

### 3. Actors, Games, and Players

#### An Analytical Model for Serial Television Fiction

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At first glance, the objective of this study seems straightforward: It aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of how contemporary television series present fictional politics. Why, then, does this chapter presume that a more detailed illustration of what exactly comprises a television series is necessary? The answer comes in the wake of the non-original but fundamental realisation that popular commercial texts in general, and *popular serial television texts*, in particular, are highly complex phenomena that extend beyond the scope of mere textual analysis or a search for proof of direct cultural representation.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter follows the assumption that the complexity of the phenomenon that colloquially carries the name ‘television series’ derives from the unique properties of *serial* texts and the dispersed, interconnected, and constantly evolving means of contemporary TV’s production, circulation, and reception. This realisation led Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni to remark that

A television fiction product is a living creature. Working on it is a journey of unexpected twists, turns, and subtle adjustments, a constant hive of activity lasting for months, even years, an ecosystem teeming with life.<sup>2</sup>

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- 1 As discussed in chapter 2. See Frank Kelleter’s notion of series as “Moving targets” and resulting methodological consequences: 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), 14 and 15f. See also Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), e.g., 2–5. Also expressed in approaches of New Film History, see James Chapman, Mark Glancy, and Sue Harper, “Introduction”, in *The New Film History: Sources, Methods, Approaches*, softcover reprint, ed. James Chapman, Mark Glancy, Sue Harper (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 1–10, which has been taken up for TV, e.g., by 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), 17–33.
  - 2 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), 27.

Following Roger Silverstone's claim that "technology arrives, [...] carrying on its back a burden of social, economic and political implications",<sup>3</sup> it can be stated that the digital and nonlinear shifts of televisions' "post-network"<sup>4</sup> era have significantly impacted the shape of serial storytelling and its various historical contexts throughout the 2010s. "Portalization" and "platformization" have increased the character of TV series as "*contingent [media] commodities*".<sup>5</sup> As this chapter will discuss, contemporary TV series are, as David Nieborg and Thomas Poell have stated for digital news and games, "unstable texts"<sup>6</sup> that "are malleable, modular in design, and informed by datafied user feedback, open to constant revision and recirculation"<sup>7</sup> and subject to the demands of "complex multisided markets".<sup>8</sup>

This chapter assumes that a TV series' ecosystem extends beyond material and institutional affordances. Indeed, serialization as a "social practice" influences, as Felix Brinker states, all aspects of serial media texts.<sup>9</sup> He notes:

[...] the concrete textual form of specific series mediates the demands of the different actors involved and, among other things, links the economic imperatives of producers to the reception practices of the audience.<sup>10</sup>

Frank Kelleter has remarked that TV series, in many ways, behave like actor networks<sup>11</sup> that "consist not just of the stories they tell but also of the manifold proceedings and forces that are gathered in their acts of storytelling".<sup>12</sup> A 'TV series' is a complex web of human, institutional, conceptual, discursive, and various textual actors and actor-relations embedded in what Marsha Kinder calls an intertextual "supersystem".<sup>13</sup> This chapter will further pursue the assumption that a TV series' various actors are determined by interdependent historical, textual, and fictional factors alike that, through their interplay, shape each other across ontological boundaries. A series' complexity, that is, its

3 Roger Silverstone, *Television and Everyday Life* (New York: Routledge, 2003 (1994)), 79.

4 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/mpub9699689/1:3/--portals-a-treatise-on-internet-distributed-television?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.

5 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.

6 Nieborg and Poell, "The platformization of cultural production", 4289.

7 Nieborg and Poell, "The platformization of cultural production", 4276.

8 Nieborg and Poell, "The platformization of cultural production", 4281.

9 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), 46.

10 Brinker, "On the Formal Politics of Narratively Complex Television Series", 47.

11 Frank Kelleter, "Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality", in *Media of Serial Narrative*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2017), 25f.

12 Kelleter, "Five Ways", 26.

13 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.

“organization and patterning involving a multiplicity of elements and their connectivity and variety, evoking surprise and wonder”,<sup>14</sup> thus describes both its systemic and aesthetic dimensions.

If it is true that “watching television draws the viewer into a world of ordered meanings, ordered by and within an increasingly global network of institutional and cultural systems”,<sup>15</sup> the task of describing and analysing the presentation of fictional politics on serial TV suddenly exceeds what mere narrative analysis can achieve.

Structural and narrative complexity continues to pose a range of problems for the analysis of serial television texts by exceeding the analytic capabilities of human-led close-reading or historical source work. Some selection, therefore, becomes necessary: Which actors and influences does one consider and which does one leave out? Moreover, given the often vaguely defined assemblage of Actors involved, how would approaching such a selection even work?

Before attempting textual analysis, this chapter proposes to pursue the examination of serial TV narratives as a “dynamic structural model”.<sup>16</sup> The original model this chapter develops aims to facilitate the description and analysis of serial narratives within the complex networks that condition them. Drawing on a variety of approaches outlined in the literature review, from historical poetics, narratology, TV, film, and media studies, psychology, Actor-Network- and Systems Theory, as well as game theory and game studies, the model describes the conscious and unconscious interplay between historical and textual entities as they create and navigate both the textual world and its historical framework.

Describing diegetic interactions as regular, rule-based *games*, the model will reveal narrative patterns and enable their analysis in the context of the unique, interdependent textual and historical logics that determine popular serial television fiction. The model is transversal in that it is not limited to one narrative phenomenon (in this case, polit-series), country, or system but is generally suitable to describe popular serial TV storytelling.

It is crucial to note here that this study is interested first and foremost in facilitating a comprehensive tool for its narrative analysis. Its focus, therefore, rests on illustrating fictional narrative patterns and their relationship with historical influences.

### 3.1 The Network of a Fictional Television Series

A fictional TV series is a complex network formed by various interconnected textual and historical actors who determine each other through their interactions (the next section will discuss the term ‘actor’ more closely). Actor-Network Theory (ANT) has proposed

14 Marina Grishakova and Maria Poulaki, “Introduction: Narrative Complexity”, in *Narrative Complexity. Cognition, Embodiment, Evolution*, ed. Marina Grishakova and Maria Poulaki (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 2.

15 Roger Silverstone, *Television and Everyday Life* (New York: Routledge, 2003 (1994)), 79.

16 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, 41–48 (Potsdam: Vistas, 1992), 41. My translation: “dynamisches Strukturmodell”.

a framework for describing complex networks that is – to a certain extent – useful for modelling fictional serial narratives within their historical conditions. Following Björn Sonnenberg-Schrank’s assessment of teen film, I propose to, firstly, regard TV series as a network that is “made, re-made, and performed by the dynamic relations that arise from the actions and interactions of human and non-human actors”.<sup>17</sup>

As the authorial function of a TV series is dispersed across a variety of distinct actors,<sup>18</sup> the *network of a popular TV series* is neither controlled by clearly discernible primary forces nor completely free of a hierarchal organisation between individual actors. As a multi-agential system, it shows what Marina Grishakova and Maria Poulaki, with regards to narrative complexity, call “weakened central control”<sup>19</sup> and a “tension systemic and agentic dynamics”.<sup>20</sup> As a complex system, the network of a TV series is arguably an “emergent” system, meaning its overall functionality exceeds the sum of its parts and that it can, as Marie-Laure Ryan notes with regards to narrative emergence, organise its individual elements “into larger functional patterns without the top-down guidance of a controlling authority”.<sup>21</sup> Serial stories, as Shane Denson and Ruth Mayer note, “possess a momentum which makes the recourse to authorial entities and intentionalities seem obsolete or at least inadequate”.<sup>22</sup>

For Kelleter, “Series are not intentional subjects but entities of distributed intention”.<sup>23</sup> He defines serial agency as “something dispersed in a network of people, roles, organizations, machineries, and forms”.<sup>24</sup> However, it is crucial to distinguish between the serial text and the narrative it conveys and the network that comprises the entirety of a series, the former two being contained in but inferior to the latter. In its use here, the term *network of a series* neither refers solely to the serial text or the meanings transmitted by audio-visual signs nor exclusively to the various historical actors that shape a serial

17 Björn Sonnenberg-Schrank, *Actor-Network Theory at the Movies: Reassembling the Contemporary American Teen Film with Latour* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 16.

18 See e.g., Marta Dynel, “You talking to me?” The Viewer as a Ratified Listener to Film Discourse”, *Journal of Pragmatics* 43, no. 6 (2011): 1631; and 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.

19 Marina Grishakova and Maria Poulaki, “Introduction: Narrative Complexity”, in *Narrative Complexity. Cognition, Embodiment, Evolution*, ed. Marina Grishakova and Maria Poulaki (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 12f.

20 Grishakova and Poulaki, “Introduction: Narrative Complexity”, 12.

21 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), 42.

22 Shane Denson and Ruth Mayer, “Grenzgänger: Serielle Figuren im Medienwechsel”, in *Populäre Serialität: Evolution – Narration – Distinktion: Zum seriellen Erzählen seit dem 19. Jhd.*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012), 186. My translation: “Ihnen kommt ein Moment von Eigendynamik zu, das den Rekurs auf Autoreninstanzen und Intentionalitäten obsolet oder doch unzulänglich erscheinen lässt”.

23 Frank Kelleter, “Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality”, in *Media of Serial Narrative*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2017), 25.

24 Kelleter, “Five Ways”, 26.

text. A TV series is a *hybrid network*. Its actors comprise the historical human, institutional, and technological entities involved in the production, circulation, and reception, furthermore the serial text itself and the diverse textual and non-textual functions created by the network's activity.<sup>25</sup> The latter comprises discursive functions like 'authors' and 'audiences' and the text's fictional characters (all of which I will discuss in more detail in the course of this chapter).

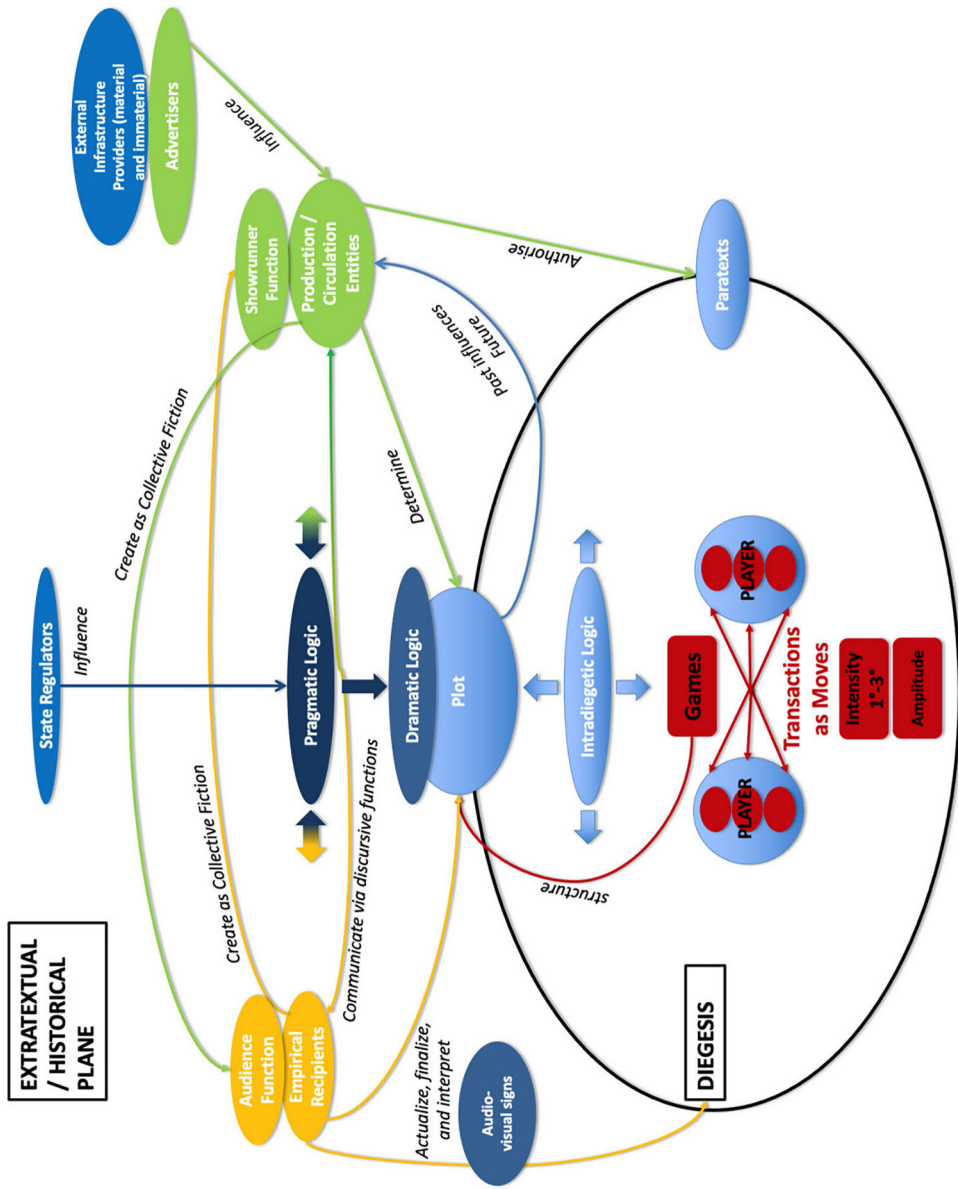
The network of the TV Series HOUSE OF CARDS (HoC), for example, contains the historical institutions (e.g., the streaming portal Netflix or the production companies Trigger Street Productions and Media Rights Capital) and individuals who worked on producing the series both as human persons and in their discursive functions as 'producers', 'showrunners', 'Writers', 'Gaffer's etc. It, furthermore, comprises the gatekeepers of the infrastructure used to transmit the series' audio-visual code and its various viewers both as human individuals and as collective 'audiences'. However, the network of HoC also contains the serial text itself (in its shape as distinct audio-visual signs) and the fictional characters and other fictional agential entities within the series' diegesis that emerge as meanings from the text, e.g., the series' protagonists Claire and Frank Underwood. Therefore, the network of the TV series HoC contains and exceeds the serial text (although it forms its own network of lower order).

As an emergent and contingent network, a TV series possesses intentionality that differs from and exceeds the assembled individual intentions of its agential elements. This point is central to the question of whether a fictional TV series can serve as evidence for authorial intention or broader sociocultural currents in the symptomatic readings of classic literary and film histories. A series' presentation of politics, e.g., is not a reflection of the attitudes of a showrunner or production company towards politics. Nor is it the reflection of the views of influential audience groups, e.g., prestige audiences with high cultural capital. Instead, the presentations visible in a polit-series are themselves a product of this series' particular emergent network and must be analysed as such.

Figure 1 visualises my model of the *emergent network of fictional television series*. The model's nodes represent individual (human or non-human) actors who can be historical, discursive, or fictional. Depending on their ontological status, the model locates the actors either on the diegetic or the historical plain outside the text or within the textual structure itself. The colours designate groupings of actors and actions with similar origin or impetus. The arrowed connections between the nodes indicate the one- or multi-directional interactions with which the different Actors influence and determine one another. Figure 1 below is a first complete illustration of the complex serial network. This chapter will discuss (and illustrate) the individual parts of its model in more detail.

25 As Kelleter remarks, "serial narratives, as actor-networks and self-observing systems, contribute to how the people who produce and consume them [...] understand themselves and proceed in these roles". In *ibid.*, "Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality", in *Media of Serial Narrative*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2017), 28.

Figure 1: The Emergent Network of Fictional Television Series



### 3.2 Defining Actors

It is essential to be clear about what exactly an ‘actor’ in a TV series’ network is. According to Bruno Latour, in ANT, “anything that does modify a state of affairs by making a

difference is an actor – or, if it has no figuration yet, an actant”.<sup>26</sup> Actors “become visible when they cause other actors to act”.<sup>27</sup> Actors can be “micro-actors” (single entities) and “macro-actors”, e.g., groups or institutions, which usually consist of various associated micro actors<sup>28</sup> whose actions share a common directional impetus. Actors are often hybrids, that is, “mixtures of humans, natures, and technologies”.<sup>29</sup> They are often “composite entities”,<sup>30</sup> that is, effects that are themselves “emerging from other networks”<sup>31</sup> to act as primary entities in a network of higher order. In his/her functional role as the creative head of a TV production, e.g., a ‘showrunner’ is an effect of various other networks attributing this role to a human micro actor. I will discuss this further. Accordingly, the true nature of an actor within a network is not always clearly discernible to second-order observers.

For my model, all discernible entities that emerge from a TV series (micro or macro, historical or fictional) are actors if they possess *agency*. This thesis follows Janet Murray, who defines agency as “the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the result of our decisions and choices”.<sup>32</sup> This concept of agency assumes a certain level of consciousness. Particularly with regards to discursive, fictional, and textual actors, the question of agency thus merits further discussion.

### 3.3 The Serial Narrative as Actor?

If agential status requires agency and agency requires (self-) consciousness, then why is the serial narrative itself an actor? A series is more than the passive product of a collaborative effort.<sup>33</sup> The unique properties of series as “self-observing systems”, as noted by Kelleter,<sup>34</sup> endow them with a special kind of agency that makes them become macro actors in their respective networks in what Sonnenberg-Schrank, in his discussion of film, calls “The agential shift induced by the self-awareness and referentiality of the texts”.<sup>35</sup>

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- 26 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 71.
- 27 Björn Sonnenberg-Schrank, *Actor-Network Theory at the Movies: Reassembling the Contemporary American Teen Film with Latour* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 16.
- 28 Michael, Mike. *Actor-Network Theory: Trials, Trails and Translations*. London: Sage, 2017), 153.
- 29 Michael, *Actor-Network Theory*, 158.
- 30 Michael, *Actor-Network Theory*, 153.
- 31 Michael, *Actor-Network Theory*, 36.
- 32 Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998), 126.
- 33 See, e.g., Ruth Mayer, *Serial Fu Manchu: The Chinese Supervillain and the Spread of Yellow Peril Ideology* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014), 13f.
- 34 Frank Kelleter, “Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality”, in *Media of Serial Narrative*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2017), 25.
- 35 Björn Sonnenberg-Schrank, *Actor-Network Theory at the Movies: Reassembling the Contemporary American Teen Film with Latour* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 7. Sonnenberg-Schrank notes this with regards to film, however, the agential properties of film an series doubtlessly vary significantly.

Contingent, 'unstable' serial texts thus possess a self-consciousness and agency that results from their network's emergent systemic affordances.<sup>36</sup>

A serial narrative's self-awareness and self-referentiality result from the unique properties of popular seriality. As popular TV series are typically released while they are still in development, "certain narrative options are still open"<sup>37</sup> at the time of reception. As long as it is still ongoing, a series' plot and its fictional world are *open* texts, meaning that additional "canonical material is still being added".<sup>38</sup> By contrast, the text of a one-part movie or a mini-series is usually *closed* at the time of its first release, meaning that it has been "declared 'finished'" by an authorial authority preventing the addition of further canonical material.<sup>39</sup> A series' *open* status as what Kelleter calls "evolving narratives"<sup>40</sup> has far-reaching consequences for its role in the overall network. A series' narrative evolution is contingent upon the extratextual production entities' constant observation of the historic environment of a series. Consequently, ongoing serial narratives can 'respond' to factors like consumer reactions, current events, or changing cultural sensibilities by incorporating them into the story's continuation.<sup>41</sup>

What is more, as "narratives of recursive progression",<sup>42</sup> series constantly readjust the continuation of their plot "to already established [narrative] information".<sup>43</sup> This, however, means that the diegesis is not merely defined by a series' historical actors in a one-way process. Instead, the existing serial narrative, in turn, influences the historical forces in their determination of its own continuation. Thus, for the purpose of modelling a series' actor-network, the narrative itself gains agential status as a macro function within the network.

A television series remains *open* as long as its production is ongoing. This remains true even in times of full-season releases and full-season production (as practised, e.g., by the streaming portal Netflix). In such cases, the arc of the recursive self-observation merely expands to a seasonal rather than episodic perspective. Accordingly, the analysis of a TV series has to consider their nature as formally *open* texts even if they have terminated at the time of analysis.

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36 See Andreas Jahn-Sudmann and Frank Kelleter, "Die Dynamik serieller Überbietung: Amerikanische Fernsehserien und das Konzept des Quality-TV", in *Populäre Serialität: Evolution – Narration – Distinktion: Zum seriellen Erzählen seit dem 19. Jhd.*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012), 221.

37 Kelleter, "Five Ways", 12.

38 Mark J.P. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 270. He writes with regards to "open" fictional worlds. For a similar conception of 'open and closed games' see also 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), 5.

39 Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 270.

40 Kelleter, "Five Ways", 12.

41 Kelleter, "Five Ways", 14.

42 Frank Kelleter, "Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality", in *Media of Serial Narrative*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2017), 16.

43 Kelleter, "Five Ways", 17.

### 3.4 Ontological Planes

The actors of any TV series are dispersed across two ontological planes: the diegesis and the historical plane, which I will call the extratextual plane. According to Gérard Genette, the diegesis is “not the story but the universe in which the story unfolds”.<sup>44</sup> It contains, as Étienne Souriau remarks, “all that occurs according to the [...] presented fiction and what it implies if one regarded it as true”.<sup>45</sup>

For my model, all fictional characters and institutions endowed with agency are diegetic (micro or macro) actors. I will call them *players* for better distinction. The nature of their agency and the structural schematisation of their actions require further discussion, which will follow shortly. For now, suffice it to say that diegetic actors (players) are of a very different substance from historical actors and interact in accordance with a different set of rules.

The extratextual plane contains all non-fictional elements and actors of a TV series' network. These can be ‘real’ micro actors like the human persons who work as writers, producers, screen actors (in the thespian sense) or recipients. They can also be macro actors, such as institutions, or discursive functions, like ‘authors’, ‘stars’ or ‘audiences’, involved in a series' production, circulation, or reception. The extratextual level also contains the principles that determine the extratextual world, such as laws of nature or the – although much less self-evident – mechanisms of a capitalist market economy.

### 3.5 The Triple Logic of Serial Fiction: *Pragmatic, Dramatic, Intradiegetic*

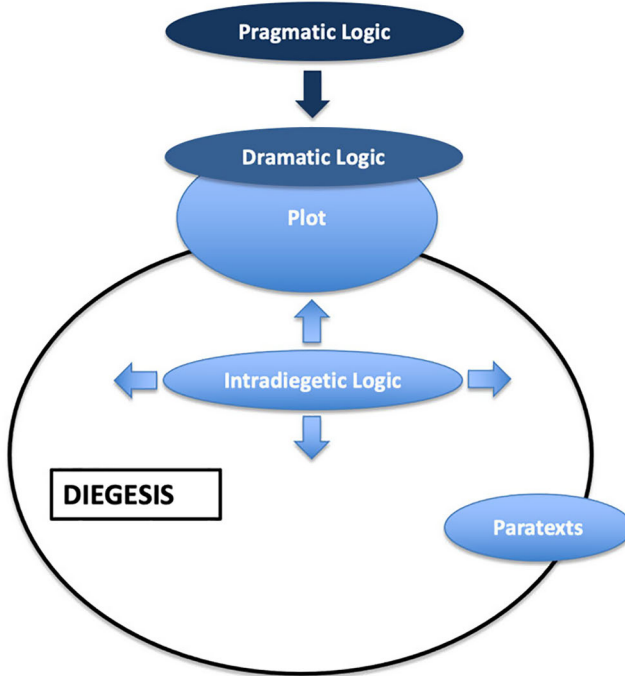
Due to their double identity as aesthetic objects and contingent cultural commodities, serial texts, the fictional world they present, and the plot they convey behave according to three distinct sets of logics, that is, regular “set[s] of factors that determine the conditions under which individual agents and organizations can participate” in systemic interactions.<sup>46</sup> While the three logics are situated on different ontological planes, they indirectly affect all actors of the network across ontological planes (though to different degrees). Their distinction (see figure 2) is of the utmost importance to analysing contingent serial texts.

44 Gérard Genette, *Die Erzählung*, 3rd ed., transl. Andreas Knop (Paderborn: Fink Verlag, 2010), 183. My translation: “Die Diegese ist mithin nicht die Geschichte, sondern das Universum, in dem sie spielt [...]”.

45 Étienne Souriau, “Die Struktur des filmischen Universums und das Vokabular der Filmologie”, *Montage/AV* 6, no. 2 (1997): 156. My translation: “[...] alles, was sich laut der [...] präsentierten Fiktion ereignet und was sie implizierte, wenn man sie als wahr ansähe [...]”.

46 John B. Thompson, *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business In The Twenty-First Century*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2012), 11.

Figure 2: The Triple Logic of Serial Fiction



There is (1) the extratextual or *pragmatic logic*, which comprises the historical world’s natural, economic, moral, political, or societal affordances, laws, and conventions; (2) the *dramatic logic* of aesthetic narrative and formal composition; (3) the *intradiegetic*<sup>47</sup> logic as the collection of natural, economic, moral, political and societal affordances and laws that govern the fictional world. These three sets of logics are distinct from one another but interdependent. While pragmatic logics primarily exist outside a TV series’ immediate network, the dramatic and intradiegetic logics emerge as a result of and are contingent on the multi-agential network’s activity.

The model of the *triple logic* partly builds on (and extends) Jan Mukařovský’s formalist concept of (aesthetic) norms. For him, the term ‘aesthetic norm’ denotes the uncodified “regulating energetic principle”<sup>48</sup> as a potential force limiting and guiding any form of activity pertaining to an artistic object.<sup>49</sup> Mukařovský distinguishes a “multiplicity of norms” that determine “the unstable equilibrium which is the structure of a work”.<sup>50</sup> He notes (1) the norms of a work which derive from “the material of a given art”, such as

47 For the term “intradiegetic” see the famous concept by Gérard Genette, e.g., *ibid.*, Die Erzählung, 3rd ed, transl. Andreas Knop (Paderborn: Fink Verlag, 2010), 148.

48 Jan Mukařovský, “The Aesthetic Norm”, in *Structure, Sign, and Function: Selected Essays by Jan Mukařovský*, ed. and transl. John Burbank and Peter Steiner (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1978), 49.

49 Mukařovský, “The Aesthetic Norm”, 50.

50 Mukařovský, “The Aesthetic Norm”, 54.

language for literature;<sup>51</sup> (2) “technical norms”, which are formal conventions, such as the “regularities of genres [...] and styles”,<sup>52</sup> that fall under *dramatic logics* in my model (3) “practical norms” located outside the aesthetic sphere, which “nevertheless acquire the range of action of aesthetic norms because of the role which they perform in the structure of the work of art”, such as “ethical norms, political norms, religious norms, [or] social norms”,<sup>53</sup> which would fall under *pragmatic logics* in my model; (4) aesthetic traditions as “systems of aesthetic norms” which predate the work but become “elements of its structure”;<sup>54</sup> (5) “‘anthropologically’ motivated postulates”,<sup>55</sup> which derive from the organization of joint human experience<sup>56</sup> and thus constitute “basic aesthetic norms”.<sup>57</sup> Mukařovský’s model provides a formalist differentiation of the discrete influences on aesthetic works of art. However, its distinctly formalist and aesthetic focus causes imprecisions concerning a work’s broader network that impede its direct application for textual analysis. The model, e.g., contains little room for affordances beyond the concept of ‘norms’ and says little about the status, activity, and relation of concrete actors and agential structures. It likewise does not locate them on their respective ontological planes. This makes it challenging to ascertain precisely the systemic origin of a network’s parts and clearly describe their conflictive interplay.

My concept of a *triple logic* of popular TV series furthermore extends previous, usually binary distinctions of the norms that shape fictional cultural commodities. It corresponds, in part, to Roland Barthes’ idea of the “*pertinence interne*” and “‘*pertinence esthétiqu*e” of mass cultural artefacts.<sup>58</sup> According to him, the “false rationality of the story”,<sup>59</sup> that is, the inner logic of the fictional world, and the “aesthetic logic that effectively regulates the course of the action”<sup>60</sup> often contradict one another. According to Barthes, the plot is determined by the joined conflictive demands of (1) narrative convention and commercial utility, which often oppose (2) the diegesis’ ‘internal’ logic. However, he does not clearly distinguish the demands made by the aesthetic conventions of engaging storytelling and the pragmatic, often (but not always) economic demands of the cultural industry and the broader historical world.

Another binary example that owes much to Mukařovský is Bordwell’s and Mittell’s work on film and television, respectively. Discerning primarily processes of meaning-making in TV, Mittell has argued for a distinction between (1) a series’ “*extrinsic norms*”,<sup>61</sup>

51 Mukařovský, “The Aesthetic Norm”, 53.

52 Mukařovský, “The Aesthetic Norm”, 53.

53 Mukařovský, “The Aesthetic Norm”, 53.

54 Mukařovský, “The Aesthetic Norm”, 54.

55 Mukařovský, “The Aesthetic Norm”, 56.

56 Mukařovský, “The Aesthetic Norm”, 55.

57 Mukařovský, “The Aesthetic Norm”, 56.

58 Roland Barthes, “Œuvre de masse et explication de texte”, *Communications* 2 (1963): 171, DOI : <https://doi.org/10.3406/comm.1963.959>

59 Barthes, “Œuvre de masse et explication de texte”, 171. My translation: “la fausse rationalité du récit”.

60 Barthes, “Œuvre de masse et explication de texte”, 171. My translation: “logique esthétique qui règle effectivement le déroulement de l’action”.

61 Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 167. Original emphasis.

which are the “norms of the television medium”<sup>62</sup> that “guide our comprehension process, including genre conventions, stylistic modes, and standard expectations for what a television series is supposed to do”;<sup>63</sup> (2) “intrinsic norms” that, is “the patterns and expectations that a given series establishes for itself”<sup>64</sup> in order to teach “viewers how to watch and what to expect from future episodes”.<sup>65</sup> The approach closely follows David Bordwell’s discussion of modes and norms in his poetics of cinema.<sup>66</sup> For Bordwell, “A narrational mode is a historically distinct set of norms of narrational construction and comprehension”.<sup>67</sup> A narrational norm, on the other hand, is a “coherent standard established by fiat or by previous practice”.<sup>68</sup> Acknowledging the influence of historical contexts on cinema, he notes, “every mode of narration is tied to a mode of film production and reception”.<sup>69</sup> However, this concept of modes and norms focuses primarily on the interplay of aesthetic form and intertextual environment concerning the reception of a filmic or serial text. It does not clearly distinguish the various influences at play in the ongoing (self-)determination of a serial text and its network.

Felix Brinker similarly takes a reception-centred binary approach in his discussion of the politicization of TV series through the “interactions between the formal strategies of narratively complex programming and the practices of audiences”.<sup>70</sup> He describes TV series as “commercially produced cultural artifacts whose form and function is determined”<sup>71</sup> (1) by their economic profitability and (2) by them being “objects of audiences’ recreational media consumption and cultural activity”.<sup>72</sup>

Marta Dynel, in her binary distinction of textual presentations, describes “two distinct *layers*” present in film and series: “the fictional world and underlying multifold layer comprised of sublayers representing discursive and cinematographic techniques”.<sup>73</sup> Manfred Pfister, for drama, notes the “embedding of an internal communication system into an external one” as “fictionality’s specific relation to reality”.<sup>74</sup> In his study on

62 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 167.

63 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 168.

64 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 44. The concept derives from David Bordwell who defines “‘secondary’ or intrinsic norms” for film as “standards attained within the text itself”: *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 150.

65 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 168.

66 Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 149–155.

67 Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 150.

68 Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 150.

69 Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 154.

70 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), 42.

71 Brinker, “On the Formal Politics of Narratively Complex Television Series”, 42.

72 Brinker, “On the Formal Politics of Narratively Complex Television Series”, 43.

73 Marta Dynel, “‘You talking to me?’ The Viewer as a Ratified Listener to Film Discourse”, *Journal of Pragmatics* 43, no. 6 (May 2011): 1631f., <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2010.11.016>. Original emphasis. [sic!]

74 Manfred Pfister: *Das Drama: Theorie und Analyse*, 11th ed. (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2001), 30. See also 20–22. My translation: “Einbettung eines inneren Kommunikationssystems in ein äußeres”, “der spezifische Realitätsbezug der ‘Fiktionalität’”.

games, Eugen Fink describes the internal and the external “sense of a game” [*Spielsinn*].<sup>75</sup> According to him, the internal sense is “the context of played things, deeds and conditions” within the game itself. The external sense of the game is “the meaning which the game has to those that commit to it, that intend it”.<sup>76</sup>

However, at least from the perspective of textual analysis, binary approaches often fail to clearly differentiate (1) between the aesthetic affordances (that I call *dramatic logic*) and the distinct intradiegetic logic of the fictional world itself and (2) between the *dramatic logic* and the *pragmatic logic*, which is often but by far not exclusively pervaded by economic considerations. This distinction, however, is vital. In contingent serial narratives, formal *dramatic logic* and its aim to create *engaging* and *coherent* narratives, on the one hand, and the pragmatic requirements of the historical realm (e.g., commodification), on the other hand, often differ from one another as much as from the *intradiegetic logic* of the fictional world. Nonetheless, all three logics determine the shape of a serial text. For unstable serial texts, this interdependent triple logic has far-reaching and, at times, confusing narrative consequences that cannot be captured by a text-centred analysis alone. It is, therefore, central to understanding how the network of a TV series operates in creating the serial text.

### 3.5.1 Extratextual Pragmatic Logic

A set of reoccurring extratextual considerations determines the creation of every TV series operating as a cultural commodity. Due to the relatively extensive resources required to produce a popular TV series, this applies to many of them. Following perspectives established, e.g., by critical theory, scholarship often reduces extratextual logics to purely economic concerns and dismisses them – and the cultural commodities they produce – as an alien, disruptive influence to ‘purely’ aesthetic practices. However, the influence of pragmatic logic exceeds economic concerns and by no means causes necessarily inferior or somehow compromised works of art.

What a series looks like ultimately depends on more or less economic factors like its budget and other production means, technological affordances, release schedules and the availability of screen actors and other creative personnel (although this is often not a purely economic concern). However, it is also contingent on official regulations, cultural context, and political discourse. Likewise, a narrative is determined by a set of largely extratextual conventions tied to genre or franchise,<sup>77</sup> which form part of the “extrinsic norms” of film and TV.<sup>78</sup>

75 Eugen Fink, *Oase des Glücks: Gedanken zu einer Ontologie des Spiels* (Freiburg: Karl Aber, 1957), 29.

76 Fink, *Oase des Glücks*, 29. My translation: “Sinnzusammenhang der gespielten Dinge, Taten und Verhältnisse”, “die Bedeutung, welche das Spiel für diejenigen hat, die sich erst zu ihm entschließen, die es vorhaben”.

77 Rodrigo Lessa and João Araújo “World Consistency”, in *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, ed Mark J.P. Wolf (New York/London: Routledge, 2018), 92. They distinguish between two layers of world consistency and a consistency with extrinsic norms without making explicit mention of the concept.

78 David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 150f.;

A series with a high release frequency and a limited cast, e.g., will often increase turnover by remaining studio-based and thus feature conflicts that can play out in limited indoor sets (in polit-fiction, often the Oval Office).

Rooted in the historical world, pragmatic logic is the most complex set of rules within the *triple logic*. This is due to the fact that it is not reliant on the limited data of the serial text but instead constituted by the limitlessly complex interactions of historical actors. The extensive and ongoing academic debate surrounding questions of 'popular-' or 'mass culture' and cultural commodification (e.g., regarding the distribution of power) attest to this. Due to this complexity, it is almost impossible to discern all actors and actor-relations that shape the pragmatic logic of a TV series (not least because 'pragmatic' does not necessarily equal 'rational' actions). However, dominant factors like natural laws, prevalent economic considerations, specific regulations, and certain breakout events (e.g., highly publicised scandals) usually make it possible to discern the general outline of a series' historical pragmatic logic.

Every TV series must accommodate a set of unique historical circumstances. HoC, e.g., had to adjust its dramatic and intradiegetic logic to the high-profile dismissal of its main star, Kevin Spacey (see chapter 8). SLUHA NARODU arguably accommodated the developing political ambitions of its star, Volodymyr Zelensky (see chapter 6). THE CROWN has adapted to changing attitudes towards the royal family throughout its run (see chapter 4). However, other extratextual factors, like the all-important economic logic of cultural commodification, apply to all series alike and have similar consequences.

The often-remarked potential perpetuity of a series<sup>79</sup> that results primarily from a need to maximise revenue is a particularly prominent example of the impact of the pragmatic logic of commodification. A series' end, for example, is usually determined primarily by extratextual factors (most often, its failure to return revenue or the loss of key personnel).<sup>80</sup>

The pragmatically motivated potential perpetuity forces the plot to evolve in unforeseen ways, delay resolution, and add detours and additional material that are, at times, neither coherent within the logic of the fictional world nor with the series' aesthetic principles. Indeed, in a long-running series, this pragmatically motivated delay will often seriously impair a text's aesthetic consistency and intradiegetic coherence<sup>81</sup> and risk wearing out its continued ability to engage audiences.<sup>82</sup> According to Jahn-Sudmann and Kel-

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Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), e.g., 44 and 168.

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

80 Jason Mittell has remarked on the various more or less coherent forms of endings a series can take as a result of this extratextual need for potential perpetuity ranging from an abrupt mid-plotline "stoppage" to the highly marketed "finale" in: *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 319ff.

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

82 Andreas Jahn-Sudmann and Frank Kelleter, "Die Dynamik serieller Überbietung. Amerikanische Fernsehserien und das Konzept des Quality-TV", in *Populäre Serialität: Evolution – Narration – Di-*

leter, this dilemma results in a long-running series' tendency towards recursive "one-upmanship" [*Überbietung*] regarding the repetition of its defining textual schemata and its serial competitors.<sup>83</sup>

Another result of the serial attempt at perpetuity is a successful series' tendency to proliferate and produce diversified continuations, spin-offs, revisions, subgenres, and so on to accommodate accumulating surplus narrative material.<sup>84</sup> The relocation of a series' breakout characters into a new, independent series is one of the most common examples of this proliferation.

### 3.5.2 Dramatic Logic: Narrative Composition and Audio-visual Form

Serial narrative's structure is, secondly, governed by the *dramatic logic* of aesthetic composition (both concerning narrative and audio-visual composition). It corresponds to what Sigmund Freud, regarding literature, calls the "real *Ars Poetica*", the 'poet's secret' to structure his\*her fantastic creation in a way that will make an audience enjoy an otherwise unrelatable daydream.<sup>85</sup> Dramatic logic is a liminal phenomenon that governs the arrangement of the signs of an audio-visual text (transmitted by digital or other means) to convey immaterial meanings and construct a series' intrinsic norms in accordance with or contrary to extrinsic norms.

Accordingly, pragmatic logic is essential in establishing a serial narrative as an engaging aesthetic artefact. It serves to, as Sandra Nuy puts it, "organise attention, empathy, and knowledge of the audience and establish meaning"<sup>86</sup> and determines a narrative's dramatic structure as a "collection of explicit and implicit structural principles for the cohesion of *Geschehen*, *story*, *plot*, and *discourse*".<sup>87</sup> In audio-visual TV series, the dramatic logics that structure the plot work in conjunction with the principles of the formal composition of images and sound in the presentation of the narrative. As such, TV series' dramatic logic is much more contingent on extratextual, pragmatic factors like laws of nature, budget, or technological affordances than purely text-based forms.

In its determination of the selection, arrangement, and presentation of diegetic events, the requirements of dramatic logic are distinct from the logic of cause and effect that governs historical reality and the conceptually parallel diegesis. In shaping a plot, dramatic rules expand, contract, omit and rearrange events. They cause the delayed

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*stinktion: Zum seriellen Erzählen seit dem 19. Jhd*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012), 206.

83 Jahn-Sudmann and Kelleter, "Die Dynamik serieller Überbietung", 207.

84 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), 20.

85 Sigmund Freud, "Der Dichter und das Phantasieren", in *Der Dichter und das Phantasieren: Schriften zur Kunst und Kultur* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2010), 111. My translation: "die eigentliche *Ars Poetica*".

86 Sandra Nuy, *Die Politik von Athenes Schild: Zur dramaturgischen Logik des Politischen im fiktionalen Film* (Berlin/Muenster: LIT Verlag, 2017), 12. My translation: "Aufmerksamkeit, Empathie und Wissen des Publikums zu organisieren sowie Sinnhaftigkeit zu etablieren".

87 Nuy, *Die Politik von Athenes Schild*, 57. My translation: "Sammlung von expliziten und impliziten Strukturprinzipien für den Zusammenhalt von *Geschehen*, *Story*, *Plot* und *discourse*". Original emphasis.

resolution or the timed escalation of conflicts that would run a much more stringent (albeit less engaging) course if left to the internal logic of historical or diegetic reality. In many popular narratives, dramatic logic strives for “total causality”, creating an “*over-coherence*”<sup>88</sup> in which all diegetic events and characters are linked by comprehensive chains of cause and effect that audiences can discern. However, particularly with the emergence of more complex TV, this does not necessarily imply – as has been claimed by dismissive critics of popular culture – a lower ‘quality’ of the series or an *undue* narrative reduction to “simple causation chains” and a dramaturgy that exhausts itself “almost entirely in the order of the duel”.<sup>89</sup>

An engaging narrative is usually committed to dramatic logic first and stringent presentation of events second. This order is the reason for Friedrich Schiller’s remark that, in fiction, “only a dilettante borrows from the material a force which he despairs of laying into the form”.<sup>90</sup>

As audio-visual aesthetic artefacts, all TV series contain a large number of “cinematic strategies”.<sup>91</sup> They are formal and diegetic elements of a TV series that serve no intradiegetic purpose but instead exist to communicate meaning to audiences. A typical example of this is the frequent contextualizing dialogue in TV series. It does not exist to further communication between characters but to provide audiences with the necessary information, context, or plot reminders (e.g., after a commercial, episode, or seasonal break). As Marta Dynel points out, “Characters may not talk to us, but they certainly talk for us”.<sup>92</sup>

Dramatic principles risk appearing at odds with *intradiegetic logic* to the detriment of continuity (particularly in long-running TV series). As Marie-Laure Ryan states

When the actions of characters are too obviously dictated by the interest of the plot, this is perceived as a ‘cheap plot trick’ [...], this is to say, as an authorial failure.<sup>93</sup>

88 See Albrecht Koschorke, *Wahrheit und Erfindung: Grundzüge einer allgemeinen Erzähltheorie*, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2012), 80. Original emphasis. See also 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), 250.

89 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) 250. My translation: “Verursachungsketten”, “Dramaturgisch erschöpft es sich nahezu völlig in der Ordnung des Zweikampfs”. He notes and subsequently refutes this claim, see *ibid.* 251ff. For the initial criticism see also Theodor W. Adorno, “Fernsehen als Ideologie”, in *Eingriffe: Neun kritische Modelle* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1963), 81–98.

90 Friedrich Schiller, *Ueber das Pathetische* in *Schillers Werke: Philosophische Schriften: Erster Teil, vol. 20*, Nationalausgabe, ed. Benno von Wiese (Weimar: Böhlau, 1962), 219. My translation: “nur der Stümper borgt von dem Stoffe eine Kraft, die er in die Form zu legen verzweifelt”.

91 “‘You talking to me?’ The Viewer as a Ratified Listener to Film Discourse”. *Journal of Pragmatics* 43, no. 6 (May 2011): 1632, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2010.11.016>.

92 Dynel, “You talking to me?”, 1642.

93 Marie-Laure Ryan, “Narrative as/and Complex System/s”, in *Narrative Complexity: Cognition, Embodiment, Evolution*, ed. Marina Crishakova and Maria Poulaki (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 34.

In some cases, the aesthetic conventions of TV's (audio-visual) narration have become so firmly established that audiences no longer perceive them as compositional formulas at all and instead accept them as 'natural' or 'realistic'.<sup>94</sup> What exactly compositional rules should be like has been a matter of scholarly debate at least since Aristotle's "Poetics".<sup>95</sup> They do not exist a priori but are themselves emergent and contingent on historic narrative convention, medium, and the activities of a given network. For popular serial storytelling, in general, and serial television fiction, in particular, a host of recurring dynamic aesthetic principles has emerged over the years. This study will examine the prevalence of many of these formal conventions throughout its analyses. However, some basic principles are worth mentioning here because they have long been regarded as being inextricably intertwined with popular seriality and have significant consequences for textual analysis.

### 3.5.2.1 Innovation, Repetition, and Limitation of Conflict

In order to remain recognisable and appealing to audiences over several episodes and seasons, a series will, as Umberto Eco remarks, contain a significant amount of formal and structural repetition while adding just enough new details to create an engaging sense of novelty. Popular series often achieve this dialectic of "innovation and repetition"<sup>96</sup> by retaining a basic character constellation and structure of reoccurring interactions (I will model them as *games* in 3.6.2) while varying the details of their individual presentations. As chapter 4 will show, the reoccurring conflict in *THE CROWN*, e.g., is the Windsor family's struggle with their royal role. While the set of characters and the nature of the struggle remain largely unchanged (repetition), the age of the characters and the concrete way in which they experience this struggle varies and usually features additional secondary characters (innovation).

This principle has significant consequences. As long as a TV series aims at retaining its central character ensemble (repetition), it will limit the intensity of its central conflicts to a reversible degree (for more on this, see 3.6.2.1). This limitation allows characters to credibly revert to a state in which they can repeatedly repeat the same structural conflicts. To give an extreme, contrary example: if a mortal character's story arc leads to his\*her death, it would be highly at odds with intradiegetic and narrative continuity (though by far not unheard of) to resurrect him\*her for the next episode to feature in the same structural conflict again.

Recent, more complex serial storytelling has been more willing to – partly – forego the principle of innovation and repetition and the resulting limitation of conflict. *GAME OF THRONES* (USA, 2011–2019), e.g., gained fame (or notoriety) for frequently and unexpectedly killing off its protagonists. However, the serial principle of innovation and

94 Knut Hackett, "Serie", in *Handbuch Populäre Kultur: Begriffe, Theorien und Diskussionen*, ed. Hans-Otto Hügel (Stuttgart/Weimar: J.B. Metzler/Springer, 2003), 402.

95 Aristotle, *Poetik: Griechisch/Deutsch*, ed. and transl. Manfred Fuhrmann (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2014).

96 Umberto Eco, "Innovation and Repetition: Between Modern and Post-Modern Aesthetics", *Daedalus* 114, no. 4 (1985): see particularly 167f., 173 for "Dialectic between order and novelty" and 179.

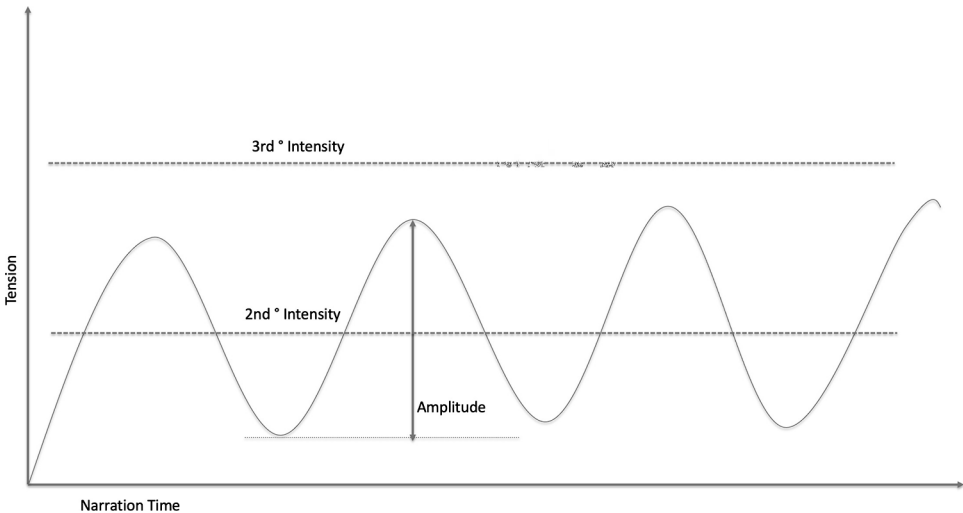
repetition often remains pertinent even when characters are removed or conflicts are resolved. In either case, the series will repeat central structural conflicts with a different set of characters or in a different set of circumstances.

### 3.5.2.2 Narrative Amplitude and Frequency

Like most popular narratives, series rely on conflict and the pursuit of its resolution to create suspense and engage audiences. However, the delayed resolution of conflict typical for popular serial narratives results in a curve of rising and falling narrative tension that resembles what Umberto Eco describes as a “*sine wave structure*”.<sup>97</sup> It marks a potentially endless (albeit not necessarily steady) transition from rising suspense to delayed resolution to falling suspense, which, in turn, acts as a starting point for rising tension.

Following F.J.J. Buytendijk’s similar discussion of games, I will call any extent between the narrative equilibrium (o) and any high point within this dynamic of rising and falling tension over time the *amplitude* of a narrative<sup>98</sup> (see figure 3). An ongoing serial narrative’s amplitude usually does not exceed a certain intensity to enable its own continuation. Likewise, it usually does not fall below a certain level to remain engaging to audiences.

Figure 3: Narrative Amplitude, Frequency, and Intensity



The number of a plotline’s transitions from rising to falling and back to rising tension over a given period of narration time is that plotline’s *frequency*. It is not steady but depends on a plotline’s position in the overall narrative structure.

97 Umberto Eco, “Eugène Sue: Sozialismus und Vertröstung”, in *Literatur für viele 2: Studien zur Trivialliteratur und Massenkommunikation im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Helmut Kreuzer (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976), 63. My translation: “Sinuskurven-Struktur”. Original emphasis.

98 Frederik J.J. Buytendijk, *Wesen und Sinn des Spiels: Das Spielen des Menschen und der Tiere als Erscheinungsform der Lebenstriebe* (Berlin: Kurt Wolff Verlag, 1933), 126.

### 3.5.2.3 Transparent Continuity vs Editorial Presence

Notions of a distinctly ‘televisual aesthetic’ have become highly questionable with increasing media, social, and cultural permeability. Nevertheless, I want to distinguish two different approaches to TV’s audio-visual and narrative aesthetics in general. The first aims to create the impression of what Hickethier calls the “transparency of the medium”.<sup>99</sup> Through “continuity editing”, “invisible editing”,<sup>100</sup> or “invisible dramaturgy”,<sup>101</sup> the series’ formal composition is arranged to support and follow the “progression of the story”<sup>102</sup> instead of drawing attention to itself, thus creating effects of realism.

More recently, some TV series (often those supposed to confer cultural capital) have shown an increasing willingness to forego principles of invisible editing. Like cinema before it, contemporary TV has seen a gradual shift towards ways of editing and mise-en-scène that intentionally forego the illusion of a smooth formal-narrative continuum and instead draws attention to the aesthetic, artificial surface of the presentation. Regarding storytelling, Joan Bleicher uses the term “constructed dramaturgy” to describe this phenomenon.<sup>103</sup> I propose to call the visible emphasis on the constructed artificial surface of a series’ formal composition the *editorial presence*. All editing is, by its very nature, selective and artificial. Therefore, whether something is perceived as invisible editing or editorial presence is ultimately a matter of convention and audiences’ viewing habits. An editorial presence, therefore, requires some notion of formal novelty.

One example of a strong editorial presence are the noticeably static camera setups, consciously ill-timed edits, and conspicuously pastel-coloured sets in the Netflix series *THE POLITICIAN*. The series’ ostentatious (albeit incoherent) formal artificiality supports the narrative’s hyperreal characters and satirical overtones as a formal reference to the films of Wes Anderson (my analysis of the series in chapter 5 will discuss this further).

An example of decreasing editorial presence is the mockumentary style that gained mainstream popularity with the traditionally transgressive comedies of the 2000s and early 2010s, e.g., the polit-comedy *VEEP* (see chapter 5). The traditional mockumentary style’s use of an unsteady camera and the interaction of characters with the camera ‘as if’ they were filming a documentary in a filmic metalepsis that simulates authentication and suggests to the audience a witnessing of the image creation<sup>104</sup> draw significant at-

99 Knut Hickethier, “Serie”, in *Handbuch Populäre Kultur: Begriffe, Theorien und Diskussionen*, ed. Hans-Otto Hügel (Stuttgart/Weimar: J.B. Metzler/Springer, 2003), 402.

100 Jeremy Butler, *Television: Visual Storytelling and Screen Culture*, 5th ed. (New York/ London: Routledge, 2018), 348.

101 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), 172.

102 Butler, *Television*, 348.

103 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), 172. My translation: “konstruierte Dramaturgie”.

104 Stefan Höltgen, “Metalepse”, *Lexikon der Filmbegriffe*, last modified March 6, 2022, <https://filmlexikon.uni-kiel.de/doku.php/m:metalepse-2582>.

tention to the series' formal composition. However, having become one of contemporary TV's formal standards, causing the habituation of audiences to the style, the *editorial presence* of the mockumentary has arguably waned in recent years. Indeed, as chapter 5 will discuss further, in the 2010s, the already overused style often emerged merely as a formal reference to evoke an alignment with established comedic conventions but without its previous metaleptic properties.

The more and more pervasive deviations from TV's continuity editing are primarily due to changes in distribution infrastructure with subscription channels and on-demand portals increasing the commercial space for more innovative and complex narratives. However, as my analyses will show, the principle of invisible editing and dramaturgy ultimately remains a pervasive default option even in series with an otherwise strong editorial presence.

### 3.5.3 Intradiegetic Logic

The *intradiegetic logic* comprises the principles that constitute the fictional world and its characters, the "world logic", as Mark Wolf calls it.<sup>105</sup> These "ontological rules" of the fictional world "specify what can and cannot exist, what is and isn't possible in a particular type of storyworld".<sup>106</sup> As Marie-Laure Ryan,<sup>107</sup> Mark Wolf,<sup>108</sup> Simon Provencher<sup>109</sup> and other scholars of worldbuilding have pointed out, the rules of the imaginary secondary world, by default, follow those of the primary, real world as long as the narrative does not explicitly state otherwise. However, the possibilities for secondary worlds to deviate from the primary world are ultimately limitless.<sup>110</sup>

It should be noted that, contrary to popular opinion, this potential liberty of fiction ultimately remains in place even if a fictional narrative references a historical precedent (e.g., in bio-series about real historical personalities like *THE CROWN*, or when series draw on historical affordances like a specific culture, places, polity, or event). While they are well within the purview of fiction, deviations from well-known historical precedent usually have to be implicitly justified by evident narrative necessity or a particularly engaging creative variation (which usually creates a strong editorial presence) in order to appeal to audiences.

105 Mark J.P. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 53.

106 Marie-Laure Ryan, "Ontological Rules", in *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf (New York/London: Routledge, 2018.), 74.

107 Marie-Laure Ryan call this the "Principle of Minimal Departure", in "Fiction, non-factuals, and the principle of minimal departure", *Poetics* 9, no. 4 (August 1980): 403–422, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0304-422X\(80\)90030-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/0304-422X(80)90030-3).

108 Mark J.P. Wolf: "World Design", in *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf (New York/London: Routledge, 2018.), 67.

109 David Langon, "World-Building Tools", in *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf (New York/London: Routledge, 2018.), 142. He cites Simon Provencher's "Golden Rule of Worldbuilding", which states: "unless specified otherwise, everything inside your world is assumed to behave exactly as it would in the real world". Posted on his blog in 2012, the "golden rule" has been often cited but is no longer available on the original platform.

110 See Ryan, "Ontological Rules", 75ff.

The intradiegetic rules specify not only the functional laws of the fictional world but also the way in which fictional characters would behave ‘if they were real’. Within the fictional world, “Characters think of themselves as freely acting human beings, and they know nothing of authorial designs”.<sup>111</sup>

While its extent may vary, a series’ diegesis, in order to function as an engaging popular fiction, ideally possesses reliable internal consistency<sup>112</sup> and is “internally intelligible”,<sup>113</sup> thus conveying what Hills calls “ontological security”.<sup>114</sup> In other words, the composition of the fictional world and its inhabitants ideally constitute a comprehensive unit from which the narrative action naturally derives and which hides its underlying dramatic logic. As Ryan puts it:

Narrative is [...] a top-down, centrally controlled system on the level of authorial design, but it must give the impression of an emergent, bottom-up system on the level of plot.<sup>115</sup>

Extensive intradiegetic logic is an essential feature of engaging popular narratives. The intradiegetic logic of a world extends to and is supported by what Matt Hills has called the hyperdiegesis. The term denotes

the creation of a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen or encountered within the text, but which nevertheless appears to operate according to principles of internal logic and extension.<sup>116</sup>

For Hills, the existence of a coherent hyperdiegesis (together with “*auteurism*” and an “*endlessly deferred narrative*”) are the common features of texts with cultish fan engagement.<sup>117</sup> This assumption references Umberto Eco’s famous discussion of cult texts as providing “a completely furnished world”<sup>118</sup> (besides displaying imperfections that enable fans to “break it up” and appropriate it at will and a noticeable “living textuality” making the text the embodiment of literary or cinematic discourse, which cannot be discussed here).<sup>119</sup>

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111 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), 33.

112 Mark J.P. Wolf, “World Design”, in *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf (New York/London: Routledge, 2018), 72.

113 Lars Konzack, “Subcreation”, in *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf (New York/London: Routledge, 2018), 210.

114 Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures*, e-library ed. (New York: Routledge, 2005), 104.

115 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), 34.

116 Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 104.

117 Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 98. Original emphasis.

118 Umberto Eco, “Casablanca: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage”, *SubStance* 14, No. 2, Issue 47 (1985): 3.

119 Eco, “Casablanca”, 4.

A popular series' ongoing attempt at perpetuity causes a steady increase in what Mark Wolf calls the "density of world detail".<sup>120</sup> This is likewise the case concerning characters and their conflicts. While this increase in density initially contributes to the immersive power of a fictional world, it ultimately reaches a point where (1) the accumulated material can no longer be contained within a narrative structure alone, causing the series to either drop material (potentially damaging continuity) or proliferate by 'outsourcing' core narrative material into new formats;<sup>121</sup> (2) the world's intradiegetic logic no longer allows for a believable repetition of core themes and the continuation of the core narrative. Due to its need to continue in perpetuity, a series thus has the inherent tendency to ultimately reveal the *pragmatic* and *dramatic* designs behind its *intradiegetic logic*. Thus, a series' perpetual continuation must almost inevitably reach the point where it wears out the illusion of the sovereignty of intradiegetic logic. Once the dominance of pragmatic and dramatic principles over the intradiegetic logic becomes visible in the text, the immersive appeal of a serial narrative usually begins to lose its hold over mainstream audiences.

### 3.5.4 Recalibration vs Development

I propose distinguishing between two types of serial narrative progression contingent on the respective motivating logic: *recalibration* and *development*. Both terms describe the serial evolution of diegetic events, characters, or circumstances. In both cases, these changes become tangible via the plot and can be accompanied by a change in a series' formal composition.

A *development* describes the evolution of a fictional character, event, or circumstance according to intradiegetic logic, that is, as a result of a coherent diegetic chain of cause and effect.

A *recalibration* is a change of plot, a fictional character, event or diegetic circumstances that primarily follows *pragmatic* or *dramatic* logic.

This distinction is essential for describing contingent serial texts. In long-running series, recalibrations are an omnipresent phenomenon that can sometimes dominate the plot more forcefully than actual character development. One example, which this study will discuss in some detail, is the recalibration of HoC's final season six and its replacement of former protagonist Frank Underwood (Kevin Spacey) with the series' previous deuteragonist Claire Underwood (Robin Wright). The reason for this adjustment does not derive from intradiegetic necessity: No diegetic development at the end of HoC's fifth season had suggested the departure of its protagonist. Frank Underwood's death is exclusively the result of actor Kevin Spacey's dismissal from the series following allegations of sexual misconduct and abuse (see chapter 8).

Another example of a recalibration that is particularly prevalent in long-running series are what William Proctor describes as "reboots" and "retcons" (a portmanteau for

120 Mark J.P. Wolf, "World Design", in *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf (New York/London: Routledge, 2018), 68.

121 See 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), 20.

“retroactive continuity”), which cause the complete or partial revision of “pre-established ‘facts’ about an imaginary world”.<sup>122</sup> A reboot deletes the previously established narrative state of affairs to resume a story from the beginning. A retcon serves to revise parts of the narrative past in order to align it with the narrative present or intended future and thus retroactively establish narrative continuity.<sup>123</sup>

It is important to note that a recalibration can – and ideally does – correspond to both dramatic and intradiegetic logic. However, recalibrations can (and often do) appear as a break with both. I, therefore, propose to distinguish between *soft recalibrations* and *hard recalibrations*.

In a *hard recalibration*, the implemented changes are not disguised by intradiegetic adjustment. A typical example is the departure of a screen actor (thespian). In a hard recalibration, the character is either removed from the narrative without a satisfying diegetic explanation or retained but played by another screen actor without providing an explanation for his\*her changed appearance.

Any hard recalibration is a risky undertaking, especially in a long-running series. It disrupts narrative coherence and destroys the discursive illusion of a fictional world’s shared ownership between authorial entities and audiences. In the conflictive relationships within a series’ network, a hard recalibration essentially constitutes an unconcealed act of extratextual sovereignty on the part of the authorial entities. As such, it usually reveals the asymmetrical distribution of power within a TV series’ network. This often irritates even less-involved audiences and usually highly upsets more involved fans.

The second *soft* option for recalibration is to provide the disruptive adjustment with an explanation that pays tribute to dramatic and intradiegetic logic. A soft recalibration will often come with the creation of intradiegetic reasons for the pragmatic adjustment in question. In HoC, for example, the disappearance of the series’ protagonist was framed as a mysterious death.

While ultimately still a sovereign act by the production entities, a soft recalibration constitutes a noticeable concession to narrative coherence and the position and ‘rights’ of engaged audiences within the series’ network. Therefore, while a soft recalibration still disrupts narrative coherence, it is usually met with more favourable reactions from audiences than a hard recalibration. A reboot is always a hard recalibration. A retcon can disguise as a soft recalibration, but it will usually be perceived as a hard recalibration by engaged audiences because it disrupts narrative continuity. However, this does not mean that recalibrations are necessarily a weakening factor in any series. In the potentially perpetual narratives of popular seriality, recalibrations are a necessary evil that ensures narrative continuation. Reboots and retcons, e.g., aid as “strategies of regeneration”<sup>124</sup> for the intradiegetic and narrative continuity of long-running series that would otherwise continue to be diluted by the continuous addition of material. Other recalibrations, such

122 William Proctor, “Reboots and Retroactive Continuity”, in *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf (New York/London: Routledge, 2018), 224.

123 Proctor, “Reboots and Retroactive Continuity”, 230.

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

as the replacement of a character, enable the series' network to react to historical developments that are adverse to their continuation.

### 3.6 Actors, Games, and Players

It is crucial, at this stage, to take a closer look at the fictional and historical actors that constitute the dynamic network of a TV series. This section will first elaborate on the status of fictional characters as diegetic actors. Following popular series' dramatic requirement of creating a coherent plot with repetitive structural characteristics, the actions of fictional characters usually occur in regular, interactional, and clearly discernible cause-and-effect chains, which this thesis proposes to model as structural *games*. The second part of this section will differentiate the historical actors' part in determining each other and the text.

#### 3.6.1 Diegetic Actors

Actors on the diegetic plain of a TV series' network are the fictional characters as part of "dynamic interactional structures".<sup>125</sup> A few words must be said about the "curious ontological status"<sup>126</sup> that fictional characters occupy. This step is necessary to establish how fictional characters, as non-real agglomerations of signs, attain the agency required to become actors in the first place. What is the source of, as Albrecht Koschorke puts it, this "animism that inspires all [fictional] beings and equips them with the power to act"?<sup>127</sup>

A fictional world consists of, as Eugen Fink notes regarding games, "subjective fantastic and objective, ontic elements".<sup>128</sup> With regards to a fictional TV series, these objective, ontic elements comprise the digitised codes that determine the audio-visual signs that, in turn, convey a narrative and its characters. Furthermore, the material ontic elements consist of the hard drives that store these codes as data sets, the technological infrastructure needed to distribute this data, the hardware necessary to decode it, and the hardware used to display the resulting audio-visual signs. However, fictional characters transcend these material circumstances.<sup>129</sup>

Jens Eder, Fotis Jannidis, and Ralf Schneider define fictional characters as "entities in fictional worlds which are brought forth through signs, but are not identical with those

125 Manfred Pfister, *Das Drama: Theorie und Analyse*, 11th ed. (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2001), 232. My translation: "dynamische Interaktionsstrukturen".

126 Mark J.P. Wolf, "Virtual Worlds", in *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf (New York: Routledge, 2018), 192.

127 Albrecht Koschorke, *Wahrheit und Erfindung: Grundzüge einer allgemeinen Erzähltheorie*, 2nd ed (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2012), 79. My translation: "Das Erzählen steht so im Bund mit einem Animismus, der alle Wesen beseelt und mit Handlungsmacht ausstattet".

128 Eugen Fink, *Oase des Glücks: Gedanken zu einer Ontologie des Spiels* (Freiburg: Karl Aber, 1957), 46. My translation: "Die Spielwelt enthält subjektive Phantasieelemente und objektive, ontische Elemente".

129 See, e.g., Wolf, "Virtual Worlds", 192.

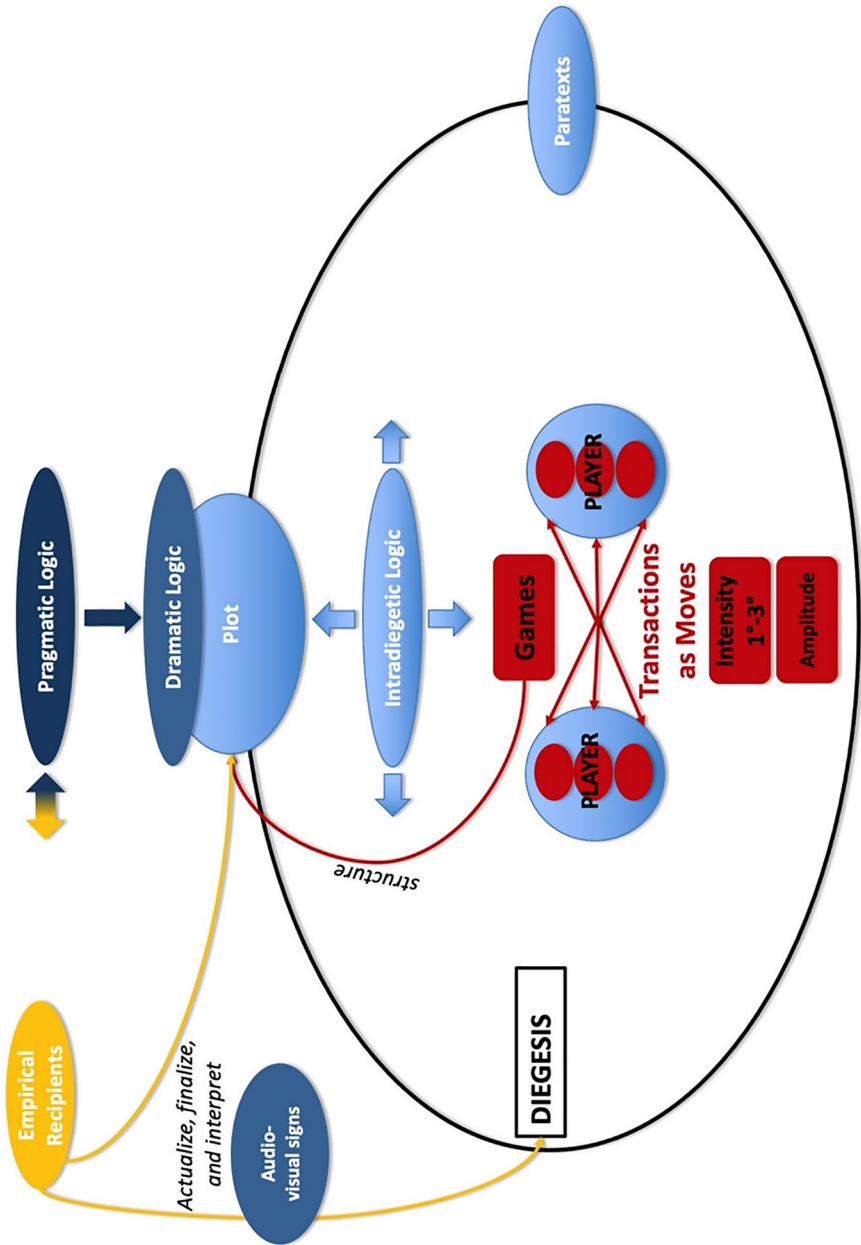
signs.”<sup>130</sup> Instead, fictional characters come to life, together with the rest of the diegesis, through the interpretative “actualisation”<sup>131</sup> of audio-visual signs through the active “mental participation of a recipient”.<sup>132</sup> As David Bordwell puts it, “The text is inert until a reader or listener or spectator does something to and with it”.<sup>133</sup>

Reader response criticism<sup>134</sup> has shown the role of the interpreting recipient, or the “Lector in Fabula”,<sup>135</sup> as the entity charged with finalizing and realizing a unique version of a fictional universe by interpreting a text’s given signs in accordance with intrinsic and extrinsic norms. In what came to be known as cognitive poetics for film, David Bordwell has named a similar conceptual entity the “viewer” or “spectator”.<sup>136</sup> For my analytical model, I will – for the moment – acknowledge and then sideline more conceptual notions of the interpreting recipient and assume the empirical recipients as carriers of the conceptual burden of interpretative actualization (see figure 4).

Fink states, “The Chimaera and other mythological creatures do not exist, but there is the poetic phantasy-production of such creatures, a real consciousness of unreal content”.<sup>137</sup> In the guided imagination of audiences, a character and his\*her world move from non-existence to the liminal state of discursive conceptual being. Fictional characters are, to say it with Wolfgang Iser, “form without reality”.<sup>138</sup>

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- 130 Jens Eder, Fotis Jannidis, and Ralf Schneider, “Characters in Fictional Worlds: An Introduction”, in *Characters in Fictional Worlds: Understanding Imaginary Beings in Literature, Film, and other Media*, ed. Jens Eder, Fotis Jannidis, and Ralf Schneider (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 17. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110232424>.
- 131 As claimed by reader-response criticism: see e.g., Wolfgang Iser, “Die Appellstruktur der Texte: Unbestimmtheit als Wirkungsbedingung literarischer Prosa”, in *Rezeptionsästhetik: Theorie und Praxis*, ed. Rainer Warning (Munich: Fink, 1988), 229. My translation: “Aktualisierung”.
- 132 Umberto Eco, *Das offene Kunstwerk*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), 41. My translation: “mentalen Mitarbeit des Rezipierenden”. Original emphasis.
- 133 David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*, 1<sup>st</sup> HUP paperback ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 3.
- 134 See e.g., Wolfgang Iser, “Die Appellstruktur der Texte: Unbestimmtheit als Wirkungsbedingung literarischer Prosa”, in *Rezeptionsästhetik: Theorie und Praxis*, ed. Rainer Warning (Munich: Fink, 1988), 229; Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading* (Baltimore/London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 107; see also Roland Barthes conception of texts after the ‘death’ of the author, in Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author”, in *Image, Music, Text*, transl. Stephen Heath, 142–148 (London: Fontana Press, 1977).
- 135 Umberto Eco, *Lector in Fabula: Die Mitarbeit der Interpretation in erzählenden Texten*, transl. Heinz-Georg Held (Munich/ Vienna: Hanser, 1987).
- 136 David, Bordwell. *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 30.
- 137 Eugen Fink, *Spiel als Weltsymbol* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag, 1960), 72. My translation: “Es gibt nicht die Chimaira und andere Fabelwesen, aber es gibt die poetische Phantasieproduktion solcher Fabelwesen, ein wirkliches Bewußtsein von unwirklichem Inhalt”.
- 138 Iser, “Appellstruktur”, 231. My translation: “[Fiktion ist] Form ohne Realität”.

Figure 4: The actualization, position, and interaction of fictional characters as 'players'



As “fictitious beings”,<sup>139</sup> fictional characters are, as Jens Eder argues, “communicative artefacts that develop through the intersubjective construction of figure-concept-

139 Jens Eder, *Die Figur im Film: Grundlagen der Figurenanalyse* (Marburg: Schüren, 2008), 64. My translation: “Fiktive Wesen”.

tions based on fictional texts".<sup>140</sup> They come into being through a diverse set of communications between production entities and audiences,<sup>141</sup> e.g., by way of the textual code, paratexts or fan activity. The signs that denote a fictional character (or world) at any given moment of narrative reception are predetermined and finite. However, as communicative artefacts, the resulting characters are emergent entities and retain, as Eder puts it, the "ability for mental intentionality".<sup>142</sup> In other words, fictional characters possess agency within the imaginative realm because audiences imagine them to do so.

From an extratextual perspective, fictional characters are, therefore, discursive macro actors that transcend ontological planes. Their agency, however, only exists within the confines of the diegesis. Outside the diegesis, fictional characters, or "Figures", as Manfred Pfister calls them, are not autonomous but "intentional construct[s]" defined by their fictional context and the dramatic function they serve<sup>143</sup> and thus adhere to *dramatic* instead of *intradiegetic* logic.

As part of narrative composition, characters can be (1) *static*,<sup>144</sup> meaning they do not undergo significant development relevant to the story, or (2) *dynamic*, meaning their development is central to the story.<sup>145</sup> In serial narratives, static characters can still change – and in long-running series, they often do – but this adjustment occurs through *hard* or *soft recalibration*, not *intradiegetic development*. According to the principle of innovation and repetition, many series feature more or less static characters who interact in "dynamic relationships" instead of changing themselves.<sup>146</sup> These relationships create an engaging 'illusion of change' by dynamizing the social periphery of a character instead of the character him<sup>s</sup> herself, as I will show in my analysis of the recalibrated sixth season of HoC (see chapter 8). In other words: the conflicts change, but the character does not.

### 3.6.2 Modelling Diegetic Interactions: Games and Players

Manfred Pfister suggests that fictional characters can be regarded "as a system of corresponding and contrasting relations".<sup>147</sup> Forming a narrative's "agential constellation",<sup>148</sup> they influence each other according to their position as protagonists, secondary characters, or background characters. As a dramatic medium, popular television series

140 Jens Eder, *Die Figur im Film: Grundlagen der Figurenanalyse* (Marburg: Schüren, 2008), 64. My translation: "Fiktive Wesen". 68. My translation: "Fiktive Wesen sind kommunikative Artefakte, die durch die intersubjektive Konstruktion von Figurenvorstellungen auf der Grundlage fiktionaler Texte entstehen".

141 Eder, *Die Figur im Film*, 69–71.

142 Eder, *Die Figur im Film*, 64. My translation: "der Fähigkeit zu mentaler Intentionalität".

143 Manfred Pfister, *Das Drama: Theorie und Analyse*, 11th ed. (Munich: UTB, 2001), 221. My translation: "ein intentionales Konstrukt".

144 Pfister, *Das Drama*, 241f.

145 Pfister, *Das Drama*, 242f.

146 Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York City: NYU Press, 2015), 137.

147 Manfred Pfister, *Das Drama: Theorie und Analyse*, 11th ed. (Munich: UTB, 2001), 225. My translation: "ein System von Korrespondenz- und Kontrastrelationen".

148 Lubomír Doležel, *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 97.

construct and convey their plot primarily through the actions of fictional characters. As Lubomír Doležel notes, “The semantics of narrative is, at its core, the semantics of interaction”.<sup>149</sup> Although Engell, in his discussion of serial causality, suggests that serial TV storytelling exceeds simple diegetic and visual “Causation chains”,<sup>150</sup> describing diegetic interactional structures remains central to the textual analysis of a series.

Fictional characters only possess the necessary agency and intentionality to become actors when viewed as part of the diegesis. However, as they usually serve the dramatic purpose of conveying the plot, intradiegetic interactions will almost always be rule-based and regular. Furthermore, the textual data that constitutes fictional characters and their interactions are finite and, at least in popular narratives, usually clearly accessible to extratextual observers.<sup>151</sup> Theoretically limitless intradiegetic games become limited structural phenomena when viewed from an extratextual perspective.

As fictional characters behave according to the triple set of narrative logics (intradiegetic, dramatic, pragmatic), modelling their intradiegetic interactions becomes a helpful tool for the overall textual analysis. A descriptive model (1) can illustrate specific narrative patterns and allow inferences about the intradiegetic and dramatic logics that shape them; (2) it highlights extratextual intervention into the narrative, especially in cases where textual elements diverge from intradiegetic or dramatic logic, thus allowing additional inferences on the respective series’ network.

Given their time-tested usefulness in modelling complex interactional structures, I propose to describe character interactions as *games*.<sup>152</sup> In a first definition, all regular and recurring diegetic interactions between two or more fictional (macro or micro) Actors shall constitute a *game*. As regular agential patterns, games serve to convey the plot. Not all games in a given narrative become dominant narrative patterns. However, the (popular) dramatic logic of narrative economy that derives from a text’s limited ability to contain and convey data suggest that a well-established game will usually serve an essential function within the plot.

All diegetic actors involved in a distinct, regular and ongoing interaction chain shall be called *players* of that game. A game can feature a set of recurring or changing players and remain the same game as long as it features the same interactional patterns between

149 Doležel, *Heterocosmica*, 97.

150 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), 250. My translation: “Verusachungsketten”. For his discussion see 251ff.

151 See a similar reasoning for the use of the play “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf” as an illustrative example for psychological analysis of communication structures in Paul Watzlawick, Janet H. Beavin, Don D. Jackson, “Kommunikationsstrukturen im Theaterstück ‘Wer hat Angst vor Virginia Woolf’”, in *Menschliche Kommunikation: Formen, Störungen, Paradoxien*, ed. Paul Watzlawick, Janet H. Beavin, Don D. Jackson (Bern/Stuttgart: Hans Huber, 1969), 138f.

152 The general idea to apply structural game approach to serial narrative has more recently also been suggested, e.g., by Thomas Klein, in “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), 235f. I have applied a precursor to the approach proposed in the following sections in my master’s thesis: Sebastian Naumann, “HBO’s ‘Girls’ and the Presentation of the Generation Y”, unpublished Master’s Thesis, Humboldt University Berlin. 2016.

players who figure the same set of *actants*. According to Algirdas Julien Greimas, actants are fundamental roles or “classifications of actors”,<sup>153</sup> or, following Bruno Latour and ANT, actors without a precise figuration.<sup>154</sup> However, other than Greimas’ structural semantics, I do not introduce the term *actant* for its presumed role as the constituent parts of a narrative deep structure. Instead, I use it as a purely descriptive entity to denote a formal role serving a predetermined compositional purpose within a fictional interactive game that needs to be filled by a concrete actor (or player) to come into existence. This means, however, that games can transcend both individual players and individual texts.

Dominant games in classic monster-of-the-week series, e.g., often consist of a static main player (the series’ protagonist) who engages with a chain of different antagonists that figure the same actant (a somehow characterised antagonist) in the same repetitive game. Anthology series likewise often use a thematic frame and reoccurring games to create intra-serial continuity despite changes in plot and ensemble.

The individual actions of any player, so long as they form part of a game, shall be called *moves* (see figure 4). Following psychological Transaction Analysis (TA), an exchange of moves between players can be described as a *transaction*, that is, an exchange of stimulus and response.<sup>155</sup> As Eric Berne states, transactions are the “unit of social intercourse”<sup>156</sup> and usually unfold as chains in which each response becomes, in turn, a new stimulus for another response.<sup>157</sup> In his study of serial causality, Engell notes the various dismissive assumptions of TV series’ diegetic and formal focus on “stimulus-response-chains”.<sup>158</sup> However, I postulate that their undoubted existence in the dramatic medium of TV, by no means, presupposes a somehow reduced narrative complexity, depth or ‘quality’. Instead, I claim their usefulness for the illustrative analysis of narrative TV texts of varying complexity.

Berne introduces a complex set of distinct transactions that I want to adapt for my model due to its high descriptive value. According to TA, each player acts from one of three different “ego states”. For Berne, ego states are systems “of feelings accompanied by a related set of behaviour patterns”.<sup>159</sup> They determine how a player sends and receives a transactional stimulus. Berne describes the three ego states as (1) “ego states which resemble those of parental figures”, (2) “ego states which are autonomously directed toward an objective appraisal of reality”, and (3) ego states “which represent archaic relics, still-

153 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), 200.

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

155 Eric Berne, *Games People Play: The Psychology of Human Relationships*, 24<sup>th</sup> edition (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 29.

156 Berne, *Games People Play*, 29.

157 Berne, *Games People Play*, 30.

158 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), 250. My translation: “Reiz-Reaktions-Ketten”. He goes on to contextualize and partly refute these dismissive claims.

159 Berne, *Games People Play*, 23.

active ego states which were fixated in early childhood”.<sup>160</sup> Technically called “exteropsychic”, “neopsychic”, and “archaeopsychic”, this study shall follow Berne’s suggestions and name the states “*Parent, Adult and Child*”.<sup>161</sup>

Individual players will ‘act out’ the behavioural patterns determined by the three ego states in different ways, taking on a *role* in a game.<sup>162</sup> A role is, as Berne notes, “something like what Jung calls *persona*, except that it is less opportunistic and more deeply rooted in the individual’s fantasies”.<sup>163</sup> A player taking a parental position, for example, may take on the role of “tough”, “righteous”, “helpful”, or “indulgent” Parent,<sup>164</sup> thus causing very different effects within their respective games.

TA further distinguishes different types of transactions that take place along “nine possible vectors of social action between an agent and a respondent”.<sup>165</sup> Accordingly, transactions can occur between varying ego states and be complementary or crossed<sup>166</sup> and either simple or ulterior.<sup>167</sup>

Transactions are *complementary* if the ego state responding to a transactional stimulus corresponds to the ego state to whom the stimulus had been sent.<sup>168</sup> Some (fictional) examples based on the player ensemble of *THE CROWN* – the series features as my first subject of analysis – will illustrate this. If Queen Elizabeth II tells off her unruly sister Margaret, she initiates a transaction from her Parent to Margaret’s Child. If Margaret’s Child, in turn, executes the response, e.g., in the shape of one of her frequent unproductive complaints about her sister’s emotional coldness, the Parent-Child transaction is complementary and the chain of alternate stimulus and response continues.

Transactions are *crossed* if the responding ego state is not the one for whom the transactional stimulus was intended.<sup>169</sup> Suppose Elizabeth II engages her younger sister in a discussion about royal duty, thus initiating an Adult-Adult transaction. In that case, the communication will fail if Margaret’s transactional response is, again, executed by her Child and addressed to Elizabeth’s Parent, e.g., by Margaret justifying her failure to fulfil her sister’s presumed expectations. In such a case, one player will either adjust his\* her ego state into a complementary position or see the transaction fail.<sup>170</sup> Either Margaret stops justifying herself and starts contributing her thoughts about royal duty (switching to her Adult), or Elizabeth takes on a parental role and tells Margaret what she expects of her.

160 Berne, *Games People Play*, 23.

161 Berne, *Games People Play*, 23. My emphasis.

162 See Berne, *Games People Play*, 45 and 54.

163 Berne, *Games People Play*, 45.

164 Berne, *Games People Play*, 45.

165 Eric Berne, *Games People Play: The Psychology of Human Relationships*, 24<sup>th</sup> edition (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 32.

166 Berne, *Games People Play*, 29ff.

167 Berne, *Games People Play*, 33f.

168 Berne, *Games People Play*, 29f.

169 Berne, *Games People Play*, 30ff.

170 See Berne, *Games People Play*, 31f.

Other than simple transactions, *ulterior transactions* are “those involving the activity of more than two ego states simultaneously”.<sup>171</sup> Ulterior transactions consist of a superficial transaction between ego states on a tangible “social” vector and a more impactful second transaction on an “ulterior, or *psychological* vector”.<sup>172</sup> They divide into angular and duplex transactions. Angular transactions comprise the interaction of three ego states across the social and ulterior levels, and duplex transactions involve four ego states across the two levels.<sup>173</sup>

If Elizabeth II ostensibly engages her sister in a discussion of royal duty (social vector: Adult-Adult) but really uses this opportunity to demonstrate Margaret’s failure to comply with house rules and thus manipulate her into fulfilling royal expectations (ulterior vector: Adult-Child), we have an angular transaction. We have a duplex transaction if Elizabeth successfully uses the ostensibly coequal conversation about royal duty (social vector: Adult-Adult) to implicitly lecture her sister about her failure, thus ensuring her submission (ulterior vector: Parent-Child).

In TA, the ulterior transactions generally form the “basis for games”.<sup>174</sup> However, for narrative analysis, all transactional chains shall be games if they occur as regular, established patterns between players, or as Berne puts it, if they are “not random, but are programmed”.<sup>175</sup>

I will call the combination of a game’s fixed set of players (or actants) and the rules that govern their interactions a game’s *configuration*. The set of assembled games that connect a character ensemble will be the narrative’s *character configuration*. Following the serial rule of repetition and innovation, most popular TV series feature a relatively stable character configuration. However, in long-running series, the configuration usually becomes the subject of frequent recalibration.

Many games have become established narrative templates that are easily recognised by audiences and often serve as shortcuts inducing inferences about characters, constellations, and events. However, despite their, at times, formulaic character, audiences will rarely perceive games as formulas at all.<sup>176</sup> On the contrary: because many games have become such well-established narrative conventions, they often appear to audiences as synonymous with storytelling and, in some cases, even reality. However, *games* are in no way self-evident or universal textual phenomena in the tradition of archetypal criticism.<sup>177</sup> The recurring games this study will identify are present in many popular serial narratives simply by virtue of convention and because of their ability to accommodate the various requirements of popular serial storytelling in sustaining an ongoing and engaging narrative (some examples for this will follow shortly).

171 Berne, *Games People Play*, 33.

172 Berne, *Games People Play*, 33. Original emphasis.

173 Berne, *Games People Play*, 33.

174 Eric Berne, *Games People Play: The Psychology of Human Relationships*, 24<sup>th</sup> edition (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 33.

175 Berne, *Games People Play*, 35.

176 See Knut Hicethier’s concept of the “Transparency of the medium” and TV’s distinct “Appearance of reality” [*Realitätsschein*]: Knut Hicethier, “Serie”, in *Handbuch Populäre Kultur: Begriffe, Theorien und Diskussionen*, ed. Hans-Otto Hügel (Stuttgart/Weimar: J.B. Metzler/Springer, 2003), 402.

177 See M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1999), 12–14.

It is crucial to distinguish *games* and *plotlines* as well as fictional characters as *players* and as *elements of a narrative composition*. A game is a rule-based, ongoing transactional pattern within a narrative. The plot and its plotlines, on the other hand, consist of various games presented in a dramatic structure. As a game's protagonist, a player is the central player of that interactional configuration. However, this does not imply a central role in a given narrative and is not necessarily congruent with his\*her purpose in the overall narrative composition. A narrative protagonist may be a central figure within the series' plot; however, within any given game, he\*she can be a relatively minor player or not appear at all.

### 3.6.2.1 Properties of Games

Every game is defined by a set of factors that I will call the *properties of a game*. (1) Following Eric Berne, every game possesses an *intensity*<sup>178</sup> (see figure 3). The intensity increases in degrees from one to three depending on the consequences that victory and defeat have for a player. A defeat in a game of *first-degree intensity* means only minor irritations. A defeat in a game of *second-degree intensity* causes significant disruption, but this disruption is still reversible. A defeat in a game of *third-degree intensity* has final consequences: the most common being death.<sup>179</sup>

The intensity of a game can be different for different players involved. Indeed, the difference in intensity within the same game is often a source of dramatic suspense, comedy, or tragedy. Some examples: Harjo Eichwald's (EICHWALD, MDB) quarrels with his party leader are of the highest importance to him but of little to no importance to her (3<sup>rd</sup>-degree intensity vs 1<sup>st</sup>-degree intensity), resulting in a comical Parent-Child dynamic between the two (see chapter 5). Elizabeth II's (THE CROWN) struggle for the right to choose her private secretary<sup>180</sup> is a question of personal convenience for herself (2<sup>nd</sup> degree), of life-changing importance to the candidates (3<sup>rd</sup> degree), and absolutely no relevance to Downing Street (1<sup>st</sup>-degree). For Frank and Claire Underwood (HoC), the battle for political supremacy is a game of life and death and, therefore, of 3<sup>rd</sup>-degree intensity, even though not all players are aware of this intensity.

The intensity of games involving central characters can become essential in measuring a narrative's structural continuity. Audiences will usually expect games involving central characters and displaying a high intensity to also feature prominently in the plot. If highly intense games fail to take a prominent narrative position, audiences will often perceive this as a compositional imbalance.

178 Eric Berne, *Games People Play: The Psychology of Human Relationships*, 24<sup>th</sup> edition (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 63f.

179 Berne, *Games People Play*, 64.

180 In *The Crown*, season 1, episode 7, "Scientia Potentia Est", directed by Benjamin Caron, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 4, 2016, [https://www.netflix.com/watch/80025763?trackId=255824129&tctx=0%2Co%2CNAPA%40%40%7C501031dc-525c-4272-9a4f-17f162718519-1055847\\_titles%2F1%2F%2Fthe%20crown%2Fo%2Fo%2CNAPA%40%40%7C501031dc-525c-4272-9a4f-17f162718519-1055847\\_titles%2F1%2Fthe%20crown%2Fo%2Fo%2Cunknown%2C%2C501031dc-525c-4272-9a4f-17f162718519-1055847%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C80025678](https://www.netflix.com/watch/80025763?trackId=255824129&tctx=0%2Co%2CNAPA%40%40%7C501031dc-525c-4272-9a4f-17f162718519-1055847_titles%2F1%2F%2Fthe%20crown%2Fo%2Fo%2CNAPA%40%40%7C501031dc-525c-4272-9a4f-17f162718519-1055847_titles%2F1%2Fthe%20crown%2Fo%2Fo%2Cunknown%2C%2C501031dc-525c-4272-9a4f-17f162718519-1055847%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C80025678).

The (2) property of a game is its *cooperative* or *uncooperative character*, a distinction that derives from mathematical game theory.<sup>181</sup> Whether a game is cooperative or uncooperative is not determined by its players' good- or ill-faith but by its structure: In a cooperative game, the rules can be enforced by an entity of higher order. In uncooperative games, no mechanism of a higher order can ensure that the rules of a given game remain intact.<sup>182</sup>

For the analysis, this is relevant both with regards to intradiegetic and dramatic logic. Games can be uncooperative on a diegetic level, meaning the players are not held accountable for their actions. However, dramatic logic can (and traditionally often does) impose a cooperative structure on a diegetically uncooperative game, e.g., by ensuring that righteous characters are rewarded and evil ones punished by the end of a narrative through a recalibration.

Cooperative games have been the narrative standard for the longer part of fiction's known history. In classic myth and literature, a divine order often guarantees the enforcement of fundamental rules (perhaps with the exception of trickster characters). Ancient Greek mythology, e.g., prominently features a set of unshakeable cosmical laws that bind mortals and gods alike.

In much of classic literature and popular entertainment, diegetically uncooperative games find themselves offset by dramatic intervention, which ensures that there is just punishment for the villain – no matter his\*her superior slyness – and a – at least moral – victory for the hero\*ine. The dissolution of the divine order and, subsequently, of other common sets of universal values throughout modernity has arguably resulted in a recession of cooperative games.

More recent popular fiction aiming at audiences with high cultural capital often extends the uncooperative principle from diegetic anti-heroes who break the rules and get away with it to an extradiegetic logic that no longer promises audiences a resolution that reinforces a common set of values. In prestige contemporary fiction, evil no longer has to fear eventual retribution. Series like *GAME OF THRONES*, e.g., have made it their distinctive quality to feature a set of games in which no player is safe from potential 3rd-degree consequences. *HoC*, likewise, ends with a 3rd-degree purge of much of the series' previous tritagonists (see chapter 8).

Uncooperative games seem especially suited for the structural requirements of serial narrative with its need for potential perpetuity. In series that have to continue indefinitely, central anti-heroes and villainous antagonists often cannot be brought to justice for their rule-breaking because they are needed for the games to come.

It should be noted that players can either participate in a game in accordance with its rules as *adjusted players* or attempt to change the game by modifying its rules as *creative players*. *Creative* participation in a game can have a constructive or destructive quality. However, successfully creative players will always produce a new game. Popular serial narratives will usually feature limited *player creativity* to retain their serial coherence and appeal, depending on the degree of repetition.

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181 Rainer Hegselmann, "Spieltheorie", in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, s.v. "Spieltheorie", ed. Joachim Ritter and Karlfried Gründer (Basel: Schwabe & Co, 1995), 1394.

182 Hegselmann, "Spieltheorie", 1394.

### 3.6.2.2 Examples of Fundamental Games

This study will examine many of the more prominent games in popular seriality in its analyses. However, some games are so fundamental to popular serial storytelling and fictional politics that I want to mention them in advance. These fundamental games often appear in conjunction with other more specific games.

#### 3.6.2.2.1 The Zero-Sum Game

A helpful notion I want to borrow from mathematical game theory is the concept of the *Zero-Sum* game. The term denotes a game in which one player's gain has to be balanced by the loss of another.<sup>183</sup> In a narrative game with a *zero-sum* structure, this dynamic of proportional 'gain' and 'loss' can refer to either soft or hard power or all types of capital, be it economic, social, cultural or symbolic. *Zero-Sum* structures can underly intradiegetic games or be implicit in a narrative's dramatic structure.

In popular fictional narratives, with their structural tendency towards over-causality, players' correlated gains and losses usually result from a clearly identifiable cause-and-effect chain within a limited set of games involving these players (often just one). Some examples: If *SLUHA NARODU*'s protagonist Vasyl Petrovych Holoborodko wants to win the presidency and reform Ukraine, the sinister oligarchs that oppose him must lose power and wealth in equal measure and through Holoborodko's actions. If *THE CROWN*'s Elizabeth II wants to come into her own as queen, she needs to reduce the influence of her influential advisors. If *VEEP*'s Selina Meyer and *EICHWALD*, *MDB*'s Harjo Eichwald suffer continuous humiliation and defeat, there need to be (and are) discernible actors who will *do* the humiliating and defeating and profit from it in equal measure.

A *Zero-Sum* game forcibly needs a winner and a loser and thus manifests in an *agonal structure*, that is, as an open or hidden, conscious or unconscious competition.<sup>184</sup> 'Agon' is one of the guiding principles of almost all popular fiction because it creates a clearly discernible protagonist-antagonist structure around a recognisable, competitive conflict.

An agonal game must not forcibly be a *Zero-Sum* game. There are many competitive situations where the winner's gain is independent of his\*her competitors' status. In a foot race, e.g., the speed of the fastest runner does not decrease that of his\*her competitors, nor is he\*she usually compensated for his\*her win from the competitors' personal properties. However, in popular storytelling, the zero-sum structure is arguably the agonal motif that provides the strongest and most easily recognisable motivation for characters to engage in high-intensity conflict as it infuses a competitive situation with personal stakes. Therefore, the general dramatic logic of popular storytelling often causes fictional politics to appear as a (frequently uncooperative) *Zero-Sum* game.

183 Rainer Hegselmann, "Spieltheorie", in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. Joachim Ritter and Karlfried Gründer (Basel: Schwabe & Co, 1995), 1394. For its origins in mathematical game theory see John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern, *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 85ff.

184 Roger Caillois, *Die Spiele und die Menschen: Maske und Rausch*, transl. Peter Geble (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2017), 35ff.

In polit-fiction, zero-sum Agon is a particularly prevalent principle. This is partly due to politics' agonal properties as the process of negotiating the distribution of power. For Roger Caillois, Agon is the main principle for the organisation of the selection of (real and fictional) politicians.<sup>185</sup> Indeed, the necessity of a certain degree of struggle in attaining power is widely accepted. However, the degree of intensity appropriate for these agonal struggles is far less clear. The presentation of fictional politics in a zero-sum structure turns it from a competition into an antagonistic struggle with high personal stakes.

Jöran Klatt argues that the zero-sum motif in contemporary series like *HoC* points toward an internalisation of neoliberal principles according to which the world's natural state is itself an agonal *Zero-Sum* game.<sup>186</sup> Remarkably, many audiences throughout the 2010s have perceived the narrative convention of the *Zero-Sum* game as a compelling and 'realistic' portrayal of politics and, indeed, the state of the world. My analyses will examine this further. However, this symptomatic reading neglects the dramatic logic of fictional narrative itself. To a certain extent, the zero-sum structure is not a marker for sociocultural currents but simply follows the dramatic requirements of popular fictional narratives to create engaging, personalized conflict. My analyses will examine this further.

#### 3.6.2.2.2 The Coming-of-Age Game

One of the most common tropes of popular storytelling is the *Coming-of-Age* game (CoA game).<sup>187</sup> It occurs in both character-based and action-based narratives (albeit in different forms) and demonstrates a character's transition from outsider to insider and his\*her development of a consolidated self through structured interactions with other characters.

Developmental psychology describes the often-painful process of creating an identity as – to put it simply – integrating personal needs, abilities, other constitutive psychological mechanisms and external conditions.<sup>188</sup> For literature, G.W.F. Hegel accordingly describes the fictional coming-of-age process in a very similar way. He states:

One of the most common and most suitable collisions for the novel is, therefore, the conflict between the heart's poetry and the opposing prose of reality's conditions.<sup>189</sup>

185 Caillois, *Die Spiele und die Menschen*, 138f.

186 Jöran Klatt, "Ränkespiele zweier Serien (1): House of Cards", *Göttinger Institut für Demokratieforschung* (blog), May 17, 2016. <https://www.demokratie-goettingen.de/blog/house-of-cards>.

187 See, for example remarks on the commonness of the Bildungsroman (as a hypostasis of the CoA motif) in Jens Eder, Fotis Jannidis, and Ralf Schneider, "Characters in Fictional Worlds: An Introduction", in *Characters in Fictional Worlds: Understanding Imaginary Beings in Literature, Film, and other Media*, ed. Jens Eder, Fotis Jannidis, and Ralf Schneider (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 43.

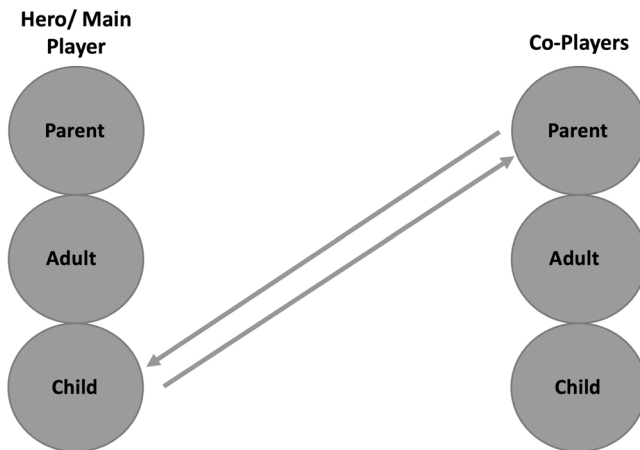
188 Erik Erikson, *Der vollständige Lebenszyklus*, transl. Waltrud Klüwer (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1988), 96. He writes about "eine Konfiguration, die allmählich konstitutionelle Gegebenheiten, höchst persönliche Bedürfnisse, bevorzugte Fähigkeiten, wichtige Identifikationen, wirksame Abwehren, erfolgreiche Sublimierungen und konsequente Rollen integriert".

189 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik III*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1986), 393. My translation: "Eine der gewöhnlichsten

According to psychology, the struggle for identity is the main task in transitioning from the psycho-social phase of adolescence to that of adulthood in the epigenetic process of human development.<sup>190</sup> As a fictional trope, the CoA game thus narratively mimics (and simplifies) the psychological process of transitioning from psycho-social adolescence to adulthood independent of a respective fictional character's physical age.

Like most internal processes, the demonstrative audio-visual medium of popular TV usually expresses this development through characters' external actions. The CoA game consists of two consecutive sets of complementary transactions between the main player and his\*her co-player(s). The first involves simple or ulterior Child (*protagonist*)-Parent (*co-player*) transactions and serves to establish the main player as pre-coming-of-age (see figure 5). The second game consists of either Adult-Adult or Parent-Child transactions between the main player and his\*her co-player(s) (see figure 6). It illustrates the character's post-coming-of-age status to audiences.

Figure 5: Pre-Coming-of-Age



A CoA game that ends in an Adult-Adult configuration usually indicates a character's peaceful integration into his\*her environment. A CoA game ending in a Parent (*protagonist*)-Child (*co-player*) configuration and thus a reversal of the game's initial structure usually indicates an (intradiegetic or dramatic) *Zero-Sum* game in which the developing hero\*ine overcomes and diminishes former mentor figures. An example of the former is THE POLITICIAN's protagonist Payton Hobart. After unexpectedly winning a crucial election, he teams up with his experienced older competitor Dede Standish to form an alliance of equals (see chapter 5). Elizabeth II's relationship with Winston Churchill in THE

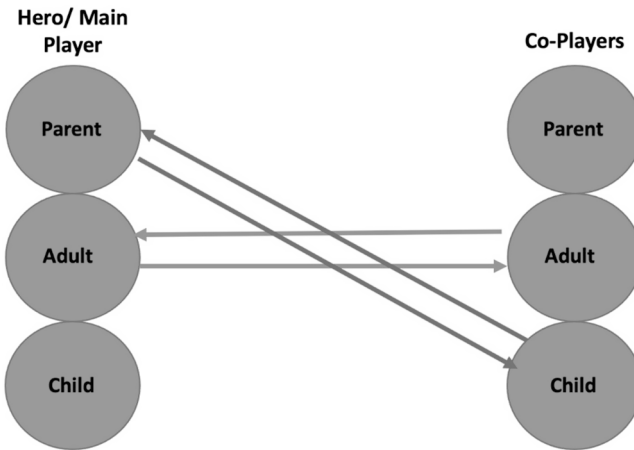
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und für den Roman passendsten Kollisionen ist deshalb der Konflikt zwischen der Poesie des Herzens und der entgegenstehenden Prosa der Verhältnisse [...]".

190 Erikson, *Der vollständige Lebenszyklus*, 36f, 70, and 94ff. See also: Erik Erikson, "Wachstum und Krisen der gesunden Persönlichkeit", in *Identität und Lebenszyklus: Drei Aufsätze*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1989), 106f.

CROWN is an example of the latter. As my analysis (chapter 4) will show, *her* growing into the role of Queen is accompanied by *his* proportional physical and mental deterioration.

Figure 6: Post-Coming-of-Age



As mentioned above, the coming-of-age motif is a common trope in fiction. One famous example is the rites-of-passage dynamic in Joseph Campbell's *Monomyth*. He names the transition of separation, initiation, and return as the “nuclear unit of the monomyth”.<sup>191</sup> Another example is the classic *bildungsroman*, which shows a protagonist growing up from childhood to adolescence and adulthood in a “succession of stages”.<sup>192</sup> These include the

development of the protagonist's mind and character in the passage from childhood [...] into maturity, which usually involves recognition of one's identity and role in the world.<sup>193</sup>

One of the reasons for the prevalence of this motif within fiction is the peculiar parallelism of perspectives between the coming-of-age hero and the reader/audience. Both initially face the similar task of getting to know a set of fictional characters and an unknown (fictional) world. This becomes particularly clear in highly divergent secondary worlds, where, as Lily Alexander notes, the audience sees the new world through the eyes of the “traveler” for the first time.<sup>194</sup> The coming-of-age character thus becomes the ves-

191 Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with A Thousand Faces*, Commemorative ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 28.

192 Jens Eder, Fotis Jannidis, and Ralf Schneider, “Characters in Fictional Worlds: An Introduction”, in *Characters in Fictional Worlds: Understanding Imaginary Beings in Literature, Film, and other Media*, ed. Jens Eder, Fotis Jannidis, and Ralf Schneider (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 43.

193 Meyer Howard Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1999), 193.

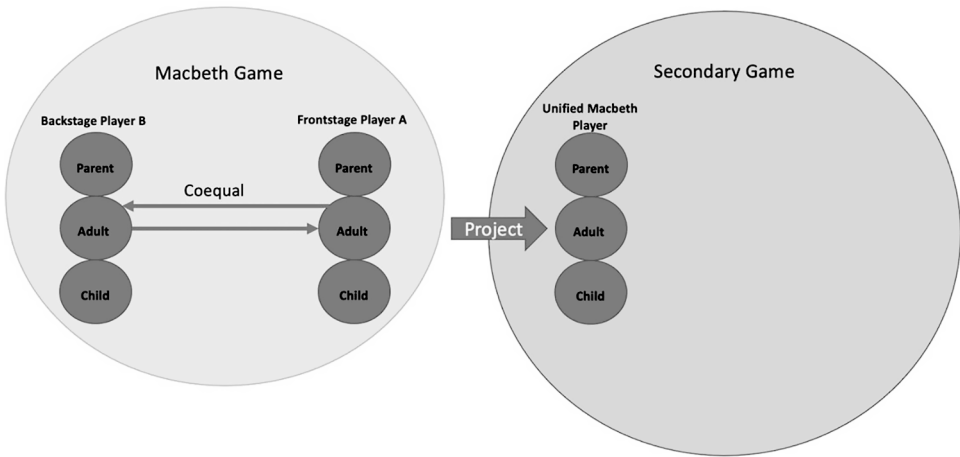
194 Lily Alexander, “The Hero's Journey”, in *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf (New York/London: Routledge, 2018), 11.

sel for the audience into the diegesis and the story. As he\*she explores the new world, so do audiences.

3.6.2.2.3 The Macbeth Game

The *Macbeth* game roughly follows the structural configuration of the infamous anti-heroes Lord and Lady Macbeth in William Shakespeare’s homonymous play. A common trope in fiction, it usually includes two allied players who join forces against a third party (or parties), forming a transactional unit for participation in secondary diegetic games (see figure 7).

Figure 7: The Simple Macbeth Game



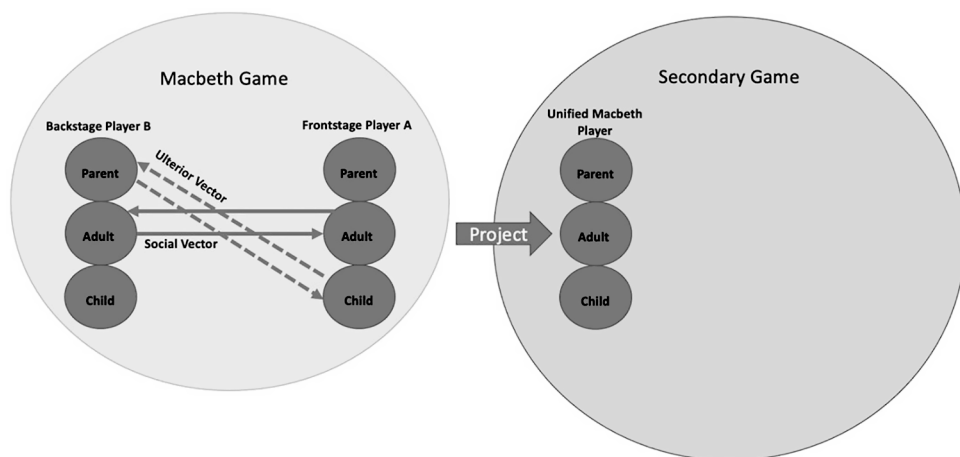
The allied players in the *Macbeth* game split into a frontstage player A, who occupies a high-profile external position in the diegesis (e.g., a political office) and a backstage player B, who does not have access to or does not wish to have access to such an exposed position. While the transactions within the allied unit are superficially coequal, backstage player B usually occupies a formally subordinate position outside his\*her transactional *Macbeth* unit. This subordinate position, however, is external and usually contrary to his\*her actual personal and intellectual qualities.

As an old narrative trope, the configuration of the *Macbeth* game conventionally assigns players’ roles according to binary patriarchal gender norms. They are by no means self-evident but, so far, remain a constant presence in mainstream popular entertainment by virtue of (sexist) convention. In the typical *Macbeth* game, a female player B is conniving and clever but ultimately operates from the backstage as an enabling force or éminence grise. The male player A is usually physically forceful, institutionally legitimated, and occupies the front stage.

If the players are real confidants, their game will often feature simple Adult-Adult transactions to form the *Simple Macbeth* game (see figure 7). Suppose backstage player B occupies the role of a more manipulating force. In that case, the game will come with a duplex ulterior vector on which backstage player B, as the personal and intellectually

superior party, takes the parental state, and frontstage player A, as the personally inferior party, unwittingly responds with his Child to form the *Complex Macbeth* game (see figure 8). However, due to his\*her already established external dominance, frontstage player A cannot take a similar duplex parental position within the allied unit without dissolving the *Complex Macbeth* game.

Figure 8: *The Complex Macbeth Game*



The initially trusting and intimate relationship between the anti-heroes Claire and Frank Underwood in the US-version of HoC is an example of the former. Shakespeare's Lord and Lady Macbeth and their TV successors, the sinister Urquharts in the original UK version of HoC (1990), are examples of the latter. In all cases, a female machinator encourages and enables a male ally to pursue what she/they regard/s as their common interest. Chapter 5 will show that THE POLITICIAN features a satirical variation of the *Macbeth* game between the capricious and extrovert protagonist Payton Hobart (male frontstage player A) and his girlfriend/partner in crime, the icy and limitlessly self-controlled Alice Charles (female backstage player B).

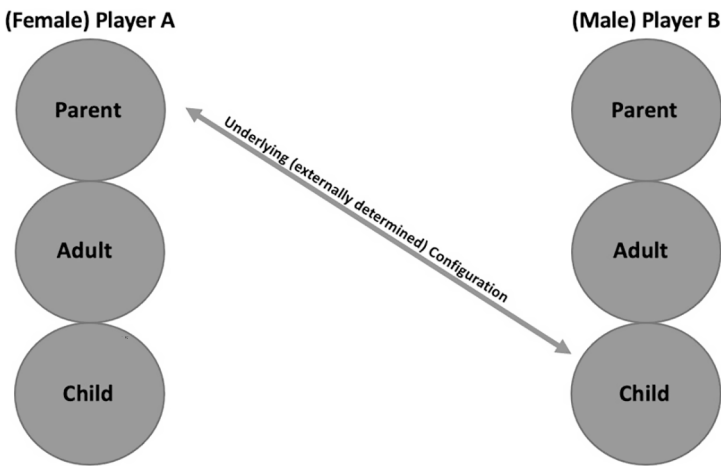
As a narrative convention, the *Macbeth* game is so well-established that it can be evoked using only a few narrative cues. The game inadvertently serves as a shortcut to establishing the protagonists' character and the overall tone of a narrative (conspiracy, sinister intrigue, behind-the-scenes machinations, betrayal, 3rd-degree intensity, general zero-sum structure). With its formation of an alliance between otherwise ruthless players, the *Macbeth* game often provides a fascinating counterpoint to a narrative's overall agonal zero-sum structure. However, the game usually does *not* serve to create narrative conflict by itself, as this would lead to the dissolution of the game. For the game to result in engaging dramatic action, additional players must engage with the unified *Macbeth* allies.

## 3.6.2.2.4 The Reverse Macbeth Game

The *Reverse Macbeth* game (RM game) is a more recent phenomenon. Like its predecessor, the *Macbeth* game, it is a common and easily recognizable narrative pattern that often plays at seemingly reversing the patriarchal, binary gender roles of the *Macbeth* game.

The RM game features two allied players: one an institutionally powerful (usually female) player A, who occupies an external frontstage and the other an externally subordinate (often male) co-player B, who occupies the backstage. The allied players of the RM game usually face an (often involuntary) power imbalance resulting in an underlying Parent-Child configuration between the (female) frontstage player A (Parent) and the (male) backstage player B (Child) (see figure 9).

Figure 9: Underlying configuration of the Reverse Macbeth game



Other than the *Macbeth* game, the RM game almost always introduces a problem-rich personal relationship and serves as a primary source for narrative conflict in usually character-based narratives. The RM game's underlying vector usually remains unchallenged by the players for reasons of dramatic logic (it provides the necessary dramatic foundation for a series' ongoing conflict). In the course of the RM game, this underlying configuration continuously clashes with the players' divergent personal transactional dynamics. Accordingly, the transactions of the RM game usually progress to cross on an additional personal vector. These crossed transactional chains take the form of (1) the (female) player A unsuccessfully introducing an additional social Adult-Adult vector to reflect on the relationship's underlying power imbalance. For maximal dramatic emphasis, this attempt usually clashes with (male) player B's simultaneous effort at a Child (B)-Parent (A) transaction (see figure 10). This progression can also be a step preceding a subsequent level of escalation.

The crossed transaction (2) results from the (male) player B trying to re-assert his perceived dominance through ultimately unsustainable Parent (B)-Child (A) transactions (see figure 11). This move inevitably causes a clash with the dominant underlying configuration leading (female) player A to transfer her underlying authority onto the personal

vector as an open Parent (A)-Child (B) transaction. This progression usually marks the end of a round of the RM game. It has (female) player A winning the match while simultaneously escalating the conflict for a subsequent, intensified round of the RM game.

Figure 10: The first conflictive progression of the Reverse Macbeth game

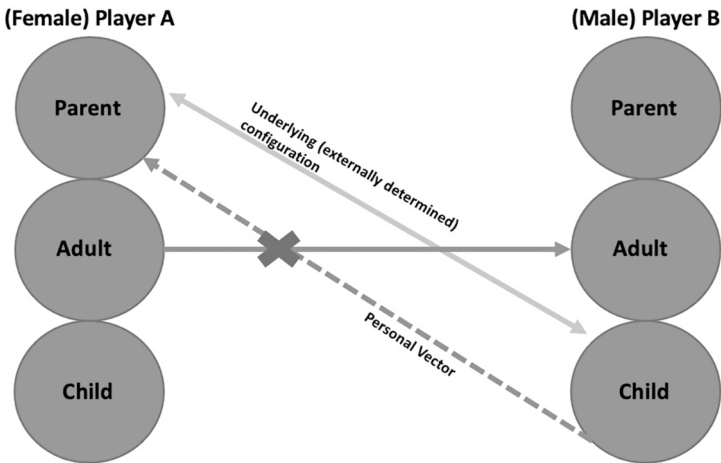
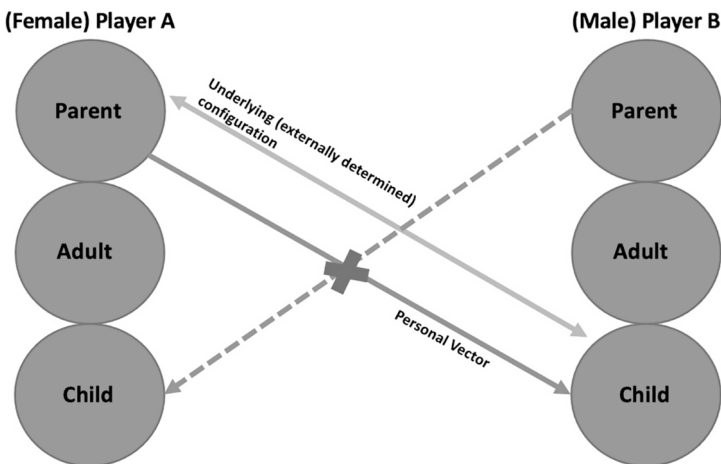


Figure 11: The second conflictive progression of the Reverse Macbeth game



As long as the RM game is ongoing, both conflictive progressions culminate in crossed transactions and thus a transactional stalemate in the RM game, which intensifies the respective conflict. In popular narrative practice, the escalation of a round of the RM game (to the point of transactional stalemate) is usually followed by a temporary interruption of the interaction and a scene change. It often manifests in the common motif of a character dramatically turning away from a dispute and leaving the room after

landing a final jab, followed by a hard editorial cut. In ongoing series with a fixed character configuration, the crossed transactional stalemate will most often be 'resolved' by an eventual reset of the game that restores its initial Parent (*her*)-Child (*him*) configuration allowing for the game to begin anew.

Conventionally, the RM game indicates a struggle caused by a perceived imbalance between a player set's configuration and patriarchal binary gender norms. A classic example of a dominant RM game is the central relationship in *THE CROWN*'s first two seasons between the shy Queen Elizabeth II (female player A), taking an initially involuntary dominant frontstage position, and her patriarchally confident husband Philip (male player B), feeling unduly marginalised in his subordinate role as consort (see chapter 4). Following the configuration of the RM, Philip, relegated to the backstage, with his patriarchal pride insulted by his wife's superior formal position, carries the inferior state of his institutional role into his personal relationship with the Queen. This configuration leads him to cause scenes, continuously mope and complain, and commit childish, often hurtful antics. Attempts on Elizabeth's side to treat her husband as an equal on the personal vector (Adult-Adult), while retaining the inevitably imbalanced underlying configuration of their overall RM configuration, remain just as unsuccessful as Philip's frequent attempts to dominate his wife in secondary Parent (*him*)-Child (*her*) side-battles.

The established narrative convention to draw conflict from the binary gender dynamic of the RM game seems to indicate that the configuration of *frontstage-woman: backstage-man* still appears as a curiosity worthy of (narrative) attention. By using its superficially anti-patriarchal configuration as a reliable source for narrative conflict, the RM game thus often implicitly reintroduces patriarchal gender norms.

All the games noted above are prevalent structural tropes throughout the series in this study and will feature heavily in my analyses. There are several additional games, particularly those specific to fictional politics and gender dynamics (like the hierarchical *King's Two Bodies* game and the transgressive *Patronage for Pleasure* game), that I will discuss as they arise.

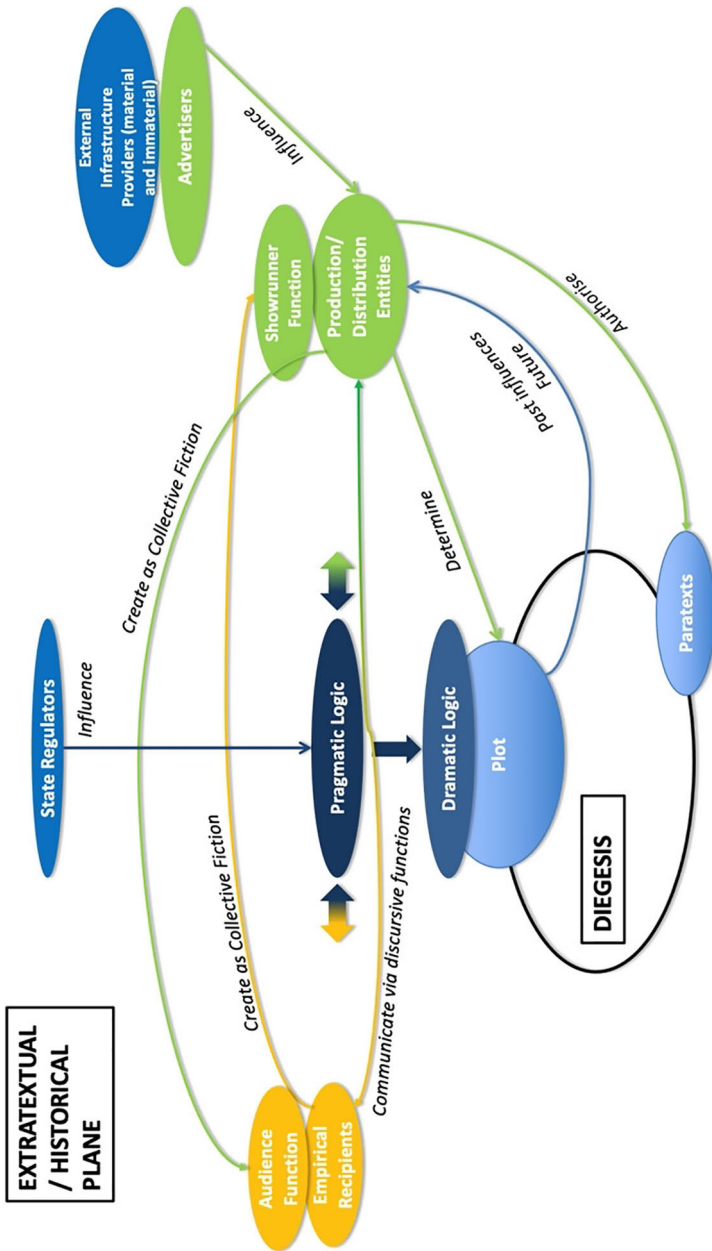
### 3.6.3 The Historical Actors

The historical or extratextual actors comprise all micro and macro actors – individuals, institutions, and discursive functions – that participate in the interdependent collective actions of a TV series' creation, circulation, and reception (see figure 12). The historical actors' network determines a series' emergent pragmatic logic through their collective activity. In this decentralised determination, as I have discussed before, the historical actors are theoretically free to make any choice they wish as long as they are able to implement it. However, they are practically always influenced by the narrative past through the "recursive progression" of a series.<sup>195</sup>

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195 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), 16.

Figure 12: The Historical Network



It should be noted here that there is a natural incompleteness of any model concerning the historical actors. This is primarily due to their almost infinite complexity and, to a lesser degree, a lack of tangible information. Contemporary portals' viewer data and details on algorithmic selection criteria have, e.g., famously remained well-kept trade secrets. However, there are enough structural regularities and revelatory breakout events

that allow observers to gain insight into how historical actors determine their respective network.

Likewise, it is often impossible to precisely discern individual actors' contributions in the emergent, multi-agential network of a TV series. Recipients, for example, take part in the production and proliferation of a text as "prosumers" and "producers".<sup>196</sup> Through what Virginia Crisp, for film, calls "informal" distribution,<sup>197</sup> they can likewise extend a series' distribution to unauthorized avenues. Similarly, channels (in the past, most notably HBO), portals (currently most notably Netflix), and – though to a lesser extent – platforms

often act as both producers and distributors of content.

Acknowledging this difficulty, I will – for the purpose of textual analysis – distinguish the historical actors according to the discursive roles the network itself produces in order to categorize its dispersed historical actors. While they require further discussion, the historical actors roughly comprise:

- (1) The production entities. They consist of (i) the "human capital"<sup>198</sup> of individuals fulfilling specific roles as micro actors within the network, such as showrunners, writers, directors, production executives, screen actors, cutters, camera people and other staff and crew. They (ii) comprise the institutional macro actors that organise these individuals into functional collectives like studios, channels, and portals. Furthermore, they are (iii) the discursively created functions of 'authors', 'showrunners', and 'stars' which I will discuss in more detail shortly.
- (2) The almost exclusively institutional macro actors of distribution. There is often an overlap with production entities. In classic linear content distribution and non-linear Advertising-Video-on-Demand (AVoD) models, advertisers also influence the shape of a narrative. I leave out, for now, actors operating in unauthorised "guerrilla networks", that is, the unauthorised, emergent "transmedia distribution"<sup>199</sup> of content through audience channels and activity that, as Elizabeth Evans notes, often predated similar activities of official entities.<sup>200</sup>
- (3) The institutionalised providers of (i) material infrastructure on which TV series depend for distribution and (ii) the regulatory framework to which they must adhere. The most influential macro actors are governments and other administrative bodies. An example are the various mercantilist quotas that prescribe the production and

196 Axel Bruns, "Producersage", *Proceedings of the 6th ACM SIGCHI conference on Creativity & cognition (C&C '07)*. Association for Computing Machinery, New York (June 13, 2007), 101. <https://doi.org/10.1145/1254960.1254975>.

197 Virginia Crisp, *Film Distribution in the Digital Age: Pirates and Professionals* (New York/London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 6.

198 John B. Thompson, *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in The Twenty-First Century* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2010), 6.

199 Elizabeth Evans, *Transmedia Television: Audiences, New Media and Daily Life* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 43f.

200 Evans, *Transmedia Television*, 44.

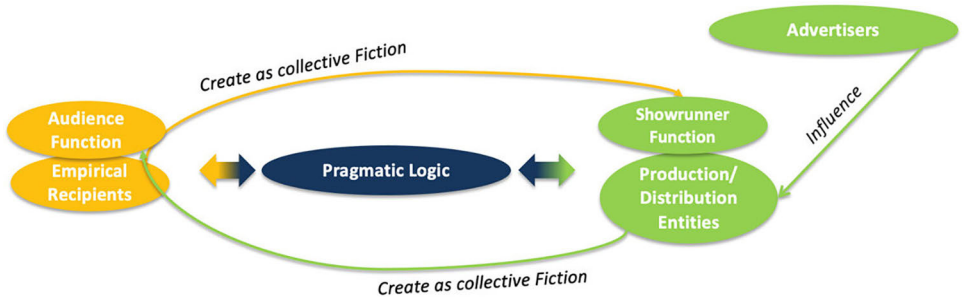
distribution of European content within the EU.<sup>201</sup> Another, more fundamental one is the provision of enforceable intellectual property laws. The line between infrastructure providers, distributors, and producers is, once again, a blurred one. Netflix, for example, has spent significant resources developing its physical content distribution network “Open Connect” to support digital data transmission in critical strategic areas.<sup>202</sup>

- (4) The human persons, macro-agential entities, and discursive functions involved with a series’ reception. These are (i) individual recipients, (ii) fan groups and other organised non-governmental recipient collectives such as civil rights organisations and (iii) the discursively created ‘audiences’.

My model considers the historical Actors only insofar as their interactions with the overall network of a TV series are insightful for textual analysis.

The complexity of a TV series’ emergent multi-agential network not only poses a problem for scholarly observation and analysis but for the network’s actors themselves. How can interactions between an almost limitless number of fragmented actors in a rhizomatic multi-sided structure be managed? In order to facilitate its otherwise impossible intra-network interactions, a TV series’ network reduces complexity by creating discursive macro actors (see figure 13).

Figure 13: The Discursive Macro Actors



201 Laid down, e.g., in the EU Commission’s “Audiovisual Media Services Directive”. For latest adjustments with regards to the local production quotas for VOD services operating in Europe see European Commission, “Communication from the Commission Guidelines pursuant to Article 13(7) of the Audiovisual Media Services Directive on the calculation of the share of European works in on-demand catalogues and on the definition of low audience and low turnover 2020/C 223/03”, *EUR-Lex*, July 7, 2020. [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C\\_.2020.223.01.0010.01.ENG&toc=OJ:C:2020:223:TOC](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C_.2020.223.01.0010.01.ENG&toc=OJ:C:2020:223:TOC).

202 See Ramon Lobato, *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 94–100.

The first intra-network model is an authorial function that I want to call the *showrunner function*,<sup>203</sup> following Mittells similar concept of the “*inferred author function*”.<sup>204</sup> The network creates this function to allow individual actors (especially audiences) to (1) make sense of the complex collective process of a TV series’ creation and (2) enable interaction with the dispersed production collective as a discursive macro actor.

The second model allows actors to make sense of and interact with the fragmented individual viewers by collecting them into the conceptual macro actor I propose to call the *audience function*. It holds particular relevance for production actors.

Both models serve to more or less satisfactorily answer the respective questions ‘Who is responsible for a TV series?’ and ‘Who is watching a TV series?’ As products of the network itself, both models are emergent discursive creations that come into being through – and adapt to – the network’s activity. Both significantly impact the shape of a narrative text and are, therefore, critical historical factors in any contextualising textual analysis.

### 3.6.3.1 The Showrunner Function – Operationalising Industrial Authorship

Since the introduction of industrial means of cultural production, the question of authorship has been much contested; TV series are no exception. Jason Mittell, taking up Michel Foucault’s theory of authorship, describes the “*inferred author function*”<sup>205</sup> as a way for viewers to produce a unified model of otherwise dispersed authorial agency.<sup>206</sup> However, it is essential to note that a discursive authorial function not only serves audiences’ needs. Instead, it provides all actors within a series’ network with an authorial reference point – with far-reaching consequences.

Derek Kompare remarks that a TV series’ authorship has increasingly been attributed to the function of the *showrunner*,<sup>207</sup> which coincides with the emerging prominence of the material position of showrunners in many contemporary TV productions. Institutionally, the term denotes a somewhat vaguely defined position with a host of creative and management responsibilities that usually refers to a human actor with a leading creative position, often the head writer, who originated the series’ premise and is “managing

203 See also Foucault’s concept of the author “as a function of discourse” in Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?”, in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, transl. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 124. See also 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), 31.

204 See Mittell’s reception-centred author concept, which owes much to Foucault (see above). In: Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 107. Original emphasis.

205 Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York City: NYU Press, 2015), 107.

206 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 107.

207 Derek Kompare, “More ‘Moments of Television’: Online Cult Television Authorship”, in *Flow TV: Television in the Age of Media Convergence*, ed. Michael Kackman, Marnie Binfield, Matthew Thomas Payne et al. (New York/London: Routledge, 2011), 98.

the entire project and keeping it on the right editorial track.”<sup>208</sup> Unlike the pre-industrial ideal of a singular creative genius, showrunners possess, as Mittell remarks, “*authorship by responsibility*”<sup>209</sup> and “*authorship by management*”.<sup>210</sup>

It has been noted that the discursive function and the material position of a ‘showrunner’ are originally US-American. Lothar Mikos, e.g., remarks that, in France, following a more cinematic tradition, the director has traditionally been credited with providing a series’ creative direction as the series’ “auteur” while the scriptwriter often does not participate in the production.<sup>211</sup> In the changing German TV landscape, the adjusted version of the originally foreign (US) concept of a showrunner is more akin to a head author or executive producer (the latter remaining an essential function in German TV)<sup>212</sup> and a, at times, lamented disregard for screenwriters’ contributions to a series’ collective production. With an increase in transnational productions, especially following localisation efforts by portals such as Netflix, the managerial showrunner position has become more pervasive, with transnational productions increasingly causing European industry to approach the American model.<sup>213</sup> However, given different traditions of authorship that derive from varying literary and cinematic traditions, there remain some questions about whether the discursive attribution of TV authorship can be generalised in the first place.<sup>214</sup> As most examples of contemporary popular seriality follow the showrunner model in some way, I will assume the *showrunner function* to stand for any discursively created central source of authorial authority and agency within a TV series’ network.

The showrunner function’s purpose is (1) to serve as a substitute for a series’ missing ‘author’, (2) as a point of address for direct communication, and (3) as a ‘brand’ and marker of contextualising identification.<sup>215</sup>

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- 208 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), 18.
- 209 Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York City: NYU Press, 2015), 88 and 90. Original emphasis.
- 210 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 88. Original emphasis.
- 211 H el ene Monnet-Cantagrel, “The strategy of “quality TV”: Branding, creating, and producing at Canal+”, in *A European Television Fiction Renaissance: Premium Production Models and Transnational Circulation*, ed. Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni (New York: Routledge, 2021), 119f.
- 212 Lothar Mikos, “TV Drama series production in Germany and the digital television landscape”, in *A European Television Fiction Renaissance: Premium Production Models and Transnational Circulation*, ed. Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni (New York: Routledge, 2021), 183.
- 213 See, e.g., Mikos, “TV Drama series production in Germany”, 183.
- 214 See, e.g., Fran ois Jost’s similar question regarding French and US TV authorship: Fran ois Jost, “What is a quality French series? Reflections on *The Bureau*”, in *A European Television Fiction Renaissance: Premium Production Models and Transnational Circulation*, ed. Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni (New York: Routledge, 2021), 130.
- 215 See Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York City: NYU Press, 2015), 111–112; 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), 18f.

As the source of authorship, the network endows the showrunner function with creative authority or, as Foucault puts it, the “sovereignty of the author”.<sup>216</sup> Mark Wolf remarks, “for a work to be canonical requires that it be declared as such by someone with the authority to do so”.<sup>217</sup> Given the host of creative activity that usually surrounds a popular TV series’ supersystem, the showrunner function serves the essential purpose of solving textual “*authorization conflicts*”<sup>218</sup> by determining which content becomes part of the ‘official’ text and which does not.

The publicised figurations of a showrunner function (usually a series’ actual showrunner such as THE CROWN’s Peter Morgan or key stars endowed with authorial authority such as Kevin Spacey before his dismissal from HoC) provide a universe of paratexts surrounding a television series’ text across various media. They promote and interpret<sup>219</sup> the series through their activity, provide relevant background information, and thus extend the narrative’s canonical material.

As an authorial function, the *showrunner*, together with other discursive creations (e.g., ‘stars’), serves as a brand “crafted for fans’ consumption”.<sup>220</sup> Brands, as Timothy Havens notes, “inhabit an entire symbolic ecosystem designed to give products and services emotional and intellectual meanings for consumers”.<sup>221</sup> This is true for the showrunner function as well. Like most notions of authorship, it invokes a false vision of creation that is “freed from economic and industrial constraints, in the name of an ideology of genius”<sup>222</sup> and thus harkens back to a pre-industrial ideal of *literary* creativity.

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- 216 Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?”, in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, transl. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 126.
- 217 Mark J.P. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 271. See also Jessica Aldred, “Authorship”, in *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf (New York/London: Routledge, 2018), 220.
- 218 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), 19. Original emphasis. See also Frank Kelleter and Daniel Stein’s discussion of the practices of authorization in serial narration: Frank Kelleter and Daniel Stein, “Autorisierungspraktiken seriellen Erzählens: Zur Gattungsentwicklung von Superheldencomics”, in *Populäre Serialität: Evolution – Narration – Distinktion: Zum seriellen Erzählen seit dem 19. Jhd.*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012), 259–290. <https://doi.org/10.1515/transcript.9783839421413>.
- 219 See 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), 18f.
- 220 Derek Kompare, “More ‘Moments of Television’: Online Cult Television Authorship”, in *Flow TV: Television in the Age of Media Convergence*, ed. Michael Kackman, Marnie Binfield, Matthew Thomas Payne et al. (New York/London: Routledge, 2011), 102.
- 221 Timothy Havens, “Netflix: Streaming Channel brands as Global meaning Systems”, in *From Networks to Netflix: A Guide to Changing Channels*, ed. Derek Johnson (New York/London: Routledge, 2018), 322.
- 222 Héléne Monnet-Cantagrel, “The strategy of “quality TV”: Branding, creating, and producing at Canal+”, in *A European Television Fiction Renaissance: Premium Production Models and Transnational Circulation*. Ed. Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni (New York: Routledge, 2021), 125.

The notion of an auteur's singular creative vision thus increases a series' cultural capital. As Matt Hills notes: "Auteurism brings with it an ideology of quality".<sup>223</sup>

At least since the rise of HBO and the successful association of the company with the somewhat ill-termed "Quality TV"<sup>224</sup> in the 1990s, channels and portals alike have attempted to transfer the cultural capital traditionally accorded to an author figure onto their own brand identity by creating an "authorship operating at institutional level".<sup>225</sup> John T. Caldwell states:

In the age of multiplatformed media content, corporate media brands do regularly function as both auteurs (who choreograph and organize the televisual spectacle) and critical analysts (who ably mine the backstory, behind-the-camera, and presentational secrets for their content – *as content*).<sup>226</sup>

More recently, nonlinear portals, too, have undertaken great marketing efforts to position themselves as a reliable source for "prized content",<sup>227</sup> e.g., by emphasising their ability to provide each user with an algorithmically, in the case of Netflix, or, in the case of Mubi, analogously curated experience.<sup>228</sup>

As a brand, a distribution/production service creates an interpretative frame for the reception of a TV series' text. Marketing texts, as Caldwell notes, "can achieve the status of prefabricated *master codes*"<sup>229</sup> that, in turn, influence how audiences view a TV series. A Netflix or HBO production with its brand connotations of 'quality', innovation, and artistic value is viewed differently than a show on, say, a private or public broadcaster.

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223 Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures*, e-library ed. (New York: Routledge, 2005), 99.

224 See, e.g., Catherine Johnson, "Tele-Branding in TVIII", *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 5, no.1 (March 2007): 8. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17400300601140126>. See also Catherine Johnson, *Branding Television* (New York: Routledge, 2012) for a discussion of the emergence and practices of TV branding in the US and the UK.

225 Elizabeth Evans, *Transmedia Television: Audiences, New Media and Daily Life* (New York/London: Routledge, 2011), 33. She notes this with reference to the section "The Studio as Auteur" (III) in *Making Television: Authorship and the Production Process*, ed. Robert J. Thompson and Gary Burns (New York: Praeger, 1990), 93–144.

226 John T. Caldwell, "Critical Industrial Practice: Branding, repurposing, and the Migratory Patterns of Industrial Texts", *Television and New Media* 7, no. 2 (May 2006): 103.

227 Amanda Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York/ London: New York University Press, 2014), 12. She defines it as "programming that *people seek out and specifically desire*". Original emphasis.

228 For Netflix's discursive branding use of its algorithms see Benjamin Burroughs, "House of Netflix: Streaming Media and Digital Lore", *Popular Communication* 17, no.1 (February 2019): 11. doi 10.1080/15405702.2017.1343948. See also Lotz's discussion of the curation-based Netflix brand in Amanda 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/mpub969968/9/1:4/--portals-a-treatise-on-internet-distributed-television?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>. For a discussion of Mubi see Matthias Frey, *MUBI and the Curation Model of Video on Demand* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

229 Caldwell, "Critical Industrial Practice", 120. Original emphasis.

Thus, the anthropomorphic macro actor of an authorial distribution/production entity becomes itself a paratext that shapes the reception of the narrative.

As primary sources for the textual analysis of many TV series, the activities of authorial showrunner functions that shape a text are vital as they often provide the only tangible expressions of the highly fragmented production actors. However, while considering their influence, it is essential to bear in mind both their discursive nature and their various pragmatic purposes.

### 3.6.3.2 The Audience Function

For a commodified TV series, the fragmented individual empirical recipients, that is, the discrete human persons and organised groups and institutions who engage with a TV series, are a vital factor. Manfred Pfister's remark that in drama, there exists a "causal connection between the structure of the intended audience and the structure of the designated dramatic text"<sup>230</sup> is even more true for contemporary TV. As evolving narratives and datafied, contingent commodities, television series are especially susceptible to their viewership. As Kelleter states, a "series can observe its own effects in reactivated or 'engaged' consumers while the narrative proceeds".<sup>231</sup> Series, therefore, "can register their reception and involve it in the act of (dispersed) storytelling itself".<sup>232</sup> Recipients' activities significantly influence the commercially oriented historical parts of any series' network in more than one way. With regards to Netflix's efforts at globalising their service (in part, by localising it), Ramon Lobato has pointed out, "Just as Netflix is changing, users are changing Netflix. The platform learns from its new global audiences, tracking tastes and viewing habits".<sup>233</sup>

However, given the unmanageable mass and complexity of fragmented individuals and interest groups that engage with a series, the question remains how empirical recipients can form a functional (and legible) part of a series' network. How do invested actors determine with whom to interact on the reception side and whose preferences to regard and disregard when making decisions about a series' continuation?

The fragmented individual empirical recipients, who engage with a TV series, become de facto (micro or macro) actors in the network of that TV series, above all else, as consumers who participate in the capitalist market environment. Generally speaking, the choice to watch or not to watch a series is already an action that resonates within the TV series' network.<sup>234</sup> To a lesser extent, empirical recipients participate in the network's activities by engaging in direct or indirect interaction with the production entities or – in the case of interactive texts – by interaction with elements of the text itself. The

230 Manfred Pfister, *Das Drama: Theorie und Analyse*, 11th ed. (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2001), 56. My translation: "Bedingungszusammenhang zwischen der Struktur des intendierten Publikums und der Struktur der dafür bestimmten dramatischen Texte".

231 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), 14.

232 Kelleter, "Five Ways", 14.

233 Ramon Lobato, *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 14.

234 As remarked, e.g., in 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), 13.

former can be conscious or unconscious, intended or unintended. To date, the latter, including experimental productions like Netflix's BANDERSNATCH (UK, 2018), remains a secondary phenomenon in the popular TV landscape.<sup>235</sup>

In order to contend with the unmanageable mass of discrete empirical individuals and groups that engage with a series in a multitude of ways, its network usually performs an operation similar to the creation of its authorial showrunner function: it constructs collective fictions, which I propose to call a series' *audience functions*. Like the showrunner function, the *audience function* is a simplified discursive macro actor created by the series network to make sense of the complex mass of actual empirical recipients. In many ways, the audience function is akin to what literary theory has called the "archireader"<sup>236</sup> or "authorial audience".<sup>237</sup> It is a conceptual entity to whom a specific set of similar attributes and preferences is attributed by a micro or macro actor with authorial responsibility.

The creation of a functional model of *audiences* is a prerequisite for the network's overall sustainable functioning. Its formation is – with very few exceptions – a prerequisite to any meaningful interaction taking place between the recipients as actors in a series' network and between the recipient side and the remaining actors of that network.

The audience functions of a TV series become visible through the network's more or less accurate and more or less extensive measurement and interpretation of empirical recipients' activities pertaining to a serial text and its network. Given that popular TV series act as cultural commodities, these data measurements and their subsequent interpretation leading to the creation of 'audiences' as "representations of markets" is usually (but not exclusively) carried out by what Donoghue, Havens, and McDonald call a "market intelligence".<sup>238</sup> It comprises those micro and macro actors in a series' network interested in mining recipients' resources for commercial or political gain.

With the establishment of digital circulation, increasingly advanced means of algorithmic gathering and interpretation of users' digital data have become an important tool to "manage uncertainty"<sup>239</sup> about a series' fragmented empirical recipients leading

235 For a discussion of interactivity in *Bandersnatch* see, e.g., Lobke Kolhoff and Frank Nack, "How Relevant Is Your Choice?", in *Interactive Storytelling: ICIDS 2019, Lecture Notes in Computer Science 11869*, ed. Rogelio E. Cardona-Rivera, Anne Sullivan, R. Michael Young (Cham: Springer, 2019), 73–85. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-33894-7\\_9](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-33894-7_9).

236 Michael Riffaterre, *Strukturelle Stilistik*, transl. Wilhelm Bolle (Munich: List, 1973), 44–47.

237 The "hypothetical audience" of a novel as imagined by its creator(s): Peter J. Rabinowitz, "Truth in Fiction: A Reexamination of Audiences," *Critical Inquiry* 4, no. 1 (1977): 126, original emphasis. See also the similar concept of "intended audience" in William E. Tolhurst, William, "On what a Text is and how it Means," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 19, no. 1 (1979): 12. See Marcus Willand, "Ilers impliziter Leser im praxeologischen Belastungstest: Ein literaturwissenschaftliches Konzept zwischen Theorie und Methode", in *Theorien, Methoden und Praktiken des Interpretierens*, ed. Andrea Albrecht, Lutz Danneberg, Olav Krämer and Carlos Spoerhase (Berlin/Munich/Boston: De Gruyter, 2015), 239.

238 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), 5.

239 Benjamin Burroughs, "House of Netflix: Streaming media and digital lore, *Popular Communication* 17, no.1 (February 2019): 9. doi 10.1080/15405702.2017.1343948.

to the discursive creation of datafied audience functions or, as Benjamin Burroughs calls them, “algorithmic audiences”.<sup>240</sup>

Datafication and computer-based processing have arguably increased the variety and accuracy of audience formation. Netflix, for example, uses more than 2000 “taste communities” to approach its fragmented subscriber base.<sup>241</sup> The resulting “algorithmic logic”, as Poell and Nieborg termed it, increasingly dominates the “production and circulation strategies” of content developers<sup>242</sup> as they try to determine who their audiences are and with what content they are most likely to engage.

Algorithmic audience formation significantly impacts the serial text and the overall network. The accuracy of a portal’s prediction of audiences’ preferences often serves to legitimise the activities of circulation services as well as the shape of the series themselves. Due to the assumed accuracy of algorithmic predictions, the offered content, audiences learn, is just what they had wished for in the first place.<sup>243</sup> However, while nonlinear services are arguably better at discerning and accommodating varying recipient tastes, their creation of audiences ultimately remains a simplifying discursive operation.

It should be noted that the established mass media practice of audience formation through gathering and evaluating recipients’ data to maximise the success of a series is not at all new to the process of popular storytelling (nor is it limited to the digital realm). While writing and publishing his novels as a newspaper series, Charles Dickens famously went on walks trying to gather information about his readers’ attitudes towards his stories to adjust future instalments to their taste.<sup>244</sup> Thus, as Iser states, Dicken’s readers “became his ‘co-authors’”;<sup>245</sup> or rather, Dicken’s *perception* of his readers did. Discursive audience functions thus become essential, albeit notoriously unstable actors in a series’ network.

### 3.7 Conclusion: Expanding the Possibilities for (Con)Textual Analysis

The model outlined in this chapter describes popular TV series as complex, emergent agential networks. As a liminal network, a TV series performs various complex operations across various micro and macro agential relationships and ontological planes. As this chapter pointed out, the actors of a TV series comprise (1) fictional characters who become actors within the network as discursive functions actualised by historical actors. As such, characters gain agential agency within the diegesis while simultaneously retaining their status as compositional elements. (2) Following assumptions of popular seriality

240 Burroughs, “House of Netflix”, 10.

241 Jane Shattuc, “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), 150.

242 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. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818769694>

243 Burroughs, “House of Netflix”, 11.

244 Wolfgang Iser, *Die Appellstruktur der Texte: Unbestimmtheit als Wirkungsbedingung literarischer Prosa*, in *Rezeptionsästhetik: Theorie und Praxis*, ed Rainer Warning (Munich: Fink, 1988), 236.

245 Iser, “Appellstruktur”, 237. My translation: “Seine Leser wurden ihm zu ‘Mitautoren’”.

research, I considered the text of a series itself to constitute a systemic actor within the network due to its ability to influence and determine activities within the network (e.g., by forcing it to contend with established narrative past). (3) The historical actors comprised of micro and macro entities involved in the production, circulation, and reception of a TV series' text, as well as the discursive functions created by those entities to allow for the reduction of intra-network complexity and thus enable its functionality, such as authorial showrunner functions or the simplified conceptual audience functions.

To reflect the distinct liminal status of a TV series' network and discern the various interdependent and often contradictory influences and considerations that ultimately determine its activity – and thus final shape – for the analysis, I introduced what I called the *triple logic* of a series' network. It consists of:

- (1) *pragmatic logic*, the various extratextual factors that influence a series' network, such as economic considerations, requirements of historical actors, and evolving historical events. The much-discussed tendency of series to delay their resolution or changes of cast (e.g., through introducing a more diverse ensemble or replacing an unruly former star) find themselves here.
- (2) *dramatic logic*, that is, the various contingent principles and conventions of aesthetic textual and formal composition serving to create an engaging plot and audio-visual setup. The narrative arc, narrative over-coherence, classic linear TV's continuity editing or the often more formally innovative audio-visual composition of prestige TV, which I termed *editorial presence* following this model's agential focus, are examples of this.
- (3) *Intradiegetic logic*, which denotes the working principles of the fictional world itself. It constitutes a decisive factor in the creation of narrative continuity (as well as the determination of the previously mentioned textual agency within the network).

As an example of the workings of the triple logic and serving as a crucial analytic distinction, I proposed to differentiate between two types of narrative evolution: *development* and *recalibration*. The former denotes a narrative evolution primarily contingent on intradiegetic logic, and the latter describes a narrative evolution determined mainly by pragmatic logic. It is either notably at odds with intradiegetic logic (*hard* recalibration) or attempts to make concessions to intradiegetic logic (*soft* recalibration). Given the implicit (albeit asymmetrical) power struggle between the various historical actors that usually pervade a popular TV series' network, engaged audiences often reject hard recalibrations as an 'executive overreach' on the part of production entities. A soft recalibration thus minimises disruption, retains continuity, and acknowledges engaged audiences' rights as actors within the network.

With recourse to the significant descriptive properties of psychological Transaction Analysis, this chapter proposed to model the actions of fictional characters as *games*, that is, as regular, rule-based transactions between various interactional roles taken on by the respective *players* of that game. As I pointed out, in the demonstrative dramatic medium of serial TV, characters' actions (and interactions) are a critical factor in determining the plot and expressing interior development. Illustrative examples for popular games were (1) the *Zero-Sum* game, which intensifies agonal narratives by introducing personal

stakes for the characters (by making their gains and losses proportional); (2) the *Coming of Age* game, which serves to demonstrate a character's development by demonstrating his\*her changing position in continued intrapersonal relationships, (3) the *Macbeth* game, which introduces a character constellation typical for intrigue-driven plotlines in which (gender coded) allied players face a highly agonal secondary game; (4) the *Reverse Macbeth* game, which cues a conflict rich, often gender-coded interpersonal relationship in which a frontstage and backstage player struggle for dominance.

This thesis presents a new approach that integrates the distinct properties of a series' fictional serial universes, its audio-visual and narrative structure, and its extratextual ecology into one structured approach. The novel approach laid out in this chapter will enable textual analyses to more precisely discern the complex interactional logics that govern the various elements of a popular TV series. While previous analytical approaches have often considered including extratextual factors in the textual analysis, few have provided a structured methodology for describing the complex interplay of historical, dramatic, and intradiegetic factors in a comprehensible (albeit not comprehensive) way.

The model outlined in this chapter provides an integrated approach to textual and historical criticism of popular TV series and a vocabulary for distinguishing narrative patterns and their origins across ontological planes. It will contribute to shining a light on crucial and contested questions of television criticism by helping to discern the actual influence of sociocultural, sociotechnical, political, or aesthetic factors. The model will, furthermore, allow us to identify and compare distinct logics and narrative patterns across series from different cultural and production contexts and thus provide an improved structured approach to comparative textual and contextual analysis.

Not all aspects of this model are equally relevant to every analytical question regarding different series. However, it provides a valuable vantage point for a host of textual and historical inquiries regarding serial television fiction and its complex ecologies. In their analyses of contemporary polit-fiction, the coming chapters rely heavily on the model established here and will demonstrate its applicability to a variety of analytical challenges. Furthermore, they will provide illustrations of already established games and describe additional games that pervade contemporary, popular (polit-)fiction. The examination of *THE CROWN* and its presentation of the making of monarchy in the following chapter, e.g., will demonstrate the narrative applications of the RM game and identify several structurally complex games pertinent to the description and analysis of contemporary (postmodern) polit-fiction that will resurface time and again in other contemporary polit-series throughout this thesis.