

## 2. Contemporary TV, Complexity, Power Struggles and the Cynical Turn

### Pertinent Research Perspectives on Polit-Series

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This thesis proposes to treat polit-series and contemporary linear and nonlinear TV series in general as highly complex structural phenomena that are simultaneously pop cultural commodities, vast narrative fictional universes, and ongoing discussions of political concepts with contested degrees of connection to historical reality. Due to the expansive nature of the phenomenon at hand, this thesis draws on a breadth of critical approaches from various scholarly disciplines suitable for analysing (polit-)series and their larger textual, economic, sociotechnical and sociocultural ecology. This chapter will review extant literature, highlight the major developments in popular polit-fiction and pertinent research, and indicate ways to combine various scholarly perspectives from narratology and literary studies, media and industry studies, structural semantics, systems theory, game theory and game studies, Actor-Network Theory and psychology.

The research pertaining to this thesis' interests can be divided thematically into four main areas: (1) Pertinent approaches to describing structural and narrative complexity; (2) research concerned with illustrating the relations of various actors within TV, popular culture, and the broader culture industry; (3) scholarship examining popular seriality; (4) the textual analysis of contemporary polit-series themselves.

Accordingly, this chapter will (1) review how scholarship from fields ranging from structural semantics to narratology and game studies have considered *complexity* as a property of narrative phenomena with a distinct aesthetic dimension, which has led Jason Mittell to coin the term “complex TV”<sup>1</sup> for his poetics of contemporary linear television.

This chapter will go on to review various approaches to describing complex networks, particularly concerning what Bruno Latour has termed Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and their application for the narrative analysis of multi-media texts. It will show how their roots in linguistics, semiotics, and structural semantics, which intended to identify a

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1 Jason Mittell, *Complex TV. The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

universal grammar of narrative action (or, in the case of archetypal criticism, underlying deep structures of fictional texts), make structural network approaches ideally suited to be developed as an analytic tool for the complex liminal phenomenon of popular serial TV.

Extant approaches to the study of games will prove particularly pertinent to this thesis. This chapter will illustrate how the conceptual universe of games has fascinated scholars from mathematics, anthropology, cultural studies, psychology, narratology and ludology in their respective attempts to model complex phenomena. I will show how structuralist narrative scholars in the 1960 and '70s attempted to theorize language – and subsequently literature – as games. Subsequently, I will discuss how, in the 1990s and early 2000s, ludologist in the famous narratology vs ludology debate rejected the conflation of game, play and narrative terminology to advocate for a distinct character of the former. However, I will point out that, particularly with regards to interactivity, the question remains whether ongoing serial narratives do indeed possess systemic similarities to interactive games that singular texts lack.

Discussing the application of game-based models in psychology, this chapter will examine psychoanalytical approaches to textual criticism, such as Jacques Lacan's model of the human subconscious in his famous text on Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter". It will furthermore illustrate the use of Transaction Analysis as a model of the interactions between fictional characters.

Discussing the prominence of game terminology in inquiries from political and social studies, I will, furthermore, review approaches to "political aesthetics" and show how scholarship has come to regard "game" and "play" as foundational principles denoting politics' increasing reliance on structures of spectacle and distraction.

This chapter will (2) examine current media industry research pertaining to processes of production, circulation, and reception within popular culture and contemporary TV. I will illustrate how media scholarship has differentiated between the evolving technological affordances of television circulation as channels, portals, and platforms and how it has theorised the impact of this evolution on economic and textual structures alike. It will become clear that the streaming portal Netflix, in particular, has become a focal point for media and industry scholarship describing the ambivalent recent 'disruption' of linear TV.

Being interested in agential relations within popular TV industries, I will examine long-running discussions surrounding power distribution within popular culture. They reach from the Frankfurt School's concept of patriarchal industrial dominance over 'mass culture' to visions of participation and democratization in the light of the emerging web 2.0 to more tempered current approaches that see a conservation of established asymmetrical power structures in a largely professionalized digital entertainment industry. Following this essentially political perspective, I will likewise examine the scholarship surrounding the politics of TV authorship as a depersonalized and discursive phenomenon of devolved influence.

This chapter will (3) examine the comparatively recent research efforts concerning popular seriality as a distinct characteristic of multi-part narratives and cultural commodities that causes the emergence of specific narrative standards, schemes, and cultural and industrial practices. A growing body of research in cultural and media stud-

ies, as well as several studies of national literatures (e.g., German and North American) and notably the homonymous research unit of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG),<sup>2</sup> have described popular seriality as a unique narrative phenomenon, which produces distinct effects both with regards to storytelling and the networks that determine it.

As I will show, there exists a remarkable asymmetry between the advanced state of research on popular seriality and its rare considerations in textual analyses of TV series in general<sup>3</sup> and of polit-series in particular. This thesis follows the assumption that the specific mechanisms and conventions of popular seriality significantly alter the perspectives of textual analyses. It will pursue the conjecture that, from an analytical perspective, popular seriality constitutes a conceptual bridge between aesthetic and industrial affordances.

I will (4) review the rich body of textual criticism and impact research on contemporary polit-series (and pertinent examinations of polit-cinema that predate it). I will point out that, until recently, there has been a notable scholarly bias towards so-called Western productions, with a significant imbalance in favour of anglophone US and UK productions and a lack of comparative analyses.

Furthermore, I will illustrate how textual criticism has struggled with the disputed notion of 'realism' in polit-series and discuss TV scholarship's anxious observation of polit-fiction's ability to alternatively instruct, influence or reveal truths about its audiences.

This section will go on to examine pertinent examples of textual criticism of contemporary polit-fiction. It will show that the narratives' use of simplifications, personifications and moralisation often disturb more literal scholarly notions of realism as historical accuracy and even lead to generalising claims of cultural incompatibility between specific national polities and fictionalisation.

Examining the body of textual criticism concerned with the normative evaluation of fictional politics, I will discuss early notions that regarded polit-series from the UK and the less prolific western European continent as largely pessimistic (with the British monarchy being the only positive part in an otherwise largely dystopian moral wasteland) while perceiving US polit-fiction as more optimistic. In this context, I will review literary

2 DFG group no. 1091, "Popular Seriality: Aesthetics and Practice", DFG, last accessed July 7, 2022, <http://www.popularseriality.de/>.

3 For more recent examples to the contrary see: Dominik Maeder, *Die Regierung der Serie: Poetologie visueller Gouvernementalität der Gegenwart* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2020). Also Claudia Stockinger, Christian Hißnauer, and Stefan Scherer, *Föderalismus in Serie: Die Einheit der ARD-Reihe Tatort im historischen Verlauf* (Leiden, Niederlande: Brill/ Fink, 2019); Christian Hißnauer, Stefan Scherer, and Claudia Stockinger, eds. *Zwischen Serie und Werk: Fernseh- und Gesellschaftsgeschichte im Tatort* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2014); Stefan Scherer, Claudia Stockinger, and Christian Hißnauer, "Formen und Verfahren der Serialität in der ARD-Reihe Tatort: Ein Untersuchungsdesign zur Integration von Empirie und Hermeneutik", in *Populäre Serialität. Narration – Evolution – Distinktion: Zum seriellen Erzählen seit dem 19. Jahrhundert*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012), 143–167; Ruth Mayer, *Serial Fu Manchu: The Chinese Supervillain and the Spread of Yellow Peril Ideology* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014).

and cultural scholarship's examinations of the idealised hero-president that remains a dominant trope in less prestigious US productions to this day.

However, I will demonstrate how textual criticism of more contemporary polit-fiction has suggested a shift in high-profile series' normative evaluation of politics in the late 2000s and early 2010s. It will become clear that there has been a cynical turn in US polit-series with high cultural capital that has moved US productions towards a more pessimistic portrayal of politics and presidents. The frequency of such (implicit) diagnoses indicates a temporary globalization of narrative conventions concerning high-profile polit-series. They show a notable tendency towards cynicism, fatalism, and absurdity as a presumed reaction to the seemingly inevitable ailments of capitalist reality.

Discussing the more recent uptake in research on gender representations in both TV criticism and political and cultural studies, I will go on to show how research has come to regard both traditionally male and female roles within the binary gender spectrum as an uneasy fit with the requirements of politics.

The chapter will conclude by indicating a variety of gaps in extant research. It will point out ways to consolidate the various aspects of popular serial television's complex systems into an analytical approach and discuss its importance for further understanding the ever-accelerating developments of the increasingly complex nonlinear TV era.

## 2.1 Describing Narrative and Structural Complexity

The relationships between the various industrial, economic, and political actors that shape a TV series and other central commodities within popular culture have, at least since the breakthrough of digital production and circulation technology, been the focus of increased scholarly attention across Media, TV, narrative, literary, cultural and information studies. A promising approach to contend with these numerous material and interactional interdependencies (proposed, e.g., by Mittell<sup>4</sup>) seems to be to regard TV and its series as inherently *complex* systemic phenomena, often implicitly following contentions from ANT or systems theory.<sup>5</sup>

Evoking systems theory's concept of "emergence", Marie-Laure Ryan, examining complex narratives, postulates that complex systems produce "patterns and behaviours that could not be predicted by simply looking at the rules" that govern that system.<sup>6</sup> In other words, the behaviour of an emergent (narrative) system exceeds the sum of

4 Jason Mittell, *Complex TV. The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

5 As noted, e.g., by Thomas Klein, "Diskurs und Spiel: Überlegungen zu einer medienwissenschaftlichen Theorie serieller Komplexität", in *Populäre Serialität: Evolution – Narration – Distinktion: Zum seriellen Erzählen seit dem 19. Jhd.*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012), 225. For perspectives on general narrative complexity see Marina Grishakova and Maria Poulaki, eds., *Narrative Complexity: Cognition, Embodiment, Evolution* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2019).

6 Marie-Laure Ryan, "Narrative as/and Complex System/s", in *Narrative Complexity. Cognition, Embodiment, Evolution*, ed. Marina Grishakova and Maria Poulaki (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 30.

possible behaviours of its parts. Narrative complexity, according to Marina Grishakova and Maria Poulaki, refers (1) to the “relations between narrative [...] representation and mind”,<sup>7</sup> that is, the creation of meaning through narrative. This assumption harkens back to reader-response criticism’s idea of active involvement of the interpretative recipient in the actualisation of text.<sup>8</sup> In what was later to become cognitive poetics, David Bordwell made a similar argument for film,<sup>9</sup> which Mittell has applied in his examination of how complex linear TV makes meaning.<sup>10</sup>

However, according to Grishakova and Poulaki, narrative complexity (2) refers to the “complexity of narrative representation contingent on media and technological affordances”.<sup>11</sup> Analysing complexity in linear TV, Mittell likewise argues for a systemic origin of narrative complexity, stating,

in the digital era, a television program is suffused within and constituted by an inter-textual web that pushes textual boundaries outward, blurring the experiential borders between watching a program and engaging with its paratexts.<sup>12</sup>

While the latter perspective still assumes narrative complexity to be rooted in various ways of reception, following Ryan, Grishakova, and Poulaki, narrative complexity appears much more as a product of emergent, multi-agential networks that operate according to a set of common rules but without a central directional impetus.

Accordingly, Stuart Hall, likewise taking a systemic perspective, describes mass communication such as TV not as a closed system but as an open network that draws its meaning “from other sources and other discursive formations within the wider socio-cultural and political structure of which they are a differentiated part”.<sup>13</sup> According to him, mass communicational messages are created and framed through their production

7 Marina Grishakova and Maria Poulaki, “Introduction: Narrative Complexity”, in Grishakova/Poulaki, *Narrative Complexity*, 13.

8 See, e.g., Hans Robert Jauss, “Literaturgeschichte als Provokation der Literaturwissenschaft”, in *Rezeptionsästhetik: Theorie und Praxis*, ed. Rainer Warning (Munich: Fink, 1988), 126–162; Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore/London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); Wolfgang Iser, “Die Appellstruktur der Texte: Unbestimmtheit als Wirkungsbedingung literarischer Prosa”, in *Rezeptionsästhetik: Theorie und Praxis*, ed. by Rainer Warning (Munich: Fink, 1988), 228–252; Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction From Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore, Mariland/London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974). Also: Jane P. Tompkins, ed, *Reader-Response Criticism. From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore/London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980); Umberto Eco, *Lector in Fabula: Die Mitarbeit der Interpretation in erzählenden Texten*, transl. Heinz-Georg Held (Munich: dtv, 1998)

9 David Bordwell, *Making Meaning. Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge,: Harvard Press, 1991), 3.

10 Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York City: NYU Press, 2015), 164ff.

11 Marina Grishakova and Maria Poulaki, “Introduction: Narrative Complexity”, in Grishakova/Poulaki, *Narrative Complexity*, 13.

12 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 7.

13 Stuart Hall, “Encoding/decoding”, in *Culture, Media, Language*, e-Library ed., ed. Stuart Hall et al. (London: Routledge, 2005), 119.

structure which is itself “framed throughout by meanings and ideas”.<sup>14</sup> This contention is reminiscent of what Marsha Kinder, with a more agential focus, has called TV’s “supersystem” that is “a network of intertextuality constructed around a figure or figures from pop culture”.<sup>15</sup> These alternatively systemic or agential perspectives on narrative complexity have significant consequences for television series’ aesthetic and narrative composition.

### 2.1.1 Complexity and TV Aesthetics

Research within film, TV and literary studies has long attempted to define a particularly ‘televisual’ aesthetics, that is, “a complex of formal tendencies that shape television works and their reception”.<sup>16</sup> Unsurprisingly, however, TV aesthetics has proven as dynamic as the medium itself. It is questionable if, faced with increasing media permeability (e.g., the growing tendency for films to serialize, select TV series to sport blockbuster budgets and star casts, and a rising similarity in the digital means of circulation and reception), the distinction between specific ‘televisual’ or ‘cinematic’ aesthetic modes is feasible at all.

Caren J. Deming and Deborah V. Tudor have remarked that linear, advertising-based TV classically refers back to the established practices of Hollywood aesthetics to structure the medium’s segmented flow.<sup>17</sup> Jeremy Butler describes the conventions of classic linear TV aesthetics as “continuity editing” or “invisible editing”.<sup>18</sup> It aims to “create a continuity of space and time”<sup>19</sup> and arranges the individual audio-visual fragments of a scene into a continuous order that “supports the progression of the story”.<sup>20</sup> The result is the impression of a “continuous flow”<sup>21</sup> that hides the image’s fragmented nature and the audio-visual narrative’s technical composition. Standard formal conventions might, e.g., be the shot/reverse-shot technique to present a seemingly natural flow of images that follows the progression of the characters’ conversation.

As Butler points out, the “continuity system” and its associated conventions have been a pervasive influence on TV aesthetics.<sup>22</sup> Classic linear television has long been associated with (albeit problematic) notions of ‘realism’ due to its, as Hickethier notes,

14 Hall, “Encoding/decoding”, 118.

15 Marsha Kinder, *Playing With power in movies, Television, and Video Games: From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (Berkeley/L.A./London: University of California Press, 1991), 122.

16 Caren J. Deming and Deborah V. Tudor, “Locating the Televisual in Golden Age Television”, in *A Companion to Television*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Janet Wasko and Eileen R. Meehan (Hoboken: Wiley & Sons, 2020), 64. For an attempt see also e.g., Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in Film and Television* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003).

17 Caren J. Deming and Deborah V. Tudor, “Locating the Televisual in Golden Age Television”, in *A Companion to Television*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Janet Wasko and Eileen R. Meehan (Hoboken: Wiley & Sons, 2020), 66.

18 Jeremy C. Butler, *Television. Visual Storytelling and Screen Culture*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Routledge: New York, 2018), 348.

19 Butler, *Television*, 348.

20 Butler, *Television*, 348.

21 Butler, *Television*, 374.

22 Butler, *Television*, 374.

“strongly conventionalised cinematic forms of representations”.<sup>23</sup> This formal composition works to hide the artificial nature of TV storytelling, thus causing a “transparency of the medium”, seemingly drawing in audiences and creating an “appearance of reality”.<sup>24</sup>

However, more structurally complex systems and their resulting ‘complex’ narrative and formal aesthetics, particularly in nonlinear subscription-based services, show what Jane Shattuck, with recourse to Richard Dyer, calls a more “novelistic approach” that breaks with both formal and narrative “common TV and media traditions”<sup>25</sup> of continuity.<sup>26</sup> With obvious recourse to Butler and Hickethier, Joan Bleicher has described TV narrative as shaped by either “invisible dramaturgy” or “constructed dramaturgy”.<sup>27</sup> In the latter, a series’ artificial nature is emphasised – instead of hidden – through visible (often novel) formal and dramatic means.

With the realisation of the multi-agential interplay that constitutes popular TV series, the term *complexity* has gained an aesthetic dimension. As Mittell, following his reception-centred approach, argues, narratively complex TV is no longer a “producer’s medium”<sup>28</sup> but instead a self-aware “operational aesthetic”<sup>29</sup> that demands “intensified viewer engagements”, “formal awareness”,<sup>30</sup> and a “procedural literacy”<sup>31</sup> in audiences. This assumption evokes notions of the Brechtian idea of a self-aware and aesthetically distant “epic theatre” that fulfils its cathartic function through its second-order observability.<sup>32</sup>

The emergent second-order aesthetic of complex TV has decisively changed how television presents conflict and characters. It has, for example, become arguably more ac-

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- 23 Knut Hickethier, “Serie”, in *Handbuch Populäre Kultur: Begriffe, Theorien und Diskussionen*, ed. Hans-Otto Hügel (Stuttgart/Weimar: J.B. Metzler/Springer, 2003), 402. My translation: “stark konventionalisierter filmischer Darstellungsformen”.
  - 24 Hickethier, “Serie”, 402. My translation: “Transparenz des Mediums” and “Realitätsschein”.
  - 25 Jane Shattuck, “Netflix, Inc. and Online Television”, in *A Companion to Television*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Janet Wasko and Eileen R. Meehan (Hoboken: Wiley & Sons, 2020), 157.
  - 26 Noted similarly, e.g., by Thomas Klein, “Diskurs und Spiel: Überlegungen zu einer medienwissenschaftlichen Theorie serieller Komplexität”, in *Populäre Serialität: Evolution – Narration – Distinktion: Zum seriellen Erzählen seit dem 19. Jhd*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012), 225.
  - 27 Joan Bleicher, “‘Wer Vieles bringt, wird manchem etwas bringen’. Das Wechselspiel der Emotionen. Spezifika der Fernseh-dramaturgie”, in *Der Dramaturgische Blick. Potenziale und Modelle von Dramaturgie im Medienwandel*, ed. Christa Hasche, Eleonore Kalisch, and Thomas Weber (Berlin: Avinus Verlag, 2014), S.172. My translation: “Unsichtbare” and “Konstruierte Dramaturgie”.
  - 28 Jason Mittell, *Complex TV. The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 32.
  - 29 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 43. See also Felix Brinker, “On the Formal Politics of Narratively Complex Television Series: Operational Self-Reflexivity and Audience Management in *Fringe* and *Homeland*”, in *Poetics of Politics: Textuality and Social Relevance in Contemporary American Literature and Culture*, ed. Sebastian M. Hermann, Carolin Alice Hoffmann et al. (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2015), 45 and 48f. Both draw on a concept by Neil Harris in *Humbug: The Art of P. T. Barnum*, paperback edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981, 59ff. See especially p.79.
  - 30 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 53.
  - 31 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 53f.
  - 32 Karl Juhnke, “Episches Theater”, *Lexikon der Filmbegriffe*, March 6, 2022, <https://filmlexikon.uni-kiel.de/doku.php/e:epischestheater-7652>.



ceptable for TV series to focus on villains and anti-heroes. Audiences of complex TV (often prestige audiences in possession of cultural capital) no longer expect the medium to portray relatable characters but instead, as Mittell argues, enter into an “operational allegiance”<sup>33</sup> with characters. In this mode, the audience’s interest is not secured solely by the character him\*herself but by his\*her formal construction and narrative presentation.

These observations on TV series’ intertwined systemic, agential, and aesthetic complexity have rarely been applied in concrete textual analyses.<sup>34</sup> However, as a TV series’ aesthetic and narrative properties directly result from the complexity of its overall systemic structure, this thesis proposes to integrate operationalisations of systemic and narrative complexity into a tool for textual analysis. It will draw on methodologies from various approaches designed to describe structural complexity, which I will outline in the coming sections.

## 2.1.2 Describing Complex Networks

Critical theory, ANT, and systems theory are primary approaches to describing and analysing complex, multi-agential media phenomena. As Doug Kellner remarks, critics of the Frankfurt School were among the first to address “media culture as a complex multidimensional phenomenon”.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, they were among the first to approach the joint analysis of popular artefacts and the systemic affordances that shape them in a way “that articulates the dimensions of production and political economy, text analysis, and audience/reception research”.<sup>36</sup> However, their judgements (e.g., about popular artefacts’ low quality<sup>37</sup> and commodified formulaic similarity<sup>38</sup>) have famously been tainted by ultimately subjective, elitist notions of ‘quality’ and ‘high and ‘low (that is, mass-) culture’.

This study seeks to depart from what Umberto Eco calls the “aristocratic” notions<sup>39</sup> of cultural hierarchies and instead examine TV series within their own systems of reference. The spectrum of ‘complexity’ will prove to be a much more useful term for describing TV series than normative categories such as ‘good’ or ‘bad’. This is particularly the case

33 Jason Mittell, *Complex TV. The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 163.

34 Although Mittell does so throughout *Complex TV*.

35 Doug Kellner, “Critical Perspectives on Television from the Frankfurt School to the Politics of Representation”, in *A Companion to Television*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Janet Wasko and Eileen R. Meehan (Hoboken: Wiley & Sons, 2020), 22.

36 Kellner, “Critical Perspectives”, 19.

37 See, e.g., Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer Verlag, 1969), 129.

38 Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, 128. See also J.M. Bernstein’s introduction to Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry. Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J.M. Bernstein (London/New York: Routledge, 1991), 10. And Adorno’s essay on “The Schema of mass culture”, in Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry. Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. by J.M. Bernstein (London/New York: Routledge, 1991), 61–97. For TV see also Theodor W. Adorno, “Fernsehen als Ideologie”, in *Eingriffe: Neun kritische Modelle*, 81–98. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1963).

39 Umberto Eco, *Apokalyptiker und Integrierte: Zur kritischen Kritik der Massenkultur*, transl. Max Looser (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer Taschenbuch, 1992), 15.



because narrative complexity originates as much in systemic as in aesthetic structures. As this thesis will illustrate, their entanglement is a pervasive characteristic of popular TV series.

In classical ANT, an actor-network is the “successful alignment of an array of heterogeneous elements”<sup>40</sup> that more or less voluntarily function together according to the designs of a “primary actor”.<sup>41</sup> Several ANT thinkers, including Latour himself,<sup>42</sup> have reflected on replacing the term ‘actor network’ with Félix Guattari and Giles Deleuze’s term “rhizome” as a metaphor for the non-hierarchic and decentralised multitude of connections between entities in a network organised along multi-agential “principles of connection and heterogeneity”.<sup>43</sup>

In the same vein, ANT has been equated with “material semiotics”, which denotes a concept “like ANT, but with a wider range of tools”.<sup>44</sup> No matter the name, the central idea of any network-centric theory is to “focus on relations – how these are produced and reproduced, ordered and disordered.”<sup>45</sup> As Mike Michael notes, “Such relations are not simply social but heterogeneous – they necessarily entail the role of nonhumans as well as humans.”<sup>46</sup>

Acknowledging, e.g., the varying complexity of popular film and TV storytelling, literary and media scholarship has become increasingly concerned with ways to model and examine highly complex structures of popular culture such as TV series.<sup>47</sup> Drawing on ANT, Kaspar Maase has proposed to regard popular culture as a “network of interactions of human and non-human actors”.<sup>48</sup>

Realizing the usefulness of ANT to approach the systemic and narrative complexity of popular artefacts, Björn Sonnenberg-Schrank has applied ANT to the analysis of teen film, proposing to regard movies as

as complex, hybrid actor-networks by analyzing them and their actants and agencies thoroughly and slowly, and on the other hand, also to treat films as actants in a larger network.<sup>49</sup>

40 Mike Michael, *Actor-Network Theory: Trials, Trails and Translations* (London: Sage, 2017), 154.

41 Michael, *Actor-Network Theory*, 154.

42 As pointed out in Michael, *Actor-Network Theory*, 63.

43 Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 11<sup>th</sup> ed., transl. Brian Massumi (London/Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 7.

44 Mike Michael, *Actor-Network Theory: Trials, Trails and Translations* (London: Sage, 2017), 51.

45 Michael, *Actor-Network Theory*, 5.

46 Michael, *Actor-Network Theory*, 5.

47 Implicit, e.g., in Lorenz Engell, “Folgen und Ursachen: Über Serialität und Kausalität”, in *Populäre Serialität: Evolution – Narration – Distinktion: Zum seriellen Erzählen seit dem 19. Jhd*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012), 241f. See also Thomas Klein, “Diskurs und Spiel: Überlegungen zu einer medienwissenschaftlichen Theorie serieller Komplexität”, in *Populäre Serialität: Evolution – Narration – Distinktion: Zum seriellen Erzählen seit dem 19. Jhd*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012), 225–240.

48 Kaspar Maase, *Populärkulturforschung. Eine Einführung* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2019), 63. Original emphasis. My translation: “Als Netz der Interaktionen menschlicher und nichtmenschlicher Akteure”.

49 Björn Sonnenberg-Schrank, *Actor-Network Theory at the Movies. Reassembling the Contemporary American Teen Film with Latour* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 20.

Referencing ANT, he argues that

every entity, unity, system, society must be understood as a potentially indefinitely complex network which is made, re-made, and performed by the dynamic relations that arise from the actions and interactions of human and non-human actors.<sup>50</sup>

However, so far, few attempts have been made to apply network-based approaches to the concrete analysis of fictional serial TV texts as part of a liminal network of textual and historical agents. This thesis will change that. Particularly within the scholarly traditions of structuralism, there are highly instructive approaches to modelling textual phenomena.

### 2.1.3 Structural Semantics and Archetypal Criticism

Proposing an agential network approach to building a tool for narrative analysis is, in some ways, closing a circle leading back to structuralism. ANT itself has arguably been inspired to no small degree by structural semantics, more precisely by Algirdas Julien Greimas' actantial model<sup>51</sup> that aims to describe a universal grammar of narrative action in fictional storytelling. It follows earlier attempts to create inventories of fundamental narrative structures, e.g., by Vladimir Propp, who distinguishes seven basic "dramatis personae" in his morphology of simple narrative structures in Russian folklore,<sup>52</sup> and Étienne Souriau's concept of six recurring narrative types or "dramatic functions".<sup>53</sup> Greimas' structuralist approach distinguishes between actors as individual characters within a story and six recurring actants, "which are classifications of actors"<sup>54</sup> determined by their position within the "narrative syntax".<sup>55</sup> They are *Sender*, *Subject*, *Object*, *Receiver*, *Helper*, *Opponent*.<sup>56</sup> Accordingly, Latour, for ANT, states that "any thing that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor – or, if it has no figuration yet, an actant".<sup>57</sup>

50 Sonnenberg-Schrank, *Actor-Network Theory at the Movies*, 16.

51 See Algirdas Julien Greimas, "Actants, Actors, and Figures", in *On Meaning: Selected Writings in Semiotic Theory*, transl. Paul J. Perron and Frank H. Collins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 106–120. And Algirdas Julien Greimas, *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method*, transl. Daniele McDowell, Ronald Schleifer, and Alan Velie (Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 197ff. And Gerald Prince, *A Dictionary of Narratology*, revised ed. (Lincoln/London, University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 2.

52 Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 20<sup>th</sup> ed., transl. Laurence Scott, ed. Louis A. Wagner (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 79f.

53 Étienne Souriau, *Les Deux Cent Mille Situations Dramatiques* (Paris: Flammarion, 1950), 83–112.

54 Algirdas Julien Greimas, *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method*, transl. Daniele McDowell, Ronald Schleifer, and Alan Velie (Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 202.

55 Algirdas Julien Greimas, "Actants, Actors, and Figures", in *On Meaning: Selected Writings in Semiotic Theory*, transl. Paul J. Perron and Frank H. Collins. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987, 106.

56 Greimas, *Structural Semantics*, 207f.

57 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 71.

Archetypal criticism, likewise, has long attempted to determine universal narrative deep structures and master plots.<sup>58</sup> In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, George Polti, building on work by Carlo Gozzi and commentaries by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, identified 36 dramatic situations that form the basis for all fictional narratives.<sup>59</sup> In 1949, Joseph Campbell famously described the “Monomyth” as “the one, shape-shifting yet marvelously constant story” that underlies all others.<sup>60</sup> For him, the foundational narrative archetype is a hero’s journey in which the rite of passage presents itself as a process of separation, initiation, and return.<sup>61</sup> Christopher Vogler, influenced by Campbell, has identified similar basic monomythical patterns in popular US cinema.<sup>62</sup> In another similar attempt, Christopher Booker identifies seven master plots underlying the structure of fictional narratives.<sup>63</sup>

Greimas’ actantial model influences this thesis’ own model in its focus on interdependent action as they share the aim to describe narrative patterns. However, the contingent patterns this thesis seeks to identify do not make archetypal criticism’s claim of universality, nor do they share its desire to unearth universal narrative deep structures and their socio-psychological connotations. Instead, this thesis’ model trades universality for functionality in its purpose as a tool for narrative analysis. As the coming section will show, one field which – following influences of semiotics and structuralism – has a particularly well-established relationship with practical approaches to modelling various forms of systemic complexity is the universe of *games*.

### 2.1.4 Complexity, Structuralism, and Games

When it comes to modelling complex systems and phenomena, arguably few terminologies have had quite as much impact as those surrounding the universe(s) of play and games.<sup>64</sup> The seductive quality of games as a conceptual model for – in the broadest sense – structuralism-inspired analytical approaches is partly due to them being widely

58 See Meyer Howard Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (Boston, MA: Heinle&Heinle, 1999), 12–14.

59 George Polti, *The Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations*, transl. Lucile Ray (Franklin, Ohio: James Knapp Reeve, 1924).

60 Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with A Thousand Faces*, commemorative ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 3.

61 Campbell, *The Hero with A Thousand Faces*, 28.

62 Christopher Vogler, *The Writer’s Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 1998).

63 Christopher Booker, *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

64 Noted, e.g., by Serjoscha Wiemer, “Niemandes Spiel? Zur Aufteilung des Spielbegriffs oder: Die Schwierigkeit, die spielende Maschine zu denken”, in *Denkweisen des Spiels: Medienphilosophische Annäherungen*, ed. Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky and Reinhold Görling (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2017), 155. Also Thomas Klein, who proposes its application to approach narrative complexity in “Diskurs und Spiel: Überlegungen zu einer medienwissenschaftlichen Theorie serieller Komplexität”, *Populäre Serialität: Evolution – Narration – Distinktion: Zum seriellen Erzählen seit dem 19. Jhd.* Edited by Frank Kelleter, 225–240. Bielefeld: transcript, 2012, 235f.

understood to denote rule-based,<sup>65</sup> regular, and repeatable<sup>66</sup> phenomena that are distinct but not independent from material reality.<sup>67</sup> In his ground-breaking study on the “Homo Ludens”, Johan Huizinga states that the game “creates order, yes, it is order”.<sup>68</sup> Michel Holquist, likewise, notes that within a game, “what was rough is made smooth, what was chaotic is made orderly”.<sup>69</sup> Consequently, this thesis draws from various game-based approaches across disciplines in its attempt to structure the complex universe of popular polit-series into a rule-based analytical model.

It is essential to distinguish, as Serjoscha Wiemer notes, the “culturalist”,<sup>70</sup> “anthropocentric” conception of games from a “formalist” understanding of games.<sup>71</sup> The former expresses itself, e.g., in the perspectives of Friedrich Schiller, Immanuel Kant, Roger Caillois or Huizinga, who regard games as distinct from work or serious purpose,<sup>72</sup> purposeful or purposeless, and constitutive for human character<sup>73</sup> or culture.<sup>74</sup> The latter, focussing on formal characteristics, has turned games into a powerful metaphor for

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- 65 Eugen Fink, *Oase des Glücks: Gedanken zu einer Ontologie des Spiels* (Freiburg: Karl Aber, 1957), 30f.
- 66 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hermeneutik I: Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Gesammelte Werke 1), 6th ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1990), 116.
- 67 See Roger Caillois, *Die Spiele und die Menschen: Maske und Rausch*, transl. Peter Geble (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2017), 89. And Gregory Bateson, “Eine Theorie des Spiels und der Phantasie”, in *Ökologie des Geistes: Anthropologische, psychologische, biologische und epistemologische Perspektiven*, transl. Hans Günter Holl (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1985), 251. And F.J.J. Buytendijk, *Wesen und Sinn des Spiels: Das Spielen des Menschen und der Tiere als Erscheinungsform der Lebenstribe* (Berlin: Kurt Wolff Verlag, 1933), 159. And Angelika Corbineau-Hoffmann, “Spiel”, in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. Joachim Ritter and Karlfried Gründer (Basel: Schwabe & Co AG, 1995), S.1388. Also Eugen Fink, *Spiel als Weltsymbol* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag, 1960), 64ff.
- 68 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: Vom Ursprung der Kultur im Spiel*, 23rd ed., transl. H. Nachod (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2013), 19. My Translation: “Es schafft Ordnung, ja es ist Ordnung”. See also Roger Caillois, *Die Spiele und die Menschen: Maske und Rausch*, transl. Peter Geble (Berlin: Matthes&Seitz, 2017), 12.
- 69 Michael Holquist, “How to Play Utopia: Some brief notes on the distinctiveness of utopian fiction”, *Yale French Studies*, no. 41, *Game, Play, Literature* (1968): <https://doi.org/10.2307/2929668>, 110.
- 70 Serjoscha Wiemer, “Niemandes Spiel? Zur Aufteilung des Spielbegriffs oder: Die Schwierigkeit, die spielende Maschine zu denken”, in *Denkweisen des Spiels: Medienphilosophische Annäherungen*, ed. Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky and Reinhold Göring (Turia+Kant, Wien 2017), 156. My translation: “kulturalistisch”.
- 71 Serjoscha Wiemer, “Niemandes Spiel? Zur Aufteilung des Spielbegriffs oder: Die Schwierigkeit, die spielende Maschine zu denken”, in *Denkweisen des Spiels: Medienphilosophische Annäherungen*, ed. Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky and Reinhold Göring (Turia+Kant, Wien 2017), 157. My Translation: “den anthropozentrischen Zug”, “formalistisch”.
- 72 See Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: Vom Ursprung der Kultur im Spiel*, 23rd edition, transl. H. Nachod. (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2013), 17. See also Viktor Turner, *Vom Ritual zum Theater: Der Ernst des menschlichen Spiels*, transl. Sylvia Schomburg-Scherff (Frankfurt a.M./ New York: Campus, 1989), 59. The special status of games is questioned, e.g., by Jean Piaget, “Nachahmung, Spiel und Traum: Die Entwicklung der Symbolfunktion beim Kinde”, in *ibid.*, *Gesammelte Werke 5. Studienausgabe*, transl. Leo Montada (Stuttgart: Klett, 1975), 189.
- 73 See Friedrich Schiller, “15. Brief”, in *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen*, ed. Klaus L. Berg-hahn (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2000), 62f.
- 74 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* 7.

various approaches concerned with modelling complex systems. Vilém Flusser, e.g., attempting to create a universal formalist model based on games, defines them as systems “consisting of elements which combine in a regular manner”.<sup>75</sup> Léon Hanssen, regarding cultural game studies, likewise states, “A game consists of a matrix of combinations and is constituted by a certain number of rules”.<sup>76</sup>

Few disciplines illustrate the interactional model-building qualities of game terminology better than mathematical game theory as the “general theory of rational decision-making under conditions of strategic interdependency of actors”.<sup>77</sup> In a study on game theory and public policy, Roger McCain accordingly states, “When we conceive interactive decisions as games, we have a powerful aid to understanding them”.<sup>78</sup> Influential since World War II, mathematics’ uniquely formalist approach arguably helped inspire a variety of other disciplines, especially in the structuralist 1960es and 1970ies, as I will discuss in the following sections.

However, while games have often served as a structural model for various phenomena (including language, literature, politics, economics, and the human psyche; see below), they have not been applied consistently as a tool for textual analysis of popular serial TV fiction. Nonetheless, in the study of fictional texts, the field of games occupies a particularly contested place, as the next section will demonstrate.

### 2.1.4.1 Games, Play, and Narrative and ‘Ludology vs Narratology’

Notions of games and play have played a significant role in literary and narrative studies, beginning in the structuralist 1960s and 1970s, which claimed a game-like structural nature for language and texts. Following this contention, Albrecht Koschorke e.g., posits that stories are “in a certain sense *narrative games*”<sup>79</sup> in that they are rule-based, reductive,<sup>80</sup> and selective activities.<sup>81</sup> Bruce Morissette argues, with recourse to structuralist approaches by Louis Hjelmslev, who describes language as being structured like a game,<sup>82</sup> that fiction as a product of language must by “analogous extension be said to be put together like a game” as well, “with each specific story or novel constituting merely

75 Vilém Flusser, “Spiele”, in *Ist das Leben ein Spiel?: Aspekte einer Philosophie des Spiels und eines Denkens ohne Fundamente*, ed. Florian Rötzer (Köln: Walther König, 2013), 4. My translation: “‘Spiel’ sei jedes aus Elementen bestehende System, worin sich die Elemente regelmäßig verbinden”.

76 Léon Hanssen, “Games of Late Modernity: Discussing Huizinga’s Legacy”, in *Contemporary Homo Ludens*, ed. Halina Mielicka-Pawłowska (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), p.30.

77 Rainer Hegselmann, “Spieltheorie”, in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* (Basel: Schwabe & Co AG, 1995), S.1392. My translation: “Allgemeine Theorie des rationalen Entscheidens unter Bedingungen strategischer Interdependenz der Akteure”.

78 Roger A. McCain, *Game Theory and Public Policy*, 2nd ed. (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing Inc., 2015), p.3.

79 Albrecht Koschorke, *Wahrheit und Erfindung: Grundzüge einer allgemeinen Erzähltheorie*, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2012), 12. Original emphasis. My translation: “in gewissem Sinne *Erzählspiele*”.

80 Koschorke, *Wahrheit und Erfindung*, 27f.

81 Koschorke, *Wahrheit und Erfindung*, 29.

82 Bruce Morissette, “Games and Game Structures in Robbe-Grillet,” *Yale French Studies*, no. 41, *Game, Play, Literature* (1968): 160. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2929672>.

one of the possible *parties* or individual playings of the game of fictional composition".<sup>83</sup> Following a similar line of thought, Michel Beaujour has argued that "poetry is a game, or like a game".<sup>84</sup>

Akin to the interactive notions associated with the term 'play' (as opposed to the structural 'game'), reader-response criticism has emphasised the participatory role of the 'reader' in creating texts. William Stephenson, in his "Seven Rhetorics of Play", accordingly claims a "play theory of news reading", arguing that "newspaper reading, subjectively regarded, has all the earmarks of play".<sup>85</sup> He derives this contention from regarding the communicative situation as an interactive instead of a passive one, "in which the individual plays with communication"<sup>86</sup> in a state of "apperception", that is, a "readiness to perceive this or that in relation to prior systems or interests".<sup>87</sup> For TV, Brian Sutton-Smith has likewise claimed that the interactive engagement of audiences with the medium of TV itself bears many hallmarks of play.<sup>88</sup>

The legitimacy of this extensive use of play and game terminology in literary and media theory – both with regards to structural 'games' and participatory notions of 'play' – has been highly contested, not least in the famous 'ludology vs narratology' debate of the 1990s and early 2000s, in which ludologists denied the legitimacy/ feasibility of claiming structural similarity between games, play, and linear narratives. At its height, Gonzalo Frasca denied any meaningful (inter)active role of the narrative recipient in fictional texts. Citing recipients' limited influence on the progression of a linear story, he states

No matter how badly literary theorists remind us of the active role of the reader, that train will hit Anna Karenina, and Oedipus will kill his father and sleep with his mother.<sup>89</sup>

Ludology has long felt the need to establish unique properties of games as distinct from those of narrative.<sup>90</sup> Accordingly, they claim that the unique ludic character of games is that of dynamic "simulation", which Frasca defines as the process of modelling a "(source) system through a different system which maintains (for somebody) some of the behaviors of the original system".<sup>91</sup> Its juxtaposition is the distinct character of narrative as static "representation".<sup>92</sup> With the increasing prevalence of digital games in the 1990es and 2000s, expectations surrounding technological abilities to increase interactivity and

83 Morrissette, "Games and Game Structures", 160.

84 Beaujour, Michel. "The Game of Poetics." *Yale French Studies*, no. 41, *Game, Play, Literature* (1968): 58. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2929665>.

85 William Stephenson, *The Play Theory of Mass Communication* (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1967), 150.

86 Stephenson, *The Play Theory of Mass Communication*, 151.

87 Stephenson, *The Play Theory of Mass Communication*, 149.

88 Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 3.

89 Gonzalo Frasca, "Simulation versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology", in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 227.

90 Frasca, "Simulation versus Narrative", 221.

91 Frasca, "Simulation versus Narrative", 223.

92 See, e.g., Espen Aarseth, "A narrative theory of games", In *Proceedings of the International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games (FDG '12)*, Association for Computing Machinery, 2012,

scholarly investment rose. Anticipating seismic changes in interactive, ludic narrative forms, Janet Murray, in her famous study “Hamlet on the Holodeck”, e.g. argues for a new poetics of the “cyberdrama”.<sup>93</sup>

Considering the notion of interactive play, Marie-Laure Ryan has theorised several levels of user interactivity in digital narrative texts. They range from relatively limited “peripheral interactivity”,<sup>94</sup> in which user interaction is limited to the interface, to “ontological participation”<sup>95</sup> and “real-time story generation”,<sup>96</sup> in which users actively participate in the unfolding of the plot as part of the story world (albeit to varying degrees). Questions of interactivity are relevant, too, in the discussion of current complex, multi-agential TV systems. However, it is crucial to note that the interactivity of narrative structures is limited by more than ‘just’ the current technological or economic boundaries of the medium. The concept of a fictional narrative that shows real, direct, and full interactivity faces what Ruth Aylett and Sandy Louchart have famously called the “narrative paradox”.<sup>97</sup> It describes the fundamental juxtaposition of, on the one hand, creating a well-composed coherent narrative and, on the other hand, granting absolute freedom to an audience, excluding one another. This contention, however, is hardly new. Friedrich Schiller already noted the inherent need for a fictional narrative to maintain a certain level of static structural control to retain its aesthetic and dramatic qualities. He states:

For his own sake, the poet must follow this road, for his realm ends with our freedom. [...] We are only *his* as long as we gaze beside ourselves. He has lost us once we reach into our own bosom.<sup>98</sup>

However, if interactivity is defined, as Ryan proposes, as systems’ “ability to modify themselves dynamically”,<sup>99</sup> it should be examined more closely whether ongoing serial narratives, with their quality of evolving both recursively and forward-facing (more on this shortly), show some degree of systemic interactivity and indeed a ludic quality that ‘closed’ narratives lack. Ludology has claimed that the structural characteristic of

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New York, NY, USA: 130. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2282338.2282365>. And Frasca, “Simulation versus Narrative”, Introduction to Ludology (2003), 224.

93 Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998), 251ff.

94 Marie-Laure Ryan, “The Interactive Onion: Layers of User Participation in Digital Narrative Texts”, *New Narratives: Stories and Storytelling in the Digital Age*, ed. Ruth Page and Thomas Brownen (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), 37.

95 Ryan, “The Interactive Onion”, 45.

96 Ryan, “The Interactive Onion”, 48.

97 Ryan, “The interactive Onion”, 48. With reference to Ruth Aylett and Sandy Louchart, “The Emergent Narrative: Theoretical Investigation”, *Proceedings of the Narrative and Learning Environments Conference NILEO4* Edinburgh, Scotland (2004): 25–33.

98 Friedrich Schiller, “Ueber das Pathetische”, in *Schillers Werke: Philosophische Schriften: Erster Teil, vol.20, Nationalausgabe*, ed. Benno von Wiese (Weimar: Böhlau, 1962), 217. My translation: “Um seiner selbst willen muß der Dichter diesen Weg einschlagen, denn mit unserer Freyheit ist sein Reich zu Ende. Nur so lange wir außer uns anschauen, sind wir *sein*; er hat uns verloren, sobald wir in unsern eigenen Busen greifen.” Original emphasis.

99 Ryan, “The Interactive Onion”, 35.



simulation turns games into future-facing phenomena as their fundamental structure anticipates a player's interaction.<sup>100</sup> This study's model follows research on popular seriality that assumes the particular characteristics of serial TV to enable audiences and other secondary actors to – sometimes unwittingly – influence their continuation (more on this shortly). Like games, ongoing serial narratives thus arguably possess indirect, systemic interactivity that grants them an inherently playful quality, which arguably forms a significant part of their appeal to more engaged audiences.

Questions of interactivity and storytelling are bound to take a central role in contemporary storytelling as portals and platforms set out to explore the hitherto largely untapped narrative and interactive potential afforded by the technological possibilities of digital, nonlinear transmission. Understanding the systemic structure of popular politics will, thus, contribute to equipping literary and media scholarship to contend with future industrial developments.

Following up on the agential component of games, psychological research has likewise used game-based terminology to model complex interactional and subconscious processes, as the subsequent section will show.

### 2.1.4.2 Games and Psychology

Particularly in the (structuralist-inspired) 1960s, and partly in conjunction with structural semiotics and archetypal studies, psychology has used the terminology and properties of 'games' to non-mathematically model human behaviour. Following a formalist approach, psychological Transactional Analysis (TA), e.g., uses the term 'game' to describe a subset of complex, regular interaction patterns with a "well-defined, predictable outcome".<sup>101</sup>

In his famous exegesis of Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Purloined Letter", psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan evokes the fictional guessing game Even or Odd and the example of coin tosses to illustrate how inherent structural principles determine the interaction of signifiers.<sup>102</sup> His analysis of "The Purloined Letter" (and a subsequent exchange of letters with philosopher Jacques Derrida), which Lacan uses to illustrate his model of the symbolic order of partially self-governing signifiers constituting the human subconscious, is a famous example of the pervasive influence of psychology on literary studies.

Psychoanalyst Marie Bonaparte, in her psychoanalytical reading of Poe's oeuvre,<sup>103</sup> and Paul Watzlawick, Janet H. Beavin, and Don D. Jackson, in their analysis of Edward Albee's play "Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?",<sup>104</sup> have likewise demonstrated the illustrative usefulness of psychological approaches to analysing the dynamics of fictional char-

100 Gonzalo Frasca, "Simulation versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology", in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 233.

101 Eric Berne, *Games People Play: The Psychology of Human Relationships*, 24<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 48.

102 See Jacques Lacan, "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'", in *Écrits*, transl. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2006), e.g., 7 and 35ff.

103 Marie Bonaparte, *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Psycho-Analytic Interpretation*, Transl. John Rodker (London: Imago Publishing, 1949).

104 Paul Watzlawick, Janet H. Beavin, Don D. Jackson, "Kommunikationsstrukturen im Theaterstück 'Wer hat Angst vor Virginia Woolf'", in *Menschliche Kommunikation: Formen, Störungen, Parado-*

acters. However, these approaches are often less focused on literary exegesis and, at least in the latter case, more intent on demonstrating a psychological method.

While it is not for this study to discern their value for psychological practice, psychological approaches continue to provide exciting perspectives for the structural modelling of character interactions. Particularly TA constitutes an advanced methodology that will serve this thesis – with some modification – to model the dynamics of fictional characters and illustrate narrative patterns in polit-series. Expanding its perspective from subjective and interpersonal processes, this chapter's next section will demonstrate the role of game-based terminology in describing political and societal processes.

### 2.1.4.3 Games, Politics, Political Imaginaries and Political Aesthetics

In political studies and sociology, the terminology surrounding 'games' has played a significant role in describing postmodern social and political processes, e.g., with the terms "gamification" and – as Joost Raessens has called it – "ludification" [of culture].<sup>105</sup> They denote – as Felix Raczkowski notes with regards to 'gamification' – "the transfer of game elements to contexts outside of games".<sup>106</sup> This use of game terminology rests on a fundamentally vernacular understanding of games that indicates the phenomenon's separation from 'seriousness' or 'reality' following pervasive anthropocentric views of games as purpose-free 'as if'-simulations, variations, and abstractions of real circumstances.<sup>107</sup>

Valerie Frissen, Sybille Lammes, Michiel de Lange, Jos de Mul, and Joost Raessens, with recourse to Joost Raessens, have described a "global 'ludification of culture'" in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century,<sup>108</sup> arguing that postmodern "western culture has witnessed a remarkable revival of the 'ludic worldview'".<sup>109</sup> Due to its conceptual origins, gamification is often criticised as unduly simplifying and distorting 'serious' processes. Mirroring neo-Marxist criticisms of earlier mass industrial products, Leopoldina Fortu-

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xien, ed. Paul Watzlawick, Janet H. Beavin, Don D. Jackson (Bern/Stuttgart: Hans Huber, 1969), 138–170.

105 Joost Raessens, "Playful identities, or the Ludification of Culture", *Games and Culture* 1, no.1 (January 2006): 52–57. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412005281779>. See also Felix Raczkowski, "Spielgrenzen und ihre Denkweisen", in *Denkweisen des Spiels: Medienphilosophische Annäherungen*, ed. Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky and Reinhold Görling (Vienna: Turia+Kant, 2017), 119f.

106 Raczkowski, "Spielgrenzen und ihre Denkweisen", 119. My translation: "die Übertragung von Spielelementen auf außerspielerische Kontexte".

107 See Gregory Bateson, "Eine Theorie des Spiels und der Phantasie", in *Ökologie des Geistes: Anthropologische, psychologische, biologische und epistemologische Perspektiven*, transl. Hans Günter Holl (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1985), 245; also Karl Groos' famous concept of game as "experimenting" and "Practice" [Einübung] in Karl Groos, *Die Spiele der Tiere*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Jena: G. Fischer, 1930), 27, 49ff.; and Julia Bee, "Die Welt spielt: Spiel, Animation und Wahrnehmung", in *Denkweisen des Spiels: Medienphilosophische Annäherungen*, ed. Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky and Reinhold Görling (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2017), 190.

108 Valerie Frissen, Sybille Lammes, Michiel de Lange, Jos de Mul, Joost Raessens, "Homo Ludens 2.0: Play, media, and identity", in *Playful Identities: The Ludification of Digital Media Cultures*, ed. Valerie Frissen, Sybille Lammes, Michiel de Lange, Jos de Mul, Joost Raessens (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 9. And Raessens, "Playful identities", 52–57.

109 Frissen et al., "Homo Ludens 2.0: Play, media, and identity", 21.

nati, e.g., examining the ludification of media cultures, argues that “games can currently be understood as a new ‘opium’ for the people”.<sup>110</sup>

With its connotations of media spectacle and self-presentation, *political* gamification has likewise been a long-standing topic of scholarly enquiry of modern and postmodern politics: In his famous 1938/39 study on games, Johan Huizinga already argues that US politics takes “entirely the form of grand national games”.<sup>111</sup> Dörner has famously referred to this phenomenon as “Politainment”.<sup>112</sup> In a similar vein, Liesbet van Zoonen has shown the pervasiveness of the trope of politics as “soap opera”.<sup>113</sup> Examining the intersections of popular culture and politics, she describes “Personalization” and “dramatization” as necessary – albeit ambiguous – key processes in creating political engagement<sup>114</sup> in what, at times, has been disparagingly called the “drama democracy”.<sup>115</sup>

As a critical terminology used to describe postmodern political communication, “gamification” discourse follows a long-running debate about the role of political representation, “political aesthetics”,<sup>116</sup> and the political ‘imaginary’<sup>117</sup> that goes back to Plato (who dismissed it as a distortive influence).<sup>118</sup> As Robin Celikates and Simon

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- 110 Leopoldina Fortunati, “New Media, Play, and Social Identities”, in *Playful Identities: The Ludification of Digital Media Cultures*, ed. Valerie Frissen et al. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2015), 293.
- 111 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: Vom Ursprung der Kultur im Spiel*, 23rd ed., transl. H. Nachod (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2013), 225. My translation: “vollkommen die Form großer nationaler Spiele”.
- 112 Andreas Dörner, *Politainment: Politik in der medialen Erlebnisgesellschaft* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2001).
- 113 Liesbet van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen. When Politics and Popular Culture Converge* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 19ff.
- 114 Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen*, 145.
- 115 See Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen*, 7. She criticises the categorical dismissal of politics’ need to communicate and engage citizens. For the critical term ‘drama democracy’ she references a homonymous book by Mark Elchardus, *De Dramademocratie* (Tielt: Lannoo, 2002).
- 116 See Thomas Meyer, “Politische Ästhetik”, in *Was ist Politik?*, by Thomas Meyer (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2000), 167–175. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-322-95150-2>; Oliver Kohns, ed., *Perspektiven der politischen Ästhetik* (Paderborn: Fink, 2016); also Thomas Ernst, Patricia Gozalbez Cantó, Sebastian Richter, Nadja Sennwald, Julia Tieke, eds., *SUBversionen: Zum Verhältnis von Politik und Ästhetik in der Gegenwart* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2008).
- 117 See, e.g., Martin Doll and Oliver Kohns, “Ausser-Sich-Sein: Die Imaginäre Dimension der Politik: Einleitung”, in *Die imaginäre Dimension der Politik*, ed. Martin Doll and Oliver Kohns (Paderborn: Fink, 2014), 7.
- 118 See Plato, “Gorgias”, in *Plato Gorgias and Aristotle Rhetoric*, transl. Joe Sachs (Newsbury port, MA: Focus Publishing, 2009), 29–120; Felix Trautmann, “Das politische Imaginäre: Zur Einleitung”, in *Das politische Imaginäre*, ed. Felix Trautmann (Köln: August Verlag, 2017); Clemens Pornschlegel, “Die Grimasse der Macht: Zur Theatralität des Politischen”, in *Souveränität und Subversion: Figurationen des Politisch-Imaginären*, ed. Rebekka A. Klein, Dominik Finkelde (Freiburg/Munich: Karl Alber, 2015), 262–276; Paula Diehl and Gertrud Koch, eds., *Inszenierungen der Politik: Der Körper als Medium* (Munich: Fink, 2007); Rebekka A. Klein, Dominik Finkelde, eds., *Souveränität und Subversion: Figurationen des Politisch-Imaginären* (Freiburg/Munich: Karl Alber, 2015); Albrecht Koschorke et al., *Der fiktive Staat: Konstruktionen des politischen Körpers in der Geschichte Europas* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2007); Martin Doll and Oliver Kohns, eds., *Die Imaginäre Dimension der Politik* (Paderborn: Fink, 2014); Martin Doll and Oliver Kohns, eds., *Figurationen des Politischen: (Vol.1): Die Phänomenalität der Politik in der Gegenwart* (Paderborn: Fink, 2016); Martin Doll and Oliver Kohns,

Rothöhler critically note, “The relationship of politics and aesthetics is thought of [...] as an antithesis”, with politics being expected to be “purified of unpleasant aesthetic side effects”.<sup>119</sup>

However, studying more recent scholarship surrounding the political imaginary<sup>120</sup> has shown that representation of constructed ‘realities’ is an essential part of creating politics in the first place. Representation does not imply undue simplification but consolidates otherwise insoluble societal complexity by manifesting unifying collective imaginaries that come to life only in their tangible presentation. Thomas Frank, Albrecht Koschorke, Susanne Lüdemann and Ethel Matala de Mazza, e.g. have examined the interdependency of politics and fiction in their analysis of the narrative trope of the “king’s new clothes”.<sup>121</sup> Discussing the “imaginary of political dominance” [*das Imaginäre politischer Herrschaft*], they argue that the ruler as a “collective singular” creates a surface for the projections of individuals to imagine the abstract social and political whole to which they belong.<sup>122</sup>

However, related discourses, namely those surrounding “post-democracy” or “simulative democracy”, criticise that, in postmodernity, political institutions and their public appearances serve to simulate a political representation and democratic sovereignty that has, in truth, been largely eroded by individualism, capitalist consumerism, and relegating decision making to non-transparent technocratic bodies.<sup>123</sup>

Despite its academic prominence, the role of political imaginaries is often overlooked in the analysis of contemporary polit-series. This study will show that contending with politics’ inherent dependency on gamified fiction and spectacle constitutes a central trope in most polit-series. Indeed, as this study will argue, the political imaginary – in various normative frameworks and narrative guises – is the constitutive leitmotif of fictional politics in general.

The coming section will concern itself with research on a different set of highly political structures: the scholarship pertaining to the contested networks responsible for creating and maintaining TV series and popular culture.

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eds., *Figurationen des Politischen: (Vol.2): Die zwei Körper der Nation* (Paderborn: Fink, 2016); Ethel Matala de Mazza, “Body Politics”, in *Einführung in die Kulturwissenschaft*, ed. Harun Maye (Munich: Fink, 2011), 167–187; Louis Marin, *Portrait of the King* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1988); Louis Marin, “Der glorreiche Körper des Königs und sein Porträt”, in *Das politische Imaginäre*, ed. Felix Trautmann, transl. Till Bardoux (Köln: August Verlag, 2017), 31–69.

119 Robin Celikates and Simon Rothöhler, “Die Körper der Stellvertreter: Politische Repräsentation zwischen Identität, Simulation und Institution: Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, The Parallax View, The West Wing”, in Diehl/Koch, *Inszenierungen der Politik*, (Munich: Fink, 2007), 57. My translation: “das Verhältnis von Politik und Ästhetik wird [...] als ein gegenläufiges gedacht”; “von unerfreulichen ästhetischen Begleiterscheinungen gereinigt sein”.

120 See above

121 Thomas Frank, Albrecht Koschorke, Susanne Lüdemann, Ethel Matala de Mazza, *Des Kaisers neue Kleider: Über das Imaginäre politischer Herrschaft: Texte, Bilder, Lektüren* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2002).

122 Frank et al., *Des Kaisers neue Kleider*, 80. My translation: “Kollektivsingulars”.

123 See Ingolfur Blühdorn, “Billig will Ich: Post-demokratische Wende und simulative Demokratie”, *Forschungsjournal Soziale Bewegungen* 19, no. 4 (2006): 72–83. <https://doi.org/10.1515/fjsb-2006-0409>. And Colin Crouch, *Coping with Post-Democracy* (London: Fabian Society, 2000).

## 2.2 TV and Industry Research – Production, Circulation, and Reception

Various branches of media and creative industry research, as well as information studies, have paid significant attention to the technological, economic, and social changes that ushered in television's transition into the era of "TV VI",<sup>124</sup> "post-network", or 'neo-network'.<sup>125</sup> Particularly the technological and structural affordances of the new television age have become a central issue for scholarship. Catherine Johnson, for example, in her (primarily UK-based) study of what she calls "Online TV", argues that "the internet era represents a distinct phase in the development of television that differs from the earlier broadcast, cable/satellite and digital eras of television".<sup>126</sup>

The undoubtedly seismic changes in media landscapes, not least in TV in the 2010s, have caused what David Hesmondhalgh calls the "infrastructural turn",<sup>127</sup> inspiring media industry scholars to embrace sociotechnical approaches and often replacing earlier sociocultural perspectives in the study of media and creative industries and the analysis of popular media texts (particularly in film studies). Especially when it comes to textual analysis, media scholars now face the question of how to consolidate the various infrastructural, technical, sociological, cultural, and textual approaches.

Mittell, in his extensive study of the poetics of complex TV, has adapted Bordwell's approaches from historical poetics to the study of film in order to show "how television storytelling has changed and what cultural practices within television technology, industry, and viewership have enabled and encouraged these transformations."<sup>128</sup> Acknowledging that "questions about form are not restricted to the realm of the text but deeply connected to contexts,"<sup>129</sup> Mittell draws an extensive picture of how evolving industrial and technical affordances shape serial TV storytelling as a complex phenomenon and how series, in their interplay with audiences, create meaning. However, dating back to 2015, this approach naturally focuses on TV storytelling as a primarily linear phenomenon and does not yet consider the consequences of the substantial developments in the digital age of nonlinear OTT services.<sup>130</sup>

124 Mareike Jenner, *Netflix and the Re-invention of Television* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 14. And Mareike Jenner, "'Is this TVIV? On Netflix, TVIII and binge-watching", *New Media & Society*, 18, no. 2, (July 2014): 260. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814541523>.

125 Amanda D. Lotz, "Portals: A Treatise in Internet-Distributed-Television", open access ed. *Maize Books: Michigan Publishing*, Ann Arbor, MI: *Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library*, published 2017, last accessed September 9, 2022, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/maize/mpub9699689/1:3/--portals-a-treatise-on-internet-distributed-television?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>. Also Lynn Spiegel and Jan Olsson, *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2004), 2.

126 Catherine Johnson, *Online TV* (London: Routledge, 2019), 2.

127 David Hesmondhalgh, "The infrastructural turn in media and internet research", in *The Routledge Companion to Media Industries*, ed. Paul McDonald (London/New York: Routledge, 2022), 132.

128 Jason Mittell, *Complex TV. The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 2.

129 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 5.

130 Abbreviation for 'Over The Top': An industry term referring to the 'direct' provision of digital content.

It should be noted that many of these approaches ultimately echo developments in film scholarship, often called “New Film History” (NFH). Since its inception in the mid-1980s, the term has come to denote a somewhat loosely defined set of approaches aimed at evolving the limited perspectives of ‘old’ film history, which, as James Chapman, Mark Glancy, and Sue Harper note, regarded film either as an aesthetic phenomenon focussing mainly on auteur-cinema with high degrees of cultural capital or as evidence of sociocultural currents.<sup>131</sup> NFH approaches, on the other hand, view film as a “combination of historical processes [...] and individual agency”<sup>132</sup> (although there has traditionally been a clear emphasis on the sociocultural perspective), thus considering a variety of filmic and non-filmic primary sources for their analyses.<sup>133</sup> NFH assumes the medium to show a “constructed version of history” contingent on its makers and audiences<sup>134</sup> and regards film as a distinct audio-visual form rather than ‘just’ narrative texts.<sup>135</sup> More recently, Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally have used some approaches (e.g., interviews with production personnel) with reference to NFH in their analyses of polit-TV in the 2010s.<sup>136</sup> However, for TV (even more so than for film), consolidating the various aesthetic and historical perspectives on complex series remains an uneasy task. The medium’s increasing sociotechnical complexity has done nothing to change this.

Given the widespread emergence of nonlinear OTT services in contemporary TV, few contextual media phenomena have received more attention than the ‘platformization’ or ‘portalization’ of content into nonlinear digital formats. Analysing the distribution of news, Thomas Poell and David B. Nieborg (not yet making the distinction between channels, platforms, and portals proposed by Amanda Lotz<sup>137</sup>) have described “platformization” as the migration of “*economic, governmental, and infrastructural extensions of digital platforms into the web and app ecosystems*”,<sup>138</sup> resulting in what they call a widespread “platform dependence”.<sup>139</sup>

131 James Chapman, Mark Glancy, and Sue Harper, “Introduction”, in *The New Film History: Sources, Methods, Approaches*, softcover reprint, ed. James Chapman, Mark Glancy, and Sue Harper (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 2.

132 Chapman, Glancy, and Harper, “Introduction”, 6.

133 Chapman, Glancy, and Harper, “Introduction”, 7.

134 Chapman, Glancy, and Harper, “Introduction”, 7.

135 Chapman, Glancy, and Harper, “Introduction”, 8.

136 Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally. “The political TV shows of the 2010s: showrunners, reality and gender”, in *Politics and Politicians in Contemporary US Television: Washington as Fiction*, ed. Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally (New York: Routledge, 2017), 17.

137 Amanda D. Lotz, “Portals: A Treatise in Internet-Distributed-Television”, open access ed. *Maize Books: Michigan Publishing*, Ann Arbor, MI: *Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library*, published 2017, last accessed September 9, 2022, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/maize/mpub9699689/1:3/--portals-a-treatise-on-internet-distributed-television?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.

138 David B. Nieborg and Thomas Poell, “The platformization of cultural production: Theorizing the contingent cultural commodity”, *New Media & Society* 20, no.11 (April 25, 2018): 4276. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818769694>. Original emphasis.

139 Nieborg/Poell, Platformization, 4276.

## 2.2.1 The Evolution of Portals and Platforms

Most recent cross-disciplinary research concerned with contemporary TV's economic and technological affordances is, implicitly or explicitly, tied to examinations of 'portals' and 'platforms'. To Amanda Lotz, media and industry scholarship owes the impetus for the distinction between channels, platforms, and portals.<sup>140</sup> As Lotz has shown, portals and platforms, on the one hand, and channels, on the other hand, differ significantly in their generation and distribution of content.

While channels present digitally or non-digitally transmitted linear schedules of professionally generated content, portals and platforms exist exclusively online and are "nonlinear", meaning they can personalise the "delivery of content independent of a schedule".<sup>141</sup> They follow what Christel Taillibert and Bruni Cailler call the "ATAWAD concept" of delivery ["Any Time, Any Where, Any Device"].<sup>142</sup> Regarding TV storytelling, this marks, as Lotz points out, a decisive shift from content "that originates from the structuring requirement of a schedule".<sup>143</sup>

Platforms are "commonly defined as large-scale online systems premised on user interaction and user-generated content",<sup>144</sup> in what Stuart Cunningham and David Craig have called "Communitainment".<sup>145</sup> They note that "Platforms provide for media to be circulated, communities to socialize, and users to generate various forms of value."<sup>146</sup> Portals, on the other hand, are "the crucial intermediary services that collect, curate, and distribute television programming via internet distribution"<sup>147</sup> and denote online services that provide "professionalized entertainment IP" and a comparatively low degree of user

140 See Lotz, "Portals", <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/maize/mpub9699689/1:3/--portals-a-treatise-on-internet-distributed-television?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>; see also Amanda Lotz, *We Now Disrupt This Broadcast: How Cable Transformed Television and the Internet Revolutionized It All* (Cambridge, Massachusetts/London: The MIT Press, 2018).

141 Lotz, "Portals", <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/maize/mpub9699689/1:3/--portals-a-treatise-on-internet-distributed-television?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.

142 Christel Taillibert and Bruno Cailler, "Video on demand platforms, editorial strategies, and logics of production: The case of Netflix France", in *A European Television Fiction Renaissance: Premium Production Models And Transnational Circulation*, ed. Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni (London/New York: Routledge, 2021), 103.

143 Amanda D. Lotz, "Portals: A Treatise in Internet-Distributed-Television", open access ed. *Maize Books: Michigan Publishing*, Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, published 2017, last accessed September 9, 2022, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/maize/mpub9699689/1:3/--portals-a-treatise-on-internet-distributed-television?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.

144 Ramon Lobato, *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 36.

145 Stuart Cunningham and David Craig, "Online Entertainment: A New Wave of Media Globalization?", *International Journal of Communication* 10 (October 2016): 5412f. <https://doi.org/1932-8036/20160005>.

146 Stuart Cunningham and David Craig, "'Tech-Tonic' Shifts: The U.S. and China Models of Online Screen Distribution", in *Digital Media Distribution*, ed. Paul McDonald, Courtney Brannon Donoghue, and Timothy Havens (New York: New York university Press, 2021), 148.

147 Lotz, "Portals", <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/maize/mpub9699689/1:3/--portals-a-treatise-on-internet-distributed-television?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.



interaction.<sup>148</sup> They thus show a certain degree of continuity with traditional TV channels.<sup>149</sup> Thus, while a platform is an “open marketplace”,<sup>150</sup> a portal represents a “walled garden” of professional content, as Ramon Lobato phrases it.<sup>151</sup>

Cunningham and Craig have pointed out that US-led ‘Western’ OTT services tend to follow *either* a platform- or a portal model relegating more traditional forms of television to portals. In an example of technological “leapfrogging”, Chinese non-linear services, on the other hand, have, so far, been much more successful in integrating the distribution of professionally and user-generated content into the interactive structure of “one-stop-shop” platforms.<sup>152</sup> However, due to the discursive dominance of high-profile productions within the ‘Western’ cultural sphere, TV scholarship in the global North has initially often focused on theorising portals, arguably showing a tendency to treat their emergence as synonymous with the general changes of the post-network era. This has somewhat changed, e.g., with Poell, Nieborg, and Brooke Erin Duffy’s recent examination of the changes in cultural industries through the widespread influence of platforms such as Tik Tok, Twitch, or Instagram.<sup>153</sup>

Lotz posits that a portal curates its library “based on the identity, vision, and strategy that drive its business model”.<sup>154</sup> This new type of content curation is possible because of the technical affordances of internet-based distribution: firstly, there is no temporally limited linear schedule,<sup>155</sup> meaning that in nonlinear television, there is ‘space’ for any amount of content imaginable. This fact has solved some of the core issues previously described as “peak TV”,<sup>156</sup> that is, the production of too much high-profile content to ‘fit’ into linear schedules.

Secondly, media and digital data scholarship have regarded portals’ ability to mine user data and apply algorithms to classify viewers into what Benjamin Burroughs calls “algorithmic audience[s]”<sup>157</sup> and produce ‘individually’ fitted content as one of the main requirements of the nonlinear TV age. What Poell and Nieborg (with regards to news and games) call “algorithmic logic” has brought content developers to turn “their production

148 Stuart Cunningham and David Craig, “‘Tech-Tonic’ Shifts: The U.S. and China Models of On-line Screen Distribution”, in *Digital Media Distribution*, ed. Paul McDonald, Courtney Brannon Donoghue, and Timothy Havens (New York: New York university Press, 2021), 149.

149 See Lotz, “Portals”, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/maize/mpub9699689/1:3/--portals-a-treatise-on-internet-distributed-television?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.

150 Lobato, *Netflix Nations*, 37.

151 Lobato, *Netflix Nations*, 37.

152 Cunningham/Craig, “‘Tech-Tonic’ Shifts”, 160.

153 Thomas Poell, David B. Nieborg, and Brooke Erin Duffy, *Platforms and Cultural Production* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2021).

154 Amanda D. Lotz, “Portals: A Treatise in Internet-Distributed-Television”, open access ed. *Maize Books: Michigan Publishing*, Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, published 2017, last accessed September 9, 2022, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/maize/mpub9699689/1:3/--portals-a-treatise-on-internet-distributed-television?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.

155 Amanda Lotz, *We Now Disrupt This Broadcast: How Cable Transformed Television and the Internet Revolutionized It All* (Cambridge, Massachusetts/London: The MIT Press, 2018), 149.

156 See Lotz, *We Now Disrupt This Broadcast*, 104.

157 Benjamin Burroughs, “House of Netflix: Streaming media and digital lore”, *Popular Communication* 17, no.1 (2019): 10. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2017.1343948>.

and circulation strategies toward the recommendation, ranking, and other kinds of end-user facing algorithms of major platforms".<sup>158</sup> It is a prerequisite for what Lotz has called Netflix's "conglomerated niche strategy":<sup>159</sup> Through collecting and evaluating consumer data, "more strategic curation"<sup>160</sup> makes it possible for subscription portals such as Netflix to target different "taste communities"<sup>161</sup> and provide niche audiences with content specifically tailored to their presumed wishes.<sup>162</sup> As algorithms aid curation, extensive content libraries become manageable for audiences and providers alike.

Studies of media economics have remarked that changing technological affordances have altered TV-based business models,<sup>163</sup> changing, as Sylvia Harvey notes, what television is "as an object and industry, and a cultural form".<sup>164</sup> One such process has been "cord-cutting",<sup>165</sup> that is, the cancellation of cable- and other linear subscription models. Lotz shows that the nonlinear turn has affected industry and consumption practices. This includes an increased focus on international markets,<sup>166</sup> the creation/increase of viewing modes like bingeing,<sup>167</sup> and changes in production, licencing, and secondary marketing models with streaming portals trying to integrate the production and distribution of content vertically,<sup>168</sup> often paying producers "cost plus" to allow them to hold licencing rights in perpetuity.<sup>169</sup>

Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni have identified the innovations led by pay- and subscription-based services of the early TV IV era – such as the establishment of new markets and revenue models for European productions and the introduction of new or

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- 158 David B. Nieborg and Thomas Poell, "The platformization of cultural production: Theorizing the contingent cultural commodity", *New Media & Society* 20, no.11 (April 25, 2018): 4280.
- 159 Lotz, "Portals", <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/maize/mpub9699689/1:4/--portals-a-treatise-on-internet-distributed-television?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.
- 160 Lotz, "Portals", <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/maize/mpub9699689/1:5/--portals-a-treatise-on-internet-distributed-television?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.
- 161 See Lotz, *We Now Disrupt This Broadcast*, p.146
- 162 See Amanda D. Lotz, "Portals: A Treatise in Internet-Distributed-Television", open access ed. *Maize Books: Michigan Publishing*, Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, published 2017, last accessed September 9, 2022, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/maize/mpub9699689/1:5/--portals-a-treatise-on-internet-distributed-television?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>; and Mareike Jenner, *Netflix & the Re-invention of Television* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan/Springer International Publishing, 2018), 115.
- 163 See, e.g., Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni, eds., *A European Television Fiction Renaissance: Premium Production Models and Transnational Circulation* (New York: Routledge, 2021).
- 164 Sylvia Harvey, "Broadcasting in the Age of Netflix: When the Market is Master", in *A Companion to Television*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, ed. Janet Wasko and Eileen R. Meehan (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley & Sons, 2020), 118.
- 165 See, e.g., Harvey, "Broadcasting in the Age of Netflix", 107.
- 166 Amanda Lotz, *We Now Disrupt This Broadcast: How Cable Transformed Television and the Internet Revolutionized It All* (Cambridge, Massachusetts/London: The MIT Press, 2018), 93.
- 167 Lotz, *We Now Disrupt this Broadcast*, 120.
- 168 Amanda D. Lotz, "Portals: A Treatise in Internet-Distributed-Television", open access ed. *Maize Books: Michigan Publishing*, Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, published 2017, last accessed September 9, 2022, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/maize/mpub9699689/1:6/--portals-a-treatise-on-internet-distributed-television?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.
- 169 Lotz, *We Now Disrupt this Broadcast*, 123. Original emphasis.

renewed industrial production and distribution methods (like the establishment of a showrunner following the US model)<sup>170</sup> – as a root cause for what they call the “contemporary renaissance in European fiction” on TV.<sup>171</sup>

Since the emergence of cable channels, it has often been argued that subscription-based TV creates content different from classic advertising-based television. Like their linear predecessors, subscription-based OTT services often focus on “content that attracts subscribers” rather than content “that will gather a mass of advertiser-desired eyeballs”.<sup>172</sup> Together with virtually ‘limitless’ nonlinear schedules, this led Lotz to state that “[s]ubscriber-funded portals are arguably good for audiences that have been unvalued by advertisers”.<sup>173</sup> This marks a significant change to traditional advertising-based TV, whose “Distinct cultures of production create barriers to diversity”.<sup>174</sup>

However, Derek Johnson, questioning the notion of limitless nonlinear schedules (and their corresponding diversity), has pointed out that nonlinearity itself is somewhat limited by the linearity of human experience and points out potential biases. He argues that

Netflix [itself a portal] helps us to shape linear flows from the non-linear possibilities of its program offerings, privileging some quantum outcomes over others based on its economic and cultural priorities.<sup>175</sup>

Indeed, this echoes larger concerns about systemic biases that have accompanied more recent discussions about machine learning, AI and Big Data.<sup>176</sup> For contemporary textual

170 Luca Barra and Massima Scaglioni, “Introduction: The many steps and factors of a European renaissance”, in *A European Television Fiction Renaissance: Premium Production Models and Transnational Circulation*, ed. Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni (New York: Routledge, 2021), 2.

171 Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni, “The grounds for a renaissance in European fiction: Transnational writing, production and distribution approaches, and strategies”, in *A European Television Fiction Renaissance: Premium Production Models and Transnational Circulation*, ed. Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni, (New York: Routledge, 2021), 15.

172 Amanda D. Lotz, “Portals: A Treatise in Internet-Distributed-Television”, open access ed. *Maize Books: Michigan Publishing*, Ann Arbor, MI: *Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library*, published 2017, last accessed September 9, 2022, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/maize/mpub9699689/1:3/--portals-a-treatise-on-internet-distributed-television?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.

173 Lotz, “Portals”, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/maize/mpub9699689/1:5/--portals-a-treatise-on-internet-distributed-television?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.

174 Sharon Marie Ross, “Introduction: IN FOCUS: Writing and Producing TV in the Post-Network Era”, *Cinema Journal* 50, No.2 (2011): 130. See Felicia D. Henderson, “The Culture Behind Closed Doors: Issues of Gender and Race in the Writers’ Room”, *Cinema Journal* 50, no. 2 (2011): 145–52.

175 Derek Johnson, “Television Guides and Recommendations in a Changing Channel Landscape”, in *From Networks to Netflix: A Guide to Changing Channels*, ed. Derek Johnson (New York: Routledge, 2018), 10.

176 E.g., concerning discrimination through selection and systemic biases. Se, e.g., Katie Seely-Gant and Lisa M. Frehill, “Exploring Bias and Error in Big Data Research,” *Journal of the Washington Academy of Sciences* 101, no. 3 (2015): 29–38. And Nina Baur et al., “The Quality of Big Data. Development, Problems, and Possibilities of Use of Process-Generated Data in the Digital Age,” *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung* 45, no. 3 (2020): 209–43. And Betsy Anne Williams, Catherine F. Brooks, and Yotam Shmargad, “How Algorithms Discriminate Based on Data They

analysis, considering the changing affordances of contemporary TV is thus of the utmost significance.

## 2.2.2 Examining Netflix

As arguably the most high-profile portal and self-proclaimed ‘disruptor’ of TV in its early nonlinear age, no OTT service has received as much scholarly attention as Netflix.<sup>177</sup> However, while the portal’s crucial role in the evolution of the Western TV landscape is largely undisputed, the actual extent and nature of its influence remain far less clear. Scholarly assertions of Netflix’s influence often seem to echo the portal’s own marketing. Examining the service’s brand, Timothy Havens has shown that framing itself as an “individualist and youthful” tech company, as opposed to a traditional media company, is an integral part of the streaming portal’s self-image.<sup>178</sup> Anne Shattuck consequently argues that Netflix is the “single most important company that disrupted and rewrote television in the twenty-first century”.<sup>179</sup> However, Ramon Lobato, in his extensive study of Netflix’s international operations, states that

There is no coherent Netflix effect at global scale. Rather than having a uniformly disruptive effect, Netflix has had quite different effects in different national contexts – ranging from disruption of broadcast and pay-TV incumbents (as in Canada, Australia, and other English-language markets), to modest success as a niche service (in much of Europe and Latin America), or no impact at all (in Africa and the Middle East, for example).<sup>180</sup>

Further comparative studies of individual productions and developments – as the one undertaken in this thesis – will, over time, contribute to solving this question. It is particularly pertinent to extended debates surrounding cultural hegemony and the division of power within cultural industrial systems that have been a long-standing focal point of research concerned with popular culture.

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Lack: Challenges, Solutions, and Policy Implications”, *Journal of Information Policy* 8 (2018), 78–115. <https://doi.org/10.5325>.

- 177 See, e.g., volumes by Ramon Lobato, *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* (New York: New York University Press, 2019); Mareike Jenner, *Netflix & the Re-invention of Television* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan/Springer International Publishing, 2018); Derek Johnson, ed., *From Networks to Netflix: A Guide to Changing Channels* (New York: Routledge, 2018); see also Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni, eds., *A European Television Fiction Renaissance: Premium Production Models and Transnational Circulation* (New York: Routledge, 2021); Janet Wasko and Eileen R. Meehan, eds., *A Companion to Television*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Hoboken: Wiley & Sons, 2020).
- 178 Timothy Havens, “Netflix: Streaming Channel Brands as Global Meaning Systems”, in *From Networks to Netflix*, ed. Derek Johnson (New York: Routledge, 2018), 326.
- 179 Jane Shattuck, “Netflix, Inc. and Online Television”, in *A Companion to Television*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Janet Wasko and Eileen R. Meehan (Hoboken: Wiley & Sons, 2020), 145.
- 180 Ramon Lobato, *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 183.

### 2.2.3 Disputing the Distribution of Power Across Popular Culture and TV

Research across disciplines implicitly or explicitly tends to view the interactions between the different actors involved in the production, circulation, and consumption of a popular TV series as a constant negotiation of the question of who gets to determine its shape and modes of availability. Predating any notion of OTT nonlinearity, the relationship of different actors within popular culture in general, be they distributors, producers, or recipients in their various forms, has long been regarded as “political”, centred around, as Umberto Eco notes, “power and dominance”.<sup>181</sup> However, which actors possess just how much power in any pop cultural agential relationship remains a highly contested question.

Older readings, most prominently that of the Frankfurt School’s critical theory, have drawn a dismissive and relatively binary image of the ‘culture industry’ [*Kulturindustrie*] and popular culture as *mass culture*.<sup>182</sup> For them, it is a “paternalistic”<sup>183</sup> and more or less manipulative realm serving to perpetuate the commercial and political interests of economically and culturally dominant forces as well as the capitalist order in general, thus making consumers complicit in their own exploitation. In this vision of mass culture, of which TV forms a prominent part, “the proletariat consumes bourgeois cultural models, which it believes to be its own autonomous expression”.<sup>184</sup>

More recent research suggests that the power relations in popular culture – and between a TV series’ various actors – are much less determined and binary (much like the actors themselves). Audience and fan studies<sup>185</sup> and, more recently, distribution or circu-

181 Umberto Eco, “Massenkultur und Kultur-Niveaus”, in *Apokalyptiker und Integrierte: Zur kritischen Kritik der Massenkultur* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer Taschenbuch, 1992), 48. My translation: “Es ist vielmehr ein politisches Verhältnis – eines des Machtgebrauchs und der Herrschaft”. Original Emphasis.

182 See, e.g., Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer Verlag, 1969), 128ff. And Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J.M. Bernstein (London/New York: Routledge, 1991), particularly “The Schema of Mass Culture”, 61–97, and “Culture Industry Reconsidered”, 98–106.

183 Eco, “Massenkultur”, 48. My translation: “paternalistisches Verhältnis”.

184 Umberto Eco, *Apokalyptiker und Integrierte: Zur kritischen Kritik der Massenkultur* (Frankfurt a.M. 1992), 31. My translation: “[...] in der das Proletariat bürgerliche Kulturmodelle konsumiert, die es für seinen eigenen, autonomen Ausdruck hält.

185 Elizabeth Evans, *Transmedia Television: Audiences, New Media and Daily Life* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures*, e-library ed. (New York: Routledge, 2005); Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, (New York/ London: Routledge, 2013); John Fiske, “The cultural economy of Fandom”, in: *Adoring Audience: Fanculture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis, 30–49 (London/ New York: Routledge, 1992); Jason Mittell, “Forensic Fandom and the Draggable Text”, *Spreadable Media*, last accessed 08.07.2022, [https://spreadablemedia.org/essays/mitte1l/#.XkbF\\_kOH5os](https://spreadablemedia.org/essays/mitte1l/#.XkbF_kOH5os); Jason Mittell, “Sites of Participation: Wiki fandom and the case of Lostpedia”, *Transformative Works and Cultures* 3 (September 15, 2009), <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2009.0118> (Last accessed 08.07.2022); John T. Caldwell, “Critical Industrial Practice: Branding, repurposing, and the Migratory Patterns of Industrial Texts”, *Television and New Media* 7, no.2 (May, 2006): 99–134; Ellen Seiter, Hans Borchers, Gabriele Kreutzner and Eva-Maria Warth, eds., *Remote Control: Television, Audiences, and Cultural Power*, reissue (London, New York: Routledge, 2013).

lation studies<sup>186</sup> have contributed much to ascertaining the manifold possibilities of direct and indirect cooperation between TV's various agents in general and for recipients' participation in user-led content creation<sup>187</sup> and ("informal")<sup>188</sup> circulation of popular TV and film.<sup>189</sup>

Concepts such as Henry Jenkin's convergence culture<sup>190</sup> and the resulting idea of participatory culture famously move away from the pessimistic and dismissive neo-Marxist notions of mass culture. For Jenkins, convergence is the

flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want.<sup>191</sup>

Participatory models often discuss an alleged trend within (digital) popular culture – and television – to democratise itself,<sup>192</sup> following increasing possibilities for recipients' involvement in independent production, contribution, active communication and "*articulation of democratic expectations*",<sup>193</sup> e.g., through the web 2.0.<sup>194</sup> With recourse to Sharon Marie Ross, Evans likewise states that, in the 2000s, there have been "shifts in power relations (real or imaginary) between viewers, producers and broadcasters".<sup>195</sup>

Visions of a more democratic, web-based popular participation culture have been fuelled by hopes of breaking the monopoly of analogue media conglomerates and diversifying the production and distribution in a low-threshold, web-based environment.<sup>196</sup> This notion of popular culture sees users turning from consumers into proactive and creative

186 See, e.g., Virginia Crisp, *Film Distribution in the Digital Age: Pirates and Professionals* (New York/London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Paul McDonald, Courtney Brannon Donoghue, and Timothy Havens, eds., *Digital Media Distribution: Portals, Platforms, Pipelines*. (New York: New York University Press, 2021); Luca Barra and Massimo, eds., *A European Television Fiction Renaissance: Premium Production Models and Transnational Circulation* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

187 Axel Bruns, "Producersage", In *Proceedings of the 6th ACM SIGCHI conference on Creativity & cognition (C&C '07)*. Association for Computing Machinery, New York (2007): 99–105. <https://doi.org/10.1145/1254960.1254975>.

188 Crisp, *Film Distribution in the Digital Age*, 6.

189 See, e.g., Elizabeth Evans' notion of audience-led unauthorised "Guerrilla Networks" of transmedia distribution in Evans, *Transmedia Television: Audiences, New Media and Daily Life* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 43f; also Virginia Crisp, "Disingenuous Intermediaries: The Gatekeeping Power of Distributors and Publishers", in *Digital Media Distribution*, ed. Paul McDonald, Courtney Brannon Donoghue, and Timothy Havens, 87–106 (New York: New York university Press, 2021); Sharon Marie Ross, "Introduction: IN FOCUS: Writing and Producing TV in the Post-Network Era", *Cinema Journal* 50, No.2 (2011): 128–131.

190 Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

191 Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 2.

192 See Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 252.

193 Kaspar Maase, *Populärkulturforschung: Eine Einführung*. Bielefeld: transcript, 2019, 230. My translation: "*Artikulation demokratischer Ansprüche*". Original emphasis.

194 Maase, *Populärkulturforschung*, 224f.

195 Elizabeth Evans, *Transmedia Television* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 7.

196 See. Maase, *Populärkulturforschung*, 224.

portmanteau terms like the “prosumers” (producer-consumer) or “produsers” (producer-user).<sup>197</sup> Frank Kelleter states, regarding popular seriality, that despite “jealously guarded borders of access, responsibility, and ownership”,<sup>198</sup> there has been a “high degree of permeability between professional and amateur practices” in commercial storytelling.<sup>199</sup> Seemingly confirming this statement in the most direct way imaginable, auteur-producers like Chris Carter (*X-FILES*, *MILLENNIUM*) or Frank Fontana (*HOMICIDE*, *OZ*) have claimed that they draw on fan sites for inspiration.<sup>200</sup>

Accordingly, it has been argued that much of the development in transmedia distribution has “been led by the audience”.<sup>201</sup> More recently, the increasing datafication of user activity has likewise been seen to intensify the seemingly interactional component of the contested relationship between producers and the engaged “prosumers”<sup>202</sup> who become both providers of content and data.<sup>203</sup>

Fan studies, in particular, have contributed to the recent study of the power dynamics and the fundamental political dimension of popular culture. As Henry Jenkins notes in his famous article on fans as “textual poachers”, some audiences rely on a pop cultural artefact as a means to form an “alternative social community”<sup>204</sup> that “constructs its own identity and artifacts from resources borrowed from already circulating texts”.<sup>205</sup> John Fiske accordingly examined fan cultures as part of the “cultural economy” in which “not wealth but meanings, pleasures, and social identities” are exchanged<sup>206</sup> and in which cultural capital is created and unequally distributed according to different markers of social in- and exclusion. Fiske describes this as the struggle of fans to “excporate the products of the industry” and the industry to “incorporate the taste of the fans”.<sup>207</sup>

Scholars of popular culture and participation have, at times, noted that the division of pop cultural power manifests in the textual structure themselves. Fiske, e.g., claims

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- 197 See Bruns, Axel. “Produsage”, *Proceedings of the 6th ACM SIGCHI conference on Creativity & cognition* (C&C’07). Association for Computing Machinery, New York (2007): 99–105. <https://doi.org/10.1145/1254960.1254975>. And Claudia Grinnell, “From Consumer to Prosumer to Produser: Who Keeps Shifting My Paradigm? (We Do!),” *Public Culture* 21 (2009): 577–598.
- 198 Frank Kelleter, “Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality”, in *Media of Serial Narrative*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2017), 24.
- 199 Kelleter, “Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality”, 24.
- 200 See John T. Caldwell, “Critical Industrial Practice: Branding, repurposing, and the Migratory Patterns of Industrial Texts”, *Television and New Media* 7, no.2 (May, 2006):122.
- 201 Elizabeth Evans, *Transmedia Television: Audiences, New Media and Daily Life* (New York/London: Routledge, 2011), 43.
- 202 Rocco Bellanova And Gloria González Fuster, “No (Big) Data, No Fiction? Thinking Surveillance With/Against Netflix”, in *The Politics and Policies of Big Data: Big Data Big Brother?*, ed. A.R. Saetnan, I. Schneider, And N. Green (London: Routledge [Forthcoming]), posted January 1, 2018, 6. <http://ssrn.com/abstract=3120038>. See also Matthias Frey, *MUBI and the Curation Model of Video on Demand* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 5.
- 203 Maase, *Populärkulturforschung*, 240.
- 204 Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York/ London: Routledge, 2013), 2.
- 205 Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 3.
- 206 John Fiske, *Television Culture*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (London/New York: Routledge, 2011), 314.
- 207 John Fiske, “The cultural economy of Fandom”, in *Adoring Audience: Fanculture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (London/ New York: Routledge, 1992), 47.



that successful popular artefacts are “producerly texts”,<sup>208</sup> following Roland Barthes’ idea of “writerly” [*scriptible*] vs “readerly” [*lisible*] text.<sup>209</sup> As such, they encourage fan activity through their seemingly open, incomplete, and incoherent qualities.<sup>210</sup> Mittel has examined the creative and investigative practice of engaging with a text’s mysteries and incoherencies as “forensic fandom”.<sup>211</sup> However, even optimistic scholarship has often remarked an inequality between individual recipients. As Jenkins states in his discussion of convergence culture: “not all participants are created equal”.<sup>212</sup>

After the initial excitement over the web. 2.0’s ability to foster participation, recent research into economic and political developments of pop culture has become much less optimistic. Dreams of democratising popular culture appear to have been partly fuelled by visions of a non-commercial internet. However, it is becoming evident that the web has increasingly been cultivated by for-profit enterprises that have professionalised and divided the online realm into lucrative areas of interest. While a complex and dynamic co-creative process arguably continues to exist, the power division between popular culture’s recipients and the production-/distribution side nonetheless seems to show what Manfred Pfister, regarding the communication process in theatre, once called “institutionalised asymmetry”,<sup>213</sup> tilting in favour of the production entities. The many collaborative practices of participatory culture have, as Maase points out, so far “not shifted but reproduced the balance of power in the entertainment area”.<sup>214</sup>

The often-evoked democratisation of popular industries is regarded as a secondary process in the nonlinear era. Studying platformization, Nieborg and Poell have, e.g., remarked upon the “inherent accumulative tendency of capital and corporate ownership and its subsequent effects on the distribution of power.”<sup>215</sup> It is an observation that seems to extend to the cultural economy and its attribution of cultural capital. Derek Kompare accordingly points out with regards to fan activity that “the real gaps between cult TV fans and ‘the powers that be’ remain, despite the discursive construction of the ‘fan-producer’”.<sup>216</sup>

208 John Fiske, *Television Culture*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (London/New York: Routledge, 2011), 95.

209 Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, transl. Richard Miller (New York: Blackwell, 2002), 4.

210 Fiske, “The Cultural Economy of Fandom”, 42.

211 Jason Mittell, “Forensic Fandom and the Drillable Text”, *Spreadable Media*, last accessed 08.07.2022. [https://spreadablemedia.org/essays/mittell/#.XkbF\\_kOH5os\\_](https://spreadablemedia.org/essays/mittell/#.XkbF_kOH5os_)

212 Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 3. See also: Fiske, “The Cultural Economy of Fandom”, 31.

213 See Manfred Pfister, *Das Drama: Theorie und Analyse*, 11th ed. (Munich: UTB, 2001), 65. My translation: “institutionalisierte Asymmetrie”.

214 Kaspar Maase, *Populärkulturforschung: Eine Einführung*. Bielefeld: transcript, 2019, 241. My translation: “Bisher, so kann man sagen, haben die Praktiken der Partizipationskultur im Unterhaltungsbereich die Kräfteverhältnisse nicht verschoben, sondern reproduziert.”

215 David B. Nieborg and Thomas Poell, “The platformization of cultural production: Theorizing the contingent cultural commodity”, *New Media & Society* 20, no.11 (April 25, 2018): 4279, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818769694>

216 Derek Kompare, “More ‘Moments of Television’: Online Cult Television Authorship”, in *Flow TV: Television in the Age of Media Convergence*, ed. Michael Kackman et al. (New York/London: Routledge, 2011), 111.

Regarding contemporary TV, Mareike Jenner, in her extensive study of the streaming portal Netflix, states that “industry power remains relatively stable, despite increasing control given to viewers”.<sup>217</sup> She argues that “control” (as opposed to power) is a “crucial concept for an understanding of TV IV and Netflix”<sup>218</sup> because it allows viewers more agency in the selection and more ways of engagement with content while keeping classic industry structures intact.<sup>219</sup> In the era of a professionalised internet, scholarship seems to regard portalised and datafied complex TV as encouraging not *participation* but *engagement* as a choice between pre-determined options for activity. Felix Brinker, e.g., has pointed out the pervasive practice of “audience management”, in which “programming offers possibilities for specific kinds of audience engagement and thereby seeks to direct, organize, and manage the time, attention, and activities of its viewers”.<sup>220</sup>

Academic focus, particularly in media industry research, has recently turned to distribution or circulation as a phenomenon that “acts as a shaping force in the industrialized practices of cultural dissemination”.<sup>221</sup> Distributive practices in TV and elsewhere have, as Courtney Brannon Donoghue, Timothy Havens, and Paul McDonald note, undergone significant changes with the implementation of digital technologies.<sup>222</sup> Acknowledging the complex multi-agential distribution process, Lotz proposes the more multi-directional term “circulation” that “encompasses all the practices involved in completed television texts reaching audiences”.<sup>223</sup>

Like other branches of industry research before it, distribution/ circulation research often emphasises the political component of circulation. As Virginia Crip argues for film, distributors act as gatekeepers “separating producers from potential audiences”<sup>224</sup> across “ten key nodes of gatekeeping power”.<sup>225</sup> Joshua A. Braun likewise points out that

217 Mareike Jenner, *Netflix & the Re-invention of Television* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan/ Springer International Publishing, 2018), 22

218 Jenner, *Netflix & the Re-invention of Television*, 40.

219 Jenner, *Netflix & the Re-invention of Television*, 22.

220 Felix Brinker, “On the Formal Politics of Narratively Complex Television Series: Operational Self-Reflexivity and Audience Management in *Fringe* and *Homeland*”, in *Poetics of Politics: Textuality and Social Relevance in Contemporary American Literature and Culture*, ed. Sebastian M. Herrmann, Carolin Alice Hoffmann, Katja Kanzler et al. (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2015), 44.

221 Courtney Brannon Donoghue, Timothy Havens, and Paul McDonald, “Introduction”, in *Digital Media Distribution: Portals, Platforms, Pipelines*, ed. Paul McDonald, Courtney Brannon Donoghue, and Timothy Havens (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 1.

222 Donoghue, Havens, McDonald, “Introduction”, 2.

223 Amanda Lotz, “Media Circulation: Reconceptualizing Television Distribution and Exhibition”, in *Digital Media Distribution: Portals, Platforms, Pipelines*, ed. Paul McDonald, Courtney Brannon Donoghue, and Timothy Havens (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 48.

224 Virginia Crisp, *Film Distribution in the Digital Age: Pirates and Professionals* (New York/London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 3.

225 Virginia Crisp, “Disingenuous Intermediaries: The Gatekeeping Power of Distributors and Publishers”, in *Digital Media Distribution: Portals, Platforms, Pipelines*, ed. Paul McDonald, Courtney Brannon Donoghue, and Timothy Havens (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 91.

“it is essential to the democratic project to study whom distribution networks are, in actuality, including and leaving out”.<sup>226</sup>

## 2.2.4 The Politics of Authorship

The political dimension of modern popular culture in general and TV series, in particular, extends to questions of authorship. The “conflictive division of labour”<sup>227</sup> between various agential entities that create a TV series has led to an ongoing debate about the contentions of authorship,<sup>228</sup> originating from a much older discussion in literary studies. The role of the author has been contested at least since Roland Barthes declared him\*her dead in 1967 in favour of a concept of a text as a discursive, structural creation.<sup>229</sup> Just two years later, in 1969, Michel Foucault famously brought him\*her back as the discursive “author-function”, which serves as a contextualizing force discursively created by audiences.<sup>230</sup> Not least since reader-response criticism, the process of creating meaning from a fictional text has been located somewhere within the co-creative process of readers/audiences individually actualizing and interpreting extant textual<sup>231</sup> filmic<sup>232</sup> or televisual signs.<sup>233</sup>

The question of who ‘created’ a work of popular culture has been challenging to answer, at least since the rise of the culture industry in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and its increasing

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- 226 Joshua A. Braun: “Points of Origin: Asking Questions in Distribution Research”, in *Digital Media Distribution: Portals, Platforms, Pipelines*, ed. Paul McDonald, Courtney Brannon Donoghue, and Timothy Havens (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 39f.
  - 227 Frank Kelleter, “Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality”, in *Media of Serial Narrative*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2017), 22.
  - 228 Most recently discussed, for instance, in Eva Novrup Redvall, “Authorship and Agency in the Media Industries”, in *The Routledge Companion to Media Industries*, ed. Paul McDonald (London/New York: Routledge, 2022), 223–232. For further discussion see also this thesis’ section 3.6.3, especially 3.6.3.1.
  - 229 Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author”, in *Image, Music, Text*, transl. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 142–148.
  - 230 See Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?”, in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, transl. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, 113–138 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977).
  - 231 As previously mentioned, see, e.g., Hans Robert Jauf, “Literaturgeschichte als Provokation der Literaturwissenschaft”, in *Rezeptionsästhetik: Theorie und Praxis*, ed. Rainer Warning (Munich: Fink, 1988), 126–162; Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore/London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); Wolfgang Iser, “Die Appellstruktur der Texte: Unbestimmtheit als Wirkungsbedingung literarischer Prosa”, in *Rezeptionsästhetik: Theorie und Praxis*, ed. by Rainer Warning (Munich: Fink, 1988), 228–252; Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction From Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore, Mariland/London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974); also Jane P. Tompkins, ed., *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore/London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980); Umberto Eco, *Lector in Fabula: Die Mitarbeit der Interpretation in erzählenden Texten*, transl. Heinz-Georg Held (Munich: dtv, 1998).
  - 232 David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge,: Harvard Press, 1991), 3.
  - 233 Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York City: NYU Press, 2015), 164ff.

application of dispersed industrial means to literary production ushered in the end of the ‘singular creative genius’.<sup>234</sup> As Robert J. Thompson and Gary Burns note, the source of popular TV texts has, likewise, “never been clear in the first place”.<sup>235</sup>

As a result of their dispersed industrial production, TV series, as Marta Dynel has pointed out regarding film, possess a “collective sender”.<sup>236</sup> Like the equally collective films, audiences routinely equip TV series with a unified vision of an ‘auteur’ – such as directors or showrunners depending on the cultural tradition. Mittell, following Foucault, has referred to the discursively attributed notion of a TV series’ authorship as the “inferred author function”.<sup>237</sup> It personifies “the romantic notion of singular authorship” in the face of TV’s “collaborative realities of production”.<sup>238</sup> According to Mittell, the inferred author function is a “viewer’s production of authorial agency responsible for a text’s storytelling, drawing on textual cues and contextual discourses”.<sup>239</sup> The discursively attributed notion of authorship thus becomes a product of a TV series’ network, not the actual source of its text.<sup>240</sup>

However, textual analysis often ignores the political dimension of dispersed authorial agency (and the complex structures that enable its creation) and its influence on the composition of a serial text. Given the entanglement of industrial and aesthetic factors in popular serial texts, the ultimately unsolved question of who decides what a serial narrative will be pervades textual analysis. While critics are sometimes quick to draw cultural inferences from textual data, they often do so without certainty about how cultural phenomena, groups, and persons can influence the complex systemic collective that creates a TV series in the first place. Recent research on popular seriality has done much to illuminate these processes. The following section will examine this further.

### 2.3 Popular Seriality

The growing body of research within literary, cultural, and media studies examining the specific characteristics of (popular) seriality is central to this thesis. The aforementioned structural complexity and conflictive political dimension of pop cultural texts seem particularly visible in popular seriality. After a first surge in the late 1980s and early 1990s, seriality research has recently become a focal point of renewed scholarly attention, particularly concerning *popular* seriality.<sup>241</sup>

234 See Gudrun Weiland, “Von einem sensationellen Erlebnis zum anderen getrieben...”: *Kriminalheftromane und die Zeitgestalt ‘Serialität’ 1920er und 1930er Jahren* (Göttingen, Universitätsverlag Göttingen, 2017), 94.

235 Gary Burns, Robert J. Thompson, “Introduction”, in *Making Television: Authorship and the Production Process*, ed. Gary Burns, Robert J. Thompson (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1990), IX.

236 Marta Dynel, “‘You talking to me?’ The Viewer as a Ratified Listener to Film Discourse”, *Journal of Pragmatics* 43, no. 6 (2011): 1631.

237 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 107.

238 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 87.

239 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 107. Original emphasis.

240 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 95ff.

241 See the DFG Popular Seriality Research Unit (no.1091), “Popular Seriality: Aesthetics and Practice”, DFG, last accessed July 7, 2022, <http://www.popularseriality.de/>; Shane Denson, “To be contin-

Knuth Hickethier distinguishes “seriality” as a “structure inherent in a TV programme” as opposed to the term ‘series’ itself.<sup>242</sup> For Kelleter, seriality is a “practice of popular culture, not a narrative formalism *within* it”.<sup>243</sup> The term ‘popular’ is now broadly understood to describe a form of seriality occurring as a phenomenon in cultural artefacts designed to have a broad appeal across sociocultural backgrounds as opposed to the more ideologically charged definition of popular artefacts as belonging to social groups with lower cultural, economic, and social capital.<sup>244</sup> As Christa Juretzka notes, popular cultural commodities have a “notoriously serial character”.<sup>245</sup>

Knut Hickethier famously described the “double dramatic structure”<sup>246</sup> or “double formal structure”<sup>247</sup> of serial narrative in which the structure of a single episode has to tie in with the dramatic structure of the overall ‘narrative cosmos’ of the multi-part series.

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- ued...: Seriality and Serialization in Interdisciplinary Perspective,” (paper presented at the graduate conference What Happens Next: The Mechanics of Serialization at the University of Amsterdam March 25–26, 2011), *JLTOnline*, June 17 June, <http://www.jltonline.de/index.php/conferences/article/view/346/1004>; Frank Kelleter, ed., *Populäre Serialität: Evolution – Narration – Distinktion: Zum seriellen Erzählen seit dem 19. Jhd.* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012); Frank Kelleter, ed., *Media of Serial Narrative* (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2017); Claudia Stockinger, “Werk in Serie? Werkförmigkeit unter den Bedingungen von Populärkultur”, in *Das Werk: Zum Verschwinden und Fortwirken eines Grundbegriffs*, ed. Lutz Danneberg, Annette Gilbert, and Carlos Spoerhase, 359–402 (Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, 2019); Ruth Mayer, *Serial Fu Manchu: The Chinese Supervillain and the Spread of Yellow Peril Ideology* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014), for systemic context see especially 7–21; Felix Brinker, “Hidden Agendas, Endless Investigations, and the Dynamics of Complexity: The Conspiratorial Mode of Storytelling in Contemporary American Television Series”, *Aspeers* 5 (2012): 87–109; Felix Brinker, “On the Formal Politics of Narratively Complex Television Series: Operational Self-Reflexivity and Audience Management in *Fringe* and *Homeland*”, in *Poetics of Politics: Textuality and Social Relevance in Contemporary American Literature and Culture*, ed. Sebastian M. Herrmann, Carolin Alice Hoffmann et al. 41–62. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2015; Felix Brinker, “On the Political Economy of the Contemporary (Superhero) Blockbuster Series”, in *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st -Century Film*, ed. Shane Denson and Julia Leyda Falmer. *REFRAME Books*, 2016, last accessed 08.07.2022; Dominik Maeder, *Die Regierung der Serie: Poetologie visueller Gouvernementalität der Gegenwart* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2020).
- 242 Knut Hickethier, “Die Fernsehserie – Eine Kette von Verhaltenseinheiten: Problemstellungen für die Seriendiskussion”, in: *Serie: Kunst im Alltag: Beiträge zur Film- und Fernsehwissenschaft* 45, ed. Peter Hoff and Dieter Wiedemann (Potsdam: Vistas, 1992), 12. My translation: “zu unterscheiden ist von der Serie die Serialität des Programms, als eine dem Fernsehprogramm inhärente Struktur”.
- 243 Frank Kelleter, “Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality”, in *Media of Serial Narrative*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2017), 15.
- 244 See Kaspar Maase, *Populärkulturforschung: Eine Einführung* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2019), 27.
- 245 Christa Juretzka, “Einlassen auf Irritationen: Ästhetik auf der Spur der Serie”, in *Serie: Kunst im Alltag: Beiträge zur Film- und Fernsehwissenschaft* 45, ed. Peter Hoff and Dieter Wiedemann (Potsdam: Vistas, 1992), 42. My translation: “notorischen Seriencharakter”.
- 246 Knut Hickethier, “Die Dramaturgie der TV-Serie”, in *Grundthemen der Literaturwissenschaft: Drama*, ed. Andreas Enghart and Franziska Schöbler (Berlin/Boston de Gruyter, 2019), 576. My translation: “doppelte dramatische Struktur”.
- 247 Knut Hickethier, “Serie”, in *Handbuch Populäre Kultur: Begriffe, Theorien und Diskussionen*, ed. Hans-Otto Hügel (Stuttgart/Weimar: J.B. Metzler/Springer, 2003), 398. My translation: “doppelte Formstruktur”.

Another critical characteristic of seriality is what Eco calls the recurrent structural principle of “Innovation and Repetition”.<sup>248</sup> According to Eco, serial texts, in order to remain recognisable as a connected narrative and engaging to audiences as commodities, must strive to “achieve a dialectic between order and novelty, in other words, between scheme and innovation”.<sup>249</sup> For Eco, the main appeal of a serial text rests not in its invention of new components but its variation of known motifs.

This realisation ties in with more recent questions of whether and how a multi-part series can be regarded as a joint work. Tanja Weber and Christian Junklewitz remark that series require a particular connection between individual segments to appear as a single work<sup>250</sup> and develop an “intraserial coherence”.<sup>251</sup> Claudia Stockinger has pointed out the structurally discursive rather than ontic quality of the category of the serial artefact as a ‘work’.<sup>252</sup> For her, a series “can be a work if it wants to be one, that is if it creates structures that evoke work-shaped effects”.<sup>253</sup>

It has often been remarked that series as cultural commodities attempt to maximise their ability to generate revenue by continuing for as long as possible.<sup>254</sup> A series will therefore delay the ultimate dénouement of its central conflicts. As Jeremy Butler notes:

Almost by definition, Serials cannot have total resolution. If they did, there would be no reason to tune in the next day. Climaxes don't generate resolutions. They just create new enigmas.<sup>255</sup>

Examining this specifically serial characteristic, Mittell distinguishes different types of endings for serial narratives in his poetics of complex TV storytelling. He describes (1)

248 Umberto Eco, “Innovation and Repetition: Between Modern and Post-Modern Aesthetics,” *Daedalus* 114, no. 4 (1985): 161–84.

249 Umberto Eco, “Innovation and Repetition: Between Modern and Post-Modern Aesthetics,” *Daedalus* 114, no. 4 (1985): 173. See also Umberto Eco, “Interpreting Serials”, in *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 84.

250 Tanja Weber and Christian Junklewitz, “Das Gesetz der Serie: Ansätze zur Definition und Analyse”, *MEDIENwissenschaft: Rezensionen | Reviews* 25, no.1 (2008): 15. <https://doi.org/10.17192/ep2008.1.663>.

251 Weber and Junklewitz, “Das Gesetz der Serie”, 23. My translation “Intraserielle Kohärenz”.

252 Claudia Stockinger, “Werk in Serie? Werkförmigkeit unter den Bedingungen von Populärkultur”, in *Das Werk: Zum Verschwinden und Fortwirken eines Grundbegriffs*, ed. Lutz Danneberg, Annette Gilbert, and Carlos Spoerhase (Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, 2019), 266.

253 Claudia Stockinger, “Werk in Serie? Werkförmigkeit unter den Bedingungen von Populärkultur”, in *Das Werk: Zum Verschwinden und Fortwirken eines Grundbegriffs*, ed. Lutz Danneberg, Annette Gilbert, and Carlos Spoerhase (Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, 2019), 283. My translation: “Serie kann Werk sein, wenn sie Werk sein will, also Strukturen hervorbringt, die werkförmige Effekte erzeugen”.

254 See: e.g. Lothar Mikos, “Serien als Fernsehgenre: Zusammenhänge zwischen Dramaturgie und Aneignungsweise des Publikums”, in *Serie: Kunst im Alltag: Beiträge zur Film- und Fernsehwissenschaft* 45, ed. Peter Hoff and Dieter Wiedemann (Potsdam: Vistas, 1992), 20 and 24f. And Jeremy Butler, *Television: Visual Storytelling and Screen Culture*, 5th ed. (New York/ London: Routledge, 2018), 73.

255 Butler, *Television*, 73.

the “stoppage”, an extratextually motivated, “abrupt, unplanned end”, usually mid-plot-line;<sup>256</sup> (2) the “wrap-up”, “a series ending that is neither fully arbitrary nor completely planned”;<sup>257</sup> (3) the “conclusion”, a final episode crafted intentionally as the series’ end<sup>258</sup>, which is, as Mittell notes, a rare occasion for a series due to their commodified nature;<sup>259</sup> (4) a “cessation”, which describes not a conclusion but an interruption of a narrative without a definite decision on its future;<sup>260</sup> (5) the finale, which is, as he puts it, “a conclusion with a going-away party”<sup>261</sup> and distinguishes itself from the conclusion by its being embedded in a set of framing paratexts.

In his theorisation of fictional worlds, Mark Wolf has shown that the perpetual continuation of a series requires the constant addition of textual material at the risk of seriously impairing both a text’s aesthetic consistency and its intradiegetic coherence and diluting the original essence of a narrative.<sup>262</sup> William Proctor accordingly argues that perpetual continuation results in long-running series inadvertently requiring “reboots” (a new start of a fictional universe after a complete overhaul) and “retcons” (ongoing adjustments of a series’ narrative past to create retroactive continuity) as necessary “strategies of regeneration” of their narrative continuity.<sup>263</sup> However, while these categories of specifically *serial* narrative endings and adjustments are handy for textual analysis, they underestimate the multitude and complexity of the causes of serial adjustments and thus remain somewhat incomplete.

As a result of his work with the Popular Seriality Research Unit, Frank Kelleter has proposed “five ways of looking at popular seriality”.<sup>264</sup> He argues that series are (1) “evolving narratives” whose reception “first happens in interaction with the ongoing story itself”.<sup>265</sup> (2) They progress recursively, meaning they consider the narrative past in creating the narrative future.<sup>266</sup> They are (3) “narratives of proliferation”.<sup>267</sup> This tendency to proliferate is, firstly, due to the fact that, as commercial products, a popular story world serves to generate as much revenue as possible, making its proliferation into several series highly desirable. However, as Kelleter points out, a series’ proliferation also arises from a structural need resulting from its perpetual continuation. As the series continues, more and more diegetic data accumulates that cannot always be accommodated within the ongoing story of one series alone. Therefore, excess data will either get lost or migrate

256 Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 319.

257 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 320.

258 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 320.

259 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 321.

260 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 321.

261 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 322.

262 Mark J.P. Wolf, “Narrative Fabric”, in *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf (New York/London: Routledge, 2018), 48.

263 William Proctor, “Reboots and Retroactive Continuity”, in *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf (New York/London: Routledge, 2018), 233.

264 Frank Kelleter, “Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality”, in *Media of Serial Narrative*, ed. Frank Kelleter, (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2017), 7–34.

265 Kelleter, “Five Ways”, 12.

266 Kelleter, “Five Ways”, 16.

267 Kelleter, “Five Ways”, 18.



to another series.<sup>268</sup> According to Kelleter, series are (4) “self-observing systems and Actor-Networks” whose existence is the result of a “conflictive division of labour” between various agential entities.<sup>269</sup> Furthermore, they (5) are “agents of capitalist self-reflexivity”<sup>270</sup> and, as such, “operate as agents of role differentiation”,<sup>271</sup> allowing other actors, through their very existence, to engage in the activities that turn them into discursive constructs such as ‘producers’ or ‘fans’.<sup>272</sup>

In her examination of the “serial figure” Fu Manchu, Ruth Mayer likewise remarks on the systemic extent of seriality and points out the need for a “reconceptualized framework of formal aesthetics to engage fully with the phenomenon”.<sup>273</sup> She suggests formal approaches to analysis that “background [...] the categories of personal intention or individual interest” by considering the various systemic and discursive forces involved in a series.<sup>274</sup>

It is interesting to compare the advanced state of scholarship on popular seriality to its comparatively low degree of application in textual analysis in general,<sup>275</sup> which is even rarer in the otherwise prolific research on fictional polit-series. Acknowledging that seriality, in many ways, acts as a bridge between textual affordances and the media industry, this study will regard its samples’ *seriality* as a decisive factor for the textual analysis of polit-series. It will thus contribute further to operationalising this complex conceptual realm for textual analysis. The following section will explore further how film and television criticism has examined the presentation of politics in polit-fiction.

## 2.4 Politics in Popular Serial Television Fiction

I have previously pointed out that contemporary polit-series share strong ties with many of the most recent developments in the complex media structures outlined above. Par-

268 Kelleter, “Five Ways”, 20.

269 Kelleter, “Five Ways”, 22.

270 Kelleter, “Five Ways”, 26.

271 Kelleter, “Five Ways”, 28.

272 Kelleter, “Five Ways”, 28.

273 Ruth Mayer, *Serial Fu Manchu: The Chinese Supervillain and the Spread of Yellow Peril Ideology* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014), 13.

274 Ruth Mayer, *Serial Fu Manchu: The Chinese Supervillain and the Spread of Yellow Peril Ideology* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014), 13f.

275 As above, for more recent examples to the contrary see: Dominik Maeder, *Die Regierung der Serie: Poetologie televisueller Gouvernementalität der Gegenwart* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2020). Also Claudia Stockinger, Christian Hißnauer, and Stefan Scherer, *Föderalismus in Serie: Die Einheit der ARD-Reihe Tatort im historischen Verlauf* (Leiden, Niederlande: Brill/ Fink, 2019); Christian Hißnauer, Stefan Scherer, and Claudia Stockinger, eds. *Zwischen Serie und Werk. Fernseh- und Gesellschaftsgeschichte im Tatort*. Bielefeld: transcript, 2014; Stefan Scherer, Claudia Stockinger, and Christian Hißnauer, “Formen und Verfahren der Serialität in der ARD-Reihe *Tatort*: Ein Untersuchungsdesign zur Integration von Empirie und Hermeneutik”. In *Populäre Serialität. Narration – Evolution – Distinktion: Zum seriellen Erzählen seit dem 19. Jahrhundert*. Edited by Frank Kelleter, 143–167. Bielefeld: transcript, 2012; Ruth Mayer, *Serial Fu Manchu: The Chinese Supervillain and the Spread of Yellow Peril Ideology* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014).

ticularly in the 2010s, researchers across TV, media, cultural and political studies were intrigued by the seemingly new resurgence of 'political fiction' (as it has most often been called) into the popular mainstream leading to a surge in scholarship on the topic.<sup>276</sup> However, politics has been a frequent leitmotif of popular screen fiction, at least since the Hollywood Movie MR. SMITH GOES TO WASHINGTON (Frank Capra: USA, 1939).<sup>277</sup>

Before the 2010s, interest in TV's presentation of fictional politics last peaked during the successful run of HBO's series THE WEST WING (USA, 1999–2006). It was arguably reinvigorated following the local success of the British polit-comedy THE THICK OF IT (2005–2012) and its US adaptation VEEP (2012–2019) and rose to global prominence during the run of the genre's preeminent contemporary representative: HoC (2013–2018). Accordingly, scholarly interest in polit-series has notably decreased since the relatively abrupt end of HoC in 2018 (this thesis will examine this further), with releases and newer seasons of older series receiving significantly less academic attention.

The same has been true for productions which carry less cultural capital and, following persistent traditions of pro-Western bias, for non-English speaking and non-European productions (in order of decreasing emphasis).<sup>278</sup> Until very recently, this bias has

276 See, e.g., the previously uncited volumes Niko Switek, ed., *Politik in Fernsehserien: Analysen und Fallstudien zu House of Cards, Borgen & Co* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018); Anja Besand, ed., *Von Game of Thrones bis House of Cards: Politische Perspektiven in Fernsehserien* (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, 2018); Steven Fielding, *A state of Play: British Politics on Screen, Stage and Page, from Anthony Trollope to The Thick of It* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014); J. Edward Hackett, ed., *House of Cards and Philosophy: Underwood's Republic* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016); Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret J. Tally, eds., *Politics and Politicians in Contemporary US Television: Washington as Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2017); Ian Scott, *American Politics in Hollywood Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011); Peter Swirski, *American Political Fictions: War on Errorism in Contemporary American Literature, Culture, and Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). See also the dedicated issues "Politikserien", *INDES: Zeitschrift für Politik und Gesellschaft* 3, no. 4 (2014) and "Fiction in British Politics", *Parliamentary Affairs* 64, no.2 (April 2, 2011). Also contributions like Frank Gadinger, Sebastian Jarzebski, and Taylan Yildiz, "Vom Diskurs zur Erzählung: Möglichkeiten einer politikwissenschaftlichen Narrativanalyse", *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 55, no.1 (2014): 67–93; Frank Gadinger, Taylan Yildiz, "Politik", in *Erzählen: Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch*, ed. Matías Martínez (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2017), 158–165; Oliver Jahrhaus, "An die Adresse des Publikums: Parabase und politische Theologie in House of Cards", *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 46, no.3 (2016): 349–368; Kenneth Mulligan and Philip Habel, "The Implications of Fictional Media for Political Beliefs", *American Politics Research* 41, no.1 (2013): 122–146.

277 Studied, e.g., by Ernest Giglio, *Here's Looking at You: Hollywood, Film and Politics* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002). See also Rob Edelman, "Politicians in the American Cinema", in *A Political Companion to American Film*. Edited by Gary Crowdus and Edward Asner (Lakeview, Michigan: Lakeview Press, 1994), 322–330.

278 For recent notable examples to the contrary see, e.g., Ulrike Gansen et al., "人民的名义 (Im Namen des Volkes) versus House of Cards: Polit-Serien als Legitimierungsinstrument aktueller chinesischer Reformpolitik", in Switek, *Politik in Fernsehserien*, 327–344; Florian Gilberg et al., "Eichwald, MdB: Überleben im Haifischbecken Berlin-Mitte", in Switek, *Politik in Fernsehserien*, 105–124; Jonathan Beierl et al., "Sex, Drugs and Politics: Die Polit-Serie Marseille", in Switek, *Politik in Fernsehserien*, 201–224; Taylan Yildiz, "Gomorrha: Mafia und Staat im Verhältnis", in Switek, *Politik in Fernsehserien*, 225–242; Audun Engelstad, "Watching Politics: The Representation of Politics in Prime-Time Television Drama", *Nordicom Review* 29, no.2 (2008): 309–324; Marlène Coulomb-Gully, "Les femmes politiques au miroir des fictions télévisuelles: Commander in Chief

rarely been the subject of much reflection. TV scholarship frequently implies a broader tradition of polit-fiction in the anglosphere as the reason for its limited perspective.<sup>279</sup> While this claim has always been questionable, the increasing number of prominent non-English-speaking polit-series has long made it unsustainable, as my overview of contemporary polit-series shows (see section 11). Another reason for a Western research bias is the (implied) assumption of a pop-cultural hegemony of Hollywood<sup>280</sup> and, more recently, US-based streaming portals. Western and US American cultural hegemony has been a persistent trope in postmodern discourses with Frederic Jameson, e.g., critically claiming that the “whole global, yet American, postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world [...]”.<sup>281</sup> The idea of a pop-cultural current or “one-way flow”<sup>282</sup> from the “West to the rest”/ “West-versus-the-rest”<sup>283</sup> is rightly a controversial and contested one. While critical examination of potential Western cultural hegemonies is crucial, their undifferentiated presupposition runs the risk of reproducing biases by overestimating the impact of so-called Western contributions and underestimating the productivity and independence of cultural industries and spheres, especially in the global South.

Despite the migration of politics as a fictional trope from the big to the small screen in the late 1970s, scholarship has, until the late 1990s, tended to concern itself with cinematic presentations of politics before turning its attention to television. Even today, exegetes often make little distinction between films and serial TV narratives. Although there can be no talk of a seamless transition between the two mediums (film and TV), research into cinematic presentations of fictional politics forms part of the legacy of TV scholarship's own investigations into polit-fiction and must – to a certain extent – be

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et L'État de Grâce: une comparaison France/États-Unis”, *Modern & Contemporary France* 20, no.1 (2012): 37–51.

279 See, e.g., Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 9. Niko Switek notes the traditional productivity of the US and the UK and remarks a recent relative increase in European polit-series: “Spiegel, Daten, Narrative: Politikwissenschaftliche Zugänge zu politischen Fernsehserien”, in Switek, *Politik in Fernsehserien*, 12. For affirmation of British tradition see, e.g., Liesbet van Zoonen and Dominik Wring, “Trends in Political Television Fiction in the UK: Themes, Characters and Narratives 1965–2009”, *Media, Culture & Society* 34, no.3 (2012): 264.

280 See Mittell, *Complex TV*, 9.

281 Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 5.

282 Ramon Lobato, *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 138ff.

283 Pointed out, e.g., in Courtney Brannon Donoghue, Timothy Havens, and Paul McDonald. “Introduction: Media Distribution Today”, in *Digital Media Distribution: Portals, Platforms, Pipelines*, ed. Paul McDonald, Courtney Brannon Donoghue, and Timothy Havens (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 12 and 14. For a more differentiated discussion with regards to current non-linear TV see Lobato: *Netflix Nations*, 138ff. In her study of Netflix, Lotz likewise remarks that the portal's existing national biases are not “uniformly ‘Western’”: Amanda D. Lotz, “In between the Global and the Local: Mapping the Geographies of Netflix as a Multinational Service”, *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 24, no. 2 (March 2021): 204. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877920953166>.

considered here. Film and TV studies share, e.g., an insecurity about the extent to which the findings of textual analysis reveal sociocultural conditions, as the following section will illustrate further.

### 2.4.1 Debating Polit-Fiction's Conflictive Relationship with Historical Reality

Scholars of (popular) literature, film, and, most recently, television have long wrestled with the question of transferability between the results of textual analysis and contextual historical reality.<sup>284</sup> Setting aside, for the moment, the hermetic, formalist approaches of New Criticism in literary studies, which demanded to regard fictional texts as self-contained (aesthetic) phenomena, the analysis of polit-series often attempts to examine if and how much fiction and sociocultural affordances can be said to have influenced one another.

Iver B. Neumann and Daniel H. Nexon propose four general analytical perspectives in the study of popular culture (and its artefacts) and (international) politics: (1) an examination with regards to its causal relationship with specific political developments and concerns;<sup>285</sup> (2) as a pedagogical “mirror” serving to illustrate and educate audiences about politics;<sup>286</sup> (3) as “data” allowing inferences regarding “dominant norms, ideas, identities, or beliefs in a particular state, society, or region”<sup>287</sup> (see, e.g., the film-historic tradition spearheaded by Siegfried Kracauer’s famous book *From Caligari to Hitler*); and (4) as “constitutive”<sup>288</sup> for political beliefs and actions through “determining”, “informing”, “enabling” or “neutralizing effects”.<sup>289</sup> The latter assumption follows notions of cultivation theory and its particular emphasis on the lasting effects of television in creating audiences’ realities.<sup>290</sup>

284 This is, e.g., one of the vantage points of Niko Switek’s edited volume *Politik in Fernsehserien: Analysen und Fallstudien zu House of Cards, Borgen & Co* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018).

285 Daniel H. Nexon and Iver B. Neumann, “Introduction: Harry Potter and the Study of World Politics”. *Harry Potter and International Relations*, ed. Daniel H. Nexon and Iver B. Neumann, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 11.

286 Nexon and Neumann, “Introduction: Harry Potter and the Study of World Politics”, 11f.

287 Nexon and Neumann, “Introduction: Harry Potter and the Study of World Politics”, 13f.

288 Nexon and Neumann, “Introduction: Harry Potter and the Study of World Politics”, 14ff.

289 Nexon and Neumann, “Introduction: Harry Potter and the Study of World Politics”, 17–20. For a summary of this and further discussion of the political in popular culture see also Kaspar Maa-se, *Populärkulturforschung: Eine Einführung* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2019), 204–212. With regards to polit-series see also Niko Switek, “Spiegel, Daten, Narrative. Politikwissenschaftliche Zugänge zu politischen Fernsehserien”, in *Politik in Fernsehserien: Analysen und Fallstudien zu House of Cards, Borgen & Co*, ed. Niko Switek (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018), 11–31.

290 Originally conceived by George Gerbner. See, e.g., George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan, and Nanoy Signorielli, “Living with television: The dynamics of the cultivation process”, in *Perspectives on Media Effects*, ed. Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillmann, 17–40 (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1986). And George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan, Nanoy Signorielli, and James Shanahan, “Growing up with Television: Cultivation Processes”, in *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*, 2nd ed., ed. Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillmann, 43–67 (New York: Routledge, 2002). More recent overview: W. James Potter, “A Critical Analysis of Cultivation Theory”, *Journal of Communication* 64, no.6 (December 9, 2014): 1015–1036. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12128>.

Manfred Pfister, asking similar questions for literary drama criticism, proposes to distinguish between “reception sociology” [*Rezeptionssoziologie*], which sees a correlation between the structure of a text and its audience<sup>291</sup> and a “sociology of content” [*Inhaltssoziologie*], which asks how selective a particular fictional vision of the world is towards social reality and what determines this selection.<sup>292</sup> For a critical examination of polit-series, the analytical perspectives of series as symptoms or data (3) and series as cultivating discursive influences (4) have had a powerful impact, as the following sections will illustrate.

#### 2.4.1.1 Series as Symptomatic Data and the Notion of ‘Realism’

The eponymous leitmotif of *politics* in polit-fiction has sometimes prompted the assumption that the study of these series allows inferences on their audiences’ political attitudes. This conjecture presumes a somewhat direct line between audiences’ ideological convictions and their entertainment tastes. Matthew Bailey e.g. has argued that “if British political fiction is a little negative, it is only a reflection of wider cultural attitude towards politics and politicians”.<sup>293</sup>

In his examinations of British polit-fiction, Steven Fielding has likewise followed a symptomatic approach using narratives as clues for audiences’ convictions.<sup>294</sup> He argues that an analysis of polit-fiction can show “*what politics means to citizens*”,<sup>295</sup> stating

plays, novels and films, along with television dramas and comedies, have long articulated Briton’s hopes and (more often and increasingly) fears about the exercise of political power.<sup>296</sup>

Other approaches, while regarding fiction as containing symptomatic social data, assume a less direct line between fictional presentation and the socio-political articulation of audiences’ desires. Dörner, e.g., states that while TV series may “not lose contact to the extra-medial reality, otherwise they will seem meaningless to us”,<sup>297</sup> they do subject re-

291 Manfred Pfister, *Das Drama: Theorie und Analyse*, 11th ed. (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2001), 56.

292 Pfister, *Das Drama*, 58.

293 Matthew Bailey, “The Uses and Abuses of British Political Fiction or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Malcom Tucker”, *Parliamentary Affairs* 64, no.2 (2011): 287.

294 Steven Fielding, “A Mirror for England? Cinematic Representations of Politicians and Party Politics, circa 1944–1964”, *Journal of British Studies* 47, no.1 (2008): 107–128.

295 Steven Fielding, “New Labour ‘sleaze’ and television drama”, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 16, no.2 (2014): 326. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-856X.2012.00538.x>. Original emphasis.

296 Steven Fielding, *A State of Play: British politics on screen, stage and page, from Anthony Trollope to The Thick of It* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 1.

297 Andreas Dörner, “Politische TV-Serien und Politische Kultur: Ein Forschungsprogramm und Betrachtungen zu einem deutschen Sonderweg”, *Politische Kulturforschung reloaded: Neue Theorien, Methoden und Ergebnisse*, ed. Wolfgang Bergem, Paula Diehl, and Hans J. Lietzmann (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2019), 165. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839447475-008>. My translation: “sie dürfen doch bei aller Zuspitzung den Kontakt zur außermedialen Wirklichkeit nicht völlig verlieren, sonst erscheinen sie uns belanglos”.

ality to aesthetic transformations as “meaningfully structured extracts of reality”.<sup>298</sup> He consequently argues for a course of research that examines, among other perspectives, how TV series production entities glean political expertise.<sup>299</sup> Sandra Nuy, following a similarly indirect sociocultural approach in her extensive study of political film, has proposed the identification of a narrative’s “Mythomotor”.<sup>300</sup> It is a term drawn from Jan Assmann’s influential work on mythology and denotes a narrative’s “directional impetus”<sup>301</sup> concerning the society that produced it.<sup>302</sup>

Regarding criticism of polit-series, particularly in the prominent case of HoC, some TV scholars have been eager to examine what they regard as the ‘realism’ of a series’ portrayal of politics – an accurate representation of historical reality – thus taking the idea of series as symptomatic data to great lengths. Solange Landau argues, e.g., that HoC aims for the “greatest possible realism”, trying to “capture the reality of the spectator on-screen as accurately as possible”.<sup>303</sup>

However, such approaches tend to ignore that the notion of ‘realism’ itself is problematic when it comes to fictional texts. Accordingly, Henrik Schillinger proposes a distinction between the “reality principle” that imitates reality and a “realism principle” that tells stories “as if they were true”.<sup>304</sup> For him, contemporary television’s portrayal of fictional politics shows the “hyperreality of an ‘authentic fake’”.<sup>305</sup> Mark Arenhövel uses the term “para-politics” to denote such “pseudo-realistic presentations of politics”.<sup>306</sup>

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- 298 Andreas Dörner, *Politische Kultur und Medienunterhaltung: zur Inszenierung politischer Identitäten in der amerikanischen Film- und Fernsehwelt* (Konstanz: UVK Univ.-Verl. Konstanz, 2000), 202. My translation: “sinnhaft strukturierte Wirklichkeitsausschnitte”.
- 299 Andreas Dörner “Politische TV-Serien und Politische Kultur: Ein Forschungsprogramm und Betrachtungen zu einem deutschen Sonderweg”, *Politische Kulturforschung reloaded: Neue Theorien, Methoden und Ergebnisse*, ed. Wolfgang Bergem, Paula Diehl, and Hans J. Lietzmann (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2019), 169f.
- 300 Sandra Nuy, *Die Politik von Athenes Schild. Zur dramaturgischen Logik des Politischen im fiktionalen Film* (Berlin/Muenster: LIT Verlag, 2017), 22.
- 301 Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). 63. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511996306>.
- 302 See also Jan Assmann, “Frühe Formen politischer Mythomotorik: Fundierende, kontrapräsentische und revolutionäre Mythen”, in *Revolution und Mythos*, ed. Dietrich Harth and Jan Assmann (Frankfurt: Fischer Wissenschaft, 1992), 39–61.
- 303 Solange Landau, “‘I’m feeling hungry today’: Die Machthungrigen in House of Cards und Borgen”, in *Gegenwart in Serie: Abgründige Milieus im aktuellen Qualitätsfernsehen*, ed. Jonas Nesselhauf and Markus Schleich (Berlin: Neofelis Verlag, 2015), 19. My translation: “In der modernen Serienlandschaft herrscht ein Wille zum größtmöglichen Realismus – das heißt, die Wirklichkeit des Zuschauers soll bestmöglich auf den Bildschirm gebannt werden”.
- 304 Henrik Schillinger, “Politik in Serie(n): Politik, das Politische und die Tragödie”, in *Politik in Fernsehserien: Analysen und Fallstudien zu House of Cards, Borgen & Co*, ed. Niko Switek, (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018), 55. My translation: “Realitätsprinzip”, “Realismusprinzip”, “als ob sie wahr sein könnten”.
- 305 Schillinger, “Politik in Serie(n)”, 57. My translation: “Hyperrealität eines ‘authentischen Fakes’”.
- 306 Mark Arenhövel, “Zwischen Ideologie und (Gesellschafts-)Kritik: Über die politische Lesbarkeit von Qualitätsserien”, in *Von Game of Thrones bis House of Cards: Politische Perspektiven in Fernsehserien*, ed. Anja Besand (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, 2018), 16f. My translation: “pseudo-realistische Darstellungen der Politik”.

This approach ultimately follows literary studies' assumption that fictional narratives adhere to dramatic truth first and historical truth second. As Wolfgang Iser states, fictional texts "possess a historical substrate," but "the way in which they constitute and communicate it seems no longer determined exclusively historically".<sup>307</sup> To him, fictional texts are, therefore, different from texts that "introduce [...] a subject matter which possesses an existence independent of the text".<sup>308</sup> Laura Saxton, studying historical fiction such as the royal bio-series *THE CROWN*, accordingly distinguishes between a text's "accuracy" and its "authenticity".<sup>309</sup> For her, accuracy defines "the extent to which a text's representation is consistent with available evidence", while authenticity "refers to an *impression* of accuracy and the extent to which readers believe that a representation captures the past".<sup>310</sup>

Stuart Hall, drawing on Charles Sanders Peirce's classes of signs, has argued that television's remarkable ability to produce effects of realism [as a sidebar note Roland Barthes homonymous 1968 article *L'Effet de réel*] is a result of its reliance on audio-visual codes. As iconic signs, they share identifying characteristics with the things they represent (e.g., historical role models).<sup>311</sup> While this does not cause their actual reality, iconic signs, for Hall, are

particularly vulnerable to being 'read' as natural because visual codes of perception are very widely distributed and because this type of sign is less arbitrary than a linguistic sign [...].<sup>312</sup>

In order to approach the much-discussed issue of just how 'accurate' or 'realistic' politics can be regarding sociocultural reality, Katja Schwer and Hans-Bernd Brosius have proposed a "spheric model of policy transmission on TV".<sup>313</sup> They argue that mass media not only pick up societal currents but are themselves influenced by internal media discourse, which blurs their ability to act as a "seismograph" for societal currents.<sup>314</sup>

Similarly, Gary Burns and Robert J. Thompson have pointed out that texts owe their existence to a "complex web of cultural, social, political, and formal conventions and ex-

307 Wolfgang Iser, "Die Appellstruktur der Texte: Unbestimmtheit als Wirkungsbedingung literarischer Prosa", in *Rezeptionsästhetik: Theorie und Praxis*, ed. Rainer Warning (Munich: Fink, 1988), 230. My translation: "historisches Substrat" – "die Art wie sie sie es konstituieren und mitteilbar machen, scheint nicht mehr ausschließlich historisch determiniert zu sein".

308 Iser, "Appellstruktur", 231. My translation: "die einen Gegenstand vorstellen oder mitteilbar machen, der eine vom Text unabhängige Existenz besitzt".

309 Laura Saxton, "A true Story: Defining Accuracy and Authenticity in Historical Fiction", *Rethinking History* 24, no.2 (March 2020): 127. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2020.1727189>.

310 Saxton, "A true Story", 127.

311 Stuart Hall, "Encoding/decoding", in *Culture, Media, Language*, e-Library ed., ed. Stuart Hall et al. (London/New York: Routledge, 2005), 121f.

312 Hall, "Encoding/Decoding", 122.

313 Katja Schwer and Hans-Bernd Brosius, "Sphären des (Un-)Politischen: Ein Modell zur Analyse von Politikdarstellung und -rezeption", in *Sesimographische Funktion von Öffentlichkeit im Wandel*, ed. Hein Bonfadelli, Kurt Imhof, Roger Blum, Ottfried Jarren (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 2008), 197. My translation: "ein Sphärenmodell der Politikvermittlung im Fernsehen".

314 Schwer and Brosius, "Sphären des (UN-)Politischen", 207.



pectations",<sup>315</sup> which renders direct sociocultural inferences difficult. In an even more critical stance, it has likewise been argued that postmodern television is "an intense but fragmentary and transitory aesthetic experience"<sup>316</sup> that draws into question any meaningful sociocultural inferences. Often implicitly inspired by critical theory's suspicion of popular culture, a second subset of TV scholarship has examined polit-series' role in creating historical political meaning.

#### 2.4.1.2 Cultivating Audiences?

At least since the introduction of cultivation theory in the 1960s,<sup>317</sup> media reception scholars have repeatedly examined how television influences audiences in their perception of reality, especially on social groups and political issues.<sup>318</sup> Given the pessimistic, fatalist, and often dystopian image of politics that prevails in contemporary fiction, it is no wonder that academics following the cultivation approach have turned their anxious attention to the question of how polit-series can shape the perception of historical politics itself.

However, while the general ability of fictional presentations to influence the perception of politics and reality is rarely disputed, there seems to be some uncertainty about just how far-reaching this impact is. Some scholars, e.g., Aristoteles Nikolaidis or Liesbet van Zoonen, see a more indirect effect. They argue that polit-fiction does not shape audiences' perception of individual issues and instead influences their "overall angle on politics".<sup>319</sup> Steven Fielding, Enric Castelló, Peter Swirski, and Jeff Smith have each pointed out that, particularly in the US, film and TV series in general and polit-fiction in particular play a significant role in constructing what Benedict Anderson calls "imagined

315 Gary Burns and Robert J. Thompson, "Introduction", in *Making Television: Authorship and the Production Process*, ed. Gary Burns and Robert J. Thompson (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1990), IX.

316 Doug Kellner, "Critical Perspectives on Television from the Frankfurt School to the Politics of Representation", in *A Companion to Television*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Janet Wasko and Eileen R. Meehan (Hoboken: Wiley & Sons, 2020), 28.

317 As mentioned previously. For a more recent overview see W. James Potter, "A Critical Analysis of Cultivation Theory", *Journal of Communication* 64, no.6 (December 9, 2014): 1015–1036. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12128>.

318 For a study on the relations between television and political communication see, e.g., Roderick P. Hart, *Seducing America: How Television Charms the Modern Voter* (London/Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1999).

319 Liesbet van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 139. See also Aristoteles Nikolaidis, "The Unexpected Prime Minister: Politics, Class and Gender in Television Fiction", *Parliamentary Affairs* 64, no.2 (2011): 296; For an empirical inquiry see also Liesbet van Zoonen, "Audience reactions to Hollywood politics", *Media, Culture and Society* 29, no. 4 (2007): 531–547; also Liesbet van Zoonen, "A Day at the Zoo: Political Communication, Pigs and Popular Culture", *Media, Culture & Society* 20, no. 2 (April 1998): 196. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016344398020002002>.

communities”<sup>320</sup> by helping to create “the perceived ‘realities’ of politics – its institutions, policies and leading figures”<sup>321</sup> in common societal discourse.<sup>322</sup>

Christiane Eilders and Cordula Nitsch propose a typology classifying the intensity of the presentation of the political in fictional series and its perceived degree of realism.<sup>323</sup> While their results vary, for some polit-series, including THE WEST WING, they find “not only a reflection of sociopolitical issues and state officials but considerable attention to institutional politics in terms of issues and characters”, accordingly attesting to the series’ high level of ‘realism’.<sup>324</sup>

Several studies have attempted to empirically quantify and qualify the cultivating impact of polit-fiction focusing on anglophone (primarily American) audiences. R. Lance Holbert illustrates a nine-part typology to categorise how political different audiences perceive a fictional program to be.<sup>325</sup> He argues that positive presentations of the US presidency (e.g., in the series THE WEST WING) prime viewers to develop positive attitudes towards the office.<sup>326</sup> Diana C. Mutz and Lilach Nir likewise argue that fiction produces high levels of emotional involvement in audiences.<sup>327</sup> Furthermore, Kenneth Mulligan and Philip Habel have shown that watching the outlandish conspiracy comedy WAG THE DOG (Barry Levinson: USA, 1997) can prime audiences for conspiracy theo-

320 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London/New York: Verso, 2006).

321 Steven Fielding, “Fiction and British Politics: Towards an Imagined Political Capital?”, *Parliamentary Affairs* 64, no.2 (March 4, 2011), 223.

322 Enric Castelló, “The Nation as a Political Stage: A Theoretical Approach to Television Fiction and National Identities”, *The International Communication Gazette* 71, no.4 (2009): 306. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1748048509102183>; Peter Swirski, *American Political Fictions: War on Errorism in Contemporary American Literature, Culture, and Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 146; Jeff Smith, *The Presidents We Imagine: Two Centuries of White House Fictions on the Page, on the Stage, Onscreen, and Online* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 9.

323 Christiane Eilders and Cordula Nitsch, “Politics in Fictional Entertainment: An Empirical Classification of Movies and TV Series”, *International Journal of Communication* 9 (2015): 1568; see also Cordula Nitsch and Christiane Eilders, “Die Repräsentation von Politik in fiktionaler Unterhaltung: Instrument, Anwendung und Befunde zur Systematisierung von Filmen und Fernsehserien”, *Studies in Communication: Media* 3, no.1 (2014): 120 – 143.

324 Eilders and Nitsch, “Politics in Fictional Entertainment”, 1571.

325 Robert Lance Holbert, “A Typology for the Study of Entertainment Television and Politics”, *American Behavioral Scientist* 49, no.3 (November 2005): 436–453. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764205279419>.

326 Robert Lance Holbert, “A Typology for the Study of Entertainment Television and Politics”, *American Behavioral Scientist* 49, no.3 (November 2005): 440. See also Robert Lance Holbert, Owen Pillion, David A. Tschida et al., “The West Wing as Endorsement of the U.S. Presidency: Expanding the Bounds of Priming in Political Communication”, *Journal of Communication* 53, no.3 (September 2003): 427–443, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2003.tb02600.x>.

327 Diana C. Mutz and Lilach Nir, “Not Necessarily the News: Does Fictional Television Influence Real-World Policy Preferences?”, *Mass Communication and Society* 13, no.2 (April 9, 2010): 201, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205430902813856>.

ries<sup>328</sup> leading them to suggest that fictional framing can affect real-life political attitudes.<sup>329</sup>

This study is not focussed upon verifying or disproving these empirical findings. Instead, it proposes a structural addition to illustrate how exchanges between complex collective entities like ‘audiences’ and ‘TV series’ can take place at all and why historical discourse surrounding polit-series feels the need to create notions of ‘realism’ in the first place. Notwithstanding their presumed stance on a series’ historical influence, the ways in which pertinent research has studied polit-series’ presentation of politics merits a closer look.

## 2.4.2 Examining the Evolving Presentation of Politics and Politicians

Regarding the presentation of politics in fictional film and TV series, media and television criticism has focused primarily on two interconnected issues: (1) the operational modalities of dramatizing politics and (2) the normative evaluations that inform its presentation in film and TV series. Lingering questions of ‘realism’ almost always implicitly or explicitly pervade these studies.

### 2.4.2.1 Describing the Serial Dramatization of Politics

Regarding the dramatic operationalisation of politics, John Corner and Kay Richardson have pointed out that “In many countries, political fiction on television has been determined strongly by the generic system of the medium”,<sup>330</sup> making the presentation of politics contingent on the requirements of the particular narrative form. Matthew Bailey, Audun Engelstad, and later Andreas Dörner have likewise each noted that fictionalisations of politics are adjusted to and simplified for popular entertainment standards, including the distortion and simplification of historical political processes. As they point out, polit-series omit what Max Weber famously calls the “slow, powerful drilling through hard boards”<sup>331</sup> of lengthy and often ambivalent political procedures.<sup>332</sup> Instead, as Nick Randall notes, series usually focus on “elections and intra-party struggles” as a “preferred source of political drama”.<sup>333</sup> This affirms Brian Neve’s earlier thesis that “neither film nor

328 Kenneth Mulligan and Philip Habel, “The Implications of Fictional Media for Political Beliefs”, *American Politics Research* 41, no.1 (August 2012): 124, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673X12453758>

329 Kenneth Mulligan and Philip Habel, “An experimental test of the effects of fictional framing on attitudes”, *Social Science Quarterly* 92, no. 1 (March, 2011): 79–99. See also: Mulligan and Habel, “The Implications of Fictional Media for Political Beliefs”, 125.

330 John Corner and Kay Richardson, “Political Culture and Television Fiction: The Amazing Mrs. Pritchard”, *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 11, no.4 (November 2008): 390.

331 Max Weber, “Politics as Vocation”, in *Max Weber: The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David Owen and Tracy B Strong, transl. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 2004), 93.

332 See Matthew Bailey, “The Uses and Abuses of British Political Fiction or How I learned to Stop Worrying and Love Malcom Tucker”, *Parliamentary Affairs* 64, no.2 (2011): 284; Andreas Dörner, “Politserien: Unterhaltsame Blicke auf die Hinterbühnen der Politik”, *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 66, no.51 (December 16, 2016): 7; Audun Engelstad, “Watching Politics: The Representation of Politics in Prime-Time Television Drama”, *Nordicom Review* 29, no. 2 (2008): 310.

333 Nick Randall, “Imagining the Polity: Cinema and Television Fictions as Vernacular Theories of British Politics”, *Parliamentary Affairs* 64, no.2 (April 2011): 267.

other forms of popular culture seem to have the power to provide effective models of political participation or action".<sup>334</sup> A judgement which again implies dismissive notions of 'realism' and (failed) historical accuracy as a marker for a fictional series' 'quality'.

A similar assumption has led political scholar Karl-Rudolf Korte to assert that the comparatively complex parliamentary procedures of German consensus politics were impossible to accurately and engagingly dramatize for TV.<sup>335</sup> This idea of a structural incompatibility of political reality and dramatic requirements, together with a historically sparse record of polit-fiction in German television, coincides with the somewhat debatable assumption of cultural incompatibility. It argues that German audiences are unwilling to engage with fictional politics.<sup>336</sup>

It is questionable whether the historical lack of a narrative tradition in (and success of) polit-series in Germany – compared to Britain or the US – is due to a cultural incompatibility or whether it simply results from circumstantial shortcomings in the dramatizations themselves. My analyses of the successful German Polit-comedy EICHWALD, MDB (2015–2019) and the French polit-thriller BARON NOIR (2016–2020) will show that the co-existence of a comparatively complex political system and a weak tradition in polit-fiction (both prevalent in France and Germany) are, in many ways, coincidental and by no means proof for an inherent systemic and cultural incompatibility.

Another central characteristic of the dramatization of popular polit-fiction is the narrative focus on what Nuy calls "figurations of the political".<sup>337</sup> It denotes the transformation of political processes into discernible individual characters and their interactions. Nuy argues that engaging dramatizations require politics to be "moralised"<sup>338</sup> by focusing on a character that serves "to raise the political from its abstract state".<sup>339</sup> This process ultimately manifests, as Engelstad notes, the Aristotelian principle of drama (be it on TV or elsewhere) as a display of characters in action.<sup>340</sup> This generically determined agential focus results in a narrative emphasis on interpersonal relationships and a tendency toward 'executive bias', that is, the focus on the executive branch of government.<sup>341</sup> As the

334 Brian Neve, "Frames of Presidential and Candidate Politics in American Films of the 1990s", *The Public* 7, no. 2 (2000): 29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2000.110087>.

335 Karl-Rudolf Korte, "Warum eigentlich nicht? Über die Unmöglichkeit, deutsches Politikmanagement im Fernsehen abzubilden", in *Politik in Fernsehserien: Analysen und Fallstudien zu House of Cards, Borgen & Co*, ed. Niko Switek (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018), 363–371.

336 See, e.g., Andreas Dörner, "Machthungrige Schurken? Zum Bild politischer Akteure in Serien und Krimireihen des deutschen Fernsehens", *tv diskurs* 21/80, no.2 (2017): 57

337 Sandra Nuy, *Die Politik von Athenes Schild: Zur dramaturgischen Logik des Politischen im fiktionalen Film* (Berlin/Muenster: LIT Verlag, 2017), 19. My translation: "Figurationen des politischen".

338 Nuy, *Die Politik von Athenes Schild*, 83.

339 Nuy, *Die Politik von Athenes Schild*, 95. My translation: "um das Politische seiner Abstraktheit zu entheben". See also Andreas Dörner, *Politainment: Politik in der medialen Erlebnisgesellschaft* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2001), 171f.

340 Audung Engelstad, "Watching Politics: The Representation of Politics in Prime-Time Television Drama", *Nordicom Review* 29, no.2 (2008): 309. See also Liesbet van Zoonen and Dominik Wring, "Trends in political television fiction in the UK: Themes, characters and narratives 1965–2009", *Media, Culture & Society* 34, no.3 (2012): 265.

341 Niko Switek calls this "Exekutivlastigkeit": "Spiegel, Daten, Narrative: Politikwissenschaftliche Zugänge zu politischen Fernsehserien", in *Politik in Fernsehserien: Analysen und Fallstudien zu House*

coming sections will discuss, this emphasis has been particularly evident in US polit-fiction (both in film and TV), where the office of the president has been the dominant focal point.<sup>342</sup>

Schillinger, examining the presentation of 'the political' in TV series, accordingly remarks that fiction's agential focus leads series to emphasise *politics* as a "dynamic process" and "power relationship" between protagonists while remaining vague about *policy* and using the *polity* merely as the "playing field on which the protagonists show their mastery of politics".<sup>343</sup> Accordingly, van Zoonen finds polit-series to tend to displaying a "political generality" concerning concrete issues.<sup>344</sup> Textual criticism has, at times, underestimated the far-reaching effects of these narrative conventions in its consideration of the normative dimension of polit-series, which often appears in a separate discussion.

#### 2.4.2.2 Studying Polit-Series' Normative Vision of Politics

Literary and TV criticism and social and political studies, particularly in the 2010s, paid significant attention to the moral assumptions polit-series make about politics, politicians, and particular national polities. Dörner has famously stated that politics in TV series appears as either "idealistic politics" [*Idealpolitik*], in which minor human flaws accompany an overall idealistic political agenda,<sup>345</sup> "Realpolitik", in which positive ends justify morally questionable means,<sup>346</sup> or as "power politics" [*Machtpolitik*] in which neither the means nor the ends require moral justification.<sup>347</sup>

In television and film studies, there currently exists a broad scholarly consensus that contemporary (TV) fiction's outlook on politics is predominantly negative.<sup>348</sup> However, there are some temporal and local differences in the normative portrayal of politics that

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of *Cards, Borgen & Co*, ed. Niko Switek (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018), 16. See also Nick Randall, "Imagining the Polity: Cinema and Television Fictions as Vernacular Theories of British Politics", *Parliamentary Affairs* 64, no.2 (April 2011), 267.

342 Zoonen and Wring, "Trends in political television fiction in the UK", 265; Philipp Loser "Wie im Film: Fernsehserien haben die Mechanismen westeuropäischer Politik verändert", *INDES: Zeitschrift für Politik und Gesellschaft* 3, no. 4 (2014): 38; Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor, *Hollywood's White House: The American Presidency in Film and History* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 3–6. Switek, "Spiegel, Daten Narrative", 15.

343 Henrik Schillinger, "Politik in Serie(n): Politik, das Politische und die Tragödie", in *Politik in Fernsehserien: Analysen und Fallstudien zu House of Cards, Borgen & Co*, ed. Niko Switek (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018), 61. My translation: "[...] Spielfeld, auf dem die Protagonisten ihre meisterliche Beherrschung der *politics* bis hin auf die Ebene der Verfahrenstricks vorführen".

344 Liesbet van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 139.

345 Andreas Dörner, "Politserien: Unterhaltsame Blicke auf die Hinterbühnen der Politik", *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 66, no. 51 (December 16, 2016): 8.

346 Dörner, "Politserien", 9.

347 Dörner, "Politserien", 9. For this triad see also Andreas Dörner, "Machthungrige Schurken? Zum Bild politischer Akteure in Serien und Krimireihen des deutschen Fernsehens", *tv diskurs* 21/80, no.2 (2017): 54–56.

348 Dörner mentions a "disillusioned and pessimistic image of politics" as a typical marker of "quality series". See Dörner, "Politserien", 6. ["ein illusionsloses und pessimistisches Bild der Politik"].

seems to have seen a certain degree of consolidation as recently as the 2010s, with television's increasing transnational scope following the nonlinear turn. This has been particularly visible in (disproportionately studied) US and UK productions.

#### 2.4.2.2.1 Serial Fictional Politics in the UK and Continental Europe

Since its inception as a dominant trope in mainstream TV in the late 1970s, British polit-series have, as Nick Randall points out, tended to portray politics as a morally ambivalent or outright corrupt business, governed by a remote deep state and populated by either corrupt or incompetent politicians.<sup>349</sup> Protagonists' shortcomings are inevitable and either due to their deficient "personalities, the constraints of the system, or their innate self-interest".<sup>350</sup> Liesbet van Zoonen and Dominik Wring, coming to similar conclusions, identify an overall gloomy vision of UK polit-fiction regarding systemic and individual morality.<sup>351</sup> They note a dominance of the "theme of self-interest",<sup>352</sup> stating that classic 'heroes' are rare in British polit-TV.<sup>353</sup>

Fielding points out the paradox that, until recently, the only positive aspect of the fictional British polity had been the monarchy,<sup>354</sup> which has maintained a continuous presence in British and US fiction. Mandy Merck has edited a volume that examines this "continuing role of royal representation in film and television as patriotic signifier and entertainment commodity".<sup>355</sup> The largely positive presentations of the monarchy in mainstream fiction have traditionally been presented as the antithesis of corrupt politics, implicitly following long-established albeit questionable notions of the historical monarchy as the 'unpolitical' and 'dignified' arm of politics.<sup>356</sup> In discussing fictional representations of monarchy, Film and TV criticism often reference the motif's complicated relationship with melodrama<sup>357</sup> and – as "Monarchy Film"<sup>358</sup> – with the controversial genre of Heritage film. Today, the cinematic 'Heritage' label justly carries negative associations of turning Britain's complex history and its dark imperial past into a simplified, selective,

349 Nick Randall, "Imagining the Polity: Cinema and Television Fictions as Vernacular Theories of British Politics", *Parliamentary Affairs* 64, no.2 (April 2011): 264–267 and 273.

350 Randall, "Imagining the Polity", 273.

351 Liesbet van Zoonen and Dominik Wring, "Trends in political television fiction in the UK: Themes, characters and narratives 1965–2009", *Media, Culture & Society* 34, no.3 (2012): 275.

352 Zoonen and Wring, "Trends in political television fiction in the UK", 269.

353 Zoonen and Wring, "Trends in political television fiction in the UK", 271.

354 Steven Fielding, *A State of Play: British politics on screen, stage and page, from Anthony Trollope to The Thick of It* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 265.

355 Mandy Merck, "Introduction", in *The British Monarchy on Screen*, ed. Mandy Merck (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 1.

356 See, e.g., Walther Bagehot's famous theorisation of the British Monarchy in his book *The English Constitution*, ed. Paul Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001/2012). Here, he describes the monarchy, e.g., as serving in a "dignified Capacity," (34) introducing "irrelevant facts" into the political process (37), acting as a "disguise" for actual politics, although Bagehot, too, states that there is, in fact, "no authentic explicit information as to what the Queen can do any more than of what she does" (49).

357 Merck, "Introduction", 4f.

358 Belén Vidal, *Heritage Film: Nation, Genre and Representation* (London/New York: Wallflower, 2012), 35f.

and often revisionist story of white, upper-class Englishness that caters to the demands of mainstream, largely non-British (especially US-American) audiences.<sup>359</sup>

On a related note, Frederic Jameson has identified what he calls the “insensible colonization of the present by the nostalgia mode”<sup>360</sup> as a common feature of postmodern culture. He states that, in a society faced with the simulacra of postmodern existence,

nostalgia films restructure the whole issue of pastiche and project it onto a collective and social level, where the desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past is now refracted through the iron law of fashion change and the emergent ideology of the generation.<sup>361</sup>

Besides the favourable monarchy, the otherwise mainly negative diagnosis of UK fictional politics essentially extends to the less prolific, non-anglophone landscape of Western-European polit-fiction. One example is Dörner’s assessments of the pessimistic and defeatist construction of fictional politics in German TV. Here, the political realm traditionally appears as a dirty<sup>362</sup> but ultimately unchangeable sphere<sup>363</sup> juxtaposed against the foil of a positive, private realm.<sup>364</sup> Interestingly, the pessimistic vision of UK/ European polit-fiction recently seems to have transitioned into US-American productions.

#### 2.4.2.2.2 Polit-Fiction in the US

Until the release of *VEEP* in 2012 and *HoC* in 2013, TV and film criticism traditionally distinguished between the negative European portrayals of politics and its positive, even idealistic presentation in US-American fiction.<sup>365</sup> In 2012, van Zoonen and Wring argued, for example, that the bleak outlook of UK fiction contrasted with

359 As discussed, e.g., by Andrew Higson in “Re-presenting the National Past: nostalgia and Pastiche in the Heritage Film”, in *Fires were started: British Cinema and Thatcherism*, ed. Lester D. Friedman (London/New York: Wallflower Press, 2006), 91–109; Thomas Elsaesser, “Images for Sale: The ‘New’ British Cinema”, in *Fires were started*, 45–57; Vidal, *Heritage Film*, e.g., p.8f. and 14; Lester D. Friedman, “The Empire Strikes Out: An American Perspective on the British Film Industry”, in *Fires were started*, 1–14; Kara McKenchie, “Mrs Brown’s Mourning and Mr King’s Madness: Royal Crisis on Screen”, in *Retrovisions: Reinventing the Past in Film and Fiction*, ed. Deborah Cartmell, I.Q. Hunter and, Imedla Whelehan (London: Pluto, 2001), e.g., 102f. and 110; Kara McKenchie, “Taking Liberties with the Monarch: The Royal Bio-Pic in the 1990s”, in *British Historical Cinema: The History, Heritage and Costume Film*, ed. Claire Monk and Amy Sargeant (London/ New York: Routledge, 2002), e.g., 219 and 224; Claire Monk, “The British heritage-film debate revisited”, in *British Historical Cinema*, 176–198.

360 Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 20.

361 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 19.

362 Andreas Dörner, *Politainment: Politik in der medialen Erlebnisgesellschaft* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2001), 213.

363 Andreas Dörner, “Machthungrige Schurken? Zum Bild politischer Akteure in Serien und Krimi-reihen des deutschen Fernsehens”, *tv diskurs* 21/80, no.2 (2017): 58.

364 Andreas Dörner, *Politainment: Politik in der medialen Erlebnisgesellschaft* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2001), 223.

365 See, e.g., Dörner, *Politainment*, 212 and 223.



most American political television and film fiction in which the outcome of the characters' struggles with conspiracy, bureaucracy, political and personal predicaments is mostly positive, showing that one can prevail regardless of strongly adverse circumstances.<sup>366</sup>

However, Matthew Bailey, likewise before the release of HoC, has pointed out that while the US – other than the UK – possesses a “grand tradition of idealism”,<sup>367</sup> the notion of a more optimistic US polit-fiction is an oversimplification.<sup>368</sup> Indeed, much of classic US polit-fiction features a negative portrayal of a corrupt or dysfunctional institutional structure where the positive outcome is a result of the personal integrity of the central protagonist, most often the US president.

Patricia Phalen et al., in their study of the pop cultural portrayal of TV presidents in selected series, have accordingly found fictional presidents to appear as “heroes, often faced with impossible choices in an effort to do what is best for the country”.<sup>369</sup> Gregory Frame states that until the 2010s, “mainstream film and television have, over the course of the past twenty-five years, become two of the presidency’s support mechanisms”.<sup>370</sup>

Van Zoonen has noted that the trope of the idealist hero (president) moving against an adverse system follows a “populist tradition” of building oppositions between tainted “elites and ‘the people’” and pervades many of Hollywood’s portrayals of politics.<sup>371</sup> It is, for example, at the centre of the 1939 film classic “Mr. Smith Goes to Washington” (Frank Capra: USA, 1939).<sup>372</sup> The trope of the idealised US presidency draws from long-established cinematic traditions. In his study of polit-fiction in Hollywood, Ernest Giglio, for example, states that “with a few exceptions, the film industry has treated the American presidency with respect and dignity, if not reverence”.<sup>373</sup>

Robin Celikates and Simon Rothöhler, comparing the political visions of Hollywood classics MR. SMITH GOES TO WASHINGTON, THE PARALLAX VIEW (Alan J. Pakula: USA; 1974), and THE MANCHURIAN CANDIDATE (John Frankenheimer: USA; 1962) to

366 Liesbet van Zoonen and Dominik Wring, “Trends in Political Television Fiction in the UK: Themes, Characters and Narratives 1965–2009”, *Media, Culture & Society* 34, no.3 (2012): 275.

367 Matthew Bailey, “The Uses and Abuses of British Political Fiction or How I learned to Stop Worrying and Love Malcom Tucker”, *Parliamentary Affairs* 64, no.2 (March 4, 2011): 282.

368 Matthew Bailey, “The Uses and Abuses of British Political Fiction or How I learned to Stop Worrying and Love Malcom Tucker”, *Parliamentary Affairs* 64, no.2 (March 4, 2011): 283. For a similar remark on US film see also Ernest Giglio, *Here's Looking at You: Hollywood, Film and Politics* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 113f.

369 Patricia F. Phalen, Jennie Kim, and Julia Osellame, “Imagined Presidencies: The Representation of Political Power in Television Fiction”, *Journal of Popular Culture* 45, no.3 (March 23, 2011): 536, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5931.2011.00812.x>.

370 Gregory Frame, “The Leader of the Free World? Representing the Declining Presidency in Television Drama”, in *Politics and Politicians in Contemporary US Television: Washington as Fiction*, ed. Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally (New York: Routledge, 2017), 61. He references his earlier study: *The American President in Film and Television: Myth, Politics and Representation* (Oxford, Peter Lang, 2014).

371 Liesbet van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 110f.

372 Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen*, 110.

373 Ernest Giglio, *Here's Looking at You: Hollywood, Film and Politics* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 105.

the hit TV series *THE WEST WING* likewise argue that the idealisation of the US presidency (at the expense of other democratic institutions) stems from a concept of democratic representation as a process of frictionless transfer between abstract constitutional regulations and the naïve trust of the people.<sup>374</sup> Historically, the idea of hero-president lies on the opposite end of the established dramatic trope of systemic conspiracy. In his examination of political thrillers, Robert Silberman has pointed out the pervasive “paranoid style in American political film”,<sup>375</sup> which is based on the “notion of heroic individualism”.<sup>376</sup>

The cultural juxtaposition of positive individualism and a negatively framed institutional realm corresponds to a pervasive narrative archetype which Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence have famously described as the “American Monomyth” (AM).<sup>377</sup> It arises from originally puritan notions of exceptionalism, individualism, and redemption and centres around a harmonious community “*threatened by evil*” that is saved by a “*selfless superhero*” after its institutions fail to solve the threat.<sup>378</sup> Discussing the trope of the (super)hero president, Lawrence and Jewett have likewise pointed out that US polit-fiction dramatically mediates the historical limits on presidential powers to maintain the individualist structure of the AM and fulfil its demands for an all-powerful messiah-hero.<sup>379</sup>

The motif of the hero-president has been considered as the result of particularly US American cultural notions of individualism that, as Robert N. Bellah et al. have remarked, “lies at the very core of American culture”.<sup>380</sup> Ian Scott, studying fictional polit-cinema, likewise points out the “crucial ideological framework that has been built around individualism at the core of political thinking in America”.<sup>381</sup>

While the trope of hostility towards systemic politics can arguably be traced back to the beginning of fictional on-screen politics, TV and film scholarship continuously sought to pinpoint historical breakout events. For Cinema, Silberman proposes, e.g., an influence of the assassination of John F. Kennedy.<sup>382</sup> Felix Brinker implies that for tele-

374 Robin Celikates and Simon Rothöhler, “Die Körper der Stellvertreter: Politische Repräsentation zwischen Identität, Simulation und Institution: Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, *The Parallax View*, *The West Wing*”, in *Inszenierungen der Politik: Der Körper als Medium*, ed. Paula Diehl and Gertrud Koch (Munich: Fink, 2007), 63.

375 Robert Silberman, “Political Thrillers”, in *A Political Companion to American Film*, ed. Gary Crowdus and Edward Asner (Lakeview, Michigan: Lakeview Press, 1994), 320. With reference to the famous essay by Richard Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics”, *Harper’s Magazine*, November 1964, last accessed 01.08.2022. <https://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics/>.

376 Silberman, “Political Thrillers”, 321.

377 Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *The American Monomyth* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1977).

378 Jewett and Lawrence, *The American Monomyth*, XX. Original emphasis.

379 John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero* (Grand Rapids, USA/Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 128.

380 Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 142.

381 Ian Scott, *American Politics in Hollywood Film*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 20.

382 Silberman, “Political Thrillers”, 321.

vision, the theme of conspiracy became particularly prevalent after the terror attacks of September 11, 2001.<sup>383</sup> However, rather than fixating on historical markers, he argues that the conspiracy trope ultimately corresponds to the requirements of basic narrative logic<sup>384</sup> and, as such, is particularly well suited to the demands of serial narrative, e.g., because of its ability to create endlessly deferrable conflict.<sup>385</sup>

Televisual representations of US politics seem to have traditionally skipped cinema's earlier pro-systemic moments and, until recently, concentrated mainly on juxtaposing a favourable presidential protagonist and an antagonistic system in line with the AM. The trope of the hero-president seems to be partly the result of a pervasive – although by no means categorical – hesitancy to portray a given TV series' native heads of state as negative figures. Examining the notion of traditionally positive fictional US presidents, Rob Edelman has, e.g., pointed out the influence of the sacrosanctity of the historical presidency in cinematic portrayals of real-life presidents previous to Watergate and the Vietnam war.<sup>386</sup> Marlène Coulomb-Gully notes a long-standing taboo of irreverent fictional portrayals of the French president.<sup>387</sup> In the UK, a similar taboo to feature a living monarch in a fictional production had been broken as late as 2006 with Stephen Frears' film *THE QUEEN*. The first fictionalised (not entirely hagiographic) portrayal of Elizabeth II in a fictional TV series came as late as 2016 (*THE CROWN*) and had tellingly received its financing from the non-British streaming portal Netflix.

In US polit-series, the dominant tradition of juxtaposing a hero-president and a villainous polity arguably changed with *THE WEST WING*'s much more differentiated portrayal of politics. Friedrich Balke remarks that while the series retains its idealised notion of the president as a paternally benevolent person and official, it features a much more procedural image of representative politics as a co-creative process as opposed to earlier monomythical (pseudo-monarchical) ideas of a presidential "one-man corporation".<sup>388</sup> In the 2010s, this evolution away from presidential idolatry seems to have continued with textual analyses of high-profile contemporary series describing decidedly more negative portrayals of fictional politics across national contexts, particularly in the US, that had hitherto been more common in European productions.

383 Felix Brinker, "Hidden Agendas, Endless Investigations, and the Dynamics of Complexity: The Conspiratorial Mode of Storytelling in Contemporary American Television Series", *Aspeers* 5 (2012): 87.

384 Brinker, "Hidden Agendas", 91f.

385 Brinker, "Hidden Agendas", 97 and 106.

386 Rob Edelman, "Politicians in the American Cinema", in *A Political Companion to American Film*, ed. Gary Crowdus and Edward Asner (Lakeview, Michigan: Lakeview Press, 1994), 323.

387 Marlène Coulomb-Gully, "Les femmes politiques au miroir des fictions télévisuelles : Commander in Chief et L'État de Grâce: une comparaison France/États-Unis", *Modern & Contemporary France* 20, no 1 (2012): 38, doi: 10.1080/09639489.2011.631701.

388 Friedrich Balke, "Doppelkörper und Korridorbildung: Souveränität und Subversion in *The West Wing*", in *Souveränität und Subversion: Figurationen des Politisch-Imaginären*, ed. Rebekka A. Klein and Dominik Finkelde (Freiburg: Karl Alber, 2015), 70. My translation: "Einmann-Körperschaft".

## 2.4.2.2.3 Observing a 'Cynical Turn'?

Critical analyses in TV and media studies concerned with the 2010s most prominent polit-series attest to US productions (above all the popular HoC and VEEP) a high degree of negativity, pessimism, and cynicism in their portrayal of fictional politics. The unanimity of these observations suggests that polit-fiction in the US approached and perhaps surpassed the pessimistic (European) tradition in the early 2010s in what one might call a cynical turn. Betty Kaklamanidou, e.g., notes that the amoral aspect of politics as a standard feature in fictional politics to create conflict had traditionally been the domain of secondary characters. In contrast, the polit-series of the 2010s "introduced a narrative which dared question the integrity of the American political protagonist".<sup>389</sup>

One of the most pervasive notions in more current TV scholarship is demystification and disillusionment in US polit-series. It expresses itself, e.g., in the breaking of taboos regarding the cinematic portrayal of formerly sacrosanct offices starting in the early 2000s, where Peter Rollins remarks that "poking fun at the president" has become more common.<sup>390</sup> With regards to the presentation of fictional US presidents, Gregory Frame points out that, following the election of Barack Obama to the US presidency in 2008,

popular culture is finding it substantially more difficult to provide the necessary buttress to what is beginning to be the rather weatherworn construct of the heroic presidency.<sup>391</sup>

US polit-fiction's pessimism arguably reached its first peak in the 2010s with the release of the cynical presidential satire VEEP. As Marc Edward Shaw argues, the series draws its humour from the difference between the standing of the presidency and the flawed characters, which creates an aesthetic of hyperbolic "omnishambles".<sup>392</sup> Nicholas Holm has pointed out that polit-comedies generally display humour that demystifies the political sphere by pointing out the discrepancy between the ideal "and its sordid particulars".<sup>393</sup>

A second pervasive notion is that of fatalism. Fielding, in his examination of British politics on screen, has remarked that while older polit-fiction shows a continuous struggle with a deeply flawed system, the recent series *THE THICK OF IT* (UK, 2005–2012) portrays a systemic and personal fatalism in which politicians "have to run just to stay

389 Betty Kaklamanidou, "The Cold war (re-)visited in *House of Cards* and *The Americans*". In *Politics and Politicians in Contemporary US Television: Washington as Fiction*, ed. Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally (New York: Routledge, 2017), 105.

390 Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor, *Hollywood's White House: The American Presidency in Film and History* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 14.

391 Gregory Frame, "The Leader of the Free World? Representing the Declining Presidency in Television Drama", in *Politics and Politicians in Contemporary US Television: Washington as Fiction*, ed. Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally (New York: Routledge, 2017), 61.

392 Marc Edward Shaw, "Veep's Poetics of Omnishambles", in *Politics and Politicians in Contemporary US Television. Washington as Fiction*, ed. Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally (New York: Routledge, 2017), 143f.

393 Nicholas Holm, *Humor as Politics: The Political Aesthetics of Contemporary Comedy* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 80.

still".<sup>394</sup> Holm likewise lists "discomfort, provocation and absurdity" as the "key modes of contemporary humour."<sup>395</sup> He argues that polit-series such as VEEP, following an absurdist and fatalist tradition, do not present political humour but "jokes about politics",<sup>396</sup> pointing out systemic flaws without proposing ways of change.<sup>397</sup> For him, postmodern entertainment is "concerned only with a doubtful and dissentful opposition to any existing structure".<sup>398</sup>

Similarly, Margaret Tally has argued that absurdist humour is one of the hallmarks of the Millennial generation.<sup>399</sup> Roderick P. Hart, studying the role of TV in political communications in the 1990s, already describes an "ample supply of cultural cynicism"<sup>400</sup> (particularly towards politics) that has grown since the 1950s.<sup>401</sup> As one of the causes, Hart identifies what he calls the "naturally cynical" language of television<sup>402</sup>, endowing audiences with an (involuntary) meta-perspective, a "strategic lens", on political processes<sup>403</sup> and making cynicism appear as the "cool"<sup>404</sup> or "intelligent option".<sup>405</sup> In his *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Peter Sloterdijk famously theorized and described Cynicism as a pervasive cultural impetus and concomitant of modernity (and arguably mass media) and its subsequent eras.<sup>406</sup>

Analysing contemporary polit-fiction, sociocultural TV criticism paints the picture of a general sense of decline and dystopia together with a defeatist notion stemming from a sense of lacking alternatives. Frame, e.g., states that the moral deterioration of US fictional presidents goes along with historical "declinism",<sup>407</sup> that is, increasing insecurity about the US' position as the undisputed global superpower and the internal potency of the US presidency.<sup>408</sup>

Giving in to the temptations of the sociocultural *series as data* approach, TV critics have, at times, argued that this cynical and defeatist fictional attitude follows changing

394 Steven Fielding, *A State of Play: British Politics on Screen, Stage and Page, From Anthony Trollope to The Thick of It* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 259.

395 Holm, *Humor as Politics*, 16.

396 Nicholas Holm, *Humor as Politics: The Political Aesthetics of Contemporary Comedy* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 82.

397 Holm, *Humor as Politics*, 82f.

398 Holm, *Humor as Politics*, 202.

399 Margaret Tally, "Comedy Natives': Generations, Humour and the Question of Why Smart + Funny Is the New Rock and Roll", in *The Millennials on Film and Television. Essays on the Politics of Popular Culture*, ed. Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally (Jefferson: NC: McFarland & Co., 2014), 146.

400 Roderick P. Hart, *Seducing America: How Television Charms the Modern Voter* (London/Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1999), 17.

401 Hart, *Seducing America*, 81.

402 Hart, *Seducing America*, 83.

403 Hart, *Seducing America*, 9.

404 Hart, *Seducing America*, 81.

405 Hart, *Seducing America*, 82.

406 Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, transl. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

407 Gregory Frame, "The Leader of the Free World? Representing the Declining Presidency in Television Drama", in *Politics and Politicians in Contemporary US Television: Washington as Fiction*, ed. Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally (New York: Routledge, 2017), 72.

408 Frame, "The Leader of the Free World?", 62 and 72f.

historical attitudes towards politics and the world in general. Edward J. Hackett, e.g., has claimed that HoC “plays off the anxieties of our current realities” in which politics seems unable to “deliver on the promise of justice”.<sup>409</sup> Florian Breitweg et al., likewise examining HoC, attribute the series’ sinister portrayals to an “erosion of trust” in the US’ unifying “civic religion” and its political institutions.<sup>410</sup> Sebastian M. Herrmann sees the pervasive radical scepticism in polit-series resulting from increasing complexity and postmodern “epistemic uncertainty”.<sup>411</sup>

Dan Hassler-Forest, regarding worldbuilding,<sup>412</sup> and Jöran Klatt, in his analysis of House of Cards,<sup>413</sup> have each pointed out that fiction’s defeatist embrace of the cynical and demystified political dystopia corresponds to an aesthetic internalization of neoliberal or neo-conservative values. This thesis will pursue the notion that this assumption is akin to what Mark Fisher has called “capitalist realism”,<sup>414</sup> which erroneously assumes that the merciless and unsustainable structures of the neoliberal order represent the lamentable but unchangeable natural state of the world.

Nonetheless, Betty Kaklamanidou, in her examination of HoC and THE AMERICANS (USA, 2013–2018), argues that while the former might show an overall dystopian vision of the moral state of (US) politics, it still retains the notion of American exceptionalism. In the series, the US, flawed as its system and officials may be, remains charged with protecting the world from a perhaps even greater evil.<sup>415</sup>

Ignoring polit-series *serial* character, most studies have naturally assumed that their diagnosis within a TV series not only somehow reflects a social reality but that it remains static throughout a series’ run. Acknowledging that long-running series change over time, this study’s comparative approach will examine series and their formal and normative presentation of politics across cultural and media backgrounds. Moreover, many newer series have not been the subject of much scholarly attention due to their comparatively young age. It will be interesting to see how the cynical turn that took up speed at the beginning of the 2010s looks shortly after the decade’s end. Indeed, as this study will show, not all series have followed the cynical turn. Moreover, some younger series seem to replace their predecessors’ defeatist visions of capitalist realism

409 J. Edward Hackett, “Introduction: Contemplating a House of Cards”, in *House of Cards and Philosophy: Underwood’s Republic* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 1.

410 Florian Breitweg, Jakob Hager, Vanessa Molter, and Cornelius Witt, “House of Cards: The American Machiavelli”, in *Politik in Fernsehserien: Analysen und Fallstudien zu House of Cards, Borgen & Co*, ed. Niko Switek (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018.), 257. My translation: “Vertrauenserosion”.

411 Sebastian M. Herrmann, “Vor dem Post-Faktischen: The West Wing und die postmoderne, ‘epistemische Verunsicherung’ in der Politik”, in *Von Game of Thrones bis House of Cards: Politische Perspektiven in Fernsehserien*, ed. Anja Besand (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, 2018), 153–166. See especially 153.

412 Dan Hassler-Forest, “Worlds and Politics”, in *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*. Edited by Mark J.P. Wolf (New York/London: Routledge, 2018), 308.

413 Jöran Klatt, “Ränkespiele zweier Serien (1): House of Cards”, *Göttinger Institut für Demokratieforschung*, blog, May 17, 2016, [http://www.demokratie-goettingen.de/blog/house-of-cards\\_](http://www.demokratie-goettingen.de/blog/house-of-cards_)

414 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Lanham: John Hunt Publishing, 2009).

415 Betty Kaklamanidou, “The Cold war (re-)visited in House of Cards and The Americans”, in *Politics and Politicians in Contemporary US Television: Washington as Fiction*, ed. Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally (New York: Routledge, 2017), 105f.

with more cautiously optimistic images of political representation and significantly improved notions of social diversity. As the coming section will discuss, a prominent example of this evolution is nonlinear TV's presentation and, at times, its rejection of binary gender norms in politics and beyond.

### 2.4.3 Examining Notions of Gender in Political Fiction and Polit-Series

The topic of gender in politics and polit-fiction has been a widely discussed issue in more recent political, literary, and media television scholarship. Indeed, gender representation has – alongside questions of race, sexual orientation and gender identity – become one of the most prevalent topics of discussion, particularly following the emergence of the MeToo movement in 2017. However, the focus on gender, politics, and representation in mainstream entertainment predates these developments. Focusing on the evolving historical images of masculinity in politics, Wieland Schwanebeck describes a paradoxical situation for politicians who are at once compelled to project traditional notions of virility without being able to resort to their sexuality to prove it.<sup>416</sup>

Examining fictional representations of female politicians, van Zoonen states, “In many other forms of popular fiction, politics and women are [...] constructed as the antithesis of each other”.<sup>417</sup> Popular polit-fiction long seemed to struggle with the consolidation of patriarchal binary constructions of women and femineity as nurturing forces and “symbols of innocence and virtue”, on the one hand, and the requirements of confident protagonists who succeed within the common frame of the contemporary fictional polity as a self-oriented “cesspit of dishonesty”,<sup>418</sup> on the other hand. Accordingly, Bettina Soller and Maria Sullima have elaborated on the notion of the “*Double Bind*” of being a female politician stating that, within the realm of the static binary gender scale, neither traditional masculinity nor traditional femineity seem to function as “satisfactory options for [female] politicians”.<sup>419</sup>

The question of (still unbalanced) gender representation – both on and off screen – has become a similarly prevalent issue in more recent scholarship concerned with the cultural and structural affordances of popular culture in general and film and television in particular. As Kaklamanidou and Tally argue, there has been a notable increase in female representation and female protagonists in polit-fiction due to (1) a cultural shift in

416 Wieland Schwanebeck “Lovers, Not Fighters: The Body Politic and Its Restrained Libido”, in *A Man's World? Political Masculinities in Literature and Culture*, ed. Birgit Sauer and Kathleen Starck (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 143.

417 Liesbet van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 87.

418 Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen*, 87. See also: Valentina Cardo, “The Amazing Mrs Politician: Television Entertainment and Women in Politics”, *Parliamentary Affairs* 64, no. 2 (April 2011): 311–325, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsq056>.

419 Bettina Soller and Maria Sulimma, “‘It’s A Great Time To Be A Woman In Politics’: Politikerinnen als Protagonistinnen von US-Fernsehserien”, *INDES: Zeitschrift Für Politik und Gesellschaft* 3, no. 4 (2014): 85. My translation: “ [...] in einem zwangsweise zweigeschlechtlich konstruierten Raum, in dem weder Weiblichkeit noch Männlichkeit eine zufriedenstellende Option für Politikerinnen bedeutet”. Original Emphasis



the 2010s that has viewers “becoming more comfortable with women as leaders”;<sup>420</sup> (2) an increase in historical women in prominent political roles,<sup>421</sup> and (3) a “television renaissance wherein women are now finally beginning to be the storytellers in Hollywood in numbers rarely seen before”.<sup>422</sup>

However, there remains much uncertainty about the extent and quality of the evolution of ongoing TV series and their changing attitudes regarding the representation of binary (and, as recently as the early 2020s, non-binary) gender norms. This study will show how evolving extratextual discourse and a change in production and circulation context can influence such norms in ongoing series.

## 2.5 Where Does This Leave Us?

Despite its advanced state, the research into the various phenomena pertinent to this thesis leaves us with one fundamental question: how can all these highly relevant insights become useful for the textual analysis of complex serial (polit-)fiction in emergent (often nonlinear) structural and industrial environments?

Strictly structuralist and formalist approaches classically offer powerful models of foundational deep structures. However, they usually remain hermetically focused on the text, excluding any historical and contextual influences. Both the research into popular seriality and the study of agential (power) dynamics in popular culture reveal highly complex conceptual structures that seem challenging to integrate into practical textual analyses. This practical difficulty is arguably one of the reasons why TV criticism traditionally often omits (or only superficially touches upon) these areas.

Overall, sociotechnical and economic studies of TV and other creative media industries, on the one hand, and the textual analysis of polit-series have, to date, remained notably separate. Regarding narrative analysis, this distance sometimes suggests a subconscious continuation of the controversial demands of post-war new criticism, which saw the text itself “as the sole legitimate frame of reference for work in literary studies”.<sup>423</sup> With TV studies still, at times, struggling to prove their academic legitimacy even decades after the cultural turn and Leslie Fiedler’s famous call to “Cross the Border – Close the Gap”<sup>424</sup> between ideological presumptions of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture, critical theory’s distrust of the culture industry still seems to haunt many scholarly perspectives.

Whatever the reason, textual analyses of polit-series often avoid including the larger industrial and historical perspective of the narrative phenomena they describe. However,

420 Betty Kaklamaniidou and Margaret Tally, “The political TV shows of the 2010s: showrunners, reality and gender”, in *Politics and Politicians in Contemporary US Television: Washington as Fiction*, ed. Betty Kaklamaniidou and Margaret Tally (New York: Routledge, 2017), 24.

421 Kaklamaniidou and Tally, “The political TV shows of the 2010s”, 25.

422 Kaklamaniidou and Tally, “The political TV shows of the 2010s”, 25.

423 Tom Kindt and Hans-Harald Müller, *The Implied Author: Concept and Controversy* (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), 7.

424 Leslie Fiedler, “Cross the Border – Close the Gap: Post-Modernism, reprinted ed., in *American Literature since 1900*, ed. Marcus Cunliffe (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1975), 344–366.

for the study of popular serial narratives, which exist both as aesthetic artefacts and cultural commodities, this limited perspective ultimately precludes scholarly inquiry from considering crucial aspects, such as a series' own *serial character* or its ongoing narrative evolution. This thesis is not interested in any normative notions of cultural hierarchy. It is, therefore, free to propose a structured approach to analysing popular TV series that includes both their properties as aesthetic objects and as products of a highly dynamic culture industry.

To date, many contextual approaches like NFH and historical poetics have primarily considered linear, pre-digital narratives. ANT, which shows much promise in consolidating the various pertinent research perspectives, has only begun to prove its usefulness for textual analysis of contemporary popular narratives.

Finally, the research into polit-series has shown a notable bias for anglophone productions, in general, and, at least in the 2010s, for one production in particular: HoC. Comparative studies, however, remain rare. Many series have escaped scholarly focus due to their release after the recent peak of polit-fiction in the mid-2010s, their comparatively low cultural capital, or their non-English or non-Western background. However, in the constantly evolving world of nonlinear TV with its simultaneously globalized and localized dynamics of production, circulation, and reception, the focus of textual criticism must move on from Anglocentric perspectives based on altogether questionable notions of 'the West to the rest'.

This study will demonstrate that more recent linear and nonlinear polit-series remain highly relevant subjects of scholarly inquiry. They continue to undergo fascinating evolutions that are closely tied to the technological and economic developments of television, its increasing transnational scope, and broader changes in political, cultural, and ideological landscapes.

In what might well turn out to be a 'woke turn'<sup>425</sup> in contemporary nonlinear TV fiction, e.g., there seem to be increasing signs of a shift in the underlying logic of recent high-profile productions. At first glance, they appear to move away from previous cynical, transgressive, and defeatist notions and towards a more generous, differentiated, constructive and decidedly more diverse view of politics, representation, and narrative composition. This development is, in no small part, made possible by the changing socio-technological and socioeconomic affordances of TV industries with its means of digital circulation and nonlinear schedules. Therefore, disregarding a TV series' economic, sociocultural, sociotechnical and systemic ecology ultimately means remaining blind to essential evolutions in contemporary popular television storytelling that are taking place right now.

Besides its own analyses, this thesis will provide valuable vantage points for future inquiry into the complex evolving phenomenon of popular serial TV. It will combine, adjust, and extend many of the approaches discussed in this chapter to devise a methodological tool that operationalises central characteristics of the broader phenomenon, which colloquially carries the name 'popular TV series' for textual analysis, including complex industry structures, seriality, ontological questions of character and world

425 I use the term to denote a heightened political and social awareness but without any of the dismissive connotations that more conservative discourse has, at times, imbued it with.

status, discursive authorship, and narrative composition. The following chapter will illustrate how such an approach can be effectively applied.