

## **From Dystopia to Realism: Emotions, Cultures and Imaginaries of Contemporary TV Seriality**

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### **1. Temporality and Symbols. Television Seriality in the Imaginative Processes of Contemporary Society**

Why has television seriality begun to acquire an increasingly central role in the cultural consumption and media consumptions of millions of people, with its impact becoming more evident since the 2010s?

Among the many analyses addressing this question, one of the most well-founded examines the connection between the distribution modes of platformized seriality and the temporality experienced by millions of young people and adults worldwide. The nuanced analysis of the relationship between television seriality and time elaborated by Jason Mittell (2015) does not adequately address this crucial aspect of the spectatorship experience: namely, how serial content integrates into daily life routines. On the one hand, the relentless growth in labor productivity diminishes the hours available for leisure and consumption; on the other hand, the cyclical crises of the neoliberal system, which impact the employment of millions, leave individuals with sudden and excessive amounts of free time. The schizophrenia of the economic system finds solace in the digital distribution forms of seriality. Indeed, thanks to the possibilities offered by on-demand cultures, users can freely configure their viewing practices, oscillating between watching a 20-minute sitcom episode and binge-watching entire seasons.

Through its constant presence in the temporal interstices of users' lives, TV seriality provides a symbolic heritage that allows viewers to interpret the world around them over the years. Fans, in some cases, link their involvement in a TV series to personal narratives and real-life situations, according to a mechanism termed "reiteration discourse" (Williams, 2011). Moreover, cognitive and affective engagement with serial narratives fosters public connection and certain orientations toward politics among viewers (Nærland, 2019; 2020).

Above all, serial narratives equip several generations of viewers with a powerful symbolic reservoir to imagine and reimagine the present, future, and past. TV series significantly influence social imaginaries and perceptions among fans, viewers, and even segments of the population that do not watch them. Series capture public attention through various cultural discourses, activate vast emotional processes (García Martínez and González, 2016), and interrogate critical areas of social life (Korobko, 2018). This special issue brings together studies and research focusing on the relationship between TV series, social imaginaries, and contemporary cultures, emphasizing the modes of affective involvement and emotional atmospheres nurtured by serial stories.

## 2. TV Series and the Imagination of the Present, Past, and Future of Our Societies

This issue opens with two articles that explore the general characteristics and properties of television seriality and its ability to shape contemporary imaginaries through depictions of sociocultural shifts and anthropological transformations.

Fabio La Rocca's article aims to describe how, in the contemporary cultural landscape, series operate as tools for knowing and experiencing the world. According to La Rocca, as epistemological devices, TV series can be studied as extended symbolic units that reflect, shape, and reproduce contemporary social imaginaries. Furthermore, La Rocca emphasizes the centrality of emotions in these sociocultural processes, using nostalgic series as case studies. Nostalgia is one of the most powerful affective engines of contemporary seriality (Niemeyer and Wentz, 2014), as it helps structure viewers' lasting involvement in narratives that reference a past – perhaps idealized, but comforting. A series like *Stranger Things* (2016 – ongoing) is an obvious example of the nostalgic function of certain serial narratives (Taurino, 2019; Tirino and Castellano, 2023).

Ivan Pintor Iranzo's article offers a philosophical reading of contemporary television seriality, tracing elements of an apophatic aesthetic within it. Pintor Iranzo references apophatic theology, which aims to demonstrate the existence of God by affirming what God is not. This negative root inspires numerous works, including *Twin Peaks: The Return* (2017) and *True Detective* (2014 – ongoing), articulating the mystery of evil as ultimately unknowable. By drawing on perspectives from various artistic fields, including visual arts, dance, and spiritual mysticism, Ivan Pintor Iranzo's multidisciplinary method illuminates how television incorporates apophatic aesthetics. It also prompts thoughtful consideration of the convergence between digital serial narratives, theological discussions, and artistic expression in today's media landscape. This article highlights the mysterious and mystical dimensions of contemporary television seriality, engaging in dialogue with the subsequent articles that comprise this issue of the journal.

A second group of four articles focuses on dystopian series as narratives capable of encapsulating cultural anxieties about the future of humanity. Dystopia has always served as a narrative device with extreme critical scope (Cavalcanti, 2022). For this reason, the genre has seen rapid growth in recent years within television seriality, as this medium allows for more extended narratives that fully develop the potential of dystopian storytelling (Lefait, 2012; Monticelli, 2018; Wojtyna, 2018; Fernández-Rodríguez and Romero-Rodríguez, 2024). In this context, Lolita Broissiat investigates how the TV series *The Walking Dead* (2010-2022), *The Last of Us* (2023 – ongoing), and *Sweet Tooth* (2021-2024) – through the symbolic possibilities offered by dystopia and uchrony – relate to contemporary social issues, influencing audience perceptions of possible and alternative futures. Employing a qualitative methodological approach that includes content analysis, thematic analysis, and a comparative approach, this article examines dialogues and scenarios to identify themes related to social concerns. This theoretical framework, incorporating Zygmunt Bauman's theory of liquid modernity, Ulrich Beck's theory of risk society, and Michel Foucault's notions of power and otherness, helps structure a three-part partition of the work: the first part analyzes the narrative forms of collapse and social reconstruction in *The Walking Dead* (see also Frezza, 2015; Holdaway and Scaglioni, 2017); the second investigates the narrative of social response to a pandemic in *The Last of Us*;

and the third examines the representation of challenges related to otherness and coexistence in *Sweet Tooth*.

Vincenzo Susca's work focuses on the techno-dystopian TV series *Black Mirror* (2012 – ongoing). Conceived by Charlie Brooker, this series has frequently been explored by sociologists and mediologists (Cigüela Sola and Martínez Lucena, 2014; Martínez Lucena and Barraycoa, 2017; Cirucci and Vacker, 2018; Conley and Burroughs, 2019; Elnahla, 2019; McKenna, 2019; McSweeney and Joy, 2019; Attimonelli and Susca, 2020; de Castro, 2021; Duarte and Battin, 2021; Wenk, 2023), as it poses multiple questions about the role, function, and limits of digital technology in our present, compelling viewers to confront the techno-anthropological transformations taking place (Tirino and Tramontana, 2018). Susca traces the genealogy of the aestheticization of the masses back to the universal expositions of the 19th century, describing how the series and the related film *Bandersnatch* (2018) stage various phenomena related to the transformation of the public into commodities and labor, resulting from a digital technoscience that, once a vector of progress and happiness, has morphed into a dark matrix of exploitation, in line with the logics of 21st-century technological capitalism. In the digital auroras, Susca observes a potential end of humanism, reverberating in the definitive affirmation of a traumatic spectacular aesthetic, where both subject and object are transformed into data, resources, and commodities for exploitation, within a reality that becomes an open-air museum. Susca's analysis highlights how *Black Mirror* depicts digital devices as horrific tools for the aestheticization of everyday life, aimed at control, surveillance, and the extraction of value from our lives.

Laura Cesaro and Claudio Riva analyze the acclaimed series *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017 – ongoing), based on the equally famous dystopian novel by Margaret Atwood. Due to its symbolic richness and the strategies it employs regarding the dystopian genre and feminist resistance, *The Handmaid's Tale* is among the most studied and analyzed series (Monacelli, 2018; Ritzenhoff and Goldie, 2019; Das, 2021; Der-Ohannesian, 2021; Kuznetski, 2021; Wells-Lassagne and McMahon, 2021; Kaličanin, 2022; Spiegel, 2024). According to Muzzioli (2007, pp. 22-24), dystopian narratives have three essential properties: 1) they present a visitor, often a rebel, who reveals the contradictions of the universe in which he/she exists; 2) they appear structurally paradoxical, as their very existence contradicts the hopelessness they are meant to convey; and 3) they are continually interrupted by complications and fragmentary intersections among various elements. Given that *The Handmaid's Tale* exhibits all three properties transparently, the series can be regarded as a quintessential paradigm of the dystopian genre. Specifically, Cesaro and Riva utilize surveillance studies to examine methods of political control and apply an ecofeminist perspective to interpret the collective actions of the handmaids. The article emphasizes that the TV series provides a powerful commentary on current political discussions. By vividly depicting a dystopian reality, the series underscores the necessity of political awareness and collective efforts to safeguard human rights and civil liberties. As viewers confront the grim realities of Gilead, they are encouraged to recognize parallels and implications in their socio-political environments, sparking conversations and advocacy for a more just and equitable society.

This group of articles concludes with the work of Elisabetta Di Minico. Gender also plays a key role in the serial narratives of the dystopian genre (Ostalska and Fisiak, 2021; Baccolini, 2022). Di Minico explains that the analysis of the TV series *The Power* (2023),

based on a novel by Naomi Alderman, enhances the capacity of TV serial storytelling to address the issue of gender oppression through the lens of dystopia. With the development of a new organ, the skein, some women can produce electric shocks and are shown to be ready to use this superpower to subvert the patriarchal social order in various countries worldwide. According to Di Minico, Amazon Prime Video's series, which also pays special attention to other non-normative bodies (such as those of trans women), offers numerous reflections on how the marginalization of female otherness has resulted in suffering and injustice over the centuries, as well as how rebellion against the status quo ignites further conflicts. In this way, *The Power* moves beyond gender binarism while providing more complex insights into power dynamics. This non-binary perspective is evident in many television productions that explore the queer dimensions of contemporary cultures (e.g., *The L Word* [2004-2009], *Orange Is the New Black* [2013-2019], *POSE* [2018-2021], *Sense8* [2015-2018], etc.) (Fellner, 2017; Villegas Simón *et al.*, 2024), sometimes directly questioning viewers about their positioning (Boisvert, 2020). Within the vast field of connections between Gender Studies and Media Studies, many scholars have explored how TV series interrogate gender and feminism in contemporary societies (Pérez de Heredia, 2016; Piazzesi *et al.*, 2018; Donstrup, 2019; Hohenstein and Thalmann, 2019; González-de-Garay *et al.*, 2020).

The last two articles focus on specific forms of serial television storytelling. Antonia Cava traces some stages of legal drama by analyzing four mainstream series – *Perry Mason* (1957-1966), *L.A. Law* (1986-1994), *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002), and *The Good Wife* (2009-2016) – to understand the evolution of legal representation alongside social and cultural transformations in the United States. From classical models, TV series have constructed refined dramaturgical frameworks around the trial arena, with a twofold effect: on the one hand, they familiarize viewers unfamiliar with legal concepts with the world of law; on the other hand, they simplify, vernacularize, and spectacularize legal phenomena (Rapping, 2003; Andrzejewski and Mateusz, 2018). Cava begins with an original socio-mediological reflection on the nature of the trial, conceiving it as a theatricalized form of representation, an authentic dialectical arena where the parties (prosecution and defense) clash, based on arguments that are more or less convincing and aligned with the pursuit of truth. From this perspective, the transformations of the lawyer's role – from Perry Mason, the blameless protagonist devoted to the “good,” to the more complex characterizations of his successors, often interested in prevailing and embroiled in ambiguous personal and professional affairs – result from the metamorphosis of both serial storytelling (especially from the First to the Second Golden Age) and cultural and social sensibilities. In summary, according to Cava, the spectacularization of law through engaging narratives brings viewers closer to legal institutions while also revealing their limitations, complexities, and inherent characteristics, moving beyond naive or utopian conceptions of justice.

Finally, Iside Gjergji offers an in-depth analysis of the concept of realism in the TV series *Fauda* (2015 – ongoing), beginning with a reconstruction of the history of Israeli TV seriality. Introducing various theoretical perspectives on narrative realism, traced back to György Lukács, Roland Barthes, Raymond Williams, and Fredric Jameson, the scholar questions the forms of realistic narrative in Israeli TV series. In particular, Gjergji identifies a distance between realism and the realistic effect. According to her, the realistic narrative is marred by the total presentification of history, which loses sight of the

historical depth of the narrated events, and by the concealment of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. Therefore, Gjergji attributes the series' capacity to produce a realistic effect to the endless sequence of attacks and counterattacks, widely acknowledged in the daily press through comparisons between events filmed during the last Israeli-Palestinian conflict and those depicted in the series. However, the scholar concludes, drawing on Fredric Jameson, that *Fauda* cannot be considered a realistic series, as it fails to effectively account for the stories "on both sides of the conflict."

Taken together, the articles collected in this issue provide a nuanced and comprehensive exploration of the symbolic potential of contemporary seriality, while also analyzing its heterogeneity and richness. The sociological and mediological study of the impact of TV series on contemporary social imaginaries and cultures is still in its infancy. However, it is hoped that the reflections contained in these essays, from complementary disciplinary perspectives, will stimulate new avenues of analysis and further comparisons of theories, methods, and research techniques best suited to studying these phenomena.

## Warning

This special issue was conceived in parallel with "Funes" Vol. 7 I/II (2023), entitled *Serial Worlds, Complex Societies. Television Series as Transformative Medium in the Digital Age*. If volume No. 7 I/II is mainly devoted to the sociological and mediological analysis of television seriality as a metamorphic medium, this special issue – from different disciplinary perspectives – addresses the multiple facets of serial narratives and contemporary imaginaries and cultures. Within each article, the individual episode citation is given according to the formula "season number x episode number" (e.g., *Morning*, 05x01, for the first episode of the fifth season of *The Handmaid's Tale*). In addition, each article is accompanied by an alphabetical list (excluding definite and indefinite articles) of the TV series and films cited so that readers can quickly find the identifying elements of each audiovisual work.

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