause (‘to change the world’). While Seong-min advocates strict adherence to the law and morality, Tae-jun believes that it is possible to compromise one’s morals occasionally in order to gain power, with the ultimate goal of implementing reforms to clean up the political world.

Unfortunately, the world of politics is cruel, and those with the least moral compromise often pay the highest price. LEE Seong-min eventually commits suicide by jumping off the roof of his office building amid allegations of having received secret funding. It is later revealed that JANG Tae-jun was behind the funding, which was used for entirely legitimate purposes. The tragic act was also intended to clear Tae-jun’s name and allow him to carry out his mission.

Other characters associated with JANG Tae-jun represent a similar dynamic, especially the aides (parliamentary assistants or secretaries) who are part of his team and hold him in high regard. This is particularly true of the young trainee HAN Do-gyeong,⁵⁴ as well as the loyal YOON Hye-won who works alongside Tae-jun for two seasons. However, it is through Do-gyeong’s perspective that the viewer is made to question the appropriateness of the methods used by Tae-jun in the first season.

KANG Seon-yeong is one of the characters in the series who is able to express her doubts, disappointment, or disapproval directly to Tae-jun because

of their close relationship. The two are romantically involved, although their relationship remains private. Seon-yeong is also a member of parliament for the Taehan Party, but she works for a representative from a rival faction. She shares JANG Tae-jun's values (the two support each other in advancing their cause) and is critical when he crosses ethical lines. Similarly, another prominent character, GO Seok-man⁵⁵—also a member of parliament and a close friend of Tae-jun—is quick to criticize his friend's questionable decisions to his face.

Chief of Staff and Its Place in the Political and Social Life of Korea

With a plot that unfolds primarily through 'political coups', orchestrated, endured, or foiled by JANG Tae-jun, *Chief of Staff* follows in the tradition of contemporary political series.⁵⁶ These 'coups' test the characters' ability to anticipate, cope with, or exploit the daily fluctuations that shape the political agenda. By echoing current events in South Korea, these incidents and cases help to build and enrich the narrative, making it entirely plausible.

For example, several sequences in the first season are devoted to a sensitive social issue. KANG Seon-yeong, a member of parliament, takes under her protection a young pregnant woman who has left her family and is alone. The representative becomes the target of the most traditionalist groups and the media, incited by her political opponents, when it is revealed that the young woman had an abortion with her support. However, KANG Seon-yeong manages to sway public opinion during a televised debate. This sensitive issue resonates with current events in South Korea, where abortion was decriminalized just a few months before the series was released.

With property speculation rampant in South Korea, there are many district-wide redevelopment projects, and the local media often report on the resulting tensions and suspicions of collusion between politicians and property developers or companies involved in these projects, whether these suspicions are later proven or not. In *Chief of Staff*, this issue is referenced several times: in the images of the violent eviction of the Seobuk market vendors (S1E10), or the heavy-handed police intervention in which JANG Tae-jun participated as a policeman, and which continues to haunt him. These scenes can be compared to real-life events well known to the Korean public, such as the 2009 eviction of residents from a building in Seoul's Yongsan district, which resulted in several deaths following a fire, or the violent police crackdown on the seventy-seven-day occupation of the Ssanyong Company in Pyeongtaek following mass redundancies in the same year.⁵⁷

At the beginning of the first episode of the first season, as JANG Tae-jun's voice explains his priorities in an interview, tents and banners denouncing the fictitious Bugang Electronics company can be seen in the background. These images are reminiscent of the tents and placards set up in front of Seoul's City Hall and along Gwanghwamun Square by the families of the victims of the Sewol sinking, and, more recently, the Itaewon crowd crush.

Similarly, the Joojin Chemicals water pollution case in *Chief of Staff* mirrors many similar industrial accidents that have occurred in Korea in the past.⁵⁸ Attempts to conceal and coerce sick employees into silence also reflect real events. Notably, in November 2018, Samsung admitted its responsibility in the leukaemia cases among its employees after years of struggle by whistleblowers and victims' associations.

Finally, the aforementioned suicide of representative LEE Seong-min is another element that adds to the verisimilitude of the series. The violence of such a scene makes one wonder about its acceptability in a series that is broadcast without specific viewer advisory. Suicide by political figures is unfortunately not uncommon in South Korea. In 2009, former president NOH Moo-hyun, whose family members were suspected of financial embezzlement, jumped off a cliff; in July 2020, PARK Won-soon, the mayor of Seoul, committed suicide after being accused of sexual harassment. Most notably, representative ROH Hoe-chan, the leader of the New Progressive Party, who was accused of corruption, ended his life by jumping off a building in 2018, less than a year before the broadcast of *Chief of Staff*.

Alongside these evocations of events and societal issues that create a 'reality effect', the series also portrays, sometimes in a haunting way, the power dynamics palpable in South Korean society. One such dynamic is the dependence on the flow of news, which is common to all modern societies but is particularly significant in Korea due to the omnipresence of connected screens and local political practices.

As can be seen in other series, the supremacy of the news flow is established through its role in the plot and narrative structure.⁵⁹ In *Chief of Staff*, the transition from one scene to the next is often made via the 'news voice' (almost always the same one) from the television.⁶⁰ Characters frequently acquire news via screens, turning on a device just in time to catch the beginning of a news flash. This ability to 'catch' the start of a news flash, an implausible element if ever there was one, is taken to the extreme when a character simply turns on a television or screen to share information, and it conveniently broadcasts the information in its entirety, even though the announcement is supposed to be live.

In *Chief of Staff*, there is an overabundance of such scenes, reinforcing the idea that continuous information is omnipresent and has a superior power. It punctuates the progression of the storyline and determines the fate of the characters. Both JANG Tae-jun (his right-hand man, YOON Hye-won, is a former journalist who secretly passes on information to a former colleague at a newspaper) and his opponents use it as a political weapon. The haste to reveal information (by broadcasting it or announcing it live) aims to create a media frenzy and destabilize the opponent. Even if the information is later denied, the images and breaking news announcements can overshadow a scandal or create a new one, ultimately discrediting the adversary. This practice is hyperbolized in the series, but reflects a widespread strategy that is particularly common during election periods in Korea. With the proliferation

of websites and information platforms, successive governments in recent years have sought ways to combat 'fake news', but have struggled to find a bipartisan approach.

One of the most powerful images used to portray suspicion is that of a person who is a subject of an official search. Ubiquitous on South Korean TV news and news flashes, these images, accompanied by an informative banner and a voiceover identifying the person in question, show agents conducting the searches emerging from buildings (offices, homes) with their arms full of the iconic blue boxes bearing the Public Prosecutor Office logo. As expected, these images are plentiful throughout the two seasons of *Chief of Staff*. From the very first episode, not only JANG Tae-jun but also his father is the target of a search warrant. Throughout the series, we see this process play out again and again, highlighting the questionable, even abusive use of the news media.

In fact, the close links between the judiciary and politics, and the excessive power given to prosecutors, have long been denounced in Korea. *Chief of Staff* echoes these public sentiments, particularly through characters who call for justice system reform. In the first episode, SONG Hui-seob states that 'it is the prosecutors who make the president in South Korea'. When he becomes Minister of Justice in the second season and gains the power to appoint prosecutors, he does not hesitate to involve himself in the searches, leading to a conflict with the new Prosecutor General. The latter is far less compliant, which results in a confrontation reminiscent of the real-life conflict between the current President, who was then Prosecutor General, and CHO Kuk, then Minister of Justice, which took place a few months before the broadcast of the second season of the series.⁶¹ CHO Kuk was appointed by the previous president to lead a reform of the justice system to reduce the power of prosecutors but resigned a month after his nomination as Minister of Justice following an investigation by the Public Prosecutor Office.⁶²

In the series, the protagonist, JANG Tae-jun, powerfully expresses the stakes of the issue when he leaves his interrogation by the prosecutors:

I answered the questions truthfully. If the prosecution doesn't falter from outside pressure and carry out a thorough and truthful investigation, the truth will be revealed faster than you think. I urge the office to look under every rock. Show the public that power and money can't buy the prosecution. I ask the prosecution to be a force that meets the expectation of the public. (S2E4)

Conclusion

It is, of course, impossible to assess the impact of the *Chief of Staff* series on voter turnout following its broadcast. Nor is it certain that increasing voter turnout was something that was the goal of the series' creators. However, this series, which chooses to portray 'behind the scenes' of the parliamentary

world rather than the more familiar aspects of the political sphere (elections, parliamentary debates, and the quarrels between the two main parties do not, or hardly ever, appear in *Chief of Staff*), is a milestone in the development of South Korean political series.

As Sandra Laugier has noted in France in relation to the series *Baron noir*, it seems that the political genre has also reached the shores of South Korea.⁶³ After decades of lethargy, the South Korean imagination has embraced the political genre, transforming it, however tentatively, into a forum for political discussion and reflection. Inspired by the success of the genre in the USA, the recent political upheavals, and the upcoming democratic elections, television drama producers have provided the necessary impetus.⁶⁴ In a landscape previously dominated by the sentimental genre, this political series stands out. Notably, even though they are not at the centre of the narrative, which revolves around Tae-jun, the female protagonists, freed from sentimental intrigues and family issues, also find their place in this world of politics that has long been reserved for men.⁶⁵ In this, too, *Chief of Staff* undoubtedly contributes to the education of the citizens of South Korea and beyond.

Notes

- 1 The first direct presidential election in South Korea was organized in 1987 after decades of military government, but the first civilian (i.e. non-military) president was elected in 1992.
- 2 On the evening of 3 December 2024 (when this chapter had already been submitted and was under peer review), YOON Suk-yeol, the acting president at the time, declared martial law and sent troops to the iconic National Assembly building (mentioned later in the chapter), to prevent parliament from overturning it. However, 190 members of the National Assembly, supported by citizens, managed to enter the building and voted to repeal the decree. Ten days later, YOON Suk-yeol was suspended from presidential powers after an impeachment vote from the Parliament. On April 4, 2025, the Constitutional Court unanimously validated his removal from office. After being arrested in January on charges of insurrection, he was released on March 8 due to a procedural flaw. He is currently facing two trials (as of June 2025): one for insurrection and the other for abuse of power.
- 3 *Bojwagwan* (보좌관, JTBC, 2019, 2 seasons). We adopt the spelling system in use in South Korea since 2000 (Revised Romanization), except for the romanization of individuals' names, for which a different form has become widely accepted in Western usage.
- 4 Until recently, the seasonal system was very unusual for South Korean television. See Stéphane Thévenet, 'Le TV drama sud-coréen : persistance et adaptation d'un système sérialisé', in *Industries des Images en Asie de l'Est (Chine/Hong-Kong, Corée, Japon, Taïwan) : entre mondialisation et identités locales*, ed. by Feigelson Kristian and Ghermani Wafa, *Théorème* 33 (Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2021), pp. 181–89.
- 5 In French: '...quand les formes, les formats, les mises en scène, soit l'ensemble des choix esthétiques, conditionnent la mise en histoire'. Antoine Faure and Emmanuel

- Taïeb, 'Les esthétiques narratives : l'autre réel des séries', *Quaderni*, 88 (Autumn 2015), p. 6.
- 6 Starting in 1971, the weekly programme *KBS Stage* presented original fictions with relative success. Depending on the social and political context, the programme became more propagandistic and lost in quality. Known successively as *Stage for People's Education*, *Stage for New Villages*, and *Hope Stage*, this programme championed national causes, such as, for example, promoting energy conservation or boosting exports.
 - 7 꽃피는 팔도 강산 (KBS, 1974–1975).
 - 8 In accordance with Korean usage (and that of many Asian countries), the patronymic/surname precedes the first name. We retain this practice here and distinguish surnames by capital letters.
 - 9 전원일기 (MBC, 1980–2002).
 - 10 KIM Seol-ah, *La télévision généraliste en Corée du Sud : son régime et son évolution depuis 1956* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Université Panthéon-Assas, Paris 2, 2009).
 - 11 We use quotation marks because the meaning of the 'season' format here is different from the way it is understood nowadays.
 - 12 고석만.
 - 13 *The First Republic* (MBC, 1981–1982), *The Second Republic* (MBC, 1989–1990), *The Third Republic* (MBC, 1993), *The Fourth Republic* (MBC, 1995–1996), *The Fifth Republic* (MBC, 2005).
 - 14 The narration of *The First Republic*, *The Second Republic*, and *The Third Republic* is done by the famous voice actor, KIM Jong-seong (김종성).
 - 15 *Korea Gate* (코리아 게이트, SBS, 1995) was aired at the same time (Saturday, starting at 8.50 pm) as *The Fourth Republic* (MBC, 1995–1996).
 - 16 The broadcast of *Three Kim Era* (삼김시대, SBS, 1998) on Saturday and Sunday evening followed the broadcast of *Sandglass*.
 - 17 이영미, '텔레비전 드라마의 왕/대통령 재현, 그 흐름과 의미' in 한국방송학회, *한국의 텔레비전 드라마, 역사와 경계*, 서울, 컬처룩, 2023 (LEE Young-mee, 'Reappearance of King and President in Television Drama, Trend and Meaning', in *Korean Television Drama, History and Border*, Culturelook Publishing, 2023), pp. 169–220.
 - 18 In order to escape from the conventions of the historical genre (and the criticism of historians), writers and directors began to produce 'fusion dramas'—fictions that mix genres and tones.
 - 19 For example, in November 1995, the channels broadcasting *The Fourth Republic* (MBC) and *Korea Gate* (SBS) received a warning from the South Korean regulatory authority, the Korean Broadcasting Commission, reminding them of various principles, including that of 'taking care, as docu-dramas reconstructing historical facts, to maintain an objective point of view and to avoid defamation or distortion of events', of 'taking care to reduce as far as possible unverified parts relating to (existing) individuals or particular groups, of reinforcing the sense of responsibility [...] of the people behind these productions by making an effort to distinguish fictitious parts from non-fictitious parts'. "Basic Warning" from the Broadcasting Commission to 2 political dramas', *Yonhab News*, 15 November 1995.
 - 20 *Sandglass* (*Morae siggye* /모래시계, 1995) was so successful that it was re-broadcast on the national SBS network in 1998.
 - 21 The repression of the Gwangju uprising was covered up by the authorities: all access to the city was blocked to prevent information from spreading.

- 22 The broadcasting schedule was unique at the time: four episodes a week on four consecutive days. It had a major impact on Korean society.
- 23 애인 (MBC, 1996).
- 24 Decriminalization of adultery occurred very recently, in 2015.
- 25 See 황인성, 원용진, 애인 (愛人) : TV드라마, 문화 그리고 사회, 한나래, 1997 (WHANG In-sung, WON Yong-jin. *Lovers: TV Dramas, Culture & Society*, Hannarae, 1997).
- 26 Noran sonsugeon 노란손수건 (KB1, 2003).
- 27 The 'Household Head System' or *Hojuje* was declared unconstitutional and abolished in 2005.
- 28 Examples include *Are You Still in Dreams?* (그대 아직도 꿈꾸고 있는가, MBC, 2003) and *On Your Side* (당신 곁으로, SBS, 2003).
- 29 The TV drama is better known under the short version of the title: *Misaeng* (미생, TvN, 2014).
- 30 Joanna Elfving-Hwang, 'Aestheticizing Authenticity: Corporate Masculinities in Contemporary South Korean Television Dramas', *Asia Pacific Perspectives*, 15.1 (2017), pp. 55–72.
- 31 The impact of this law can be debated: by ensuring a longer contract duration (four years instead of two) to employees without any guarantee of consequent employment, this law can be seen as a way for a company to benefit longer from employees without any commitment.
- 32 The political genre nevertheless remains in the minority.
- 33 OCN (cinema) was established in 1995 and TvN (entertainment) in 2006.
- 34 조성현 & 박지훈, 한국 픽션 정치드라마의 정치 재현, in *평화연구* 20.2 (2012) (JO Sung-hyun & PARK Ji Hoon, 'The Representation of Politics in Fictional Political Dramas in Korea: An Analysis of *City Hall*, *Dae-Mul*, and *President*', in *Peace Studies*, 20.2 (2012), pp. 399–436.
- 35 시티홀 (SBS, 2009).
- 36 *President* (프레지던트, KBS, 2010–2011).
- 37 Better known as *Daemul* (대물, SBS, 2010).
- 38 어셈블리 (KBS2, 2015).
- 39 60 일, 지정생존자 (TvN, 2019).
- 40 *Designated Survivor* (ABC & Netflix, 2016–2019).
- 41 Justine Guichard, 'La démocratie sud-coréenne à l'échelle de la trentaine', *Pouvoirs*, 4.16 (2018), pp. 55–66.
- 42 See Christophe Duvert, *Les voies de la justice en Corée du Sud* (Ateliers des Cahiers, 2021).
- 43 Jean-Yves Colin, 'Combats politico-judiciaires à Séoul', *Asia Centre*, 12 March 2021 <<https://asiacentre.eu/fr/2021/03/12/combats-politico-judiciaires-a-seoul-2>> (accessed 1 August 2024).
- 44 LEE Myung-bak's term was five years, as mandated by the Constitution, but PARK Geun-hye's was shortened by one year after her impeachment.
- 45 At the time of writing, South Korea is in the same situation, and we can observe similar political activity as the country prepares for its next election in April 2024.
- 46 A third season was planned but cancelled after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. The final scene has JANG Tae-jun receiving a phone call from the presidential office (the president himself was never shown on screen in this political series). Although the conversation is not shown or heard, the viewer knows its content from the previous

- scene: it is an offer to join the presidential team as an adviser, i.e. as chief of staff, not for a congressman but for the president himself. The English translation of the Korean term *bojwagwan* as ‘chief of staff’ in the title of the drama is a source of confusion.
- 47 보좌관, *JTBC* <<https://tv.jtbc.co.kr/plan/pr100111119>> (accessed 1 August 2024).
- 48 Topped with a blue-green dome and surrounded by an empty space in the middle of Yeouido Island, the monument is well known and easily identifiable in Seoul’s landscape. Unexpectedly, it became more than ever the symbol of the South Korean democracy on 3 December 2024, when Korean lawmakers struggled through the night to enter the building, blocked by army and police troops, to pass a motion to lift martial law, declared hours earlier by the president.
- 49 The character of JANG Tae-jun is played by LEE Jung-jae (이정재) who went on to gain international acclaim a few years later by playing Gi-hun in *Squid Game* (Netflix, 2021). He also plays a Jedi Master in the series *The Acolyte* (Disney +, 2024), conceived as a prequel to *Star Wars*.
- 50 송희섭.
- 51 In the drama, leaders of Yeong-il and Joojin Groups are completely immoral characters who do not hesitate to command or organize murder to achieve their goals.
- 52 It should be noted that we are still quite far from the Manichaeism of the *House of Cards* character here.
- 53 In the third episode of the first season, viewers learn that he was a butcher!
- 54 HAN Do-gyeong starts as a trainee on JANG Tae-jun’s team and later becomes a secretary for KANG Seon-yeong.
- 55 It is very interesting to note that this character has the same name as the director of the first political series discussed above, see note 9.
- 56 Emmanuel Taïeb, ‘*House of Cards*. Qu’est-ce qu’un coup politique fictionnel ?’, *Quaderni*, 88 (Autumn 2015), pp. 67–81.
- 57 The fire caused six deaths (five civilians and one policeman).
- 58 Such as the contamination of the Nakdong River by toxic chemicals in 1991, or the spillage of hydrofluoric acid at an industrial site in Gumi in 2012 (the latter killed five employees and poisoned eighteen others, with over four thousand other people affected with symptoms of nausea, skin rashes, lung pain, and irritation).
- 59 See for example, the analysis of *Prison Break* by François Jost, *De quoi les séries américaines sont-elles le symptôme?* (CNRS Editions, 2011), p. 15.
- 60 Sometimes from radio (when driving a car).
- 61 At the time of writing, YOON Suk-yeol was the president of South Korea. Impeached since his controversial declaration of martial law at the end of 2024, he was definitively removed from office on 4 April, 2025.
- 62 Former Law Professor at Seoul National University and then Presidential secretary for civil affairs from 2017 to 2019 (MOON Jae-in administration), CHO Kuk stepped down one month after his nomination as Minister of Justice after being investigated by Public Prosecutor Office. In February 2024, he was sentenced to two years in prison for falsification of academic documents and abuse of power. As the writing of this article is coming to an end, CHO Kuk has just launched a new political party to run in the next (April 2024) general elections.
- 63 Sandra Laugier, *Nos vies en série* (Flammarion/Climats, 2019), pp. 186–89.
- 64 Writers, directors, producers, programme managers, and even channel managers.
- 65 Most notably, KANG Seon-yeong and YOON Hye-won.

Chapter 3

Why Talk About Boys? Some Thoughts on Two Israeli Series—*Our Boys* and *Unknowns*

Ayelet Lilti

These are boys, living children, not a symbol or a sign.

Mother of Naftali Frenkel¹

Based on true events, the American–Israeli mini-series *Our Boys* (*HANEARIM*, 2019), co-created and co-directed by Hagai Levi, Joseph Cedar, and Tawfik Abu-Wael, recounts the events leading up to the military conflict between Israel and Hamas in July 2014. Agent Simon, working for Israel's General Security Service (Shabak), investigates the kidnapping and murder of a young Palestinian, Mohammed Abu-Khdeir, shortly after three Israeli teenagers—Gil-Ad Shaer, Eyal Ifrah, and Naftali Frenkel—are abducted and murdered by Hamas.² The series was co-produced by HBO and Keshet International and was broadcast in August 2019 on HBO.

Unknowns (*ALUMIM*, 2021), co-created and directed by Tawfik Abu-Wael, for Kan channel, is another youth-centred series. It tells the story of at-risk teenagers in the small town of Bet Shemesh who are suspected of raping a teenage girl from a nearby kibbutz. The local police inspector, Avner, is determined to catch them, while his wife, schoolteacher Naomi, is convinced of their innocence. In Hebrew, the word *ALUMIM* means both 'youth' and 'unknowns'. This double meaning is significant: these young people live in a ghost town and seem to have been abandoned by their parents; they try to fit in without knowing how. The family circle is broken, and they spend most of their time outdoors, in the school yard or around a bonfire, as if they were a pack of nameless dogs wandering the streets, struggling to survive.

Unknowns is a social drama. It questions the possibility of young people living in difficult social conditions, marred by poverty and drug use, to escape their deplorable situation. Similarly, *Our Boys* explores and delves into the complexities of a polarized and fragmented Israeli society. The story revolves

around the investigation carried out by Shabak agent Simon, which takes the viewer through unfamiliar and sometimes obscure parts of Israel. For example, agent Simon infiltrates the Adam settlement in the West Bank, just outside Jerusalem, to follow his suspects: Yosef Haim and his two nephews, Avishay and Yinon. In this setting, the agent's investigation reveals a surprising cross-section of Israeli society: secular, traditional, religious, and ultra-Orthodox inhabitants. The series also features a group of young people, some of them far-right activists, known in Israel as the Hilltop Boys. These young people, who see themselves as pioneers and descendants of the biblical Jews, take over desolate land in the West Bank and work as farmers and shepherds.³

Although the two series focus on different themes, they both depict the young generation as neglected and forgotten. In both series, young people appear to be manipulated and used for dubious purposes. In *Our Boys*, the story centres on two young murder suspects, Avishay and his cousin Yinon, who are influenced by their uncle suffering from psychopathic tendencies and a lack of validation from his own father. In *Unknowns*, young people are either exploited or neglected by parental authorities, who are themselves forgotten by the state. The education system attempts to provide these young boys with basic socialization but not much else. The plot of the series revolves around two young characters: Osher and Menachem. Osher, the more reserved of the two, strives to stay as 'clean' as possible, in hopes of erasing his criminal record and eventually joining the army, thus integrating into Israeli society. Menachem, 'the tough one' of the duo, appears to be envious of his friend's aspirations, rejecting his ideas, and seemingly wanting to drag Osher down with him. In Hebrew, Osher means 'happiness', and Menachem—'comfort'. Osher aspires to break the cursed familial and societal cycles; Menachem, having abandoned all hope, seeks to terrorize the streets of the small village of Bet Shemesh in order to gain the respect of his gang members. The story of two friends' divergent paths recalls that of the biblical Cain and Abel.

In this chapter, I am interested in exploring questions that are shared by both series: what added value can be found in the representation of young people in the context of these narratives? What kind of reflective perspective do these subjects offer? In short, why talk about boys?

I will focus primarily on the series *Our Boys* due in part to the polemic that the series has generated in Israeli society. At the end of this paper, I will also return to *Unknowns* with reference to an extract from an interview I conducted with the series' director Tawfik Abu-Wael, who also co-directed *Our Boys*.

My starting point is the notion that an adolescent (in modern Hebrew, *NAAR*—the singular of the word *HANEARIM*—means a teenage boy) can be viewed as a political entity, embodying 'corpo-temporal' transition, halfway between childhood and adulthood. Neither fully a child, nor a man, the adolescent body represents the hesitant presence of an uncertain future. As

such, 'boys' are more likely to be 'sacrificed' because, in this context, their socio-political identity is not firmly anchored in time, nor is their status in family or social circles. My second suggestion is that this entity—'the boys'—acquires particular significance when read in relation to ancient narratives within the Jewish tradition. In that context, I propose to consider the narratives of these series through the lens of a brief Old Testament scene which, in accordance with ancient rituals, depicts boys as instruments to prevent major confrontations between rival camps and sacrifices on the battlefield. The purpose of exploring this specific myth and others in relation to the contemporary series is to show how ancient narratives shape modern ones, particularly in their focus on vulnerable masculine subjects such as 'the boys'. In this sense, I will interrogate this political entity—The Boys—as a recurring narrative trope in order to ask: will boys always be *The Boys*? Namely, those of the past who reappear in the present—*represented*—and those who were culled before their time? In other words, boys deprived of a future and whose presence is a ghostly echo of a mythical time. These boys are representations of Jews and Palestinians in both series, and their youth seems to be sacrificed in the name of an unknown future.

In my analysis, I will draw on two chapters by Hayuta Deutz and Nasrin Alian from the recent edited volume entitled, in Hebrew, *The Boys: A Debate Following the TV Series*.⁴ This volume is a collection of articles by thinkers—academics and writers from various fields—who give voice to the heated public debate that took place in Israel and around the world after the series aired. Both chapters—one written from a Jewish point of view and another, from a Palestinian one—focus on the representation or misrepresentation of adolescents in these series. The reason I am particularly interested in these two critical analyses is that both—each in its own way—question the English title 'Our Boys': they explore the ties that bind these adolescents, and their arguments seem to be driven by the motivation to uncover the identity of these ('our') youths, as if, above all else, 'The Boys' were the 'Unknowns'.

Our Boys caused a storm on the political map, with some calling it anti-Semitic.⁵ A contentious point for some was the series' focus on the kidnapping and murder of the young Palestinian character, rather than the kidnapping and murder of the three Jewish boys, with some critics arguing that the former event is considerably less common than the latter.⁶ These assertions highlight a significant question central to my argument. The debate has brought to the fore the efforts of different political groups to assert their primary right to representation: that the discussion should be centred on these boys, not those other ones. It represents a desire to uncover the true victim, one that is found in their own camp. The creators' response to these claims was to try to examine the motives of the Jewish murderers. For some critics, this artistic ambition falsifies reality in Israel; for others, it holds up a critical mirror to Israel's socio-political landscape. For example, philosopher Eva Illouz focuses on the way the series shatters the narcissistic image of

Israeli society.⁷ The reception of *Our Boys* has been controversial, and the lively discourse around the series shows that it touches upon some essential and sensitive issues surrounding the question of representation inside and outside Israel.

1. 'HANEARIM'

At first glance, the English title of the series, under which it was distributed—*Our Boys*—suggests an intention to tell the story of everyone's children; those from our families, our communities, our societies. However, the series' narrative structure portrays the division between 'them' and 'us', chronicling the lives of Israeli and Palestinian boys on both sides of the political border that separates them. But not only that; it also tells the story of the divide between different sectors of Israeli society that is deepening every day.

However, the Hebrew title—*HANEARIM* (*The Boys*)—evokes a different connotation. To a viewer familiar with the region's historical and cultural roots, it may resonate with the biblical myths that have had a profound influence on the region's narrative culture. More than an influence, the echoing presence of traditional stories in contemporary tales speaks to the notion that the history of this region—steeped in conflicts, departures, and exiles—is unfolding according to a predetermined destiny; the one assigned at the time when the first of these stories were told and gathered—the biblical time. This notion of historical destiny, reaffirmed over time, alongside the region's connection to the historical Holy Land and the cycle of conflicts surrounding it, bestows a 'mythical' aspect upon this land. Here, political forces, like ideologies, contribute to an imaginary dimension that resonates within the collective consciousness. This is the case with the word-choice in the Hebrew title of the series—*HANEARIM* (*The Boys*). With this title, the series, which incorporates documentary sequences within its fictional depictions of real events, frames contemporary narratives in a way that echoes the ancient epics, which have shaped the region and, in particular, the historical and socio-political aspects of Israel. The myth is also a story of sacrifice, of the struggle of human beings against the will of greater powers. It is a tragedy that raises the question of the meaning of the hardships suffered by peoples and individuals. It is a test of their faith in their gods or in their own destiny.

2. 'Let the Boys Get Up Now and Play Before Us...'—the Prelude to War

This verse, taken from the Old Testament and found in the Book of Samuel II, is the opening of a striking scene from the chronicles of the wars between the house of David and the house of Saul.

In contemporary Hebrew, this statement is employed as an expression of contempt for people who claim to master things of which they have little

knowledge or experience. Furthermore, when the expression—‘Let the boys get up now and play before us’—is employed, it suggests a sense of amusement on the part of the audience witnessing the scene of ineptitude.

In the past, however, this statement had a different purpose. In the enigmatic scene from the Old Testament, King Saul’s minister of war, Abner, turns to his counterpart from the house of David, Joab, and says: ‘Let the boys get up now and play before us...’ Here is the full extract:

14. And Abner said to Joab, ‘Let the boys get up now and play before us’, and Joab said, ‘Let them get up’.

15. And they got up and passed in number, twelve of Benjamin and of Ish-bosheth, and twelve of David’s servants.

16. And each one took hold of his fellow’s head and his sword was thrust in his fellow’s side, and they fell together. And he called that place ‘the territory of those slain by the sharp swords’ which is in Gibeon.

17. And the battle was very sore on that day and Abner and the men of Israel were beaten before David’s servants.⁸

As we can see from this passage, the servants of the house of King Saul fought the servants of the house of David. In Hebrew, the ‘servants’ are the boys of each camp. What was the purpose of this apparent game?

According to the archaeologist Yigael Yadin, this fight had a specific goal—to avoid a more general and bloody war. Moreover, the meaning of the Hebrew word *NAAR* (boy) here differs from its contemporary use: rather than meaning ‘adolescent’ or ‘young man’, according to the historian, ‘boys’ refers to elite fighters whose purpose was to determine the outcome of a military campaign.⁹ On this subject, the etymological dictionary of the Hebrew language suggests a few possible meanings for the word. The first, linked to the verb *NAAR*, of Syriac-Aramaic origin, signifies ‘to come forth’ or, alternatively, ‘to bray’, in allusion to the roughness of the voice at the beginning of puberty. An alternative meaning comes from an Ancient Phoenician word signifying ‘boy’, or ‘servant’.

Yadin suggests that the intention behind Abner’s proposal was not to entertain the armies, but rather to elect representatives of each side to settle the war, thus avoiding further casualties. The use of the verb ‘to play’ implies that this confrontation was a spectacle with many spectators from each camp. Moreover, this ‘war game’ ended unexpectedly, as all the elite fighters—the boys—were killed and the two armies fought each other with devastating consequences.

As Yadin argues, the Old Testament scene reflects ritual practices from the region. In this context, it is well worth recalling the Roman legend of Horatii and Curiatii. It tells the story of the battle between Rome and Alba Longa during the reign of Tullus Hostillus (traditionally c. 672–642 BC). According to this legend, it was agreed that the settlement of the dispute

should depend on the outcome of combat between the two groups of brothers.¹⁰ The legend was revisited in the eighteenth century by painter Jacques Louis David—the famous *Oath of the Horatii* from 1784, now at the Louvre—in a way that aligned with and anticipated the ideas of the French Revolution.

Whether the term *HANEARIM* ('the boys') means 'elite fighters', or people lacking experience, as is the case of the contemporary Hebrew expression mentioned above, I argue that the term can be understood as a representation—textual, visual, and political—of an anonymous sacrifice that resonates with ancient mythical tropes.

Following the kidnapping and murder of the three young Israelis by Hamas, and the kidnapping and murder of the young Palestinian from the Shouàffat neighbourhood of East Jerusalem, a war broke out between Israel and Hamas in July 2014. These tragic events are portrayed in the series as a product of the devastating scenes that we, the viewers, are constantly witnessing through the cameras of Israeli television, the media, the surveillance cameras of the Shabak, stores or the street, police surveillance cameras, cell phones recordings, images on social media, and so on. Viewers are constantly confronted with this framed, broadcast—in short, represented—reality. In the series, fictional scenes and documented reality are used together so that viewers repeatedly observe a representation of a political reality, that is always unattainable, as it has already taken place and is replayed, fixed only on screens from which emanate an incessant profusion of images. A mythical, ghostly presence of 'The Boys' are at the heart of this reality, which only serves to revive sacrificial symbols. A spectacle that the audience witnesses from a distance, without having access to it. Reminiscent of the biblical scene from the Book of Samuel, 'The Boys', as a political entity, are the protagonists of the prelude: they do not avoid further sacrifices, but on the contrary, they are a sign, a reminder of the ever-greater sacrifice yet to come: war, destruction, and the prospect of an even more uncertain future.

3. A Biblical Gesture

In Jewish tradition, the word *HANEARIM* ('the boys') or more precisely here, *HANAAR* ('the boy') also resonates with other biblical narratives. The most famous among these, often considered as the founding myth of Israel, is 'The Binding of Isaac'.

In her analysis of *Our Boys*, Hayuta Deutz considers its reliance on several traditional Jewish sources and contends that this series is concerned with the Jewish identity question. More precisely, according to the references in her essay, the debate that the series has generated seems to revolve around the question of what it is like to be of Jewish culture and heritage. One might link this query to the figure of the 'exegetical person'—one whose destiny has been chronicled through history, and who turns to her historical sources for spiritual guidance, and, accordingly, engages in a critical approach. Deutz explores this theme by referring in particular to two mythological

layers within the series' narrative: the story of 'Cain and Abel' and 'The Binding of Isaac'.

In *Our Boys*, Yosef Haim, the uncle of Avishay and Yinon, involves his two nephews in the terrible murder of Mohammed Abu-Khdeir. Haim himself is a disappointment to his father, the head of a yeshiva, Rabbi Shalom Ben David, who does not consider his son a *Talmid chacham* (Sage student), suited for great studies. As Deutz suggests, in the series' final episode, Ben David's words echo the biblical telling of the story of Cain and Abel, when he confesses to his son that he was wrong to reject his offerings. He then asks his son to sacrifice himself for his nephews' future, reminiscent of 'The Binding of Isaac'. The father thus rejects his son, and this time for good. Yet the ultimate sacrifice suggested in the series, adds the author, is that of a young Palestinian. As Deutz points out, this biblical narrative also appears in the storyline of the Abu-Khdeir family. At first, the father, Hossein—who works with his two sons in building construction—is unjustly angry with his son, Mohammed, over a broken machine. By the time he realizes his mistake, it is too late to apologize; his son has already been taken from him. By dismantling the machine, 'the father changes the order of priorities'. As Deutz explains:

Hossain Abu-Khdeir accepts his responsibility. Unlike him, the head of the Jewish family, Rabbi Shalom Ben David, does not change his ways. He does not hear the voice of God's messenger who stops the gesture and prevents the ligature. He does not change his priorities. In his history, he will continue to reject his son and prefer his studious grandson.¹¹

These two myths, 'Cain and Abel' and 'The Binding of Isaac', the author adds, evoke deep-seated emotions such as anger, revenge, jealousy—intense feelings that create 'circles that widen to become a family, communities, tribes and a people'.¹²

Deutz prefers to emphasize the universality of these myths, arguing that these dramatic emotions are the heritage of all humanity. In addition, the author implies that these myths are also the 'dramatic material' of a contemporary socio-political reality.

'The Binding of Isaac' focuses on the nature and degree of Abraham's faith in his God. The significance of God's impossible demand to sacrifice his only son is to test how far the patriarch would go to fulfil the will of his God. How far would his faith go? For only an Abraham who did not doubt the justice and coherence of such a request could persevere in his mission to lead the people of Israel to their land of Kanaan. For some, this myth also signals the end of human sacrifice. According to Adina Yael Sternberg, the message conveyed by the myth of 'The Binding of Isaac' is that one must sacrifice to God in order to sanctify the place where God appeared.¹³ According to tradition, this is Mount Moriah in Jerusalem, a

sacred place for both Jewish and Muslim faithful. To this day, God's extreme request to Abraham to sacrifice his most beloved son, and the gesture that responds to this request, resonate strongly in contemporary Israeli cultural consciousness. In Israel's canonical literature and popular music, we hear repeatedly voices asking, without an answer: How many more sacrifices must be made? How long will we be tested? Have we not given enough?¹⁴ The presence of these myths in contemporary narratives, as in *Our Boys*, should not only be interpreted as a universal heritage. It must also be understood as the heritage of those who consider themselves heirs to this historical and cultural lineage. The fact that Deutz refers to these myths among other sources—her other references are post-biblical texts—shows that the 'mythical gesture' continues to be revisited, questioned, and explored in the region's narratives. These myths continue to shape the way in which creators and writers in general interpret the realities they experience and their representations.

'The boy', Isaac, becomes a symbol of a silent sacrifice: first abandoned by his father, he is then saved by God's messenger—a presence of a superior power, capable of changing destinies. In *Our Boys*, the grandfather and Rabbi Ben David tries to save the two nephews, Avishay and Yinon, in order to give them a chance of a future. But the series also features other authorities beyond the religious or parental ones, like that of the state. Its representative, Simon, the Shabak investigator, tries to help Avishay, the young man who seems to have more of a future. Likewise, psychologist Devora attempts to protect him from the authorities. The stammering and hesitant Avishay, the boy on whom the investigation focuses, becomes a symbol of the region's uncertain destiny.

4. Underrepresented Palestinian Youth

According to the series' creators, *Our Boys* aims to offer a candid view of Israeli and Palestinian society, with a particular focus on the dynamics within the groups that inhabit the region affected by the tragic youth murders. As mentioned earlier, the series' depictions have not been universally accepted and sometimes provoked strong reactions and even outrage from both sides of the conflict.

The same volume referenced earlier contains a text by Nasrin Alian, a lawyer specializing in the rights of Palestinians in Israel. In her chapter, entitled 'Strangers in the House: Youth under Oppression in East Jerusalem', Alian focuses on the living conditions of Mohammed Abu-Khdeir and other young Palestinians.¹⁵ By doing so, she also challenges the English title of the series, asking the following questions: 'Can we say that these are *our* boys? Or even speak of them in a single, homogeneous language?'¹⁶ This analysis once again points at the extent to which the English title, and more specifically the possessive *our* touches on the political power of representation. Alian's motivation for writing her chapter is to inform readers about

the socio-political life of young Palestinians in East Jerusalem, something which, according to her, the series fails to do.

From this perspective, Alian argues, the kidnapping and murder of the young Palestinian become symptomatic of the situation in which the majority of young people find themselves abandoned by the state, unequal, and forced to follow the educational ideology of the occupier, which imposes its law on them. But while the series is considered ‘left-wing’ on the Israeli-Jewish side, the author argues, on the Palestinian side it is seen as a work that exploits the tragedy—which serves as a marginal subplot—to showcase the human qualities of the Shabak investigators. Moreover, the series’ focus on the three Jewish murderers of the young Palestinian serves primarily to analyse the tensions that exist in Israeli-Jewish society. As Alian points out, the portrayal of young Abu-Khdeir’s life and death is ‘merely a background story to the main story, which focused on the young Jews’.¹⁷ These critical remarks by Alian seek to underline the harsh reality faced by young Palestinians in East Jerusalem and the contempt with which they are treated by the State of Israel. Furthermore, her comments highlight the fact that the show’s portrayal of young people only concerns Israeli-Jewish society, while young Palestinians are once again overlooked.

Both Deutz’s and Alian’s analyses of the series help to establish *Our Boys* as a representation of a socio-political reality, and of a profound division unfolding in real time in Israel, anchored in the image of young people. Regardless of whether we translate the title of the series as ‘The Boys’ or ‘Our Boys’, it points us towards a mythical and political entity reduced to an introductory spectacle—one that does not avoid a greater tragedy but, on the contrary, becomes its prelude. The Boys, as the ‘unknowns’, are the reiteration of a mythical, biblical gesture, the ‘revenants’ from other times. It is as though each mention of them is a sign that they will once again be forgotten.

I would like to conclude this chapter with the words of Tawfik Abu-Wael, director of *Unknowns* and co-director of *Our Boys*, by referring to an interview I conducted with the filmmaker in December 2023. In this interview, Tawfik expounds on his desire to tell a story about alienated young people in Israel. He discloses that he himself had experienced a very difficult childhood in Israel, the son of a large family of Palestinian origin, who had spent a lot of time on the streets and was familiar with violence and insecurity:

As a creator who managed to get out of it thanks to my mother’s insistence, I look everywhere for signs of humanity. I find them among young Palestinians as well as young Jews. I try to decipher evil, to deal with the relationship between the privileged and the less privileged, to dialogue with the victim-perpetrator narrative, because I don’t want to see myself as a victim, given my background. The objective is to comprehend the depravity of those who have fallen into the realities described.

The series *Our Boys* and *Unknowns* evidently embody this pursuit, as demonstrated by the creators' efforts to comprehend and portray the complexity of these young individuals, as well as their living conditions. Both series not only shed light on the notion of 'the boys' as a mythological political entity but also bear witness to the way in which these young people, increasingly forgotten and marginalized, are able to re-emerge on our screens with a revitalizing force.

Notes

- 1 *Our Boys* (Keshet International, HBO, 2019), S1E1.
- 2 While the series is based on real events, agent Simon and psychologist Devora are fictional characters.
- 3 Most of these 'boys' are over twenty years old. Some of them have been involved in violent incidents against Palestinian residents of Judea and Samaria.
- 4 Hayuta Deutz, 'The Bound and the Binding: Biblical and Talmudic Layers in *Our Boys*' ('העוקד והנעקד: שכבות מקראיות ותלמודיות ב"הנערים"'), in *The Boys: A Debate Following the TV Series*, ed. by Tami Riklis (Am Oved Publishers, 2022), pp. 227–36; Nasrin Alien, 'Strangers in the House: Youth Under Oppression in East Jerusalem' ('זרים בבית: נעורים בצל דיכוי בירושלים המזרחית'), in *The Boys: A Debate Following the TV Series*, pp. 91–103.
- 5 'Prime Minister Netanyahu Called on Viewers to Boycott the "Keshet 12" Channel', *Israel Hayom*, 30 August 2019 <www.israelhayom.co.il/article/687369> (Accessed 24 March 2024).
- 6 Nathan Hersh, 'Netanyahu's Call to Boycott HBO's *Our Boys* Is an Attempt to Silence Self-Reflection', *New York Times*, 5 September 2019 <www.nytimes.com/2019/09/05/opinion/netanyahu-boycott-hbos-our-boys.html?searchResultPosition=2> (accessed 24 March 2024).
- 7 Eva Illouz, 'The Boys in the Mirror: A Work of Art as a Narcissistic Injury' ('הנערים' (במראה: יצירת אמנות כפגיעה נרקסיסטית), in *The Boys: A Debate Following the TV Series*, pp. 33–39. My translation.
- 8 Shmuel II (II Samuel), Chapter 2, 14–17 <www.chabad.org/library/bible_cdo/aid/15862/jewish/Chapter-2.htm#v17> (accessed 1 March 2024).
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 'Horatii and Curiatii', *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 22 February 2012 <www.britannica.com/topic/Horatii-and-Curiatii> (accessed 24 March 2024).
- 11 Deutz, 'The Bound and the Binding'.
- 12 Ibid., p. 232.
- 13 Adina Yael Sternberg, 'The Message of the Binding of Isaac to Abraham and Future Generations' ('המסר של עקידת יצחק לאברהם ולדורות'), *Megadim*, 58 (2019), pp. 105–16.
- 14 Since the Hamas terrorist attack on Israel on 7 October 2023, Israeli radio has been broadcasting songs that are canonical in Israeli culture, such as 'We Don't Need' by singer Shlomo Artzi. This song, written by Avi Koren and composed by Shmuel Imberman, was written in memory of the author's friend who fell in the War of Attrition in 1970. Over time, this song has become a prayer song, adopted by certain currents of religious Judaism. The third stanza refers to the biblical myth of 'The Binding

of Isaac': 'We have already suffered the pain of a thousand scars, inside ourselves we have hidden a sigh. Our dry eyes have no more tears, tell us that we have stood the test'. These days, this song is regularly performed at The Hostage Square in Tel Aviv. Shlomo Artzi, 'We don't need' (אנחנו לא צריכים) (Isradisc, 1970).

15 Alian, 'Strangers in the House'.

16 Ibid. My translation.

17 Ibid., p. 92.

Chapter 4

Medieval Fantasy and Democracy: The Example of the French TV Series

Kaamelott

Sylvie Allouche

Introduction: Why Do Democracies Love Medieval Fantasy So Much?

Medieval fantasy, in whatever form, whether literature, cinema, or TV series, is very successful in the democratic countries of the West. However, as the historian Florian Besson explains:

While it should be clearly remembered that ‘the Middle Ages’ designate a long and pluralistic period marked by an extreme diversity of forms of political and social organizations, it remains that the power of the dominant ultimately rests on the use of violence, and this throughout the medieval period and in all societies. The pattern of the three orders, which structures feudal society in depth, does not say anything other than the confiscation of legitimate violence for the sole benefit of the aristocrats.¹

What, then, explains our fascination with this period, and the forms of power it brings to the fore? Should we see in it a regressive taste for primary forms of organization of power, where everything is simpler and more libidinal, because it suffices to submit, as in a pack, to the one who is most capable of exercising violence? As part of the education to democracy, should medievalist fantasy authors be expelled from democratic states, or at least censored, as Plato suggests about poets in the third book of the *Republic*:

We will beg Homer and the other poets not to be angry if we cancel those and all similar passages, not that they are not poetic and pleasing to most hearers, but because the more poetic they are the less are

they suited to the ears of boys and men who are destined to be free and to be more afraid of slavery than of death.²

But, as Besson also points out, many medievalist fictions are uncomfortable with the form of exercise of power they most often stage:

The hero is also often a chosen figure: a child announced by prophecy, heir to a line of kings, chosen by the gods. This election is of course to be understood literally: the hero does not impose himself on the throne, he is *elected* there—and this throne therefore takes on the appearance of a parliamentary seat.³

As Besson then underlines, ‘the democratization of political universes, well studied for the rewritings of the Arthurian myth, is in fact a trend that structures all medievalist fantasy’,⁴ referring in note to studies by Alice P. Kenney,⁵ Anne Besson,⁶ and William Blanc.⁷

So, Western democracies are fans of medieval fantasy stories that depict non-democratic power relations while timidly resorting to narrative elements aimed at softening their impact. How does the cult French medieval fantasy series *Kaamelott* fit into this landscape?

The French TV Series *Kaamelott*

The French comedy series *Kaamelott*, which depicts the life of the legendary King Arthur in the fifth century, is an interesting example in this regard. It is a six-season television series that aired from 2005 to 2009, complemented by a film released in 2021, which was meant to serve as the first instalment in a trilogy. The series, mainly the creation of Alexandre Astier, who also plays Arthur, has become a cult series in France. So much so that in 2017, the website Topito ranked it first in its ‘Top 7 best French series’ list.⁸ And in 2024, the series is still ranked first in the top hundred French series by Sens Critique⁹ and third in the top twenty-five European series.¹⁰ The fans of the series are numerous, as evidenced by the existence of the website <https://kaamelott.fandom.com>, and among them, the astronaut Thomas Pesquet helped to publicize the series by being granted the opportunity to watch the film aboard the International Space Station at the time of its release in July 2021.¹¹

The series has a specific format, called ‘Books’, that has greatly evolved over the seasons. Initially fitting into the very short time slot of an earlier comedy series called *Camera café*, Books One to Five include 249 vignette episodes of three minutes and thirty seconds or seven minutes, whereas Book Six includes nine episodes of forty minutes each. The first five seasons tell the story of the early years of King Arthur’s reign at the head of the Kingdom of Logres and, more broadly, the Kingdom of Brittany, which includes the British Isles and the western regions of France.¹² Then, tired of the task, he

relinquishes the crown and the quest for the Grail; the crown falls first to Léodagan, his father-in-law, and then to Karadoc, one of the Knights of the Round Table.

Book Six offers an extensive flashback that allows us to discover how Arthur became King of Brittany. The displacement is not only temporal but also spatial, since most of Book Six takes place in Rome, where Arthur is only a lowly soldier in the urban militia. But Arthur is in fact the bastard son of Uther Pendragon, the previous King of Brittany, from whom Arthur's existence was hidden. At the age of four, Arthur succeeded in removing the sword Excalibur from the rock in which it was planted, which marked him as the one chosen by the gods to reign over Brittany. For fear that his father would kill him, Arthur is secretly sent to Rome, where he is presented to the series' audience as a young man. While Arthur has no memory of his homeland, nor knowledge of his status, Sallustius, senator and adviser to the Emperor, having heard of the legend surrounding Arthur, makes a pact with him, hoping to accomplish through him a task that has always eluded the Roman Empire: to unite all the Breton clans and to place a Roman at their head. Arthur agrees to be a pawn in Sallustius' political machinations, but he has plans of his own. The scenes I discuss in the following sections take place at the end of Book Six, when Sallustius and Arthur's plans are about to come to fruition.

The Staging of a Democratic Consultation

In the eighth episode of the sixth season, Arthur explains to Sallustius that the Romans must leave Brittany and destroy all but one of their camps, since the Bretons are ready to fight them. Arthur will be the King of the Bretons, but Sallustius can say in Rome that he is the one who put a Roman at the head of the Breton clans. To convince Sallustius of his people's determination, Arthur asks a large crowd of Bretons gathered on the beach about their willingness to fight the Romans:

Who among you would favour a truce between the Roman and the Breton forces? (*No one raises their hand*). Okay. And who, on the contrary, thinks that we must continue the offensives until Rome capitulates and demobilizes its troops down to the last soldier? (*Everyone raises their hands*). (S6E8)¹³

Considering the seemingly unanimous desire of the Bretons to drive the Romans out of Brittany, Sallustius seems to have no choice but to accept Arthur's deal. If Arthur had simply presented Sallustius, the second most powerful man in Rome, with his willingness to give up his tutelage, he might not have been convincing. The approval by the Breton people of his martial speech gives Sallustius the impression that he has much more to lose by engaging in a war against the Bretons than by accepting the terms proposed

by Arthur, which allow him to achieve what really matters from his point of view: to give the Roman Senate the impression that he has finally succeeded, in the name of Rome, in solving a problem that no one has been able to solve for four hundred years before him.

Is Arthur's demonstration an exercise in proto-democracy? Arthur does indeed ask two questions to the people gathered on the beach, and they can theoretically answer differently than Arthur expects. However, Arthur's deception of Sallustius goes much further, as shown in the scenes that precede the exchange between Sallustius and Arthur.

Was It Really a Democratic Consultation?

In fact, a few minutes earlier in the same episode (S6E8), the audience sees Arthur training the assembled Bretons to raise their hands at any phrase that includes the word 'soldier'. While the audience has seen the scene, Sallustius, who is not on the beach when it happens, has not. Sallustius then has every reason to believe that when Arthur asks the Bretons if they are ready to fight the Romans to the end, the Bretons are indeed answering the questions put to them. This is all the more comical because the previous scenes have made it clear that, on the contrary, the Bretons are actually very afraid of the Roman army, as we will see later.

Arthur, therefore, does not only deceive Sallustius by pretending to be his pawn when in fact he is playing his own game, but also by staging the support of his people. The deception is not only comical, but also subtle, as Arthur does not lie about the people's support, he only lies about the fact that the Breton crowd is actually answering his questions and expressing their desire to fight the Roman army.

Then what do the people gathered on the beach represent? First of all, they make it possible to differentiate between direct democracy and indirect democracy. Considering the vast extent of the Kingdom of Brittany, it is clear that even if the population density in the fifth century had nothing to do with the current population of the same regions, the population of the Kingdom of Brittany counts at least a few million inhabitants, who are obviously not all on the beach. This becomes even more apparent from the earlier scenes of the episode, which take place only a few hours before.

In sequences that precede the scenes discussed above, it is clear that not all Bretons, or even a representative sample of them, have been brought together, although Arthur is pleasantly surprised at the number of people who have come together in such a short time. The whole Breton nation is obviously not gathered, and those present are not representatives of it either. This is then neither direct nor indirect democracy.

Another point to consider is that the assembled Bretons do not answer the questions put to them. They only react to the keyword 'soldier' when, for the proper exercise of democracy, the people should express their opinions. Does Arthur then disregard what will be considered later as the natural

rights of the people he claims to rule by engaging in a parody of democratic consultation in favour of his machinations aimed at becoming the King of Brittany?

A King Who Listens to His People?

The answer to this question must be nuanced. As he will show throughout the rest of his reign, Arthur is indeed concerned with listening to his people, even if it is not in the form of established democratic consultations. We also see this in Episode 8 of the sixth season, when, as soon as he arrives on the beach, a certain Pellinor asks to speak to him as an envoy of the assembled people:

Arthur: What then? [...] Go ahead, I'm listening.

Pellinor: There are a few of us in the group who feel a little uneasy and we would like to know your opinion. [...]

Arthur: My opinion on...

Pellinor: Yes, then, you appealed to everyone of goodwill, the majority of people who were contacted responded. However, there is a little rumour that is starting to circulate that you intend to eventually oppose us to the Roman army, and so uh, we are a little afraid of disappointing your expectations.

Arthur: No, but I don't have any particular expectations, I'm trying something, that's it, and you for your part must try to trust me.

Pellinor: I don't think there is a deficit of confidence, I would rather say that we would like to be sure that you are aware of the general intellectual level, particularly in the face of the Roman legions who had the privilege of receiving a solid education. (S6E8)¹⁴

Perceval, one of the main characters of the show and the adopted son of Pellinor, makes an interesting comment, as he considers the idea of presenting a collective opinion as something incongruous and inappropriate: 'It's the others, they sent him to say things for them, result: who passes for a jerk?' (S6E8).¹⁵

Moreover, as shown in the second sequence discussed above, Arthur takes into account the fear expressed by his people who are indeed afraid of confronting the Roman army. His plan is precisely to deceive Sallustius in order to avoid an armed conflict with it. We can assume that he knows that if it came to war, the Bretons would not be able to stand up to the Roman army, but he also wants the best for his people, and therefore, even if the Bretons were able to confront it, he wants to prevent them from dying in the war if it can be avoided by trickery.

A third element appears noteworthy, namely the fact that Pellinor underlines, still in a comical fashion, the fact that the Breton people did not have

the intellectual level to fight the Roman soldiers, who, unlike them, received some education. But, in so doing, he also implicitly points out that democratic activity requires a certain level of education.

Other Democratic Elements in *Kaamelott*

Even if Astier takes a certain amount of liberties with the figure of Arthur and his knights, especially in terms of the humorous tone he adopts, in the tradition of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975), and even if anything is possible in fiction, it would probably have gone too far to stage a king who renounces his throne in order to establish a democracy, especially since the series strives for a certain historical accuracy by developing the geopolitical aspects of the Kingdom of Brittany and its links with the declining Roman Empire. There are, however, several elements that suggest a democratic dimension in *Kaamelott*, beyond the parody of democracy staged in Book Six. Two sequences in particular caught my attention, as well as the attention of philosopher Thibaut de Saint Maurice, who comments on them in the chapter on *Kaamelott* of his second book on TV series. In a section precisely devoted to the question of whether the Arthurian monarchy according to *Kaamelott* can be considered as an 'ironic mirror of democracy', he underlines that once Lancelot has become master of Brittany (which happens in the ninth and last episode of the sixth season),¹⁶

Through the prism of Lancelot's critics, the monarchical regime set up by Arthur takes on the colours of democracy, while the regime wanted by Lancelot takes that of true absolute monarchy or even tyranny, i.e. the power of one only.¹⁷

In particular, de Saint Maurice highlights a sequence in Episode 3 of the sixth season where Arthur instructs Merlin to inform the Bretons that he will choose to support him in the government of the kingdom those among them who have distinguished themselves by great deeds, without consideration of their fortune or their power.¹⁸ Although we might question the link thus suggested between the capacity to accomplish heroic acts and the capacity to govern a kingdom well, the fact remains that Arthur proposes in doing so to implement a crucial principle of the democratic ideal: his government will be constituted on a meritocratic basis.

In another scene, once members of the government are identified, Arthur organizes their work around the very symbolic Round Table. As the King himself explains:

I went to look for knights throughout the kingdom, in Caledonia, Carmelia, Gaunes, Vannes, Wales, I had a large table built for the knights to sit together, I wanted it round, so that none of them end up sitting in an angle, or at the end of the table. (S5E49).¹⁹

As de Saint Maurice comments:

In other words, despite the persistent inequalities in the kingdom of *Kaamelott* (between the ‘sheep’ and the lords, the servants and the masters, the men and the women), one can see in Arthur the bearer of a progressive political ideal which is essentially translated by the establishment of a primitive form of democracy through the institution of the Round Table.²⁰

But one can also highlight another element that contributes to the democratic message of *Kaamelott*, when the series raises the question of representativeness in Episode 53 of Book Two. Since the number of places at the Round Table is in fact limited to eight, there indeed appears the need to alternate the knights who occupy the seats. But on what basis should the alternation at the Round Table be organized? Interestingly, Lord Calogrenant, who has apparently integrated the embryonic democratic principles underlying the Arthurian conception of power, puts forward an argument based on representativeness to justify his claim for a permanent seat at the Round Table, which Arthur immediately generalizes, as pointed out by Justine Breton in her analysis of the scene:

Lord Calogrenant, a character notably inherited from the novels of Chrétien de Troyes (1160–1176), specifies in *Kaamelott*: ‘Wait, as king of Caledonia, I cannot be fired: I represent a majority!’ Arthur completes: ‘Okay, so the same for Léodagan, king of Carmelide, and Galessin, duke of Orcania.’²¹

Thus, several elements distilled throughout the series give a democratic colour to Arthur’s exercise of power: attention paid to the demands of the people, contrast with Lancelot’s tyrannical regime, Arthur’s wish to establish his government on a meritocratic basis, and the consideration of the representativeness of the Knights of the Round Table.

The Call of Democracy in Medieval Fantasy

As noted above, according to Besson, this more or less implicit valuation of democracy in medieval fantasy fiction is not unique to *Kaamelott*. Drawing on a variety of examples, Besson demonstrates that ‘the vast majority of heroes of medievalist fantasy are characterized by their refusal of power’.²² Yet *Kaamelott* plays a central role in his argument (as evidenced by the title of Besson’s article which quotes Arthur’s refrain once he has laid down his crown in the series: ‘Stop calling me sire!!!’²³). Besson indeed explains:

Because, for our democratic societies, which are built around the idea of equality for all, domination, whatever its basis, is a hindrance.

Democracy is basically, as Rousseau shows, the dream of a society in which no power is exercised by anyone over anyone, of an acephalous society, where civil society is the sole depositary of power, and where relations of domination fade behind the harmony of wills—which moreover raises the question of the status and role of the ‘leader’ in a democratic regime. Hence the success of the Round Table motif, which refers to the dreamed image of a perfectly distributed power.²⁴

Besson then mentions another aspect of Arthur’s exercise of power in *Kaamelott*, to which de Saint Maurice also quickly alludes. In fact, this is a recurring motif in *Kaamelott*, which, as Besson emphasizes, can also be found in other fantasy stories:

Therefore, it is logical to note that the refusal of power goes with the refusal of slavery: Arthur secretly frees the slaves of Kaamelott; Richard, Matrim Cauthon, Garion, Pug, all face empires based on slavery, and will shatter them from within, thereby proving the ideological superiority of democratic-egalitarian models.²⁵

If Besson quotes Rousseau, de Saint Maurice goes further back in time, and to support the idea that Arthur’s approach to organizing power is a step toward democratization, he suggests reading Arthur’s initiatives in the light of Aristotle’s *Politics*—specifically the latter’s reflection on the political role to be given to the mass of the citizens:

for them not to participate is an alarming situation, for when there are a number of persons without political honours and in poverty, the city then is bound to be full of enemies. It remains therefore for them to share the deliberative and judicial functions. [...] For all when assembled together have sufficient discernment, and by mingling with the better class are of benefit to the state.²⁶

The explicit possibility of establishing a democracy is briefly mentioned in the internationally acclaimed US series *Game of Thrones*, when in the last episode the character named Sam suggests using a democratic process to choose the leader of Westeros (S8E6). The vignette quality of the scene and its comic tone, which is unusual for *Game of Thrones*, made me think of *Kaamelott*, and I am not the only one. For example, Martin Ulrich von Müller, who uploaded the French version of the passage to YouTube, commented as follows: ‘Admit that this scene from *Game of Thrones* could have been a scene from *Kaamelott*,’²⁷ while another commentator added: ‘I thought about it the first time I saw this scene, perfect!’²⁸ While I do not remember such an explicit scene in *Kaamelott* itself, the connection seems all the more legitimate, beyond the form, as it echoes *Kaamelott*’s omnipresent underlying questioning

of the possibility of democracy, which is precisely what I have tried to demonstrate in this chapter.

Conclusion

There is something paradoxical about the widespread taste of citizens of democracies for works of medieval fantasy in which the heroes are princes and princesses, kings and queens, who never owe their positions to democratic elections, but to their birth, their divine election or their violence. What attitude should we adopt towards these works? Should fantasy authors be thrown out of the democratic city? Obviously, democrats would find it difficult to defend such a position, despite the embarrassment of loving the many works of art that seem to promote undemocratic values. They will generally prefer to adopt a liberal position, according to which artists are free to produce works that feature undemocratic values, considering that this liberty is precisely the privilege of art, especially in democratic settings. Should the democrat then, in order to avoid resorting to blacklisting or censorship, be content to encourage the reading and viewing of works that stage and value democracy?

The analysis I propose of *Kaamelott's* relationship to democracy allows us to consider a third way, namely to always regard these works as possible sources of reflection on democracy (even when they do not stage democracy, or when they criticize, laugh at, or parody it), in so far as we grant 'two forms of trust: trust in the competence of the viewer and trust in the intelligence of the work as such', as philosopher Sandra Laugier suggests in her book on television philosophy.²⁹ It is true, however, that it is all the easier if, as in *Kaamelott's* case, the work contains positive elements, and not only contrasting ones, which make it possible to defend the values of democracy. Even though, as de Saint Maurice points out, it is not certain that *Kaamelott's* overall lesson is indeed democratic.

Notes

- 1 'S'il faut clairement rappeler que « le Moyen Âge » désigne une période longue et plurielle marquée par une extrême diversité des formes d'organisation politique et sociale, reste que le pouvoir des dominants y repose *in fine* sur l'usage de la violence, et ce durant toute la période médiévale et dans la totalité des sociétés. Le schéma des trois ordres, qui structure en profondeur la société féodale, ne dit pas autre chose que la confiscation de la violence légitime au seul profit des aristocrates.' Florian Besson, '« Arrêtez de m'appeler sire !!! ». Les enjeux du refus du pouvoir à travers la fantasy médiévaliste', *L'Atelier du Centre de recherches historiques*, 19 (2018), §2, doi: 10.4000/acr.8200. All translations from French are by the author, unless otherwise noted.
- 2 Plato, 'Republic', in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, trans. by Paul Shorey (Harvard University Press, 1969), 387b.
- 3 'Le héros est d'ailleurs souvent une figure d'élu : enfant annoncé par la prophétie, héritier d'une lignée des rois, choisi par les dieux. Cette élection est bien sûr à entendre

- au sens propre: le héros ne s'impose pas sur le trône, il y est élu – et ce trône revêt donc des allures de siège parlementaire.' Besson, '« Arrêtez de m'appeler sire !!! »', §3.
- 4 'La démocratisation des univers politiques, bien étudiée pour les réécritures du mythe arthurien, est en fait une tendance qui structure toute la *fantasy* médiévaliste.' Besson, '« Arrêtez de m'appeler sire !!! »', §3.
- 5 Alice P. Kenney, 'Yankees in Camelot: The Democratization of Chivalry in James Russell Lowell, Mark Twain, and Edwin Arlington Robinson', *Studies in Medievalism*, 1.2 (1982), pp. 73–78.
- 6 *Arthur au miroir du temps*, ed. by Anne Besson (Terre de Brumes, 2007).
- 7 William Blanc, *Le roi Arthur, un mythe contemporain* (Libertalia, 2016).
- 8 'Top 7 des meilleures séries françaises', *Topito*, 20 March 2017 <www.topito.com/video/top-meilleures-series-francaises> (accessed 8 August 2024).
- 9 'Top 100 des meilleures séries françaises', *Sens Critique*, n.d. <www.senscritique.com/top/resultats/les_meilleures_series_francaises/210486> (accessed 8 August 2024).
- 10 'Top 25 des meilleures séries européennes', *Sens Critique*, n.d. <www.senscritique.com/top/resultats/les_meilleures_series_europeennes/825701> (accessed 8 August 2024).
- 11 Thomas Pesquet, 'La patience est un plat qui finit toujours par payer : Kaamelott premier volet a fait le trajet jusqu'à l'ISS !' Twitter (X), 22 July 2021 <https://twitter.com/Thom_astro/status/1418279426219937793> (accessed 8 August 2024).
- 12 'Royaume de Kaamelott', *Kaamelott Fandom*, n.d. <https://kaamelott.fandom.com/fr/wiki/Royaume_de_Kaamelott> (accessed 8 August 2024).
- 13 'Qui parmi vous serait favorable à une trêve entre les forces romaines et bretonnes ? (*Personne ne lève la main*) D'accord. Et qui, au contraire, pense qu'il faut continuer les offensives jusqu'à ce que Rome capitule et démobilise ses troupes jusqu'au dernier soldat ? (*Tout le monde lève la main*).'
- 14 'Arthur : Quoi donc ? [...] Allez-y, j'veus écoute.
 Pellinor : On est quelques-uns dans le groupe à ressentir comme un petit malaise et on aimerait bien connaître votre opinion. [...]
 Arthur : Mon opinion sur...
 Pellinor : Oui, alors, vous avez fait appel à toutes les bonnes volontés, la majorité des personnes qui ont été sollicitées ont répondu présent. Seulement voilà, il y a une petite rumeur qui commence à courir comme quoi vous auriez l'intention d'éventuellement nous opposer à l'armée romaine, et alors là euh, on a un peu peur de décevoir vos attentes.
 Arthur : non, mais j'ai pas d'attentes particulières, je tente quelque chose, voilà, et vous de votre côté il faut essayer de me faire confiance.
 Pellinor : Je crois pas qu'il y ait un déficit de confiance, je dirais plutôt qu'on voudrait être sûr que vous êtes conscient du niveau intellectuel général, notamment face aux légions romaines qui ont eu le privilège de recevoir une éducation solide.'
- 15 'C'est les autres, ils l'ont envoyé dire des trucs à leur place, résultat : qui est-ce qui passe pour un con ?'
- 16 'miroir ironique de la démocratie'. Thibaut de Saint Maurice, *Philosophie en séries*, saison 2 (Paris, Ellipses, 2010), p. 23.
- 17 'Au prisme des critiques de Lancelot, le régime monarchique mis en place par Arthur prend des couleurs de démocratie, tandis que le régime voulu par Lancelot prend celle de la véritable monarchie absolue voire de la tyrannie, c'est-à-dire du pouvoir d'un seul.' Ibid.
- 18 Ibid., p. 24.

- 19 'J'ai été chercher des chevaliers dans tout le royaume, en Calédonie, en Carmélie, à Gaunes, à Vannes, au Pays de Galles, j'ai fait construire une grande table pour que les chevaliers s'assoient, ensemble, je l'ai voulue ronde, pour qu'aucun d'entre eux ne se retrouve assis dans un angle, ou en bout de table'.
- 20 'Autrement dit, malgré les inégalités persistantes dans le royaume de Kaamelott (entre les « pécores » et les seigneurs, les servantes et les maîtres, les hommes et les femmes), on peut voir en Arthur le porteur d'un idéal politique progressiste qui se traduit essentiellement par la mise en place d'une forme primitive de démocratie à travers l'institution de la Table ronde.' de Saint Maurice, *Philosophie en séries*, p. 25.
- 21 'Le seigneur Calogrenant, personnage notamment hérité des romans de Chrétien de Troyes (1160–1176), précise dans *Kaamelott* : « Attendez, en tant que roi de Calédonie, je peux pas être viré : je représente une majorité ! » Arthur complète : « D'accord, donc pareil pour Léodagan, roi de Carmélide, et Galessin, duc d'Orcanie. » Justine Breton, 'Anachronisme, égalité et domination : représenter le roi Arthur autour de la Table ronde', *L'Atelier du Centre de recherches historiques* 19 (2018), §12, doi: <https://doi.org/10.4000/acr.8156>.
- 22 'la grande majorité des héros de la *fantasy* médiévaliste se caractérisent par leur refus du pouvoir'. Besson, « Arrêtez de m'appeler sire !!! », abstract.
- 23 Ibid., title.
- 24 'Car, pour nos sociétés démocratiques, qui sont articulées autour de l'idée de l'égalité de tous, la domination, quel que soit son fondement, gêne. La démocratie est au fond, comme le montre Rousseau, le rêve d'une société dans laquelle aucun pouvoir ne serait exercé par personne sur personne, d'une société acéphale, où la société civile serait le seul dépositaire du pouvoir, et où les rapports de domination s'effacent derrière l'harmonie des volontés – ce qui pose d'ailleurs la question du statut et du rôle du « chef » dans un régime démocratique. D'où le succès du motif de la Table Ronde, qui renvoie à l'image rêvée d'un pouvoir parfaitement distribué.' Ibid., §12.
- 25 'Dès lors, il est logique de constater que le refus du pouvoir va avec le refus de l'esclavage : Arthur fait secrètement affranchir les esclaves de Kaamelott ; Richard, Matrim Cauthon, Garion, Pug, tous affrontent des empires qui reposent sur l'esclavage, et vont les faire éclater de l'intérieur, prouvant ainsi par-là la supériorité idéologique des modèles démocratico-égalitaires.' Ibid.
- 26 Aristotle, 'Politics', in *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, trans. by H. Rackham (Harvard University Press, 1944), 1281b.
- 27 'Avouez que cette scène de Game of Thrones aurait carrément pu être une scène de Kaamelott.' 'Game of Kaamelott : La Démocratie', *You Tube*, 10 July 2019 <www.youtube.com/watch?v=u4MsmasvMOI> (accessed 8 August 2024).
- 28 'J'y ai pensé la première fois que j'ai vu cette scène, parfait !' Ibid.
- 29 Sandra Laugier, *TV-Philosophy: How TV Series Change Our Thinking*, trans. by Daniela Ginsburg (University of Exeter Press, 2023), p. 17.

Chapter 5

The Series *The Days* as a Global Resource for Political Education and Democratic Conversation about Nuclear Energy Governance

Adrienne Sala

Introduction

Following the 2019 series *Chernobyl*, the mini-series *The Days*, released on Netflix in June 2023, offers a distinct exploration of a significant historical event. Spanning eight episodes, *The Days* provides a gripping portrayal of the intense seven days at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant in the wake of the Great East Japan earthquake and tsunami that struck the country on 11 March 2011. The series was developed, written, and produced by Jun Masumoto, with direction by Masaki Nishiura and Hideo Nakata. Masumoto and Nishiura had collaborated in the past, as both had been involved in the production of *Code Blue* (2018), a film centred around natural disasters and crisis management. For his part, Nakata, famous for directing the suspenseful Japanese horror TV film series *Ringu*, brought his expertise to *The Days*, creating the high level of psychological tension within the narrative.

While *The Days* seemingly addresses a similar subject as *Chernobyl*—a nuclear disaster—it forges its own path by exploring the intricacies of three different perspectives: that of Japanese government officials, the representatives of the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), and the workers at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant. The series intricately portrays the interplay—or at times, the critical lack thereof—among these key actors, thus shedding light on the flaws in the governance of Japan's nuclear energy sector. The series is grounded in verifiable facts, publicly available on both Japanese and international social media, but it goes beyond public knowledge by revealing the inner workings of the Japanese administration. *The Days* offers insights into the prime minister's cabinet, the approach toward crisis management of the government, and also, in sharp contrast, depicts the prompt

and critical response of the power plant workers to the disaster. In an interview, Jun Masumoto revealed that his impetus for creating *The Days* was his concern that the Fukushima nuclear accident was fading from the collective memory of the Japanese public.¹ Despite the severity of the disaster, he highlighted the existence of a noticeable gap in both the older and younger generations' understanding of nuclear energy, which is evident from the public's muted response to the Japanese government's decision to extend the lifespan of nuclear reactors beyond the current sixty-year limit.² Within this context, Masumoto's goal was to heighten awareness, among the public, of their duty to monitor the actions of the government and TEPCO, to ensure that these bodies do not place their interests above public safety and the common good.

The Days underscores the growing importance of TV series in social science analysis and how they can shape the construction and perception of social realities, becoming a resource for political education and democratic discourse.³ Scholars point out that TV series serve as 'new materials', providing researchers with pedagogical tools to visually summarize complex findings more effectively than would be possible by verbal explanation alone.⁴ Indeed, much like *Chernobyl*, by addressing a nuclear disaster *The Days* grants access to political practices and scenes from higher administration typically hidden from view. The series provides viewers with the analytical tools necessary to critically assess the government's crisis management, as well as the absence of effective institutional coordination and the unheeded approaches to risk prevention. This enables viewers to form their own informed perspectives on these crucial matters. *The Days* is also a call for accountability at all levels of governance—from government officials and institutions to citizens themselves. Thus, *The Days* transcends national boundaries to engage with a global issue that has impacted nuclear policy and energy governance across numerous countries.

To accomplish the task of bringing the disaster to life, the TV series' creators drew from three principal sources: the official report by the Fukushima Nuclear Accident Independent Investigation Commission (NAIIC), mandated by the National Diet;⁵ *On the Brink: The Inside Story of Fukushima Daiichi*, a bestselling book by journalist Ryūshō Kadota featuring interviews with over ninety individuals involved in the disaster response;⁶ and the *Anatomy of the Yoshida Testimony*, which provides a first-hand account from Masao Yoshida, the manager of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant.⁷ Kadota's book also inspired the film *Fukushima 50*, directed by Setsurō Wakamatsu and released in March 2020. While that film dramatized the workers' heroism—often described as a 'suicide mission' in which sixty-nine workers stayed behind after 750 people were evacuated, later collectively known as the 'Fukushima 50' in media reports,⁸—*The Days* reveals the initial deficiencies in risk prevention and crisis management within administrative and organizational frameworks that contributed to the disaster, juxtaposed with the commendable coordination at the grassroot level of the nuclear plant.

Thus, the series combines meticulous research with compelling storytelling to spotlight three principal themes: the shortcomings in risk prevention and

crisis management, the consequences of this on workers' individual agency and organizational structures and, finally, the exploration of accountability.

Lack of Risk Prevention and Coordination in Early Crisis Management

The Days unveils the consequences of inadequate risk prevention and coordination, emphasizing how regulatory capture of the nuclear industry hampered the timely flow of information among all levels of governance, from the prime minister to the general public. The series portrays the plant workers' collective response in stark contrast, exemplifying a model of effective governance characterized by trust and unity amidst broader systemic challenges.

Lack of Knowledge about the Nuclear Emergency Procedure

The first episode begins with the routine operation of Unit 1 at Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, abruptly interrupted by the activation of the emergency shutdown system (Safety Control Rod Axe Man—SCRAM), in response to the massive 9.0 magnitude earthquake that struck off the Pacific coast of Japan's north-eastern region on 11 March 2011 at 14:46. The subsequent seismic aftershocks and tsunami exacerbate the crisis, leading to a complete blackout at the nuclear power plant, as well as severe structural damage and formidable operational difficulties. The critical issue becomes the effective cooling of the reactors, made difficult by the lack of power and damaged infrastructure. In contrast to the incidents at Chernobyl and Three Mile Island, where power and control instruments remained operational, Fukushima confronted an unprecedented predicament with its control room darkened and the status of the reactor cooling systems unknown.

The circumstances depicted in the first episode highlight a significant deficiency in the understanding of nuclear emergency protocols among TEPCO executives and Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry (METI) officials. It becomes evident that they are not adequately versed with the emergency procedures mandated by the 1999 *Act on Special Measures Concerning Nuclear Emergency Preparedness*, a law designed to protect citizens' lives, health, and property in the event of a nuclear disaster.⁹ Article 15 of this law outlines the protocol for declaring and managing a nuclear emergency. In the event of a nuclear emergency, it is imperative that the responsible minister immediately relay the situation to the prime minister, suggesting a public announcement and recommending appropriate actions. The prime minister is then obligated to swiftly make a nuclear emergency known to the public, detailing the affected zones, summarizing the emergency's nature, and communicating vital information to the populace and relevant organizations. Furthermore, the prime minister is empowered to direct local mayors and prefectural governors to enact evacuation or shelter-in-place orders among

other emergency responses. Central to Article 15 is the prime minister's duty to proclaim a nuclear emergency and to expeditiously establish the Nuclear Emergency Response Headquarters, tasked with issuing coordinated instructions to nuclear operators, governmental bodies, and local authorities, and to set up a Joint Council for Nuclear Emergency Response.

Following the sudden declaration of a state of emergency, TEPCO's Vice-President, Mr Murakami (played by Ken Mitsuishi), finds it imperative to immediately contact Mr Yoshida (played by Koji Yakusho), the plant director at Fukushima:

Murakami: Are you the one who issued an Article 15 alert to the government without consulting headquarters first? This must be a serious emergency.

Yoshida: Indeed, it is an emergency. We lack any information on the reactor cooling systems' status because the control room is without power.

Murakami: What are you doing now?

Yoshida: I don't know what to do. None of our training scenarios covered this situation. We will continue reviewing the emergency manual to devise an urgent response plan and will keep you updated. (S1E1)

This scene poignantly reveals the disarray among the workers, TEPCO executives, and government officials. During his first press conference, Prime Minister Azuma (the fictional character based on Prime Minister Naoto Kan and portrayed by Fumiyo Kohinata) is depicted giving unfounded public reassurances, which are promptly contradicted by METI minister Ushiroya (played by Ogi Shigemitsu), who interrupts to inform him that a state of emergency has been declared. Ironically, despite the legal requirement for the prime minister to declare such an emergency, he is the last to be informed, underscoring the flawed top-down communication within the crisis management system.

A key distinction is generally recognized between the initiating events of the Fukushima Daiichi accident and those at Chernobyl and Three Mile Island: while the latter were primarily due to human error, the crisis at Fukushima was triggered by a natural disaster. However, *The Days* emphasizes that the disaster at Fukushima was exacerbated by human factors, aligning with the findings of the NAIIC report, which criticizes the lack of pre-emptive measures and slow response. The Commission clearly attributes the escalating crisis to the failure of the crisis management system operated by the prime minister's Cabinet Office, regulatory bodies, and other agencies.¹⁰ Their unfamiliarity with the law, especially the mandated nuclear emergency protocols, exposes a dual issue: a sense of complacency among proponents of nuclear energy about its safety and reliability, coupled with a notable deficiency in regulatory oversight. This overconfidence was paired with a

critical gap in risk awareness, despite the law being a response to the 1999 Tokaimura nuclear accident in Ibaraki Prefecture, which resulted in two deaths due to radiation exposure.¹¹

In Episode 4, director Nakata, famed for *Ringu*, intensifies the level of psychological drama by portraying the traumatic effects of radiation on a worker. This episode provides a retrospective view of the 1999 nuclear accident from the standpoint of a member of the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency (NISA), who is deeply disturbed by the radiation risks posed by an uncontrolled Fukushima Unit 1. A poignant scene unfolds when a young employee comments on the severe aftermath of the 1999 incident:

Employee: I heard the worker's condition was so severe that the person who drafted the reports developed Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

The NISA deputy manager: I am the one who wrote that report. Please inform the chairman of the radiation risks if Unit 1 remains uncontrolled. The prime minister must be made aware. (S1E4)

In the following scene, the character Wakiya Shinsuke, the NISA chairman (played by Mitsuru Fukikoshi), is shown hesitating to relay critical data to the prime minister and is depicted as inept, lacking nuclear energy and risk prevention expertise. His educational background in economics from the University of Tokyo and his prior METI role, as revealed in Episode 3, are used to dramatize NISA's problematic lack of autonomy, given its ties to METI, a pro-nuclear entity. The NAIIC report supports the series' portrayal, exposing how conflicts of interest weakened NISA's regulatory effectiveness, which may have delayed disaster response. Wakiya's depiction in the series demonstrates a severe deficiency in expertise at NISA, leading to distrust among the prime minister and other key actors. His inability to relay crucial information about radiation risk to the prime minister is representative of the general lack of responsibility and underscores the broader failure within the NISA organization.

Limits of Nuclear Energy Governance

In line with the findings of the NAIIC report, *The Days* highlights the specific mindset that explains the Japanese nuclear industry's failure to grasp crucial lessons from past disasters and the consequences of its own frequent opposition to regulation. The strong belief that nuclear energy was anchored in progress and technological advancement contributed substantially to an attitude that downplayed risk perception among both decision-makers and the broader public. This mindset is rooted in Japan's post-1970s oil crisis commitment to nuclear power—a commitment very avidly supported by the government and by corporate entities. The zealous

promotion of nuclear energy was delegated to a bureaucracy charged with the conflicting tasks of both promoting and regulating nuclear power. The Japanese government has often been portrayed as closely aligned with both political power and business interests, resulting in limited effectiveness in enforcing laws and regulations.¹² The parliamentary-initiated independent commission brought to the fore the issue of regulatory capture, exposing its detrimental impact on the prompt and widespread dissemination of information.

The Days clearly delineates the governmental challenges in acquiring precise data, highlighting NISA's lack of expertise and the poor coordination among stakeholders such as the Fukushima Daiichi plant operators, TEPCO headquarters, and the Nuclear Safety Commission (NSC). This lack of coordination led to inconsistent statements, undermining public communication transparency. The governmental disarray is further highlighted in a scene in Episode 2, which portrays Chief Cabinet Secretary Sano (played by Inoue Hajime) at a press conference stating: 'Currently, we have no reports of radiation leaks or an imminent threat thereof. No special measures are required; please remain indoors or at your current locations.'

This prompts a journalist to question the contradiction of declaring an emergency while advising against evacuation, to which another suggests uncertainty about the situation's full scope as a reason:

The first journalist: 'They're declaring an emergency but telling people not to evacuate?'

The second journalist: 'Perhaps they don't know the full extent of the situation, so they are declaring an emergency just in case.'
(S1E2)

Episode 2 highlights the officials' struggle to determine an evacuation zone, a crucial measure prescribed by the *Act on Special Measures Concerning Nuclear Emergency Preparedness* for immediate action in such crises. A pivotal scene shows the prime minister and METI minister wrestling with the decision, hindered by Wakiya's inability to determine the evacuation parameters. This dilemma is exacerbated by Minegashi from the NSC (played by Sakō Yoshi), who deflects responsibility back to NISA, under Wakiya's leadership. Compounding the confusion, Minegashi discloses a local government's independent decision to establish a two-kilometre evacuation radius, contrary to the typical three-kilometre standard. In the ensuing press conference, chief cabinet secretary Sano asserts a state-enforced evacuation within a three-kilometre radius of Fukushima Daiichi.

Addressing earlier communications, a journalist queries: 'Two hours ago, you stated no special measures were needed and instructed people to stay indoors. Has there been an incident or a radiation leak?'

Sano: We aim to take all necessary precautions. (S1E2).

The bureaucratic system's inadequacy and the deficit of experts severely hindered the executive's ability to make well-informed decisions and uphold transparency and accountability. Frustrated by this information void and the unfolding situation, the prime minister chooses to visit the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant.

The prime minister: The Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency and TEPCO are both useless. Even the people in our own office can't provide clear answers.

Sano: You should reconsider returning to the crisis management headquarters.

The prime minister: I am going to Fukushima. (S1E3)

The prime minister's decision to visit the plant underscores his information deficit which reflects further inefficiencies in the crisis management system, as it disrupts the established command structure. The NAIC report and Kadota's book indicate that the prime minister's unplanned visit to the Fukushima plant disrupted the command hierarchy, showing confusion and aggravating already existing communication breakdowns, thereby diminishing mutual trust among involved parties.

Naoto Kan (2010–2011), who served as prime minister during the disaster, later conceded that despite his efforts to inform the public, the scarcity of confirmed facts limited the extent of the information he was able to provide. In his testimony before the parliamentary panel investigating the disaster, he expressed his sense of powerlessness during the disaster, citing the scant information received from NISA and TEPCO. He acknowledged his own fears during the crisis and criticized the actions of the bureaucracy and of TEPCO, whose focus on self-preservation ultimately overshadowed public safety. Highlighting the potential magnitude of the crisis, Kan informed the panel of a dire contingency plan for the possible evacuation of 30 million people from Tokyo, an event that could have precipitated national collapse. This point is clearly illustrated in Episode 7, when the series explores the aftermath of the disaster, highlighting the monumental challenge of sustaining government operations and reconstructing the nation amidst widespread radioactive contamination. The inefficiency of the administration is contrasted with the dedication of the plant workers.

Fukushima Daiichi Workers' Coordination in the Face of Tremendous Risk and Uncertainty

The pivotal role of the workers, particularly the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant manager Masao Yoshida, is vividly captured, drawing upon insights from Ryūshō Kadota's book and Yoshida's testimony. *The Days* contrasts this with the shortcomings of the administration, focusing on the undue burden shouldered by Yoshida and his team amidst a crisis exacerbated by the government's inadequate response.

After conducting extensive interviews with Yoshida and other plant workers, Kadota devoted the final chapter of his book to the plant manager, focusing on his return home on 17 March 2011. Following Yoshida's passing from cancer on 9 July 2013, Kadota penned a tribute article honouring him as the individual who averted a nuclear catastrophe potentially surpassing Chernobyl in severity by an order of magnitude.¹³ The series *The Days*, based on Kadota's book, similarly describes the heroism of Yoshida and his team as they struggled to prevent catastrophe, repeatedly entering reactor buildings contaminated by high levels of radioactivity. It shows that Yoshida quickly called on the Self-Defence Forces (SDF) to send fire engines and also had workers set up a network of lines to pump seawater into the reactor. Episodes 2 to 7 accentuate the disparity between the crisis management team at the Fukushima Daiichi, who are actively engaged in emergency procedures, and the governmental decision-makers, who are portrayed as distant and disconnected. These episodes depict Yoshida taking charge of the critical emergency venting of Unit 1 to avert a potential explosion, while government officials struggle to comprehend the gravity of the situation unfolding on the ground.

The series depicts a scene from an interview with Yoshida that Kadota recounts in his book, in which workers donned fire suits and oxygen masks with air tanks on their backs to open the vents and cool the overheated reactor, braving potentially lethal conditions.¹⁴ Director Masumoto captures the workers' sentiments from the book, with one worker recalling, 'I can face death as long as Mr. Yoshida is with us,' and another affirming, 'If anyone else had been in charge, I doubt we could have contained the disaster.'¹⁵ This profound trust and commitment are expressly brought to life by the portrayal of the main workers' characters.

Yoshida: I won't be getting out of here alive. I am the one who has pushed everyone's limits again and again; I've put them all in danger. I've made up my mind that if any of our staff died because of those orders, I would not have the right to survive. It's been on my mind since day one of the accident. (S1E6).

The episode underscores the great responsibility that Yoshida assumed over his workers. The workers' effective coordination under Yoshida's leadership is starkly juxtaposed with the disarray among the prime minister's Cabinet Office, METI, NISA, and TEPCO. In Episode 6, Yoshida's decision to retain only a core team at the plant while allowing other employees to evacuate is misunderstood by the prime minister, who protests, 'You can't leave, you have to fix it,' mistakenly believing that Yoshida intends to abandon the facility. This crucial scene from the series brings to light central themes from Japanese labour-management studies, particularly how loyalty and duty can merge with corporate values, often at the expense of the employer's obligation to ensure worker safety. In the final episode, Yoshida describes the gruelling

daily conditions faced by the power plant workers who continued their tasks for months without sufficient rest, adversely affecting their physical and mental health.

By 18 March, a total of over twenty workers had been injured at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant.¹⁶ Two workers, Kazuhiko Kokubo (twenty-four years old) and Yoshiki Terashima (twenty-one years old), lost their lives. They were killed by the tsunami while conducting emergency repairs immediately after the earthquake.¹⁷ Their bodies were discovered on 30 March 2011. The series depicts, across several episodes, the distress and anxiety of Terashima's parents as they await news of their son, who had been missing from the nuclear plant since the first day of the disaster. It illustrates the spread of misinformation on social media, falsely alleging that Terashima abandoned his post after committing errors that exacerbated the damage. The series draws a stark contrast between rampant rumours on social media and the distress of parents desperate for reliable information, emphasizing the government's failure to communicate effectively and the dire consequences of misinformation. Through its narrative, *The Days* probes the structural shortcomings that led to the broader deficiency in communication, referencing the NAIIC report which ascribes the failure to a bureaucratic culture that favoured organizational self-preservation over public safety.

Public Interest and Organizational Dysfunction: A Critical Examination

Japanese TV series frequently explore the public-private dichotomy, echoing Harold Lasswell's perspective that the emphasis on the general interest is often a façade to shield the private interests of political leaders from scrutiny.¹⁸ These narratives offer a lens through which to assess an individual's capacity for autonomous action within organizational structures, despite hierarchical pressures and the blurring of lines between organizational mandates and personal values.

Exploring the Connection between Individual and Collective Responsibility and the Public Interest in Japanese TV series

Released on Netflix in January 2022, *The Journalist* is an adaptation of Isoko Mochizuki's novel of the same name, drawing inspiration from her tenacious investigative journalism into Japanese politics and its relationship to the press and to scandal. The series unveils the extent to which political authorities manipulate press freedom and judicial autonomy to safeguard the administration from the consequences of political scandals.¹⁹ It delves into the effects of hierarchical and organizational pressures on personal autonomy, spotlighting the distortion of the public interest by power holders who force subordinate bureaucrats to implement directives from above,

resulting in ethically dubious actions such as document falsification to preserve the status quo of the current administration. *The Journalist* is a critical tool for analysing Japanese politics but also broadly questions the workings of democracy. The series depicts the transformation of civil servants from agents serving the citizenry to executors fulfilling the private interests of powerful leaders. It thus underscores the dilemma that public servants face when confronting their superiors, as well as the struggles of workers against their employers, particularly when their rights are being arbitrarily violated.

Japanese corporate work ethic has been lauded internationally and become part of Japan's national pride due to its connection to rapid industrialization and economic growth, creating a relatively egalitarian society up to the 1990s. Nevertheless, scholarly research into *karōshi* and *karōjisatsu*—death and suicide from overwork—has revealed the physical and mental health impacts of certain working conditions, particularly in the absence of adequate oversight, means for workers to contest poor conditions, and protection of their rights.²⁰ Inoue Tatsuo has pointed out that an overemphasis on group loyalty can erode dedication to universal principles, including human rights and justice.²¹ These occupational hazards, together with industrial and environmental degradation, have unveiled the pernicious realities of corporate entities when they cease to be socially embedded, exerting unchecked power over both individuals and the environment.²²

The TV series *Hanzawa Naoki*, directed by Katsuo Fukuzawa and Takayoshi Tanazawa, which aired on TBS from 2013 to 2020, adapts Jun Ikeido's novels as a critique of Japanese corporate culture, spotlighting the damaging impact of hierarchical harassment. The international and domestic reception of the series stems from its vivid narrative, in which the protagonist confronts a hierarchy that seeks to compromise the organization for personal gain. The series starkly reveals the disparity between those in positions of power who shirk their responsibilities within the organization, and their subordinates, who are left to deal with the fallout from their superiors' errors.

The series *The Days* delves into the ethos of Japanese corporate culture by portraying Yoshida and his colleagues as embodiments of team loyalty, company dedication, societal responsibility, and a robust work ethic. But *The Days* also shows how Yoshida and his colleagues stand apart from traditional corporate culture by stepping up during a crisis. They challenge a hierarchy that issues detrimental directives, threatens the public interest, and exerts its authority to protect the organization's interests rather than the common good. Episode 5 particularly accentuates this tension, depicting Yoshida's resolute measures to inject seawater into the reactor in direct contravention of TEPCO executives' commands. The book details how the discord between Yoshida and his superiors escalated during teleconferences with the prime minister's office, with executives insisting he halt the seawater injection. Knowing this was their last chance to cool the reactor and prevent

a greater catastrophe, Yoshida responded defiantly: ‘What are you talking about?! We can’t stop.’ While Wakiya from the NISA was too fearful to confront the prime minister, Yoshida stood up to authority to advocate for his convictions.

Yoshida’s reflections on the significance of those seven critical days at the plant extends beyond the immediate crisis, probing the deeper implications for Japan’s national conscience. His introspective questions echo the core concerns of the NAIIC report, which dissect the collective mindset that contributed to the disaster. This scrutiny encompasses every stratum of governance—from bureaucracy to government, organizations, and the citizenry—encouraging a deeper consideration of individual and collective responsibility in a democracy.

Series as a Resource for Political Education and Democratic Discourse

The series’ final scene depicts the ongoing work at the nuclear power plant in January 2017 and 2019, illustrating that the conditions inside the reactor—high temperatures and radiation levels—are too extreme for even robots to observe what occurred. Yoshida offers a pedagogical and powerful comparison of the reactor’s radiation levels to those of the Hiroshima bomb to underscore their severity. This scene echoes the nuclear education provided to Japanese residents living near nuclear plants in the 1960s and 1970s, which portrayed nuclear power as safe, progressive, and a symbol of advanced technology, promising a brighter future for the populace.

In the final episode, Yoshida retraces the history of nuclear energy, asking, ‘Looking back, how did this all begin?’ He explains that the demand for massive amounts of energy developed in response to the economic high growth period from 1955 to 1973, noting that nuclear energy represents ‘an energy source three million times more powerful than coal’. This underscores the Japanese belief, during this time, that the nation’s economic growth could continue indefinitely, were it to be powered by nuclear energy. By portraying the towns around the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, juxtaposing the current desolation with the once-promised ‘Energy for a better future’, the final episode shows the ghost towns left behind by more than 110,000 people who were forced to evacuate, resulting in tens of thousands of homes being abandoned. By detailing the consequences of the nuclear accident and its impact on the environment, as well as on human and animal life, the series achieves its educational goal, providing critical tools for the public to contemplate key questions of responsibility. In response to his inquiry, Yoshida states, ‘We have to clean what we have damaged’, intentionally leaving ambiguous the definition of ‘we’—whether it refers to the workers, TEPCO, the state, or the citizens.

In the final scene, Yoshida appears to provide an answer by revealing that he can do only one thing: inform future generations about the disaster. ‘I can share my experience at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power station. The

only ones who can tell what happened are those who were there at that moment.' He fulfils his duty to the end: 'This is the ultimate responsibility of those who were involved.' In the series' concluding moment, an accident investigation commissioner asks Yoshida, 'Do you consent to the public release of your testimony?' (S1E8). This scene underscores the commission's commitment to transparency and the pivotal role of Yoshida's account in illuminating the initial response to the nuclear disaster. It highlights the imperative of information accessibility for fostering public awareness and shared responsibility. *The Days* serves to widely disseminate the narrative of the Fukushima disaster and also underscores its own vital part in preserving collective memory—ensuring that the event's history and its implications for future generations are not forgotten.

Similarly, *Chernobyl* has galvanized public discourse around an event previously lacking in in-depth analysis. The series stands as a significant work, filling a void lacking detailed historical narratives, as only a limited number of books and scholarly works on the Chernobyl disaster had previously been published, many of which necessitated meticulous research through archives and data.²³ The series has effectively addressed the historical narrative gap, bringing to light the long-unspoken details of the event. It delves into the 'black box' of Soviet deceit, showcasing the underestimation of radiation and the disaster, and the decision to isolate a city rather than evacuate it, drawing a parallel with contemporary issues of misinformation and bureaucratic secrecy. In contrast with *The Days*, *Chernobyl* portrays a disaster without individual heroes, and with many workers fading into obscurity within Soviet cities, inviting contemplation of the communist regime's foundation on deceit.²⁴

Both series endeavour to raise individual experiences to a collective level, scrutinizing the interplay between public and private interests and the dynamics between organizations and individuals. These series enhance the audience's understanding of the world by spotlighting crucial social, political, and environmental issues. For example, *The Days* begins provocatively with Yoshida's reflection, 'What was the meaning of those days?' immediately immersing the audience in a narrative of accountability and consequence. As Yoshida prepares to relay the events to the nuclear accident inquiry, his introspection—'Did we take a wrong turn somewhere?'—confronts the responsibility borne by the workers of the Fukushima plant, including himself. The subsequent existential musing, 'Or was it a destiny we couldn't escape?', shifts the discourse to the nature of the disaster: an interrogation of whether it was an act of fate or a preventable catastrophe. Throughout, the series succeeds in not just capturing viewers' attention but also in mobilizing them as informed citizens, suggesting a collective engagement with the unfolding narrative and its broader implications. The narrative illustrates the philosophical bedrock of Japanese society, in which individual responsibility is intertwined with the coordinated efforts of communities, organizations, and public authorities.

Individual Agency and Organizational Structures

In Japan, the principle of individual responsibility is deeply rooted in a historical context in which the notions of 'self-help' (*jijō*), 'mutual aid' (*kyōjō*), and 'public aid' (*kōjō*) prioritize the individual's role in maintaining societal and economic order.²⁵ With the neoliberal policy shift from the 1980s onward, Japanese social culture has increasingly emphasized individual autonomy, a retreat from intermediary and state interventions, and a promotion of moral values at the individual level. During his tenure as prime minister from 2020 to 2021, Yoshihide Suga emphasized the principles of *jijō*, *kyōjō*, and *kōjō* as a guiding framework for Japanese society. He elaborated that individuals should initially seek solutions independently or from within their community and turn to government assistance only as a last resort.²⁶ This traditional approach, especially applied since the Kobe earthquake in 1995, advocates for a gradual response to crises, in which reliance on state intervention is minimized.

Various scholars have analysed the Japanese government's policy reforms following the Kobe disaster to improve crisis management and the government's collaboration with civil society organizations.²⁷ These scholars have emphasized the significant legal reforms that led to the creation of a comprehensive disaster management system, bolstered by the 1998 NPO Law which encouraged the growth of NGOs and a greater openness to international aid.²⁸ They have pointed out that these reforms were evident during the Great East Japan earthquake and tsunami disaster relief in which the Fukushima nuclear power plant accident took place, where NGOs, now recognized as professional entities by citizens and the state, responded promptly and effectively due to their increased experience and preparedness.²⁹ Their analysis of disasters as critical moments that test government crisis management and often catalyse volunteerism particularly reflects citizen attitudes towards government and individual responsibility.³⁰ Indeed, civic engagement theories propose that volunteerism rates can shed light on societal expectations of government and personal roles in managing crises.³¹

Thus, many scholars have lauded the swift mobilization of civil society, including NGOs, in the wake of the Great East Japan earthquake and tsunami; however, *The Days* sheds light on the often overlooked immediacy of the power plant workers' response to the nuclear crisis. From the onset, the series reveals that the vanguard of crisis management was not external intervention, but the workers within the Fukushima Daiichi plant. Their swift action and in-depth understanding of the facility were determinant in the crucial hours and days following the disaster, laying the groundwork for later, more structured relief efforts. While NGOs and civic groups rapidly organized to aid devastated regions affected by the natural disaster, the nuclear accident posed unique challenges that required an insider response. *The Days'* creators persuasively depict this initial phase, showing workers grappling with the unfolding catastrophe, shouldering the responsibility to

mitigate the crisis with limited resources, limited aid from the local SDF, and without the immediate aid of national or international entities. The contrast becomes more pronounced as the series progresses. Only after the workers' initial and critical interventions does the series illustrate the broader coordination efforts. In Episode 8, the prime minister's recognition of the potential national peril catalyses a unified response. This evolution from autonomous, worker-driven emergency action to an integrated approach involving TEPCO, government entities, the SDF, and international assistance underscores the transition from isolated crisis management to a collective, inter-agency endeavour.

The series deftly illustrates the principles of 'self-help', 'mutual aid', and 'public aid' in its depiction of a comprehensive nuclear disaster response orchestrated by the government once the prime minister understood the profound risks of radioactive contamination to Japanese society.

Conclusion

The Days underscores the transformative power of TV series as a medium that extends beyond entertainment to serve as a conduit for historical education, political critique, and societal reflection. *The Days*, like *Chernobyl*, compels viewers to confront the complexities of nuclear disaster management, the labyrinthine nature of governmental response, and the profound implications of such events on human lives and the environment. Some critics attribute the differing global receptions of *Chernobyl* and *The Days* to the latter's in-depth exploration of Japanese organizational challenges, which may limit its appeal compared with the more globally resonant *Chernobyl* narrative. This chapter offers an alternative viewpoint, arguing that *The Days* ultimately aims to elevate personal experiences into collective understanding, setting individual narratives within broader social and political contexts. It reveals the critical role of frontline workers in crisis management, a perspective often overshadowed by responses from broader civil society. The series illustrates the integral part these workers played during the nascent stages of the Fukushima disaster, providing a foundational response that would shape subsequent relief efforts.

This portrayal serves as a poignant reminder of the human element within institutional frameworks, drawing attention to the dedication and professionalism at the heart of effective governance. *The Days'* creators not only rekindle public memory of the Fukushima disaster but also ignite discourse on the accountability of those in power and the importance of citizen vigilance in democratic societies. They emphasize the necessity for informed public participation in governance and the continuous reassessment of our collective approach to risk, responsibility, and the stewardship of technology. By doing so, they show that TV series shape our comprehension of global dynamics and personal experiences by conveying values and increasing viewer awareness of critical social, political, and environmental issues.³²

Notes

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PART II

MOBILIZATION OF
TELEVISUAL FICTIONS BY
POLITICAL REGIMES

Chapter 6

‘Our War for Our Survival’: Politics and Ideology in Russian Spy Series *Sleepers*

Anastasia Krutikova and Tatsiana Zhurauliova

Introduction

In October 2017, viewers of Russian state television broadcaster First Channel were introduced to a new spy series titled *Sleepers*, which aired during the coveted two-hour evening prime-time slot. The first season of the series was directed by a renowned *auteur* filmmaker, Yuriy Bykov, already famous for his award-winning gritty social dramas and the critically acclaimed crime series *Method*. Despite its prime-time slot, *Sleepers* did not become an immediate hit, yet it quickly attracted a heated critical discussion both online and in the press, which in turn drew wide viewership.¹ The controversial status of the series was further established when Bykov took to social media to express his deep regret at his involvement in the project. In his statement, he wrote,

I am a weak, wavering person, whose momentary weakness and disorientation led to the fact that the best minds of the country finally turned away from me [...] Hundreds of honest people have suffered from the regime and the lawlessness of the authorities, which I tried to defend in this series [...] I betrayed the entire progressive generation that wanted to change something in this country.²

Following this apologetic statement, Bykov sought to distance himself from the series in all subsequent interviews, often referring to it as a commercial project he undertook for financial reasons. Nonetheless, Bykov’s public apology serves as a crucial backdrop for understanding the series’ place within the contemporary Russian mediascape. Bykov acknowledges his initial desire to patriotically contribute to the Russian state’s ideological narrative, while at the same time expressing remorse for his perceived ‘weakness’ that made him susceptible to manipulation. His ambivalent reflections highlight the complexity

of the moral dilemmas and challenges faced by artists in contemporary Russia, with its increasingly repressive and authoritarian political climate.

Sleepers follows an operation by the FSB (Russia's Federal Security service, the descendant of the KGB) to uncover a network of sleeper US spies, who have infiltrated different spheres of life in Russia, including the media, government, and business elite. Set in 2013 against the backdrop of the 2011–12 Arab Spring uprisings and the 2013–14 Euromaidan in Ukraine, it develops the theme of colour revolutions and reflects the state's pervasive fear of similar upheavals in Russia. While *Sleepers* can hardly be considered as a remarkable production from an aesthetic point of view (despite Bykov's involvement), the series crystallizes the main trends in the development of Russian political and media landscape and national ideology over the past two decades, at the same time representing a notable example of the state's contemporary approach to propaganda.

In this chapter, we will focus on *Sleepers* in order to explore the complex relationship between propaganda and televisual fiction in contemporary Russia. Created for one of the federal channels and financed by the Ministry of Culture, the series represents the dynamics of state involvement in media production under Putin's regime. Taking *Sleepers* as an example of state-sponsored production, we will consider the main ideological points that drive the series' plot, contextualizing them within a broader political discourse of the 2010s. A close reading of one of the series' central scenes—the confrontation between the hero and the villain—will allow us to analyse *Sleepers*' rhetorical and symbolic vocabulary, which resonates with both Soviet and Hollywood productions. This ability to invoke the conventions of both Soviet spy films and contemporary US examples of the same genre, exported globally, allows the series to appeal to two distinct audiences: the older generation who grew up watching Soviet cinema, and younger viewers who are familiar with the language of globalized media. Yet, rather than simply adopting these conventions and their corresponding narrative techniques, *Sleepers* weaves them together to demonstrate how state propaganda adapts over time, responding to the evolution of the viewers' tastes and preferences.

The Transformation of Russian Mediascape in the 2000s and 2010s

Over the past two decades or so, the relationship between television and the political establishment in Russia has undergone a spectacular transformation. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the subsequent economic liberalization of the 1990s resulted in the diversification of television programming, with the emergence of independent national and local broadcasters. This trend was halted by the arrival in power of Vladimir Putin, who initiated the reverse process of reorganizing the country's fragmented audiovisual landscape towards a greater centralization and marginalization of small independent media outlets. In the early years of Putin's presidency, the crackdown on political and media opposition included the prosecution of media moguls

who had publicly criticized the government's policies. The period also saw the creation of legal instruments aimed at restricting independent journalism and increasing governmental oversight of small local TV companies.³ By the end of Putin's second term in 2008, all major media outlets in Russia were under the direct or indirect control of his administration or close circle of associates.⁴ Although explicit censorship was not practised, as observed by media scholars Elena Vartanova and Sergey Smirnov, a 'loyalty to the ruling regime became a prerequisite for the quiet existence of all socio-political media regardless of their form of ownership and business model; self-censorship or informal pressure from the power elites became the norm that defined the activities of the journalistic community'.⁵

This consolidation of media ownership and state control were accompanied, and in part accelerated, by the rapid growth of the entertainment industry, with television networks preferring less controversial and more profitable entertainment content over serious political and social commentary, while importing or adapting formats from the global media content market.⁶ This trend facilitated the expansion of Russian series production, which has been continuously growing since the early 2000s. The arrival of streaming platforms to the country's audiovisual market in the early 2010s also spurred investment in the domestic series industry and led to greater content diversification, with online platforms catering primarily towards younger audiences and facing less stringent state regulation, as well as less state interference in the series production and distribution online.⁷

In the early 2000s, the majority of Russian television series focused on entertainment, contributing to the general public's sense of growing economic prosperity and stability in the country.⁸ Television channels broadcast both Russian and foreign television shows, thereby upholding the idea of the country's openness and inclusion in the global media sphere. The beginning of Putin's third presidential term in 2012, amid widespread protests against rising authoritarianism, marked a noticeable shift in the editorial policies of state-run television channels aligned with the government's nationalistic and anti-Western rhetoric.⁹ Russian television has become increasingly intolerant of media pluralism and saturated with disinformation and explicit political propaganda, broadcasting exclusively the state's point of view on current affairs and justifying its aggressive foreign policy.¹⁰ This trend towards unwavering support for Putin's regime has permeated both information and entertainment programming, including the series commissioned by state television channels. In this respect, *Sleepers* stands out as an inaugural series, one of the first to both project and articulate the ideas constitutive of the populist ideology that has gained ground in the Russian political sphere since 2012.

Sleepers' Bipolar World Order

Sleepers centres on Andrey Rodionov, an FSB officer who returns to Russia after fifteen years of serving abroad in the Middle East and Northern Africa.

On his return, he discovers a society that has been dramatically transformed by oligarchy, corruption, and consumerist culture, all three often associated within the official media discourse with liberalism and the Western influence. He reconnects with two of his university friends, who are now married to each other—Ivan and Kira Zhuravlevy. Ivan is a successful journalist and, as we later discover, a CIA operative with the code name ‘Ethan’. Kira is a gallerist and the object of Rodionov’s affection in the past, as well as in the present.

The series aspires to represent a microcosm of Russian society, with the plot driven by the conflict between two polarizing worldviews—pro-Western, which is frequently labelled in Russian propaganda as liberal, and pro-Russian, or nativist. Two male protagonists, Ivan Zhuravlev and Andrey Rodionov, embody these ideological positions. A spy, killer, and adulterer, Zhuravlev believes in democracy, freedom of expression, independent judiciary system—values that in the series are tarnished by association with his character. By contrast, Rodionov’s character is an embodiment of pro-governmental, pro-Putin ideology. Significantly, not only has this character been lauded by the pro-Kremlin press as a model of patriotism, this fictional representation of security forces has also been officially recognized and celebrated by the state. In 2018, following the release of the series, Igor Petrenko, who plays Rodionov, was awarded the FSB Prize, given annually for ‘the best works in which a positive image of a security officer is created at a high artistic level, the activities of the security agencies are most objectively reflected’.¹¹

Sleepers’ conception of two incompatible worldviews is in line with Putin’s populist discourse, which since 2000 has evolved from attacking domestic economic elites towards focusing on the foreign enemy and thus positioning Russia as ‘the main challenger to the Western-dominated global order’.¹² Pronouncedly nationalist, this ideology of binary opposition exemplifies the rhetorical logic of populism, understood as a nebulous discourse that imagines society to be split into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’.¹³ The rhetoric of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ is featured prominently in one of the series’ central scenes—the confrontation between the two protagonists in the season’s finale. The scene takes place in Zhuravlev’s living room, ransacked by the security services. The apparent American spy himself is drunk, huddled on the couch under a blanket. By contrast, Rodionov is sober and stoic. Pensively gazing out of the window, he refuses to look at his former friend as he ponders the reasons behind Zhuravlev’s ‘betrayal’ despite his privileged family background, elite European education and successful career. ‘I didn’t betray anyone’, Zhuravlev retorts:

Zhuravlev: Betrayal is when one has taken an oath, but I haven’t sworn allegiance to anyone: neither *sovok* [the Soviet Union], nor this ‘new Russia’ of yours. These are not *my* banners, these are *your* banners.

Rodionov (*turns to look at Zhuravlev*): And what’s *your* banner?
 Zhuravlev (*laughs*): My banner is the banner of a normal person,
 on which it is embroidered in golden letters: fair trial, equal
 rights, progress, and the future. Like in Vienna, Paris, London,
 even New York (*Rodionov moves to sit across from Zhuravlev*).
 Some people also call that democracy... (S1E8)

This dialogue represents the clash of ideologies embodied by the two protagonists. Zhuravlev refuses to align himself with either the legacy of the Soviet Union or the ‘new Russia’, instead pronouncing his allegiance to the values of ‘fair trial, equal rights, progress, and the future’, which he associates with democratic societies. In this respect, he wants Russia to follow the example of ‘Vienna, Paris, London, even New York’—a phrase that implies a certain equivalency between distinct democratic regimes. This indiscriminate grouping of the USA and different Western European nations into a single category of the ‘West’ has been a recurrent theme in various discourses on Russian national identity. As scholar Vera Tolz has noted, the West has long functioned as the ultimate site of projection, often imagined as ‘a single undifferentiated entity ... regarded either as a positive model for Russia to emulate or as a negative example to be rejected’, thus serving to delineate the boundaries of national identity and its position within the broader context of world history.¹⁴

Rodionov defines the ‘West’ in a similar way, but frames it as a negative force driven by the geopolitical ambitions of the USA. He believes that the American government manipulates its allies and orchestrates conflicts worldwide to gain control of natural resources. While such a view resonates with common critiques of US foreign policy as imperialist, it also refers to a geopolitical thinking framed in terms of ‘spheres of influence’—a perspective that presents a substantial part of the globe as mere arena for geopolitical confrontation between major economic and military powers. Expressed through the words of a fictional character, this view is an almost exact reproduction of the anti-Western discourse that has permeated the mainstream media since 2012, disseminated in the form of investigative reporting and documentaries. In 2016, for example, a special edition of the analytical programme *Vesti Nedeli* (*News of the Week*) positioned the Russian president as the global defender against the hegemony of the imperialist West: ‘Putin is like a bone lodged in their throat. He hinders their plans to start wars based on false allegations, as in Iraq; prevents them from destroying countries, as they did in Libya. Putin prevents the US from placing the world under its control, because he doesn’t give up.’¹⁵ Here, as in *Sleepers*, the confrontation between ‘us’ and ‘them’—an ambiguous entity of the collective West—is played out on the global scale, evoking the Cold War imagery of the bipolar world order.

Viewed through these lenses, the dialogue in *Sleepers* functions as an important commentary on Russia’s struggle with its identity and geopolitical

place in the post-Soviet era. On the one hand, it captures the ideological polarization within Russia by focusing on the conflict between Putin's supporters and opposition forces. At the same time, it hijacks the latter's pro-democracy rhetoric by reducing it to an expression of nefarious US plot to advance its economic interests and destabilize Russia. In this respect, the series echoes the state's efforts to portray political opposition and any expression of discontent within Russia as the product of foreign interference. This strategy is most strikingly exemplified by the 2012 law requiring all NGOs receiving foreign funding to voluntarily register as 'foreign agents'. Here, 'foreign agent' is an emotionally and ideologically charged term that serves to promote the idea of an internal enemy conspiring with the West to undermine Russia's sovereignty and the prosperity of its people. *Sleepers* does not use the term 'foreign agents'—a category that at the time of the series' creation was reserved for institutions and organizations, but in 2022 was dramatically expanded to include individuals and other legal entities. Nonetheless, the related concepts of the internal enemy or 'fifth column'—a term rooted in the Soviet past—are central to the plot of the series, with the eponymous 'sleepers' being Russian citizens, seduced or forced by the CIA to undermine national interests. In the later part of the dialogue between Rodionov and Zhuravlev, the idea of confrontation between 'us' and 'them' is extended beyond the opposition between Russia and the West to include those Russians who oppose Putin's regime:

Zhuravlev: I wanted to build a normal life here, like everyone wanted in the nineties, everyone! We all wanted democracy! And then *your* kind came, and trampled all over it ... any expression of dissent! And now there are security services everywhere ... And the impoverished, downtrodden Russian people, 'governed' by you.

Rodionov: It was *you*, who made the Russian people destitute in the nineties, when, while hollering about democracy, you were quietly snatching factories. And yet, as you can see, *we* survived. Yes, *my* kind took back the country, and it's *my* kind that will defend it ... this is not a war between the 16th and the 21st centuries, this is *our* war for *our* survival, for the very existence of Russia. (S1E8)

The phrase 'war for our survival, for the very existence of Russia' is crucial, as it resonates with the populist discourse anchored in the idea of a Western conspiracy to undermine Russian sovereignty and plunder its resources. This rhetoric can be traced back to Mikhail Iuryev's controversial article, 'Fortress Russia: The Concept for the President' that gained wide resonance upon its publication in 2004. Iuryev calls for a complete isolation from the West, warning that any openness to the global economic market would lead to the destruction of Russia 'as an independent country and a separate

civilisation'.¹⁶ Written just before the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, the article soon became an influential text in the development of various anti-Western conspiracy theories asserting links between the CIA, colour revolutions, and anti-Putin protests.¹⁷ Over the past two decades, the concept of the colour revolutions as a product of foreign (Western) interference rather than an expression of legitimate popular discontent and resistance to authoritarianism has become another dominant element in Russian political and media discourse.¹⁸

In the realm of fiction, *Sleepers* is a prime example of the state's fear of colour revolutions. In fact, in his aforementioned social media apology, Bykov cites the 'desire to do [his] part against the orange revolution in the country' as the reason for undertaking the project in the first place.¹⁹ The 'orange revolution' in this statement is a stand-in for colour revolutions in general—the plot of the series involves a convoluted geopolitical dynamic between Russia, the USA, and China, and alleges that it was CIA interference that led to both the 2011–2013 Arab Spring uprisings and Euromaidan, which took place in Ukraine from November 2013 to February 2014. While these historical events may be beyond the reach of Rodionov and his team, their valiant efforts succeed in thwarting CIA plans to start a similar uprising in Russia.

Sleepers is a remarkable work of fiction that offers a comprehensive summary of Putin's eclectic populist ideology. The series encapsulates its core elements: the rhetoric of 'us' versus 'them'; anti-Western conspiracy theories that conceptualize colour revolutions as a result of an external plot; the revival of the Cold War conception of a world divided into zones of influence controlled by great powers; as well as the imagery of confrontation between Russia and the USA, framed in terms of a conflict of values. The series is also notable because of the formal and narrative means it uses to advance its ideological message. It simultaneously revives Soviet representational tropes and repackages them for the contemporary audience to both suggest a continuity between Russia's past and present (as well as future) and to widen its appeal to an intergenerational audience.

Re-presenting the Soviet Legacy for a Contemporary Audience

While the scene of the dialogue between the two protagonists summarizes the main ideological points of *Sleepers*—as well as Putin's government—the message of the conflict of values permeates every aspect of the series, including its symbolic and aesthetic elements, and narrative framework. For Zhuravlev, this conflict represents the confrontation between the Soviet past and a future oriented towards the West. By contrast, Rodionov embraces the legacy of the Soviet past as a foundation for Russia's future, viewing Zhuravlev's pro-Western agenda as a threat to the nation's survival. In a symbolic scene in the first episode, Rodionov returns to his stark, empty apartment after a long, hectic day tracking terrorists. Stepping up to the window, he takes in

the panoramic view of Moscow with distant high-rises of the business district and brightly lit entertainment venues. Silent and alone, Rodionov appears to be contemplating the country he has rediscovered on his return from abroad. Deep in his thoughts, the hero sits down at the kitchen table and, as he searches his pockets, he pulls out a coin, spinning it on the table. Accompanied by a disquieting jazz melody, the camera oscillates between the close-up of Rodionov's pensive face and the coin as it falls to reveal the image of a hammer and sickle, an iconic symbol of Russia's communist past (S1E1, 26:58). The scene establishes the contrast between modern Moscow and the Soviet past represented by the coin, and by extension the conflict of values at the heart of the series.

Throughout the series, the Soviet legacy emerges as tightly woven into the fabric of present-day Russia. Rodionov's character in particular functions as an echo of idealized male protagonists from Soviet films and series: he is exemplary in everything, right down to his name (derived from *rodina*, the Russian word for homeland). He is the paragon of duty: upstanding, professional, honest, and loyal to his ideals. He practically lives in FSB offices, with his colleagues functioning as a surrogate family. Recent scholarly analysis of the series highlights the similarities between Rodionov and fictional counterintelligence officers from the famous Soviet spy series *TASS is Authorized to Announce* (*TASS upolnomochen zayavit*, 1984). The authors contend that both series propagate a statist ideology, depicting the headquarters of the FSB (and KGB) as ideologically charged spaces.²⁰ *Sleepers'* set design further establishes the connection between the security services, the Soviet past, and the current regime: in the office of the senior FSB officer, Putin's portrait is placed next to the portrait of Leonid Brezhnev and a Russian coat of arms.

The Soviet and Cold War rhetoric is also revived in the series through the emphasis on multiple threats posed by the 'fifth column'. The figure of the internal enemy, a staple in Soviet propaganda, was associated during the Cold War with state repressions against ideologically unreliable or dissenting citizens and heightened fears of foreign espionage conspiracies.²¹ In the contemporary Russia depicted in *Sleepers*, the sleeper agents, evoked by the title of the series, are tasked with carrying out subversive missions on the command of CIA officers. However, these agents represent only a fraction of the threat. Equally dangerous are political activists, bloggers, and journalists who emerge in the series as the new 'fifth column'. While not overtly treasonous, they are portrayed as compromised by their ties to Western countries, whether through education, family, or professional interests.

The widespread criticism of the series that followed its release focused not on its propagandistic message *per se*, but on its vague allusions to real public figures who have come to symbolize the struggle for democracy in Putin's era. Although the series' credits state that all its characters are fictional, several reviewers identified real-life prototypes for some characters. These include the assassinated journalist Anna Politkovskaya, known for her

investigative reporting on the Chechen wars and the FSB’s growing influence in the 2000s; anti-corruption activist and politician Alexei Navalny; and political activist Leonid Volkov.²² These connections were also indirectly acknowledged by Bykov in his apology post, where he referred to the ‘hundreds of honest people’ who ‘suffered from the regime’. Whether based on real-life prototypes or not, the depictions of journalists and activists in the series contributed to the negative reception of the series by certain viewers in Russia, resonating with the state’s ongoing repression of political opposition and civil society, which has resulted in the loss of life for some and forced emigration or long prison sentences for others.

The series’ portrayal of the confrontation between the CIA and the FSB is particularly marked by a Soviet view of international order, presenting a grotesque image of the Americans, with some characters vaguely based on real public figures. For instance, Michael Mulligan, the US ambassador in the series, is depicted as a narrow-minded, ignorant, and hysterical man. This character is the fictional equivalent of Michael McFaul, the United States Ambassador to Russia from 2012 to 2014. Often referred to in the Russian press as a ‘specialist in colour revolutions’,²³ the latter appears to have also inspired another character in the series—a high-ranking CIA officer in charge of the ‘sleepers’ programme, who arrives in Moscow from Cairo, and heads to Kiev at the end of the series. With the story set in 2013, these references clearly establish this character as the US agent charged with instigating social unrest. Highly intelligent and manipulative, he is primarily driven by greed and personal interest, rather than any specific political ideology. Similarly, other American characters appear greedy, chauvinistic, hedonistic, and cruel. They stand in stark contrast with Rodionov, thus providing an ideological and moral counterweight—a balancing act that is central to the series’ uncomplicated binary world order that leaves no room for ambiguity or moral exploration.

Drawing upon the most incongruous Soviet clichés to portray FSB and CIA agents, US citizens, and Russian dissidents, *Sleepers* presents Russia as a besieged nation meant to uphold the Soviet Union’s legacy. Yet at the same time, the series also goes to great lengths to appear contemporary in its *mise-en-scène*. Despite its revival of Soviet representational tropes, *Sleepers*’ universe is undeniably modern: distant camera shots serve to accentuate the modern architecture that has appeared in Moscow over recent decades, while the interiors of the characters’ residences and workplaces feature modernist and minimalist designs that belong on the pages of glossy magazines. The background of the narrative is often punctuated by images of television news channels playing on a loop, echoing the news culture and aesthetics that emerged with global television networks such as CNN or BBC World.

The director carefully exploits the genre conventions of political and espionage thriller series, largely defined by Hollywood productions that have been internationally distributed over the last two decades, including the series *24*, *The Americans*, and *Homeland*—quintessential of the genre as it has been

reimagined in the wake of 9/11, driven by the 'War on Terror' ideology.²⁴ These conventions include, for example, the visuality of surveillance, which intensifies the sense of state omnipotence over the lives of citizens and reinforces the conspiracy worldview that underpins the narratives of such series.²⁵ *Sleepers* depicts a team of FSB investigators that includes a stereotypical figure of a young computer expert, who can provide clues about terrorists in a matter of seconds by skilfully manipulating images captured by the ubiquitous surveillance cameras on city streets. Furthermore, *Sleepers* not only follows some general storytelling patterns common to many post-9/11 American and European spy thrillers, such as dynamic, fast-paced action, a plot driven by an investigation, an external threat and 'national interest' imperative, the use of actual events to establish dramatic premises, an emphasis on technology, and cliffhangers at the end of each episode; it also explicitly references specific American series.²⁶ In their reviews, younger viewers frequently note the similarities between *Sleepers* and *Homeland*, both of which use jazz music in the opening credits, overlaying it with fragments of dialogue, to create a distinct stylistic effect of disquieting atmosphere.²⁷ Sergey Minaev, the series creator and scriptwriter, explicitly cited *Homeland* as one of the series that inspired him, along with the aforementioned 1980s Soviet classic *TASS is Authorized to Announce*.²⁸ While *Sleepers* revives many Soviet tropes to advance its ideological message, it also exemplifies how the Russian entertainment industry adapts Hollywood's cinematic techniques and narrative structures of the contemporary espionage thriller genre to create stories that appeal to younger domestic audiences, which have become accustomed to the visual language of globalized media and television culture.

The Hero-Villain Confessions: *Sleepers* and the Conventions of the Spy Genre

Sleepers' characters themselves invite comparison with international examples of the spy genre cinema: in one scene, Rodionov is indeed introduced as a Russian James Bond, jokingly of course, but with a dash of seriousness (S1E3). The dialogue between Rodionov and Zhuravlev discussed above, also follows the logic of emblematic villain exposés from the Bond films. For example, there is Javier Bardem's memorable Raoul Silva in *Skyfall* (2012), who has a striking scene with Bond (Daniel Craig), in which Silva establishes an equivalence between them through a chilling metaphor of rats struggling for survival. Silva gets another opportunity to develop his moral position and motivation in the scene of his confrontation with M, played by Dame Judi Dench. A former MI6 agent, Silva confronts M for betraying him and leaving him to be captured and tortured by the Chinese government. Bardem's performance and Dench's subtle yet powerful reactions foster in the viewer a sense of empathy for Silva's character—we feel his pain, both physical and mental, and begin to understand his motivations. Yet the sympathy we might feel for this character is limited. As is typical of the genre, the film goes to

great lengths to establish Silva as a vicious and repulsive protagonist, a true villain to Bond's hero.

This is also the narrative logic of *Sleepers*: Zhuravlev's statements might appeal to the viewer in their message of democracy and freedom, but his overall character is repulsive—he lies, kills, cheats, and betrays everyone (including his country, his wife, and his son). Unlike his words, Zhuravlev's actions show that he is motivated by personal greed and self-promotion. In contrast to Zhuravlev's villainy, Rodionov emerges as the clear 'good guy' in the series.

Both in *Skyfall* and *Sleepers*, the confrontation between the two main protagonists serves as a summary of the story's moral universe, establishing the ethical stakes for both the 'bad' and the 'good' guys. Yet, while this conversation establishes the polarity of the two views, it cannot be considered a true dialogue, as neither character emerges with a change of heart. In this respect, *Sleepers* differs from the recent Hollywood productions that complicate the ethical binary of good versus evil, friend versus foe, thus redefining the conventions of the genre.

In the superhero genre, *Black Panther* (2018) offers a striking example of a complex anti-hero who presents a morally compelling argument. Challenging Black Panther's status and Wakanda's status quo, Killmonger is clearly established as a villain by his tactics and choices, but his perspective is compelling enough for both the viewer and the film's hero and heir to the Wakandan throne, T'Challa, to reflect and change their positions. This dynamic creates a complex narrative where the line between right and wrong, good and evil, is blurred, challenging the audience to engage with the narrative on a deeper ethical level.

Closer related to *Sleepers* is the example of *The Americans*, a series in which, as Sandra Laugier has argued, the conversation becomes the central means of moral education—a space where the main characters grow and develop their ethical positions as the viewers follow along.²⁹ In particular, we can consider the scene from the final episode of the series in which Elizabeth and Philip Jennings are confronted by their neighbour Stan, an FBI agent (S6E10). In some ways, this scene mirrors the confrontation in *Sleepers*: two friends confronting each other over deception and betrayal; in both series, the two friends represent two distinct and opposing political and ideological systems. But in *The Americans*, both sides are changed over the course of the conversation, challenged to reconsider their choices and actions. This is especially true of Stan, who ultimately lets the Jenningses go, making a choice guided by a deeper, more complex understanding of the dichotomy of friend and foe, good and evil. As viewers, we cannot help but ponder his decision, wondering what we would do in the same situation.

There is no such ambiguity in *Sleepers*. Its protagonist, Rodionov, remains unperturbed by the confrontation with his former friend. His unyielding conviction and dismissal of Zhuravlev's criticism and justifications seems to contribute to his character's overall 'virtuousness', a sharp contrast to

Zhuravlev's treachery and lies. By associating Rodionov's belief system with his character's virtuous status, *Sleepers* creates a value connotation that serves to legitimize his loyalism towards the ruling political regime. Similarly, as viewers, we are not given much of a choice when it comes to Zhuravlev: in the scene discussed above, there is a sharp dissonance between what he says (defending democratic values and personal freedoms) and what we know of his character, which is supposed to discredit and undermine his pronouncements.

Nevertheless, the final confrontation between the two protagonists in *Sleepers* is significant because it takes the form of a conversation in which each outlines and defends his worldview. The series uses the format of the hero-antagonist conversation for a dual purpose: not only does it ensure the series' accessibility and appeal to an audience well-versed in the language of global media, but it also subtly repurposes these familiar structures to advance a narrative that affirms and consolidates a particular ideological perspective. The scene reflects *Sleepers*' ambition as an educational tool, but the predetermined outcomes of this conversation betray its propagandistic message.

Conclusion: The Complex Relationship between Propaganda and Televisual Fiction in Contemporary Russia

Released at a pivotal moment in Russia's political development, *Sleepers* epitomizes the shift towards a more overt and aggressive form of state propaganda, which seeks to align popular culture with governmental policies and ideology. In this respect, *Sleepers* stands out as an inaugural series, one of the first to both project and articulate the ideas constitutive of the populist ideology that has gained ground in the Russian political sphere since Putin's re-election in 2012. This series' role as a manifesto of the new political reality was noted by many reviewers, both the advocates and critics of the series, albeit with different conclusions. For the first, it is a 'brilliantly made propaganda film' precisely outlining 'all ideological and moral accents',³⁰ for the latter—'an election political manifesto', Putin's version of the 'April Theses'—a reference to Vladimir Lenin's programme for Bolshevik rule in Russia.³¹

In its formal elements, narrative and language, the series draws on the conventions of both Soviet spy films and contemporary foreign examples of the same genre, attempting to appeal to different generations of Russian viewers: those who grew up with Soviet cinema and younger viewers accustomed to the language of globalized media. The series incorporates Soviet representational tropes and references not only to appeal to the nostalgic sensibilities of older generations, but also to actively establish a continuity between the Soviet regime and contemporary Russia. And while it adapts Hollywood genre conventions and emulates popular US and European spy series, *Sleepers* forgoes the moral complexity of the latter in favour of serving an authoritarian regime and its populist political imaginary.

Notes

- 1 The first season of the series, which aired between 9 and 12 October 2017, was among the top five most-watched series during that period, with slightly higher ratings in Moscow than in other regions (according to data collected by *Mediascope*, ‘Report of Program Leaders by Genre: TV Series, week 9–15 October 2017’ <<https://mediascope.net/data>> (accessed 2 February 2023)). Although it did not lead in viewership, it provoked a strong critical reaction both in the press and on social media. For details on the critical response to the series, see Tatsiana Zhurauliova and Anastasia Krutikova, ‘Réimaginer la féminité. La représentation des femmes dans les séries russes contemporaines’, *Cahiers du Genre*, 2.75 (2023), pp. 59–88, doi: 10.3917/cdge.075.0059.
- 2 Yuriy Bykov, ‘Nebolshoe obraschenie k vam, moi dorogie zritel’i’ (‘A little appeal to you, my dear viewers’), VKontakte, 13 October 2017 <https://vk.com/wall-23793890_10837> (accessed 5 November 2023). All translations from Russian are by the authors, unless otherwise noted.
- 3 Tina Burrett, ‘Evaluating Putin’s Propaganda Performance 2000–2018: Stagecraft as Statecraft’, in *The SAGE Handbook of Propaganda*, ed. by Paul Baines, Nicholas O’Shaughnessy, and Nancy Snow (Sage, 2019), pp. 492–509.
- 4 Maria Lipman, Anna Kachkaeva, and Michael Poyker, ‘Media in Russia: Between Modernization and Monopoly’, in *The New Autocracy: Information, Politics, and Policy in Putin’s Russia*, ed. by Daniel Treisman (Brookings Institution Press, 2018), pp. 159–90.
- 5 Elena Vartanova and Sergey Smirnov, ‘Russian Media as an Entertainment Industry’, *Mediascope*, 4 (2009) <www.mediascope.ru/сми-россии-как-индустрия-развлечений> (accessed 8 April 2024).
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 See Alexandre Prokhorov, Elena Prokhorova, and Salys Rimgaila, eds., *Russian TV Series in the Era of Transition: Genres, Technologies, Identities* (Academic Studies Press, 2021). It should be noted that streaming platforms have also recently come under increased scrutiny from federal authorities, who require online services to share user data, and are looking to introduce compulsory licences for content—a practice already established in traditional offline media. The state is increasingly becoming involved in the operation of streaming platforms on the grounds that certain content appears to violate national regulations and ideology. For a detailed discussion of this process, see Zhurauliova and Krutikova, ‘Réimaginer la féminité’, p. 65.
- 8 The idea of regained prosperity and stability after a decade of social and economic crisis was itself constitutive of the propagandistic message of the early Putin era and a basis for his initial popularity with the Russian population. See Burrett, ‘Evaluating Putin’s Propaganda Performance 2000–2018: Stagecraft as Statecraft’.
- 9 Ibid., p. 493.
- 10 While in 2001 the main six largest TV channels (Channel One, Russia 1, NTV, TNT, STS, REN TV) broadcast mainly series imported from Europe, Latin America, and the United States, with the share of domestically produced series not exceeding 17%, by 2018 they had practically banished foreign TV shows from the broadcasting grid, with Russian series accounting for 94%. *Televideniye v Rossii v 2018 Godu. Sostoyaniye, Tendentsii I Perspektivy Razvitiya. Otrasevyy Doklad (Television in Russia in 2018. State, Trends and Development Prospects. Industry Report)*, Federal Agency for Press and Mass Media (2019), p. 62.

- 11 'Competition of the Federal Security Service of Russia for the Best Works of Literature and Art on the Activities of the Federal Security Service in 2018' <www.fsb.ru/fsb/premiya/2018.htm> (accessed 30 January 2023).
- 12 Tina Burrett, 'Charting Putin's Shifting Populism in the Russian Media from 2000 to 2020', *Politics and Governance*, 8.1 (2020), pp. 193–205, doi: 10.17645/pag.v8i1.2565.
- 13 Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, 'Populism and (Liberal) Democracy. A Framework For Analysis', in *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?*, ed. by Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 8.
- 14 Vera Tolz, *Russia: Inventing the Nation* (Arnold, Oxford University Press Inc., 2001), p. 70.
- 15 "'Taynye bogatstva Putina": ni faktov, ni dokumentov, no podgadit khochetsya' ("Putin's Secret Riches": no facts, no documents, just a troll attempt to mess things up), *Vesti Nedeli*, Rossiya-1, 31 January 2016 <<http://vesti7.ru/article/350379/episode/31-01-2016>> (accessed 6 May 2024). This commentary was broadcast in response to the BBC documentary *Putin's Secret Riches*, which was aired on BBC One and BBC World on 25 and 27 January 2016.
- 16 Mikhail Yuryev, 'Krepost Rossiya. Kontseptsiya dlya prezidenta' ('Fortress Russia. A concept for the president'), *Novaya Gazeta*, 15 March 2004 <<https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2004/03/15/22740-krepost-rossiya-kontseptsiya-dlya-prezidenta>> (accessed 22 April 2024).
- 17 For the overview of the text's influence on anti-Western conspiracy theories in contemporary Russia, see Ilya Yablokov, *Fortress Russia: Conspiracy Theories in the Post-Soviet World* (Wiley, 2018), pp. 10–11.
- 18 Paradoxically, the notion of Western interference has been systematically employed by Putin's government to justify Russia's involvement in the internal affairs of former Soviet republics, in addition to increasing repression within Russia. Both are presented as a means of protecting Russian identity and values, in Rodionov's words, 'the very existence of Russia', understood through the lens of the ideology of the 'Russian world'. See Mikhail Suslov, "'Russian World" Concept: Post-Soviet Geopolitical Ideology and the Logic of "Spheres of Influence"', *Geopolitics*, 23.2 (2018), pp. 330–53, doi: 10.1080/14650045.2017.1407921.
- 19 Bykov, 'Nebolshoe obraschenie k vam, moi dorogie zriteli'.
- 20 Elena Prokhorova, Alexandre Prokhorov, and Salys Rimgaila, 'Glocalizing Neo-Noir: Iury Bykov's *The Method* and *Sleepers*', in *Russian TV Series in the Era of Transition: Genres, Technologies, Identities*, ed. by Alexander Prokhorov, Elena Prokhorova, and Rimgaila Salys (Academic Studies Press, 2021), pp. 165–89.
- 21 Egor Fedosov and Elena Genina, 'Globalization of the Internal Enemy Image in the Soviet Visual Propaganda during the Early Cold War (1946–1953)', *The Bulletin of Kemerovo State University*, 20.4 (2020), pp. 952–62, doi: 10.21603/2078-8975-2020-22-4-952-962.
- 22 Sergey Bednov, 'Nespyashchiye Na Lubyanke' ('Sleepless in Lubyanka'), *Trud*, 2017 <www.trud.ru/article/13-10-2017/1355298_nespjaschie_na_lubjanke.html> (accessed 17 April 2024); Anastasiya Mironova, "'Spyashchiye" vmesto aprelyskikh tezisov' ("Sleepers" instead of April talking points'), 13 October 2017 <www.gazeta.ru/comments/column/mironova/10930460.shtml?updated> (accessed 14 April 2024); Aleksey Korostelev and Pavel Lobkov, "'Zhan-Zhak", Navalny i Venediktov: vse paralleli seriala "Spyashchiye" s rossyskimi liberalami' ("Jean-Jacques", Navalny and

- Venediktov: all the parallels of the TV series “Sleepers” with Russian liberals’), *Tvrain.tv*, 18 October 2017 <https://tvrain.tv/teleshov/here_and_now/kto_byl_prototipom_spyashchih-447895> (accessed 14 April 2024).
- 23 See, for example, Evgeny Shestakov, ‘Chto rasskazal Makfol o strukture “tsvetnykh” revolyutsy’ (‘What McFaul told us about the structure of “colour” revolutions’), *RG.RU*, 2020 <<https://rg.ru/2020/08/12/chto-rasskazal-makfol-o-strukture-cvetnyh-revolucij.html>> (accessed 12 June 2025); Aleksandr Bratersky and Valery Volkov, ‘Dipmissiya vypolnena. Posol SShA v Rossii Maykl Makfol mozhnet pokinut svoj post do novogo goda’ (‘Mission accomplished. US Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul may leave his post before the new year’), *Gazeta.ru*, 8 November 2013 <www.gazeta.ru/politics/2013/11/05_a_5737589.shtml> (accessed 12 June 2025).
 - 24 Sylvie Allouche and Sandra Laugier, ‘Présentation’, in *24 heures chrono, naissance du genre sécuritaire?*, ed. by Sylvie Allouche (Vrin, 2021), doi:10.53984/philoserries01209.
 - 25 Pablo Castrillo, ‘Castles and Labyrinths: Aesthetics of Power and Surveillance in Post-9/11 Television’, *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 47.2 (2019), pp. 110–19, doi:10.1080/01956051.2018.1540393. Also Delphine Letort, ‘Conspiracy Culture in *Homeland* (2011–2015)’, *Media, War & Conflict*, 10.2 (2017), pp. 152–67, doi:10.1177/1750635216656968.
 - 26 Pablo Echart and Pablo Castrillo, ‘Towards a Narrative Definition of the American Political Thriller Film’, *Communication & Society*, 28.4 (2015), pp. 109–21, doi:10.15581/003.28.35944; Joseph Oldham, ‘Changing Narratives of Conspiracy on British Television: A Review of *Hunted*, *Secret State*, *Complicit* and *Utopia*’, *Journal of Intelligence History*, 13.1 (2014), pp. 94–103, doi:10.1080/16161262.2013.840157.
 - 27 For example, see Maksvel, ‘Review on *Sleepers*’, *Kinopoisk* (2017) <www.kinopoisk.ru/user/1301975> (accessed 22 April 2024).
 - 28 Yaroslav Zabaluyev, “Ne byvayet lyudey, kotorye rabotayut vragami”. Sergey Minayev o rabote nad stenariyem seriala “Spyashchiye” na Pervom kanale’ (“There is no such thing as people who work as enemies.” Sergey Minaev about the script of the TV series *Sleepers* on Channel One’), *Gazeta.Ru*, 9 October 2017 <www.gazeta.ru/culture/2017/10/08/a_10923110.shtml> (accessed 12 April 2024).
 - 29 Sandra Laugier, ‘*The Americans*: Amour, espionnage et remariage’, in *Les Séries. Laboratoire d'éveil politique*, ed. by Sandra Laugier (CNRS Éditions, 2023), pp. 29–50.
 - 30 Aleksandr Shumsky, ‘Probuzhdeniye “spyashchikh” (“Sleepers” awakening)’, *zavtra.ru*, 17 October 2017 <https://zavtra.ru/blogs/probuzhdenie_spyashih> (accessed 11 September 2024).
 - 31 Mironova, “‘Spyashchiye’ vmesto aprelskikh tezisov’. Presented in April 1917, the April Thesis summarized the key points of Lenin’s plan to seize power and establish Soviet rule in the country.

Chapter 7

Teşkilat: The Political Power of Television Series in Turkey

Solène Poyraz

The spy series *Teşkilat* (*The Organization*) follows the exploits of a team of five agents as they confront the international terrorist group known as Şirket ('The Enterprise'). The series has been broadcast since March 2021 on TRT1, a Turkish public television channel affiliated with the Communications Department of the Office of the President of the Republic.¹ Additionally, it has also been exported internationally. There is some evidence that *Teşkilat* has been a popular choice among the audience since its first season.² However, in contrast to series created by privately owned channels, whose renewal for further seasons is largely determined by their popularity, series produced for TRT are not subject to audience ratings. In this regard, it is noteworthy that *Teşkilat* has now reached its fourth season.

The Turkish series (*dizi*) industry has become a significant and lucrative sector since the 2000s, contributing to Turkey's dominance in the international market.³ As the second-largest exporter after the United States, the Turkish TV drama industry has been officially recognized as a sector of strategic importance in recent years, particularly in the wake of the profound transformation of the country's media landscape initiated by the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AKP, Justice and Development Party), in power since 2002.⁴ The series produced and broadcast by TRT channel have been employed by the Turkish authorities as a tool in their political communication strategy, with the goal to establish their own regime of truth. The AKP's use of series as a key element of regional and international soft power has already received some scholarly attention.⁵ This chapter will discuss the use of the series in the context of domestic political communication.

The focus on TV series constitutes a strategic decision by the government, given that Turkey—which can be described as a 'television society' (*televizyon toplumu*)—reports a record average daily viewing time of 3.5 hours, with series coming second only to the news.⁶ Watching series on TV tends to involve more social interaction compared to using streaming services. It is generally associated with family time rather than being a solitary activity.

The format, which typically consists of two-hour episodes, a recap of the previous episodes, and a preview of the forthcoming one, allows the audience to become familiar with the series and establish the level of audience support required to continue filming. According to the scholar Aylin Dağsalgüler, the public's awareness of the impact of television series in Turkey can be traced back to the controversy surrounding the series *Mubteşem Yüzyıl* (*The Magnificent Century*, 2011–2014), which was broadcast by the private channels Show TV and Star TV.⁷ 'We don't have such an ancestor' (*Böyle bir ecdadımız yok*), the Turkish prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, commented at a rally in November 2012, referring to the image of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent conveyed by the series, which depicts a ruler who spends more time in his harem than on horseback.⁸ In 2014, TRT presented its own historical series, *Diriliş Ertuğrul* (*Resurrection: Ertuğrul*, 2014–2019), which recounted the adventures of the father of Osman Gazi, the founder of the Ottoman Empire, in the thirteenth century. Subsequently, TRT broadcast several other historical series, including *Payitaht: Abdülhamid* (*The Capital: Abdul Hamid*, 2017–2021) and *Barbaros* (2021), which adopt a nostalgic narrative approach to the past.⁹ These 'commissioned' series (*sipariş dizisi*) represent a form of historical appropriation by the government,¹⁰ to the extent that it becomes unclear as to whether these series remain in the realm of fiction or rather claim the status of a history textbook.¹¹

The spy series that will be discussed in this chapter represents an original TRT project that builds upon the success of another spy series, *Kurtlar Vadisi* (*Valley of the Wolves*, 2003–2005). The latter, broadcast by the private channel Show TV in 2003, depicted the operations carried out by a Turkish intelligence agent to neutralize an international mafia group threatening the country's prosperity. *Teşkilat*, by comparison, is broadcast on a public television channel, is sponsored by the main armament suppliers to the Turkish armed forces, and offers content aligned with the government's official rhetoric. In the context of the attempted coup in 2016 and the presidentialization of the regime in 2018, this series appears to be part of a larger state project to establish an overarching political communication strategy. This raises the question: is *Teşkilat* a security series like any other?

On the one hand, it is similar to other series of its genre in that it offers access to a world that is normally inaccessible to the public and to the scholars.¹² In a manner similar to the French spy series *Le Bureau des Légendes* (*The Bureau*), *Teşkilat* provides insider access to the world of secret services. Unlike all other local productions, which usually feature the famous views of the Bosphorus in Istanbul, the seaside resorts of Eastern Thrace, or, occasionally, the landscapes of Southeastern Anatolia, this series is set in Ankara, the capital of Turkey. It showcases the latest technological and military inventions, familiarizes the audience with the language of security actors and the new reconfiguration of the Turkish security apparatus. Like *Homeland* and *Le Bureau*, *Teşkilat* depicts the common terrain of military operations in

Syria, Libya, and northern Iraq, as well as broader international security concerns, including the fight against terrorism and the cyber threat. As such, it exemplifies the relentless quest for realism that is the distinguishing feature of the security series genre.¹³

On the other hand, as a series commissioned and distributed by a channel controlled by the Presidency of the Republic and financed by Turkish arms magnates (Baykar, ASELSAN), *Teşkilat* differs from other series of its genre. If we consider that ‘the security series have emerged as a genre which, beyond suspense and personal intrigue, expresses a vision of national security and, beyond that, of human security, a common challenge for democracies’,¹⁴ how can we interpret this type of series in relation to a political regime that some describe as ‘competitive authoritarian’¹⁵ or ‘anti-democratic’?¹⁶ While the philosopher Sandra Laugier views popular culture in a democracy as a form of public moral education, in the context of authoritarian rule, it is worth questioning the ideological content of these series and their role in the communication strategy of the powers behind them. Since series transmit values and particular conceptions of the world, the appropriation of series by the authorities raises doubts about their potential to serve as ‘arenas for discussion.’¹⁷ By analysing the series in terms of both the representations it creates and the context in which it was produced, I argue that *Teşkilat* is an integral part of the government’s communication strategy as it has developed in Turkey’s post-2016 political reality. As a security series commissioned by those in power, it also prompts a discussion of the risks associated with the series in the service of power. Without undertaking a comprehensive reception study, my proposed methodology involves examining the context in which the series was produced and broadcast in relation to the current events and political discourses to which it allies. The first part of this chapter will describe the general process of integrating TV series into the government’s communication arsenal, which was formalized in 2018. The second part will examine the characteristics that distinguish *Teşkilat* from other similar productions and explore the limitations of its educational and reassurance functions.

Teşkilat within the State Communication Strategy

After the controversy surrounding the broadcast of *Muhteşem Yüzyıl*, the ruling party recognized the value of television series in promoting the official vision of Turkey’s past. As a result, historical drama serials were quickly incorporated into a broader policy of historical commemoration and school textbook revision to glorify the Ottoman past and rehabilitate certain controversial historical figures.¹⁸ This is what the historian Edhem Eldem calls a *clorrhoea*: a moment when history, besieged by populist and simplistic rhetoric, invades the political field and the public arena.¹⁹

Concurrently, since the Gezi protests of spring 2013, the AKP has adopted the idea of *algı* (perception)²⁰ as a fundamental element of its mode of governance.²¹ The national protest movement, which began as an environmental

campaign to protect Gezi Park in central Istanbul from an AKP construction project, has since mobilized thousands of people in several cities to demonstrate against the government's authoritarian and violent practices. In response, the government tightened its surveillance of the population and control of civil society, by developing extraordinary means of communication and judicial mechanisms to prevent similar uprisings in the future. In the words of Achille Mbembe, we observed in Turkey the process of 'generalisation of the belligerent relationship as the ultimate consequence of the authoritarian course taken by many political regimes faced with intense protests'.²² This process culminated in the coup attempt of 15 July 2016. On that fateful night, a group of soldiers belonging to the Gülenist movement, a religious brotherhood previously allied with the government, launched a failed coup attempt, targeting mainly Istanbul and Ankara. The attempt was quickly thwarted, largely due to strong popular support following a live FaceTime call from Recep Tayyip Erdoğan encouraging 'the people' to take to the streets. This was followed by widespread repressions, largely driven by a crackdown on members of the Gülen Brotherhood, whose image has undergone a significant transformation in official discourse from a pro-government group to a terrorist organization. As a result, political news coverage has become increasingly dominated by the securitization perspective, with the news agenda consistently interpreted in terms of threats and placed within the domain of national security.²³

The 2017 referendum approved the presidentialization of the regime, which in turn led to the institutional reorganization that began in 2018. In particular, the newly created Directorate for Presidency Communications was established with a direct reporting line to the Presidency. It was tasked with implementing the Turkish Government communication model, originally proposed by Fahrettin Altun, who defined it as follows:

We have endeavoured to establish an inclusive ecosystem encompassing all communication stakeholders, from the media to universities. Indeed, we have sought to manage communication in a systematic manner. All these efforts have been integrated into a coherent model, which we have designated as 'Turkey's communication model'.²⁴

Television serials are an important element of this communication strategy and receive significant state funding. TRT-produced series have the largest budgets, with the average cost per episode ranging from one to two million Turkish lira, as in the case of *Diriliş Ertuğrul* or *Barbaros*.²⁵ Along with the media, think tanks, and universities, series are used by authorities as a privileged vehicle to disseminate their own regime of truth. *Teşkilat* is distinctive in that it is not, strictly speaking, a historical series; rather, it deals with immediate history.²⁶ The series presents a comprehensive account of the events that occurred between 2010 and 2020 and offers an

interpretation of the contemporary reality as perceived by those in power. The most recent example of rewriting of the recent past through the series is *Metamorfoz* (*Metamorphosis*, 2023–), a series depicting the life of Osman Kavala, a businessman, philanthropist, and cultural figure, who has been imprisoned in Turkey since 2017. As Osman Kavala's trial continues, the series on Tabii, TRT's new streaming platform, has introduced a dark character vaguely based on him and his story.²⁷ The TRT channel's productions serve to disseminate the prevailing state ideology. They define which individuals are considered part of the 'us' and which are the 'enemy', which are the 'good citizens' and which are the 'bad' ones, or what the 'traitor' or even the 'terrorist' looks like. Julien Paris had already described this specific use of series by the authorities as a means of re-establishing moral order within society.²⁸

Since 2021, *Teşkilat* has presented on screen various aspects of Turkey's foreign policy and the key figures involved in its formulation, inviting the audience to understand and interpret them in a particular manner. In the current climate of criticism directed at Turkey's foreign policy by a portion of the population, *Teşkilat* presents a scenario justifying the country's interventions abroad over the past decade. It appears that the primary concern of the scriptwriters of the first season of the series was to address the question, 'What are we doing in Syria?' (*'Suriye'de ne işimiz var?'*), which had become a subject of controversy in parliament and on social media, especially after the death of thirty-six Turkish soldiers in Idlib on 27 February 2020. The first season of the series is therefore structured around the theme of conflict in Syria, introducing viewers to the activities of the Turkish police and military special forces in the region. The series' focus on the humanitarian operations of the Turkish armed forces, recognized by the local population, echoes the official narrative disseminated by the Ministry of Defence's YouTube channel and the state-owned media outlet Agence Anatolie. Both outlets regularly report on the distribution of humanitarian aid by Turkish soldiers on Syrian territory.

In this respect, the discourse within the series reflects the original project of the AKP's 'revolution of the minds', which aims to restore the people's confidence in Turkey's greatness. The AKP presents itself as the party of a cause (*Dava Partisi*) which stands for the values of a 'great and strong' Turkey in a 'fairer world'.²⁹ *Teşkilat* repeatedly employs clichés that resonate with the official rhetoric. For example, one of the characters proclaims in the first episode: 'We have embarked on the road to becoming one of the centres in a new, polycentric world, but the Company has always punished those who do not bend to the system' (S1E1). This phrase strongly echoes the Turkish president's slogan, 'The world is bigger than five', which questions the current international order. In Episode 10, during a dialogue explaining the reasons for Turkey's presence in Syria, another character says: 'There is no table where we do not have a seat' (*'Olmadığımız masa yoktur'*), using a phrase taken from Turkey's official rhetoric in defence of its foreign policy (S1E10).

The Limitations of an Initiating and Educational Security Series

‘The *Teşkilat* series will be the first to show footage from the MİT (Turkish National Intelligence Agency) campus, which is carefully guarded and known as the “Fortress”. The series will also show the methods used in MİT field operations and the latest advances in drone technology (İHA/SİHA)’, the conservative, pro-regime newspaper *Yeni Şafak* reported on 7 March 2021, the day the first episode was released.³⁰ By showing places and practices that are usually hidden from public view, *Teşkilat* respects the basic principle of the spy series, which is to introduce viewers to ‘unexplained forms of life and new, initially opaque vocabulary’.³¹ To achieve this, the show’s creators not only chose the locations and weapons used by real-life secret agents, but also ensured that the actors were able to perform realistic shooting and combat scenes, which required them to be specially trained in the use of firearms.³²

Teşkilat can be classified within the security genre, as it reflects the transformations that the state security apparatus has undergone since 2016. The process of democratization that began in Turkey in the 1990s, influenced by the European project, has led to a reduction of the military’s involvement in the country’s political affairs. Although it remains powerful, it has been overtaken by other actors, particularly the MİT, which plays a decisive role in the power structures alongside new private intelligence agencies. Since the recent reversal of the trend towards centralization of power, the High Command has become increasingly subordinate to the Ministry of the Interior, with the police and the Ministry receiving ample funding, while the army is frequently deployed outside the country. The resumption of the conflict in southeastern Turkey in 2015 between the Turkish state and the PKK, Kurdish Workers’ Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*), a proscribed terrorist organization, has accelerated the reorganization of the state security services in favour of the police, the gendarmerie, and its special forces (PÖH, *Polis Özel Harekat*, and JÖH, *Jandarma Özel Harekat*). From the very first episode, *Teşkilat* follows the course of an operation conducted by these special forces, with an agent in the field, a drone, another agent making decisions in the command centre in Ankara, and the timeline leading up to the firing of the drone.

The series presents the most advanced weapons recently added to the Turkish armed forces’ inventory. In this respect, it fulfils an initiation function, introducing viewers from the outset to the uses and working of a drone manufactured in Turkey (SİHA). As the episodes progress, we become more familiar with the technology and discover its limitations: the drone has to be used quickly, as it only has a limited number of flying hours. Drones are repeatedly presented as the saviour: ‘The apocalypse will fall on them from the sky (*kiyamet onlara gökyüzünden gelecek*)’, the head of the secret service proclaims from his command post in the middle of an operation. Yet, he insists that this is a team effort, with the drone only there to assist the agent

in his mission: 'The drone comes in support.' The logos of major arms companies such as Baykar and Aselsan, which appear on screen at the end of each episode, complete the display of Turkish drones and weapons, reinforcing the communication arsenal designed to project an image of Turkey as an armed power.

The educational aspect of the series is undermined when the use of surveillance, cameras, and drones places the viewer in the position of a constant observer in the face of an ever-present threat. The development of drone technology provides new possibilities for the 'big hunt' in the name of fighting terrorism—a manhunt, which is based on 'an eye that has become a weapon'.³³ Indeed, the action in the series is often framed through cameras (drones, helicopters, weapons, and so on) and their lenses. As the episodes unfold, viewers also learn about some of the violent practices sanctioned by the state.³⁴ The dehumanization of the enemy through the tracking and the use of drones is reiterated in the news bulletins announcing the 'neutralization' of terrorist elements as part of the Turkish armed forces' operations in Syria and Iraq. Similar images appear on news channels and at large public events. The Teknofest festival, which has been held in Turkey annually since 2018, is the project of the Bayraktar brothers, owners of the Baykar company, and one of *Teşkilat's* sponsors. The festival is an occasion to exhibit the full range of the military's armaments. For a week, visitors who often come with their families can observe anti-terrorist operation drills, while children can build model drones or fly them on simulation stands.

Incidentally, it is the engineers who design the drones who come under attack in the first episode. The chief engineer, as he dies from a gunshot wound, tells an agent called Serdar that the drone security protocol has been stolen by the attackers:

Serdar: Stay calm, the ambulance will be here...

Chief Engineer: They stole it... they stole the SİHA security protocol...

Serdar: Stay calm...

Chief Engineer: This project... it's everything for us... promise me...

Serdar: Promise you what?

Chief Engineer: Promise me that you'll get that data back, promise me so that I can die in peace.

Serdar: I promise... but you won't die, hold on, stay calm... (S1E1)

The series' script creates an atmosphere of general suspicion in which all organizations represent a potential threat to Turkey. In the first episode, the 'President', the head of the team of agents, reminds the audience of the ethos of the series when he says: 'It's our job to be suspicious, Serdar, don't trust anyone.' As happened after the release of *Le Bureau* in France, *Teşkilat* has led to a surge of interest in the intelligence professions in Turkey. However,

there has also been a notable increase in the number of reports made by ordinary citizens on the intelligence services' website, rising from 23,553 in 2020 to 75,000 in 2023. These figures reflect a pervasive policy that promotes a society of whistleblowers as a guarantee of public security and good citizenship.

A Series to Reassure: From the Exacerbation of National Values to the Necropolitical Relationship with the State

The series, which follows a team of likeable agents as they try to stop the enemies of the Turkish nation, aims to reassure the audience. This is particularly evident in light of the nation's traumatic experience with the Islamic State organization, which was responsible for a series of deadly attacks between 2015 and 2017, resulting in numerous casualties among the civilian population. Similarly to France and Belgium, Turkey has been the target of terrorist attacks in central locations of its largest cities, Istanbul and Ankara, including Ankara's train station on 10 October 2015 (with 109 fatalities), Atatürk Airport on 28 June 2016 (with 45 fatalities), İstiklal Avenue on 19 March 2016 (with 5 fatalities), and the Reina nightclub on 1 January 2017 (with 39 fatalities). *Teşkilat* revisits these painful, repressed experiences, which do not receive the reparative benefits of a trial process in the real world (as may be the case in France). It offers a reassuring and comforting framework for analysis, featuring Turkish security agents who are prepared to sacrifice their lives in order to protect their country.

In an interview conducted in June 2021, a few months after the release of the first season of *Teşkilat*, İbrahim Eren, the former director of the TRT1 channel, claimed that the success of the series was not a coincidence, but the result of a long reflection about the way to respond to society's demand for content that would expose national and local values (*yerli ve milli*).³⁵ Throughout the episodes, patriotic and nationalist values are celebrated through the use of dialogue and symbols (such as the Turkish flag). The series can be interpreted as a form of appropriation of reality: it gives meaning to the traumatic events and offers relief in an increasingly uncertain context. In this regard, the analysis of historical series proposed by Deniz İnceoğlu, and his reference to Svetlana Boym's concept of 'restorative nostalgia' as opposed to 'reflexive nostalgia', is particularly insightful.³⁶ İnceoğlu argues that those in power use the series as a means of rewriting history through the manipulation of national myths and symbols.³⁷ In other words, in times when people feel disoriented and insecure, they turn to the past in order to rediscover a foundation of nationalist and even military values.

Teşkilat begins with a fire in which young Serdar tragically loses his entire family. It is suggested that the family lived in Germany at the time and that the fire was deliberately set by a group of neo-Nazis. Only young Serdar is rescued: he is thrown out of a window by his father and caught in a sheet stretched out by the neighbours in the street. Although the incident takes

place in the imaginary town of Karolinenweg in 1995, the scene alludes to the fire in Solingen on the night of 28 May 1993, in which five people of Turkish origin perished. The camera lingers on a slogan written in black paint on the wall: ‘*Turken RAUS*’ (‘Turks out’), serving as a reminder of a dark period for Turkish immigrants in Germany during the 1990s.

Embassy official: I’ve come to take you back to Turkey.

Serdar: I don’t have anyone in Turkey.

EO: You have your state. From now on, it’s the state of the Turkish Republic that’s your mother and your father. (S1E1)

This is the very first dialogue in the series, when the Turkish embassy official comes to take young Serdar back to Turkey. The image that accompanies the dialogue is particularly striking: it shows the hand of a man, wearing a ring with the Turkish flag, reaching out to take the hand of a child. This image symbolizes the Turkish state as a saviour, and a state that assumes the roles of both father and mother, as a substitute for a family.

A few minutes later, Serdar appears as an adult, now a special agent, on the verge of neutralizing a wanted terrorist. When he warns the criminal by walkie-talkie that he is ‘coming to get him’, the latter asks him: ‘Who are you?’ ‘The Turkish state,’ replies Serdar (S1E1). In less than twenty minutes, the narrative shifts from portraying the state as a family to presenting Serdar as the state personified. Such framing establishes a clear relationship between the state and the agents of the secret services, which will be maintained throughout the series. Despite the character being presented as a superhero, his personality is ultimately subsumed by the state. The same idea is reflected in the series’ slogan: ‘There are certain heroes; the state lives with them, their names are buried in history...’ (*Bazı kahramanlar vardır; devlet onlarla yaşar, isimleri tarihe gömülür...*). This phrase suggests that the state is perpetuated by these heroic figures, yet their individuality is ‘buried’. In order to fulfil his duties, Serdar must set aside his emotions and feelings. In the second episode, when he confesses to his superior that he is in a romantic relationship, the latter cautions him that love can impair his ability to perceive reality and potential threats:

Serdar: Isn’t that why we love? Because it makes us blind?

Senior agent: For us, the world doesn’t exist Serdar, you only have your State, don’t forget, be careful. (S1E2)

In the first episode, Serdar makes a promise to a dying engineer that he will recover the data on the drones, which we understand to be of great value to the nation. According to the plot, the Turkish intelligence services then decide to put together a team of their best agents to recover this security protocol. The selected agents agree to pretend to be dead to their relatives for the mission. ‘They chose to die before they died’ (‘Ölmeden önce ölmeyi

seçtiler'), highlights the series description. The agents do not hesitate to leave behind their mothers, children, and wives. The 'President', representing the higher authority, asks the candidates for the mission to 'think' before accepting it, thus giving them a choice. However, the answer from the chosen agents is unequivocal:

Agent: You have spoken of the State, you have spoken of the mission, my President, there is nothing more to say.
 President: Still, think about it... (S1E1)

By creating this team of martyr agents who choose to 'die' before they die, the series promotes the idea of a collective 'us' who are prepared to die for their country and for ideals that transcend individuality. In a mode of governance by crisis, the objective of the authorities is to consolidate their ranks as the crisis unfolds, thereby retreating to a limited set of values and a new way of forming a community. This is evidenced by the TRT channel, whose slogan, 'Stories that unite us' (*Bizi birleştiren hikayeler*), indicates a commitment to redefining a collective 'us', based primarily on a discourse of victimhood, the revival of a relationship with the state, and the necropolitical principle. That's what is at stake here: as defined by Achille Mbembe, it is the reign of a 'sacrificial economy whose functioning requires, on the one hand, the generalised lowering of the price of life, and on the other, habituation to loss'.³⁸

Conclusion

Teşkilat marks a new phase in the AKP government's gradual appropriation of the serial industry. Produced and broadcast by the public television network TRT, which is directly linked to the Presidency, the series have become an integral part of the government's political communication strategy. Their purpose is not simply to project soft power in the region or to correct the narratives conveyed by certain popular productions by the privately owned channels. Rather, they are a showcase for the Turkish state's approach to security, as it has been reformulated in the post-2016 political reality. As a result, the ethical dimension and the initiating and educational functions of such series are diverted into a specific political use. While retaining elements of historical nationalism, *Teşkilat* offers an interpretation of immediate history as formulated by those in power. In the process, it introduces viewers to the 'new' players who are taking centre stage in the recent reconfiguration of the security apparatus (special forces, secret agents, and drones). It also familiarizes the public with their methods (targeted assassinations, kidnappings, and so on) and endorses certain social behaviours, attitudes, and practices (such as suspicion, denunciation, and sacrificial economy).

Unlike other series in its genre, *Teşkilat* is far from confronting viewers with ethical dilemmas or presenting them with a series of moral choices.

Neither Serdar nor the viewers have a choice: the interests of the state and the homeland must always prevail. This specific relationship with the state is not a new trend; it is consistent with the rhetoric of the Turkish series which promote historical nationalism. However, as Julien Paris points out in his analysis of forms of moral regulation in the audiovisual sphere, the means employed and the content broadcast by the state remain contingent on the national political environment.³⁹

The use of fiction to legitimate reality, beyond the pursuit of realism characteristic of security series, is more broadly aligned with the AKP's mode of governance. The objective is to construct an audiovisual imaginary that supports a representation of the world in which threats are dispersed and diffuse, and anxieties are rekindled. This enables the authorities to justify their actions *a posteriori* and to formulate their political agenda accordingly. The on-screen dialogues, landscapes, and symbols resonate directly with official rhetoric, confirming and reinforcing cognitive reflexes or, on the contrary, preparing the imagination for all possible threats and anticipating appropriate responses.

Notes

- 1 In July 2018, the Turkish Supreme Audiovisual Council (RTÜK) was attached to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, while the TRT channel came under the control of the Presidency through its affiliation to the Directorate of Communication (İletişim Başkanlığı).
- 2 According to media sources, the viewing rate totalled 10.10 points for the first episode of Season 1, broadcast on Sunday, 7 March 2021. Additionally, the series ranked at the top of Twitter feeds nationwide. 'Teşkilat ilk bölümüyle reyting rekorları kırdı' ('Teşkilat broke rating records with its first episode'), *TRTHaber*, 8 March 2021 <www.trthaber.com.translate.google/haber/gundem/teskilat-ilk-bolumuyla-reyting-rekorlari-kirdi-562475.html?_x_tr_sl=auto&_x_tr_tl=en&_x_tr_hl=en&_x_tr_pto=wapp&_x_tr_hist=true> (accessed 1 September 2023).
- 3 Arzu Öztürkmen, "'Turkish Content': The Historical Rise of the *Dizi* Genre', *TV/Series*, 13 (2018), doi:10.4000/tvseries.2406.
- 4 Emre Erdoğan and Tuğçe Erçetin, 'Medya Sistemleri Tartışmasında Kutuplaşma ve Popülizm İlişkisi', in *Popülizm ve Medya*, ed. by Yasemin Giritli İnceoğlu and Savaş Çoban (Ayrıntı, 2023), pp. 222–63.
- 5 Özlem Arda, Pınar Aslan and Constanza Mujica, *Transnationalization of Turkish Television Series* (Istanbul University Press, 2021).
- 6 Report prepared by survey agency KONDA, 'Dizi ve Haber Tercihleri' ('Preferences in terms of series and information'), January 2018 <<https://konda.com.tr/tr/rapor/konda-medya-raporu>> (accessed 10 September 2023).
- 7 Aylin Dağsalgüler, 'Osman Kavala, hakikat ötesi, Metamorfoz' ('Osman Kavala, beyond the truth, Metamorphose'), *Gazete Duvar*, 24 June 2023 <www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/osman-kavala-hakikat-otesi-metamorfoz-makale-1625260> (accessed 10 September 2023).
- 8 Julien Paris, 'La morale nationale et internationale des histoires. L'impératif moral dans la production et la circulation des séries télévisées turques', in *La Circulation des*

Productions Culturelles, ed. by Dominique Marchetti (Centre Jacques-Berque, Institut français d'études anatoliennes, 2017), doi:10.4000/books.cjb.1201.

- 9 Deniz İnceoğlu, 'Osmanlı Tarihi Temalı Televizyon dizileri Aracılığıyla Nostalji ve Popülizm', in *Popülizm ve Medya*, ed. by Yasemin Giritli İnceoğlu and Savaş Çoban (Ayrıntı, 2023), pp. 404–16.
- 10 Ludovica Tua, 'Un sultan en prime time. Un modèle de masculinité dans les séries télévisées turques', *Le Temps des Médias*, 36 (2021), pp. 102–20, doi:10.3917/tdm.036.0102.
- 11 Tinas Rukiye, 'Quel rôle jouent les séries historiques turques: manuels d'histoire ou fictions?', *Séries: les sens de l'Histoire*, 17 (2020), doi:10.4000/tvseries.4042.
- 12 This series has become a part of my corpus for the study of the narratives surrounding the Syrian conflict in Turkey since 2011, following the impossibility of observation of military operations on the ground.
- 13 Pauline Blistène, 'Quand les séries télévisées s'emparent de la lutte contre le terrorisme', *Esprit* (March 2018) <<https://esprit.presse.fr/article/pauline-blistene/quand-les-series-televisees-s-emparent-de-la-lutte-contre-le-terrorisme-41395>> (accessed 1 October 2023).
- 14 Sandra Laugier, *Nos vies en série: philosophie et morale d'une culture populaire* (Climats, 2019).
- 15 Esen Berk, Şebnem Gümüşçü, and Hakan Yavuzylmaz, *Türkiye'nin Yeni Rejimi: Rekabetçi Otoriterlik (Turkey's New Regime: Competitive Authoritarianism)* (İletişim, 2023).
- 16 Hamit Bozarslan, *L'anti-démocratie au XXIème siècle: Iran, Russie, Turquie* (CNRS Editions, 2021).
- 17 *Séries politiques: le pouvoir entre fiction et réalité*, ed. by Emmanuel Taïeb and Rémi Lefebvre (De Boeck, 2020).
- 18 Tua, 'Un sultan en prime time'.
- 19 Edhem Eldem, 'L'Empire ottoman et la Turquie face à l'Occident', *La lettre du Collège de France*, 44 (2019) < <https://books.openedition.org/cdf/6201?lang=en> > (accessed 14 August 2024).
- 20 In his book on the vocabulary of time, *Zamanın kelimeleri*, Tanıl Bora revisits the term 'perception' (*algı*), recalling that it originates from the Pentagon and refers to a war logic that seeks to destroy the enemy at all costs and considers the truth to be a theatre of operations. Tanıl Bora, *Zamanın kelimeleri, Yeni Türkiye'nin Siyasi Dili (Words of Time, Political Language of New Turkey)* (İletişim, 2018).
- 21 Agathe Fautras, 'Résister en situation autoritaire : le cas des collectifs militants d'après-Gezi à Istanbul (2013–2018)', *Carnets de géographes*, 12 (2019) <<http://journals.openedition.org/cdg/4916>> (accessed 8 October 2023).
- 22 Achille Mbembe, *Politiques de l'inimitié* (La Découverte, 2018), p. 58.
- 23 Esen Berk and Başar Baysal, 'Güvenlikleştirme ve Demokratik Gerileme İlişkisi: Türkiye Örneği', in *Eleştirel Güvenlik ve Türkiye*, ed. by Esen Berk and Başar Baysal (İletişim, 2022), pp. 129–62.
- 24 Haber Merkezi, 'İletişim başkanı Fahrettin Altun: 'Türkiye İletişim Modeli' olarak kurumsallaştırdık' ('Communications chief Fahrettin Altun: we have institutionalised it as "Turkey's communications model"'), *BengüTürk*, 10 May 2023 <www.benguturk.com/iletisim-baskani-fahrettin-altun-turkiye-iletisim-modeli-olarak-kurumsallastirdik> (accessed 7 October 2023).
- 25 İnceoğlu, 'Osmanlı Tarihi Temalı Televizyon dizileri Aracılığıyla Nostalji ve Popülizm'.

- 26 Jean-François Soulet, *L'histoire immédiate, Historiographie, sources et méthodes* (Armand Colin, 2012).
- 27 Aylin Dağsalgüler, 'Osman Kavala. Hakikat ve Ötesi', *Gazete Duvar*, 24 June 2023 <www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/osman-kavala-hakikat-otesi-metamorfoz-makale-1625260> (accessed 7 October 2023).
- 28 Paris, 'La morale nationale et internationale des histoires'.
- 29 Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, *Daha Adil Bir Dünya Mümkün (A Fairer World is Possible)* (Turkuvaz Kitap, 2021).
- 30 'Teşkilat nerede çekiliyor? İşte, Teşkilat'ın dizisi konusu ve oyuncularını' ('Where is Teşkilat filmed? Here, Teşkilat's series plot and cast'), *Yeni Şafak*, 7 March 2021 <www.yenisafak.com/teskilat-nerede-cekiliyor-teskilat-dizisi-konusu-oyunculari-h-3602444> (accessed 1 September 2023).
- 31 Pauline Blistène, 'The Bureau and the realism of spy fiction', *Open Philosophy*, 5.1 (2022), doi:10.1515/opphil-2020-0178.
- 32 A meeting with the cast of *Teşkilat* at the Cinema Atlas 1948 as part of the 'Meetings with Young People and Children' at the Beyoğlu cultural festival (*Beyoğlu Kültür Yolu Festivali*), Istanbul, October 2022.
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Chapter 8

Al-Ikhtiyar or the Apology of the Egyptian State: (Re)Writing History on the Small Screen

Sixtine Deroure

In Egypt, Ramadan series are a cultural phenomenon embraced by various segments of the population, with the holy month being a period during which ‘people avidly watch some of the most captivating serials broadcast each year’.¹ One such series, which premiered during the month of Ramadan in 2020, achieved phenomenal success as evidenced by media professionals claiming that ‘almost all Egyptians watched it and cried’.² The three seasons of *al-Ikhtiyar* (*The Choice*, 2020–2022), produced by a company owned by the General Intelligence Services, present a number of significant events in the political development of Egypt following the 25 January 2011 revolution, aligning with the prevailing narrative of the current regime.

Three distinct regimes succeeded each other in a relatively short span of time following the revolution that brought an end to Hosni Mubarak’s thirty-year dictatorship rule. Mubarak’s ousting was first succeeded by a temporary rule of the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), followed by elections in June 2012 that brought Mohamed Morsi, a candidate from the Muslim Brotherhood, to power. However, public opinion became increasingly hostile towards Morsi, with the media launching a lynching campaign against his political leadership, leading to massive demonstrations.³ These major upheavals were accompanied by numerous events: demonstrations, street clashes resulting in casualties, national referendums, the drafting of new constitutions and the dissolution of the National Assembly. Morsi was ultimately removed from power just a year after his inauguration in a coup led by his former Minister of Defence, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, with the support of thousands of demonstrators. At the time, al-Sisi invoked a ‘popular mandate’ (*tafwid*), calling for more massive demonstrations to ‘combat terrorism’, thereby enabling his new regime to employ unprecedented levels of violence against its opponents.⁴ This violence culminated in the police massacre of

thousands of supporters of the ousted President Morsi on 14 August 2013, who had gathered for sit-ins at Rab'a and al-Nahda squares in Cairo.⁵ Subsequently, authorities quashed the brief period of political openness brought about by the revolution through a series of brutal repressions.⁶ In response, Islamist militants launched an armed insurgency in North Sinai and attacks in major urban centres across the country against state government forces, particularly targeting the army and police.⁷ The authorities accused the Muslim Brotherhood of being behind the attacks and the organization was officially declared as a 'terrorist organization' in December 2013.⁸ Meanwhile, the post-coup political shutdown was accompanied by the crafting of a national narrative aimed at legitimizing the military regime while undermining any form of opposition. The armed insurgency in North Sinai continues to this day, manifesting in varying degrees of intensity and confronting regular governmental military campaigns.

The Plotlines of the Three Seasons

The plot of *al-Ikhtiyar* revolves around the conflicts between the Muslim Brotherhood, which is depicted as a 'terrorist organization', and jihadist groups associated with it, on the one hand, and the state military and security services on the other. The series revisits the pivotal events of the past decade, placing a special emphasis on the valour and sacrifice of both police and military personnel, celebrated together as the 'martyrs of duty' by the authorities.

The title of the series reflects a speech given by President al-Sisi in 2018, wherein the contrast between two real-life army officers, who are the main characters of Season 1, is emphasized.⁹ This season chronicles the experiences of Colonel Ahmed Mansi, who perished in 2017 in an attack led by militants affiliated with Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) on a military checkpoint in al-Barth, North Sinai, the primary theatre of the 'war on terror',¹⁰ and Hisham Ashmawi, who ultimately turned to jihadism. Colonel Mansi was well known to the public in Egypt even before the series was released. His martyrdom, along with twenty-two soldiers on duty at the time, left a lasting impression due to the scale of the attack, as well as the broadcast of his final distress call in the media. Conversely, Ashmawi, who was held responsible by the authorities for organizing numerous terrorist attacks, was declared public enemy number one and arrested in Libya in 2018. He was sentenced to death and executed in March 2020. Their paths symbolize a Manichaean 'choice'—a choice between what the series portrays as good and evil.

The second season, titled 'Men of the Shadows', focuses on police heroes. Several characters are based on real individuals who perished in the 'war on terror', such as Colonel Mabruk, while others are inspired by police officers who are still alive but had their identities changed for security reasons.¹¹ The main characters of the season are inspectors from National Security and agents from the Special Operations of the Central Security Forces, working

to thwart 'Islamist plots'. Both seasons recount events that occurred between 2012 and 2020.

The third season, titled 'The Decision', stands out due to its narrow time-frame, focusing on the years 2012–2013. The plot revolves around the shortcomings and failures of the Muslim Brotherhood during its time in power and depicts the behind-the-scenes events leading to the rise of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, soon to be hailed as the national saviour. The inclusion of the current president in a TV series, a first in Egyptian film and series history, came as a major surprise to the public.¹² The casting of Yasser Galal as President al-Sisi added to the impact: the actor achieved a perfect on-screen rendition of his prominent character, even though they bear little resemblance in real life. Galal, predominantly known for his roles in action movies, joined a cast featuring Egyptian cinema icons such as Amir Karara, Karim Abdel Aziz, Ahmed Mekki, Ahmed Ezz, and Ahmed al-Saaka, some of whom were renowned for their previous comedic roles. The series, broadcast daily during Ramadan in 2020, 2021, and 2022, capitalized on the high value of the holy month for television programming and viewership. Despite its overtly propagandistic tone, underlined by the involvement of the Army's Moral Affairs Department—which falls under the tutelage of the Ministry of Defence and is responsible for the army's public image—in the production of the series, its high-profile cast and broadcast schedule contributed to its popularity in Egypt.¹³

Indeed, *al-Ikhtiyar* offers a valuable perspective for analysing how specific narratives, disseminated through a 'popular' medium, influence the representations of a national history.¹⁴ It is part of a broader history of cinematic propaganda dating back to the 1950s, primarily focused on the narratives of army heroes. These productions, some of which have been funded or 'assisted' by the state, aimed to propagate a nationalist discourse.¹⁵ In addition to glorifying the military, *al-Ikhtiyar* also endeavours to elevate the sacrifices made by policemen to a level equivalent to those of soldiers, as depicted in the first season.¹⁶ The second season draws on the cinematic style developed in the late 1990s, which centred on police exploits.¹⁷

The heroization of both soldiers and policemen is integral to the wider political project of reinstating state authority by promoting the image of its security institutions as the bulwark that has safeguarded the country from the 'Islamist threat'. This process is part of a broader dynamic of erasing the revolutionary years, interpreted by the army as the result of a 'cultural failure',¹⁸ and its dead, the 'martyrs of the revolution': civilians killed in clashes with the police and the army.¹⁹

However, *al-Ikhtiyar* stands out in the current cultural and political landscape. First and foremost, the success of the series can be partly attributed to its technically high-quality production, described as 'historically unusual for a state-sponsored propaganda piece in Egypt'.²⁰ Secondly, the series has sparked extensive discussion and attention from various political actors and observers, who regard it as an authoritative historical narrative. And finally,

unlike previous depictions that focused on earlier conflicts, such as the different wars Egypt led against Israel, it recounts events from the very recent past. Consequently, it serves to glorify individuals who have perished in an ongoing 'war on terror', a topic that frequently dominates the news.

In this article, I analyse the specific techniques used to lend the series the semblance of a historical document, which I refer to as 'a fiction of authority'—a fiction that reproduces an official historical account, whose content is authenticated and serves a legitimizing purpose. This involves the chronological portrayal of well-known events reconstructed through effects, whether narrative or technical, such as the use of archival materials, which I identify as what Roland Barthes described as the 'effect of reality' ('*effet de réel*'), thereby imbuing the narrative with a sense of historicity.²¹ Barthes first formulated this concept in relation to text discussing the realism literature movement, in which he examined the writing technique involving the description of 'unnecessary' details and their impact on the reader. He wondered about the significance of seemingly insignificant details, but he did not provide a clear definition. According to him, these 'unnecessary' details signify reality. Scholars have since applied and expanded upon this concept, particularly in the field of TV series studies.²² I draw upon Hervé Glevarec's definition of the concept, which highlights the permeability between reality and fiction: 'The effect of reality is this contact, of limited duration within the diegesis, with the real and social world. The effect of reality occurs whenever a representational universe (fictional or ordinary setting) "touches" the real world.'²³ This effect is an insertion of reality into the representation. This concept captures the dual movement where 'fiction touches the world as much as the world touches fiction, since fiction now tends to "fall" into the world and vice versa'.²⁴ Through this notion of 'effect of reality', I examine how the integration of archival materials and re-enactments in the series blends the line between fiction and reality, enabling the narrative of the series to reinterpret traumatic and controversial events from Egypt's recent history.

This effect is reinforced by the use of what I call 'proofs of reality', employed within or outside the narrative, for example by political actors, aimed at certifying that everything depicted therein is true. This evidence can take various forms, such as a list of sources that would have been used to stage particularly controversial events. They are also original videos showing secretly recorded conversations between real political figures in power at the time to support what has been depicted in the episode as true. Thus, the global narrative of the series presents itself as the ultimate revelation that unveils the truth: what truly transpired 'behind the scenes' of the revolution and its aftermath.

Furthermore, I consider the potential implications of the 'effects of reality' presented throughout the series and supported by the 'evidence of reality', producing effects in the real world. After re-enacting historical events in a manner presented as reality, the series is subsequently utilized as evidence of reality in the real world, suggesting its potential to influence real-world events. Consequently, the TV series transcends mere fiction and becomes more akin

to a ‘fiction of authority’. This effect is achieved through the narrative’s repetitive nature, echoed in a media blitz and utilized by various actors who emphasize its veracity, thus establishing it as a version of public memory. However, dramatizing a recent and controversial past poses risk for those attempting to impose their official narrative, as it opens the door to subversion.

Any reception study to complement and inform the analysis of ‘effects in the real world’ poses a serious methodological challenge in the repressive political context of Egypt, where a large-scale survey cannot be conducted. The analysis presented in this chapter is rooted in the series’ content and production conditions, as well as the reactions it stirred in the media and on social networks. Additionally, it draws insights from seven focus groups comprising a total of twenty-two participants, as well as numerous informal discussions in Cairo following the broadcast of the series. Conducted in Cairo in January 2024, the focus groups, whose members were acquainted with each other, represented various political currents and opinions.²⁵ Roughly half of the participants were involved in the 25 January revolution, actively participating in demonstrations multiple times, and three-quarters of them expressed support for the revolutionary movement. The participants span different generations, ranging from twenty to fifty years old, with the average age falling between thirty-five and forty-five. Not all focus group participants watched the series with the same frequency, but all saw at least one episode, often viewing numerous excerpts on social media. They hold divergent opinions, ranging from almost complete endorsement of the storyline to significant scepticism. Nevertheless, some common elements emerge from almost all focus group discussions: unanimous recognition of Colonel Mansi’s heroism and adherence to an anti-Islamist discourse, particularly anti-Muslim Brotherhood sentiment.

Recounting the History of the Nation through ‘Effects of Reality’

Unlike the renowned Western TV series addressing the theme of terrorist threat that followed 9/11 (such as *Homeland*, *24*, and *The Bureau*), in *al-Ikhtiyar*, those labelled as enemies and soon-to-be ‘terrorists’—the Muslim Brotherhood—were once in power. The series’ plot is constructed around revealing their alleged vicious plans to control the state and depicting how the army and the police intervened to save the country from their grip. Therefore, all elements recounted in the series are backed up by ‘effects of reality’.

The first episode of Season 1 opens with a primary ‘effect of reality’, a notice, alerting the viewer that everything they are about to see in the series is true:

Notice: This series is based on real events, with certain names and places modified, and it is an account of the period of Egyptian history from what we have seen with our own eyes or heard from those who lived through these events. The production team. (S1E1)

The notice is accompanied by a nearly inaudible radio recording that recalls Mansi's final call to the rescue troops during the battle, which contributed to his notoriety, as mentioned in the introduction. Therefore, in addition to the message clearly stating that everything shown in the series is real, the viewer's auditory memory is stimulated by this sound effect, which marks a second insertion of reality.

The following sequence opens with a black background and an indication at the top right of the screen, '07/07/2017 al-Barth district North Sinai', followed by the mention, 'real images of the event'. This opening sequence directly shows real footage of the famous battle in which Mansi died, further reminding the viewer that all of this is real. This blend of auditory and visual elements, consisting of 'real' images mixed with reconstructions, extends the sense of reality. This technique is reminiscent of older films about the October 1973 war against Israel, celebrated as a great military victory in Egypt, such as *The Bullet Remains in My Pocket* (directed by Hossam al-Din Mostafa and released in 1974), which used 'real footage from the battles showing the great number of soldiers and their ammunition'.²⁶

It is used multiple times throughout the three seasons of *al-Ikhtiyar*. If the mention of 'real images of the event' is indicated with each insertion of archival footage, the transition from archival footage to reconstruction is never indicated. Consequently, the viewer does not know exactly whether what they are watching is still a real image or its reconstruction. Most of the historical events depicted in the series through their reconstructions are accompanied or interspersed with archival footage.

This technique is also employed in the lengthy opening credits (approximately 3 minutes and 30 seconds). The opening credits sequences of three seasons each show different images but follow the same pattern: newspaper headlines from the period and identifiable historical archival footage mixed with excerpts from the series. For example, the opening credits sequence of the first season shows numerous videos of clashes and demonstrations—especially the massive protests on 30 June 2013 recognizable by the fireworks, calling for the resignation of Mohamed Morsi, which paved the way for the coup d'état on 3 July. But we can also distinguish images of the fire following the terrorist attack on Boutrussiya Cathedral in Cairo in December 2016, and newspaper headlines reporting the attack on Rafah in North Sinai during the Ramadan fast-breaking in August 2012, in which sixteen conscripts and soldiers were killed, followed by real videos of their funerals. This attack will also be staged later in Episode 1. A map of Libya is also seen, from which numerous terrorists, including Ashmawi, have launched attacks in Egypt. Various headlines indicating the names of officers killed in various attacks are also shown. The incorporation of reality into credits using videos and archival images is not new, as described by Senem Gungor in relation to the title sequence of *Homeland*. Gungor describes the alternation between shots of the actors and real footage of attacks or presidential speeches, intended 'to give the audience the impression that this is real and now'.²⁷ The excerpts

of real speeches inserted form 'little pieces of the real', a reality that the series' story will unveil, recreating what she calls a 'symbolic reality'.²⁸ In *al-Ikhtiyar*, this reality is not merely symbolic, and other 'effects of reality' are inserted to blend the line between reality and fiction.

One of them is created by the timeliness of the series. The final minutes of Season 2 are set on 12 May 2021, the same day the episode aired, suggesting that the viewer has just witnessed events unfolding almost in real time; and that the police mission continues at the very moment they are watching the series. In the same vein, the storyline revisits recent events, some of which occurred shortly before the series began airing. After the credits, Episode 1 of Season 1 commences with an event that occurred precisely one year before its airing, in May 2019, which garnered significant attention in Egypt: Ashmawi's arrest and his extradition from Libya to Egypt. Consequently, for the viewer, this evokes a very fresh memory. This element is also distinctive because it reminds the viewer that the stories they are watching belong to real characters.

Indeed, throughout this sequence, which lasts a total of 5 minutes and 64 seconds, the 'effect of reality' consisting of inserting archival footage will be repeatedly produced at a high pace: the constant fusion between archival footage and reconstruction. The scenes of the sequence almost all share a common element: they prominently feature the real or reconstructed television news coverage of Ashmawi's arrival by plane, either in the foreground or background. The presenter in the actual news coverage, Khaled Abu Bakr, reprises his role in the reconstruction, wearing the same clothes and delivering his performance with great precision. What sets apart the scenes in this sequence is the degree of observation of the scene. Three of these can be identified: either the viewers directly see the archival footage, as if watching live television at the time of Ashmawi's real arrival; or they witness the same scene being filmed by television crews and reconstructed, as if they were also on the tarmac waiting for the plane; or they see the original scene through a television screen, being watched by characters within the series, including Mansi's widow. The alternation between the three degrees of observation accelerates throughout the sequence, increasing the sense of confusion and the near impossibility of distinguishing between the archival footage and the reconstruction without pausing the episode. The sequence creates further ambiguity, making it impossible to distinguish between the Ashmawi in the real footage and the actor who portrays him in the series, Ahmed al-Awadi, both of whom wear blindfolds.

Season 1 concludes with a double effect of reality (archival footage and temporality) with actual footage of Ashmawi's final words, just before his execution on 4 March 2020, which was a month and a half before the series began airing.²⁹ The combination of these effects of reality gives the viewer the sensation of witnessing history, sometimes very recent, unfold live before their eyes. This is reinforced by a set of techniques and discourse that affirm that everything the viewer sees is indeed reality.

'Proofs of Reality': Everything You Watch Is the Truth

The constant use of archival footage serves, beyond creating an 'effect of reality', to prove that what is depicted in the series is real. This assertion of reality, and even truth, is further reinforced by 'proofs of reality', such as the mention of specific sources used in the development of certain episodes that address particularly controversial events. For example, the portrayal of the dispersal by the police of the sit-ins at Rab'a and al-Nahda squares, which brought together thousands of supporters of the ousted president, Mohamed Morsi. This event resulted in the deaths of a thousand people and is considered by human rights organizations as the largest massacre in modern Egyptian history.³⁰ Followed by an unprecedented crackdown against members of the Muslim Brotherhood and any form of opposition to the al-Sisi regime, the mention of this massacre in conversations continues to be whispered even to this day. After almost ten years of official silence on the subject, its depiction in the fifth episode of the second season of *al-Ikhtiyar* has thus sparked numerous comments and reactions, as well as some apprehension regarding the potential repercussions of such representation.³¹

Unsurprisingly, the staging follows the narrative of the authorities, showing armed protesters on numerous occasions. This mirrors the narrative circulated in the media prior to the actual massacre, which claimed that the sit-in was armed and aimed at maintaining President Morsi in power at all costs, thus justifying the need for its forceful dispersal.³² In this official narrative, the presence of armed violent protesters allegedly left the Interior Ministry with no choice but to intervene, resorting to violence only in self-defence. Given that the official narrative has been contested by numerous testimonies 'suggesting the killings were part of a policy to attack unarmed persons on political grounds', the fifth episode of the second season opens with a list of sources utilized in its development.³³ Among the initial sources are reports from the National Council for Human Rights, forensic experts, and notably the Qatari channel Al-Jazeera, although it was banned in Egypt at the time of the series' broadcast, as well as 'certain channels supporting the Muslim Brotherhood broadcasted from outside the country'. The other sources are less surprising: statements from the Ministry of Interior on 14 August 2013, as well as other institutional or pro-regime journalistic sources (like *al-Yum al-Sabi'*), and finally testimonies from residents of various governorates as well as officers and eyewitness images. This list serves to affirm that what will be shown in the episode is based on reports from different actors and institutions, including those considered pro-Muslim Brotherhood by the Egyptian authorities, such as the channel Al-Jazeera, claiming a certain neutrality of the narrative. It amplifies the 'effects of reality' by anchoring the reconstruction in reality because, beyond legitimizing what will be shown, it reminds the viewer that this event has left real traces, such as reports, which can be mobilized as archives.

Another 'proof of reality' is provided by the testimonies of the real-life colleagues and family members of the soldiers and policemen, mostly killed in terrorist attacks, whose stories are featured in the series. Some key events of the series are recounted at the end of the season by the actual survivors in the form of documentary interviews in the last episodes of Seasons 1 and 2. In the same episode, the families also revisit some of these events, and through their testimonies, confirm the accuracy of what has been shown. For example, Manar Mansi, the widow of Colonel Mansi, confirms that everything depicted in the series is true and adds personal details to affirm this veracity. She describes how her husband reacted to a particular event shown in the series, such as the death of one of his colleagues, and how he felt about it, adding an additional claim to authenticity to the preceding narrative.

Some 'proofs of reality' are enacted outside of the series, within the media sphere. For example, Manar Mansi was interviewed on TV the night the episode depicting her husband's martyrdom was screened.³⁴ Having her testify live about what the audience had just watched once again contributes to creating a blend between fiction—the portrayal of Mansi on TV—and reality—he is truly dead, and his wife is here to tell you about it. Similarly, during the annual Ramadan Iftar event organized by the presidency, in April 2022, President al-Sisi himself took the initiative to assure the audience that everything depicted in Season 3 was based on 'real facts'. He repeatedly affirmed that everything being recounted is indeed true, adding: 'Many of us may wonder, what is the purpose of producing this series? The purpose is to record the truth with honesty, sincerity and honour at a time when there was neither honour nor truth.'³⁵ As a key figure in the political crisis occurring at that time, his testimony also serves as 'proof of reality'.

Moreover, in addition to being mentioned in the opening credits, the participation of the army and its Moral Affairs Department in the development of the show has been highlighted by the cinema actors and members of the production team in interviews. The actors emphasized the fact that they had been personally trained along with military personnel from the special forces, who shared their field experiences to make their acting more realistic. The actors consistently emphasized in the media the support they received from individuals 'from the inside' to shape their characters and ensure they would 'stick the closest possible to the reality'.³⁶ The scriptwriter of the first season, Baher Doweidar, also testified in an interview that the armed forces provided him 'everything he needed' to look for 'the truth'. Doweidar added that writing this story was an important responsibility because it involved events that were experienced by many people, thus acknowledging his intention to re-enact history.

The support from the army also materialized through the provision of equipment that serves as further 'proof of reality'. In a television interview, Peter Mimi disclosed that the actual plane used to repatriate Ashmawi from his arrest in Libya was utilized in the series for the scene's re-enactment.³⁷ In front of the captivated host, who insisted, 'This is not a plane that looks

like it?', he reiterated several times, 'This is the same plane.' The object here constitutes a retroactive effect of reality—since the viewer doesn't know it's the actual plane when watching Episode 1—which I therefore refer to as 'proof of reality'. The director's assertion that the plane is genuine serves to prove that everything shown in the series is true.

In the same interview, Peter Mimi explains that the choice to use archival footage in the series also serves as evidence. According to him, he had the idea when he and the scriptwriter realized that if they simply told what they had learned from primary sources while gathering information about Mansi's life and the military operations he led in the series, the audience might not believe it. Because Mansi's story was so extraordinary, they felt the need to substantiate what they had been told. The use of archival material constitutes 'proof of truth', authenticating the reality of the depicted events.

As mentioned above, episodes of Season 3 often conclude with excerpts from secretly recorded video footage from the time of the events depicted in the series. These recordings show conversations between the Muslim Brotherhood and high-ranking officers, including al-Sisi, that remained secret until the show was broadcast. These recordings are also used as 'proofs of reality', invariably with a view to substantiating what has just been depicted in the episode. The use of these previously unreleased videos to the public reinforces the sentiment that the series unveils a truth that had hitherto been hidden from the viewer. The TV series extensively explores the notion of a 'duplicious reality' where, as discussed by Luc Boltanski and cited by Pauline Blistène, 'an apparent and surface reality is progressively replaced by a much more real reality, which is hidden, disturbing, woven with crimes, enigmas, conspiracies and plots'.³⁸ In *al-Ikhtiyar*, however, this hidden reality inevitably goes unnoticed by citizens, especially during terrorist attacks, because only the agents are truly aware of what is happening and can take action to prevent a disaster. The secrecy, inherent in intelligence work, justifies concealing a truth from the public until it is finally revealed by the television series. The series' role in unveiling hidden truth will affect its reception, as we will argue in the next section of this chapter.

The Effects of *al-Ikhtiyar* in the Real World

The 'effects of reality' employed in the series are reinforced by 'proofs of reality', or sources and discourses about the events depicted in the series, which are presented within the media field and attest to the veracity of the series. The 'effects of reality' and the 'proofs of reality' then create effects in the real world.

These effects largely affect the cast and production team of the series. Talking about filming the first episode of Season 1, Peter Mimi, the series' director, mentioned that he felt proud to have used the real plane that took Hisham Ashmawi back to Egypt for his trial. This comment prompted a round of applause from the audience. This statement by one of the show's

creators not only evoked a strong and immediate reaction from the audience, but also underlined the blurred line between re-enactment and reality, focusing on the effects of re-enactment that can trigger emotions related to the actual events. In this interview, Mimi goes on to describe an actor playing a cameraman filming Khaled Abu Bakr's television coverage in the series, raising his fist in triumph as Ashmawi is escorted to the car that will take him to prison—a gesture the actor improvised. This anecdote underlines the degree to which the entire team seemed invested in the filming and the story, to the point of experiencing the re-enacted scene as if it were real, leading to spontaneous expressions of joy during the re-enactment of the arrest of Egypt's most wanted terrorist. It is not possible to determine with certainty whether these anecdotes are true or imagined only as part of a communication strategy to promote the series. If the latter were the case, then those who propagate them would be acting 'as if' they believed in them.³⁹ But it suggests that the production of the series, in presenting its plot as reality, in turn produces effects in reality.

As well as the production team and cast, the series seemed to have an impact on the families of the martyrs whose stories were portrayed on screen. It is out of concern for this impact—which could be devastating—that Peter Mimi warned viewers, and particularly the families of the soldiers featured in the series, about Episode 28 of Season 1, which depicts the battle of al-Barth and the deaths of Mansi and his team in the battlefield. Remarkably, his cautionary message, posted on his Facebook page before the episode aired, came with a real photograph of al-Mansi and his team of fighters:

If anyone knows the families of the martyrs of the al-Barth accident, please convince them not to watch tomorrow's episode (Episode 28). I apologize for the brutality of the episode. I tried as much as I could to reduce the ugliness of what had happened, but at the same time all people should know about the heroes who stood up and defended the country, the checkpoint [in which the soldiers were attacked] and their fellow soldiers until their last breath.⁴⁰

This message reinforces the claim that the episode is such a faithful reconstruction of reality that it would be too distressing for those directly affected by the attack to watch. According to some state-controlled news sources, the announcement of the episode prompted numerous calls on social media for it to be run without commercial breaks 'out of respect for the memory of the martyrs'.⁴¹ Subsequently, the authorities issued a decision banning all advertising during the episode, despite the expected high audience figures.

While these reports come from the state-controlled press and as such must be read with caution, there is other evidence that some viewers were emotionally moved by the episode. For instance, BBC Arabic news channel reported instances of viewers being filmed in tears while watching the series, suggesting that some of them may be 'mixing fantasy with reality'.⁴² However

difficult it is to determine whether these reactions were genuine or performative, these examples illustrate how the TV series has entered the real world. *Al-Ikhtiyar* also seems to evoke strong emotions among the martyrs' families: in a television interview, Manar Mansi recalls that she cried while watching the opening episode, torn between feelings of joy and sadness.⁴³

In a separate interview, Manar Mansi mentioned another important effect of the series in the real world—that of restoring justice. As she confided to the interviewer, watching the series made her feel that her husband's 'right' had been restored, that justice had been done for him.⁴⁴ In this confession, she not only reaffirmed her belief in the veracity of the narrative presented in the series, but also acknowledged its impact on her and its reparative function.

One of the series' effects in the real world is also evident in the performance of Amir Karara, the actor who portrayed Mansi on screen and whose physical resemblance to him was recognized by both Mansi's widow and friends.⁴⁵ To reinforce his connection with his character, Karara even shared a photo montage on his Facebook page of him standing with Mansi, claiming that the martyr had appeared to him in a dream and spoken to him.⁴⁶ In sharing this experience with the audience, Karara went beyond his role as an actor to impersonate Mansi, demonstrating a genuine belief in the story and the sacrifice of the character he was portraying, almost bringing fiction into the real world.

Some of the material shown in *al-Ikhtiyar* has been used by different political actors as historical evidence, creating another real-world effect of the series. The episode depicting the 'dispersal' of the Rab'a sit-in offers one striking example (S2E5): after its release, Alaa Mubarak, the son of former ousted President Hosni Mubarak, tweeted that the episode provided evidence that there were weapons at the sit-in.⁴⁷ Links between the portrayal of certain events in the series and events occurring in the real world at the time of its broadcast have also been noted by media. The independent online newspaper *Mada Masr* reported that media outlets affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood had spotted the occasional temporal overlap between the series and reality, such as on 26 April 2021, when nine people were executed for the 2013 attack on the Kerdasa police station in Giza, which led to the violent dispersal of Rab'a and Al-Nahda squares.⁴⁸ This event had been shown ten days earlier in the series, providing a justification for the real-life convictions.

This interplay between the broadcasts of the episodes of the series and the real events does not end here. On 18 April 2021, commenting on the train crash in Egypt that had happened a few days earlier, MP Mostapha Bakri speculated that it was 'not a coincidence', suggesting like some media outlets that it had been orchestrated by the Muslim Brotherhood in retaliation for the broadcast of the episode showing the dispersal of the Rab'a.⁴⁹ These claims were based on the words of Transport Minister Kamal al-Wazir, who declared that many Brotherhood members worked within the Railways Authority, and on the train driver's Facebook page comments against the

second season of *al-Ikhtiyar*.⁵⁰ The impact of the series, which has been elevated to the status of a historical document, is such that it is believed to inspire a desire for revenge in the 'enemies of the nation'.

As we have mentioned, the involvement of the armed forces in the production of the series was widely reported in the media as a way of asserting its realism. As intelligence studies scholar Pauline Blistène argued in her work on spy television series, the distinction between internal support for production and propaganda is not easy to make when the support comes from a state agency.⁵¹ The mention of the involvement of a government agency associated with the armed forces in the series creation may seem surprising, assuming that propaganda is likely to be more effective when its propagandistic nature is not recognized as such.⁵² Many respondents in my interviews denounced the propagandistic tone of *al-Ikhtiyar*: some explained to me why they refused to watch the series altogether, others confessed that they watched it with much scepticism.

However, deliberately publicizing the involvement of the armed forces in the production of the series may have the opposite effect. As Blistène argues, it serves as a kind of guarantee of the narrative's credibility: what is told is true because it is based on the experience of insiders. Beyond the claim of revealing the secrets of the state to the public, *al-Ikhtiyar* adopts an almost pedagogical approach, with the intention of helping the viewer better understand the universe of the military and security institutions. This view was confirmed by some of the interviewees. One interviewee in a focus group, who identified herself as 'a former revolutionary', went so far as to claim that this was precisely the role of the Ministry: to inform the public about the actions of the army, to produce knowledge about the army in order to make its activities accessible. Another interviewee explained that if his son asked him about a particular recent event, he could now describe it in detail because he had seen it portrayed in *al-Ikhtiyar*.⁵³ In this way, he puts the serial narrative on an equal footing with a historical source.

Even interviewees who were acutely aware of the propagandistic aspect of the series admitted to being torn between feeling manipulated by the political machine and sympathizing with the heroes, involuntarily experiencing emotions such as sadness or pride. These emotions reflect the viewers' awareness that they are watching the re-enactment of events that happened, and that some of the heroes portrayed on screen actually sacrificed their lives for their country. One focus group participant, who was visibly moved by the series as she began to cry in the first moments of the collective viewing of the episode which showed Mansi in his final battle (S1E1), reported that she began to confuse Mansi with the actor who played him, Amir Karara: 'When I think of Mansi, I see Amir Karara.' In this case, fiction intrudes on reality to the extent that some viewers start confusing the fictional characters with the actors who portray them, conflating fiction and reality.

If these testimonies suggest that the series influences the emotions of certain viewers, despite their scepticism about its propaganda nature, there

is evidence that the reception of the series changed over time. The ‘effect of reality’, as the interference of fiction in reality and vice versa, also creates possibilities for some political and social actors to engage with the ‘fiction of authority’ in order to criticize it and respond with a counter-narrative. While the first season, centred on Mansi and the army heroes, was a huge success, the second season, according to some interviewees and the viewing statistics,⁵⁴ was less popular and was criticized for its lack of realism, particularly in its biased portrayal of the police. The relative unpopularity of the second season appears against the backdrop of the police’s poor reputation in Egyptian society in general, which has been tarnished by numerous cases of abuse of power. It contrasts sharply with the popularity of the army (which, however, has come under increasing criticism too, especially since the uprisings of 2011).⁵⁵ The series’ depiction of police officers as always treating their detainees with respect and never resorting to torture or violence drew a particularly negative response, both online and in the interviews.

Season 3, which featured the journey of soon-to-be President al-Sisi and his attempts, along with the army, to protect the country from the Muslim Brotherhood in power, was met with a lot of mockery. For example, Amr Waked, an Egyptian actor exiled in the USA known for his strong stance against the Egyptian authorities, affirmed on Twitter that ‘people’ perceived the third season of the TV series as a ‘comedy’.⁵⁶ Several interview respondents also described this season as a comedy, with two of them saying they watched it ‘just for laughs’ because ‘it was really silly’. In the same vein, a piece written by Egyptian writer and political activist Shady Lewis was entitled ‘Sisi in a television series: risk of laughter’.⁵⁷ Lewis describes Yasser Galal’s portrayal of al-Sisi as ‘subject to ridicule’ due to what he considers excessive mimicry. Galal’s performance, according to Lewis, bordered on the comical because of his remarkable ability to mirror the real al-Sisi. His realistic portrayal of the president even earned him some comments from internet users, who went so far as to blame the actor for the decline in their purchasing power during the economic crisis, substituting him for real political leaders who escape any criticism in a climate of acute repression.⁵⁸ Amr Waked denounced the series for ‘falsifying the history we have lived and seen’.⁵⁹ Cartoonist Andeel similarly criticized the series with a provocative sketch depicting al-Sisi placing a slice of *basterma* (a popular form of dried meat in Egypt) labelled ‘History’ on a sheet of paper marked ‘Series *al-Ikhtiyar*’.⁶⁰

Remarkably, some political actors find ways to exploit the ‘proofs of reality’ to their advantage. For example, the former presidential candidate in the 2018 elections and renowned lawyer Khaled Ali, known for handling cases involving the imprisonment of political opponents, utilized the series to advocate for the retrial of one of his clients, Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh. This former candidate in the 2012 presidential election, former member of the Muslim Brotherhood, and leader of the Strong Egypt Party was arrested in 2018 and accused of ‘leading a terrorist group’.⁶¹ Consequently, Khaled

Ali argued that the TV series depicted Aboul Fotouh's strong opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood, thereby indicating his disassociation from the organization.⁶² In this respect, by their very claim to authenticity, the 'proofs of reality' used to create the 'fiction of authority' can also be employed subversively, to re-purpose the narrative for alternative agendas.

Conclusion

I have tried to show in this chapter how the 'effects of reality', narrative and visual techniques that insert elements of reality into fiction, supported by elements within and outside the serial narrative that serve as 'proofs of reality', have elevated *al-Ikhtiyar* to the level of a 'fiction of authority'. While depicting historical events, the serial narrative produces effects in the real world by being, in turn, inserted into it. As a popular object reaching a wide audience, this series serves as a cultural artefact that contributes to shaping social and collective memory.⁶³ I argue that this genre is part of a broader initiative by post-revolutionary authorities in Egypt to rewrite the history of the past decade and silence competing narratives. Part of this rewriting revolves around the cult of the 'martyrs of duty', whose heroic deeds are portrayed throughout *al-Ikhtiyar*, with the aim of regenerating public mourning on a collective scale around those portrayed as sacrificing themselves for the just cause: the nation.⁶⁴ These efforts thus contribute to a wider legitimization campaign of the authorities in power.

Notes

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Chapter 9

The Knockout: Mirroring the Social and Political Reality of Present-day China

Shenshen Cai and Emily Dunn

Television has acquired a vital role in the lives of Chinese people, now reaching some 97% of the country's total population of 1.3 billion.¹ TV drama is currently the second most-watched TV genre,² and it is 'a dominant form of storytelling in contemporary China'.³ Since the second half of the 1990s, amid the sweeping trend of commercialization in China's media sphere in general, and within the domain of TV drama in particular, there has been more cooperation and complicity than friction and clash between the state and the market. According to Chris Berry, the state and the market 'complement rather than contradict each other' and 'exercise hegemony through their new alliance'.⁴

Originating in the early days of socialist rule and undergoing a 'silent' era during the heyday of the Maoist revolutions, when revolutionary model operas and films were the only entertainment available to the population, television drama has re-emerged in mainland China as a dominant form of recreational media. Since the Opening Up reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, there has been an accelerating trend towards commercialization within the Chinese TV drama industry. However, this increasingly market-oriented development has not promoted creativity and diversity in television content. It has remained the exclusive domain of the state, which has never relinquished its role as legislator and regulator of the television drama industry.

Although in the post-socialist and post-Mao era TV dramas have been produced to meet the growing demands of audiences for leisure and entertainment, contemporary Chinese TV series must conform to the mainstream and orthodox values and ideology of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and fulfil the role of educating the public about them.

For instance, dynasty dramas that promote the ideal of a strong central government and benevolent leadership accommodate the new-authoritarian, neo-conservative, and New Left political thought in China.⁵ Similarly, the

subgenre of anti-corruption TV dramas has been successfully appropriated by the official propaganda apparatus and private TV producers to restore the reputation of the CCP government among the Chinese people, which has been declining in recent years. Another subgenre of TV drama that highlights the ‘correctness’ of the Communist cause and the virtues of CCP members is the subgenre of revolutionary espionage TV serials. In addition to these popular television drama subgenres, party policy and rhetoric also permeate dramas, which focus on social issues such as the lives and troubles of disadvantaged social groups like migrants and redundant workers.

After the current Chinese president, Xi Jinping, came to power in 2013, he tightened the CCP’s control over the cultural and entertainment industry and re-emphasized the role of artists and cultural workers as serving the party. In 2023, after a decade of Xi’s rule, the hit series *The Knockout* was released, offering a prime example of a drama that accommodates both market demands and official policy. On the one hand, as an atypical anti-corruption TV series, *The Knockout* caters to the tastes of contemporary Chinese audiences who are increasingly discontented with rampant economic and political inequality, social injustice, and corruption. On the other hand, it also follows the party’s policy of taking a hard line on corrupt behaviour by its members within the officialdom. As noted by sociologist Yuezhi Zhao, TV drama as a medium, ‘because of its fictional character and its more popular social base, has been able to address popular sensibilities and social conflicts in a unique way’.⁶ Using TV serials such as *The Knockout* as a resource, the Chinese government imposes a form of political education on its officials and sends a strong anti-corruption message to the public.

This chapter provides a detailed textual analysis of the plot, individual scenes, and main characters of *The Knockout*. In doing so, it aims to foreground the variety of tactics that television dramas employ to edify their audiences with political discourse, and to examine their influence in confronting social and political stigmas and complexities.

Chinese-style Anti-corruption Literature and Media Works

Corruption has been a rampant phenomenon in the Chinese government since the Opening Up reforms. Although the CCP government has enacted several new anti-corruption laws and policies, and some high-level government officials have been imprisoned or even executed, the anti-corruption campaign has yet to prove effective in reducing cases that involve party members.⁷ In the literary field, with the tacit endorsement of the state and despite the cautious disapproval of official literary critics, who feel that the genre has gone too far, the corruption genre has permeated all literary formats and frequently appears on bestseller lists.⁸ Journalist Louisa Lim has observed that the plot devices of literature about bureaucracy can make the reader’s

pulse race through the depiction of 'underhanded power plays, hidden alliances, and devious sexual favors'.⁹ In the media domain, many popular anti-corruption literary works have been adapted into television drama series or films and have recorded high audience ratings.

By using the image of 'clean officials' (*qingguan*) who are upright and impartial, caring for the destitute and standing up to powerful criminals to protect the interests of the common people, these anti-corruption dramas send the message that society is better off and fairness is being restored.¹⁰ In so doing, the anti-corruption drama creates an imagined 'moral community' in which viewers share a 'moral consensus'. Scholar Ruoyun Bai argues that, as the heroes of this hypothetical 'moral community', 'clean officials... mediate and reduce the gap between the propaganda and the popular' and 'blend the Party's need for good publicity with a powerful popular belief in and desire for the redemptive power and heavenly justice embodied by clean officials'.¹¹ Furthermore, as a cultural icon representing the Party-state, the 'clean official' helps to 'anchor the Party in the role of moral leadership and create a sense of moral unity between the Party and the people', providing 'the moral basis for the Party's leadership of the community'.¹²

Over the past decade, instead of presenting a façade of peace and prosperity through images of honest and upright officials combatting their corrupt counterparts—a popular format of the anti-corruption novels that widely circulated at the turn of the millennium—writers have scrutinized the ecology of bureaucratic institutions, including their hidden rules, under-the-table deals, and improper relationships, and created meticulous and authentic depictions of corrupt officials throughout the hierarchies of the Chinese political system.¹³ Disguising the deteriorating reality of Chinese officialdom and pretending to be convinced by it in order to please the official propaganda organs—which, according to Vaclav Havel, is a prominent feature of societies under post-totalitarian rule—has always been popular among writers of literature about bureaucracy, especially those writing in the anti-corruption genre.¹⁴ However, recently published popular official novels with an anti-corruption focus are more honest and unsparing in exposing the overall negative trend within the state bureaucracy, characterized by frequent abuses resulting from such widespread practices as favouritism, nepotism, and factionalism. The novels of officialdom provide a panoramic view of the routines and unspoken rules of the Chinese official apparatus. This new trend in the literary domain has spread to the production of popular television drama serials, including *The Knockout*. Unlike typical anti-corruption dramas that focus on 'clean officials', *The Knockout* vividly depicts a group of archetypal corrupt officials throughout its thirty-nine episodes. In the drama, the 'clean officials' only read official directives in meetings, and, occasionally, their voiceovers narrate the development of the plot. On the contrary, the corrupt officials serve as the prime moving forces of the plot, as they are designed and revealed to be the protectors of evil forces.

The Knockout as a Typical Anti-corruption Drama

The Knockout represents a fine example of contemporary popular Chinese anti-corruption TV drama in terms of its character development and its focus on the convoluted relationships within the circles of power. Set in Jinghai, a fictional prefecture-level city in southern China, *The Knockout* follows the lives of the Gao brothers, raised in a working-class neighbourhood originally built around an old factory. The series begins by describing their daily life in the factory dormitory shortly after the death of their parents, focusing first on the story of the eldest brother, Gao Qiqiang, a fishmonger who struggles to provide for his siblings and is himself harassed by the local mafia. The latter, embodied in the series by the characters of the Tang brothers, reveals to the viewer the forces of the underworld that plague China's regional cities, highlighting not only the mafia's considerable hold on local life, but also its various corrupt relationships with government officials and public security officers.

In order to survive in this corrupt social and political environment, Gao Qiqiang seeks out opportunities to make connections with an important local mafia figure and gradually becomes an important mafia leader in Jinghai himself; even the Tang brothers, his oppressors in the early episodes of the series, eventually come to work for him. As the story unfolds, Gao Qiqiang rises to become the head of a trading group and a major tycoon in Jinghai, while secretly running gambling and prostitution businesses.

During one of his fights with the Tang brothers, Gao Qiqiang ends up in a police station, where he meets and befriends An Xin, a policeman who is investigating the case. An Xin is then a young policeman with integrity and determination to fight crime in Jinghai. However, his unyielding attitude is seen as problematic by the local mafia and corrupt senior officials, particularly Zhao Lidong, the city mayor, under whose influence An Xin first falls foul of false accusations and is later transferred from the vice squad to the traffic police. This demotion marks the end of An Xin's investigations into corruption among high-ranking officials and makes him deeply suspicious of the new team, appointed by the central authorities to investigate corruption in Jinghai.

The character of An Xin is designed to be courageous and respectable, but naïve and simple. As the story progresses, An Xin begins to realize the degree of corruption in the city government and police, which is beyond his ability to change. *The Knockout* does not portray An Xin as a 'clean police officer', but rather foregrounds his naivety in order to use him as a foil to highlight the corrupt officials. As he uncovers dark secrets within the police and local government, An Xin discovers that several of his close and trusted colleagues have been bribed by the mafia. These include, for example, his supervisor Cao Chuang, or his colleague Li Xiang, director of the Jinghai Public Security Bureau. Li Xiang is ordered by the city mayor to kill an activist who keeps exposing the corrupt schemes underway at the mayor's

office. However, in an intriguing and significant twist, Li Xiang changes his mind at the last minute, moved by the activist's bravery.

The series provides further examples of corruption within Jinghai's police force and municipal government. We meet Zhang Biao, a policeman jealous of An Xin's abilities, who is bribed by and works for local criminals; Yang Jian, the head of the drug squad of the Jinghai police bureau and later director of the local electricity department; Yang's father-in-law, the chairman of the Standing Committee of the Jinghai National People's Congress, who is believed to have a particularly influential background. Through these cases, *The Knockout* suggests that corruption is endemic to governing structures in China, inextricably linked to a widespread mafia.

Gao's younger brother, Gao Qisheng, exposes the problem of corruption from a different perspective. A graduate of a prestigious Chinese university, Gao Qisheng is the pride of his family. Portrayed as an intelligent, well-educated young man with a promising future, he nevertheless turns to crime and sets up a clandestine drug-trafficking business in his hometown. In contrast to his brother, who is forced to join the mafia, Gao Qisheng chooses to become a criminal in search of quick and easy profits. Through his character, the series alludes to the world of business in China, where, arguably, bribing officials and associating with the mafia is not uncommon.

The plot and characters of *The Knockout* reflect the social and cultural reality of contemporary China. It is widely rumoured that China's famous pop star, Zhao Wei, has developed close ties with Chinese billionaire Jack Ma, who has recently come under government attack after criticizing CCP regulators for stifling the growth of the tech sector.¹⁵ After Zhao Wei and her husband were banned from entering China's financial markets for 'tying a white wolf with bare hands', Jack Ma attempted to distance himself from Zhao Wei by denying in the media any personal or business connection with her.¹⁶ It remains unclear whether Jack Ma's loss of favour with the Party led to the exposure of Zhao Wei's unscrupulous financial practices and whether Zhao was involved in Ma's case, given the extremely complex relationships and factions in China's political, business, and entertainment circles. However, the case of Zhao and Ma shows that in present-day China, no matter how wealthy or popular one becomes, it is still the Party that determines fate and fame. *The Knockout* reflects these power dynamics and the close links between Chinese official and criminal circles. In Gao Qiqiang's case, despite being a notorious mafia leader in Jinghai, he utilizes his connections with government officials such as Zhao Lidong to be elected as a local member of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, which is a great honour for a businessman.

The series also illustrates the community work carried out by Chinese officials and the mafia. For the former, these public projects are designed to improve their administrative record. For the latter, they serve both as a front for illegal activities and as additional opportunities for enrichment. Throughout the episodes, Gao Qiqiang builds kindergartens, renovates dilapidated streets,

and refurbishes old dormitories for residents. He does volunteer work at a local retirement home, which pays off: it is there that he befriends a retired senior official who supervises the police investigator in charge of fighting the mafia. Intended to reflect modern Chinese society, the series suggests that the worlds of business, politics, and crime are inextricably linked, making the fight against corruption a major challenge for the central authorities.

Although Gao Qiqiang is portrayed as a successful man for many years, by the end of the series police investigators obtain evidence of his criminal activities and expose Zhao Lidong as his protector. Both Gao and Zhao get the punishment they deserve. Much to the viewer's relief, the drama ends with all the criminals and their allies in the government being punished for their wrongdoings. But while the audience might relate to some of the Jinghai stories that play out every day across the country, they will surely doubt that this happy ending is an honest reflection of today's China, where corruption has become an intractable curse and a major social and political issue.

Political Education in *The Knockout*

Since the Opening Up era, corruption and social inequality have been at the heart of the Chinese public's concerns. However, in a political system like China's, where freedom of expression is severely restricted, it is almost impossible to denounce and discuss the problem publicly.

This issue became particularly acute during the Covid lockdowns, which were enforced by the Chinese authorities between February 2020 and November 2022. This policy led to a series of public protests by activists, both individual, started by Peng Zaizhou, and collective, initiated by students from Beijing and Shanghai universities, known as the 'White Paper Revolution'. Although both were systematically silenced in the Chinese media and on the internet, they had political consequences and contributed to the lifting of the 'zero-Covid' policy.

The Knockout was released shortly after these events and treated a similarly potentially explosive issue of widespread corruption. In this case, however, it was pre-emptively and successfully appropriated by the official propaganda apparatus to salvage the CCP government's declining status and promote its perspective on the problem, well known in Chinese society. Through television series such as *The Knockout*, the Chinese government sends a strong ideological message to both its officials and the public. For the former, the aim is to warn and discourage corruption; for the latter, to reassure that corruption will eventually be punished.

After President Xi Jinping took power in 2013, he tightened the CCP's control over the production of cultural and entertainment products and reinstated the role of artists and cultural workers in serving the party. Like other anti-corruption TV dramas, *The Knockout* has been successfully appropriated by the official propaganda apparatus to rescue the CCP government's fading status among the Chinese public. Employing television drama as a

popular and effective form of media, the Party uses fictional characters in TV serials to address public concerns and social issues.

One storyline in *The Knockout* follows a task force conducting a retrospective investigation to track down corrupt government officials over the past twenty years, including those who have retired. This subplot is particularly effective in conveying the idea of the CCP's determination to punish corrupt officials within its ranks and to appease the Chinese public, increasingly exasperated by the presence of corruption in almost every aspect of social and political life in the country. The character of An Xin illustrates this point. When the task force asks him to collaborate with them, he initially refuses to do so. Having suffered too many setbacks in his own attempts to fight crime in the city, he does not believe that the group can solve Jinghai's problems. From a spirited young policeman with a stubborn belief in social justice to a decadent middle-aged man, An Xin's transformation reflects the life journey of the common man in contemporary China. However, after some time interacting with the members of the group, An's hope is rekindled, and he eventually helps them to eradicate the criminal forces in Jinghai.

Li Xiang also exemplifies a redeemed policeman who regains his good conscience and dedicates himself to serving the people. Li's story underlines the idea that Party members and officials, being human, can err out of selfishness or irrationality. However, it suggests that their integrity and devotion to the Party will lead them back to the path of righteousness, and eventually, end corruption and restore justice. *The Knockout* instils in the Chinese public the belief that the CCP can address all social and political issues despite the absence of media freedom or opposition parties, thus revealing the drama's role as an idealistic propaganda tool.

Like the revolutionary films of the early decades of socialist China, contemporary literary and media works always feature pronouncedly good and bad characters. The specificity of *The Knockout* is that it confronts a large group of corrupt government officials against a small cohort of party members of high moral integrity and conscience. Despite being silenced, intimidated, or purged in the series, this minority succeeds in eliminating the mafia and criminal forces, thereby restoring the audience's faith in the CCP. This narrative serves as a propaganda tool, educating the public to maintain hope in the Chinese government as the ultimate saviour of society.

Gao Qiqiang and Gao Qisheng are two other representative characters in *The Knockout* who also serve to educate the Chinese people. They both appear to be good guys, driven to work hard by a sense of responsibility to their families, but eventually they go astray and their lives end tragically. Gao Qiqiang, once a sympathetic character, chooses to join the criminal world, which brings him to a dreadful downfall. Gao Qisheng, despite his education and the possibility of a better life, is ruined by his greed and moral failings. The fate of the Gao brothers in *The Knockout* is a cautionary tale of rebellion against social injustice, which emphasizes the idea that punishment awaits those who challenge the status quo.

Moreover, the stories of Gao Qiqiang and Yang Jian serve as a reminder of the limits of tolerance for corruption, and of the Party's inevitable and severe retaliation when these limits are crossed. The anti-corruption campaign in China is complicated by deep-rooted connections among businessmen, government officials, and mafia gangs. Eradicating corruption involves dismantling these intertwined interest groups and networks. Confidence in fighting corruption alone does not suffice; the government's determination to eliminate corruption requires changes in laws and the political system for effective reform.

Conclusion

As a contemporary anti-corruption television drama in China, *The Knockout* became a national hit immediately after its release. The well-developed plot-lines and characters, the compelling portrayal of the intricate relationship between the mafia gangs, police, and government officials, and the wonderful performances of the actors make *The Knockout* a classic anti-corruption TV series. One of the distinguishing features of the drama is its meticulous and engaging depiction of corrupt government officials and police officers—an impressive and insightful critique of the system.

At the same time, *The Knockout* has been successfully enlisted by the Party's propaganda machine to spread its political education to the Chinese public by censoring the plot to conform to acceptable guidelines. The series conveys the message that the fight against corruption will be carried out at all costs. It emphasizes the importance of maintaining faith in the government's ability to fight corruption. It advises the public not to repay evil with evil, disrupt the established social order, or challenge the Party's authority. Instead, the series suggests patience and trust in the Party's ability to restore justice. In this respect, *The Knockout* might be at the forefront of a new anti-corruption myth. It remains to be seen whether this myth will take hold in society.

Notes

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- 10 Ruoyun Bai, ‘“Clean Officials”, Emotional Moral Community, and Anti-Corruption Television Dramas’, in *TV Drama in China*, ed. by Ying Zhu, Michael Keane, and Ruoyun Bai (Hong Kong University Press, 2008), p. 49.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 57.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 The most influential and popular ‘primitive’ officialdom novels include *Chinese Style Secretary*, *Traditional Chinese Painting*, *New Provincial Party Secretary*, *Director of Beijing Office*, and so on. These books have achieved excellent online reading rates and topped bestseller lists.
- 14 *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens against the State in Central-Eastern Europe*, ed. by Vaclav Havel and John Keane (Hutchinson and Xco, 1985), pp. 10–59.
- 15 Jamie Seidel, ‘China Erases Billionaire Actress Zhao Wei from History’, news.com.au, 31 August 2021 <www.news.com.au/technology/online/internet/china-erases-billionaire-actress-zhao-wei-from-history/news-story/94100f6569377078cfeee411f5fc3538> (accessed 7 August 2024).
- 16 ‘Tying a white wolf with bare hands’ is a popular Chinese saying that is used to describe unethical practices in financial markets. In modern China, some rich entrepreneurs and celebrities (capitalizing on their popularity and close connections with influential business personalities) use small amounts of money to leverage large commercial or financial projects, which easily attract blind investments from small stakeholders. However, once the projects have received a large amount of investment, they withdraw their benefits, leaving the small stakeholders trapped in the failing projects without profit.

Chapter 10

Soap Operas, Strategic Identities, and Electoral Competition in Contemporary Brazil

Antonio Athayde Sauandaj

Introduction

As electoral sociology has already empirically refuted the idea of a rational voter, the average citizen, when confronted with political competition, could today be more accurately described as a ‘cognitive miser, who uses shortcuts, unconventional materials, affects, experiences of everyday life, and personal morality to construct opinions’.¹ Thus, a struggle for symbolic power is waged in the political arena, mobilizing discourses, images, and symbols from the most diverse sectors of social activity. The entertainment sphere is no exception. Focusing on a case study of contemporary Brazil and adopting the theoretical perspective of social constructivism, this chapter highlights the role of references from audiovisual fiction in the process of signifying and performing political identities during electoral campaigns.

Brazil is widely known for the excellence of its soap operas (*telenovelas*). Since they first appeared in the 1950s, soap operas have played an important role in the Brazilian audiovisual market, contributing to the formation of the national cultural identity. To stay attractive to younger generations and to compete with the emerging market of streaming platforms, soap operas have recently had to reinvent themselves, while still preserving their strong dramatic inflection and preference for local landscapes. Present in the daily lives of a large proportion of Brazilians, soap operas constitute important vectors of socialization. According to a 2022 study by the Orbis Institute and the Brazilian Institute of Public Opinion and Statistics, soap operas are the favourite programme of 39.6% of the public with a television set at home, and attract almost six times as many viewers as television journalism.² Although Globo—Brazil’s largest media group—is by far the most influential in terms of audience, other channels, such as Record, the runner-up, have also invested in soap operas. This vying for the audience

not only expresses a competition for market share, but also reflects a conflict of narratives and worldviews, revealing in turn the complex power relations between members of the political field and media groups. The financial stability of audiovisual companies largely depends on the subsidies they receive from the federal government, corroborating the relationship of mutual dependence between political and media powers, as well as the importance of these companies' framing of events in the political field, especially during election time—a framing that is not only constructed through newspapers, but also through the moral epics within fictional content that are the basis of soap operas.

In Western democracies, with the weakening of political party allegiance and the increasing personalization of political competition, candidates are more and more compelled to build 'strategic identities'.³ This is what political scientist Annie Collovald argues in her analysis of the career of French president Jacques Chirac (1932–2019). According to Collovald, the myth of political individuality is maintained by a series of objectification techniques that personalize certain social values and naturalize a leader's political properties. In this constructivist model, actors outside the political field also contribute to the process of the political character construction (journalists, commentators, spectators).⁴ The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate how television series, in highly polarized political contexts, can also provide symbolic material for the construction of strategic identities.

To give empirical substance to this argument, this chapter analyses the confrontation between two antagonistic political personalities in contemporary Brazil. On the one hand, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva embodies the values of the left (ecology, labour rights, feminism), but has a troubled past due to numerous corruption affairs involving members of his party, the Workers' Party. On the other hand, Jair Messias Bolsonaro, a member of the Liberal Party, represents the hardest wing of the Brazilian right, and builds his political communication strategy on a vehement criticism of corruption and public security issues, as well as elements of climate scepticism and anti-feminism. But how did these two men become symbols of the Manichean division of the Brazilian political spectrum? Numerous social actors have contributed to this, including those from the cultural field. Soap operas, as both a means of socialization and a cultural product, have played a key role in this process, not only by providing symbolic material for the construction of the political identities of Jair Bolsonaro and Lula da Silva, but also by giving moral meaning to their political competition.

Our analysis is divided into two parts. First, we examine the link between Bolsonaro's political enterprise and the production of Brazil's first biblical soap opera, *Ten Commandments*, broadcast by Record TV in 2015–2016 and subsequently re-released three times. As we will see in detail, by providing visual and narrative support for the far-right candidate's moralizing discourse, the soap opera played an important role in producing the 'charismatic

situation⁵ that led to Bolsonaro's election in 2018, i.e. the set of socio-political factors that allowed the feeling of political frustration to be objectified in the individual properties of the new opposition leader, such as his masculinist stance, or his political incorrectness. The second soap opera under consideration is *Pantanal*, broadcast in 2022 by Globo, and repeatedly mentioned by Lula da Silva during his presidential campaign that same year, particularly to compare its main villain—a farmer who assaults his wife and deforests his land—with Jair Bolsonaro. As well as highlighting the fluctuating relationship between Lula da Silva and the Globo media group, the political use of this soap opera attests to the institutionalization of gender and environmental causes as political cleavages in Brazil.

The methodology employed is qualitative, based on monitoring the candidates' press and social media, as well ethnographic observation of campaign videos and close analysis of soap operas. Neither of the two soap operas addresses the political agenda directly. However, as cultural products that are often overlooked by political science, yet harbouring a political bias, they serve as prime examples of what Denis-Constant Martin has called 'UPOs (Unidentified Political Objects)', and deserve to be studied from a transdisciplinary perspective, combining the tools of semiology and political sociology.⁶ In order to expound the electoral use of fictional televisual material, this chapter puts forward one main hypothesis: similar to political news, soap operas influence the representational process by offering symbolic material for the framing of the electoral competition and the construction of strategic political identities.

The Gender, the Bible, and the Soap Opera

The Evangelical Rise of Jair Bolsonaro

The emergence of Jair Bolsonaro as a charismatic leader and the main figurehead of the opposition to the Workers' Party is a result of the crisis in Brazilian political institutions that began in the early 2010s. After over a decade in power, the left-wing party faced a deepening economic crisis, widespread criticism of its governance model, as well as the explosion of corruption cases involving members of the government, revealed by such highly publicized federal police operations as *Mensalão* and *Lava-Jato*. The president at the time, Dilma Rousseff, tasked with implementing fiscal austerity measures for the first time under the Workers' Party government, saw her legitimacy challenged by several opposition groups who seized the opportunity to develop an alternative political project.

In addition to criticizing corruption, the opposition soon found another point of attack against the Workers' Party: its gender education policies. In 2011, the Ministry of Education attempted to launch the *School without Homophobia* project, which included teacher training programmes and pedagogical activities aimed at raising awareness among secondary school pupils

about violence related to gender and sexual orientation. However, the project was halted due to fierce opposition from conservative parliament members, particularly those associated with evangelical churches. Among the opponents, deputy Jair Bolsonaro stood out with his shocking, sexist, and homophobic comments, which were widely broadcast by the media, particularly in television programmes that combine political and entertainment content. Faced with a sharp reaction from conservatives, President Dilma Rousseff backed down and cancelled the entire project.

Not insignificant, this controversy reflected a broader politicization of gender issues in Brazil. Notable Supreme Court rulings during this period included the 2011 decision affirming the constitutionality of civil unions for same-sex couples and the 2012 decision authorizing the interruption of pregnancy in cases of anencephalic foetuses, bringing the subject of abortion into the public agenda. Indeed, all these developments have contributed to the gradual introduction of gender issues in the political debate, opening the way for the emergence of the anti-feminist and anti-LGBT rhetoric which served as a window of opportunity for the rise of Bolsonaro as leader of the opposition. In fact, despite already serving his fifth term as a federal congressman, Bolsonaro was virtually unknown to the public until the early 2010s, with his electoral capital resting mainly on the army, as the institution in which he served before joining Congress. In an April 2017 interview given to the newspaper *Estado de S. Paulo*, Bolsonaro himself acknowledged that the criticism of the *School without Homophobia* project served as a 'political springboard' for his career.⁷

By fostering new alliances between members of the Brazilian political right and evangelical church leaders, the conservative discourse on gender acted as a 'symbolic glue'.⁸ To extend its influence, this new alliance was not only formed in corridors of power, but also publicly celebrated and performed. In 2013, Reverend Silas Malafaia, a neo-Pentecostal Protestant pastor and leader of the Assembly of God church, one of the largest in the country, officiated the wedding of Jair and Michelle Bolsonaro. Malafaia, an influential figure in the religious field and beyond, is also one of the main organizers of the annual Marches for Jesus in various Brazilian cities. These evangelical processions, started in Brazil in 1993 by the Apostle Estevam Hernandes, have been a part of the nation's official calendar since 2009. Originally an ecumenical and convivial event, it turned political in early 2010 precisely to give voice to the reactionary discourse against gender politics. For instance, in 2011, Malafaia used the march to criticize the recognition of civil unions between same-sex couples and advised voters against supporting parliamentarians who defended the rights of sexual minorities. In 2013, the March for Jesus in São Paulo was similarly politicized, with many participants protesting against the LGBTQ+ minority and challenging then-president Lula da Silva to address 'gay activism'. Two years later, on 30 May 2015, Bolsonaro took part in his first March for Jesus, in the state of Rio de Janeiro. Moreover, just after launching himself as a pre-candidate for the

presidential election in March 2016, Bolsonaro, who was originally a Catholic, converted to evangelicalism through a baptism ceremony celebrated by Everaldo Dias Pereira, a Brazilian reverend, in the waters of the Jordan River in Israel—a scene that was filmed and publicized on the candidate's social media. On 21 June 2019, Bolsonaro participated in the march as president-elect, a move that further reinforced and legitimized these evangelical groups, as captured in the headline of *Folha de S. Paulo*, the country's largest newspaper: 'March for Jesus has watershed with a "messianic" president. The presence of a president brought the legitimacy awaited by evangelicals for almost three decades.'⁹

Bolsonaro's strategy to appeal to the evangelical electorate has proved far-reaching, given its steady rise in Brazil over recent decades. Recent census studies revealed that the number of the Brazilian population that declares itself evangelical continues to grow: between the 1990s and 2020, the number of evangelicals went from 9% to 31.8%.¹⁰ According to the projections by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, in 2030 the number of evangelicals will surpass the number of Catholics in Brazil for the first time, ushering in not only a major demographic and cultural change, but also a major political transformation. The legislative branch, for example, already reflects these changes. Founded in 2003 within the National Congress, the Evangelical Parliamentary Front consists of a cross-party coalition made up of Christian deputies, mostly evangelicals, who defend 'the words of the Gospel' through legislation. While in 2011 the Evangelical Parliamentary Front represented only 15% of the members of Congress, in 2015, following the series of controversies over gender relations discussed above, 198 deputies joined this coalition, representing more than a third of the elected mandates in the lower house of parliament (38%).¹¹

It is against this backdrop of the political consolidation of evangelical groups, the politicization of gender issues, the weakening of the Workers' Party, and the formation of new alliances between conservative groups in the political and religious fields, that the soap opera *Ten Commandments* premiered on 23 March 2015 on Record TV. This biblical epic would play an important role in shaping Jair Bolsonaro's political identity.

The Ten Commandments

Founded in São Paulo by businessman and communicator Paulo Machado de Carvalho in 1953, Record TV is today the second-largest commercial television network in Brazil. Its programme mixes journalism, audiovisual fiction, and televangelical content. In 1992, immediately after being bought by Edir Macedo, a businessman and founding reverend of the Universal Church of God's Temple, the station launched its famous religious programme, *Tell Me and I'll Listen*, which is still on air today, and is hosted by important personalities from the Universal Church. In addition to these programmes specifically focused on Protestant proselytizing, the broadcaster

has also invested in biblical dramas. Eight mini-series and nine soap operas inspired by Bible plots have been produced, telling stories such as Joseph in Egypt, Samson and Delilah, King David, the Genesis, or the Apocalypse. In December 2019, the Regional Prosecutor's Office for Citizen's Rights in Rio de Janeiro even filed a public civil action against Record TV, requesting a reduction in the amount of time churches are given on the channel and arguing non-compliance with the Brazilian General Broadcasting Law.

The first major biblical soap opera launched by Record TV was *Ten Commandments*, written by Vivian de Oliveira, directed by Alexandre Avancini, and broadcast every night from Monday to Saturday in prime time. The plot portrays the saga of Moses, from his birth to his arrival in the Promised Land, including his escape from Egypt through the Red Sea and his meeting with God on Mount Sinai. Retracing a period of more than one hundred years of history, the soap opera is a major production, filled with impossible love stories, twists and turns, intrigues and power struggles. In an interview to the newspaper *O Globo*, on 23 March 2015, director Alexandre Avancini estimated that each episode cost an average of 700,000 *reais* (the equivalent of 140,000 dollars). To shoot the soap opera, twenty-eight sets and a 7,000-square-metre scenic city were built in the town of Vargem Grande, in Rio de Janeiro. Part of the team also spent twenty days recording in the Atacama Desert, in Chile, in order to depict the landscape around the River Nile. In addition, some of the most striking scenes, such as the opening of the Red Sea and the invasion of plagues in Egypt, were produced by Hollywood studio Stargate, the same company that created the special effects in such series as *The Walking Dead* and *Spartacus*. The synopsis follows the biblical tale, starting in the city of Pi-Ramses, in the year 1300 BC, when the pharaoh Seti orders all male Hebrew babies to be thrown into the River Nile to die. One of the children is saved and ends up being found by Princess Henutmire, Seti's daughter. Raised as a prince, he is given the name Moses and only when he is an adult does he discover his Hebrew origins. Sentenced to death, Moses manages to escape and spends years working as a shepherd, until he receives a call from God to return to Egypt to free the Hebrews from slavery.

Ten Commandments was a resounding success, the biggest in the history of Record TV's fictional productions. On 10 November 2015, with the episode dedicated to the crossing of the Red Sea, it scored 28.1 audience points in São Paulo, 7 points ahead of the giant Globo, according to consolidated data from the Brazilian Institute of Public Opinion and Statistics. This was a great achievement for Record TV as it was the first time that it overtook Globo for the prime-time audience lead.

By its sheer ratings success, *Ten Commandments* helped mainstreaming religion and supplied semiological material for the new far-right wing's political movement. Indeed, the soap opera made two important contributions to the new reactionary political enterprise that was emerging around Jair Bolsonaro. The first one was by telling the story of Moses, from which a

parallel could be drawn with Bolsonaro's own candidacy, the latter supposed to free the Brazilian people from the evils and corruption of left-wing politicians. The candidate's middle name, Jair 'Messias' (messiah, in Portuguese), further contributed to this association. Another useful contribution that soap opera made to the advancement of Bolsonaro and his allies consisted in providing a specific discursive repertoire, which is a set of words and expressions that, owing to their biblical origin, could convey a strong moral message. Elements of Christian language and comparisons between the political game and the stories of the Bible have become part of the political communication strategy of the new Brazilian extreme right. Judge Sergio Moro, a key ally of Bolsonaro who would later be appointed Minister of Justice, quoted a verse from the Bible to explain his new position in the political field: 'I look at, I listen to my chosen people.'¹² General Luiz Eduardo Ramos, who was Minister of Civil Service during Bolsonaro's government, declared on the day of his inauguration: 'God gave me the wisdom of Solomon, the ability to articulate and manage as Joseph of Egypt, and the strength of a warrior like David.'¹³ Bolsonaro himself, throughout his election campaign as well as his term in the presidential office, used the Manichean rhetoric of 'Good' and 'Evil' countless times, and even the idea, drawn from the story of Moses, that he would be on a 'God-given mission' to re-establish order in Brazil after the degeneration promoted by the Workers' Party administration. In a speech to a hundred evangelical leaders on 11 April 2019, the freshly elected president explained his victory in the following terms: 'We got here almost by a miracle. I'm going to say it's a miracle, yes, in my opinion, but this miracle is what I call a God's mission. We will fulfil this mission and Brazil will reach a safe harbour.'¹⁴

The new right-wing government established a markedly different relationship with media groups than its predecessor, preferentially funding broadcasters that supported its policies and ideological stance, such as Record TV. Between 2020 and 2022, state-owned free-to-air broadcaster Brazil TV paid around 7 million *reais* (approximately 1,410,136 US dollars) to show three soap operas from Record TV, including, of course, the mega-production *Ten Commandments*.

Nevertheless, presenting the political competition as a religious saga did more to elevate Bolsonaro than to perpetuate his political enterprise. In the longer term, the strategic partnership with Record TV to the detriment of its relationship with Globo TV put the Bolsonaro right-wing government at a disadvantage and contributed to its downfall.

When the Piranhas Devour the Villain

The Unstable Relationship Between Lula Da Silva and Globo TV

The Workers' Party's relationship with Globo TV is not without ambivalence. For the largest political party of the left, Globo is often seen as the main

representative of reactionary Brazilian media, advocating for elite interests and intervening whenever the rights of the working class make significant progress—a point of view that is actually corroborated by the annals of history. For instance, in 1954, the newspaper *O Globo*—at the time Rio de Janeiro's bestselling print newspaper—was implicated in coup plotting against Getúlio Vargas's left government, which was responsible for approving the first labour legislation in Brazil. In 1964, the media group supported the overthrow of left-wing president João Goulart and, with the following establishment of the military dictatorship, it enjoyed a privileged position on the Brazilian audiovisual market by receiving a concession from new authoritarian government. This was the beginning of the television station that has grown to become not only the largest in Brazil, but also the second largest in the world, only behind the American Broadcasting Company (ABC). Watched by more than 200 million people every day, both in Brazil and abroad, Globo TV has never hesitated to mobilize its enormous broadcasting power to take part in the main political debates that have taken place throughout Brazil's recent history. It was the channel's negative marketing that undermined Lula's first presidential campaign in 1989. Similarly, almost three decades later, the television channel played a key role in the campaign to denigrate the Workers' Party, saturating political news with corruption scandals and providing the media backdrop to both the impeachment of Dilma Roussef in 2016 and the arrest of Lula da Silva in 2018. Given these long-standing tensions between the giant media group and the Brazilian left, it seems surprising that, in the 2022 elections, Globo TV chose to implicitly support the Workers' Party candidate. However, this change in the disposition within Globo towards left-wing political agenda can be better understood in the light of Jair Bolsonaro's troubled relationship with the network during his time in presidential office.

Although Globo supported Bolsonaro's candidacy in 2018, their relations soon soured after he was elected president, notably on the grounds of the president's intolerance of media criticism. In a Facebook live broadcast on 30 October 2019, Bolsonaro attacked Globo in response to the latter's report on the investigations into the murder of councillor Marielle Franco, pointing to the possible involvement of the president's allies in the case. In his usual manner of delivering political speeches, Bolsonaro appeared exalted and did not spare any foul language. 'This journalism you do is rotten journalism, Globo TV, you're no good!' he shouted, before threatening the broadcaster not to renew its concession to operate Brazilian free-to-air television, a public contract indispensable for the broadcaster's activities. At the time, Globo was forced to justify itself and did so by an official statement: 'Globo has no intention of destroying anyone but is independent enough to impartially report all the facts, even those that might irritate the authorities.'¹⁵

This altercation marked a volte-face in the relationship between Bolsonaro and the country's largest media group; since then, their relationship has

continued to deteriorate. On several occasions, Bolsonaro and his allies have called Globo ‘rubbish’, accusing it of practising partial coverage and of being a mouthpiece for ‘globalist’, ‘woke’, and left-wing interests. In this sense, the criticism is much more insidious than it seems, and stems from what James D. Hunter aptly calls the ‘culture wars’.¹⁶ Considered to be Bolsonaro’s ideology, writer Olavo de Carvalho draws on Antonio Gramsci’s work on cultural hegemony to propose a theory according to which the left—politically, economically and militarily defeated after the fall of the Berlin Wall—would have infiltrated the means of knowledge production (the administrations, the press, educational institutions, inter-state organizations, and cultural companies) in order to bring about the overthrow of the social order not through revolutionary struggle, but through the dissemination of a deceptive ‘cultural Marxism’, of which ‘gender ideology’ would be one of the most degenerate manifestations.¹⁷

For his part, Jair Bolsonaro went beyond threats or accusations of an ideological nature against the Globo group. As head of the government, he held considerable decision-making power over the distribution of public resources in the audiovisual sector, particularly with regard to which companies would receive service contracts from the state. It is within these tensions that the government’s acquisition of the religious soap opera of Record TV, mentioned above, took place in 2021. But the broadcaster linked to the Universal Church was not the only beneficiary of Bolsonaro’s favours. The Jovem Pan group, which was initially a radio station with mostly humorous programmes, expanded during Bolsonaro’s presidency, and launched its first TV channel in October 2021, bringing together far-right journalists, commentators, and political personalities to discuss current affairs. Close to President Bolsonaro’s ‘political incorrectness’, Jovem Pan has been constantly embroiled in controversy, and even lawsuits, due to its guests’ outspoken statements, including pro-gun speeches, transphobic statements, and even a Nazi salute.

The market leader, Globo TV, reacted to Bolsonaro’s threats by providing increasingly negative coverage of his government. In addition to producing numerous critical reports and focusing on negative portrayals of the political and economic situation in Brazil, associating it with Bolsonaro’s policies, the broadcaster leveraged fictional, entertainment content. Globo’s soap operas released after 2018 systematically adopted narrative frameworks opposed to Bolsonaro’s ideological agenda, such as a story about prejudice faced by a homosexual teenager (*All Forms of Love*). This semiological counter-offensive strategy was even reported by the *Washington Post*; on 31 July 2019, the newspaper featured this curious headline: ‘In Bolsonaro’s Brazil, woke soap operas are part of the resistance.’¹⁸

In this context of escalating tensions between the government and the Globo media group, the soap opera *Pantanal* premiered on 28 March 2022 (just six months before the general elections), implicitly revealing and affirming the broadcaster’s unprecedented support for Lula da Silva’s candidacy.

The Symbolic Revenge of the Subaltern Groups

The soap opera *Pantanal* (in Portuguese, the name of one of the big five Brazilian biomes, mixing savannah and swamp biodiversity) is a remake of a production of the same name, created and written by Benedito Ruy Barbosa, and originally shown on Rede Manchete TV in 1990. Adapted by Bruno Luperi and directed by Davi Lacerda, the new version of the soap opera is part of a strategy by the Globo media group to rebrand its fiction content, which had been suffering from competition not only from other Brazilian broadcasters, but above all from new international streaming platforms. Just before the premiere of *Pantanal*, the 2021 soap opera *A Place in the Sun* ended with the worst overall average audience in Globo TV's history. As a way of remarketing itself, the broadcaster invested heavily in the production of *Pantanal*, drawing inspiration from national folklore and focusing on Brazil's natural landscapes. In fact, the soap opera increased Globo's audience by 30% among people aged between fifteen and twenty-nine; elements of its story, its characters and their catchphrases, became memes on social media.

The soap opera is based on the story of the farmer Joventino and his ten-year-old son, José Leôncio. The two settle in the Pantanal region, where Joventino becomes an important rancher, owner of a large herd of cattle and an influential man in the region. Besides the narrative of the family saga, the soap opera is full of intrigue and romance, and even a certain amount of fantasy, by telling, for instance, the legend of Maria Maruá, a woman who turns into a jaguar. Tenório, the soap opera's super-prejudiced and merciless villain, is in charge of the plot's evil deeds. Besides using a vocabulary full of sexist, racist, and homophobic comments, he commits a series of barbarities that take the viewer's breath away: he assaults women, unscrupulously murders his enemies and, when he finds out that one of his employees has had an affair with his wife, he corners him on a hill and rapes him, creating scenes worthy of a horror film. As if all this wasn't enough, Tenório is also a farmer who is indifferent to climate change, deforests his land ruthlessly and refuses to hear any criticism. In fact, the analogy between this character of the soap opera villain and public behaviour of Jair Bolsonaro is quite flagrant, as soap operas' characters might be interpreted as vivid *incarnations* of social representations. By providing strong common cultural references, works of televisual fiction play an important role in the process of social construction of the moral categories employed to decorticate both ordinary situations and political debates.

Lula da Silva soon realized the imagetic and symbolic potential of *Pantanal* to denigrate his opponent. In addition to his contempt for nature, the villainous Tenório could easily be associated with the leader of Brazil's far right concerning his 'gender performance',¹⁹ spectacularly sexist and masculinist—not to mention his conflicting relationship with non-majority sexual identities. In this sense, the soap opera *Pantanal* reinforced the symbolic construction of the 'populist cut', helping to divide the Brazilian society into two

antagonistic camps.²⁰ While social reality is far too complex to be summarized in black-and-white Manichean terms, comporting many shades of grey, the classic *telenovela* narrative of villains vs heroes offers a kind of shortcut, a simplified scheme that pits ‘conservative villains’ against ‘progressive heroes’. In that vein, during his campaign events, Lula da Silva often used references from Globo’s soap opera *Pantanal* to lighten the tone of his speeches; when political events coincided with the airing of the series, he would lament that he was missing it. However, his primary use of the soap opera was to criticize its villain, Tenório, and indirectly target Bolsonaro. At a campaign event in Teresina on 4 August 2022, for example, Lula commented on the situation of Maria Bruaca, Tenório’s abused wife: ‘I want to say to the women: yesterday I was disgusted when Tenório threw his wife, Bruaca, out of the house. I still think she should come back. She doesn’t have to kill, she doesn’t have to shoot, but she must teach that shameless sexist a lesson. He must respect the woman who lived with him for thirty years. I cry for her!’²¹ In this excerpt, by declaring to his electorate that he cries, Lula uses the characters in the soap opera to differentiate himself from his main opponent, Bolsonaro, who claims a traditional, ‘rough’ way of being a man. After all, as R. Connell argues, not showing any signs of fragility publicly is one of the cornerstones of the social representation of ‘hegemonic masculinity’.²²

In addition to turning to the Globo TV show to publicly outline his views on gender, Lula da Silva has often used it to tackle agribusiness, another topic of thorny political controversy in Brazil. On Friday, 30 August 2022, he posted on his Twitter account: ‘I know it will be four difficult years with a lot of fighting. I don’t want any relationship with a farmer like Tenório in the soap opera *Pantanal*, who is a land grabber. I’d rather meet Zé Leôncio [another character of the soap], who is more modern and who thinks about correct, low-carbon agriculture.’²³

Capping off this unprecedented alliance between the Workers’ Party and the Globo group, on 29 September 2022, while waiting to take part in a presidential debate, Lula da Silva used Instagram to share a photo of himself watching the soap opera from his dressing room.²⁴ Such a tribute to the broadcaster may come as a surprise given the history of animosity between the Workers’ Party and Brazil’s largest media group, but, in the context of the presidential election’s contingent and precarious dynamics, it revealed an alliance profitable to both sides. An alliance that could secure the renewal of the concession contract for Globo TV, threatened by the confrontation with Bolsonaro, but also one that could secure the media support that Lula da Silva needed to reach an upper-middle-class electorate. As the newspaper *Brasil de Fato* reported on 7 October 2022, most of the actors who were featured in the soap opera *Pantanal* ended up declaring their support for Lula da Silva’s candidacy on social media.²⁵ Indeed, this new arrangement between the Workers’ Party and Globo illustrates how, in politics, alliances do not necessarily obey ideological affinities, but respond first and foremost to interests defined by the constraints of the situation.

One might argue that audiovisual fiction provides only one representation in a myriad of framings of Brazilian political competition. It is true, but, in a context of political polarization, every representation counts. Circulating through the most diverse instances of socialization, these representations interact with each other in the process of giving moral meaning to the political competition. If the analogy between Jair Bolsonaro and the sexist and anti-ecological villain of Globo's soap opera is possible, it is only because it meets the right conditions for its reception in the discursive context of the time. As discussed in the first part, the far-right candidate himself contributed to this association by taking anti-feminist and climate-sceptic positions before. Additionally, the fictional narrative of *Pantanal* and its moral message to the viewers can be situated alongside the press and polling institutes, that equally contributed to polarization of the presidential race, structured around postmodern issues such as ecology, feminism, and LGBTQ+ rights. The *Datafolha* polling institute, for example, launched numerous surveys throughout the campaign, comparing and conjecturing about the 'evangelical vote' and the 'Catholic vote'—postulating, implicitly, that one either 'votes as an evangelical' or 'votes as a Catholic'. On 8 October 2022, an article in the *Globo* newspaper perfectly illustrated the effort to associate feminist and ecological causes with the Workers' Party:

The data of the survey show that former president Lula is seen as the candidate most prepared to defend minorities and workers' rights, while current president J. Bolsonaro is better prepared to fight crime. Lula is rated by 56% of voters as the most prepared to defend the rights of minorities (women, LGBTQ+, black and handicapped people). The former President is also singled out as the most willing to defend the environment (51% against 42%).²⁶

Finally, the last episode of the soap opera *Pantanal* was broadcast by Globo TV on 7 October 2022, just three weeks before the second round of the presidential elections, and set the tone for the race. After a chase scene against the backdrop of the lush vegetation of the swamps, the villainous Tenório is cornered by two of his employees, one of whom pierces his chest with a dagger. As Tenório falls into a river nearby, his body is completely devoured by a group of piranhas, carnivorous freshwater fish typical of this region in Brazil. After this hyperbolic representation of the revenge of subaltern groups against the actor of their domination, the soap opera concludes with the celebration of three weddings at a single party (an iconic element of Latin American scenography), as well as with a scene of a gay kiss between two rural workers, in a sort of Brazilian version of Ang Lee's classic, *Brokeback Mountain*. On 30 October 2022, after a hotly contested race, the polls delivered the victory of Lula da Silva (50.9%) over Jair Bolsonaro (49.10%).²⁷

It is not a question of stating here that Globo TV's soap opera, *Pantanal*, 'foreshadowed' the outcome of the elections; but to argue that it has contributed to this victory by providing symbolic material for the Workers' Party's political communication strategy. In doing so, the media group did not necessarily act out of ideological affinity with the left-wing party, but to guarantee its hegemonic position in its own social and economic field (namely the audiovisual industry) and to respond to growing competition from Record TV, whose proximity to Bolsonaro has given it a major advantage in the Brazilian mediascape.

Conclusion

As 2015 marked the premiere of the biblical soap opera *Ten Commandments* on Record TV, testifying to the growing space occupied by evangelicals in the public debate, Globo TV's soap opera *Pantanal*, broadcast in 2022, put on stage a progressive Brazilian fable and helped to crystallize political cleavages that had already been instrumentalized by Jair Bolsonaro's campaign, such as gender relations or the environmental cause. By analysing the political appropriations of these two soap operas by the main political figures in contemporary Brazil, we can infer that not only does audiovisual fiction intervene in the process of representation, but it also provides semiological material for the construction of the candidates' strategic identities. Inasmuch as the signifier always hides the signified, the narratives and categories of judgement disseminated by these soap operas are the product of the constantly changing power relations between the actors within the political and media fields.

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PART III

ORDINARY POLITICS:
SHAPING DISCOURSE
ON DEMOCRACY

Chapter 11

Make Romantic Comedies, Not War: How Televised Romance Can Help Us Reimagine Everyday Peace in Korea and Israel/Palestine

Yuval Katz and Sojeong Park

Love Will Not Tear Us Apart

Crash Landing on You (2019–2020; henceforth: *Crash Landing*) is a sixteen-episode South Korean romantic comedy that focuses on the love story of Se-ri, a successful South Korean businesswoman, and Jeong-hyeok, a North Korean soldier, after Se-ri mistakenly crosses the border to North Korea when paragliding during a tornado. The show achieved record-breaking viewership ratings for a cable channel TV show and garnered global popularity as a ‘K-drama’ through its distribution on Netflix. While the show is not the first time North Korea has been depicted in South Korean fiction, *Crash Landing*’s detailed depiction of life in North Korea triggered a reimagination and discussion of North Korea and inter-Korean relationships.¹

Arab Labour (2007–2012) is an Israeli satire that focuses on the life of Amjad Alian, a Jerusalem-based Palestinian journalist who helplessly tries to fit into the Jewish-Israeli hegemony to no avail. A central subplot of the show tells the love story of two of Amjad’s friends—Meir and Amal. Meir is a Jewish photographer who works with him in the newspaper; he is a middle-of-the-road Zionist who used to be a soldier and occasionally rejoins the army as a part of his reserve duty. He is aloof to the Israeli occupation of Palestine and does not spend much time thinking about it. Beyond his relationship with Amal and his friendship with Amjad and his family, Meir continues to hold on to many Jewish prejudices against Palestinians throughout most of the show. Amal, on the other hand, is a Palestinian human rights lawyer. Educated in Boston, she is a feminist well-versed in postcolonial critique who proudly expresses her national identity by representing Palestinians in court against the Israeli state. Meir and Amal’s story draws

inspiration from romantic comedies and uses some of the genre's familiar tropes. *Arab Labour* was the first Israeli television show written by a Palestinian—the journalist and novelist Sayed Kashua. It aired for four seasons on Israeli prime time, winning awards and accolades for its complex, witty depiction of Israeli–Palestinian relations while facing considerable rage for its merciless mocking of Jews and Palestinians alike.²

Israel/Palestine and Korea, as they are depicted on these shows, face seemingly opposing political conundrums: *Arab Labour* describes what happens when the settler colonial project of the Jewish state forces Jews and Palestinians in Israel to live together, while *Crash Landing* talks about how war forces Koreans to live apart. Subsequently, the shows differ in their levels of realism; while the encounter between Se-ri and Jeong-hyeok in North Korea is blatantly fantastic, romantic relationships between Jews and Palestinians happen in real life, despite powerful cultural taboos.³ In this chapter, we argue that both shows help us reimagine peace by bringing the discussion on intractable violent conflicts to the realm of everyday life. Examining the similarities and differences between our case studies, we underscore how the everyday becomes a useful conceptual framework for reimagining peace in various political and cultural contexts. We contend that television functions as a cultural forum for unpacking complex questions of distance and proximity, connection and disconnection.

Specifically, romantic relationships between ostensible enemies challenge ideological divides; lovers create an idiosyncratic intimacy that deviates from state ideology, exposing its social construction. Humour reinforces this social critique by discussing the ironic and ridiculous obstacles lovers face in their relationships; it indulges in the misunderstandings and misreadings of the enemy, and by making fun of such mistakes, humour restores the enemy's humanity taken away by war. We begin our discussion by reviewing the intractable conflicts in Korea and Israel/Palestine, demonstrating how they shape the relationship between people in their respective communities. We will then explain how everyday peace can be explored and expressed on television before homing in on romantic comedies, pointing out how love stories and their generic conventions promote everyday peace.

Intractable Conflicts in Korea and Israel/Palestine

Israel/Palestine and the Korean Peninsula share a devastating legacy of war. The Japanese occupation of Korea began in 1910 and ended with Japan's defeat in World War II. Discussions about establishing a democratic government in Korea led the United States and the Soviet Union to divide the Korean Peninsula into two occupation zones, with the Soviet Army stationed north of the 38th parallel and the US Army stationed south of it. The temporary division ultimately begot separate governments. As the geopolitical conflicts of the Cold War intensified, so did the tensions between the separated nations, and in 1950, the Korean War broke out when the North Korean People's

Army invaded South Korea with the support of the Soviet Union and China. After three years of war, the two countries signed the Korean Armistice Agreement and established the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Since then, the people of the Korean Peninsula have been locked in a perpetual war.⁴

Diplomatic attempts to resolve the conflict in the Korean Peninsula have continuously failed. The North-South Joint Statements, which outline steps for achieving peaceful reunification, were signed in 1972, 2000, 2007, and 2018, experimenting with different unification scenarios. While hopes for the end of conflict dwindle, there are still divided families who wish to reunite with their loved ones after over seventy years. Additionally, some North Korean defectors want to meet with their family members who remain in North Korea.

Unlike the Korean Peninsula, Jews and Palestinians lived separately from each other for millennia. After being sent into exile by the Roman Empire (70 CE), Jews were scattered around four corners of the earth, suffering from ceaseless persecution, climaxing in the Holocaust, when almost two-thirds of European Jews were murdered by Nazi Germany. Yet even before the Holocaust, many Jews in Europe realized they would never be seen as equals or be granted full civil rights; therefore, some Jewish leaders concluded they must emancipate themselves.⁵ The Zionist movement convened for the first time in Basel, Switzerland, in 1897, aiming to ‘establish for the Jewish people a publicly and legally assured home in Palestine’.⁶ Zionism in Palestine, like the formation of the United States or South Africa before it, has been a project of settler colonialism wherein Jewish immigration and settlement in the land come at the expense of indigenous Palestinians.⁷

Israel became an independent state after the 1948 war, in which it conquered hundreds of Palestinian towns and villages, exiling most of their residents and destroying the Palestinian national home in what became known as the Nakba.⁸ Palestinians with Israeli citizenship have a highly contentious relationship with the state, which discriminates against them. They are torn between their legal status as Israelis and their attachment to their brothers and sisters in the West Bank and Gaza, who came under Israeli control in 1967 and are still subjugated to Israeli military rule.⁹

In the next section, we combine the theoretical framework of everyday peace with television studies to argue that television can function as a cultural forum for unpacking violent conflicts and finding ways to move toward dialogue and reconciliation. It is where difficult questions regarding national identities, state ideologies, and social change can be worked through to begin dismantling the cultural barriers that keep members of enemy communities apart.

Everyday Peace and the Televisual Cultural Forum

Most theories of peace and conflict resolution in International Relations (IR) care about nation states negotiating with each other through official representatives—politicians and diplomats—who try to reach agreements that

stop mutual hostilities¹⁰ or navigate unpredictable terrains to avoid catastrophic escalations.¹¹ Some theories do not even reach the level of decision-makers. They concentrate on abstract processes and scenarios in the international system that can bolster peace, like how superpowers balance each other to maintain stability.¹² Other theories argue that the values of democratic regimes encourage them to avoid war or coercion when engaging with each other.¹³

Since the 1990s, several peace scholars have tried to move beyond the nation-state system to reorient the field toward activities at the local level conducive to peace.¹⁴ More recently, Roger Mac Ginty has argued that before peace is negotiated and codified into an agreement, it can be disrupted through the actions of ordinary people.¹⁵ For example, he points out a story from a war memoir by a British soldier who survived World War II thanks to one moment of grace—a German soldier in a tank already aiming at him decided not to shoot.¹⁶ Veteran peace theories would argue that, in the grand scheme of things, sparing the life of a single soldier matters little when trying to comprehend the most brutal war in humankind's history. Subsequently, they fail to account for the motivations and consequences of some of the most atrocious war phenomena, like rape¹⁷ or genocide,¹⁸ because they happen to ordinary people in the course of war rather than to armies or states.

Contrarily, everyday peace suggests that thinking beyond war, especially in intractable conflicts where violence has become a habit, is possible if we look at the experiences of ordinary people, even if they seem minuscule and redundant. Inspired by postcolonial critique, the local turn in peace studies seeks to restore a sense of trust among people who feel the everyday has betrayed them as they are forced to live through haunting memories of violence.¹⁹ This approach insists on decentralizing international actors that intervene in conflicts, imposing a Western, liberal agenda with little care for the needs of local communities. Instead, a new approach to peacebuilding should consider 'everyday local agencies, rights, needs, customs and kinship as discursive "webs of meaning"'.²⁰

How can we theorize such 'webs of meaning'? The difficulty in documenting and making sense of local interactions is one of the biggest challenges scholars and practitioners of everyday peace face. Trained in approaching peace through diplomacy and liberal values, they fail to 'see' everyday peace that might contradict them.²¹ We build on the argument that television can function as a cultural forum where social problems are discussed openly without necessarily reaching a clear solution or imposing an ideological dogma.²² From a psychoanalytic perspective, television has a therapeutic value where a show or the news coverage of a particular story work through the problems they pose to society without necessarily prescribing a solution. The polysemy of televisual texts is the source of their popularity; their inherent incompleteness can create a non-judgemental cultural space where a conversation about complex issues can commence.²³

Arab Labour has already been studied as an example of everyday peace.²⁴ However, the previous study focused on this show exclusively, leaving the

following question open: Does *Arab Labour* reflect a unique Israeli/Palestinian phenomenon, or can we find televisual explorations of everyday peace in other geographical and political contexts? We address this gap by employing a comparative approach in this study, as we examine two intractable conflicts with distinct characteristics integratively. Moreover, the previous study said little about the romance in *Arab Labour* and how it helps overcome barriers between ostensible enemies. The following section will discuss the power of fictional love to overcome structural barriers, illustrating the feasibility of peace under the most unlikely circumstances. By doing so, romance redirects attention away from the realm of high politics to the everyday lives of ordinary people.

How Fictional Love Overcomes Structural Barriers

Literary and television genres are institutions, meaning all structures, devices, and speech within a particular genre contain specific indications and signals about our social life.²⁵ While every narrative includes obstacles, the type of obstacles is an essential element that distinguishes one genre from the other. In romance, the ultimate goal of the narrative is to consummate romantic love and overcome obstacles put in place to prevent it from happening. These generate tension, making the consummation of love more dramatic.²⁶

According to Giddens, romantic love is a set of ideas that includes the belief that people will meet their 'one and only' and 'live happily ever after'.²⁷ Romantic love has been considered an ideal form of a heterosexual relationship, under the perception that an individual is an incomplete being that needs to be perfected by 'Mr/Ms Right'. The intervention of structural forces that hinder the progress of romance is a convention of romantic fiction because it makes the romance more powerful.²⁸ By employing the forbidden love motif, the romance genre can expose the irrationality of a social order that separates two individuals destined to be together. Such political implications of the romance genre push back on critiques that disregarded it as superficial.²⁹ In line with the feminist rationale that 'the personal is political', what may appear to be a portrayal of everyday relationships can expose social absurdities and provide transformative and emancipatory power.³⁰

The power of the romance genre intensifies when coupled with comedy. The psychological effects and the poetics of humour reveal its subversive potential.³¹ Humour often relies on incongruities and contradictions to deliver its message. The tension between logic and how the story unfolds in a joke reveals the ironies and absurdities of everyday life. Simultaneously, laughter relieves, allowing the joke to defuse the tension it created, especially when addressing sensitive topics. According to Frye, when romance and comedy are fused, they fulfil a desire to transform reality, while portraying a powerless individual's struggle to overcome societal conventions.³² Romantic comedies use obstacles as a springboard for characters to achieve a happy ending, and comedic devices are employed to subvert various ideologies that keep people

apart. Therefore, many Hollywood romantic comedies portray seemingly insurmountable barriers, including geographical distance (*Sleepless in Seattle*, 1993), social class (*Pretty Woman*, 1990), and even mortality (*Just Like Heaven*, 2005).³³ National hostilities are also a common barrier found in forbidden love stories.³⁴

Arab Labour and *Crash Landing* address both external and internal obstacles. Due to the Palestine/Israel and two Koreas' historic-political situation described above, the external obstacles involve national conflicts and ethnic stereotypes. At the same time, characters go through psychological and emotional struggles to find out if their relationship deserves all this effort. Thus, we explore how romantic relationships evolve in the face of conflict situations in each show and what comic devices are employed to help characters overcome, challenge, or negotiate obstacles in these relationships to achieve everyday peace.

From Love to Peace: The Case of *Crash Landing on You* and *Arab Labour*

The Politics of War in Everyday Life

After Amal and Meir date for a while, they face a common situation repeatedly explored in romantic comedies—meeting the other side's parents. Meir does not know how to handle the situation and asks two acquaintances to pretend to be his parents when he invites Amal for dinner. Amal quickly discovers Meir's plot and storms out of his apartment (S1E9). Her insult in this episode marks the beginning of a long-standing tension with Meir, in which she tries to move on while he fights to win her over. The most accentuated clash between them occurs in Season 2, Episode 8. On the evening of Memorial Day, the most sensitive time of the year for Jewish–Palestinian relations, Meir waits for Amal outside her building. She asks him to stop coming to her place and stop calling her. They have the following conversation:

Amal: Listen, this is not my natural place. I feel this is too complicated [...] there are things beyond emotions, Meir. We come from two entirely different worlds; it will never work. Let it go, enough.

Meir: No chance? Do you mean the Jewish–Arab thing? I don't give a f*ck about this thing, okay? I don't care about the Nakba, and I don't care about [the] 1948 [war].

At this exact moment, the siren goes off.³⁵ Meir remains still, as expected of him, and Amal goes away, demonstrating how state-imposed rituals in a war-ridden country penetrate everyday life and brutally undermine the possibility of love. The holiday's symbol forces Meir to choose between Amal and the state in a split second. He selects the state, proving to her that everything he just said was empty words.

At the end of the episode, Meir lights a torch at the main Independence Day ceremony in Mount Herzl.³⁶ Amal is watching the event live with her new boyfriend, Jamil, who is the direct opposite of Meir, the 'right man' for her—a Palestinian political activist who organizes a big rally against the state. On the podium, Meir makes the following speech:

I am honoured to light this torch to celebrate love. I hope you are seeing this and that you are listening, my love, my homeland, my country. I love you! I'm sorry that I hurt you; I know this is hard. You are my home, and I will be yours. And I am willing to do everything for our shared home [...] I don't care which language you speak, and in which language you dream. I want to live with you and know that together, we can overcome all difficulties.

Meir's words resonate in two semantic fields: following the ceremony's protocol, they should endear the state to its citizens in a sacred ritual where such sentiments are expected. However, Meir aims the speech at Amal, speaking about their partnership, embedded in everyday experiences and the shared emotional home they have built together. While Jamil does not make much of the speech, Amal is moved by Meir's gesture on national TV and understands his hidden message. Meir succeeds in bringing Amal back to him; in doing so, he nullifies the patriotic masquerade he performed at the ceremony, exposing the detachment of the sacred ritual from Meir and Amal's ordinary lives, proving that human attachment and intimacy are stronger than the love of country.

In *Crash Landing*, the 'crossing the line' metaphor depicts the tension between war and romance. In one of several attempts to get Se-ri back to South Korea, Jeong-hyeok gets shot (E7). Se-ri cannot leave him behind and takes him to a hospital, where they share a bed for the night. Despite being wounded, Jeong-hyeok chooses to sleep on the floor. Se-ri convinces him that sharing the bed without emotion is okay, saying, 'there is no need for a war if we stay within our boundaries'. This is meant to be a symbolic and humorous statement typical of romantic comedies where couples happen to stay a night together. However, it holds a literal sense for them as they are forced to keep their boundaries under a ceasefire situation.

Nevertheless, their love is stronger as the boundaries are finally crossed two episodes later when Se-ri finds a route back to South Korea, and Jeong-hyeok accompanies her to the border. When they reach it, Se-ri asks him to walk with her a little further. Jeong-hyeok refuses, saying, 'I can't take a single step over this line.' As Se-ri crosses the line alone and starts heading towards the South Korean portion of the DMZ, she feels a hand holding her, stopping and turning her around. It is Jeong-hyeok, who says, 'A single step would be fine.' This single step represents the courage that Jeong-hyeok has not dared to take before. It is common for romance narratives to feature two people crossing a symbolic line by breaking down emotional barriers to enter each

other's world, but the line that Jeong-hyeok crossed is a physical one created by war, involving death and sacrifice. Knowing they may never meet again due to the war between their nations, they secretly ignore the border for a few more minutes together before saying goodbye.

A post-credits scene following their goodbye hints at the interpenetration of or clash between war and romance. Upon arriving home, Jeong-hyeok discovers that Se-ri has rearranged his books to spell out an anagram that says, 'I LOVE YOU RI JEONG-HYEOK (사랑해리정혁)'. The titles of each book, including *Revolutionary Age*, *Thoughts and Justice*, *History of Liberation*, and *Realism*, imply communist ideologies but have been turned into a romantic message. This romantic scene is repeated in later episodes when Jeong-hyeok infiltrates South Korea to protect Se-ri from his enemy. When he has completed his mission and returned to North Korea, Se-ri finds that Jeong-hyeok has also rearranged her books, such as *Foreign Marketing Analysis*, *Ren-devous Economics*, *Leaders' Leadership*, and *Ethics and Business*, to form an anagram that spells 'I LOVE YOU YOON SE-RI (사랑해윤세리)'. By creating these anagrams, neither communist nor capitalist language holds any power. Their romantic language emasculates the ideological language of their respective states and transforms it into their own. As such, the traces of war and division between the two states continuously disrupt their romance, while simultaneously, their romantic everyday interaction dilutes national identities.

According to Povinelli, intimate love in liberal societies reinforces the 'self-evident good of cultural institutions' by adhering to a contractual logic and affirming the ostensible meritocratic nature of liberal society, wherein one's partner is chosen based on love rather than kinship or status.³⁷ *Arab Labour* and *Crash Landing* follow this logic only partially; while Meir, Amal, Jeong-hyeok, and Se-ri follow the conventions of middle-class heterosexual love, their love is not an expression of obligation to the nation.³⁸ Instead, the way the state disrupts their intimacy pushes them to defy it. Their impulse to do so is not driven by ideology but by passion; in many ways, breaking the rules is what makes the love affair more exciting.

Alternative Gender Roles

In the fourth and final season of *Arab Labour*, Meir and Amal face severe economic distress. The newspaper where Meir works shuts down, and Amal becomes the family's breadwinner. They can no longer afford to live in a Jewish neighbourhood in Jerusalem with their newborn child. Given their minimal budget, they are advised to move to the other side of the city and live in Ras al-Amud, a Palestinian neighbourhood (S4E1). Meir is unprepared for this development; while many Jews reside in East Jerusalem and the West Bank in settlements, living among Palestinians as equals is extremely rare.

Meir soon discovers that since Ras al-Amud does not belong to Israel nor the Palestinian Authority, it is disconnected from basic infrastructure like telephone lines (S4E2, S4E3). Meir realizes his power to turn this

situation around by using his Jewish privilege and passing as a settler to help his neighbours.³⁹ Beit Meir (literally, 'Meir's house', in Arabic) becomes a fake settlement that receives full government support; the telephone company immediately sends technicians accompanied by soldiers to install a telephone line in Meir's house. Once they leave, the Palestinian neighbours wire into Meir's connection to gain telephone access for the first time. Amal eventually discovers this scheme and grows furious with Meir, who has turned her into a settler. Nevertheless, when she sees how Meir has grown close to the youth in the community and that he has done everything for their sake (S4E8), she decides to play along with this scheme (S4E10).

While Meir seemingly leads the saga of the fake settlement, this story flips heteronormative gender roles. Amal has a respectable job as a lawyer, while Meir is unemployed. Meir agrees to leave the comfort of the Jewish side of Jerusalem for a potentially hostile environment. As noted above, Meir is wary of Palestinians despite his relationship with Amal and his friendship with Amjad and his family. While his relationship with Amal slowly changes his perception of Palestinians throughout previous seasons, the fourth season brings his transformation to a dramatic peak. By moving to Ras al-Amud and through Amal's mediation, he learns first-hand about deprivation, poverty, and injustice Palestinians must endure; inspired by Amal's effort to protect her people as a lawyer, he turns from an average Zionist to a political activist who truly changes the lives of people he once saw as enemies.

Crash Landing also portrays a reversal of power dynamic that subverts gender norms and demonstrates that strength and agency are not limited to one gender. While Se-ri stays in North Korea (E1–E9), Jeong-hyeok protects her from danger, following a 'damsel in distress' motif that reproduces heteronormative gender norms. However, in the latter half of the series, the power dynamic between the two characters reverses. Once in South Korea, Se-ri shelters Jeong-hyeok, hires him as her bodyguard to disguise him as a South Korean, gives him a limitless credit card, and even takes a bullet for him (E11–E13), just as he did for her in North Korea. Moreover, Se-ri's agency for solving the problem and creating peace is not confined to proactive measures. The familial and cordial atmosphere she creates with Jeong-hyeok and his subordinates deserves attention for its contributions to peace beyond traditional male-dominated approaches. Se-ri develops a close relationship with them, often having meals together and bonding like a family (E4, E6, E9, E12, E13). Se-ri and the North Korean soldiers disregard the state-dictated, predetermined animosity in these interactions.

Moreover, the task of caregiving is not confined to the female protagonist. During Jeong-hyeok's stay at Se-ri's house (E11–E14), he becomes aware of how disconnected Se-ri is from other people, including her family, and how she struggles to find pleasure in her daily life. On the day he leaves South Korea (E16), he fills Se-ri's kitchen cabinets with easily cookable food so she will not skip meals. He reserves one hundred messages for Se-ri using the mobile phone's message reservation function, which she

receives every day while he is back in North Korea. The messages contain encouraging reminders for Se-ri to eat, sleep, and share her emotions with those around her. Jeong-hyeok's caring actions help Se-ri survive his absence and live a better life, both mentally and physically, than before they met each other.

Humour and Language

Although North and South Korea both use the same language, the North Korean dialect differs significantly from the language spoken in South Korea. South Korean popular culture often portrays the North Korean dialect negatively or mockingly.⁴⁰ However, in *Crash Landing*, the use of the North Korean dialect by Jeong-hyeok is presented romantically. More generally, the show uses this dialect in ideological conversations with humour that ironically offsets these ideologies and subvert previous negative stereotypes associated with North Korea. Much of the humour of *Crash Landing* is derived from the conversations between North Korean characters and Se-ri. Like screwball comedies, the series includes fast-paced conversations that involve bickering over each other's differences and joking around to make fun of one another. For example, in a scene where Jeong-hyeok warns Se-ri not to share her North Korean experiences after returning to South Korea (E2), the conversation between Jeong-hyeok, Se-ri, and other two young soldiers goes as follows:

Jeong-hyeok: Once you return to the South, you may not disclose anything that happened here.

Se-ri: Don't you worry about that. I am definitely not going to tell anyone. I'm going to suffer from amnesia when I return.

Ju-meok: Right. She is telling the truth. If you watch South Korean dramas, nine out of ten are suffering from amnesia.

It's a common illness in capitalistic countries.

Eun-dong: [With a concerned face] *Is that because they drink too much American coke.*

Ju-meok is familiar with South Korean pop culture as he has watched many shows secretly. He describes the cliché of South Korean soap operas and melodramas, where the protagonist's amnesia serves as an obstacle to consummate love, as an illness in capitalism. Another young soldier worries that this illness might be due to the influence of American imperialism. This innocent conversation is satirical, highlighting how national propaganda can blind people and hinder a deep understanding of other cultures. As such, by employing humour in ideological conversations, the show disarms and makes fun of the ideologies of the two Koreas.

Language and humour play a significant role in easing tension in *Arab Labour* as well. In Season 3, Episode 1, Amal worries about bringing a mixed

child into the world. She and Meir consult Bushra, Amjad's wife and Amal's best friend, in Arabic and Hebrew. Bushra encourages the couple, promising them their child will feel loved and supported. Amal then looks at Meir, asking in Arabic 'فكرك' ('fiqrak, 'do you think so'), to which Meir, who is not fluent in the language, responds: 'fiqrak, of course!' Amal laughs and starts feeling contractions immediately. Meir gets ready to take her to the hospital when Amjad storms into the house, shouting, after his neighbour Yoske had asked him to 'keep a low profile' because having a Palestinian neighbour makes it difficult for Yoske to sell his flat. Amjad frustratedly asks Bushra and Amal why it is still inconceivable that Palestinians and Jews would live together in the same building, telling Amal: 'You should think twice about the world your son is being born into!' Once she hears him, Amal's contractions disappear.

The same dynamic repeats throughout the episode. Amjad, determined to prove Yoske wrong, joins the popular reality show *Big Brother* to spread mutual understanding. Instead, Big Brother gives him a secret mission to present himself as Yossi Peretz, a Mizrachi Jew;⁴¹ after some thinking, Amjad accepts the mission but asks instead to be called Daniel Epstein because he feels more comfortable playing an Ashkenazi character.⁴² Meir and Amal watch Amjad on TV and burst into laughter, which gives Amal contractions again. They rush to the hospital, and Amal shouts at Meir in Arabic because he is walking in front of her, telling him not to leave her behind. The guard at the door hears them talking in Arabic, and once they get closer, asks for هوية (hawiye, ID card in Arabic).⁴³ Again, Amal loses her contractions and turns back to the car angrily.

This episode makes a powerful statement about humour and language's power to unite and divide people. Like many other national minorities, Palestinians in Israel use Arabic as a demarcating tool to create safe spaces inaccessible to the surveilling ears of the Jewish majority. Language is one of the few ways Palestinians have to resist; unlike Israeli Jews, many Palestinians in Israel are fluent in both Hebrew and Arabic, allowing them to move seamlessly between the two languages. The fact that Amal ushers Meir into Arabic gently is an act of love; she wants him to feel comfortable and welcomed among her family and friends. Laughter has a similar effect; it helps relieve tensions, pushing Amal to give birth or reveal the ridiculousness of the identity game in Israel, demonstrated in Amjad's performance on the *Big Brother* show.

However, laughter and language need to be handled with care because they can become double-edged swords; if Meir is gradually accepted as a member of the Palestinian in-group through Arabic, the guard, who represents state power to stop suspicious visitors to the hospital, uses Arabic as a hostile outsider, weaponizing it against Palestinians. Similarly, Meir and Amal find Amjad's actions hilarious, but within his family circle, Amjad's wife and father are ashamed of his behaviour, feeling that he is turning his Palestinian identity into a joke.

Diluting National Identities

Romantic comedies possess a symbolic power to traverse ideological boundaries drawn along the lines of race, class, sexuality, or ethnicity. Fuelled by the modern idea of romantic love as a tool for self-fulfilment, lovers are willing to make great strides to consummate their love despite seemingly insurmountable obstacles and the risk of social castigation. Intractable violent conflicts worldwide are based on the separation between 'us' and 'them'; their discursive construction is necessary before war can be waged on the battlefield. States nurture hatred and ignorance toward the other side to make it seem as if 'we' can never befriend 'them', let alone fall in love.

Shows like *Crash Landing* and *Arab Labour* prove this premise false; by focusing on the everyday efforts of lovers to be with each other, they underline the ability of ordinary people to reject toxic ideologies that push people to fight for a distant 'king and country'. These products of popular culture divert attention away from negotiations happening behind closed doors between diplomatic elites, insisting that wars matter to ordinary people no less than to any political leader. The importance of peace talks notwithstanding, we argue that popular culture is where a new potential for peace can be found across various genres, including romantic comedies, which are often dismissed as frivolous and inconsequential.

Crash Landing and *Arab Labour* dilute national identities when lovers interact; by trespassing into the enemy's territory, whether physically or culturally, they resist the attempt to silo them into neat boxes of uncompromising patriotism, building something of their own beyond enemy lines, even if it is contingent or short-lived. Thus, they adhere to how de Certeau describes resistance in everyday life through poaching.⁴⁴ Our comparative analysis of *Crash Landing* and *Arab Labour* demonstrates cultural poaching in action that is not unique to a specific country or conflict. We point out how the politics of war disrupt and are being disrupted by love. While Jeong-hyeok/Se-ri and Meir/Amal should not be with each other due to a fortified border or cultural disapproval, they undermine the logic of separation through iconoclastic actions. By rearranging communist/capitalist books to spell out love or delivering a speech articulating it, they defy monumental national symbols while generating intimacy because their efforts are meant to bring the lover close.

The shows also reinforce the ancient connection between masculinity and war; therefore, their appeal to peace is by reversing gender roles when a woman like Amal takes on the dominant role of leading her family and helping transform Meir into a peace activist, and as Jeong-hyeok becomes a caregiver for Se-ri, helping her overcome a difficult situation.⁴⁴ Thus, poaching the terrain of the political enemy coincides with poaching the unknown land of the gendered other, holding an exciting potential for revelation on both fronts.

Finally, humour and language function as powerful mechanisms for bringing people together. While not knowing a language begets estrangement,

learning it is a crucial first step in creating proximity and affection. Humour helps defuse strenuous situations while delivering social critique through irony; both *Crash Landing* and *Arab Labour* move effortlessly between light-weight jokes about the awkwardness of a new romantic relationship and cogent social critique on the absurdity of war.

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Chapter 12

Contributing to the Construction of a Democratic Dialogue in Côte d'Ivoire: *My Family* Series in the Ivorian Political Landscape

Othniel Halépien Bahi Go

Introduction

While in the late 1990s Ivorian households could enjoy access to television which predominantly broadcast content imported from the Nigerian film industry, Nollywood,¹ the advent of digital technology and the internet in the 2000s has led to a significant increase in local audiovisual production.² Digital technology has enabled many content creators to develop and share their work without waiting for any government support. Young video creators³ including Ange Freddy,⁴ Le Labo 225,⁵ and Paul Yves Hey Tien⁶ have gained widespread public attention through social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube. As journalist Léo Pajon notes, these changes could happen because 'digital transformation, by reducing the barriers and costs to entering the audiovisual sector, contributes to the multiplication of the number of players willing to try their luck...'⁷ For example, Ivorian actress and presenter Kady Touré, who produced her own film, explained her choice as follows: 'I didn't have any sponsors, I did it with my own money... I did it because I wanted to prove what I could do before other funds came in later.'⁸ Filmmaker Bakupa-Kanyinda envisions digital technology as a tool for individual expression, providing the means to reveal dimensions and imaginaries of the world that are otherwise invisible. He argues that 'digital technology makes it possible to stimulate creativity, to produce more without sacrificing quality, to further explore and enrich African memory'.⁹ As a result, content producers are increasingly interested in developing series, which have the advantage of telling a longer story, attracting viewers for a longer period of time, and allowing producers to make profits.¹⁰

Digitization has contributed to the de-institutionalization of audiovisual production by encouraging content producers to work on subjects of their interest and to express themselves freely on various social issues. This is the case of Ivorian videomaker Roland Gogo, who used his web series *Yopougon dans le quartier* (*Yopougon in the Neighbourhood*) to denounce the depravity of Abidjan's youth.¹¹ In 2019, the Senegalese series *Maitresse d'un homme marié* (*The Mistress of a Married Man*), broadcast online and on the Senegalese private channel 2STV, presented the underside of Senegalese society, focusing on illicit relationships between men and women that defy socially approved moral norms.¹² The show provoked a scandal in the country.¹³ The Islamic NGO Jamra attacked the series in an appeal to the National Audiovisual Regulatory Council (*Conseil National de Régulation de l'Audiovisuel*, CNRA), claiming it was an apology for infidelity.¹⁴ These examples suggest that, far beyond entertainment, some series can be used to spark a conversation between the public and political leaders, and to help expose areas of dysfunction in society.

Taking as a starting point the idea that democracy is rooted in deliberation and the ability of citizens to express themselves and engage in open debate about political decisions, television and web series can be seen as a mode of expression for citizens and, as such, contribute to the process of democratization of societies.¹⁵ It is precisely from this perspective that Ute Fendler has examined the production of TV series in Burkina Faso as a new public space, emphasizing the value of humorous content in softening the potential 'shocks' of addressing socially taboo issues.¹⁶ Our own study of the viewing practices of students in Abidjan focused on the reasons and ways in which fans engage with the series¹⁷ and how they form their attachment to them.¹⁸ This chapter, which extends our previous research, is further informed by Vivane Békrou's analysis of the series *Ma Famille* (*My Family*, 2002–2007), which she used as a case study to observe socio-political dysfunction in Côte d'Ivoire.¹⁹ In addition, we draw on Sandra Laugier's perspective on the series as a means of awakening and educating viewers by engaging them in conversation about contemporary political issues.²⁰ The main focus of this chapter is to analyse how the various aspects of the Ivorian series *My Family* (specifically the episode entitled 'Fanatique' (Fanatic), which consists of eight 26-minute segments and deals largely with political themes), such as its fictional universe and characters, promote a more democratic society in Côte d'Ivoire. Based on qualitative and documentary data collected from film and television production professionals in French-speaking Africa, and more specifically in Côte d'Ivoire, and on the analysis of the episode 'Fanatic', this chapter first examines the process of legitimization of the serial format within the country's audiovisual landscape.²¹ It then considers the contribution of digital technology to the emergence of audiovisual production in Côte d'Ivoire, and finally looks at how this series contributed to facilitating dialogue between the Ivorian public and the political establishment.

The Legitimization of the Series in Côte d'Ivoire

Television series have become an integral part of the Ivorian media landscape, providing not only entertainment but also a forum for discussion and debate on socio-political issues and serving as important creators of social norms and values. The legitimization of the series in the Ivorian audiovisual scene started with their inclusion in the programme of the Ouagadougou Film and Television Festival (FESPACO)²² and continued in the 2000s with the broadcasting of locally produced series such as *My Family* and *Nafi* on Radiodiffusion Télévision Ivoirienne (RTI).²³ At the time, however, the commitment of television networks to developing this new format was somewhat limited: they were only willing to rent space to content producers who had to rely on advertisers to finance their programmes.

The process of consolidating the status of TV series in Côte d'Ivoire took a decisive turn in 2007, when Canal+ channel added the South African series *Jacob Cross* (2007) to its programming.²⁴ From that moment on, the RTI began to offer more support to local Ivorian producers.²⁵ The creation of the RTI Distribution network and the launch of the pan-African channel A+ in 2014 further contributed to the development of the national TV series industry.²⁶ These channels now provide funding and technical support to local creators in a digital environment where production costs tend to be lower. Now, in 2024, with the liberalization of the audiovisual landscape in Côte d'Ivoire, many industry initiatives rely on digital technologies and receive support from the Film Industry Support Fund (FONSIC), which also subsidizes television series projects.²⁷

The Digital Era and Series Production in Côte d'Ivoire

Technological innovation and political and economic liberalization have made media production and distribution accessible to segments of the population that were previously unable to play an active role in these sectors.²⁸

With the advent of digital technology, some producers tend to overlook quality standards. Instead, following their Nigerian counterparts, they create content with the means at hand. This approach is well summarized in the words of Ivorian filmmaker Andy Mélo:

While they (Nigerians) were making films with iPhones, we were complaining. We thought we couldn't make films without cranes, tracks, etc. But Nigerians were just making films with iPhones; they were selling them, and we were buying them. We were happy to watch them... It's not the quality of the film that matters, it's the story it tells.²⁹

This model of producing for the local market with the available resources has been adopted by many Ivorian series creators. In other words, for Andy Mélo, when it comes to digital technology, anything is acceptable. What matters most is the message conveyed, not the aesthetic qualities of the film, whether it be image quality, sound, or photography. For Ivorian director and producer Fadika Kramo, digital technology has simplified all the logistics, making the process much easier:³⁰

If filming conditions had remained the same as before, I don't think the industry would have developed as it has. When you spend 5 million [CFA francs] on a film, it's easier to make it profitable and start making another film. At the time, the process was too complicated [...] All the constraints we had, bringing rolls of film from France that could weigh 40 or 50 kilos to shoot a feature-length film, with all the shipping, customs and transport costs that entailed, all those problems no longer exist because the equipment is no longer so heavy. When the footage was finished, it had to be sent back to the lab to print the rushes, which were then sent back to Abidjan for editing. After editing, the footage was sent back to France for mixing, and then the negative had to be reformatted before the 35mm film print could be made.³¹

The combination of better access to technology and the desire of producers to develop content that is appealing to local audiences has contributed to the expansion of local production. For Pierre Barrot,

Digital technology has visibly encouraged the development of [television] production in African countries. In the 1980s, very few African series were broadcast, especially in West Africa. Today, given the increase in the number of TV series, we can say that the high production costs discouraged creators from working in this segment. In recent years, African television programmes have been characterized by a strong presence of local productions.³²

Since then, in a country where television series used to be rare, over twenty series have been produced in twenty-four years (2000–2024), including *Sida dans la cité* (*Sida in Town*, 2003), *Dr Boris* (2008), *Nafi* (2006), *Class A* (2009), *Teenagers* (2011), *TA3* (2013), *Un homme pour deux sœurs* (*One Man for Two Sisters*, 2007), *Campus* (2011), *Sicobois* (2014), *Brouteur.Com* (2013), *La Villa d'à Côté* (*The Villa Next Door*, 2011, 2017), *Le choix de Marianne* (*Marianne's Choice*, 2007), *L'histoire d'une Vie* (*The Story of a Lifetime*, 2010), *Chroniques africaines* (*African Chronicles*, 2014), *Manigance* (*Manipulation*, 2014), *La Cour Commune* (*The Common Court*, 2014), *Invisibles* (2019), *Cacao* (2020), *Maquisards* (2023), *Le futur est à nous* (*Our Future*, 2024), and others. Among these series, the one that stands out³³ for its

portrayal of African society in general and Ivorian society in particular is the series *My Family* (2002).³⁴

***My Family*: A Conversation Between Political Establishment and Ivorian Citizens**

By depicting the everyday complexities of family life in sub-Saharan Africa, and more specifically in Côte d'Ivoire, the two hundred and sixty-one³⁵ 26-minute episodes of the *My Family*³⁶ reveals a society in a moral decline following the socio-political crisis that was unfolding in the country in 2002, when the first episodes were broadcast.³⁷ It examines the disruption of the family unit caused by the crisis. In the case of Gohou and Clémentine, some of the series' main characters, Gohou must obey the orders of his wife, who constantly reminds him of his domestic duties and his shortcomings. In the Bohiri family, the dynamic is reversed. Bohiri holds little respect for his wife, Delta, and exploits her lack of character when it suits him. Aided in his intrigues by his mother, Nadié, who does not like her daughter-in-law, Bohiri takes every opportunity to stay away from home, and cheat on his wife. The two couples depicted in the series form a group of friends. Such multiplication of the main characters lends the series a polycentric narrative structure. The narrative is populated by a further fifteen characters, who interact with the four main protagonists (Bohiri, Gohou, Clémentine, and Delta) and make regular guest appearances.³⁸ These character appearances serve to reinforce the core themes and narrative strands of the plot.

A typical episode is structured around about twenty sequences, each of which develops around ten concurrent storylines. In addition to the main narrative threads, the episodes explore a variety of themes, including love, solidarity, friendship, family, romantic relationships, work, relationships with in-laws, child-rearing, and Ivorian politics, among others. To ensure a realistic portrayal of the political and social conditions, the actors in the series kept their original names, while the scriptwriters tried to match the series' scenario with real-life events. The first episode of the series, 'Couvre-feu' (A Curfew), is thus set during the curfew imposed by the authorities in Côte d'Ivoire in 2002, which incidentally contributed to the series' popularity. Focusing on the everyday life of Ivorian families, *My Family* shows the diversity of lifestyles within Ivorian society, from the wealthiest³⁹ to the most deprived.⁴⁰

Production Context

An examination of the context in which *My Family* was produced suggests that the success of the series may not be coincidental. Amidst the tensions in Bouaké over the violent armed conflict between the government army and the rebel militia, a new phenomenon is emerging in Ivorian society: the series *My Family*.⁴¹ The Ivorians, its target audience, are assumed to be at home, possibly in front of their TV sets, as the authorities continue to impose

curfews in response to the crisis. The liberalization of the audiovisual sector is still in its early days. Apart from Canal+'s encrypted channels and those available via satellite, Ivorian viewers can only watch programmes broadcast by RTI. Broadcast every Sunday evening from 2002 to 2007 between 7.30 pm and 8 pm, the series was created by Akissi Delphine, nicknamed Delta, who was already known for her roles in another popular series, *Comment ça va?* (*How Are You Doing?*).⁴² The actress also appeared in several film projects realized by renowned directors such as Roger Gnoan M'Balla⁴³ and Henri Duparc.⁴⁴ Her varied background in the local film and television industry was one of the factors behind the success of the show. In addition, it attracted much audience attention by featuring several actors already well known to the public from their roles in other popular shows such as *Comment ça va?*, *Dimanche passion* (*Sunday Passion*),⁴⁵ *Les Guignols d'Abidjan* (*The Guignols of Abidjan*),⁴⁶ *Faut pas fâcher* (*Don't Get Angry*) and *Qui fait ça?* (*Who Does This?*).⁴⁷ Finally, the fictional universe of the series received much praise from viewers, also contributing to its enduring popularity.

The Fictional Universe and the Initiation of a Dialogue Between the Society and Its Political Leaders

François Jost describes the fictional universe as a determining factor in the audience's choice of what content to watch. In his definition, this term refers to all the elements used to describe the series' setting (characters, locations, storylines, and so on). For him,

all fiction is like a country that we may or may not want to discover, that appeals to us to varying degrees, whose inhabitants we like or dislike, and whose characters guide us well or poorly. Some are so far removed from our own world that we feel lost, while others reassure us because everything in them is so familiar. Just as countries that share our culture or language are easier to visit than those that require us to constantly mobilize our knowledge of languages and customs, fiction is more or less comforting depending on how far removed it is from our world and ourselves.⁴⁸

Jost identifies three access points that can capture the viewer's interest: topicality (divided into two components: dispersion and persistence), human contradictions and characters, especially heroes. These elements are features that help the viewer to become familiar with the content, allowing the reality to come to the fore. In *My Family*, the Ivorian social context is prominently represented by two of the three elements that Jost identified in relation to the fictional universe: current events and the characters. If the current events relate to the socio-political crisis in Côte d'Ivoire in 2002, the characters in the series are best analysed in the light of their actions and the way in which they reflect reality.

Characters and the Staging of Reality

The ambiguity of the notion of character makes it difficult to define. Philippe Hamon underlines the complexity of the term by observing that

the notion of character: a) is not an exclusively 'literary' notion: its literalness (how a particular 'unit' called 'character' functions as a statement, a problem of 'textual grammar', to put it another way) must take precedence over its literarity (cultural and aesthetic criteria).⁴⁹

Viewed as one of the places that 'determines taste and interest (in adults and pupils) in reading and writing',⁵⁰ its importance can be 'measured by the effects of its absence ... Without it, how can we tell stories, summarize them, judge them, talk about them, remember them?'⁵¹ Characters are also seen as points of attraction, designed to keep viewers interested. For Boutet, the audience is captivated by characters who:

most of the time embody easily recognisable stereotypes that can be found in a large number of situations and plots, i.e. animate the episodes of the series while remaining fairly predictable and faithful to the viewers' expectations. But the stereotypical nature of the characters and their cast also meets another requirement, that of consensus, of 'political correctness' for television objects that are more economic than artistic.⁵²

In *My Family*, the characters contribute to the formation of the audience's sense of identity, which develops dynamically on the basis of the connection that the viewers establish with the series. They echo Marianne Alex's vision of characters.⁵³ According to her, characters in series can be chosen with a view to consolidating identity, as they are a showcase for audience representations. By representing stereotypes that are common in real life, the characters create connections between viewers and the content, allowing them to project themselves into it. In *My Family*, most of the protagonists share an attitude of mindlessness that prevents them from projecting themselves into the future. Their miserable social situation, to which they seem oblivious and unreflective, drives them to desperation, to the point of engaging in unrealistic pursuits such as running for the Presidency of the Republic.

The female characters in the series, such as Paty, Abibi, Julie, H el ene, Mado, Bienvenue, and C ecilia, who all come from different family backgrounds, seem far more concerned with getting a man into their lives at all costs than with taking control of their future by looking for a job and a stable source of income. Meanwhile, most of the male characters—Digb e, Abass, Djangon e, Narcisse, Decothey, Herv e, Dosso, and Kouadio—show little interest in trying to escape their lives of poverty and unemployment. Through their stories, the series highlights the severity of the socio-political and economic crisis that was unfolding in the country at the time of the release of *My Family*, with

widespread unemployment as one of its direct consequences. *My Family* was not the only entertainment product to focus on the problem of chronic unemployment among young Ivorians. The popular musical group Espoir 2000 denounced the problem of access to the labour market in Côte d'Ivoire in their song 'Abidjan', which was released as part of the album *Clair de lune* in 1997.⁵⁴ Similarly, in his 2015 feature film *Sans Regret (Without Regret)*, French-Ivorian director Jacques Trabi exposed the problem of corruption that permeates the national selection exams for entry into the public service. The government, however, takes a different view and officially reports an unemployment rate of only 2.6%.⁵⁵ This figure contrasts sharply with that of the African Development Bank (ADB), which estimates the unemployment rate at 70 to 90%.⁵⁶ The stark contradiction between these two estimates points to the urgent need for a new working definition of employment in the country.

My Family expands on the theme of youth employment in Côte d'Ivoire to highlight that even when young people find opportunities to work, they don't feel committed to it. Such is the case with Digbé, Narcisse, and Abass, who struggle to make ends meet on the modest income they earn from their telephone service business, yet seem more concerned with finding beautiful girlfriends.

In this atmosphere of social insouciance, political activity is subject to ridicule and contempt. Abass's intention to enter politics trivializes the issue even further. Like Abass, many other characters (Amin, Decothey, Gohou, Bohiri) aspire to a political career without having any political programme, clear objectives, or vision for their campaigns. Decothey's idea to run for president stems from a dispute with his friend Gohou, a candidate for the Supreme Magistracy, who has promised Decothey the post of prime minister if he comes to power. In response, Decothey decides to form his own party and run for president himself. Indeed, the national political scene is aptly captured by a comment made by Digbé in the episode 'Fanatic':

Digbé: I don't understand the people in this country. Everyone who can stand wants to be a candidate!

Delta's friends, Clémentine and Amélie, share this view and encourage her to involve her husband in politics, hoping that the media attention it would attract would force Bohiri to finally end his infidelities. As for the other candidates, they turn to politics in search of opportunities for personal gain. Like Gohou, who is mainly attracted by the idea of collecting membership fees from his 800 supporters. Ultimately, what motivates characters are personal passions rather than rational choices. Personal interest is evident in Bienvenue's impatience to take revenge when her fiancée is in power. In the episode 'Fanatic', she explains this point to her friend Cécilia with genuine conviction:

Bienvenue: My girl, do you remember my man? He's been elected head of our party and he's running for President. He's going

to be President of the Republic and I'm going to be First Lady of this country, just imagine! Men like Bohiri who made me suffer, I'm going to make them beg at my feet.

Cécilia: And are you sure he'll be elected?

Bienvenue: And why not? He's got everything it takes to be President!

Cécilia: So you think that anyone from anywhere can become President of the Republic? Politics is something you have to learn, Bienvenue.

Thérèse intends to do exactly the same—take revenge if her candidate wins the election. Together with her husband Dosso, she is determined to be one of the most loyal supporters of her candidate to receive favours once he is elected, as she discusses with Dosso and his second wife Ange in the following scene:

Ange: My dear, politics doesn't interest me.

Thérèse: Leave her alone Dosso... Ange, we're off to our meeting.

But if one day things work out for our party, don't count on us. We won't give you any favours. I'm telling you that now.

Ange: Thérèse, if Dosso becomes Prime Minister, keep all the goods he gives you for yourself. What would I normally earn? And it's today that I would benefit from any kind of pardon from him.

Later in the episode, Thérèse discovers that she has joined the same political party as Bienvenue, and that Bienvenue is the fiancée of the party leader. However, as the two are not on good terms, Thérèse changes her plans and encourages her husband Dosso to stand for election. She believes that politics is nothing special. When Dosso refuses to take part in the presidential elections, insisting that he doesn't know anything about politics, Thérèse explains her views as follows:

Thérèse: Dosso, you know me, don't you?

Dosso: Thérèse, I know you very well, but you must realize something: I don't know anything about politics. It's my friend who asked me to help him and now you want me to take his place. If someone did that to you, would you like it? Don't do to your friend what you wouldn't wish for yourself!

Thérèse: But why does it matter? If you don't know anything about politics, I'll tell you. Politics is ruthless, it's about deceiving your friend, it's about confusing people, that's what politics is all about, it's nothing new!

The series presents a decidedly negative view of politics and the people's perception of it. Exasperated with being manipulated by politicians, the

characters seem eager to take their destiny into their own hands and aspire to attain the highest office in the country. The only characters who refuse to get involved in any political activity are Bienvenue and her mother Ange, who both share a distinctly different view of politics. They believe that every citizen should take part in the political debate. For them, politics is a matter of taking action to improve one's personal well-being:

Bienvenue: Anyway, Mum, we shouldn't do what they do, because the politics you see around here causes too many problems for the people!

Ange: Don't bother my dear, my politics is my water bags that I tie up here!

Bienvenue: You're right, Mum, the real politics is how you get the money to pay for the food you eat every day.

Characterized by many tensions and contradictions, the episode 'Fanatic' offers a caricature of Ivorian political life. The series subtly denounces the misappropriation of public resources by evoking the attitude of Gohou, who is determined to divert part of his party's membership fees. This is reminiscent of the many real cases of embezzlement of public funds that have come to light in recent decades. In 1999, the European Union's audit of its health support programme in Côte d'Ivoire found that almost 180 million CFA francs had been misappropriated.⁵⁷ In 2015, during the African Cup of Nations (CAN), 720 million CFA francs (equivalent to more than one million euros) disappeared from the accounts.⁵⁸ In 2023, a case of embezzlement was discovered during the construction of the Ebimpé stadium in Abidjan.⁵⁹ In this respect, *My Family* can be seen as a reaction to the abuses of power and crimes against the public good committed by certain real political actors; a reaction that, through the series, helps to initiate a kind of dialogue between the series' vast audience and the Ivorian political class.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to examine the ways in which the series *My Family* contributes to construct a democratic dialogue in Côte d'Ivoire. It has demonstrated how digital technology has promoted the democratization of public debate in the country, allowing citizens to express their views through the television series. This analysis suggests that the series is not just an entertainment product. Many series have moved from the realm of recreation to represent real spaces that can capture the attention of a large number of viewers by 'articulating and making visible a certain set of behaviours, ideas, ordinary or collective human situations'.⁶⁰ We are long past the time when series were only useful for 'making human brain free for Coca-Cola'.⁶¹ In their depiction of the dysfunction and complexity of contemporary, rapidly evolving societies of sub-Saharan Africa, television series emerge as

proxies for dialogue between governments and citizens, and thus deserve close attention from policymakers.

Through its engagement with socio-political themes in the episode 'Fanatic', *My Family* initiates dialogue, highlighting the problem of embezzlement in the Ivorian political sphere and urging politicians to reconsider their disregard for the common good and the well-being of ordinary citizens. The episode's distinctive caricature style renders it an invaluable educational resource for all those engaged in political life in Côte d'Ivoire, citizens and political leaders alike.

Notes

- 1 Nollywood refers to the Nigerian film market (with a population of 219 million in 2022) and is an organization of producers run by marketers who distribute and sell the industry's cultural products. The idea behind Nollywood is to produce at low cost for the local population. See Pierre Barrot, *Nollywood : Le phénomène vidéo au Nigeria* (Harmattan, 2012).
- 2 Othniel Go, 'État et pratique cinématographique en Côte d'Ivoire : de l'institutionnalisation à la démocratisation d'une activité en expansion', in *États et cinéma en Afrique francophones : Pourquoi un désert cinématographique ?*, ed. by Claude Forest (L'Harmattan, 2020), pp. 287–300; Alessandro Jedlowski, 'La révolution vidéo en Afrique subsaharienne. Nigéria, Éthiopie et Côte d'Ivoire', *Sociétés politiques comparées*, 43 (2017).
- 3 '10 vidéastes ivoiriens à suivre en 2020 pour garder la bonne humeur', *Jeunes.ci*, n.d. <<https://jeunes.ci/actualites/reseaux-sociaux/10-videastes-ivoiriens-suivre-en-2020-pour-garder-la-bonne-humeur>> (accessed 24 March 2022).
- 4 'Facebook page of Ange Freddy', n.d. <www.facebook.com/Realangefreddy> (accessed 11 April 2022).
- 5 'Facebook page of Le Labo 225', n.d. <www.facebook.com/cidigitale> (accessed 11 April 2022).
- 6 'Facebook page of Paul Yves Hey Tien', n.d. <www.facebook.com/PaulYvesHeyTien> (accessed 11 April 2022).
- 7 Léo Pajon, 'Netflix met le cap sur l'Afrique francophone', *Jeune Afrique*, 2021 <www.jeuneafrique.com/1114880/culture/netflix-lorgne-lafrique-francophone> (accessed 10 June 2022).
- 8 Interview with Kadhy Touré by Claude Forest, 'Kadhy Touré : Le cinéma comme business', 30 May 2017 <<http://africultures.com/kadhy-toure-cinema-business-14112>> (accessed 22 December 2022).
- 9 Balufu Bakupa-Kanyinda, 'L'esprit du numérique', *Présence Africaine*, 170.2 (2004), p. 104.
- 10 Producers were able to broadcast their content with the support of advertisers who acquired advertising slots during programme transmission.
- 11 *Yopougon dans le quartier* <www.dailymotion.com/video/x46v9g5> (accessed 10 January 2024).
- 12 Produced by the Marodi TV group, the Senegalese TV soap opera *Maitresse d'un homme marié* (created by Kalista Sy) was originally broadcast in Wolof, on 2sTV channel and YouTube from January 2019, before appearing in French on the pan-African channel A+ in 2020. The series depicts the daily life of women in contemporary Senegalese

- society and denounces many social problems, including polygamy, rape, domestic violence, and poverty. *Maitresse d'un homme marié* <www.youtube.com/watch?v=BrKbkMCN4qE> (accessed 2 November 2021).
- 13 Marame Gueye, 'Senegal's Fear of Outspoken Women', *Africa is a country*, 4 January 2019, translated in *Le Courrier international*, 15 April 2019 <www.courrierinternational.com/article/television-maitresse-dun-homme-marie-la-serie-senegalaise-qui-derange> (accessed 30 June 2020).
 - 14 AFP, 'Maitresse d'un homme marié, la série qui met à nu les tabous de la société sénégalaise', *L'Express*, 2019 <www.lexpress.fr/styles/maitresse-d-un-homme-marie-la-serie-qui-met-a-nu-les-tabous-de-la-societe-senegalaise_2083514.html> (accessed 18 September 2022).
 - 15 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (The Belknap Press, 1999).
 - 16 Ute Fendler, 'La série télévisuelle entre appropriation, remédiation et création : Kadie Jolie, Vis-à-Vis et Commissariat de Tampy (Burkina Faso)', *Lendemain*, 35.138–139 (2010), pp. 69–77.
 - 17 Othniel Go, 'Pratiques Spectatoriennes sériephiliques des Étudiants Abidjanais : analyse des préférences de contenus au regard du genre', *Akofena*, 3.5 (2022), pp. 307–14.
 - 18 Othniel Go, 'Pratiques spectatoriennes sériephiliques chez les étudiants abidjanais' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Université de Lille, 2023).
 - 19 Viviane Békrou, 'Soumission ou subversion : complexité de la condition féminine dans le téléfilm *Ma Famille* d'Akissi Delta', *Nouvelles Études Francophones*, 27.2 (2013), pp. 182–95, doi:10.1353/nef.2013.0018.
 - 20 *Les séries : Laboratoire d'éveil politique*, ed. by Sandra Laugier (CNRS éditions, 2023).
 - 21 As part of the doctoral thesis Go, 'Pratiques spectatoriennes sériephiliques', we interviewed twenty-four film professionals between 2014 and 2023, including actors, producers, and directors.
 - 22 One of the most prestigious film awards in sub-Saharan Africa. A 'TV and Video' section was created in 1993 following the expansion and development of video content across the continent.
 - 23 Interview with Marie-Christine Amon (director, producer, scriptwriter), 7 January 2016, Cocody, Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire).
 - 24 The son of one of the founding fathers of the ANC (African National Congress), Jacob inherits an empire. But his inheritance comes with many challenges, leading him on an epic quest and into battle with his detractors. Co-produced by Nigeria and South Africa, the 52-minute programme comprises eight seasons that were broadcast between 2007 and 2013.
 - 25 'Co-production et distribution : RTI distribution exporte la culture ivoirienne au-delà des frontières de l'Afrique', UNESCO, 2017 <<https://en.unesco.org/creativity/policy-monitoring-platform/co-production-et-distribution-rti>> (accessed 30 June 2021).
 - 26 A+ is a pan-African entertainment television channel launched by Canal+ Overseas on 24 October 2014. With staff based in France and Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire), A+'s programming consists mainly of series produced in French-speaking Africa.
 - 27 Since the liberalization of the audiovisual sector in Côte d'Ivoire, seven television channels have dominated the country's television landscape: three mainstream channels (RTI1, RTI2, RTI Bouaké), one news channel (7infos), and three entertainment channels (NCI, Life TV, A+ Ivoire).
 - 28 Alessandro Jedlowski, 'Afriques audiovisuelles : appréhender les transformations contemporaines au prisme du capitalisme global', *Politique africaine*, 153.1 (2019), p. 7.

- 29 Interview with Andy Mélo, 22 December 2015, Abidjan, Cocody (Côte d'Ivoire).
- 30 Kramo Lacina (1948–2022) came to public attention with his film *Djéli conte d'aujourd'hui* (1980), which won the Grand Prix Etalon d'or de Yennega, the International Critics' Prize and the International Catholic Film Office Prize at FESPACO 81 in Ouagadougou. He was Director General of the Office National du Cinéma de Côte d'Ivoire (ONAC-CI). We interviewed him in Yopougon, Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire), 20 August 2014.
- 31 Interview with Kramo Lacina.
- 32 Interview with Pierre Barrot, former Head of Audiovisual Cooperation and Image Promotion at the OIF, 31 January 2017, Paris.
- 33 'Ma famille, série TV ivoirienne culte est de retour', *AFP* and *Le Monde*, 2016 <www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2016/09/06/ma-famille-serie-tv-ivoirienne-culte-est-de-retour_4993117_3212.html> (accessed 10 April 2024).
- 34 Go, 'Pratiques spectatoriennes sériephiliques'.
- 35 Faustin Ehouman, 'Akissi Delta, actrice et réalisatrice: "Désormais, je vais porter plainte contre tous ceux qui m'accuseront..."', *Fratmat.info*, 2023 <www.fratmat.info/article/233134/culture/cinema/akissi-delta-actrice-et-realisatrice-desormais-je-vais-porter-plainte-contre-tous-ceux-qui-maccuseront> (accessed 10 June 2025).
- 36 *Ma Famille* <www.youtube.com/watch?v=5aapKC0gFIU&list=UULPj8hdIVTgZU75hwFfe5rzvw> (accessed 22 July 2024).
- 37 On the night of 19 September 2002, a military rebellion broke out in Côte d'Ivoire. Certain cities, such as Bouaké and Korhogo, were taken over by the rebels, effectively dividing the country into two parts, the North and the South.
- 38 These include the famous Ivorian TV presenter Didier Blehou, the singer Betica, and the comedian Adama Dahico.
- 39 In particular, the couples Bohiri/Delta and Gohou/Clémentine.
- 40 These are illustrated by the family of Dosso and his two wives, Ange and Gbazié, and the family of Kouadio and Amoin.
- 41 Located 350 km from Abidjan, Bouaké is the capital of the Bandama Valley district and the administrative centre of the department of the same name and of the Gbêké region. During the 2002 crisis, the city became the rebels' military base.
- 42 One of the first Ivorian satirical programmes created by Léonard Groguhet. The programme was broadcast on Ivorian television (RTI) from the early 1970s until 1994.
- 43 Born in Grand-Bassam in 1943, Roger Gnoan M'Balla introduced Côte d'Ivoire to the international cinema scene. His film *Au nom du Christ* (1993) won the 'Youth' prize at the Locarno Festival (Switzerland) and the 'Yennenga' Grand Prize at the Ouagadougou FESPACO Pan-African Film and Television Festival (Burkina Faso). He died on 11 July 2023 at the age of eighty-two.
- 44 Franco-Ivorian director Henri Duparc graduated from the Institute of Cinematography in Belgrade (former Yugoslavia) in 1962 and studied in the IDHEC from 1964 to 1966. Determined to bring African cinema to Africans, Duparc made films such as *Bal poussière* (1988), *Le sixième doigt* (1990), and *Caramel* (2004).
- 45 The entertainment show hosted by the famous Ivorian presenter Barthélemy Inabo and broadcast on Ivorian television in the 1990s.
- 46 Ivorian entertainment series with actors such as Michel Gohou, Nastou, Amélie Wabehi, and Dolo Adama, all of whom are well known to the general public in Côte d'Ivoire.
- 47 Satirical comedy exploring Ivorian social problems.
- 48 François Jost, *De quoi les séries américaines sont-elles le symptôme?* (CNRS, 2011), p. 19.

- 49 Philippe Hamon, 'Pour un statut sémiologique du personnage', *Littérature*, 6.2 (1972), p. 88.
- 50 Pierre Glaudes and Yves Reuter, *Personnage et didactique du récit* (Université de Metz, 1996), p. 6.
- 51 Yves Reuter, 'L'importance du personnage', *Pratiques*, 60.1 (1988), p. 3.
- 52 Marjolaine Boutet, 'Les séries télévisées américaines des années 1980', *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, 84.4 (2004), p. 63.
- 53 Marianne Alex, "'Séries de filles" et "Séries de mecs": enquête sur les représentations genrées des étudiants et étudiantes concernant les séries américaines', *Genre en séries*, 2 (2015), pp. 22–49, doi:10.4000/ges.1606.
- 54 'Espoir 2000: Serie 'C' Album: Clair de lune (1997)' <www.youtube.com/watch?v=LAYfQyIFh6A> (accessed 30 April 2024).
- 55 Ismael Sy, 'Le taux de chômage en Côte d'Ivoire oscille entre 70 à 90 %', *Mediapart* (2021) <<https://blogs.mediapart.fr/ismael-sy/blog/200121/le-taux-de-chomage-en-cote-d-ivoire-oscille-entre-70-90>> (accessed 17 April 2024).
- 56 Ibid.
- 57 Marie-Laure Colson, 'Côte d'Ivoire : coup de balai Responsable de détournements de fonds européens, le ministre de la Santé a été remplacé', *Libération*, 13 August 1999 <www.liberation.fr/planete/1999/08/13/cote-d-ivoire-coup-de-balai-responsable-de-detournements-de-fonds-europeens-le-ministre-de-la-sante-_282168> (accessed 10 March 2024).
- 58 Alexis Adélé, 'CAN : la Côte d'Ivoire dote ses Eléphants de 4 milliards de francs CFA sans avoir élucidé les détournements de 2015', *Le Monde*, 4 January 2017 <www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2017/01/04/can-la-cote-d-ivoire-dote-ses-elephants-de-4-milliards-de-francs-cfa-sans-avoir-elucide-les-detournements-de-2015_5057739_3212.html> (accessed 10 April 2024).
- 59 Alexis Billebault, 'En Côte d'Ivoire, le stade d'Ebimpé fait de nouveau polémique', *Jeune Afrique*, 13 September 2023 <www.jeuneafrique.com/1482424/societe/en-cote-divoire-le-stade-debimpe-fait-de-nouveau-polemique> (accessed 10 January 2024).
- 60 Hervé Glevarec, 'Attachement aux univers fictionnels et déplacement du champ du dicible et du pensable : la sériephilie des jeunes adultes', in *Séries cultes et culte de la série chez les jeunes. Penser l'adolescence avec les séries télévisées*, ed. by Martin Julier-Costes, Denis Jeffrey, and Jocelyn Lachance (Presses de l'Université Laval, 2014), p. 29.
- 61 The phrase refers to a comment made by Patrick Le Lay in an interview published in *Les Dirigeants face au changement* (Huitième Jour, 2004). The book was commissioned by the consulting firm EIM. In the interview, Patrick Le Lay argued that TF1's role was to 'help Coca-Cola, for example, to sell its product'. He further explained: 'For an advertising message to be perceived, the viewer's brain must be available. The purpose of our programmes is to make them available: in other words, to entertain them, to relax them and to prepare them between two commercial messages. What we are selling to Coca-Cola is available human brain time.' Journalist Christine Pouget discovered this interview and reported it to a wider audience. Dambrine Adrian, "'Le temps de cerveau humain disponible" : Patrick Le Lay', *La culture générale* (2020) <www.laculturegenerale.com/patrick-le-lay-le-temps-de-cerveau-humain-disponible> (accessed 25 January 2021).

Chapter 13

Servant of the People: When Imagination Takes Over

Thibaut de Saint Maurice

When it comes to democracy, it is fairly easy to find a basic definition.¹ For example, it can be defined as a political system in which power is exercised by the people. However, any attempt to put such a democratic exercise of power into practice is fraught with problems. Who are the people who are supposed to exercise this power? How do they do it? And what kind of power is it? One of the promises of the idea of democracy is that every citizen should be able to participate in political life, and thus bear political responsibility. However, even in a democracy, as the sociologist Albert Ogien observes, ‘the demand of ordinary citizens to assume control of the state affairs often provokes sarcasm or mockery, if not panic. Such demands always raise a concern: is it reasonable to entrust political amateurs with the responsibility of governing a country?’²

One of the most prominent responses to this question comes today from Ukraine and its President Volodymyr Zelensky. It occurs at a time when Ukraine symbolizes a democratic ideal in resistance against the violence of the autocratic rule of Vladimir Putin, Russia’s leader. What is perhaps even more remarkable is that this response was imagined and subsequently enacted by a television series. To date, the Ukrainian series *Servant of the People* (*Sluha narodu*) is the only example of a series that has had such a strong political impact. It presents a scenario in which Vassili Goloborodko, a teacher of history and geography at a secondary school in Kyiv and a novice in politics, becomes President of Ukraine against the odds. In the wake of this story, a new political reality has emerged, offering its producer and lead actor, Volodymyr Zelensky, a complete novice in his political ‘profession’, in a manner similar to his character, the opportunity to be elected president of his country. The fiction has therefore been re-enacted twice: first in a series broadcast on Ukrainian television, on channel 1+1, between 2015 and 2019, and later within the context of real Ukrainian political life, commencing on 20 May 2019, the date upon which Volodymyr Zelensky became president. Upon assuming office, President Zelensky

encountered a series of circumstances that bear a troubling resemblance to those faced by President Goloborodko in the series. After a year in power, both presidents are implicated in corruption cases. However, whereas President Goloborodko had initiated an investigation in order to identify the perpetrators of corruption, the revelations about Zelensky and his entourage in the Pandora Papers scandal came as a brutal reminder of reality.³ Conversely, when viewing the videos recorded by President Zelensky with his smartphone during Russia's invasion of Ukraine in March 2022, we immediately recall the scene from the sixth episode of the first season of *Servant of the People*, in which President Goloborodko declares with passion: 'I'm ready to die for my country.' In this unique configuration, the boundaries between reality and fiction are blurred, with the two intermingling and feeding off each other. This places narrative and stagecraft at the heart of political reality. The question remains as to how such a configuration came about. How did a satirical series, with its light-hearted humour, come to assume such great political importance, to the point of turning a 'professional joker', as former Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko described Zelensky, into a popular, widely elected president and today, an icon of democratic resistance?⁴

This chapter explores how *Servant of the People* shapes political reality and public perceptions. It begins by examining the political journey of an ordinary man, showing how fiction prefigured Zelensky's rise to power. Then, it discusses the intersection of political and ordinary life, highlighting how the series portrays democracy as an everyday experience. The chapter moves on to the change of status of the series, illustrating its growing influence as a political and cultural phenomenon. Next, it provides an insight into its role in exposing power structures. The discussion then shifts to the educational power of fiction, analysing how the series serves as a tool for democratic awareness. Finally, *Servant of the People* redefines political trust and civic engagement, demonstrating how imagination can shape political realities.

The Political Journey of an Ordinary Man

When Vassili Goloborodko wakes up at the beginning of the first episode to go and teach history to his pupils, he is unaware that he has just been elected President of Ukraine. Over the course of twenty-three episodes, *Servant of the People* presents the story of an ordinary man's ascent to power and his struggle against the corruption of the political elite and the endemic corruption affecting his country. His election follows a secret initiative by his students, who post a video of Vassili speaking out against the inaction and corruption of Ukraine's political class on social media. With millions of views within days, the video persuades Vassili to stand for election, while his students launch a crowdfunding campaign to raise the necessary funds. Meanwhile, in the shadows, the oligarchic powers represented by three hard-to-identify men continue to pull the strings, deciding for once not to

manipulate the election: ‘May the best man win [...] let the Ukrainians decide. An uncontrollable democracy? I love this game’ (S1E1).

Vassili’s initial steps in his new role create comic situations, arising from his naïvety, simplicity, and ignorance of the codes and backrooms of political life. However, with time, his confidence increases, and he dedicates himself to the cause of reform. To spearhead this effort, he assembles a team of trusted individuals, including his former spouse, Olga, and a group of friends from his high school, whom he entrusts with important roles in the government. They all face the challenge of maintaining their integrity in a country mired in debt and under the thumb of powerful oligarchs. At some point, Vassili is forced to confront his own family, particularly his father Petya, who seems unable to understand—or accept—that the fact that his son has become president does not entitle him to any privileges. Additionally, he must discipline his sister, Svetlana, who wants to utilize her newly acquired position for a business venture by procuring favourable bank loans. However, the difficulties are structural. The near-impossible challenge of reforming the country in accordance with International Monetary Fund (IMF) standards ultimately forces Vassili to resign at the beginning of Season 2, which was broadcast in 2017. Season 3, which began broadcasting in spring 2019, was cancelled after three episodes following Zelensky’s victory in the presidential election.

Political Life and Ordinary Life

The political importance of *Servant of the People* lies in its representation of Ukrainian political life, encompassing both the corridors of the presidential palace and ministries, and the ordinary lives of Ukrainian families. Furthermore, the series had an impact on real-life politics, paving the way for Volodymyr Zelensky to be elected president in 2019. However, its effects extend beyond this. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 attracted international attention to the series. Broadcast in more than twenty countries within weeks of the war’s outbreak, it played a role in the conflict, contributing to the war of narratives that took place alongside the military confrontation on the ground. The series then invites us to reconsider the effects of fiction beyond the critical analysis suggested by Plato or, more recently, Adorno and Horkheimer.⁵ The primary criticism of the poets formulated by Plato in Book X of the *Republic* relates to their use of images to manipulate fiction. He argues that images serve to distance us from reality, not only because they are merely a reflection of ideas, but also because they impede our sensibility and saturate our attention. From a Platonic perspective, it is therefore implausible that fiction could have a positive impact on reality. Adorno and Horkheimer arrive at a similar conclusion, although they do so for different reasons. In their analysis, the products of the cultural industry are not distinct from those of industry in general. They are part of a capitalist system that aims to maximize profit through standardization and mass distribution. They

argue that within such a system, the products of mass culture have the effect of undermining both the individual capacity for reflection and the collective capacity for critical mobilization.

The question thus arises as to how we might explain the profound impact that this series has had on political reality. What impact has it had on changing the political culture in Ukraine? With more than 20 million viewers in a country of nearly 45 million, the series introduced the Ukrainian people to a political alternative that became a reality when its leading actor took on the role of presidential candidate. In other words, the impact of the series can be explained by its role in providing a common and shared resource for the moral and political education of its wide audience.

The significance of *Servant of the People* lies in its capacity to reveal the ordinary dimension of political life. Through the ascension of an ordinary man to the presidency of Ukraine, this series reveals how democratic and ordinary life are interconnected. Vassili's life at the beginning of the series is perfectly ordinary: a middle-aged man, dreamy, somewhat disorganized but passionate about his work, lives with his parents after a failed marriage and teaches at a local public high school. The series offers many scenes from his everyday life at home, often in a comical light, such as when he tries to persuade his mother to iron his shirt in the morning so that he can get to class on time. By presenting occasional examples of successful collective action, beginning with the mobilization of Vassili's pupils to get him elected, the series portrays a genuinely democratic form of life as an alternative to the anti-democratic form of life where self-interest and corruption at every level prevail. As Dewey reminds us, democracy cannot be reduced to a set of institutions or a system for distributing rights and responsibilities, or even a set of moral principles. Democracy is, above all, an experience. It is a way of life in which common conversation is always possible because everyone can take part in it, from their ordinary situation, in complete confidence. Of all the characters in the series, Vassili is the one who takes the time to have this conversation, employing every opportunity to explain his vision of democracy and the advantages of his reforms to his numerous 'families', often during mealtimes, when moments of collective conversation are shared. The election of Vassili Goloborodko in fiction and that of Volodymyr Zelensky in real life both exemplify the democratic reality that empowers individuals to serve the needs of their communities. Conversely, everyone, regardless of their status, has a responsibility to defend democratic form of life. With the Russian invasion in February 2022, this fiction has tragically become reality for the entire Ukrainian population. It has also found a new audience beyond Ukraine's borders, being distributed internationally.

Change of Status

Servant of the People was first broadcast between 2015 and 2019 and was exported to a limited number of countries. Between 2017 and 2021, it was

accessible to Netflix subscribers in the United States, as well as to viewers in Ukraine's neighbouring countries, including Belarus and Serbia, whose TV networks had purchased the broadcasting rights. The Russian channel TNT broadcast only the pilot episode before suspending further transmission. The military aggression perpetrated by Russia against Ukraine at the end of February 2022 has renewed interest in the series worldwide, introducing President Zelensky in his new role as leader of the Ukrainian resistance to a new audience. As criticisms of Russian aggression have increased and political and economic sanctions against Russia have been implemented, there has been a surge in global demand for the rights to broadcast the series. The Arte channel began broadcasting the series in France and Germany less than a week after the start of the war, on 2 March 2022. In March 2022, *Servant of the People* was made available in the UK (Channel 4), Albania (Tring TV), Finland (Yle), Greece (ANT1), and Spain (Telecinco), and came back to the Netflix catalogue in the United States. In April 2022, it became accessible to the viewers in Tunisia (Hannibal TV), Canada (Vision TV), Estonia (TV3), and Italy (La7), among other countries. In the context of the war, the series has acquired a new significance: it has become a new means of exercising soft power and fuelling the war of images and narratives waged by two opposing countries, with Volodymyr Zelensky now serving as President of Ukraine. In addition to his video-conference appearances in the parliamentary assemblies of Western democracies and his inspirational videos posted on social networks, *Servant of the People* is increasingly perceived as a prequel to his presidency and to Ukraine's democratic struggle. The commentary on the series, set against the backdrop of ongoing military operations, has become a regular feature of the media discourse for audiences across the globe. The admiration that Volodymyr Zelensky has gained for his resistance efforts is further reinforced by the heroism that his character displays in the series. However, the question arises as to how *Servant of the People* can effectively serve as a resource for political education for the people for whom it was originally intended.

Behind the Scenes

Servant of the People is a compellingly critical comedy that examines the Ukrainian political establishment, its endemic corruption, and the forfeiture of the democratic aspirations born with the 2014 Maidan revolution. It continues a trend set by several popular series over the last twenty years, which has been to show to the viewers the inner workings of the worlds inaccessible to the general public, including the corridors of power. Following a few successful series set in this unique professional environment, such as *The West Wing* (HBO, 1999–2006), *Borgen* (DR1, 2010–2022), *The Thick of It* (BBC Four, 2005–2012), and *Veep* (HBO, 2012–2019), *Servant of the People* introduces a satirical angle to the political series genre. The Ukrainian series even borrowed certain staging techniques from *The West Wing*, such as the

'walk and talk' sequences, the lengthy discussions in the corridors of government buildings, filmed in a tracking shot, which demonstrate the processes of deliberation and political decision-making. In addition, the series adopted the colours and typography of the title of its American predecessor, replacing the solemn image of President Bartlet with that of Vassili Goloborodko, who appears confused, riding his bicycle. These series emerged as the most effective form of critical investigation of the sites of power, thus contributing to the democratic ideal of transparency. The initial critical act to defend this ideal, which it realized, was to document these sites by providing the public with common frameworks of representation, enabling the majority to engage in open discussions about issues that were previously confined to a select few. If, as Dewey believed, democracy is not merely a set of institutions but also a shared experience sustained by an ongoing conversation about the interests and goals of the community, then these series may be regarded as valuable democratic resources because they provide the opportunity for renewed conversations.⁶ They expose the backstage workings of these institutions which often escape the scrutiny of democratic society. And, by depicting these worlds in numerous episodes over several seasons, they direct the viewer's attention to the ordinariness of these previously exclusive forms of life, revealing the potential for a shared experience.⁷ But in addition to documenting the sites of power, *Servant of the People* educates its viewers about democracy. What kind of education is it, and what democratic reality do we discover by watching the series?

The Educational Power of Fiction

One of the key challenges in answering this question is to consider seriously the potential of fiction as a learning and educational resource. It is relatively easy to imagine that *Servant of the People* is an entertaining show, which is one of the reasons for its success. It is less apparent, however, that the series may have played a role in Volodymyr Zelensky's rise to power, and that the fiction it depicts may have been a resource for political education for the public. This implies, as Jean-Marie Schaeffer suggests, that the 'fictional immersion' offered by the series is not merely a promise of entertainment but also, and simultaneously, a means of acquiring knowledge.⁸ Serial fiction is what that author calls a form of 'shared and ludic feint' that develops over time and for a wide audience.⁹ It creates a common and shared representation that is likely to define an alternative reality for the universe it projects. In this context, if we follow the mimetic learning model, which posits that mimetic immersion generates knowledge, it is possible to speculate that a fictional work such as *Servant of the People* could have reinforced its audience's understanding of the complexities and challenges of democratic political life. This is particularly probable given the series' overt educational intent.

From the outset, the objective is clear: to elucidate the various mechanisms that underpin contemporary Ukrainian politics by exposing the corruption

schemes and oligarchs who oversee them. Although lacking in political experience, Vassili is well-versed in teaching, having taught history in high school before becoming president. So, he takes up his duties like starting a new school year with new pupils. He lays down the rules, instructs his deputies, explains the lessons, and gives the first assignments. On various occasions, including his inaugural address, meetings with the Council of Ministers and speeches to Members of Parliament, he does not hesitate to give a few lessons about democracy to those who are supposed to serve it. To remind the deputies of the fundamental principles of representative democracy, he repeatedly explains to them that democracy represents the power of the people, and that the election transfers this power temporarily to the deputies, who serve the people. In addition to these lessons in political culture, the viewer observes Vassili's imaginary conversations with historical figures, including Plutarch, Abraham Lincoln, and Ernesto Che Guevara, all of whom were renowned for espousing democratic ideals. Finally, Vassili frequently reflects on the history of Ukraine since its independence in 1991. He recalls the challenges the country faced in achieving its democratic aspirations, which were threatened by its Russian neighbour. He critiques the excesses of the Lukashenko regime in Belarus and emphasizes the distinctiveness of the Ukrainian nation in light of its Soviet past. By mobilizing these educational resources, *Servant of the People* gradually establishes itself as an exercise in civic education for the Ukrainian citizens and as a kind of national story that describes an idealized vision of Ukrainian democracy. Widely accessible, this story uses the power of comedy to put the spectator-citizen back at the centre of the political debate. The series presents several scenes inspired by the international contemporary popular culture that are readily recognizable to the viewer. These include, for example, the scene in which the main heroine learns to use cutlery in *Pretty Woman* (S1E2) and the final slow-motion shot of the heist crew in *Ocean Eleven* (S1E15). In the meantime, in the political domain, the reforms discussed in the series, such as timely payments of salaries, state of the roads, fight against tax evasion, management of stray animals, or school education, primarily concern the ordinary lives of the people. Considering the events that have occurred in recent years, it becomes evident why this series has such significance in the ongoing war of narratives between Ukraine and Russia. It provides a comprehensive illustration of the density and singularity of Ukrainian political culture, while simultaneously offering insight into the potential for an authentically democratic Ukrainian state.

Restoring Confidence through Familiarization

Another aspect of *Servant of the People* regarding its political significance is the way the series helps to restore confidence in the democratic ideal. The Maidan revolution in 2014 initially raised democratic expectations, but these were quickly undermined by the inability of the political elite to implement

the necessary institutional reforms to transform the structures of public life in the country. The endemic corruption and the constant suspicion of oligarchical influence have left Ukrainians with a bitter distrust of the political elite that has appropriated power.

The series provides numerous examples of this appropriation. One such example is the exposition of a bloated bureaucracy in which all the posts are held by 'friends' or 'acquaintances' of those in power. Another is the scene in which the outgoing president has entrenched himself in his office, refusing to leave on the pretext that Ukraine is 'his' country. The prevalence of corruption and the seizure of power in Ukrainian politics has created a system that benefits only those in control, such as Prime Minister Yuri Chuiko. Furthermore, the pervasiveness of corruption in Ukrainian society renders the country ungovernable, becoming a part of everyday life for most Ukrainians who accept it as given. As complexity increases, it becomes increasingly challenging for ordinary citizens to have reasonable confidence in the actions of their leaders and fellow citizens. This, in turn, makes it more difficult for them to reduce complexity. In the analysis of Niklas Luhmann, confidence functions as 'a mechanism for reducing social complexity'.¹⁰ In general, confidence is developed through familiarity with a given environment and the associated situations and behaviours that enable us to make decisions, sometimes without much deliberation, regarding which expectation is most likely to be fulfilled. The difficulty arises when the complexity of systems and institutions, in this case corruption and nepotism, results in the loss of familiarity. Once confidence is no longer established, experienced, and assimilated as a set of sufficiently solid rules, it becomes difficult to maintain it. The capacity to act, engage in relationships with strangers and make plans is contingent upon the existence of a set of reliable rules. Consequently, the regular and democratic exercise of confidence requires familiarity if it is to be exercised at all.

Servant of the People addresses this lack of confidence by providing viewers with an educational experience through familiarization. The narrative does not only familiarize the viewers with the places, situations, and choices that are specific to the exercise of political power. It also establishes familiarity against the backdrop of family relationships between the characters.¹¹ This is done through the *mis-en-scène* of Vasili's own family, which is almost always the first echo chamber for his political decisions. Then, there is the 'family' of action, composed of Vassili's lifelong friends, his 'brothers' as he calls them, in whom he trusts completely, and Olga, his ex-wife, who come to support him in the reforms he intends to undertake. The mutual trust they share is the primary quality of this family (and thus familiar) relationship, which also weaves together interpersonal relations within a democratic form of life. By watching the series, the viewer-citizen becomes familiar with the complexity of the political issues at stake, as he observes a familiarity between the characters based on their trust in each other. The educational significance of the series lies precisely in this process of learning to trust. The democratic life

to which the viewer is being educated consists in this moral ‘family life’ that exists between strangers and is possible because they have trust in each other and respect for each other’s voice. And if Volodymyr Zelensky goes from playing Vassili Goloborodko to becoming a real President of Ukraine, it’s because of his relevance—a sign of his acquired familiarity—as Ukrainian producer Alexander Rodnianski explains: ‘Volodymyr had a lot of wit, charisma, and energy. Ukrainians loved him because he was relevant, not because he was funny. In a country where the elite often failed to meet expectations, his satire of politicians and oligarchs resonated with the disillusioned public.’¹² To resonate and to be relevant amid general mistrust means the ability to restore the possibility of trust in the political project, without succumbing to either idealism or populism.

An Ideal of Change

An idealistic perspective would have presumed that all that was necessary to effect change in Ukraine and implement reforms was good intentions, courage, and honesty. It is evident, however, that it is not quite the message that the series attempts to convey. Vassili is not particularly successful in his endeavours. He makes serious missteps, as is the case with the head of the IMF at the conclusion of Season 1. This eventually results in his resignation at the beginning of Season 2 and his defeat in the subsequent presidential elections. At the outset of Season 3, he is imprisoned and must conduct a complicated legal battle to be cleared of all charges. Such a path suggests disillusionment and a painful apprenticeship to the harsh realities of politics, rather than the triumph of one man’s moral qualities over the cynicism of an entire establishment. Zelensky is not comparable to Capra, nor is Vassili Goloborodko akin to Mr Smith.

Had the series adopted a populist perspective, it would have presented a satirical critique of the ruling political elite. However, while the latter is not exempt from criticism, the strength of *Servant of the People* lies in its capacity to hold the people equally to account. Each episode of the series denounces both the corruption within the political class and the corruption affecting ordinary citizens, including Vassili’s own family. In the fifteenth episode of Season 1, Vassili realizes that his initiative to restore Ukraine’s road network has failed due to the corruption of intermediaries involved in the project. In his frustration, he describes Ukrainians as *yokels*, a pejorative term that refers to individuals who exploit the system of corruption to their advantage without concern for the nation’s well-being. The people are not always right, nor are they simply the innocent victims of a ruling elite. Rather, they are constantly confronted with their own moral contradictions. Once again, Zelensky makes an excellent point and provides the viewers with much-needed comic relief. The series assumes an additional educational dimension, in the sense of adult education as defined by Stanley Cavell, which implies the capacity to change and improve oneself.¹³ Thus, one of the principal ambitions of the series is

to highlight the necessity for societal transformation, including both the institutional and political apparatus as well as the most mundane aspects of daily life, to achieve greater equity. The popular trust placed in Vassili Goloborodko and subsequently enjoyed by Volodymyr Zelensky is not artificially inflated by the narrative of spectacular achievements. *Servant of the People* is not a dithyramb, nor is it a lengthy promotional video for an actor who has decided to enter politics. The series is instead a light-hearted comedy about ordinary men and women who, based on the mutual trust they share, collectively decide to try to transform their country, despite the repeated failures and challenges they face in doing so. Neither an idealist nor a populist series, *Servant of the People* fulfils the promise of its title and strives to educate its viewers. It invites them to improve themselves and to realize their democratic aspirations, starting by reforming their form of life to bring it closer to a democratic form of life, through which everyone can participate in public life, be concerned about the common good and have their voice heard.

It has been over twenty years since a series like *24* made a significant political impact by introducing the character of David Palmer as the first African-American President of the United States. Over several seasons, this series familiarized its audience with the possibility of an election of an African-American president. Similarly, the seventh season of *The West Wing* presented the race to the White House of Governor Santos, the first Hispanic presidential candidate, thereby showing its audience the possibility of a change in the political elite. However, the impact of these explicitly political series on reality remains uncertain. Several American series, including *24*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and more recently *Homeland*, have featured a woman as President of the United States, without this possibility ever being realized. There is still an element of doubt about the impact of a series on the political reality in which it emerges. Yet these series, echoing the singular trajectory of *Servant of the People*, suggest that the genre of political series is now part of the construction of a new space for the representation of political action and its fundamental values. This is because the serial nature of the fiction they unfold makes it possible to tell the story that other media forms of political discourse fail to convey to their audiences: the form of the everyday life of a democracy. The political power of series is therefore not only linked to their subject matter or their commercial success, but to the way in which they extend reality by educating their viewers about new possibilities. Sometimes, as *Servant of the People* so convincingly demonstrated, the imagination can take over.

Notes

- 1 This chapter develops the ideas presented in the paper by Thibaut de Saint Maurice, 'Serviteur du Peuple. Un président peut en cacher un autre', in *Les séries : laboratoire d'éveil politique*, ed. by Sandra Laugier (CNRS, 2023), pp. 319–31.
- 2 Albert Ogien, *Politique de l'activisme. Essai sur les mouvements citoyens* (Presses Universitaires de France, 2021), doi:10.3917/puf.ogien.2021.01, p. 121.

- 3 This case is well documented on the OCCRP platform, *Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project* <www.occrp.org> (accessed 15 January 2024).
- 4 Stéphane Siohan, 'Zelensky, un président serial-populiste en Ukraine', *La Revue des deux mondes* (2019), pp. 46–52 <www.jstor.org/stable/26778610> (accessed 7 January 2024).
- 5 Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Kulturindustrie*, trans. by Éliane Kaufholz (Allia, 2019).
- 6 John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (Macmillan Publishing, 1916).
- 7 Sandra Laugier, *Nos vies en séries* (Flammarion/Climats, 2019).
- 8 Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Why Fiction?*, trans. by Dorrit Cohn (University of Nebraska Press, 2010). First published in French as Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Pourquoi la fiction ?* (Seuil, 1999).
- 9 Ibid., pp. 138–39.
- 10 Niklas Luhmann, *La confiance*, trans. by Stéphane Bouchard (Economica, 2015).
- 11 Luhmann, *La confiance*, p. 25.
- 12 Aureliano Tonet, "Les Ukrainiens aimaient Zelensky non parce qu'il était drôle, mais parce qu'il était pertinent": Alexandre Rodnianski, producteur sur plusieurs fronts', *Le Monde*, 21 March 2022 <www.lemonde.fr/cinema/article/2022/03/21/les-ukrainiens-aimaient-zelensky-non-parce-qu-il-etait-drole-mais-parce-qu-il-etait-pertinent-alexandre-rodnianski-producteur-sur-plusieurs-fronts_6118381_3476.html> (accessed 7 January 2024).
- 13 Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Harvard University Press, 1984).

Chapter 14

The Street Is Watching: Jaq, a Nuanced Story of Blackness, Gender, and Urban Struggle in Contemporary London

Alexandre Diallo

Introduction

The increase in crime rates in London's urban areas, coupled with their portrayal in popular culture, has heightened fears and misrepresentations. Media often stigmatizes these spaces as 'ghettos', oversimplifying and commodifying their complex socio-economic and racial dynamics, thereby perpetuating stereotypes and masking nuanced realities. Grime and UK rap music, particularly from artists like Kano, Stormzy, Skepta, and Dizzee Rascal, address inequality, social struggle, and life in East London's marginalized boroughs. While these portrayals highlight important issues, they often sensationalize gang violence, distorting public understanding, and amplifying fears. On the other hand, tabloids and mainstream media frequently cover gang-related crimes and drug trafficking in East London with sensationalist headlines, portraying these areas as inherently dangerous and reinforcing public fears. This coverage often lacks depth, focusing on shocking statistics and violent incidents without contextualizing the underlying socio-economic issues. For example, *The Independent* runs stories with titles like 'Knife crime on the rise due to "teenagers made vulnerable by pandemic"' that emphasize violence without exploring root causes.¹ This media representation coincides with a notable rise in knife crime and gun trafficking. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) reported a 7% increase in knife crime in England and Wales in 2019, with significant portions attributed to gang activities. Boroughs such as Lambeth, Southwark, and Hackney experience the highest rates of knife crime among young people, underscoring the geographical concentration of gang activity.² Additionally, recent Home Office data indicates 33,049 seizures of Class A drugs in the year ending March 2023, reflecting persistent drug-trafficking issues.³

Top Boy is a British television series that takes place in Hackney, which has experienced significant gang-related issues, with a marked increase in

knife crime and youth violence over the past decade. The series delves into the lives of drug dealers in East London, focusing on Dushane, an ambitious and strategic leader, and Sully, his volatile and loyal partner. Alongside them is Jacqueline ('Jaq', Jackie), a fierce and dedicated gang member who navigates the complexities of loyalty and survival. The series highlights the socio-economic struggles and the harsh realities of crime, offering a raw and authentic portrayal of urban life.⁴ Launched in 2011 and revived by Netflix in 2019, the series has significantly impacted the UK's cultural conversation around urban challenges, with the third season watched by more than 5.3 million UK viewers in its first month in 2023.⁵ The show features a cast that includes up-and-coming actors like Micheal Ward and Jasmine Jobson and prominent figures from the UK grime scene, such as Ashley Walters, Little Simz, and Kane Robinson (Kano). Kechae West notes that these strategic casting choices enhance the narrative's authenticity and allow the series to engage with fundamental societal issues.

The character of Jaq, portrayed by Jasmine Jobson, emerges as a pivotal figure in the Netflix revival of *Top Boy*. Her storyline explores the challenges she faces within the hypermasculine world of drug trafficking and her responsibilities as a caretaker to her family, while also highlighting her identity as a Black lesbian woman. Despite gradual improvements in the representation of lesbian and Black characters in fiction, these portrayals often remain limited and stereotyped.⁶ Moreover, the depiction of London's urban spaces continues to be stigmatized and misunderstood, perpetuating negative stereotypes. This dual misrepresentation presents a research gap that needs addressing to better understand the nuanced experiences of Black lesbian women in these contexts. This chapter asks: How does Jaq's character in *Top Boy* navigate the intersections of sexual identity, family, and agency in a context of violence, and what does this reveal about the representation of Black lesbian women in contemporary urban fiction? This analysis will explore Jaq's character by uncovering how *Top Boy* offers critical commentary on the social fabric of urban life in London, moving beyond mere entertainment. Firstly, the chapter explores the theoretical framework around the representation of lesbian characters in TV series, the portrayal of 'ghettos' in fiction and television, and the depiction of Black characters in US and UK series. Secondly, it critically analyses the character of Jaq, using her as a lens to explore the intricate interplay of sexual identity, family, and agency within London's violent urban landscapes as represented in *Top Boy*.

Theoretical Framework

On-screen Representation of Black Characters

The representation of Black characters in UK television has undergone significant changes over the decades, yet it remains mired in issues of stereotyping, typecasting, and limited roles. These issues, deeply embedded in societal

prejudices, are evident in the portrayal of Black characters across various genres and periods. Examining the historical context, theoretical frameworks, colourism, the influence of US media, and contemporary examples reveals both the progress and persistent challenges in this area.

Historically, Black characters in UK television were often depicted in stereotypical and subordinate roles, a reflection of the racial biases prevalent during the time. Shows like *Love Thy Neighbour* (1972–1976) and *The Fosters* (1976–1977) are quintessential examples, where Black characters were confined to roles that reinforced racial hierarchies and appealed primarily to white audiences. The comedic use of racial tension and stereotypes in *Love Thy Neighbour*, for instance, normalized racial slurs and caricatures, embedding these negative portrayals into the cultural consciousness. Stuart Hall's theory of representation aptly explains how such media depictions construct reality, making these limited roles appear natural and inevitable to the audience. This process of normalization further restricted the diversity of Black representation on screen, reflecting and reinforcing societal attitudes of the time. As Sarita Malik points out, these portrayals were not only a reflection but also a reinforcement of existing social hierarchies, limiting the scope of Black identities on television.⁷

The persistence of these stereotypes can also be understood through the lens of various theoretical frameworks. Hall's theory emphasizes that media plays a critical role in shaping societal perceptions by repeatedly presenting particular images and narratives. This concept is evident in how *Love Thy Neighbour* consistently used racial stereotypes, contributing to a distorted and narrow view of Black life that became widely accepted. Bell hooks' concept of the 'oppositional gaze' offers further insight, suggesting that such portrayals force Black viewers to either reject or internalize these limiting images, thereby marginalizing their authentic experiences. Additionally, Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality highlights the compounded marginalization faced by Black individuals, particularly when intersecting with other identities such as gender and sexuality. These frameworks collectively illustrate the complex dynamics of race in media representation, showing how stereotypes are perpetuated and why they are challenging to dismantle.⁸

Colourism, the preference for lighter skin tones within the same racial group, also plays a significant role in the portrayal of Black characters in UK television. Craddock et al. discuss how this bias is maintained in UK media, where lighter-skinned individuals are often cast in more favourable roles, reinforcing societal preferences for lighter skin. For example, in *Bridgerton*, the character Simon Basset, who is lighter-skinned, is portrayed as a romantic lead, aligning with Kimberly Jade Norwood's analysis that lighter skin is often associated with desirability and higher social status. Conversely, darker-skinned characters in shows like *Hollyoaks* and *EastEnders* are frequently relegated to roles that emphasize struggle and adversity, reinforcing negative stereotypes and limiting the representation of darker-skinned individuals.

This pattern highlights the need for more inclusive portrayals that reflect the full spectrum of Black identities and challenge colourist attitudes in media.⁹

The influence of US media on the representation of Black characters in UK television cannot be understated, particularly during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. American shows like *The Jeffersons* and *Good Times* introduced more complex portrayals of Black characters, depicting families navigating economic and racial challenges. These shows provided a more nuanced view of Black life, yet they still grappled with issues of type-casting, such as the 'Coon' stereotype embodied by J.J. in *Good Times*. The impact of these US shows on UK television was significant, as British media began adopting similar narrative structures and stereotypes, although the progress in the UK was slower. The importation of American media content influenced British portrayals, highlighting the complex interplay of cultural influences in shaping media representation.¹⁰

Despite some progress, the representation of intersectional identities, particularly those at the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality, remains inadequate. A 2020 report by the British Film Institute (BFI) revealed that while on-screen diversity has improved, Black actors remain underrepresented in leading roles, especially those that explore the intersectionality of race, gender, and sexuality. The severe underrepresentation of Black LGBTQ+ characters is particularly concerning, with Stonewall reporting that only 1% of characters on UK television were both Black and LGBTQ+. This lack of representation is mirrored in US media, where the UCLA Hollywood Diversity Report found that only 4% of lead roles were occupied by Black LGBTQ+ characters. Additionally, a McKinsey study in 2021 highlighted that Black actors and creators in the UK and USA face systemic barriers that impede genuine representation, particularly for intersectional identities. Shows like *Sex Education* have made some attempts to address these issues by including Black queer characters, but these portrayals often lack the depth necessary to fully capture the complexities of being both Black and queer in a predominantly white society. The limited representation of Black LGBTQ+ women further underscores the need for more varied and comprehensive portrayals, as highlighted in the 2021–2022 GLAAD 'Where We Are on TV' report.¹¹

Contemporary UK television has made strides in improving the representation of Black characters, but significant challenges persist. *Small Axe* (2020), directed by Steve McQueen, has been lauded for its nuanced portrayal of Black British life, addressing themes of systemic racism, identity, and resistance. However, critics like Clive Nwonka argue that while *Small Axe* represents progress, its narratives still focus heavily on trauma and struggle, potentially limiting the broader scope of Black representation. Similarly, *Top Boy* has been praised for its depiction of the socio-economic challenges faced by Black Britons, yet it also faces criticism for perpetuating the trope of Black criminality. Despite these critiques, the reception of these shows among Black audiences and critics has been largely positive, though there remains

a need for more varied narratives that extend beyond themes of struggle and trauma to fully encompass the diversity of Black experiences. Achieving authentic representation in UK television requires not only diversifying the types of stories told but also ensuring that Black creators have the opportunity to tell their own stories.¹²

Misrepresentation(s) of Gang Violence in London

While media representations play a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions of social issues, these portrayals often fail to reflect the complexities of real-life situations. In the context of gang violence, media often sensationalizes and simplifies depictions, which not only mislead the public but also have profound implications for the communities most frequently portrayed. Yvonne Jewkes highlights the frequent stereotyping in these depictions, which often fail to address the complex socio-economic and cultural realities of gang life.¹³ Such misrepresentations not only mislead the public but also stigmatize communities that are disproportionately depicted in these narratives—typically minority groups.

The portrayal of gang violence in media channels is often criticized for its excessive emphasis on sensationalism and violent crimes, which distorts public understanding and amplifies fears, exposing racial bias. Media framing, as discussed by Robert Entman, shapes audience interpretation by highlighting specific aspects, thus influencing perceptions.¹⁴ Travis Dixon and Daniel Linz demonstrate that the overrepresentation of African Americans and Latinos as criminals in US television news perpetuates racial stereotypes and impacts public attitudes.¹⁵ Similarly, Franklin D. Gilliam and Shanto Iyengar show how local news reinforces racial biases and contributes to public fear of crime, skewing perceptions of racial minorities as primary perpetrators of violence.¹⁶ These studies highlight the media's role in shaping public perceptions, often exacerbating racial biases through selective and sensationalist coverage. The misrepresentation of women in gang violence, both in fiction and reality, further complicates public perceptions. Media narratives often portray female gang members as either invisible or depicted in ways that reinforce gendered stereotypes. Joan Moore and John Hagedorn observe that women are often portrayed as victims or seductresses, oversimplifying their roles and motivations. Such depictions diminish women's agency and impact within their communities, failing to capture the nuanced realities of their involvement in gang activities.¹⁷ Simon Harding's research delves into the gender dynamics within gangs, revealing that women's roles are often marginalized yet crucial for the gang's operations, underscoring the need for media portrayals to reflect women's actual, complex roles in these contexts.¹⁸

Despite some progress, television narratives continue to struggle with presenting female characters involved in violence in a nuanced way. Amanda Lotz argues that modern television increasingly presents women in roles that challenge traditional gender norms, showing that female aggression is

no longer merely a marker of villainy or emotional instability.¹⁹ Sue Thornham emphasizes the significant influence media representations have on societal perceptions of gender, advocating for portrayals that reflect the complexities of real-life gender dynamics.²⁰ Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker argue that postfeminist media texts' nuanced portrayals of female violence can both challenge and reinforce traditional gender norms.²¹ These shifts highlight the ongoing tension between breaking stereotypes and inadvertently reinforcing them, demonstrating the complexity of gender representation in contemporary media.

Representation of Lesbian Characters in TV Series

The representation of lesbian characters in media has evolved significantly over the past few decades, transitioning from harmful stereotypes and marginalization to more complex and nuanced portrayals. Historically, media often depicted lesbian characters through negative stereotypes or relegated them to minor roles. Diane Hamer and Belinda Budge discuss how early portrayals frequently resorted to the trope of the 'predatory lesbian', which reinforced societal prejudices and failed to provide meaningful representation. These depictions marginalized queer women, perpetuating stereotypes and limiting public understanding and acceptance.²² Amy Villarejo further highlights that these early portrayals in cinema were primarily influenced by broader cultural anxieties about gender and sexuality, which entrenched negative stereotypes.²³

In recent years, significant progress has been made towards authentic representation of lesbian women in the media. Sarah Projansky emphasizes that contemporary US shows like *Orange Is the New Black* and *The L Word: Generation Q*²⁴ foreground the experiences and identities of lesbian women, challenging viewers to engage with their stories on a deeper level.²⁵ *Orange Is the New Black* explores the lives of incarcerated women in the USA, many of whom are lesbian, presenting their relationships and struggles with unprecedented depth and authenticity. This shift towards complexity and realism in LGBTQ+ representation promotes a more inclusive media landscape, respecting and reflecting the diversity of real-world experiences.²⁶ Diana Fuss notes the importance of mainstream visibility for lesbian characters in dismantling stereotypes and fostering acceptance, underscoring the power of representation in media.²⁷

Intersectionality is a critical factor in the portrayal of queer women, addressing how various aspects of identity, such as race, class, and gender, intersect to shape experiences. Kimberlé Crenshaw's framework of intersectionality provides a lens through which to understand these layered portrayals.²⁸ Karen Ward Mahar discusses how shows like *Pose* depict the lives of LGBTQ+ people of colour in the US ballroom culture in the 1980s and 1990s, offering rich, multifaceted characters who navigate the intersections of race, poverty, and gender identity.²⁹ Such portrayals provide a

comprehensive view of queer women's lives, highlighting the multiple forms of discrimination they face. This intersectional approach enriches narratives and fosters greater empathy and understanding among viewers, as Rosalind Gill emphasizes in her work on media representation.³⁰ Additionally, Sade McAdam suggests that intersectional portrayals are essential for reflecting the real-life complexities faced by marginalized communities.³¹

Lesbian characters in media are often depicted in challenging environments, such as violent or male-dominated settings. Anne Bonds explores how these characters navigate and resist oppressive structures, showcasing their resilience and complexity.³² This resilience enriches their portrayals by emphasizing their strength and multidimensionality, moving beyond simplistic representations. Michelle Hilmes highlights how these narratives also bring attention to intersectional challenges, illustrating the layered identities of lesbian characters.³³ For example, characters in *Orange Is the New Black* and *The L Word* navigate adversity, reflecting the diverse and dynamic nature of lesbian identities in media.³⁴

Despite advancements, statistics highlight ongoing challenges in lesbian representation in UK media. According to the Creative Diversity Network's 'Diamond: The Sixth Cut (2021–2022)' report, LGBTQ+ characters accounted for approximately 6.6% of on-screen representation, though specific data on lesbian characters within this group suggests they are underrepresented relative to other LGBTQ+ identities.³⁵ Similarly, Ofcom's 2021 report on diversity in UK television notes that while LGBTQ+ representation is improving, lesbian visibility remains disproportionately low compared to that of gay male characters and other LGBTQ+ identities.³⁶ Stonewall's research further emphasizes the persistent underrepresentation and often stereotypical portrayal of lesbian characters, underscoring the need for more inclusive and equitable media portrayals.³⁷ These statistics underscore both the progress and the gaps that must be addressed to achieve full and fair representation.

Analysis of Jaq

In this section, we will critically analyse the character of Jaq from *Top Boy*, using her as a lens to explore the intricate interplay of sexual identity, family, and personal agency within London's urban landscapes.

Love is Balance

In *Top Boy*, Jaq, the main female character, is openly lesbian, with her relationship with her girlfriend Becks being a significant but seamlessly integrated aspect of her life. This portrayal challenges traditional, reductive narratives by presenting her sexual identity in a normalized and non-sensationalized manner, allowing for a depiction that is both realistic and progressive. A scene where Jaq casually interacts with Becks illustrates this normalization, reflecting a media representation that aligns with Rhea Ashley Hoskin's argument that

LGBTQ+ identities should be depicted without reducing characters to their sexual orientation. This approach also supports E. Patrick Johnson's emphasis on the importance of portraying Black LGBTQ+ individuals in multifaceted ways that avoid reductive stereotypes. Such representations are crucial for reducing stigma and fostering a more inclusive media landscape that accurately reflects the diversity of real-world experiences.³⁸

Jaq's relationship with Becks in *Top Boy* intricately explores the intersection of social class and sexual identity. Their differing backgrounds create friction, underscoring the complexities of lesbian relationships intersecting with race and class. Becks's privileged background, symbolized by the comfortable and fancy house she lived in, which is outside the Summerhouse estate, contrasts sharply with Jaq's marginalized experience, reflecting societal tensions between black and white spaces. Elijah Anderson's theory on 'black space' and 'white space' illustrates how these environments shape experiences and identities, whereas Becks's white space offers safety and opportunity (even providing a shelter for Jaq's sister Lauryn as she escapes her controlling and abusive partner and father of her child and his psychopath sister), while Jaq's black space is marked by systemic violence.³⁹

In *Top Boy*, Jaq's relationship with Becks is characterized by openness and equality, offering a stark contrast to the power imbalances present in Dushane and Shelley's relationship, particularly in Seasons 4 and 5. As the series' central drug kingpin, Dushane exerts financial control over Shelley, his partner, who runs a hair salon, especially when he lends her a substantial sum to start her business in Season 4. The failure of this venture in Season 5 exposes the patriarchal dynamics of their relationship, leading to conflict, violence, and threats as Dushane attempts to reassert his dominance. In contrast, Jaq and Becks's relationship challenges hypermasculine norms by presenting a healthy and equal partnership. This contrast is further emphasized in Season 5, where Dushane's violent reaction to the failed business underscores the destructive impact of power and control, ultimately leading Shelley to reconsider their relationship.

You and Me

Jaq's family dynamics in *Top Boy* offer critical insight into her character, contrasting sharply with her relationship with Becks. As the primary breadwinner and protector for her sister Lauryn and her newborn nephew, Jaq faces immense pressure due to the lack of a broader support network. This responsibility exacerbates her vulnerabilities and moral dilemmas within the drug trade, as seen when she takes on increasingly risky tasks to provide for her family. In contrast, Lauryn's dependence and involvement with the abusive Curtis further emphasize Jaq's protective and sacrificial nature, particularly when Jaq intervenes to shield Lauryn from harm, despite the personal risks. This dynamic aligns with Sandra Laugier's concept of the ethics of care, as Jaq consistently prioritizes her sister's safety, even at great cost to herself.⁴⁰ Lauryn's death becomes a pivotal moment, reshaping Jaq's identity as she

moves from a role of protector to one driven by grief and revenge, reflecting Marya Schechtman's idea of narrative identity, where significant life events redefine self-perception and actions.⁴¹ Jaq's transformation highlights how personal loss can deepen one's entanglement in violence, illustrating the complex interplay between care, responsibility, and identity.

Jaq's refusal to express her feelings, despite efforts from Becks, her neighbours, and gang members, underscores the depth of her trauma and the complexity of her character. Judith Herman's work on trauma explains that survivors often adopt maladaptive coping strategies, such as emotional and physical distancing, after experiencing loss.⁴² Jaq's behaviour reflects this, as she isolates herself and channels her grief into violence—actions that reveal her struggle to process trauma in a healthy way. This violent response, stemming from unresolved trauma, not only highlights the profound impact of her experiences but also adds emotional depth to her character. Through Jaq's journey, the series offers a nuanced portrayal of grief and loss, inviting viewers to empathize with her struggles.

Violence Is Everywhere

Jaq's character in *Top Boy* offers a compelling exploration of the pervasive nature of violence in London's gang culture, illuminating the limits and contradictions of agency within this environment.

Jaq's interactions, particularly with figures like Sully, illustrate her vulnerability within the violent world of drug trafficking. Despite her perceived power and intimidation, she faces constant threats from both rival gangs and members within her organization. Drug trafficking functions as a ruthless capitalist enterprise, where violence is a fundamental tool for maintaining control, ensuring profits, and enforcing discipline. This environment highlights the harsh realities of a system driven by profit at any cost, where human lives are commodified, and violence becomes a necessary means of conducting business. For example, in the fifth episode of the third season, 'Has It Come to This', Jaq admits to Sully her role in stealing a drug parcel, hoping for leniency and that Sully will not do anything harmful to her family and to her girlfriend. However, Sully, expressing his distrust ('Cause I do not trust you no more'), denies her request. This episode starkly illustrates the brutal realities of the high-stakes, capitalistic drug trade, where money dictates trust and hierarchies and where only actions and their consequences matter. Despite Jaq's plea for her family's safety, Sully remains unmoved, coldly instructing Jaq to meet him later, setting a tense scene for a potentially life-or-death decision (noted by Jaq herself, who says, 'I know the next time I see you, you're gonna decide whether I live or die. All right? I know that'). Jaq's desperate plea to safeguard her partner and nephew ('But Sully, I'm beggin' you, please... don't hurt my family. Becks and the baby have no part in this') underscores her precarious position, yet Sully's harsh rebuff ('Jaq, don't beg. It's disgustin') highlights the ruthless nature of their world.

Jaq's involvement in drug trafficking positions her as both a perpetrator and a victim of the violence that plagues her community, reflecting the complex ethical ambiguities of her role within the gang. Dave Grossman's theories on the desensitizing effects of lethal behaviour elucidate how her violent environment shapes her actions and deepens her entrenchment in the cycle of violence.⁴³ Her quest for vengeance against the person who sold her sister a fatal dose further complicates her moral standing, as she grapples with the ethics of revenge in a socio-economically marginalized context. This struggle mirrors the desensitization process described by Urbanik and Roks, where gang members, through pseudo-homicide investigations and hyper-vigilance, become numb to violence, leading to a breakdown in trust and solidarity.⁴⁴ Similarly, Airola and Bouchard's research on retaliatory acts in gang contexts, such as the Surrey Six Murder, highlights how these acts shift the dynamics of trust and loyalty within gangs, often straining relationships as the need for revenge takes precedence.⁴⁵ Together, these perspectives offer a nuanced exploration of Jaq's identity, challenging viewers to consider the ethical complexities of justice and violence in her world.

Violence in *Top Boy* is not only physical but also symbolic, as it constrains the lives of borough residents, limiting their opportunities and freedom regardless of whether they are directly involved in drug trafficking. In the first episode of the third season, 'Step Back', Jaq's involvement in a community protest against unjust deportation demonstrates her potential for activism. This scene, framed by a symbolic grid separating her from Dushane, underscores the conflict between her public activism and private criminal endeavours. As Jaq aligns with her community—connecting momentarily with fellow residents not involved in her criminal world—Dushane's frustrations surface. He disparages the protest and Jaq's role in it, concerned about the attention it could bring to their illegal activities ('Yea. Let them fuckin' take him. You're a drug dealer'), to which Jaq firmly responds ('That ain't gonna happen'). His rebuke ('Fuckin' joke ting, man. And fuck Kieron as well') starkly contrasts with her defiant stand, revealing Jaq's solidarity with and care for her neighbours. This juxtaposition enables viewers to consider activism's constraints and symbolic meaning within an ultraliberal environment where economic survival necessitates participation in illicit activities. The neoliberal context depicted in *Top Boy* suggests that, while symbolically powerful, activism often struggles against the pervasive influence of capitalistic values prioritizing profit over people. This environment positions the business as a form of working insulation, where economic survival necessitates participation in illicit activities, and state institutions are either present as threats or conspicuously absent in providing support. Her best friend Kieron's situation, where, despite being born in the UK, he faces deportation, underscores the precarious nature of citizenship and belonging in such a neoliberal setting. His continued involvement in the gang highlights how the economic grip of drug trafficking is overwhelming and nearly impossible to escape. This is indicative of how, within such communities,

illegal enterprises become essential economic structures due to the absence of supportive state mechanisms.⁴⁶

In the Netflix revival of *Top Boy*, violence is a pervasive force that traps the residents of the Summerhouse estate in cycles of hardship. Dushane's attempt to legitimize his business in Season 2, strained by his mother's opposition and her subsequent death, highlights the emotional toll of his criminal life. Stefan, the younger brother of Jamie—who was killed by Sully—faces the trauma of life in the estate, where violence is inescapable. Mandy, Dris's ex-partner, and her daughter Erin, are similarly haunted by Dris's murder at Sully's hands. The series starkly presents violence as the only perceived option for many, with escape seemingly impossible, as shown by Dushane's brother Chris, who seeks a life away from the estate. This portrayal emphasizes violence as both the cause and consequence of the characters' struggles, urging viewers to confront the harsh realities they face.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined Jaq's character in *Top Boy*, focusing on how her portrayal challenges and transforms traditional representations of gender and sexuality within the context of urban violence. Jaq exemplifies a shift in narrative complexity that reshapes audience perceptions by presenting intricately woven social realities. Through her character, *Top Boy* not only serves as a profound educational tool but also prompts a reevaluation of gender representation within crime dramas, offering new perspectives on the challenges faced by individuals in socio-economically deprived urban areas. By incorporating Jaq's lesbian identity into the storyline without making it her defining trait, the series sets a precedent for how Black lesbian characters can be portrayed in mainstream media, promoting a more inclusive and realistic representation.

Our analysis demonstrated that Jaq's character is pivotal for understanding the representation of Black lesbians in contemporary television series. The nuanced depiction of her relationship with Becks within a hypermasculine, gang-related environment, coupled with a complex representation of family dynamics, underscores how violence operates as a structuring force within the narrative. This aligns with Suzanna Danuta Walters's emphasis on visibility in LGBTQ+ media representation, illustrating the transition from invisibility to nuanced, central characters. As Sandra Laugier argues, television series have a significant educational role, offering viewers complex narratives that encourage critical reflection on social issues.⁴⁷ Through characters like Jaq, audiences are prompted to reconsider preconceptions about gender, race, and sexuality, fostering greater empathy and understanding.

However, while *Top Boy* succeeds in enriching representations of Black lesbian characters, it also raises questions about its portrayal of violence. The series often presents violence as ubiquitous and the sole escape route for its characters. While this approach resists gender stereotypes, it risks reinforcing

the stigmatization of the depicted urban areas, suggesting that violence is an inevitable aspect of life in these communities. This portrayal may undermine the progressive representations it seeks to advance, highlighting the complex role of fiction in shaping societal views. The reception and impact of television series like *Top Boy* illustrate the power of media representations to influence and mirror societal attitudes. As Diallo's research on the reception of popular TV series demonstrates, the representation of diversity can spark significant public debate about national culture and identity.⁴⁸ These discussions can highlight shifts in societal norms and the evolving expectations of media audiences. *Top Boy*'s portrayal of Black characters contributes to this ongoing discourse, reflecting the power of television to shape cultural narratives while also inviting scrutiny and debate over its impact.

This study's focus on a single character within one television series is a limitation, as it may not capture the full spectrum of Black lesbian representation in media. Future research should explore a broader range of characters and media to provide a more comprehensive view, thus deepening our understanding of the representation of marginalized identities in contemporary urban fiction.

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PART IV

TV SERIES AND SOFT POWER:
BETWEEN GLOBAL AND
LOCAL AUDIENCES

Chapter 15

The Platform: The Hybridities of Techno-Thriller and Politics in the Emirates

Thomas Richard

First released in 2020 and running for three seasons, *The Platform*, a series created by Hozan Akko, centres around Kamal, a computer wizard and the creator of the eponymous Platform, an internet machine capable of analysing enormous amounts of data and disclosing classified information, with the intention to inform the public. While developing his project with the help of his friend and benefactor, Nasser, a level-headed but audacious wealthy Emirati, Kamal reveals secrets that prompt him to question his relationship to his estranged family and childhood friends. Furthermore, his quest for the truth leads him into a complex web of conspiracies, including plans for a military and political takeover of the country by Islamic radicals.

The Platform's focus on technology and its glamorous setting are inspired by the US series *Person of Interest* (CBS, 2011–2016), as the main character uses the technology that he developed to protect ordinary people and expose criminals. However, the Emirati series diverges from its US inspiration in its approach to social and political issues, both in its making and in its narrative. Rather than a simple remake of its American counterpart, *The Platform* is influenced by both international and local references. These are combined and juxtaposed, giving it a distinctive glocal character, intended to resonate with a diverse audience.¹ It can therefore be considered as part of a more general effort by Emirati cultural producers to develop this distinctly glocal aspect of the national television industry.² The emergence of such novel cultural products can be situated within the broader context of efforts to challenge the increasing prevalence of foreign television series, particularly those originating from Turkey and the United States. Simultaneously, by moving away from the aesthetics and consumption patterns associated with the month of Ramadan and focusing more on binge-watching suspense series rather than melodrama, *The Platform* openly challenges contemporary Emirati society and its cultural practices.³

Although relatively unknown in the Western countries, *The Platform* has achieved some success locally. Its first season was the most-watched show on Netflix in the Arabian Peninsula for six months which is remarkable given the highly competitive entertainment environment in the Arab World. The main narrative line, with its numerous twists and turns and open endings, may appear confusing, bringing together complex and sometimes very different topics, while leaving some of the interconnections between them unexplained. Nevertheless, it is precisely this hybridity and complexity, both in the references and in the making of the series, that is central to our discussion in this chapter. Rather than adopting a didactic approach, whereby social and political issues are developed and presented to the viewer in a linear, lecture-like manner, which is common in Middle Eastern *musalsalat*,⁴ the series tends to proceed in a horizontal way allowing for a greater degree of individual interpretation of the narrative. It thus presents a portrait that concurrently reflects and questions the Emirati society, its evolution, its transnationality, and its political landscape. This portrait appears flattering, but also nuanced and thought-provoking. To examine the series' hybridity, we will first consider the social dimension that emerges throughout *The Platform's* three seasons, both in terms of its content and production. We will then examine the making of the series in relation to the challenge of greater openness and inclusivity, which is currently being promoted by the Emirati authorities, and the related issues of gender, technology, and youth subculture, brought to the small screen. In the second part, we will analyse the political undertones of the series, on the one hand in its relationship with power and the issue of open information, and on the other in its original take on radical Islam.

A Reflection of the Emirates?

In its making and narration, *The Platform* explores several themes related to the self-image that the Emirates seeks to project to its domestic and international audiences. However, the series does not merely reiterate this undeniably flattering self-portrait, but also subjects it to critical scrutiny.

The Making of the Show: The Emirates as a Cultural Hub

In recent decades, the Emirates have sought to present themselves to the outside world as an economic, intellectual, and cultural hub, primarily through city branding, as exemplified by Dubai and Abu Dhabi.⁵ The film and television industry has played a crucial role in this process. Through co-productions with the Hollywood film industry, they have familiarized international audiences with the landscapes and landmarks of these cities, while promoting the idea of cultural openness of the Emirates as a land of opportunities for talented entrepreneurs, willing to invest in a safe and luxurious environment. While the outcomes of such a strategy require in-depth analysis, the

popularity of the Emirates among online influencers provides evidence of its relevance.⁶ At the same time, technology and social media play an important role in fostering an attractive image of the country, which is perfectly captured in the series' narrative, where characters spend a lot of time dealing with the problems posed by the influence of social media.

This ambitious vision of the Emirates is underlined not only by the series' storyline, but also by its production, for it seems to precisely embody this techno-cultural openness, the country being a hub where cultures meet and mingle. *The Platform's* producer, Mansour al Dhaheiri (born in 1974) is Emirati, fluent in English, and describes himself on his website as 'one of the most accomplished' film producers in the country.⁷ His partner in the making of the series, Hozan Akko (born in 1978), is a Syrian national. Both have previously collaborated on *Misfits* (Renny Harlin, 2021), an American-Finnish Hollywood-style thriller with an international cast (Pierce Brosnan, Jamie Chung, Tim Roth), which attests to their ease in navigating the international film and media industry. Both of their personal websites are in English, as is most of their social media, and both sites are carefully designed, easy to navigate, and use the latest technology (with complex animations).⁸

The main director of *The Platform* is Rodrigo Kirchner, a German national with family ties to Chile, who moved to the Emirates to pursue his directing career. The international aspect of the series' production team is also reflected in the cast. While many of the main actors involved in the series are of Syrian nationality, Maxim Khalil, who plays Kamal, also has a Russian passport through his mother, and Leen Gherra, who portrays Sarah, one of his main love interests, is an American citizen. Samer Ismail, in the role of Kamal's brother Adam, appeared in 2012 in the TV series *Omar Ibn al Khattab* (MBC1), produced in Qatar. One of the series' leading actresses, Reham Alkassar, announces in her Instagram biography that she is an 'international actress' with degrees from art schools in Berlin and Damascus.⁹

This international aspect of the series' cast and production team reveals two major trends that have marked regional development over the last two decades. Firstly, these actors and directors, most of whom were in their thirties and forties at the moment of the series' development, represent a new generation of Arab cinema and television creators that emerged in the 2000s (Maxim Khalil started his career in 1998) and 2010s. Abdulmohsen Alnemr, who plays Nasser, Kamal's friend and protector, was born in 1963, has Saudi nationality and began his career later in life, with his first screen credit in 2011. This new generation has been attracted to the Gulf States by the development of a new television and film industry that has been supported by the local authorities with major investments aimed at creating a new visual identity and reinforcing the soft power that can be derived from audiovisual products, of which *The Platform* seems to be a textbook example.¹⁰ Secondly, the involvement of actors and scriptwriters of Syrian origin in this show suggests that the shift in the production of television series over the past decade from centres in Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria to the Gulf countries has

been accelerated by the Syrian civil war, which has forced a number of actors and technicians to flee the country in the face of the political and economic upheavals associated with the war. The case of Maxim Khalil is particularly illustrative of this trend. Having publicly opposed the Assad regime and subsequently criticized the Free Syrian Army, Khalil was compelled to flee the country.¹¹ The experience of these actors, directors, writers, and technicians, who are familiar with the renowned model of Syrian TV series, which has been in existence since the early 1990s, has been combined in the Emirates with the resources and expertise of their local and Western counterparts.¹² This has resulted in the hybrid product that is *The Platform*. In a literal sense, the Emirates acted as a hub to welcome talents from all over the world to create the show.

The series has been created with the intention of appealing to a diverse range of audiences. Divided into three seasons (each comprising ten or twelve episodes of 45 to 55 minutes), it follows the common pattern of Western series, with a systematic cliffhanger at the end of each episode and a narrative model designed to maintain the tension throughout the show. At the same time, together these three seasons represent the typical number of episodes in a popular Middle Eastern Ramadan series (approximately thirty episodes) and emphasize family drama, a narrative trope commonly used in Middle Eastern series to evoke social and political issues. Such a model, a hybrid of two formats already familiar to local audiences, set in the glossy backdrops of the Emirates, offers an alternative to the Turkish TV series that enjoy popularity in the Arab Middle East,¹³ but are also contested in the Emirates for their possible role in the public's cultural alienation.¹⁴ Such dynamics in the regional entertainment market generate a demand for renewed local formats that *The Platform* seems to answer, particularly when it comes to two key issues already explored in Turkish TV shows, namely technology and gender relations.

Technology and Gender Relations: Social and Cultural Issues Seen Anew

Most of the actors mentioned above are avid users of social media, especially Twitter (now X) and Instagram, with consequential numbers of followers (ranging from 22,000 to over 200,000).¹⁵ They commonly use social networks to post professional news, share moments from their daily lives, or act as influencers. Those who are more politically engaged publish their comments on regional political headlines, while others discuss more neutral lifestyle-related topics. The presence of social networks in the actors' real lives echoes their role in the series in which social media, the internet, and artificial intelligence are prominent. For instance, Amal, one of the technology experts who helps Kamal investigate, made her fortune gambling with Bitcoins. In one episode, all the main characters are interviewed by a journalist named Sheikha, played by actress and influencer Mhira Abdulaziz, who has created a popular online news channel. The main activity of another key character

in the series, Sarah, is that of an influential blogger who collects and publishes testimonies of abused women that she finds through social media. In addition, several of the series' subplots involve technology, such as the storyline with malicious social media influencers trying to destroy the Platform or with a case of online revenge porn. In examining the field of computer technology, the creators of the series take great care to explore its political, social, and economic implications. To this end, they introduce a character (Zico, Kamal's childhood friend) who takes on the role of the technically inept member of the team. Nonetheless, he compensates for his lack of technical expertise in IT with a commendable sense of composure, thus introducing a new perspective to their investigations.

At the time of *The Platform's* release, the representation of the multiple and diverse impacts of modern technology was already commonplace and familiar to viewers, particularly through locally available Turkish and Western TV series. *The Platform* thus follows in the footsteps of its predecessors while exploring the theme further.

The genre choice of a techno-thriller with a strong focus on technology and the prominent role that IT plays in the narrative, for good and for ill, echoes the development of a technology industry in the Gulf States, which has had profound impacts on the labour market and on the daily lives of people living in the Arabian Peninsula, as well as on the visual image projected by the branding choices outlined above.¹⁶ From *Masameer* (Malik Nejer, 2020) to *Barakah Meets Barakah* (Mahmoud Sebbagh, 2016), both taken ironically and seriously, social media and internet technologies have become deeply embedded in the image of the Gulf States, with a particular focus on the Emirates that appears in the films of Ali Mostafa (*From A to B*, 2014; *The Worthy*, 2016). The genre of *The Platform* reflects the commitment of the local authorities to a knowledge-based economy as a key part of their development strategy, and the impact of such a policy on the local culture. Far from portraying the Emirates as a rich oil country, the show, in keeping with the Emirates' self-image as a cultural and scientific hub, places the country at the forefront of IT industry development, making technology not just a narrative trope, but the central element of the series.

Alongside the emphasis on modern technology comes the issue of gender relations. Like technology, gender serves to represent the Emirates as distant as possible from traditional, patriarchal society. The series features many strong, independent, and successful female characters, both positive and negative, who are confident and stand their ground in front of the two main characters—Kamal and Nasser—or the more ambiguous Adam, Kamal's brother. The only unequivocally patriarchal roles are assumed by jihadi militants, who represent some of the main antagonists of the show. Yet, even when confronted with them, women appear not submissive but defiant and strong. Strong female characters include Sheikha, the internet journalist, who is self-employed and a successful professional; Sarah, Kamal's childhood love interest and an influential blogger and writer; and Yara, Kamal's second love

interest and a famous creator of an independent clothing brand. None of these women are portrayed as housewives, mothers, or sisters, unless being forced to by the series' antagonists. Even their clothes reflect their independence: all are elegantly dressed, with carefully chosen make-up and jewellery, except for Amal, the internet genius, who looks more like a tomboy. Amal asserts her individuality with a more casual outfit, but her character is still dressed with care and attention to detail. The choice of attire, such as the veil, appears to be a matter of personal preference for the characters, rather than a mere reflection of societal norms.

Such a portrayal of women and gender relations evokes the success of Turkish series in the Arab states, which depict equally strong, independent, yet very feminine heroines. These characters have managed to seduce the local female audience, who deeply identify with them, to the extent that these fictional representations have generated a degree of moral panic among conservative authorities in the Arabian Peninsula.¹⁷ Rather than opposing this recent trend in the representation of women that emerged in Turkey, *The Platform's* showrunners introduced similar female characters as the central piece of their storytelling, offering a local alternative to the Turkish soap operas. This emphasis on women's rights and visibility in the public space reinforces the image of the Emirates as an open society. Such portrayals of women, once rare on Middle Eastern television, have now become commonplace, at least among the local elite who are frequently featured in the show. The choice of clothing, as well as make-up, and general attitude is no longer perceived as a matter of social relevance. Similarly, the portrayal of such characters is not necessarily positive, as would be the case in a didactic show. Some characters are ambiguous, such as Sarah, or even negative, as exemplified by Kamal's lawyer, who betrays him.

The series' focus on technology and the renewed idea of gender relations are also significant from a cultural point of view. As crucial narrative elements of the series, technology and gender relations serve to situate it within a renewed cultural and social conception of the Emirates. This conception relates to a distinctive subculture that has emerged in Emirati society in the last few decades.¹⁸ Unlike youth culture, it can be described as that of young adults, who perceive themselves as cosmopolitan and embrace the hybridity of local and Western lifestyles as revealed through the series' characters and narrative. These young adults are fully aware of the opportunities and the threats posed by social media and computer technologies. They aspire to live fulfilling lives and to achieve professional success. They identify with their Middle Eastern roots, yet refuse to be reduced to them, just as Kamal does in the series: he remains deeply attached to his childhood neighbourhood while at the same time thriving as a successful inventor and academic, living between the United States and the Emirates.

The Platform brings to the screen a way of life that is, arguably, aligned with that of the intellectual and economic elite. Although this may be seen as a narrative blind spot, the series features characters and themes that a

broader audience can both identify with and relate to.¹⁹ This is possible because the series presents them in a renewed way, abandoning the didactic aspect that has been quite common in Middle Eastern TV shows.²⁰ In fact, Middle Eastern *musalsalat* do not ignore the social and technological dimensions of modernity. However, as Lila Abu-Lughod observed, they frequently adopt a didactic approach, attempting to educate audiences and orient their opinions and beliefs in accordance with that of the producers. In contrast, *The Platform* allows for a greater degree of interpretation, even in instances where the audience is made to stand with Kamal. The eponymous Platform is presented as a collaborative system that is based on collective reflexion aided by an algorithm. Its focus is on providing the public with facts, free from propaganda or bias, to assist in their informed understanding of the news. Similarly, the show does not attempt to teach moral lessons; rather, it allows viewers to decide how to interpret the social and cultural issues it raises. Nevertheless, such an open-ended approach to information comes into question when the series delves into politics.

The Politics of *The Platform*: Is Openness Viable?

The series tackles two major political issues: the availability of open information, defined as information that is widely accessible, sourced, reliable, and independent; and the rise of jihadi groups. However, although it offers a critical perspective on international and local policies, its engagement with these topics presents some limitations.

Open Information, from the Quest for Truth to the Issue of Control

Since the foundation of Al-Jazeera in 1996,²¹ followed by the launch of its competitors in Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, and then the events of the Arab Spring during the 2010s,²² the accessibility and free circulation of information in the Middle East has become a crucial issue that *The Platform* places at the core of its political narrative. The software developed by Kamal can be employed to gather and analyse vast quantities of data, thereby revealing and providing access to information that various authorities attempt to conceal from the public. The appearance of this information on screen, in the form of texts accompanied by images of the Arab Spring, instantly resonates with the showrunners' experience of the Syrian civil war and the way this conflict has been framed in the news.²³

To a certain extent, Kamal can be seen as an idealized, morally unquestionable version of Julian Assange. Both have developed techniques to uncover secret and dangerous information. Both tend to distrust governments, and both claim that the quest for truth is at the very core of their work. The only areas in which Kamal seems to have a comparative advantage over his real-life counterpart are his ethical conduct in relation to the release of secret information and the lack of controversy surrounding his private life. As such,

he and his Platform enjoy considerable support among the citizens, who turn to it whenever in need of accurate and trustworthy facts, particularly given the system's apparent resilience to hackers. Somewhat modestly, Kamal asserts that his success is only based on the trust that people place in him and on their willingness to share information that they have.

Kamal's invention brings to light the truth about the death of his mother, and, in the process, uncovers a jihadi plot, organized in his old neighbourhood, that threatens the lives of his loved ones, as well as the values of honesty, reliability, and tolerance he claims as his ethical pillars. His adversaries, the jihadis, are portrayed as sharing information in a selective manner, on a need-to-know basis, through the manipulation of others (for example, Sarah, and to some extent Amal) and exploiting to their benefit the rights and protections guaranteed by Western constitutions. In the concluding season of the series, it becomes evident that the jihadists' ultimate goal is to steal and misappropriate Kamal's machine in order to gain a significant advantage in advancing their ideological projects. The machine is an object of great interest not only to the jihadist group, but also to several criminal gangs, who attempt to lay their hands on it in the hope of boosting their profits and gaining access to sensitive information.

The only apparent obstacle to the success of all these endeavours appears to be Kamal's ethical standpoint. His choice to utilize his talents for the greater good might seem naïve, as the show does not explain how the character deals with the challenges and temptations of power brought about by privileged access to information except that he follows some kind of moral compass. The ethical questions surrounding the Wikileaks case, which arguably inspired the series, remain largely unexplored, sacrificed to the general pace and other narrative details.²⁴ In this regard, the series addresses only the issues of fake news and paid influencers in some detail. It introduces an ill-intentioned character who tries to destroy the Platform by claiming it poses a threat to individual rights. However, following the revelation that this character has been manipulated by jihadists and that his claims are devoid of any factual foundation, the issue is dropped altogether when the case is dismissed in court. The theme of false information is explored through the dilemma faced by the character of Yara, who finds herself blackmailed with deepfake intimate photos. The solution is found in open information provided by the Platform, which reveals the fake nature of the images. This story may appear as warning call to the viewers to be wary of online activity and to take responsibility for their actions. However, it seems somewhat weak, when considering all the potential possibilities for control and power abuse associated with the Platform.

As a matter of fact, Kamal tends to ignore that his actions are closely monitored by local authorities. While being aware of possible surveillance by the state during his life in the United States described in the first season, a possible echo of the 'war on terror' surveillance cases and abuses, he seems to be almost oblivious to it as the seasons unfold, despite the increasing

presence of the local authorities in the narrative.²⁵ If Kamal is indeed reluctant to provide information to the authorities who are holding his brother in custody, he is unaware of the fact that Nasser frequently collaborates with another character, Abu Ali, who is never far away from the main protagonists. Despite the lack of clarity surrounding Abu Ali's actual function, he appears to wield significant influence within the local security apparatus, and to utilize this influence to closely monitor what happens with the Platform. Although Abu Ali is generally depicted as a benevolent character, the nature of his role in protecting citizens is ambiguous. Of all the characters in the series, he is particularly enigmatic. Unlike the others, he is not subjected to the scrutiny of the Platform. His background and motivations remain obscure. He does not have his own dedicated storyline, yet he remains close to the main protagonists and provides them with assistance whenever needed. His age and his authority tend to identify him with a paternalistic aspect of the state that always keeps an eye on its citizens.²⁶ Abu Ali is the only character who appears to possess the requisite level of composure, openness, and patience to grasp the full import of the Platform's potential implications. This is evident in his understanding that the Platform's capacity for both good and evil must be weighed alongside the need for discretion in matters of political secrecy, a viewpoint that Kamal tends to dismiss. It can be argued that the creators' attention to portraying this character can be attributed to the specifics of political life in the Emirates and a desire to circumvent possible censorship for addressing sensitive and potentially politically divisive topics. Abu Ali introduces ambiguity to the series which reinstates the didactic verticality in presenting this character, while avoiding it elsewhere.

Radical Islam as a Threat to Society

Among the various anti-heroes who appear in the series, the primary threat that Kamal, Nasser, Abu Ali, and their associates face comes from a jihadi group that plots terrorist attacks and attempts to expand its influence locally and internationally. Its representation is broadly inspired by the imagery of ISIS²⁷ that emerged in popular culture in the years prior to the series' release. This image had already been brought to the screen in Saudi Arabia by the series *Black Crows*, which aired in 2017 (and is currently available on Netflix), that focused on ordinary life under the rule of ISIS.²⁸ Additionally, the role of an extremist leader is played by the same Egyptian actor, Sayed Ragab, in both *The Platform* and *Black Crows*, which suggests continuity between the two shows. The territory occupied by jihadi fighters appears as a wasteland, covered in ruins. An abandoned factory just next to the battlefield serves as their local headquarters. This (unnamed) area, possibly inspired by the Syrian desert regions controlled by ISIS, close to the town where Kamal and his friends grew up, and easily accessible by car from the Platform's office, leaves the geography of the series somewhat uncertain, and incidentally makes the jihadi threat even more pervasive.

The jihadis themselves are portrayed as brutal, manipulative, dishonest, driven by their appetite for violence rather than religious discipline, and quick to betray one another in their quest for personal power. The story of Kamal's family and his childhood experiences illustrate the pervasiveness of jihadists in the lives of ordinary people. Both Kamal and his brother are revealed as victims of sexual abuse inflicted by a jihadi leader, and of brutality by their father, encouraged by the leader. The series presents this act of violence as motivated more by the reassertion of power than anything else, suggesting that this is the main and perhaps only driving force behind the jihadis' actions, and contrasting it starkly with Kamal's quest for truth and justice.

As well as explaining the primary motivation behind the actions of jihadi groups, the series highlights their pervasive influence in society, including on people who are incapable of recognizing it. This is the case of the criminal gangs and Amal, who end up acting in the interests of the jihadis, all attracted by the prospect of easy money but unable or unwilling to see the bigger picture. Ezz Eddine, the jihadi leader played by Sayed Ragab, outwits his adversaries by exploiting their desire for an open society and a comfortable life through seduction and intimidation to achieve his ultimate goal of seizing power. Significantly, the group is not clearly named in the series, but its members refer to it as the 'Brotherhood' (*Ikhwanīyah*), alluding to the Muslim Brotherhood movement, inimical to the Emirati government, and thus creating a link of association between them and the jihadists featured in the series. The threat appears even more dangerous when considering the rank and profile of the jihadist group. While some of its members are brutal criminals living in a wasteland, they take their orders from leaders who are deeply embedded in local and international society. These leaders maintain the harmless appearance of wealthy and cultured people, but they are just as ruthless, if not more cunning, than those under their command.

In contrast to the terrorists' greed for money, power, and control, disguised under the religious apparatus, the main protagonists hold on to their faith as a key value, but this does not translate into activism. This point is particularly well illustrated by Nasser or Abu Ali, who cherish religious values but do not attempt to enforce them on others (a point that Abu Ali makes explicitly in his conversations with others). They have no difficulty coexisting and developing genuine friendship with other characters who understand their religious identity differently, such as Amal or Yara. Nasser engages in mild flirtation with Sheikha and his lawyer, within the boundaries that he considers proper. His piety also motivates him to help even those people who have treated him unfairly, such as Adam and Amal.

This precise aspect partly reflects the internal geopolitics of Islam, underlying an opposition between the Emirates and Qatar (that supports Muslim Brotherhood leaders), but the show attempts to question it beyond the use of fairly graphic images to disqualify the jihadi characters.²⁹ If it is Abu Ali who finally stops the group, it is only possible because of the Platform that allows discovering the whole conspiracy. Despite the need for a certain degree

of secrecy, the ideals of transparency emerge as a key to identifying, isolating, and ultimately defeating the jihadist ideology. Where even a well-intentioned policeman fails, resorting to violence and secrecy in his investigations, Kamal succeeds, backed by his invention, in uncovering the terrorists. In this way, less naïve than it seems, the series reflects on the limits of secrecy in the face of an ideological enemy that can only be truly defeated by being exposed.

Conclusion

The Platform comes with its faults: its plot is sometimes too complex to follow, some subplots remain incomplete, and some characters lack the necessary depth to fully comprehend their motivations. Nevertheless, as a television series, it resonates strongly with the many recent trends unfolding in Middle Eastern societies and the regional political landscape. Firstly, the series is indicative of an evolving geopolitical context, reflecting the period when the Emirates began establishing their soft power and expanding their presence on the audiovisual scene in the Middle East. The series also reflects the limited success of the ‘war on terror’ waged by Western countries. Despite the military setback experienced by ISIS, jihadism remains a serious ideological threat in the region, calling for action.

Second, *The Platform* is an exemplar of a hybrid object, which brings together local and international influences: Westernized, but at the same time deeply anchored in the Emirati and Syrian cultural and cinematic traditions. The series was not designed as a universal product that could appeal everywhere. Rather, it represents a new type of glocal product intended for a local audience, while keeping its relevance abroad. This is achieved precisely because its layers of meaning are open to a variety of interpretations. This hybridity is evident in the horizontal aspect of the show, which avoids imposing its message on viewers. Instead, it allows them to find their own answers to the questions raised throughout the episodes. In this regard, *The Platform* is particularly relevant when it comes to exploring novel approaches to understanding the cultures of the Middle East. It eschews the traditional didactic format in favour of conceptualizing these cultures in terms of sub-cultures, hybridity, and from the viewer’s point of view, ‘poaching’, to use Michel de Certeau’s words, as a way of finding an individual path within the maze that is the series.³⁰

Certain themes remain crucial in this maze, including the exploration of the ideas of transparency and accessibility of information, both in the making of the series and in its plot. Additionally, *The Platform* engages in a critical reflection on the ongoing transformation of Emirati society. Throughout the series, these questions—which invite political, social, and even philosophical debate—remain unresolved, yet they afford viewers the opportunity to reflect on them, regardless of whether they agree with the characters’ choices. The self-portrait of the Emirates outlined in the series looks flattering, but as we have seen, it is a portrait that questions its very premises and attempts, at a

deeper level, to engage in a discussion on new ways of understanding power, truth, and justice in a transnational and uncertain society.

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Chapter 16

Politics and Philosophy in Two Mexican Streaming Thrillers: *Ingobernable* (*Uncontrollable*, 2017) and *El candidato* (*The Candidate*, 2020)

Paul Julian Smith

One Country, Two Series, Two Platforms

This chapter compares and contrasts two political thrillers made in Mexico within three years of each other. *Ingobernable* (*Uncontrollable*, Netflix, 2017) and *El candidato* (*The Candidate*, Amazon Prime, 2020) would appear to coincide. Aesthetically and industrially, both profit from their creators' collaboration with transnational streamers Netflix and Amazon Prime, respectively, enjoying higher production values than most Mexican series on free-to-air TV. Narratively, both labyrinthine plots suggest corruption and conspiracy theories at the highest level of government (the Presidency and the Mayorality of Mexico City, respectively once more). And politically both point the finger at the United States' supposed covert and nefarious influence. They even exploit the same symbolically charged location (the main square or *Zócalo* of the capital, which houses both the National Palace and the Town Hall), and feature the same actress in a central role. Finally, both were well received by the local press, which highlighted their potentially explosive political effects.

Yet the two series also diverge from each other. *Ingobernable* is Mexican- and female-centred, focusing on a First Lady falsely accused of murdering her husband (she is played by telenovela star Kate del Castillo). *El candidato* is American- and male-centred, as its protagonist is a CIA operative (played by British actor James Purefoy) investigating a Mexican master criminal allegedly linked to the young mayor. These textual differences may derive to some extent from the series' opposed production histories. *Ingobernable* is made by Argos, an indie Mexican producer which has long specialized in controversial content (feminist-themed telenovela *Los Aparicio* (Cadena Tres, 2010) ended with the

first lesbian wedding on Mexican TV). Argos's CEO, Epigmenio Ibarra, was one of the highest-profile opponents of Enrique Peña Nieto, the centrist president from 2012 to 2018, who, along with his then wife, a real-life tele-novela actress, is fictionalized in *Ingobernable* (moreover, Ibarra's son directed the series, while one of his daughters served as a producer and the other as an actor).

Conversely, *El candidato* is produced by Televisa, Mexico's hegemonic broadcaster long allied with the federal government, but is billed as an 'Amazon Prime Original'. Its showrunner is the American Peter Blake, the creator of network and premium cable dramas such as *House* (Fox, 2004–2012) and *Billions* (Showtime, 2016–2023); and, although the series was shot on location in Mexico, most of its producers, writers, and directors are based in the United States. Drawing on the work of philosopher Sandra Laugier, however, this chapter argues, beyond practices of production and consumption, for a broader interpretive context which takes seriously the twin and competing poles of politics and philosophy in TV series in general and, more particularly, in these two Mexican streaming thrillers which are at once so similar and so different.

Political and Televisual Transformation

Mexico would appear to be a test case for Laugier's positive conception of television as a 'laboratory of political awakening', as the period when the two series in question were created was one of radical political and televisual change. To start with the political context, the Council on Foreign Relations, a non-partisan think tank, published an article on 10 March 2022, arguing that 'Mexico's democracy is crumbling under AMLO' (Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the veteran Leftist populist who was elected president in 2018).¹ The CFR writes:

From the start of his presidency, AMLO has displayed little regard for democratic norms. At the podium in hours-long press conferences every morning, he attacks journalists and columnists not toeing his line. He lashes out at non-governmental organizations and civil society movements investigating corruption, supporting women's rights or defending human rights. And he has questioned the value of independent public agencies such as the national electoral institute (INE), the antitrust commission (COFECE), the freedom of information agency (INAI) and the national commission on human rights (CNDH).

RFI also cites the Economist Intelligence Unit's Index of Democracy (now EIU) which downgraded Mexico in 2021 from 'flawed democracy' to 'hybrid regime'. It is worth looking briefly at the details of the original report.² Basing itself on the five categories of electoral process and pluralism,

functioning of government, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties, the index records a general decline in democratic governance around the world, but one that is most marked in Latin America. The region is characterized by a sharp reduction in the 'political culture' score.³ Specifically on Mexico, the EIU writes:

Mexico's president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, continued his efforts to concentrate power in the executive branch. In August Mr López Obrador said that he would seek wholesale reform of the country's electoral authorities, as he believes that they are biased against his government and said that they are 'at the service of anti-democracy'. Mr López Obrador also ramped-up his attacks on the media and became increasingly intolerant of critics, including among his allies. High levels of cartel violence had an impact on the June mid-terms and pose growing risks to Mexican democracy. Despite Mr López Obrador's persistently high approval ratings, Mexicans express low levels of confidence in government.⁴

This long-announced 'transformation' in politics (to use the favourite word of AMLO, a former mayor of Mexico City and perennial candidate for the presidency) was matched by a revolution in media, with the decline of free-to-air television and the rise of streaming services. Here OBITEL, the academic survey of television series in Spanish-language territories, charts the changing media environment, just as the EIU does for the political sphere. In its overview of 2017 (the year of the premiere of *Ingovernable*), OBITEL's theme was 'TV Fiction on Video on Demand Platforms'.⁵ Of special interest is what the survey calls 'social merchandizing', in this case the 'unusual interest in [...] subjects connected to the procurement of justice'.⁶ Interestingly, this newly prominent topic registered both on broadcast television (legal-themed telenovelas on heritage networks Televisa and Azteca that depicted a new adversarial courtroom system) and on streaming (Netflix's *Ingovernable* once more).⁷ The series is also mentioned briefly in relation to independent production companies such as Argos, whose contents are confined to VOD platforms.⁸ Significantly the two 'highlights of the year' for OBITEL are also politically motivated: the invention of a fictitious child victim in news coverage of a major earthquake in Mexico City,⁹ and the rejection by the Senate and the networks themselves of a code of ethics enshrining 'the audience's rights to communication' first proposed by IBITEL, the independent media authority.¹⁰ Pre-AMLO, then, OBITEL's downbeat verdict on Mexican TV series is that the territory is 'a great market for Netflix, [with] little innovation in national fiction and few opportunities for transmedia'.¹¹

Two years later, OBITEL's general survey was called 'Melodrama in Times of Streaming' and its specialist Mexican section 'Melodrama on Netflix: Transformation or Evolution?'¹² Sketching 'Mexico's audiovisual context in 2019', the authors write that 'the high expectation of change caused by the

victory of Andrés Manuel López Obrador for the presidency of Mexico have not been translated into any substantive modification in the media ecosystem'.¹³ The only exception is that 'the new president has imposed a political-communication framework by holding morning press conferences, in which, with little opposition from the media, he sets the topics to be discussed on a daily basis' and attacks journalists as part of 'the mafia of power'. Ironically, the survey notes, various series on Televisa sought to address 'political-social tensions' in ways that another progressive president might have found praiseworthy, focusing on such themes as insecurity and femicides.¹⁴ Meanwhile, the importance of the national shift to VOD platforms was confirmed by Netflix moving its Latin American operation offices to Mexico City. In addition to Netflix's six million accounts in the country, in 2020, Amazon Prime had reached almost half a million.¹⁵

By 2021, OBITEL's Mexican survey was called 'Between the Pandemic, Melodrama and the Increase of VOD Systems'.¹⁶ Here once more the media ecology is contradictory. During the unique circumstances of lockdown, audiences for both free-to-air TV and digital had increased, with Netflix doubling its audience to 12 million but Amazon Prime also doubling its share of VOD subscribers from 10% to 20%.¹⁷ Although production would be disrupted by the pandemic, the former streamer had produced six Mexican series in 2019; the latter, four (including *El candidato*).¹⁸ In a young country (the average age in Mexico is just twenty-nine), Amazon Prime seemed to be targeting the youth audience (its flagship comedy *Como sobrevivir soltero* (*How to Survive Being Single*) was set in the capital's dating scene).¹⁹ But, OBITEL writes, the highlights of the year are, for social interactivity, a drag competition show on YouTube that engaged the LGBTI community; and, for social comment, feminist-themed telenovelas on supposedly conservative free-to-air Televisa.²⁰

It seems, then, that new platforms do not necessarily result in new contents, even over a period of radical political transformation. And OBITEL, in spite of its unrivalled data, struggles to make a connection between the two spheres, even as it regularly returns to socio-political questions that might seem to lie beyond its immediate brief of tracking trends in TV series in the Spanish-speaking world.

Production and Consumption

Although our two titles barely figure in OBITEL's sober academic survey, serving at most as illustrations of general tendencies, they drew more attention in the trade press and general media, which testify to some extent to the series' processes of production and consumption. These sources also focus more on the transnational component of both series than does OBITEL, which treats each territory in turn.

Latin American trade site *Produ* fully documents the lengthy creative process of *Ingobernable*, attesting from the start to the collective nature of

TV authorship. Their first article mentioning the title, as early as 24 July 2015, cites Ted Sarandos, general Content Director at Netflix, as saying that the streamer is 'committed to making quality series for Mexico, Latin America, the US and the world'.²¹ The second, on the same date, interviews Epigmenio Ibarra, CEO of Argos, the series' indie production company. The combative Ibarra is said to have come from an event at the Guanajuato International Film Festival which addressed Ayotzinapa, a notorious case of the kidnapping and disappearance of students which came to define the presidency of Peña Nieto, previous to AMLO (the one recreated in the series). Ever the national booster, Ibarra claims that 'Mexico must have more confidence in its TV series.' He notes that his company Argos's series have always had 'social subject matter' but now the audience has changed, and young people watch 'other things'. It is necessary, then, to 'push the [boundaries of the] formats'.²² *Produ's* third mention of *Ingobernable* comes in an interview with star Kate del Castillo on 30 November 2015. Where previously she had praised the 'strong character' she plays who 'shakes the foundations of the National Palace', here she focuses on her role as producer, not actor. Castillo has bought the rights to Argos's previous envelope-pushing hit *Las Aparicio* and hopes to launch an English-language version on the US market.²³

A lengthy survey the following year in *Produ* called 'Mexico Grows and Changes' (28 April 2016) cites *Ingobernable* as an example of the new strength of an industry which now comprises 7% of the national GDP.²⁴ And subsequent articles also document the infrastructure which underlies Netflix's expanding presence in the major market of Mexico, now established as the streamer's headquarters in Latin America. Thus, on 9 January 2017, *Produ* reports on the opening of Argos's new studios, named for Leftist literary giant Gabriel García Márquez and intended to target, amongst others, the US Spanish-speaking market. The only title mentioned is *Ingobernable*, said to be 'one of the first' productions shot in the new facility, which is described as a 'one stop shop' (the phrase is given in English in this Spanish-language article) for American producers seeking a partner in Mexico.²⁵ We learn on 23 March 2017, however, that the shoot in Mexico was, uniquely, replicated in San Diego, California. As Kate del Castillo was under criminal investigation in her home country after a much-publicized visit to narco boss El Chapo with American actor Sean Penn, the producers meticulously constructed two identical sets of the key location of the presidential office in official residence Los Pinos, each boasting a rare 'four walls' for realistic effect. Careful colour correction ensured a seamless montage between the two, while the use of digital effects and body doubles seen from behind placed the actress in Mexico City exteriors that she could not physically visit at the time.²⁶

In this unusual case, industrial facilities reinforced the 'social subject matter' in which Argos specialized (the company supported its star in her legal battle). Along the same lines on 1 March 2017, Netflix's VP of Original Contents stressed the streamer's commitment to strong female protagonists

in their original series. Citing *Ingobernable* and *Glow* (an American women's wrestling series), she said that it was 'fundamental that women be depicted in all their dimensions and complexity'.²⁷ On 22 March 2017, producer Epigmenio Ibarra went further as he presented the series to the press, claiming that it revealed 'the confrontation between ideals and power'.²⁸ Furthermore, he said, he took advantage here of the 'freer subject matter' on VOD platforms than on broadcast TV:

We made *Ingobernable* in the belief that if there were more uncontrollable ['ingobernables'] women the world would be a better place. We made it in these times of darkness and hate to praise, strengthen and support the struggle of women who won't keep quiet and will never surrender. And also, to talk about the putrefaction of power, a reality which is unfortunately universal.

Ibarra concluded his comprehensive take-down of the then current Mexican government by saying that del Castillo's legal situation did increase the production costs but was worthwhile because the star herself was 'uncontrollable'. Ibarra, who, in addition to being a producer, is also a high-profile newspaper columnist and Twitter warrior with 800K followers bitterly opposed to AMLO's predecessor, here makes clear his critique of the *ancien régime* and his support for a feminism to which, ironically enough, his chosen candidate in the forthcoming election would prove reflexively hostile when he took up residence in the National Palace on the Zócalo.

Two years after that election, *Produ's* coverage of Amazon Prime's *El candidato* is skimpier, although it documents once more a creative and industrial collaboration between Latin America and the United States. On 31 July 2020, Natalie Osma and Juan Rendón, the Colombian executive producers of the series who are based in Los Angeles, admit that collaborating with established US showrunner Peter Blake and serving as a 'hinge' between the American and Mexican ways of working was a 'challenge' and an 'apprenticeship'. From their earlier positions in the news division of Univision, the Spanish-language US network, the future producers came across what they call real-life 'IP' (intellectual property) on corruption in Mexico and its relation to US agencies. After two years of development and now with Amazon in the mix, the lavish shoot in Mexico involved 150 people, took eighty-two days, and over twenty locations. Osma and Redón praise the high production values of the series and the 'professionalism' of their Mexican colleagues which 'can be seen on screen'.²⁹

On 6 August 2020, the pair make their transnational rationale yet more specific. They say they specialize in 'bilingual productions' for the Anglo, US Latinx, and Latin American markets and also offer support to US companies who want to produce in Latin America. Further evidence for this cooperation is found in coverage of the promotional event 'Prime Video Presents Mexico' (reported by *Produ* on 26 January 2021). Here the streamer's executives,

flanked by local talent, announced that they would make fifteen series and five feature films in Mexico over the next three years, adding to existing titles such as *El candidato*. The world head of Amazon Studios said that the streamer's aim was to give subscribers 'local series spearheaded by the best local voices' and to 'take these stories to a global audience'. But she made no special reference to concrete demographics, whether the young singles who, according to OBITEL, prefer Amazon Prime content or the 'uncontrollable' women openly targeted by Netflix.³⁰

It is something of a shock to turn from *Produ's* sober specialist chronicle of production histories to the main example of the Mexican general press's account of the series which can only be called melodramatic. Álvaro Cueva is the sole serious TV critic in the nation ('since 1987', as he proudly writes) and a long-term columnist for quality centrist daily *Milenio*. He is also, like Epigmenio Ibarra, an outspoken foe of Peña Nieto and a strong supporter of AMLO. His review of the first season of *Ingobernable* on 23 March 2017 is, most unusually, written in the form of an open letter to the 'dear friends' of the series (the local producers and creatives).³¹ Cueva praises *Ingobernable's* aesthetics: its colour correction and audio are, unlike other Netflix productions in his country, 'perfect on an industrial level', well up to the standard of US titles like *House of Cards* (a telling point of comparison). He lauds Kate del Castillo's performance as 'spectacular', saying that the already established star here demonstrates 'admirable freedom, strength, and lack of inhibition'. Following Ibarra (a fellow columnist at *Milenio*), Cueva stresses the series' innovation in genre. Neither telenovela nor series, *Ingobernable* 'is a different, proudly Mexican format equally enjoyable for the public that loves melodramas and the audience devoted to the best international series'.

But Cueva's main theme is the show's immediate local political impact. He claims to be concerned for the lives of the creators: 'I swear that I never in my life saw a Mexican program that tackled, as you do, the pinnacle of power'; or again, 'I'm terrified. If you were trying to begin something like a revolution with your work, well done! You have everything in place to achieve it.' Touching as it does on 'wounds' such as the Ayotzinapa case, it now only remains for the 'masses' to experience this 'war cry' and 'go beyond the evident fact that the main characters of this great story are the President of the Republic and his First Lady'. Behind Cueva's hyperbole ('you have taken television where it had never gone before') is a concrete political intervention (by the series, by the critic) just one year before the general elections which were widely predicted to usher in a new regime.

Writing after those elections, Cueva gives an equally positive, but more puzzled and puzzling, review of *Ingobernable's* twin drama, *El candidato*. On 24 July 2020, he calls Amazon Prime's series 'magnificent' but claims to detect 'something fishy' (in Spanish: 'gato encerrado') in its launch. Cueva calls this 'a creation of Peter Blake (of *House* and *Billions*)' cast with 'important figures from our industry' in a 'peculiar bilingual exercise' alongside prestigious English-speaking actors. Yet this 'most fine and intelligent' show received no

premiere via Zoom; and its stars and producers were not made available for interviews with the press. Cueva claims that 'someone got scared' about promoting a series that 'denounces the direct intervention of the United States in many aspects of the political life of Mexican reality' and imposed 'a campaign of silence' on publicists.

Yet Cueva concludes: 'In Mexico there is freedom of expression and the fact that this [series] exists and can be seen speaks well of all those involved, starting with the authorities themselves.' While in the case of *Ingobernable* Cueva celebrated an attack in fictional form on the previous president, with *El candidato* he suspects the suppression of a very similar dramatic take-down of the capital's mayor. But beyond this appeal to the current political sphere (one that had of course been transformed over the lengthy course of *El candidato*'s development), Cueva's response is unashamedly emotional: he ends by saying the series 'charmed, moved, and terrified' him. This is a vital affective dimension which Sandra Laugier invites us to explore in taking seriously the political and philosophical dimensions of TV fiction. Laugier's generalizing approach not only takes us beyond the specificity of the industrial questions of production and reception that I have explored so far; it also provides, as we shall see, a vocabulary for the content analysis of individual episodes of our two series.

Taking Series Seriously, Twice

Two essays by Laugier, both introducing collective volumes on series from the United States, Europe, and Israel, set out a new approach to TV studies based on US philosophers of ordinary language such as Stanley Cavell. This approach overlaps the disciplines of politics and philosophy to which the books are respectively devoted. The introduction to the French volume *Les séries. Laboratoires d'éveil politique* sketches 'a politics of popular culture'. It begins by redefining 'culture', after Walter Benjamin, as no longer a 'place of distinction' but rather 'an essential motor of social intervention, innovation and democratization'.³² This last is redefined in turn not as an institutional system but as 'a demand for equality and participation in public life'. Series, then, are not just entertainment but rather 'the work [*oeuvre*] of moral and political education'; and the 'elaboration of a pluralist and conflictive morality' seen in such American classics as *The Sopranos* and *The West Wing*. TV fiction is held to be a 'resource for education', contributing to 'the reinforcement of democratic demands'. This good is reinforced by series' conditions of reception: the length of audience engagement with them over time and viewers' 'attachment to characters' and to interactive groups which is so different to the 'classical model of identification' familiar from cinema.³³

Ethics thus appears in a way that did not formerly form part of the field of morality: in the character's 'way of being' ('*façon d'être*'), a kind of education that is embodied even by those who are by no means exemplary. This 'pedagogy' enables the depiction of a range of figures before they were seen

in cinema, once more: of women 'of all ages and styles', of gays, of 'racialized' people, to such an extent that it seems the majority of current series are now focused on female characters, whether single or in groups. Such democratic education gives the lie to previous critiques of mass culture which denounced the 'alienation, manipulation, or intoxication of viewers'.³⁴ Rather TV is to be seen as a realization of Emerson and Dewey's ideal of a democratic art: rooted in the experience of the active spectator and in everyday life, not cut off from the ordinary and placed on a pedestal. This 'democratization of culture',³⁵ exemplified by Cavell's classic Hollywood 'comedies of remarriage', is thus both aesthetic, ethical, and political. Amongst other things, it takes aim at the 'mystique of the individual creator',³⁶ still common in cinema, interweaving as television does the individual and the collective, the private and the public.

In so far as they are typically collective productions, then, consideration of TV series should include in its 'intention' writers, producers, technicians, production processes, and audience expectations.³⁷ The stakes of our own relation to popular culture are thus political in that it 'transforms our existence by educating our ordinary experience'.³⁸ Moreover series, however scorned by aesthetes and dismissed by intellectuals, can be 'tools for [political] change'. We should therefore avoid erecting new hierarchies, as in praising a canon of 'quality TV', branded by Laugier 'dark, cynical, and masculine'. And we should attempt to see series not as an 'object' but as a 'shared experience'.³⁹

Such an experience is most clearly political in the main subgenre studied by Laugier and the DEMOSERIES research group, which she baptizes 'séries sécuritaires'. These are titles on such topics as terrorism from Israel and Europe which, amongst their other virtues, 'shake the domination of the United States and permit other democracies to pose political proposals'.⁴⁰ The most immediate and most moving example of this phenomenon is Volodymyr Zelensky, who became the President of Ukraine only after playing one on TV.⁴¹ Most importantly, then (as shown by this latter most unexpected case), 'series offer us a form of democratic life that is not founded on pre-existing, consensual values but which *invents* values that can be shared by using the possibilities of the medium'.⁴² Such a resource is most valuable now when so many regimes and political actors praise and practise anti-democratic values.

As we see in Laugier's introductory essay for a special issue of the journal *Open Philosophy*, this political practice is also philosophical.⁴³ Here Laugier presents series as 'shared representations of moral reasoning and feelings [that] arouse ethical reflection in their viewers—in the spirit of philosophy'.⁴⁴ Beyond posing 'important social, political, racial, health, and security issues', series deserve to be considered not as mere illustrations or objects of philosophy but as philosophy itself, just as Cavell analysed popular Hollywood film for its 'immanent ethics' and 'characterization of moral perfectionism'.

Likewise popular culture can be seen as a 'moral resource [...] reformulating ethics'.⁴⁵ Here Laugier appeals to the pragmatist philosopher John

Dewey's definition of the public: 'Individuals experience a problem that they initially see as arising from private life, and a solution is arrived at through the interactions between those who decide to give public expression to this problem.' As a public medium that is consumed in private spaces, television is clearly essential in this process of 'rethinking the connections between culture and democracy'. Demonstrating as it does 'an ordinary aesthetics', 'the vocation of popular culture is the philosophical education of a *public*'.⁴⁶ But this pedagogy is once more not hierarchical. Rather it is 'a form of self-education [...] a form of culture of the self, a subjectivation that occurs through sharing and commenting on material that is integrated into ordinary life'.

While this argument may seem abstract, Laugier also lists concrete performative and textual features in series which are the basis of this education: not just 'actors' modes of expression' but also 'trajectories of characters or ensembles; narrative turns and arcs; plot twists; and so on'. She also notes that TV scholars treat 'modes of production, formal features, or reception [but] always separately'.⁴⁷ In the spirit of fulfilling this rare combination and addressing all three areas, then, we can now go on to offer, after my surveys of production and consumption, a close textual reading of episodes from *Ingobernable* and *El candidato*. I will focus on the first episodes of the first seasons. Laugier remarks that finales are especially charged in that they must facilitate faithful viewers' leave-taking from characters for whom they have formed lasting and profound attachments.⁴⁸ But first episodes are equally crucial in that they must lay the basis for that attachment if audiences are to affectively invest in the fictional (political, philosophical) world of one series amongst so many available to them on streaming platforms.

Ingobernable: Shadows of the Avenue

De noche son mis pasos
 Sombra de la avenida
 Sé que me andan buscando
 Los veo en cada esquina
 ['At night my steps
 are the shadow of an avenue
 I know they are looking for me
 I can see them on every corner']⁴⁹

Netflix's brief synopsis of *Ingobernable* stresses the ethical dimension of the series: 'The First Lady of Mexico is a woman of conviction and ideals. But when she loses faith in her husband, she'll need all her strength to uncover the truth.' The lyrics to the series' theme tune, however, sung by a plangent female voice in the first person, stress the series' shadowy aesthetics (the first episode will take place wholly at night), its urban setting (avenues and street corners), and its thriller theme of a woman on the run and subject to surveillance.

The stylish credit sequence is equally abstracted. Dressed only in their underwear, a woman and man silhouetted in blood red float or fall over a shifting backdrop of city traffic and formal shots of the First Family. The series' title then comes up over an aerial night shot of Mexico City centre featuring the urban landmarks of the Latin American Tower and Palace of Fine Arts, a short walk from the symbolically charged location of the Zócalo, which appears on the screen highlighted in ruby red once more. The final opening credits assert a claim to collective TV authorship: the two 'general producers' are given as Verónica Velasco (a creator of Argos's earlier feminist and lesbian title, *Las Aparicio*) and, of course, the celebrity CEO Epigmenio Ibarra.

The high production values of this dazzling pilot, briskly paced at just 39 minutes, are clear from the start. The first, aerial shot of the episode proper, now with no colour filter, is of the great avenue of Reforma, its skyscrapers gleaming over a poster of the First Couple far below. We cut to a series of disorientating extreme close-ups: a laptop, a coffee cup, a cigarette, and a cell phone; and, more urgently, a divorce document still unsigned by the president. The restlessly roving camera shifts to Kate del Castillo's Emilia, smoking and dishevelled, and dressed in a midnight blue that will chime with the episode's nocturnal exteriors. What we hear is a TV announcer on that laptop giving a cursory backstory: two months earlier the First Lady had left the presidential residence and asked for a divorce; tonight, the president has called a press conference.

Clearly the series will be female-centred, as star del Castillo, most familiar to Mexican and US Latinx audiences from narco-drama *La reina del sur* (*Queen of the South*, RTI/Telemundo, 2011–2023), is alone in its very first scene. Moreover, the primacy of the media (we hear the announcer speak before the character) will be an obsession of the subsequent real-life presidency of AMLO. Here in this fictionalized depiction of his predecessor, the stress is from the start on another of AMLO's *bêtes noires*, corruption and conspiracy theories: what, asks the announcer, can be the motive for this unexpected press conference by an already disgraced president who has lost all support?

The luxurious location proves to be the so-called 'Presidential Penthouse' of the fictional 'Gran Hotel de México' (evoking the real-life Gran Hotel Ciudad de México), complete with a private terrace graced with classical columns, no doubt built for the exiled del Castillo on a soundstage in San Diego. As Emilia nervously smokes, we now see behind her a blurrily unfocused image of what Mexican audiences will recognize as the National Palace with the huge Mexican flag flying before it in the Zócalo. The episode that follows will shift constantly, sometimes imperceptibly, between this very precise political *mise-en-scène*, hyper-familiar to the local public, and the conventional thriller paraphernalia, which is easier to read for a transnational audience. On this dark and stormy night, Emilia next opens a hotel safe to remove a shiny revolver. Meanwhile, on the expertly designed

soundtrack the insistent ringing of cell phones mixes with ever louder claps of thunder.

With the *Argos* audience already primed to expect the United States' covert and nefarious influence, we now cut to a location identified as 'Los Angeles, California'. In a hushed restaurant an unidentified older man speaks in Spanish to American business partners who reply in English, as they negotiate a deal on steel: Chinese imports may be cheaper, but Mexican merchandise, he tells them, is of better quality. As he leaves for his private jet, it is clear that the self-possessed Mexican has the upper hand in this negotiation. Back in Mexico City, the actor playing the president (a dead ringer for Peña Nieto, down to his trademark quiff) storms into the luxury hotel and pounds on his wife's door, his angry face shown distorted by the peephole. We cut once more to a third location: an indoor swimming pool where an unknown young woman, first shown doing expert laps, will meet her female lover in the locker room. With Epigmenio Ibarra's *Argos* known for controversial content, audiences will perhaps not be surprised by the literally steamy lesbian sex scene that follows and is strikingly crosscut with a violent argument between the First Couple back in the hotel. This sequence might seem to reinforce the Mexican public's low levels of confidence in government. Certainly, it shows an iconoclastic disrespect for the office of the president (in real life Peña Nieto did indeed divorce his glamorous wife).

We remember that OBITEL called attention to the presence of 'social merchandizing' on Mexican TV in the year of *Ingobernable's* release; and that *Argos* itself sought to combine social subject matter with boundary-pushing formats. As the main characters' argument turns physical, with the president pinning his wife against a wall, our attention may well drift to the transformation or evolution of melodrama on Netflix. In this physical battle Emilia turns the tables on her aggressor, violently kicking and punching him until the blood of both flows. The family conflict familiar from telenovela and the social issue of domestic violence are here taken to a new, graphic level, exemplifying both the strong female protagonists sought by Netflix ('depicted in all their dimensions and complexity') and actor del Castillo's description of her protagonist as 'shaking the foundations of the National Palace' that is visible from her character's hotel window.

Ingobernable blurs, then, the division between traditional telenovela with its family focus and the best international series, which treat more challenging themes such as the procurement of justice. And it gives us, just fifteen minutes in, the episode's most explicit, if camouflaged, dialogue on the series' political proposal. As they fight, the wife alleges that her husband turned his back on 'everything that was important to us' and that he 'betrayed the whole country'. He replies in heavily loaded terms: 'I'm your husband. I'm the President'; and 'You can't do this to Mexico.' Emilia answers, disgusted: 'As if you cared about Mexico.' A personal divorce is thus presented as a yet unspecified dispute over political policy. Here, as in Laugier's analysis

of TV series from other countries, there is an incipient work of moral and political education, one in which the individual and the collective are interwoven.

Let us return to the three crosscut opening locations (and crosscutting is the key aesthetic technique and philosophical import here). Each place blurs the boundaries between public and private. The hotel room is individual but also institutional (precisely, the 'Presidential Suite'); and its secluded space, open to the exterior only via its private terrace, is vulnerable to violation by an enraged and powerful spouse. The Los Angeles restaurant is surely public but is inhabited here solely by an elite group of transnational and bilingual businessmen who haggle over trade. And the fancy swimming pool and locker room are open to all their no doubt moneyed membership but now serve as a location for once-taboo sexual practices for just two of them. In parallel plotting, this final place also points to the breakdown of a second marriage (even as they make love, the young woman claims she is disappointed not to have met her female partner's wife).

All three locations stage dramatic conflicts in their respected arenas of the political, the commercial, and the libidinal. And all three are intimately (privately) connected: the elderly businessman, we soon learn, is the father of the First Lady (his American colleague fears their deal will be damaged by his daughter's divorce); and the young girl is the First Lady's daughter (as Emilia struggles with the president she desperately calls her daughter in the locker room). As we saw, Laugier wrote: 'Individuals experience a problem that they initially see as arising from private life, and a solution is arrived at through the interactions between those who decide to give public expression to this problem.'⁵⁰ Here, in the pilot to *Ingobernable*, we will see only the positing of those individual problems, not their resolution; but crucially private life is shown to be already enmeshed in public expression for this very visible extended First Family.

For them even death will take place in the open, subject to prurient media visibility. As the Minister of the Interior arrives at the hotel for the press conference, the president's body falls with a crash from the penthouse terrace on to the roof of his car. The next striking and extended sequence abandons, in a bid perhaps for the status of quality TV, the norms of ordinary, realist aesthetics for an expressionistic, even poetic, register. In anguished slow motion we see shots in turn of the driving rain, duelling umbrellas, running security guards, intrusive paparazzi, and the blood-spattered face of the corpse. On the soundtrack we hear only the tolling of a great bell (Mexico City's huge cathedral is indeed nearby the supposed hotel location).

Meanwhile Emilia has been knocked unconscious on the terrace. She awakes, sodden, to find her fingers on the pistol's trigger and looks down from a vertiginous high angle to the street below where her husband lies spreadeagled on the car roof. This is a vital shot which initiates our attachment to her unique and traumatized point of view from now on. Emilia next confronts herself in the bathroom mirror and hastily wipes off the blood

from her face. While her character's 'way of being' is by no means exemplary, the active spectator (who has already pieced together the three family relations in their three distinct locations) has been given the basis for exploring the broadly philosophical questions of an immanent ethics and the characterization of moral perfectionism in the protagonist's perilous trajectory that follows. And we have seen a most dramatic example of subjectivation: a respected First Lady becomes, all of a sudden, a suspected criminal; and a cosseted wife turns into an unprotected fugitive. Not for nothing is this episode called 'The Decision'.

Fearing perhaps to lose or bemuse the everyday viewer by placing this highly crafted TV artefact too high on its pedestal, the creators of *Ingovernable* now give us the most melodramatic scene, one that would surely be recognized and appreciated by telenovela habitués. As the car with the president's children pulls up by the hotel, still in the pouring rain, the anguished young son calls out to his dead father: '¡Papá!' The episode then swiftly switches to another popular genre, the thriller or murder mystery. To the urgent sound of a percussive soundtrack, Emilia deftly exits the hotel, avoiding the swarming police; flees via a restaurant kitchen, where she does not hesitate to shoot a security guard in the leg; and disappears into the teeming city.

We cut finally to a security centre where an official extols the twenty thousand cameras in the capital but laments the megalopolis's twenty-four million inhabitants. Kate del Castillo (or rather her body double seen from behind) is shown disappearing into that anonymous urban mass, walking its most trafficked pedestrian crossway. In the last shot, the camera rises once more, as at the start, to reveal a vast urban landscape featuring the landmark Monument to the Revolution lit up in uncharacteristic blood red. A further character has been introduced earlier: the steely and stylish young political aide, who is played by Eréndira Ibarra, daughter of 'general producer' Epigmenio and veteran of Argos's *Las Aparicio*. She now scans the multiple security screens in search of her elusive prey, setting up the series' plotline, most unusually, as a conflict between two exceptional women.

El candidato: Faces of the City

Espionage, crime, and politics collide in modern-day Mexico City. A brilliant but self-destructive CIA officer, his young and ambitious Mexican-American protegee, and the city's inspirational but secretive Mayor all struggle for power during an invasion of the city by the world's most murderous drug cartel.⁵¹

El candidato's single season of ten episodes dropped in 2020 (the more successful *Ingovernable* was extended to two seasons and twenty-seven episodes). This was two years after the general elections that brought AMLO, a former mayor of Mexico City, to the Presidency. And the series' plot would seem to confirm *The Economist's* view of the nation's decline from 'flawed democracy'

to 'hybrid regime', albeit stressing fictional conspiracy theories rather than the overt abuse of power by the real-life executive. And of course, as we saw, the series was conceived well before the general elections of 2018 and could hardly anticipate future political culture.

As there is no independent local producer here, unlike in the case of *Ingobernable*, the sole production credit before the title of this extended 54-minute episode reads 'An Amazon Original'. And although the original idea came from Colombian producers, American Peter Blake will also get a single 'creator' credit, as if aspiring to the mystique of the individual creator to which the television medium is generally inhospitable. In the precredit sequence the first shot is of video screens at a TV studio; and, as in *Ingobernable*, the first thing we hear is the voice of a media presenter. A fictional political talk show, called 'Faces of the City', pits the American ambassador against the young and handsome mayor of the capital (played by José María de Tavira, best known in Mexico for romantic comedies and costume dramas). Defending his territory from the foreign representative, the mayor switches to English to tell his interlocutor: 'Narco violence has not come to Mexico City.' This public debate is crosscut with a more sinister private ritual. In an unestablished location, criminals take part in a bloody ceremony in honour of La Santa Muerte. Placed prominently as it is without any context, the scene reads as bizarre and exoticizing.

The credits that follow are superimposed over monochrome aerial shots of the city grid, literally distancing the viewer from the urban landscape and showing no recognizable landmarks. The credits themselves have an Anglo bias, as will the dialogue, which is mainly in English. The name of James Purefoy comes first as the American officer Wayne, while Eréndira Ibarra (who had played the elegantly costumed political aide in *Ingobernable*) comes second as Isabel, the trainee agent (here she is clad in casual denim). Yet it is the second-billed Isabel who will be our identification character, serving as the proverbial fish out of water in this challenging new morally compromised world (the fact that, unlike Purefoy, Ibarra is perfectly bilingual clearly helps to centre her in the series' fictional world).

Compared to *Ingobernable's* feminist allegiance to strong women, depicted in all their complexity, *El candidato's* pilot reads as relatively retrograde. Throughout this episode the gruff and foul-mouthed Wayne will bully and humiliate his female trainee, even risking her life when he takes her straight from the airport to Tepito, a notoriously criminal central barrio (to be fair, like First Lady Emilia, CIA agent Isabel can hold her own in a physical fight with a man). Coarsely misogynistic, Wayne is also culturally insensitive. In spite of what we are told is twenty years' residence in Spanish-speaking countries, Wayne is unskilled in the language, brusquely and implausibly interrogating a low-level Tepito informer in expletive-ridden English. He even uses the notorious Trumpian slur 'bad hombres', which is unlikely to endear him to the cosmopolitan audience in Mexico or the United States that has chosen to watch this bilingual series.

Unlike *Ingobernable*, *El candidato* gives on-screen titles to specify its distinct locations in the huge megalopolis: an initial encounter between Isabel and the mayor takes place (is said to take place) in middle-class *colonia* La Roma; a nocturnal police raid is in working-class borough Iztapalapa. Such toponyms, which are surely unfamiliar to Amazon Prime's international target audience, serve perhaps as reality effects, suggesting through their very unfamiliarity the facticity of a somewhat far-fetched story. The nervously roaming documentary-style camerawork and bleached-out colour (an ordinary aesthetic if ever there was one) are also no doubt intended to have a similar effect. *El candidato* also lacks *Ingobernable's* high-profile casting (Kate del Castillo was already a huge star and controversial public figure), stylized aesthetic, and showy crosscutting, not to mention its steamy lesbian sex scenes.

The political environment is also downbeat, workaday. In the next sequence the squeaky-clean mayor summarily fires an underling for a mere hint of corruption (he has bought a home in the ritzy neighbourhood of Santa Fe and may be compromised by the constructor). The fact that this sequence is shot not in the actual Town Hall but in the eighteenth-century palace that now houses the Museum of Mexico City explains some incongruous details of the *décor* here: the two men walk past an antique carriage parked in the patio of the monumental building and pause in front of a large painting of Aztec capital Tenochtitlán that actually hangs on its grand stone staircase. Although only assiduous cultural mavens are likely to recognize this precise historic location amongst so many (the capital is known as 'the City of Palaces'), the sequence suggests that the series is only intermittently aiming for local plausibility (*Ingobernable's* invented 'Gran Hotel de México' was less evidently a simulacrum). Conversely, the street scenes in Tepito feel authentic, focusing on such idiosyncratic real-life details as pirate DVD stalls, transvestite vendors, and a shrine to La Santa Muerte, with which city residents would indeed associate with the so-called 'barrio bravo' ('fierce hood').

Neglecting the social subject matter and strong female protagonists of Argos and Netflix, Amazon's Mexican drama focuses on a drug-trafficking theme that is much more familiar in television fiction, especially in the United States (in Mexico itself romantic telenovela has always been dominant on free-to-air TV). After all, *El candidato* arrived fully two years after Netflix premiered the similar-themed *Narcos: Mexico*. The fictional criminal kingpin here even has the same first name as the real-life drug baron in the earlier series (Rafael) and is played by an actor who appeared in it (the well-respected and very recognizable Joaquín Cosío). More generally, the rogue cop and naïve rookie here feel like stereotypes. Yet, like *Ingobernable*, *El candidato* also has some very explicit political dialogue shoehorned into its generic thriller plot. Isabel, now clad in a sleek cocktail dress, has contrived an invitation to a swish party held in the (real-life) Numismatic Museum in the Historic Centre where the mayor will also be present. Here he obligingly sets out his political project to the woman who, we now learn, was his girlfriend in the United States a decade before. Like AMLO, the mayor's priority is, he says,

to combat corruption. This is because corruption is always also violence. Mexico, he continues, deserves 'another kind of government, an authentic democracy'. It is a sentiment that would no doubt be shared by the great majority of local viewers, however disappointed they are by actual political culture in Mexico.

There follows the one extended and expert action sequence of the episode: an unofficial night raid on and by rival cartels on the steep narrow streets of working-class Iztapalapa that features support by a flock of black-clad and heavily armed federal police officers. This exhilarating scene culminates in a more static and convoluted ethical dilemma. The drug baron (whose nickname is 'Lord of the Shadows') has kidnapped the family of an unwilling collaborator. And the Americans must decide whether to give him a gun to kill himself so as to save his wife and child. This key question of loyalty, deceit, and self-sacrifice recurs at the very end of this first episode with a stunning and very early plot twist. Wayne reveals to Isabel that the apparently noble mayor, her ex-boyfriend, has in fact been groomed by narcos from childhood. Her previous personal connection to him is the real reason that the CIA has summoned her as an agent to the city from her analyst job in their Virginia HQ.

In a long-term strategy reminiscent of classic Cold War conspiracy thriller *The Manchurian Candidate* (John Frankenheimer, 1962), the mayor (claims Wayne) will later be installed as president in order to secure the interests of his sinister enablers, the drug-trafficking cartels that he claims to be keeping out of the city. This revelation is problematized by the fact that Wayne himself, the law enforcement officer, is compromised by a criminal background: he shares a tattoo and perhaps more with 'Lord of the Shadows' Rafael, whom he had 'run' as a contact years before. In the final sequence of the pilot, the mayor is summoned to the Zócalo where the dead bodies from that night's raid have been dumped. The TV announcer, who tops and tails the episode, announces off screen: 'The narcos have reached the heart of Mexico City.' As local viewers would be well aware, in real life no such scene has taken place. Despite the series' argument to the contrary, the capital is and was much safer than other, more distant Mexican states that are racked by this kind of very visible violence.

The final revelation makes it difficult to read *El candidato*, as Laugier does for her security series, as a motor of social intervention, innovation, and democratization, much less as a work of moral and political education. Trainee Isabel is idealistic, telling her cynical superior Wayne that she 'wants to make a difference'. But if even the most moral of politicians is secretly in bed with the criminals, then it is difficult to read the series as a vehicle for political change. And, if it suggests any shared experience (another of Laugier's positive qualities of TV drama), it would seem to be one of universal false consciousness. When Isabel first arrives at the airport she sees (we see in close-up) the cover of a political magazine with two straplines: the first comments on the 'impunity' of the previous government; the second on the 'challenge'

facing the newly installed mayor. It would seem in the Mexico of *El candidato* that there is no difference between the two successive regimes; and the electoral process has had no effect on the proper functioning of government. There can be no political transformation when even the noblest of public figures is in fact a sinister secret agent.

Conversely, the pilot does lay the basis for the audience's affective attachment with Isabel, the young woman who finds herself perilously placed as 'bait' not because of her current professional achievement, but because of her past personal relationship. However different in tone and aesthetic the two series may be, then, both *Ingovernable* and *El candidato* depict female protagonists who must make a political and ethical choice, whether it is to flee the scene of the husband's murder in which she has been wrongly implicated or to betray the ex-boyfriend by whom she is inadvertently compromised once more. Such choices can be read, in the broadest terms, as philosophical in that they put into question the character's 'way of being' and enmesh the fate of that individual with the collective by positing a conflictive morality for the person and the nation.

Between Land and Language

We began this essay with the distressing decay of democracy in Mexico over the period the two titles were developed and released. While the burden of political transformation (or degeneration) is too heavy to be carried by a pair of streaming series, most especially in the current situation of extreme polarization, these dramas are unusually explicit in their commentary and implications. After all, the experienced critic Cueva called *Ingovernable* a 'revolution' and *El candidato* a 'bomb' (in a good way). Surely such direct political ambition is rare on television. It could be argued, however, that more widely watched shows on despised free-to-air TV in the same period have an equal or greater social impact: Televisa's *Vencer* ('Overcoming') franchise in which four female friends replace the traditional heterosexual couple as protagonists perhaps stakes a better claim to feminist solidarity over its five lengthy seasons of telenovela targeted at women viewers of limited income.

Yet, as their narrative arcs develop, both of my streaming series boast strong, if very different, female protagonists. As Laugier wrote, actors' performances are also part of the meaning of TV fiction. And the distinct contributions of Eréndira Ibarra (so steely in *Ingovernable*, so sympathetic in *El candidato*) are not to be underestimated. Eréndira's ubiquitous father Epigmenio and the US showrunner Peter Blake are industry stars who surely also determined the production and reception of their creations. By staging the murder of a lightly fictionalized president while the original was still in power, the CEO of Argos could hardly have made more explicit his challenge to what he called at the press conference that launched his series 'the putrefaction of power'. Of course, Ibarra (a businessman, filmmaker, TV producer,

and journalist) wields considerable power himself in Mexico, not least in his steady support for the current president, which is reciprocated by AMLO himself.

Beyond socio-political issues, such as the struggle of ‘uncontrollable’ women, we saw that OBITEL tracked in this same tumultuous period the transformation or evolution of the national genre of melodrama on streaming platforms. Cueva, again, announced the birth in *Ingovernable* of a ‘proudly Mexican’ format situated between two genres (telenovela and series) and appealing to two audiences (domestic and cosmopolitan). *El candidato*, a Mexico-shot show whose genre is much closer to the tradition of English-language series, is more resistant to such a culturally nationalist reading. But if genre is inseparable from meaning in this televisual context, then so is aesthetics: the series’ *mise-en-scène*, camerawork, and editing strategies, although very different from each other, aspire intermittently to high art’s traditional ‘place of distinction’ via unusually high production values while still appealing to ‘a politics of popular culture’.

Laugier suggests that challenging series may place audiences in a disorientating, even unpleasurable position. This risky narrative choice corresponds to an ethical preference: one not founded on pre-existing, consensual values but which rather *invents* values. Beyond the social, political, racial, health, and security issues cited by Laugier and the questions of language and urban geography to which I have drawn attention myself in these two series, their character arcs do suggest an immanent ethics and a moral perfectionism that are based on attachment (of characters, of viewers): to family, country, and profession. It is not clear, however, if *Ingovernable* and *El candidato* can serve as laboratories of political awakening. They certainly demand a newly active spectator in televisual terms but seem likely to encourage political cynicism amongst those citizens who are not yet inured to the kind of conspiracy theories to which they appeal.

Whatever the case, as scholars we must surely discriminate between different TV series and, indeed, between successive seasons of the same one. A trade article on *El candidato* claims it ‘showcases Mexico City as the vibrant, wealthy metropolis that it is [...] almost a separate character in the show’, in the words of one executive producer.⁵² While this comment might be intended to flatter sensitivities of Mexican audiences, wary of yet another clichéd narco narrative that presents their country as a hellhole, the national press had no compunction in attacking local work that it thought inferior: Álvaro Cueva himself was deeply disappointed in the second season of *Ingovernable*, which he branded ‘crap [which] insults the intelligence of the audience in a kind of tacky telenovela with intellectual aspirations’.⁵³ While the artistic quality of some Mexican series may be debatable, then, this criterion is itself problematic in any study that seeks to emphasize the positive value of popular culture. And I have argued here that series’ political and even philosophical import is not to be denied, especially in the case of these unique twin thrillers from rival streaming services.

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Chapter 17

Borgen: Power & Glory: Northern Europe's Green Policies and the Challenge of Relying on Black Gold

Benjamin Campion

Nine years passed between the airing of the first three seasons of *Borgen* (DR1, 2010–2013) and the launch of an unexpected fourth season. Broadcast from 13 February to 3 April 2022 on the Danish channel DR1, the latter was also distributed internationally by Netflix from 2 June 2022. It is featured in the streaming platform's catalogue as a 'Netflix original series', separate from DR1's *Borgen*, which is confined to the three seasons produced between 2010 and 2013. On Netflix, this fourth season is presented as a distinct entry subtitled *Power & Glory*, as if to make it less an extension of the Danish 'social-political drama' than a work in its own right.¹ But the question remains: what happened during this hiatus of almost a decade?

This chapter aims to answer that question by exploring how the evolving geopolitical context of the late 2010s and early 2020s informed and influenced the writing of Adam Price (the creator of *Borgen*) and the *mise-en-scène* of Per Fly, Mogens Hagedorn, and Dagur Kári (the directors of Season 4). Working in the field of film studies, I will analyse how *Power & Glory* adapted to its time and how the distribution agreement between DR1 and Netflix accentuated its process of 'glocalization'.² *Borgen's* narrative, at once internal and external, intimate and universal, perpetuates its duality from the very first minutes of Season 4, between an epigraph reflecting on universal themes ('Man is the only animal whose desires increase as they are fed'³—Henry George), an opening sequence showing the butchering of a bowhead whale and the discovery of oil in Greenland (images that bring to mind media coverage of overfishing and global warming), and an episode title that sounds as much like a manifesto as a prediction ('The Future Is Female').

My analysis will demonstrate the reciprocal influence of geopolitics and serial narrative. On the one hand, how does the series update its message by tackling central issues that are inextricably linked to our transition to the 2020s? Conversely, how do the screenwriters integrate these issues into the

narrative of a series that has already been built up, with its duo of female protagonists played by Sidse Babett Knudsen (Birgitte Nyborg) and Birgitte Hjort Sørensen (Katrine Fønsmark)? Between public representation and private life, collective interest and personal aspirations, compliance with protocols and free will, deontology and utilitarianism, *Borgen's* first three seasons used to gravitate without ever really trying to settle down. Based on the 'interplay' between these opposite poles, at once contradictory and complementary, *Power & Glory* has a somewhat different tone, where the oscillation is less of an expression of flexibility and openness, and more of opportunism and populist politics. Indeed, the time that passes and the changes in the political landscape (and the urgency of the climate crisis that is arguably becoming the central topic of contestation) undoubtedly inform the significant changes to both the series (its storyline format, its global turn) and characters (a certain hardening of Birgitte's character and an increasingly disillusioned view of the political process).

Birgitte Nyborg, a Leader with a Thousand Faces

At the end of the first episode of *Borgen*, entitled 'The Castle' (nickname of Christiansborg Palace, the seat of the Danish parliament, the prime minister's office, and the Supreme Court in Copenhagen), Birgitte Nyborg is set to become prime minister following a general election with an unexpected outcome. This immediately presents her with a number of dilemmas that will permeate the entire series: how do you take on such duties when you're a lesser-known politician whose two front-runners in the polls have been torn apart by a case of embezzlement of public funds? How do you conduct 'normal' politics when you find yourself in the spotlight by becoming the first woman to lead Denmark?⁴ It might be particularly hard to combine one's share of 'idealism' with the cold and often morally violent pragmatism of *realpolitik*.⁵ How do you take a stance on such divisive issues when you claim to be a 'centrist', Birgitte being the leader of a minority centre-left political party (the 'Moderates') during the first two seasons?

That the series opens with a make-up session already says a lot about the many faces Birgitte will have to wear as she navigates the political, media, and family intrigues that will punctuate her career as prime minister. Married with two children at the beginning of the series, she divorces Philip Christensen at the start of Season 2 and returns to being just 'Birgitte Nyborg'. Season 3 sees her form the 'New Democrats' and take on ex-journalist Katrine Fønsmark as her campaign manager, while her former communications chief, Kasper Juul, goes in the opposite direction by becoming a journalist again (a job he had at TV1 before entering politics).⁶ At the end of Season 3, Birgitte becomes Foreign Minister, before moving on to the European Commission at the end of the following season. Whether in private or public life, Birgitte regularly changes her face, as if she fears her make-up will become a second skin preventing her from reinventing herself.

As for the fact that Birgitte is a woman, it has a significant impact on the development of her political career and the way she is treated by the media, but it is not what defines her. Unlike the American series *Commander in Chief* (ABC, 2005–2006) or the French mini-series *L'État de Grace* (*State of Grace*, France 2, 2006), *Borgen* takes care to disseminate its issues relating to the 'gendered imperatives that weigh on women',⁷ without making this its central, overriding subject.⁸ In what amounts to a rejection of the binarity governing the contemporary world, Birgitte conquers her own legitimacy by '[renouncing] her femininity'.⁹ It is by taking power (an attitude generally perceived as masculine) that she becomes a 'postfeminist heroine',¹⁰ recognized for her expertise and likely to win the support of the citizens who identify with her. Since Birgitte is introduced at the beginning of the series as a 'novice convinced that politics is about promoting the common good',¹¹ this postfeminism appears to be a way for her to break away from gendered assignments and rally support for her ideas rather than her person.

Rise, Fall, and Recapture of Power

The first three seasons of *Borgen* have a dramatic structure that can be described as 'classical'.¹² They depict Birgitte's rise to power as an 'almost ordinary citizen',¹³ but already 'well-versed in politics',¹⁴ followed by her stormy tenure as prime minister, her inescapable political downfall, and her fight to regain power by creating a new party. The outcomes of Seasons 3 and 4 appear to be replicas of each other, serializing (if not reinventing) this narrative path: Birgitte takes on new roles each time, as a way of combining the progression of her career with the contemporary impossibility of conducting long-term politics. *Borgen's* central figure moves forward (as does Katrine, who shifts from journalism to politics before returning to her first love by becoming head of news at TV1), without taking the time to look back and make a concrete assessment of her political action.

Thus, the series 'does not provide a moral, but a performance whose central theme is morality'.¹⁵ In this respect, it stands apart from one of its acknowledged sources of inspiration, US drama *The West Wing* (NBC, 1999–2006), more centred on 'political games' and more eager to educate its audience through didactic presentations.¹⁶ Less expensive but particularly ambitious for a DR1 production (the public channel of a nation with less than six million inhabitants), *Borgen* does not hesitate to play on several levels simultaneously in terms of fields of expression and geographical scope. Its 'complex' narrative is divided between political, media, social, and private spaces,¹⁷ confronting Birgitte with issues ranging from national to European and even global, which require her to adapt to new contexts while striving to remain faithful to the ideological course she had initially set herself.¹⁸

In that regard, the relatively 'episodic' framework of the first three seasons,¹⁹ made up of ten one-hour episodes each (the fourth being reduced to eight episodes), brings a 'double storytelling' to the series—i.e. a combination of

an ongoing narrative and more specific episodic themes.²⁰ In addition to the general narrative arc of the season, each episode indeed focuses on more specific issues and thereby frees the series from a logic of 'binge watching' where the desire to know the next part of the story leaves less room for an assessment of individual segments.²¹ Following this episodic framework, several clues gradually lead us to the plot of the day: the title of the episode, the epigraph that follows the 'DR Præsenterer' card, and the introductory scene. This opening sequence of small, increasingly enlightening touches is tantamount to a focus in the technical sense of the word: from one adjustment to the next, we see things more clearly.

Episode 3, for example, is entitled 'The Art of the Possible' and has as its epigraph 'Democracy is the worst way to run a country, except for all the others'—Winston Churchill. From these first elements, we can guess that Birgitte, who has just formed her government, will have to compromise with the different currents of thought that run through it to win acceptance for her first major measure as leader of the nation. The deadline becomes clear from the very images and, above all, intratextual sounds that open the episode. Driven by her chauffeur (which immediately indicates that she is no longer a citizen like any other), Birgitte follows the news on the radio. Her political agenda is mediatised and communicated to us like an order of the day she would listen to before becoming an active player of. 'It took Nyborg's cabinet just two months to negotiate the budget bill', we hear on the radio. 'If the budget is passed in two days, the Prime Minister will have passed her exam.' Hanne Holm, political editor of the *Ekspress*, comments: 'The budget is what makes Denmark tick. If the budget bill falls, so does the cabinet.' Meanwhile, Birgitte spots a man lying on the pavement, visibly unconscious: this image illustrates the social decay of Denmark and the need, for Birgitte, to take legislative action as quickly as possible. As a sign that she has not yet become a political animal devoid of empathy, she follows the unconscious man with her eyes and seems genuinely concerned by his fate. Nevertheless, she does not ask her chauffeur to stop: a prime minister must always move forward.

Both demonstrative and metaphorical, this preamble to the episode's political manoeuvres highlights Birgitte's ambivalent position. Paradoxically, for her coming to the rescue of the people now means not stopping in the face of distress. The countdown is on, and she has not a second to lose. In 'almost documentary style',²² the staging (visual, aural) confronts us with the dilemmas Birgitte will have to tackle almost despite herself, given that her position imposes it and that a rejection of her budget bill would lead to the fall of her government. From the outset, the series links its personal destiny to that of its heroine, threatened with failure in/by every episode—even if the most radical blows only come at the end of or between two seasons. Unlike a straight thriller like *24* (Fox, 2001–2010, 2014), each season of which, thanks to Jack Bauer's inexhaustible efforts, seems to be heading towards a comforting happy ending, *Borgen* is the story of an inevitable

downfall, since democracy appears, as Churchill foretold, to be a lesser evil rather than a solution to all inequalities. While Birgitte resolves crises from episode to episode, her personal journey is punctuated by leaps forward that lead her to take up new positions, like a pure product of ‘politics as spectacle’ whose lacklustre backstage the series strives to reveal.²³

Fiction in the Age of Climate Change

After three dense seasons broadcast between 2010 and 2013, Adam Price and Birgitte Nyborg needed a breather. Politics is exhausting, in fiction as in reality. It was only with the financial backing and international exposure of Netflix (which acquired the rights to stream *Borgen* in 2020) that a fourth season became a possibility, almost a decade after the series concluded.²⁴ What happened in the meantime? The planet caught fire. Megafires began to multiply, temperatures rose to unprecedented levels, heatwaves repeated relentlessly, drought spread, the ice caps continued to retreat, all under the effect of climate disruption.²⁵ The exceptional has ‘become regular’,²⁶ and environmental experts predict ‘the worst is yet to come’.²⁷

Faced with such an accelerating climate crisis, one might be surprised that audiovisual fiction did not take greater hold of the subject over the last quarter of a century. American cinema, of course, has its fair share of disaster films that do not hesitate to spectacularize the already cinematic consequences of greenhouse gas emissions and excessive exploitation of the planet’s resources. In 2004, Roland Emmerich threw us into *The Day After Tomorrow* while asking us in a tendentious way: ‘Where will you be?’²⁸ Five years later, he anticipated an apocalyptic *2012* filled with successive cataclysms, blaming us (while shamelessly exploiting it) for our own collective inaction: ‘We were warned.’ Subsequently, others will prefer to laugh at the tenacity with which politicians and media personalities strive to deny the repercussions of human activity since entering the industrial age, like Adam McKay directing *Don’t Look Up* for Netflix in 2021.

In a more minimalist vein, environmental issues naturally find their way into auteur cinema, whether it’s evoking radical activism (*Night Moves* by Kelly Reichardt, 2013) or health scandals (*Dark Waters* by Todd Haynes, 2019). These reflections are perpetuated in ‘quality’ series which, even more than investigative films, take the time to study in great detail the intricacies of industrial and even governmental conspiracies designed to conceal devastating contaminations.²⁹ In 2009, Season 2 of the legal thriller *Damages* (FX, 2007–2010; Audience Network, 2011–2012) followed, over thirteen episodes, the handling of a case linked to the large-scale use of a banned toxic compound by an energy supplier under a secret agreement with a pharmaceutical firm. In France, *Jeux d’influence* (*Influence Games*, Arte, 2019–2023) draws on the journalistic and documentary expertise of Jean-Xavier de Lestrade to examine the failings of the agrochemical industry, giving a voice to investigative journalists, whistleblowers, as well as producers,

lobbyists, and political elites defending their own interests. For his part, filmmaker Xavier Giannoli delves into a resounding VAT fraud involving carbon quotas, which took place in France between 2008 and 2009,³⁰ in a series with an even more vindictive title: *D'argent et de sang* (*Money and Blood*, Canal+, 2023–2024).

In Scandinavia, the Danish thriller *Follow the Money* (DR1, 2016–2019) played a pioneering role by exploring, in its inaugural season, the financial arcana of the renewable energy market. In the wake of the Norwegian investigative drama *Mammon* (NRK1, 2014–2016), *Follow the Money* helped give Scandinavian series an international scope by deciphering the schemes and cross-border speculations of multinationals with opaque ramifications.³¹ Season 4 of *Borgen* extends this openness to the world by setting part of its action in Greenland. Until then, ecological issues had remained fairly peripheral in Adam Price's series, except on the scale of 'micro-narratives' such as the episode 'Plant a Tree' (S2E5) which led to the dismissal of the Energy and Climate Minister, Amir Diwan, after it was revealed by Birgitte's team (with her tacit blessing) that he was driving a vintage, polluting Cadillac.³² Symbolically, the opening of this episode showed Kasper getting Birgitte to plant a tree in front of the cameras in order to announce her 'Our Common Future' programme, and then, once the filming had been completed, ordering a technician to get rid of the tree and throw coffee cups on the floor with no concern for the cynicism of such recklessness. During its first life, *Borgen* was therefore mainly interested in small causes whose consequences were perhaps not yet fully appreciated.

Borgen and the Cursed Legacy of Black Gold

As announced by the grandiloquent subtitle used by Netflix (*Power & Glory*), the return of *Borgen* for a fourth season gives it the opportunity to think bigger. The 'unity of place' and the 'predominance of internal issues over external ones' that characterize the first three seasons are replaced by geographical expansion and a clearer focus on foreign policy.³³ The exteriors were shot in and around the town of Ilulissat in Greenland, where a large part of the new season takes place. Birgitte is now Foreign Minister, which puts her at the heart of the negotiations when a major oil field is discovered. With the potential to produce up to 100 million barrels a year (which would cover oil needs for the next thirty years and bring in a total of around \$285 billion), this field lies in Western Greenland off Disko Bay, on a drilling site very close to the Ilulissat ice fjord, declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. After quickly getting rid of her Arctic ambassador by sending him to Manila as General Consul, Birgitte replaces him with his deputy, Asger Holm Kirkegaard, a political novice but an expert on Greenland. Asger is tasked with conducting negotiations with two high-ranking representatives of the Greenland government: Hans Eliassen, Minister of Mineral Resources, and Emmy Rasmussen, Chief of Staff to the Prime Minister.

Classical in serial storytelling but unusual for *Borgen*, the identification vector provided by Asger (a clumsy, naïve, and politically inexperienced young man, who can be manipulated as easily as we would if we were in his position) enables the series to respond to another recurring criticism stating that ‘the great absentee of the democracy of opinion described by *Borgen* is the people’.³⁴ The return episode opens with majestic aerial shots of a bowhead whale being fished and butchered. These bird’s-eye views are humanized by the ensuing exchange between Josva and Tanja Johansen, grandfather and sister of Malik, a former Greenlandic marine recruited by Danish Intelligence to provide information about the oil company he works for. When Malik is found dead at the foot of Nakkaavik fjord,³⁵ Asger suspects that the suicide argument, so often used to stigmatize the Greenlandic population,³⁶ actually serves to cover up a murder. Asger’s altruism, never undermined, is reminiscent of the early Birgitte, who was so fundamentally attached to the modesty and social conformity that characterize Danish culture.³⁷ Not only does Asger care about Malik’s fate, but he also opens up unreservedly to Greenlandic culture, embracing its history, geography, and customs. He regularly quotes Knud Rasmussen, the Danish explorer and anthropologist who grew up with the Inuit, and tells Birgitte how thrilled he was to see the Mother of the Sea statue, ‘the most important mythological character in Greenland’ (S4E6). Asger embodies a vision of politics that is both candid and erudite, where experience prevails over the pretence of knowing everything.

The shared experience of his immersion in Greenland also opens up the series to the use of a language rarely heard in European series: Greenlandic, a term that can be translated as ‘the language of the people’. Standing at the foot of an imposing statue of the Danish missionary Hans Egede, Asger comments reflectively: ‘He is highly controversial up here because he used threats and violence to make the Greenlanders Christian. [...] He was a brutal colonial ruler, but by learning the language he also ended up strengthening the Greenlandic identity’ (S4E6). While Birgitte talks to her American or Chinese interlocutors in impoverished English, Asger wonders about the linguistic richness of the Old Continent and thinks of bringing people together by listening to and understanding each other. Initially perceived as a ‘clown’ (S4E2), the neo-ambassador asserts himself before our very eyes as a unifying figure, while the political elites tear themselves apart and become increasingly distant from the realities of the world they govern.

This is evidenced by the opening titles specially designed for Season 4, which show the protagonists cloistered in fragments of ice floe allegorically dissolved by a black oil that spreads and gradually plunges nature into darkness. ‘You’re alone on the ice floe now. Let’s hope it doesn’t melt under your feet,’ Prime Minister Signe Kragh warns Birgitte, who she now holds in contempt (S4E1). At the end of the season, Birgitte finds herself on the front page of *Politiken*, mocked by a caricature described by Torben Friis as follows: ‘A cold and aloof Nyborg is standing on a Chinese oil barrel. Behind

her is a Russian submarine, American fighter jets and down here in the corner, [...] there is a polar bear almost drowning' (S4E8). By agreeing to sign an oil contract with Greenland and China, Nyborg is satirically accused of reigniting the armed conflict between the United States and Russia at the expense of the ecological cause, once again relegated to second place. When governments quarrel over the exploitation of natural resources, nature itself pays the price. Beyond political strategies and international legal texts, *Borgen* reminds us at this point that ecology is everyone's business, and that climate disruption can only increase unless we acknowledge the divisions and cultural specificities of each region of the world.

'Are We For or Against Oil Today?'

The most drastic change in *Power & Glory*, compared to the previous three seasons of *Borgen*, is undoubtedly the narrative structure. For the first time, the series devotes a whole season to a single political storyline: the discovery of the oil field in Greenland and its far-reaching repercussions.³⁸ Could this be linked to the partnership between DR1 and Netflix, and the promise that the entire season would be available online simultaneously, just two months after the end of its broadcast on DR1? One thing is certain: this choice lessens the expansion resulting from the addition of a new season by condensing the narrative, while depriving the series of episodic thematization,³⁹ and pushing the screenwriters to transform the conflict between Denmark and Greenland into an international crisis placing the various nations involved 'on the brink of World War III' (S4E7). At the end of Episode 5, the plot takes on a global scale when a Chinese copy of an American military drone crashes north-east of Greenland. This leads a Russian submarine to violate Danish territorial waters and deploy special forces commissioned by China to recover the compromising parts. The constellation of events that accompany the oil discovery and the ensuing conflict thus allows the screenwriters to transform this local dispute into a worldwide one. Balanced between overlapping stories and a macroscopic serial narrative structure, *Power & Glory* nonetheless drops the episodic integrity that typified *Borgen's* first three seasons in favour of a more linear and serialized storyline.

A question that is even more revealing of the narrative dilemmas peppering the season is raised several times by Asger during phone conversations with Birgitte: 'Are we for or against oil today?' Indeed, the story takes a 180-degree turn when Birgitte, more Machiavellian than ever, renounces her ecological convictions before coming back, at the very end of the season, to what appears to be the right path.⁴⁰ In the final act of Episode 3, Birgitte performs a radical political turnabout by announcing live on TV1, after having firmly opposed it, that she is in favour of the extraction of Greenlandic oil. That such a manoeuvre, designed solely to enable her to stay in power, should come at a time when ecology is at stake, speaks volumes about the cynicism that still surrounds environmental issues in political circles. *Borgen* certainly

doesn't fail to denounce the hypocrisy of a superficial ecological conscience, whether through titles that evoke greenwashing (Green Oil & Energy, an opportunistic partnership between Denmark, Greenland, and China⁴¹) or wishful thinking (New Earth, an eco-friendly movement created by Birgitte's son Magnus), or through the advice of pseudo-experts in climatology promising that 'an environmentally conscious extraction of the Greenlandic oil will be virtually undetectable in global carbon emissions' (S4E8). But the transformation of its idealistic heroine into a 'power-hungry cynic' takes the series a step further,⁴² making the climate crisis the ultimate stumbling block to contemporary political systems—as if the probity that distinguished Birgitte in the first three seasons of *Borgen* no longer has a place in a political world where the regulation of climate change has still not become a universal priority.

Birgitte is regularly seduced by tempting offers that lead her down a path of lies and even corruption. The US ambassador Richard Stranton first dangles the prospect of becoming Secretary-General of the United Nations in exchange for withholding information from the Foreign Policy Committee—information that could spell the end of the oil project (S4E2). Then she agrees to become deputy prime minister, aligning herself with Signe Kragh's ultraliberal and colonialist policies (S4E7). Indeed, the series reminds us that Denmark has governed Greenland for more than 300 years and (S4E1), as such, manages both the security and foreign policy of this autonomous but non-independent territory (S4E2). Fiercely opposed to the decolonization of Greenland, Birgitte does not hesitate to patronize Hans Eliassen by pointing out that a distribution proportional to their respective populations would only bring Greenland 1% of the oil revenue (S4E7). This show of strength resonates with the words of freshly re-elected US President Donald Trump, who announced on 22 December 2024 that he wanted to take control of Greenland 'for purposes of National Security and Freedom throughout the world'.⁴³ In the final moments of *Power & Glory*, Birgitte finally takes up a vacant post as Commissioner of the European Commission as a back door to escape popular discontent.

But the most symptomatic sign of her anti-green shift is undoubtedly the brainstorming she engages in with Asger to establish a new strategy and retain her title of Foreign Minister, just as a motion of censure threatens her with impeachment. At the age of fifty-three, with her long political experience and seemingly unshakeable convictions, Birgitte is nevertheless jubilant in exchanging sales pitches with Asger in order to sell the green dream while exploiting Greenland's black gold. The outcome is the following official declaration:

We have to face the fact that we live in a world which will be dependent on oil for at least 30 or 40 more years.⁴⁴ Much of the oil the West is buying is produced around the Persian Gulf by countries who are often at war with each other, who do not respect human

rights, who aren't democracies, and where women are more or less oppressed. So, the question is, shall we continue to buy expensive oil supporting countries whose political systems we disapprove of? Or shall we, in a limited period, choose to produce our own oil? [...] So we've decided that we will proceed in a responsible way to examine the possibilities for producing oil in Greenland. (S4E3).

The preparation of this imperialist speech makes the treatment of the environment seem like a rhetorical game in which pragmatism takes precedence over any consideration of the urgency of climate action. The statement is similar to that made by the Finance Minister regarding the goal of carbon neutrality by 2050: 'Well, then we'd have 28 years to produce oil without breaking our promises to the taxpayers' (S4E1). The need for significant measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions does not seem to be of prime importance. Is it a question of terminology? According to Katharine Viner, the editor-in-chief of the *Guardian*, 'the term "climate change" doesn't accurately communicate the real danger we are in'.⁴⁵ To raise awareness, it might be more appropriate to talk about 'climate crisis', 'climate collapse', or 'global meltdown'.⁴⁶ In any case, perhaps it is this (newfound) awareness of the climate crisis in the 2020s that motivates the series to present its heroine in more black-and-white terms than in the earlier series.

Narrating the Climate Crisis without Trivializing It

In 2015, Adam Price expressed his desire to say 'something about society, about being citizens in Denmark, in Europe, in the world'.⁴⁷ As it enters the 2020s, *Borgen* acknowledges the rejection of elitism in favour of an increasingly populist vision of politics—as evidenced by the selfies and hashtags Birgitte ends up using to feed her Instagram account and convey the impression that she remains close to the 'grassroots'. The series' opening up to streaming is also accompanied by a will to capture 'viewers' attraction to messy women characters', even if it means adopting the cynicism of *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013–2018) over the idealism of *The West Wing*.⁴⁸ However, it is the choice to focus on an environmental issue that reflects the most visceral desire, on the part of the series' authors, to place the series 'in the modern television landscape'.⁴⁹

Yet fictionalizing climate change remains one of the trickiest areas to tackle. How can such complex scientific phenomena be portrayed without watering them down or even trivializing them? How can long-term changes be portrayed without over-condensing them and hastening their resolution?⁵⁰ The storytelling approach, which consists of saturating the plot with external elements (a Canadian oil company, a Russian criminal followed by Interpol, the US military, a Chinese investment fund), is occasionally balanced by more metaphorical warning signs in *Power & Glory*. Birgitte's perimenopausal hot flushes alert her, in their own cruel way, that her body is heating up

alongside the planet. 'You can't control nature,' her doctor coldly comments in Episode 3. The soundscape of the fishing scenes in Greenland echoes the destruction wrought by the Chinese oil company, which, in the disillusioned words of Josva Johansen, is 'blowing up the whole mountain' (S4E8). While he laments the gradual retreat of the pack ice, Josva piteously admits that he has given up the usufruct of land coveted by the Chinese to build a port in exchange for a brand-new fishing boat. You can't buy land in Greenland, but the same cannot be said for the human soul.

More globally, this fourth (and final?) season of *Borgen* exposes a number of dilemmas that need to be further explored in the dramas of tomorrow. Are we prepared to give up our personal comfort in order to curb climate change? On this point, Birgitte's stance is not lacking in hypocrisy when she tells Hans Eliassen, from the back of her chauffeur-driven official car, that 'the Danish government obviously thinks that fossil fuels are environmentally indefensible and are a thing of the past' (S4E1). Should ecology take precedence over income and the improved living conditions it provides? This seems easy to say for Birgitte, who professes in televised interviews that cod fishing is beginning to take hold in Greenland because of rising sea temperatures (S4E2) and that, faced with this cry for help from the ecosystem, the inhabitants have every interest in considering 'nature and the ice, and not an oil adventure, [as] the true legacy of Greenland' (S4E1). Finally, will we be able to overcome our divisions and stop blaming each other, considering that global warming is stateless? Here too, *Borgen's* answers do not inspire optimism. While Birgitte absolves herself of responsibility for the exploitation of the Greenland oil field by explaining that she 'inherited this situation' (S4E8), Jens Enok Berthelsen, North Atlantic Member of Parliament, makes a point of reminding her that Denmark and its allies (starting with the United States) already bear a heavy responsibility for climate change. 'And suddenly, Greenland has to pay for 200 years of pollution by the West. Don't you think we're paying that price already?' he angrily asks (S4E3). Birgitte's twenty-one-year-old son Magnus uses the same rhetoric to admonish his mother live on television. Speaking on behalf of young people who are necessarily primarily concerned by ecological decline, he rages: 'Your generation has destroyed the world so badly that my generation can do nothing else but fight for the future!' (S4E8).

Before the Earth becomes definitively unliveable, there is still time to think about solutions other than the one that consists, for the Birgitte of *Power & Glory*, in heading off by bike to an environmental protest movement in order to win the sympathy of the demonstrators (S4E3). The reality of this Birgitte seems far removed from that of her voters, insofar as she breaks with the tradition of 'moderation and compromise' that cements Danish society.⁵¹ It may not be too late to confront reality, but if even our fictional heroes are no longer capable of calling us to order, then the damage must be deep. As deep as an oil field ready to rain its black gold on our parched land.

Notes

- 1 Ib Bondebjerg and others, *Transnational European Television Drama: Production, Genres and Audiences* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 187.
- 2 Erik Swyngedouw, “Globalisation” or “Glocalisation”? Networks, Territories and Rescaling’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 17.1 (April 2004), pp. 25–48, doi:10.1080/0955757042000203632.
- 3 All quotes from *Borgen* are taken from the British English subtitles provided by Netflix.
- 4 Pierre Langlais, ‘*Borgen*, une femme “normale” au pouvoir’, *Télérama*, 17 November 2012 <www.telerama.fr/series-tv/borgen-une-femme-normale-au-pouvoir,89421.php> (accessed 25 August 2023).
- 5 Stuart Jeffries, ‘*Borgen* Creator Adam Price on What’s Next for Birgitte Nyborg in the Show’s Third and Final Series’, *The Guardian*, 14 November 2013 <www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2013/nov/14/borgen-creator-adam-price-birgitte-nyborg-third-series> (accessed 24 August 2023).
- 6 These switches highlight the collusive relationships that prevail in what Christian Le Bart defines as the ‘small world of media and politics’. See Christian Le Bart, ‘*Borgen*. Le droit aux émotions d’un(e) Premier ministre’, in *Séries politiques. Le Pouvoir entre fiction et vérité*, ed. by R. Lefebvre and E. Taïeb (De Boeck Supérieur, 2020), p. 103. Le Bart also points out that Kasper and Katrine become lovers without worrying about the potential conflict of interest associated with their positions—him being a spin doctor and her a journalist, then the other way round.
- 7 Sandrine Lévêque and Frédérique Matonti, ‘Birgitte Nyborg ou l’impossible réussite des femmes en politique. Ce que *Borgen* nous dit du genre en politique’, in *Séries politiques. Le Pouvoir entre fiction et vérité*, ed. by R. Lefebvre and E. Taïeb (De Boeck Supérieur, 2020), p. 170. All French-to-English translations are by the author.
- 8 Nils C. Ahl and Benjamin Fau, *Dictionnaire des séries télévisées* (Philippe Rey, 2011; repr. 2016), p. 168.
- 9 Pierre Sérésier, *L’Empire de la mélancolie. L’Univers des séries scandinaves* (Vendémiaire, 2017), p. 132.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid., p. 130.
- 12 Bondebjerg and others, *Transnational European Television Drama*, p. 206.
- 13 Sérésier, *L’Empire de la mélancolie*, p. 130.
- 14 Le Bart, ‘*Borgen*. Le droit aux émotions d’un(e) Premier ministre’, p. 94.
- 15 Sérésier, *L’Empire de la mélancolie*, p. 134.
- 16 Bondebjerg and others, *Transnational European Television Drama*, p. 206.
- 17 Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York University Press, 2015).
- 18 Bondebjerg and others, *Transnational European Television Drama*, pp. 207–208.
- 19 Florent Favard, *Écrire une série TV. La promesse d’un dénouement* (Presses universitaires François-Rabelais, 2019), p. 65.
- 20 Bondebjerg and others, *Transnational European Television Drama*, p. 206.
- 21 Josef Adalian, ‘Inside the Binge Factory’, *Vulture*, 11 June 2018 <www.vulture.com/2018/06/how-netflix-swallowed-tv-industry.html> (accessed 25 August 2023).
- 22 Bondebjerg and others, *Transnational European Television Drama*, p. 204.
- 23 Sérésier, *L’Empire de la mélancolie*, p. 133.

- 24 Kylie Warner, 'Borgen's Bleak View of Women in Power', *The New Yorker*, 4 August 2022 <www.newyorker.com/culture/on-television/borgen-s-bleak-view-of-women-in-power> (accessed 26 August 2023).
- 25 Audrey Garric, 'Avant même le début de l'été, canicules et mégafeux se déchainent sur la planète, mais le pire est encore à venir', *Le Monde*, 16 June 2023 <www.lemonde.fr/planete/article/2023/06/16/avant-meme-le-debut-de-l-ete-canicules-et-megafeux-se-dechainent-sur-la-planete-mais-le-pire-est-encore-a-venir_6177858_3244.html> (accessed 26 August 2023).
- 26 Clémence Apetogbor, 'Incendies : "Ce qui pouvait s'apparenter à l'exceptionnel est désormais régulier en 2022, et sera sans doute notre quotidien en 2023"', *Le Monde*, 19 July 2022 <www.lemonde.fr/climat/article/2022/07/19/incendies-ce-qui-pouvait-s-apparenter-a-l-exceptionnel-est-desormais-regulier-en-2022-et-sera-certainement-notre-quotidien-en-2023_6135412_1652612.html> (accessed 26 August 2023).
- 27 Garric, 'Avant même le début de l'été'.
- 28 This tagline appears on one of the promotional posters for the theatrical release of the film.
- 29 *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, ed. by Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (I.B.Tauris, 2007).
- 30 Isabelle Malin, "Planet killers" : la traque des spécialistes de la fraude à la taxe carbone au cœur d'une série documentaire sur les criminels environnementaux', *franceinfo TV*, 23 January 2023 <www.francetvinfo.fr/monde/environnement/crise-climatique/empreinte-carbone/video-planet-killers-la-traque-des-specialistes-de-la-fraude-a-la-taxe-carbone-au-c-ur-d-une-serie-documentaire-sur-les-criminels-environnementaux_5598809.html> (accessed 26 August 2023).
- 31 Bondebjerg and others, *Transnational European Television Drama*, p. 204.
- 32 Florent Favard, 'La série est un récit (improvisé) : l'articulation de l'intrigue à long terme et la notion de "mythologie"', *Télévision*, 7 (2016), p. 49.
- 33 Le Bart, 'Borgen. Le droit aux émotions', p. 103.
- 34 Jean-François Pigoullié, 'Borgen, une réhabilitation de la politique ?', *Esprit*, 2 (2013), p. 135.
- 35 S4E2, 'The place where you fall'.
- 36 'Greenland has the highest suicide rate', a policeman reminds Asger after the discovery of Malik's body in Episode 4. Birgitte herself doesn't hesitate to use this statistic to rebuke Hans Eliassen: 'Need I mention the number of political scandals in Greenland? Abuse of power, nepotism, corruption. Let's talk again when your suicide rate is under control, along with alcoholism and widespread sexual abuse' (S4E4).
- 37 Sérisier, *L'Empire de la mélancolie*, p. 130.
- 38 Warner, 'Borgen's Bleak View of Women in Power'.
- 39 Taking *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999–2007) as an example, Jason Mittell nevertheless praises 'the model of seriality [which] infused episodic television that typifies most complex television, with fairly episodic plots building into a serialized storyworld and characters arcs' (Mittell, *Complex TV*, p. 29).
- 40 Machiavelli is one of the recurring references in the series, whether through epigraphs or intradiegetic quotations.
- 41 S4E8. In the same spirit, the Danish series *Follow the Money* reveals the hidden face of a supposedly virtuous company, Evergreen, characterized by complete opacity despite promises of transparency.
- 42 Warner, 'Borgen's Bleak View of Women in Power'.

- 43 Klaus Dodds, 'President Trump, Hemispheric Security and the Greenland Connection', *Le Grand Continent*, 21 February 2025 <<https://geopolitique.eu/en/2025/02/21/president-trump-hemispheric-security-and-the-greenland-connection>> (accessed 24 February 2025).
- 44 Asger quotes an OPEC press release stating that 'the world's oil consumption will break all records over the next five years'. These forecasts have begun to materialize in reality, according to official figures. See Adrien Pécout, 'La demande mondiale de pétrole se dirige vers un record en 2023', *Le Monde*, 28 June 2023 <www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2023/06/28/tiree-par-les-pays-emergents-la-demande-petroliere-se-dirige-vers-un-record-en-2023_6179503_3234.html> (accessed 28 August 2023).
- 45 Sara Rigby, 'Climate Change: Should We Change the Terminology?', *Science Focus*, 3 February 2020 <www.sciencefocus.com/news/climate-change-should-we-change-the-terminology> (accessed 28 August 2023).
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 Adam Price, 'Winner of the FSE European Screenwriters Award 2015: Speech of Thanks', *Federation Screenwriters Europe*, 21 September 2015 <<https://federationscreenwriters.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/AdamPriceSpeech2015.pdf>> (accessed 28 August 2023).
- 48 Warner, '*Borgen's* Bleak View of Women in Power'.
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 This is precisely what happens in the final episode of *Power & Glory*, when a *deus ex machina* decrees that China has given up exploitation of Greenland's oil because of the endangerment (identified by Birgitte thanks to a simple drawing by her son) of copepods on which whales feed.
- 51 Sérissier, *L'Empire de la mélancolie*, p. 130.

Chapter 18

Feminism Waves and Series Waves in the USA

Sandra Laugier

Feminist TV series have seen explosive growth in the USA since 2017 and the #MeToo movement. Every viewer can follow the evolution that has brought women to the forefront of the small screen on a daily basis. Over the past decade, female characters have taken centre stage: whether in the cult classic *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011–19), where heroines become the majority in the final seasons, or in *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013–2018), where the president's wife (Claire Underwood, played by Robin Wright) ends up wielding power after the ousting of the president (Frank Underwood, played by Kevin Spacey, who himself was swept up by the #MeToo wave). We also find this trend in the now-dominant genre of mini-series, from the acclaimed *The Queen's Gambit* (Netflix, 2021) to the classic *Mare of Easttown* (HBO, 2021) to *Maid* (Netflix, 2021), which highlights the detailed tasks of a housekeeper. Women are also taking on leading roles in the detective genre and the genre of legal drama, as well as the virile espionage or military genre: *Alias* (ABC, 2001–2006), *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011–2020), *Vigil* (BBC 1, 2021–), *Tehran* (Kan 11/Apple TV+, 2020–), *Special Ops: Lioness* (Paramount+, 2023–), *Les Sentinelles* (Canal+, 2024–).

Of course, there have been women on screen before, but what distinguished the characters mentioned above, whether they are a president or a cleaning lady, is that they are active and independent, assertive and risk-taking, seeking to control their destiny—in short, they are figures for female identification and *empowerment*.

The presence of active women on screen is certainly not the only sign of change. It is time to take a broader look at the place of TV series in gender studies, which has long tended to analyse series, like many other popular Hollywood productions, in critical terms, seeing them as an expression and reiteration of existing gender, race, and class structures and discriminatory practices. Despite the abundance of research on media, the encounter between gender and TV remains an innovative scholarly project for several reasons. Firstly, the complex nature and rapid evolution of media products,

technologies, and actors means that we need to monitor the transformations of a media landscape in which representations and forms, as well as production and consumption practices constantly evolve, sometimes overlapping and sometimes colliding with new processes of remixing, sharing, co-creation, and contestation.

The *#MeToo* movement and the resulting efforts of the media industry to (self-)regulate the content they offer compels us to analyse the coexistence of stereotypical images, still present on screens, as well as subversive and critical processes that have brought women and so-called minorities to the forefront.

In order to carry out this critical and reflexive work, we must also take into account the status of popular culture, which is regularly underestimated in relation to academic and avant-garde culture, despite the fact that it plays an increasingly important role in the daily lives of audiences of all generations. The influence of a widely and internationally accessible culture has been multiplied in recent decades by digital technology (including the proliferation of social networks and platforms) and the transformation of the audiovisual landscape with the arrival of platform giants (such as Netflix, Amazon, and so on) that are increasingly available all over the world. The trend is further complicated by the entrance of new competitors such as Disney+ and Paramount+, also expanding their international reach, as well as the development of digital presence and original content by local TV channels, including those of the public service. Of course, not all of the resulting products are of equal value; in particular, certain apologies for the nuclear and heterocentric family are still widely broadcast around the world. However, this chapter will focus on US series that contribute to the subversion of gender norms and promote emancipation. These series are widely watched in both the USA and all over the world, contributing to the development of local feminist discourses and the internationalization of the *#MeToo* movement. Just as the first wave of feminism had its origins in the USA (with a strong influence from French thinkers) but circulated throughout the world, before being contested and enriched by perspectives from the South, feminist TV series began in Hollywood and circulated everywhere, until they were confronted and transformed by great works of the global production.

Until recently, the cinematic universe has been male-dominated in both its representations and its narratives. Only a handful of women have emerged within the industry to fill symbolically valued positions such as that of a director. Feminist protests at the industry's ritual events, such as the Oscars in the USA and the Césars and Cannes ceremonies in France, reveal how little progress has been made in the twenty-first century for the advancement of women in cinema—a field still dominated by the virilist rhetoric of the 'auteur', nurtured by film critics. TV series seem to be following a different trajectory. Like women, series are frequently undervalued, subject to disdainful comments from patent cinephiles who tend to dismiss both the cultural product and its audience.¹ Their reception takes place not in cinemas and

public spaces but in the domestic universe, where television has long been a piece of furniture, and their public is often constituted by female spectators. The series have historically been a *minor* medium, presenting the family universe and enabling the lasting presence of female characters. There are numerous examples of enduring series based on strong female characters from the second half of the twentieth century, from *Bewitched* (1964–1972), *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970–1977), *Kate & Allie* (1984–1989), *Golden Girls* (1985–1992), to *Dr Quinn* (1993–1998) and *Ally McBeal* (1997–2002). While cinema offered little in the way of equivalents, these characters gradually broke free of stereotypes.

However, it was not until the turn of the century that the first feminist wave in series took place with productions such as the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* series (The WB/UPN, 1997–2004).² Its showrunner, Joss Whedon, had explicitly conceived *Buffy* as a feminist work designed to morally transform a mixed teenage audience. *Buffy* brought to the screen an ordinary girl who pulverized both vampires and stereotypes, permanently transgressing male dominance on screen. This figure of a strong, even brutal young woman, comfortable with her aggression and sexual fantasies, enabled Whedon to promote a different vision of women in the eyes of teenagers. As he says, ‘The main phenomenon I hoped to be part of was a change in popular culture, an acceptance of the idea of a female heroine, not just a protagonist, but a real heroine.’ This ethical concern runs through all seven seasons of *Buffy*. Unlike other slayers in the series (such as Faith), Buffy is not a solitary, *marginal* heroine; she interacts with and takes care of a group of friends. When Buffy enters university, feeling isolated, pathetic, and losing her confidence, her friend Xander comforts her: ‘Let me tell you something. When it’s dark or I’m alone or panicking or whatever, I always ask myself: “What would Buffy do? You’re my hero.”’ Buffy is a *moral role model for everyone*, and therein lies her innovation; it is no longer about being a role model just for girls. The heroism embodied by Buffy is also an affirmation of another ethic, based on caring for others and protecting loved ones: the *care*, the ordinary ethic proposed by Carol Gilligan.³ Unlike superheroines, Buffy has an intimate circle, a *private life*. Weak and strong ties, vulnerability, friendship, and love are essential to the dynamic of the series. Buffy cares for those close to her (her mother, her sister, her friends), not just humanity as a whole. She demonstrates the ways in which *care* is a strength, a ‘vocation’—that of justice—that puts heroism within everyone’s reach. *Buffy* is the iconic feminist series that liberated a whole generation of viewers by showcasing the power of women—not just one heroine. It continues to be watched and discovered by new generations.

A Methodology of Popular Culture

The turn of the century thus marked a turning point in both the development of US TV series and the place of gender in these productions. Among notable examples from this period are now classic series from HBO, the cable and

elitist channel: the provocative *Sex and the City*, created in 1998, focused on four women in search of a sex life in New York; such classics as *The Sopranos* (1999–2007), *Six Feet Under* (2001–2005), and *The Wire* (2002–2008), which highlighted increasingly strong and atypical female characters, while placing new emphasis on male fragility.⁴ Other networks soon followed HBO's example: AMC with the acclaimed *Mad Men* (2007–2015), ABC with *Desperate Housewives* (2004–2012), and Showtime with *The L Word* (2004–2009), an unprecedented lesbian series that became emblematic of series' formidable and now-confirmed ability to represent and value sexual minorities, including mature trans women.

Since then, feminist series like *Orange Is the New Black* (Netflix, 2013–2019), *Big Little Lies* (HBO, 2017–), and *Better Things* (FX, 2016–2022) have often featured a group of women as *heroes*. *Transparent* (2014–2019), before ending with the departure of its main star, accused of sexual harassment, had had the merit of staging the existence of late transitions, here through the story of a transgender parent and their adult children. Although the series contributed to destigmatizing trans-identities, it is regrettable that the leading role was played by a cisgender man, a trend that is also now changing. Trans characters played by trans people are becoming more and more common; in other words, they appear in our intimate spaces, entering into our ordinary lives. After all, in many homes, the TV set has been replaced by the computer screen or tablet that we take to bed with us.

The plots of TV series often span several years and are characterized by the seasonal recurrence, which allows female characters to become rooted in their fictional landscapes. Viewers have time to get attached to these characters. The focus on families, a major theme in contemporary series, gives a new place to private life; emphasis is also placed on professions, such as health or justice, in the process of accelerating feminization. The focus on youth also leads to more complex and 'fluid' visions of sexuality, from *Girls* (HBO, 2012–2017) to *Euphoria* (HBO, 2019–). In science fiction and fantasy, too, as well as in anime, female characters are gaining in heroism and autonomy (*The 100*, The CW, 2014–2020), and openly lesbian, bisexual, and trans figures are no longer 'tokens', but the new normal.

The methodology of popular culture, and particularly television series, has enabled a greater focus on female expression and diversity. This shift is evident both in the depiction of everyday life and in genres traditionally dominated by male protagonists, such as detective series, science fiction, espionage, or terrorism thriller. These genres have largely become feminized, not solely in response to professional statistics (although this factor plays a role), but to meet the expectations of a female and often engaged audience.

The Waves of TV Series

Recent US TV series are not merely placing women in the credits; this inclusion has become a matter of course. These series are capable of

questioning the causes and limits of this increased on-screen presence, and one can speak of a second wave of feminist series since 2017, or perhaps even a third wave since 2021.

Feminist science fiction and fantasy have long raised life-affirming issues such as fertility, forced pregnancy, and abortion bans, as seen in *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Battlestar Galactica* (Sci-Fi, 2003–2009), and *House of the Dragon* (HBO, 2022–). These issues are now making their way into more realistic series. In the latest season of *The Morning Show* (Apple TV+, 2019–), which deliberately anchored its first season in the #MeToo movement with an extreme concern for pedagogy, the journalist heroines, Alex and Bradley (played by two great stars of the moment, Jennifer Aniston and Reese Witherspoon), are overwhelmed and terrified by the Supreme Court's decision to attack the freedom of abortion by reversing *Roe vs. Wade*. Here, too, the series provides the historical and conceptual framework for the decision, through discussions about the replacement of Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the iconic US Supreme Court justice who passed away under President Trump, by judge and anti-abortion activist Amy Coney Barrett. Ginsburg, known as 'The Notorious RBG'—a nickname taken from the great rapper Notorious B.I.G.—has also been evoked in series like *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS, 2007–2019; S12E6) and the biopic film *On the Basis of Sex* (Mimi Leder, 2018). She also appears briefly as Tara Nicodemo in *Mrs. America*, which traces the history of feminist struggles.

Mrs. America is an essential resource for understanding serial feminism. The series revisits the history of the US feminist movement through the trajectory of Phyllis Schlafly (Cate Blanchett), a conservative activist who rose to fame in the 1970s by blocking the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), which aimed to enshrine equal rights between the sexes in the US Constitution, a measure that initially enjoyed broad Democratic and even bipartisan support, but was ultimately blocked by conservative activists. This series highlights the diversity of feminists and their commitments and the important conflicts between white feminists and Black and LGBT women that accompanied the rise of political feminism. It features figures like Gloria Steinem (portrayed by Rose Byrne), Bella Abzug (Margo Martindale), Betty Friedan (Tracey Ullman), and Shirley Chisholm (Uzo Aduba), the first Black woman to run for the Democratic nomination in 1972, whose name was brought back into public discourse by Kamala Harris during her vice-presidential campaign. But it also highlights lesser-known but crucial political figures, such as Republican feminist Jill Ruckelshaus (Elizabeth Banks).

The series offers a timely examination of female political power, touching on some sensitive topics: the crucial political role of anti-feminist women, defenders of the traditional family; internal inequalities in the feminist movement, and the experiences of Black feminists like Chisholm, exploring her 1972 candidacy and the reluctance of white feminists to support her, preferring the alliance with a white male candidate, John McGovern.

Mrs. America's originality also lies in its focus on Schlafly, an influential enemy of feminism who founded the *Eagle Forum* and supported Donald Trump, another political outsider who successfully channelled 'white' angst in response to contemporary cultural transformations. Schlafly herself is one of those women forgotten by history, as suggested by her husband's constant muffling or the series' melancholy ending, in which she returns to her kitchen after helping Reagan win the presidency through the mobilization of her anti-feminist networks. Those who rally to her cause, notably her close friend Alice Macray (played by Sarah Paulson), are portrayed with care and sympathy.

The series reveals internal inequalities within the feminist movement, and the rise of the anti-feminist argument as a major political tool of ultra-conservative ideology. This ideology, which became dominant among Republicans, and has grown in influence in Europe, crescendoed with the arrival of Trump to power in 2016.

This historic moment for women is very well described in the often overlooked series *The Comey Rule* (Showtime, 2020), notably with a scene in which the entire family—the wife and four daughters—of James Comey, then director of the FBI, are in tears as the results of the presidential election are announced on TV: in fact, the series very pedagogically returns to that horrible moment in 2016 when, just days before the election, the FBI had reopened the investigation into Hillary Clinton (who had used her unsecured private messaging when she was Secretary of State). With the benefit of hindsight, one wonders whether Comey (unintentionally) played a role in the Democratic candidate's defeat by Trump or whether it was simply the irreducible (entrenched) sexism of American society that decided the outcome of the election. A cultural cause, not a political one.

It was the *#MeToo* movement that, after that terrible *backlash*, enabled popular culture to take a renewed interest in second-wave feminists and their issues. There is a Steinem biopic coming out soon, starring Alicia Vikander and Julianne Moore, and a Chisholm biopic with Viola Davis. And the ERA itself was ratified in 2017, four decades after it was blocked—by Nevada, Illinois, and Virginia—reviving hopes that it might one day pass.

Today's TV series no longer confine themselves to the role of 'mirror' of a society, they claim the history of feminism, claiming to be part of it and directly change things.

Uzo Aduba won the award for Best Supporting Actress for her portrayal of Chisholm, on an Emmys night that, although 'remote', was historic for the triumph of Black actresses and actors in unprecedented numbers. Regina King and Yahya Abdul-Matee were honoured for their work on *Watchmen* (HBO, 2019), which was voted Best Series of 2019; but also Zendaya, Maya Rudolph, Eddie Murphy, Ron Cephas Jones, and Laurence Fishburne. Regina King, the talented actress who won for the fourth time, symbolizes the turning point achieved by series (far ahead of Hollywood cinema in this respect) in putting Black women in the spotlight, no longer

as a token or a gimmick, but as a political gesture with multiple implications.

Representing women in all their diversity has become a crucial, and arguably commercial, goal for the small screen. Television provides a privileged space for the expression of women's experiences, as well as men's vulnerabilities. Black women, long underrepresented in cinema (with a few notable exceptions), are a particularly prominent element in these transformations brought about by and within series. Consider two major HBO series, *Watchmen* and *Lovecraft Country* (2020), both of which revisit repressed episodes of American history (the Tulsa Massacre) and, as *Black Panther* has already done, radically expand the audience for Black characters, who themselves become emblematic and saviours of their nation or the world. Exploring all the resources of popular culture—comic books, Lovecraftian fantasy, horror and superhero genres—these series create a new and exuberant imagery of violence, articulating gender and race in a very realistic way, and using horror to express, and reverse, the daily terror experienced by Black people. Black women, elected representatives and voters, have been at the forefront of the struggle for women's rights, and have been neglected throughout history. Today, they are the strong arm in the fight against a Republican party that has become synonymous with sexism and racism, and they are the main force that made Kamala Harris's candidacy an obvious choice for the Democratic presidential nomination.

The success of these North American series highlights the emergence of a new feminism in popular culture. This new wave has managed to relativize the 'official' feminism—often associated with white, cisgender, educated women—and introduce new themes. It is no longer merely a question of women gaining visibility or screen time, or displaying a diversity that has now become almost obligatory, even on streaming services like Paramount+. Instead, feminist series provide audiences with tools for cultural analysis of the situation of women, in all their diversity.

This evolution raises the question of how this second wave of serial feminism is incarnated on screen. A significant factor is the arrival of a generation of actresses ready to elevate this female genre to the next level, much like the comedies and melodramas of Hollywood cinema did in the 1930s and the 1940s. Actresses such as Reese Witherspoon, Nicole Kidman, and Shailene Woodley in *Big Little Lies*; Edie Falco in *The Sopranos* and *Nurse Jackie* (Showtime, 2009–2015); Regina King in *Seven Seconds* (Netflix, 2018) and *Watchmen*; Cate Blanchett and Uzo Aduba in *Mrs. America*; Elizabeth Moss in *Top of the Lake* (BBC, 2013–2017) and *The Handmaid's Tale*; Kate Winslet in *Mare of Easttown*; Laura Dern in *Big Little Lies* and *Twin Peaks* (ABC/Showtime, 1990–1991, 2017); Toni Collette and Merritt Wever in *Unbelievable* (Netflix, 2019) are leading the charge. Like Katharine Hepburn, Irene Dunne, and Barbara Stanwyck of the last century, these actresses defy the profile of young debutantes and reject the *male gaze*, embodying self-confidence and feminine solidarity.

Even before the #MeToo movement, series like *Big Little Lies* depicted women defending themselves together against the enemy, including through drastic actions like throwing him down the stairs. These TV series thus offer roles and sustained careers for older women, distinct from the young ingenues typically favoured in cinema. They allow actresses to work as long as their male counterparts and provide potential identifications or attachments for adult women, who are weary of the one-sided youth-centric focus where only men visibly age on screen.

Maternity Ward

House of the Dragon, set two hundred years before the iconic *Game of Thrones*, diverges significantly from its predecessor, particularly in a relative absence of real battlefield action and major geopolitical and military battles. The primary political conflict in *House of the Dragon* centres around the theme of *succession*, a concept explored in other hit series of recent years. In this series, succession is represented in the most concrete manner, with a notable emphasis on the process of childbirth.

A remarkable feature of this new series is the frequent depiction of childbirth—four in total, each more gruelling and *gory* than the last. This is a stark contrast to *Game of Thrones*. In the very first episode, Queen Aemma, wife of Viserys, does not survive a cruel Caesarean section ordered by her beloved husband to ‘save the child’. Episode 6 opens with the (almost normal) birth of their daughter Rhaenyra’s third child. In the same episode, Laena, wife of Daemon (Viserys’s brother and Rhaenyra’s uncle), finds herself in the same situation as Aemma, with a difficult delivery. Daemon, unlike Viserys, offers to sacrifice the child to save her, but to no avail. In one of the final episodes, Rhaenyra gives birth (to her sixth child) prematurely and extracts the lifeless baby herself, plunging her hands between her legs. In keeping with historical reality, *House of the Dragon* presents motherhood as an extreme risk, leading to the death of either the mother (S1E1) or the child (SE10), or both (SE6). These scenes (though less violent than many moments in *Game of Thrones*) have provoked perplexed and even indignant comments, as they present the harsh realities and violence of childbirth to a broad audience. While *Game of Thrones* was a pioneer in showcasing female heroines of all ages and styles, *House of the Dragon* continues this liberation by lifting representational taboos and depicting women’s *reproductive labour* on screen.

Meanwhile, the fifth season of *The Handmaid’s Tale* takes a more radical approach to the theme of childbirth. Starring Elizabeth Moss, the series was one of the first to address these issues in a direct and traumatic manner, depicting ‘handmaids’—fertile women in a world with a sharply declining birth rate—tasked with producing babies for infertile women of the ruling class. These women are dispossessed of their bodies, which have become the *property* of their masters. The state control of the procreative function, and thus of women’s bodies, gives *The Handmaid’s Tale* its consistency and

desperate topicality. In the fifth season, we witness a temporary turnaround in the relationship between June, the heroine, and Serena, her former 'boss'—notably in a scene where Serena gives birth under very precarious conditions, with only June's help.

A viewer who follows a series from the beginning can live with its characters for five to nine years or more. This is a significant amount of time; in real life, few people maintain relationships for that long, especially with individuals outside their own social group defined by gender, race, class, or sexual orientation. *Orange Is the New Black* exemplified this by bringing an extraordinary diversity of women to the screen within the framework of a 'prison series'—a major popular genre traditionally dominated by men. Kerry Washington played a dynamic Black politician in *Scandal* (ABC, 2012–2019) for several seasons before portraying Anita Hill in *Confirmation* (Rick Famuyiwa and Susannah Grant, 2018), which dealt with the scandal surrounding Clarence Thomas's appointment as a Supreme Court justice in 1991. Similarly, feminist series have been pioneers in displaying intersectionality, a concept often neglected in earlier shows such as *Sex and the City*, which was criticized for its cast of exclusively white women. The presence of racialized women like Washington or Viola Davis, the star of *How to Get Away with Murder* (ABC, 2014–2020), marked a significant milestone in television representation. Another landmark was the inclusion of mature women: Pam Grier in *The L Word*, Meryl Streep in *Big Little Lies*, and Holly Hunter in *Top of the Lake* and *Succession* (HBO, 2018–2022). The next frontier is the visibility of individuals with disabilities, evidenced by the growing number of series focusing on autism.

Series have become a crucial platform for putting intersectionality into action as a critical lens to address the invisibility of women who do not belong to privileged groups. For example, the female characters in the acclaimed series *American Crime* (ABC, 2015–2017) embody intersections of poverty, lack of education, and racial and sometimes religious oppression. Utilizing a unique feature of anthology series, the series retains the same cast across three seasons, radically altering their social positions and character profiles from one season to the next. By featuring the same actresses—most notably, the talented Regina King and Felicity Huffman—in varied social context, *American Crime* explores class, gender, and race relations in all their harshness. It poignantly exposes the arbitrary nature of racial segregation and the inescapable weight and violence of discrimination. This approach goes beyond merely alternating 'points of view', as seen in films like *Rashômon*. Instead, *American Crime* constructs characters in new contexts, creating understanding and shocks that reveal the depth of systemic discrimination more effectively than any discourse. The series aired on ABC, a mainstream US channel, making its impact even more democratic than series shown on cable or streaming platforms.

Finally, we cannot help but be struck by the growing presence of poor white women, often referred to as 'white trash', in feminist and anti-racist

series. These characters reframe the narratives of 'white' feminism. Here, we can think of Ruth Langmore (played by the talented Julia Garner) in the critically acclaimed series *Ozark* (Netflix, 2017–2022) and Alex, the protagonist of *Maid*. Despite their whiteness, Alex, Ruth, and characters like Mare are developed through intersectional struggles of gender and class. These series depict the reality and diversity of oppression while avoiding a miserabilist portrayal. Ruth, in particular, holds her own in terms of strategy and cruelty, compared to male characters.

Housework, the 'dirty work' of *care*, is often relegated to women, poor people, racial minorities, and other marginalized groups. *Maid* highlights the difficulty of valorizing these occupations that literally deal with *shit*: clogged toilets, devastated apartments filled with garbage, or homes of 'hoarders'. Alex turns this grim work into a slightly more lucrative specialty, as no one else is willing to take these jobs.

Maid, similar to *Unbelievable*, another landmark Netflix feminist series, is also about women supporting other women, helping them find their voice and path. Not all the people Alex encounters are kind, but her ultimate salvation comes from women like Denise, the shelter director (BJ Harrison), and especially Regina (Anika Noni Rose), a seemingly atrocious client who becomes a friend. The complex, life-saving relationship between Alex and her mother Paula further illustrates the series' radical exploration of intersectionality through unconventional forms of care.

This Is Us (NBC, 2016–2022), which can be considered the 'model' intersectional series, became increasingly politicized with each episode, inventing the genre of intersectional melodrama. It tells the multi-generational story of a middle-class white family who adopt a Black child in the 1980s. In the second season, Rebecca Pearson (Mandy Moore) reflects on the pivotal moment in the series' first episode when, after losing one of her triplets, her husband Jack persuades her to adopt an abandoned Black baby, Randall: 'This stranger became my child and this child became my life.' *This Is Us* affirms that America is a mixed and multifaceted nation, both historically and in the present, without shying away from the difficulties this reality entails.

Expats (Prime Video, 2024) focuses on three American women living in Hong Kong, whose lives are radically transformed in the space of a few months following a tragedy. But what the film actually teaches viewers is the importance of the characters who support the 'heroines' and their families, these 'helpers', an English word that is so often used to refer to domestic staff, as in Katherine Sockett's beautiful book *The Help*.

Expats is both a feminist and postcolonial drama that explores grief and pain. But the series is arguably even more poignant and dark. Margaret (Nicole Kidman) has had to move from New York to Hong Kong with her husband and their three young children, living in a sumptuous apartment complex called The Peak: from the start of the series, Margaret suffers in this privileged life. The move has put an end to her career as a landscape

architect, and she spends her days caring for her children and trying to be perfect in this new maternal role, with an unease that is admirably captured in an early scene. In this context, she develops an unhealthy jealousy of her domestic help, Essie (Ruby Ruiz), a middle-aged Filipina who works as a nanny and housekeeper, among other duties. Margaret's friend and neighbour Hilary (Sarayu Blue) lives a few floors down with her husband, David (Jack Huston), the two of them leading a cosy, childless existence, subsidized by Hilary (an excellent businesswoman) and maintained by the help, Puri (Amelyn Pardenilla).

From the very first episodes, even before the revelation of the drama that ties it all together, the series takes a highly original look at the relationship between the families at the heart of the story and the 'helpers' who are made available to the expatriates and whose work, though indispensable and 'taken for granted', is also experienced with a degree of resentment. This social structure is clearly colonial, with the two expatriate families entirely dependent on the assistance that their social status affords them.

It is against this backdrop that tragedy strikes Margaret's family with the (unexplained) disappearance of their third child, Gus, in yet another unhealthy context of *care*: that of the third expatriate, of a completely different type, young Mercy (Ji-young Yoo), a Columbia-educated American of Korean descent who lives on the cheap in Hong Kong and who finds herself in Margaret's and then Hilary's orbit. Margaret—jealous of Essie and resentful of her children's attachment to their nanny—entrusts Gus to Mercy for a night out at the night market, even though she barely knows her. Young Mercy, while obsessed with the idea of being appreciated and 'recruited' by the wealthy family, is on her cell phone (searching for ways to ingratiate herself with the family and potential employer) at the very moment the little one entrusted to her care disappears into the crowded night market; proof, if any were needed, that care work requires considerable abilities that she does not have and that Margaret was unable to recognize in Essie.

Expats raises the question of *who* the main character is. Is it Margaret, who has suffered an exceptional misfortune? Is this what makes her the heroine, or is it Margaret's social status or the status of the star Kidman, dedicated to these ethereal, suffering bourgeois roles? Shouldn't Hilary, played by an Indian actress accustomed to supporting roles (Sarayu Blue), be front and centre? These nagging questions of inequality between women are a strong point of the series. Directed by a woman and written entirely by women, *Expats* analyses the complex relationships between women: between friends, between employers and employees, between mothers and daughters. Alongside the many series that now focus on women and their suffering, to the point of constituting a genre in its own right (including *Big Little Lies*, also starring Nicole Kidman), *Expats* is the first series to reveal the unequal attention paid to characters in series with an unprecedented reflexive intelligence.

Gender Technologies and Aesthetic Activism

The visibility of US series actresses in all their diversity should not overshadow the concrete progress made by the industry, where more and more women are gaining access to crucial professions such as producer, scriptwriter, director, and editor. Here too, series have been particularly instrumental in offering these job opportunities. But it is also the medium of series as such, in its *form* and reception, that has facilitated a new kind of feminist aesthetic activism.

This evolution of series underscores the transformative power of popular culture: TV series do not merely reflect society; they have the potential to change it (*Handmaid's Tale*) or to envision new futures, as demonstrated by *For All Mankind* (Apple TV+, 2019–).⁵ Although it has remained relatively low-profile, *For All Mankind* exemplifies the anticipatory and even ontological power of television series, similar to how Zelensky's role as a president in *Servant of the People* prefigured his real-life presidency.

For All Mankind is neither space science fiction nor one of the dystopias that have shaped global TV and political culture in recent years. It is an uchronia, an alternative future, based on a simple and ingenious premise: what would have happened to space exploration if the USSR had not abandoned the race in the 1970s? Through ten-year leaps in history, *For All Mankind* depicts the USA—and humanity—taking a different path, transformed by the continuous pursuit of space conquest and an ongoing East-West rivalry that induces all kinds of political and gender changes.

For All Mankind is based on ordinary human qualities, but is not a virilist ode to the USA. Men are vulnerable here, and women take power. In this alternate reality, the USSR sends a woman to the moon as early as the second episode, prompting NASA in its competitive spirit to put women on rockets in the early days of the conquest of space. This leads viewers to wonder why they were not there in the first place. But more directly, the element of fictional storytelling leads to a broadening of *For All Mankind's* initially virile cast by introducing a bevy of female characters, and not just the 'wives': women are astronauts, engineers, heroines, and even a president! This expansion cleverly leads us to question the concept of humanity, reflected in the title. Why is it '*Mankind*' that appears in Armstrong's famous statement ('one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind')?

One of the most subtle lessons of the series is in the ways it represents the fate of female, homosexual, and Black Americans. By staging ordinary lives within other presents, reinvented pasts, or divergent futures, the series becomes a terrain for experimentation and political critique, and the site of complex interrogations of inequalities in emancipation.

We can return to the political stakes of these series. For philosopher Stanley Cavell, as for John Dewey, what is at stake in the relationship to popular culture is directly political.⁶ The educational value of popular culture, its capacity to disseminate and shape the capacities of viewers, is essential

to its democratic and inclusive quality. TV series have an impact (what we call soft power, but which is often more than just 'soft') because of the medium's ability to represent its audience, even for commercial reasons, and therefore to resonate widely. This optimistic approach to TV series as genre technologies does not exclude, and on the contrary requires, a critique of the points of resistance to change in the treatment of the family, as seen recently in the rather reactionary security series *Special Ops: Lioness*; but also of violence: the series *Unbelievable* takes care of its subject, showing how to avoid 'rape porn' and complacency with violence, very present in many series with feminist ambitions. It is still an issue with representations of sexuality, as shown by the difficulty of many US series, even feminist ones, to avoid eroticizing their subjects and actresses; unless, as in *The Handmaid's Tale*, they become actresses of their own desire and sexuality.

US Series or Global Series?

North American series have thus followed and expressed the waves of American, as well as global, feminism. They are numerous and varied in style and themes, and many of the genre's masterpieces come from the USA. The latter also have a strike force linked to their long-standing distribution on the small screen, now relayed by platforms, and to the army of Hollywood screenwriters (exemplified by the global resonance of their strike). The credits for *The Little House on the Prairie* (NBC, 1974–1983) echoed around the world, as did those for *Game of Thrones* decades later. Many people were sincerely moved by the death in November 2023 of Matthew Perry, one of the actors in *Friends* (NBC, 1994–2004), the popular late-twentieth-century series that established apartment-sharing as a new urban way of living together and making a family, and which had made a striking comeback during the Covid-19 pandemic. For cult science fiction or fantasy series (from *Star Trek* to *Buffy* or *Game of Thrones*), fans gather, often in costume, at conventions where they share their passions and fan fiction. In short, we are dealing with a global cultural phenomenon that is transforming the meaning of 'watching a series on TV' and transforming life forms.

North America has launched successive waves of feminism and feminist series, which have infused the entire industry, giving it a progressive tone that is one of its strongest and most enduring contributions. It is interesting that the vast majority of US series since the turn of the century carry this progressive spirit, even *woke* in the positive sense, in a world where democratic values seem fragile. This is undoubtedly because these liberal series have been able to make the most of the medium's capacities, notably to describe complex situations, characters, and stories. From this point of view, the often-repeated complaints about the 'alienation' or addiction created by series are part of the undervaluation of popular culture.

We must certainly ask ourselves whether these series can really be feminist when the commercial stakes involved in their broadcasting are so high. One

might wonder about the enthusiasm, including critical enthusiasm, generated by the mediocre film *Barbie* (Greta Gerwig, 2023), with its highly conformist feminism and profits far higher than those of the series discussed here, which did a much more complex, in-depth, and realistic job of analysing and describing the varied situations of women. North America no longer has a monopoly on creativity in TV series. Despite the Netflix formatting, the multiplication of styles, languages, and subtitles is a veritable revolution in the consumption and circulation of series. The ultimate democratization of series, after the expansion of audiences and casts, is the possibility for these 'local' series to circulate globally. The paradox of television series is that they have subverted Hollywood domination and the patriarchal norm faster than their noble ancestor, the cinema, which is often still seen as more creative and autonomous.

Notes

- 1 Laugier Sandra, *Nos vies en series* (Flammarion/Climats, 2019).
- 2 See *Buffy, Tueuse de vampires*, ed. by Sylvie Allouche and Sandra Laugier (Bragelonne, 2014).
- 3 Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Harvard University Press, 1993) and Gilligan, *In a Human Voice* (Wiley, 2023).
- 4 See Brett Martin, *Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution: From the Sopranos and the Wire to Mad Men and Breaking Bad* (Penguin, 2013).
- 5 Teresa de Lauretis, 'La technologie du genre', in *Théorie queer et cultures populaires. De Cronenberg a Foucault* (La Dispute, 2007), pp. 37–94.
- 6 See Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed* (Harvard University Press, 1979); Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness* (Harvard University Press, 1984); and John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (Capricorn Books, 1934).

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