

## 9. Conclusion

### Polit-Series, Politics, and (Progressive) Perspectives

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Since I began research for this thesis in early 2019, several of its case studies have gained an, at times, troubling historical immediacy. The most prominent and perhaps most tragic case is undoubtedly that of Volodymyr Zelensky, the star of *SLUHA NARODU* (SN). Having played a fictional president in his TV series, the comedian subsequently rose to his country's real-life presidency in May 2019 and has – as of late February 2022 – become one of the protagonists in Ukraine's defence against a condemnable Russian invasion. In a war that has been mediated to a hitherto unseen extent, President Zelensky's skilfully orchestrated public appearances have made the former actor world-famous and arguably played a crucial role in rallying his own population and much of the international community behind the Ukrainian cause. Remarkably, the simplified moral universe of the almost inevitable – and perhaps necessary – wartime narratives eerily resembles SN's central fictional vision of a united populous and its 'man of the people'-president at war with an existential external threat.

Another example is the French polit-thriller *BARON NOIR* (BN). In its dramatisation of a systemic malfunction of the French polity, the series has its fictional president, Amélie Dorendeau, be slapped in the face by a malcontent protester.<sup>1</sup> Released on February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the scene came with a surprising – though arguably unrelated – historical echo when, on June 8<sup>th</sup>, 2021, a man assaulted French president Emmanuel Macron in a similar manner,<sup>2</sup> following a troubling increase in social and political tensions in France.

In a further instance, an episode of *MADAM SECRETARY* (MS) released in December 2019 shows the fictional US President Elizabeth McCord being saved from illegitimate impeachment by a corrupt political establishment through a people's march on Wash-

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1 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 5, "Satanas", directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired February 24, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 11.25".

2 Rc/aw, "Protester slaps French President Emmanuel Macron in the Face", Deutsche Welle, June 8, 2021. <https://p.dw.com/p/3uae5>.

ington.<sup>3</sup> Roughly a year later, on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021, several hundred supporters of the defeated historical President Donald Trump stormed the Washington Capitol to prevent the US Congress from verifying the largely uncontested election victory of Democrat Joe Biden.

The seeming self-evidence of such circumstantial parallelism between polit-fiction and real-life politics may easily tempt one to attest to the series what critics have frequently (and erroneously) termed 'realism'. The term often wrongly refers to the assumption of an instinctive accuracy in the series' portrayal of sociocultural circumstances rather than a narrative's successful creation of an effective compositional illusion of 'authenticity'.<sup>4</sup>

This seductive and common fallacy – its examples across media criticism and scholarship are legion – strikes at the heart of what this thesis set out to do. It examined (1) how contemporary polit-series present politics by (2) discerning the manifold, interconnected, and often contradictory influences that compelled them to do so.

This study's analysis of ten series of varying economic and cultural backgrounds provided several central insights into contemporary polit-fiction.

(1) The series use relatively few recurring narrative patterns, which can be modelled with some precision.

(2) The series' narrative structure and presentation of politics result from the activity of a complex actor-network<sup>5</sup> that is contingent on various sets of discrete but interdependent influences. This interdependence makes textual networks resist simple analytic reduction to any one set of factors, e.g., the above-mentioned sociocultural perspective. Accordingly, this thesis provided a model of TV series' multi-polar networks to allow a structural perspective on the influences that shape popular serial narratives.

(3) Despite using a relatively simple set of basic patterns, the series' presentation of politics turned out to be surprisingly varied. At first glance, Andreas Dörner's truism of polit-fiction presenting either power politics [*Machtpolitik*], idealistic politics [*Idealpolitik*], or realpolitik<sup>6</sup> remains accurate. This is unsurprising given that the three types cover 100% of the moral political spectrum. However, the series' portrayals of politics, politicians and the polity proved to be significantly more complex, ambivalent, and, at times, fluid than initially expected.

3 *Madam Secretary*, season 6, episode 9, "Carpe Diem", directed by Felix Alcalá, written by David Grae, aired December 1, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81287034?trackId=200257859>, 40.43".

4 Laura Saxton, "A true story: defining accuracy and authenticity in historical fiction", *Rethinking History* 24, no.2 (2020): 127f., <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2020.1727189>.

5 See the work of the "Popular Seriality Research Unit", e.g., in Frank Kelleter, "Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality", in *Media of Serial Narrative*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2017), 22–26; Ruth Mayer, *Serial Fu Manchu: The Chinese Supervillain and the Spread of Yellow Peril Ideology* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014), 19; 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), 242.

6 Andreas Dörner, "Politserien: Unterhaltsame Blicke auf die Hinterbühnen der Politik", *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 66, no.51 (December 16, 2016): 7.

(4) The ambivalence and intricacy of the political presentations are, perhaps unsurprisingly, largely proportional to the series' narrative complexity. It, in turn, is subject to the diverse influences of a series' network and much less dependent on the sociocultural effects of a series' national origin context or the complexity of the historical political system it references than has often been anticipated. Indeed, a series' production and circulation background seem to be of much greater importance to its narrative complexity and the intricacy of its political vision. Series produced to fit into the flow of a linear schedule, e.g., seem to present less-complex narratives. In contrast, those produced for subscription channels and SVOD services still seem to target specific audiences with higher cultural capital following much-discussed industry practices going back to the early days of 'Quality TV' in the 1990s.

## 9.1 Emergent Networks and the Triple Logic of Popular TV Series

Following the realisation that popular TV series (and popular storytelling in general) are distinct narrative phenomena that behave like actor-networks<sup>7</sup> and according to a complex set of intertwined logics, this thesis predicated that ongoing series possess a momentous double identity as an aesthetic artefact and cultural commodity in "complex multisided markets".<sup>8</sup> I posited that, seeing that the authorial function of a TV series is dispersed across a variety of distinct actors and as the scope of its textual continuation extends into theoretical perpetuity, an ongoing series is an emergent and contingent, multi-agential system that shows "weakened central control";<sup>9</sup> with far-reaching consequences. I propounded that, as an emergent, complex actor-network, a TV series possesses an intentionality that exceeds the sum of the assembled individual intentions of its actors. This poses a problem for any symptomatic sociocultural reading of a TV series, as any series' dual nature and the, at times, contradictory activity of its network will necessarily obstruct its ability to accurately 'mirror' societal currents.

I thus postulated that the network of a popular TV series is contingent on three distinct but interdependent poles that highly increase its systemic and narrative complexity.<sup>10</sup> Together they form what I termed the distinct *triple logic* of popular serial fiction. It consists of (1) the extratextual or *pragmatic logic* comprising the historical world's natural, economic, moral, political, or societal norms and laws; (2) The *dramatic logic* of aesthetic narrative and formal composition; and (3) the *intradiegetic logic* as the collection of distinct

7 See above references to the "Popular Seriality Research Unit".

8 David B. Nieborg and Thomas Poell, "The platformization of cultural production: Theorizing the contingent cultural commodity", *New Media & Society* 20, no.11 (2018): 4281, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818769694>. Nieborg and Poell primarily use the term in their discussion of commodities such as games and news but it nonetheless applies to TV series as well.

9 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.

10 See, e.g., remarks on the interplay of micro- and macrosystems and narrative complexity in Grishakova and Poulaki, "Introduction: Narrative Complexity", 13.

natural, economic, moral, political and societal norms and laws that govern the fictional world.

As one of the most notable examples of distinct serial processes influenced by the triple logic within ongoing TV series, I introduced the distinction between *recalibration* and *development*. As a *development*, I described the evolution of a fictional character, event, or circumstance according to intradiegetic logic, resulting from a coherent chain of diegetic cause and effect. A *recalibration*, on the other hand, is a change of plot, a fictional character, event, or diegetic circumstances that primarily follows changing pragmatic or dramatic logic. I posited that both ways of narrative evolution are not only the result of different activities within a series' network but also affect their respective network in substantially different ways.

This study showed that, in order to be able to distinguish the 'how' and 'why' of any popular TV series' presentation of politics, it is essential to take into account its network activity and the varying logics that shaped it.

### 9.1.1 Modelling TV Series' Emergent Networks

Based on the assumption that capturing the tension between the various "systemic and agentic dynamics" in a series' network constitutes an essential factor for understanding the resulting complex narratives,<sup>11</sup> this thesis developed an original model designed to illustrate its various moving parts and their interaction and thus provide a comprehensible (albeit not comprehensive) tool for further analysis.

With its model, this thesis expanded previous approaches, e.g. from historical poetics, that see TV series as "the nexus of numerous historical forces that work to transform norms and possibilities".<sup>12</sup> Going beyond considering 'just' historical factors that influence a series in a one-way communication, this thesis' model describes micro and macro actors and their interactions across ontological planes:<sup>13</sup> the diegesis and the historical plane (which I called the *extratextual plane*).

I asserted that a TV series is a *hybrid network* whose actors comprise the historical human, institutional, and technological entities involved in production, circulation, and reception, as well as the serial text itself and the diverse textual and extratextual functions created by the network's activity, which include fictional characters but also extratextual discursive agents such as 'showrunners' and 'audiences'.

For my model, all discernible entities that emerge from a TV series are actors if they possess *agency*. I followed the notion that, as contingent, unstable texts, series possess an agency resulting from their particular systemic affordances. A serial text's self-awareness and self-referentiality ultimately result from the unique properties of *seriality*.

11 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), 12.

12 Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 5.

13 See also Marta Dynel, "'You talking to me?' The Viewer as a Ratified Listener to Film Discourse", *Journal of Pragmatics* 43, no. 6 (2011): 1631f, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2010.11.016>.

(1) This makes them “evolving narratives”,<sup>14</sup> in which textual evolution is contingent upon the extratextual production entities’ constant observation of the contemporary historical environment. Thus, ongoing serial texts can respond to factors like consumer reactions, current events, or changing cultural sensibilities by incorporating them into the story’s continuation.<sup>15</sup>

(2) They are, as Frank Kelleter remarks, “Narratives of Recursive Progression”<sup>16</sup> and, as such, constantly readjust the continuation of their plot “to already established [narrative] information”.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, a series’ diegesis is not merely shaped by the extratextual forces in a mono-directional process. Instead, an ongoing serial text influences the extratextual forces in their determination of its continuation and thus possesses a particular systemic agency of its own.

### 9.1.2 The Games Fictional Characters Play

Discussing fictional characters’ particular position in a TV series’ network, I argued that all fictional characters and diegetic institutions endowed with agency are likewise (micro or macro) actors. However, considering the “curious ontological status”<sup>18</sup> of fictional characters, I pointed out the discursive nature of their agency within my model. As “communicative artefacts”,<sup>19</sup> they attain the agency required to become actors through their nature as the product of a co-creative discourse between audiences and production entities. Characters thus possess agency as long as they are viewed from within the diegesis. From outside the diegesis, they appear as a limited compositional element but still retain a partial systemic agency as part of the larger serial text.

I argued that, in the demonstrative medium of popular TV, much of the plot and character development is conveyed via externalised, tangible character interaction. Modelling these interactions thus presents a helpful tool for textual analysis. Drawing on illustrative approaches from mathematical game theory, Actor-Network Theory, structural semantics and psychology, I proposed to model character interactions as *games*, that is, as regular and recurring diegetic interactions between two or more fictional actors with agency whom I termed *players* for better distinction. I posited that any distinct game could feature a set of recurring or changing players and remain the same game as long as it features the same interactional patterns between players who figure the same set of actants (I described this as the *configuration* of a game). In popular serial narratives, with their need for recognisable, repeatable patterns, games play a crucial role in ensuring both the continuity of a narrative and a series’ ongoing ability to engage audiences.

14 Frank Kelleter, “Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality”, in *Media of Serial Narrative*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2017), 12.

15 Kelleter, “Five Ways”, 13f.

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

17 Kelleter, “Five Ways”, 17.

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

19 Jens Eder, *Die Figur im Film: Grundlagen der Figurenanalyse* (Marburg: Schüren, 2014), 68. My translation: “Kommunikative Artefakte”.

Following psychological Transaction Analysis (TA), I proposed to model games as *transactions*, that is, as ongoing exchanges of stimulus and response between one or more of the players' respective ego states, or systems "of feelings accompanied by a related set of behaviour patterns"<sup>20</sup> colloquially referred to as "Parent, Adult and Child".<sup>21</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>22</sup>

Drawing on both psychological game models and mathematical game theory, I introduced several properties of a game that constitute applicable specifications for the analysis. I, e.g., described the intensity of a game which qualifies its impact from zero change to reversible irritation to irreversible alteration (1<sup>st</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> degree).<sup>23</sup> Following mathematical game theory, I likewise distinguished between *cooperative* and *uncooperative* games in which the rules are either guaranteed by a force of higher order or unenforceable and thus subject to frequent alteration.<sup>24</sup>

Games mark out narrative patterns and often transcend individual players and even individual texts. Many games turned out to be established narrative templates that are easily recognised by audiences and often serve as narrative shortcuts to inducing audiences' inferences about characters, constellations, events and their normative classification. As crucial examples of such overarching game structures in popular serial storytelling, I identified the *zero-sum* game, the *Coming-of-Age* game, the *Macbeth* game and the *Reverse Macbeth* game.

Borrowed from mathematical game theory, the term *Zero-Sum* game denotes a configuration in which one player's gain must be balanced by a co-player's proportional loss.<sup>25</sup> In a narrative game with a *zero-sum* structure, this dynamic of proportional 'gain' and 'loss' can express itself in transactional dominance, a redistribution of soft or hard power or all types of capital (economic, social, cultural or symbolic). I propounded that structural *Zero-Sum* games often occur in popular storytelling because they usually manifest in an *agonal structure*, that is, as an open or hidden, conscious or unconscious competition.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, they are an easy way to produce engaging interactional suspense and a straightforward protagonist-antagonist configuration.

As this study has set forth, the dramatic logic of any agonal configuration has a decisive impact on any narrative in a political setting as it almost inadvertently leads to a normative dismissal of the political realm itself. If it is to host a believably agonal conflict, the political realm must almost inevitably appear to be organised as a merciless zero-sum sphere of winners and losers pursuing their self-interest. This easily evokes neo-liberal

20 Eric Berne, *Games People Play: The Psychology of Human Relationships*, 24<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 23.

21 Berne, *Games People Play*, 23.

22 Berne, *Games People Play*, 45f. and 54.

23 Berne, *Games People Play*, 63f.

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

25 See Hegselmann, "Spieltheorie", 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.

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

and neo-realist images of the coldly rational conceptual “homo oeconomicus” that often present as cynicism when transferred to (fictional) politics.<sup>27</sup> However, this political vision is mainly contingent on dramatic logic and more or less independent of the actual ideological intentions of the historical actors in a series’ network.

I put forward that while this configuration is by no means without alternatives, the narrative conventions of the *Zero-Sum* game have been the predominant fashion for storytellers to present politics, at least in the first half of the 2010s. Nevertheless, the game’s dramatic ability to evoke engaging and highly suspenseful narrative conflicts has often unjustly been equated with a naturally compelling and ‘realistic’ portrayal of politics and, indeed, a deeper understanding of the state of the world when, in fact, it is merely a product of a relatively common narrative convention.

Discussing the *Coming-of-Age* game (CoA game), I asserted that its signature reversal of a transactional configuration from Child (protagonist)-Parent (co-player) transactions to Adult-Adult or Parent (protagonist)-Child (co-player) transactions narratively imitates (and simplifies) the psychological transition from psycho-social adolescence to adulthood through demonstrative interactional patterns. I maintained that, when adapted for narrative purposes, this epigenetic process remains intact regardless of the respective fictional character’s physical age.

Examining the two variations of the CoA game, I demonstrated that its development into a final Adult-Adult pattern usually indicates a protagonist’s peaceful narrative transition into adulthood. In contrast, a final Parent (protagonist)-Child (co-player) configuration indicates a conflictive struggle with authority and a *zero-sum* re-balancing of a protagonist’s ascent with a co-player’s (often a previous mentor-figure) proportional descent.

It emerged that the CoA game is the interactional operationalisation of one of the most popular fictional tropes and has been described in one way or another, e.g., by G.W.F. Hegel as one of the “most common and suitable collisions for the novel”,<sup>28</sup> or as part of Joseph Campbell’s fabled Monomyth.<sup>29</sup>

Discussing the *Macbeth* game, I introduced a protagonist configuration which follows an old Shakespearean trope and usually assigns players’ roles according to binary patriarchal gender norms. In this narrative pattern, a (usually male) frontage actant A and a (usually female) backstage actant B form a co-equal transactional unit in their interactions with other co-players.

As I pointed out with regards to HOUSE OF CARD’s (HoC) infamous power couple, Claire and Frank Underwood, this unit often serves as a fascinating narrative deviation

27 See 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>; and Jöran Klatt, “Ränkespiele zweier Serien(2): Game of Thrones”, *Göttinger Institut für Demokratieforschung* (blog), May 24, 2016, <https://www.demokratie-goettingen.de/blog/game-of-thrones>.

28 Georg W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik III*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1986), 393. My translation: “Eine der gewöhnlichsten und für den Roman passendsten Kollisionen [...]”.

29 See Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with A Thousand Faces*, commemorative edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 28.



from a series' general configuration and thus emphasises a protagonist's singular compositional position. Due to historical precedence, the *Macbeth* game conventionally (but by no means necessarily) serves to introduce to audiences a particular type of anti-hero by quickly evoking references to its homonymous Shakespearean role models (even if, as in HoC, this is never explicitly stated).

Discussing the *Reverse Macbeth* game (RM game), it became clear that this narrative pattern rests in a seeming reversal of the *Macbeth* game's binary patriarchal gender roles. It conventionally introduces a transaction in which the dominant frontstage actant A is female while the secondary backstage actant B is male. However, I pointed out that, in conventional popular storytelling, the patriarchal undertones of the *Macbeth* game often remain because the RM game usually serves to cue a problematic imbalance in the power dynamic between two players whose conflictive potential derives from a male player B's involuntary relegation to the backstage and a female player A's usually involuntary occupation of the frontage position.

### 9.1.3 Historical Actors and their Interactions

This thesis described the extratextual part of a series' network as comprising 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. I asserted that, as the historical network contains actors and actor-relations of almost infinite complexity, it develops discursive collective functions such as *showrunners* or *audiences*. They personify the dispersed, abstract processes of a series' creation, circulation, and reception and thus reduce complexity and enable the interaction between the various actors of a network. I pointed out that this process has been going on throughout the history of serial storytelling. It includes more recent attempts spearheaded, e.g., by OTT services, to make sense of recipients through the automated collection of user data and the subsequent creation of – still highly imaginary – “algorithmic audience[s]”.<sup>30</sup>

## 9.2 Analysing Contemporary Polit-Series

Taking a synchronic and heuristic approach, this thesis examined the presentation of politics in ten selected fictional TV series. It focussed on series that were (1) released throughout the 2010s as part of the developments of the emerging streaming age; (2) series that show a “*basal* presentation of politics”,<sup>31</sup> that is, a tangible focus on institutionalised political structures and protagonists rather than an underlying political concern;

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

31 Sandra Nuy, *Die Politik von Athenes Schild. Zur dramaturgischen Logik des Politischen im fiktionalen Film* (Berlin/Muenster: LIT Verlag, 2017), 96. My translation: “*basale* Politikdarstellung”. Original emphasis.



(3) series with ‘strong seriality’ whose eventual end remained undetermined at the time of distribution.<sup>32</sup>

### 9.2.1 The Crown: Basic Themes and the Postmodern Making of Monarchy

This study started its analysis by examining the underlying narrative structure of the Netflix series *THE CROWN* and its vision of the British monarchy as a postmodern polity. The series’ extensive use of narrative games in constructing its largely character-based narrative made it an ideal analytical starting point. *THE CROWN* struggles with a conflict typical for more complex character-based series, which face the task of consolidating continuous character development with the inherent need for structural repetition.

I asserted that, to tackle this challenge, *THE CROWN*, following dramatic logic, draws on a time-tested and almost universally legible narrative formula by presenting its royal characters engaged in a coming-of-age-type struggle between personal need and the requirements of their public role, which Hegel describes as “the conflict between the heart’s poetry and the opposing prose of real circumstances”.<sup>33</sup> In *THE CROWN*, this conventional conflict re-emerges as an identity diffusion caused by a conflict between what Ernst Kantorowicz calls “The King’s two Bodies”.<sup>34</sup> It became clear that the series revolves around a struggle caused by the dichotomy between the fictional Queen’s “body politic”, the conceptual, ceremonial body of the sovereign, and her “body natural”, the physical person who wears the crown.<sup>35</sup>

I demonstrated that this well-established narrative formula serves (1) to condense the complex construct of the British monarchy into an operational narrative and (2) to make a relatable fictional character out of a figure (a hyper-privileged monarch) in objectively unrelatable circumstances.

I postulated that this underlying dramatic configuration significantly affected *THE CROWN*’s evaluation of the monarchy. The *King’s two bodies* (K2B) trope almost inadvertently creates a climate of goodwill towards any protagonist suffering from the idiosyncrasies of a life of royal splendour. No matter how detached or dysfunctional the fictional Windsors might become, the K2B trope ultimately serves to dramatically justify their behaviour by illustrating the irresolvable perversion of their condition. Nevertheless, I

32 See the notion of the “weak serial form”: Aldo Grasso and Massimo Scaglioni, *Che cos’è la television: Il piccolo schermo fra cultura e società: i generi, l’industria, il pubblico* (Milan: Garzanti, 2003), 134. Quoted via Tanja Weber and Christian Junklewitz, “Das Gesetz der Serie – Ansätze zur Definition und Analyse”, *MEDIENwissenschaft: Rezensionen | Reviews* 25, no.1 (2008): 21, <https://doi.org/10.17192/ep2008.1.663>. They write of a “schwache serielle Form”. The original calls for “una forma seriale debole” (original emphasis).

33 Georg W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik III*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1986), 393. My translation: “[...] der Konflikt zwischen der Poesie des Herzens und der entgegenstehenden Prosa der Verhältnisse [...]”.

34 Andrew Higson has pointed this out as a common feature of monarchy fiction in *ibid.* “From political power to the power of the image: contemporary ‘British’ cinema and the nation’s monarchs”, in *The British monarchy on screen*, ed. Mandy Merck (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 353.

35 For both terms see Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*, 7<sup>th</sup> paperback printing (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 7f.

asserted that the trope, by providing an engaging way to dramatise the abstract and remote concept of monarchy, largely adheres to the requirements of dramatic logic. This may usually result in a positive portrayal of the monarchy but should not be mistaken for the symptomatic utterance of a pro-monarchical stance of a series' network or, even less so, of its individual historical actors.

I propounded that, in *THE CROWN*, the K2B trope emerges as a transactional pattern between a ceremonially superior monarchical actant and a co-player, which I called the *Monarch's two Bodies* game (M2B game). It features ulterior transactions on two distinct vectors: the ceremonial vector, which allows the monarch to hide his\*her humanity behind a ritualised parental façade, and the ulterior personal vector, on which his\*her personal qualities (or lack thereof) come into play.

It became clear that, in *THE CROWN*, the M2B structure manifests in two basic game types that drive most of the series plot. (1) In CoA games, the protagonists undergo the painful process of sacrificing their humanity to approach their royal body politic by attaining a parental transactional dominance in games with a largely *zero-sum* structure. (2) In RM games, which create narrative conflict by pitting a ceremonially superior actant (usually Elizabeth II) against a secondary player (e.g., her husband and sister) with an unfulfilled personal claim to parental dominance and a subordinate institutional or public role.

Furthermore, examining the series' presentation of the monarchy, this study postulated that, in *THE CROWN*, royal pageantry appears as an extravagant signifier of dominance without an equivalent significate, thus turning the Queen into a hyperreal simulacrum. *THE CROWN*, therefore, implicitly draws on a postmodern expansion of the relatively conventional K2B trope, which Louis Marin has conceptualised as the monarch's mediatised third body.<sup>36</sup> This decidedly postmodern concept understands the monarch's two original bodies as becoming unified only in the imagination of his\*her subjects/audiences. In *THE CROWN*, with its constant emphasis on highlighting the protective fictions of royal ritual, the imaginary construct of *Queen Elizabeth* comes into being only through performative acts, which serve to unify the individual that wears the crown (body natural) and the concept of the monarch (body politic) in the public's interpretative imagination. The Queen exists only by continuously diverting the gaze of the panoptic public from her all too human body natural through the "smoke and mirrors"<sup>37</sup> of royal performance.

Examining the configurational changes in *THE CROWN* throughout its run, particularly in the series' fourth season and following the introduction of a fictional Diana, Princess of Wales, it became clear that the series undergoes something of a structural recalibration regarding its normative evaluation of individual royals (albeit not the monarchy itself). I submitted that this notable increase in the protagonists' moral ambivalence illustrates the changing influence of several conflating logics within the series' network.

36 Louis Marin, *Portrait of the King* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1988), 13ff.

37 Title of *The Crown*, season 1, episode 5, "Smoke and Mirrors", directed by Philip Martin, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 4, 2016, Netflix, Left Bank Pictures/ Sony Pictures Television, streamed TV series episode.

It is partly the result of a dramatic inability of the series' relatively rigid initial configuration to accommodate the character of Diana Spencer. The *Princess of Wales* has long become an established fictional trope in her own right, which evokes, in audiences, expectations of a generally positive character engaged in justified opposition to the Windsor family. In order to accommodate Diana as a character into its *dramatic* and *intradiegetic* logics, the series thus shifts its previously sympathetic portrayal of the royal family to allow for legitimate conflict to take place, thus causing a general reconfiguration of the series' narrative structure.

I likewise pointed out that this change in THE CROWN's portrayal of the monarchy most likely followed *pragmatic* logic too. The series arguably incorporates the notable shifts in the global perception of the historical Windsors' image following several highly publicised scandals and controversies, such as Prince Andrew's alleged sexual abuse of a sex-trafficked minor, Prince Harry's conflictive resignation as a senior royal, and increased attention on the family's role in Britain's dark colonial past.

However, I posited that, while the series breaks a long-standing taboo in presenting a living British monarch – and a decidedly flawed one at that – it is by no means a critical account of the monarchy. In THE CROWN, the necessary postmodern accord of the governed is continuously granted to the monarchical simulacra – not least to ensure the series' continuation under established narrative circumstances (a requirement of the dramatic logic of seriality). Thus, THE CROWN inadvertently endows its fictional monarchy with a kind of pseudo-democratic legitimacy.

I showed that, despite a growing ambivalence towards royal individuals, the monarchy in THE CROWN appears as a legitimate tool of affirmative culture. It is an imaginary intended to prevent the public from pursuing actual change by suggesting a division between the coldness of modern reality and a world of 'higher' ideals represented by royal pageantry with its references to 'national greatness', historical continuity, and a distinct national community. While the series laments the institution's flaws, the monarchy ultimately appears as the only shield against the onslaught of (post)modernity.

I likewise noted that THE CROWN, essentially following the controversial tradition of Heritage film, undergoes substantial narrative contortions to preserve its escapist feel. This includes avoiding the presentation of the monarchy's historic role in preserving and legitimising the racist, violent, and exploitative assumptions of empire and circumventing any mention of the institution's unavoidable attachment to destructive discriminatory practices such as inherited privilege, institutionalised inequality, and racialised exploitation (of which the Windsor family has itself profited significantly throughout the centuries).

## 9.2.2 The Changing Face of Polit-Comedy

To examine the influences of a change in genre on a series' presentation of politics, this study went on to analyse the way contemporary polit-comedies operationalise political settings for their construction of humour. Analysing three examples from the beginning (VEEP), middle (EICHWALD, MdB), and end (THE POLITICIAN) of the 2010s, this chapter showed that, throughout the decade, mainstream polit-comedy's presentation of pol-

itics has co-evolved following changing conceptions of what constitutes 'acceptable' humour.

The chapter asserted that the decade's earlier examples, following an established narrative trend of the early 2000s, tend to rely on the transgressive 'uncomfortable humour' of mockumentary-style cringe-comedy and a corresponding presentation of political omnishambles, that is, politics which has "been very badly managed, with many mistakes and a great lack of understanding".<sup>38</sup> In the continuous presentation of a seemingly unending downward spiral of dysfunctional yet unchanging politics, both VEEP and EICHWALD gain a highly absurdist component. However, analysing their narrative setup, I pointed out that this absurdism is, first and foremost, the result of dramatic serial logic, which requires the perpetual retention of a narrative base structure.

I followed the assumption that both VEEP and EICHWALD rely primarily on what Nicholas Holm (who also analyses VEEP) has called the "three key modes of contemporary humour – discomfort, provocation and absurdity".<sup>39</sup>

This study asserted that both VEEP and EICHWALD show a reduced editorial presence, essentially using the mockumentary style to evoke its strong associations with earlier examples of prestige 'cringe humour'. However, I showed that, while VEEP relies largely on transgression and invective to create its humour,<sup>40</sup> EICHWALD follows more closely in the original mockumentary style's tradition of exploiting the comical potential of unresolved social discomfort.

Analysing the series' dominant narrative patterns, I asserted that, in its presentation of politics, VEEP introduces a variation of the K2B trope<sup>41</sup> and its transactional operationalisation, the M2B game (featured prominently in *THE CROWN*). It applies the uncooperative, zero-sum *President's two bodies* (P2B) game in which a superficial ceremonial vector continuously collides with transactions on the ulterior personal vector to create a maximum of comical irritation that can, in turn, be expressed in colourful invective, the series' main event. In EICHWALD, on the other hand, transactions occur in what I have termed the *Treat me like an adult* (TA) game, in which ostensible Adult-Adult transactions

38 See "Omnishambles", *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries*, accessed Aug 17, 2020, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/omnishambles>. I referenced earlier mentions of the term by Marc Edward Shaw, "Veep's Poetics of Omnishambles", in *Politics and Politicians in Contemporary US Television: Washington as Fiction*, ed. Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally (New York: Routledge, 2017), 137–148; and previous remarks by Steven Fielding, *A state of Play: British Politics on Screen, Stage and Page: From Anthony Trollope to The Thick of It* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 263.

39 Nicholas Holm, *Humor as Politics: The Political Aesthetics of Contemporary Comedy* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 16. For his discussion of VEEP see 75–88.

40 See Katja Kanzler, "Veep, Invective Spectacle, and the Figure of the Comedic Antiheroine", *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 67, no. 2 (2019): 147–162. <https://doi.org/10.1515/zaa-2019-0014>.

41 Following the assumption of the series' relying on presenting the discrepancy between high ideals and base humanity voiced with regards to VEEP, e.g., by Marc Edward Shaw, "Veep's Poetics of Omnishambles", in *Politics and Politicians in Contemporary US Television. Washington as Fiction*, ed. Betty Kaklamanidou, Margaret Tally (New York: Routledge, 2017), 143f; also in Nicholas Holm, *Humor as Politics: The Political Aesthetics of Contemporary Comedy* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 82.

collide with ulterior, childish pettiness, thus creating lingering social awkwardness and evoking the series' classic mockumentary-style cringe humour.

The younger *POLITICIAN* presents a paradigm shift in polit-comedy at the end of the 2010s. It became clear that the series moves from 'uncomfortable' to what I termed 'woke' humour, which functions entirely without the previously fashionable transgression of the boundaries of progressive, socially acceptable discourse. As I have demonstrated, this turn constitutes a decisive change in TV's "cultural logic of gentrification",<sup>42</sup> which previously prized the play with "controversy",<sup>43</sup> transgression, relative obscenity and invective as distinguishing features. It has arguably dominated prestige television (especially in uncensored subscription-based services) since the 1990s and until well into the mid-2010s.

Analysing the narrative setup of *POLITICIAN*, I asserted that the series presents a satirical inversion of the conventional coming-of-age progression. Here, the politician-protagonist Payton Hobart moves from the typical moral emptiness established as a common point of reference in earlier polit-fictions (such as *VEEP* or *EICHWALD* and, in a variation, *THE CROWN*) to a more balanced personality that adheres to both political necessity and his personal needs and ideals.

A transactional analysis of the series' central character configurations showed that the evolution of Payton Hobart represents a satirical inversion of polit-fiction's often hyperbolic reading of the Hegelian *poetry vs prose* motif (e.g., present in *THE CROWN*): Payton develops from an unfeeling polit-automaton to a responsible civil servant, friend, husband, and father, thus consolidating a cynical vision of reality's prose with his heart's underlying desires.

It emerged that all three series adhere to the pragmatic logic of changing historical discourse among prestige audiences regarding the acceptability (and comical potential) of transgressive behaviour. However, their varying dramatic logic continued to play a significant role in their respective presentation of politics. In order to plausibly retain a static, omnishambolic narrative setup for several seasons in *VEEP* and *EICHWALD*, corrupt incompetence must be a central characteristic of all relevant fictional characters and their interactions to make the continuous presence of the incompetent protagonists believable within intradiegetic logic. In the character-based *POLITICIAN*, on the other hand, the characters' ongoing development and several prominent B- and C-plotlines (which at times overshadow the main political plotline) allow for a more nuanced

42 See Dan Hassler-Forest, "Game of Thrones: The Politics of World-Building and the Cultural Logic of Gentrification", in *The Politics of Adaption: Media Convergence and Ideology*, ed. Dan Hassler-Forest and Pascal Nicklas (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 189f. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137443854\\_14](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137443854_14); also Katja Kanzler's remarks on the "Characteristic transgressiveness" of prestige TV: Katja Kanzler, "Veep, Invective Spectacle, and the Figure of the Comedic Antiheroine", *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 67, no. 2 (2019): 149, <https://doi.org/10.1515/zaa-2019-0014>.

43 Janet McCabe and Kim Akass discuss classic HBO-led, linear 'Quality TV' as "courting controversy": Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, "Sex, Swearing and Respectability: Courting Controversy, HBO's Original Programming and Producing Quality TV", in *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, ed. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 62–76.

portrayal of political processes and players without threatening the series' intradiegetic plausibility.

Examining the resulting presentations of politics, this chapter demonstrated that, in the earlier *VEEP* and *EICHWALD*, politics appears as a cynical and highly agonal, uncooperative *Zero-Sum* game in which no rule is guaranteed, and one player's gain has to be balanced by another player's loss. In the later series, *POLITICIAN*, on the other hand, politics is a cooperative and ultimately constructive process with a controlled and temporally limited agonal scope in which competitors can end up having a friendly drink together.

In the same vein, *VEEP* and *EICHWALD* show politics as a process in which post-democratic deceptive simulation replaces the productive mechanisms of representative democracy. Supported by the pseudo-veristic *mise-en-scène* of the mockumentary style, both series present their cynical vision of politics as a lamentable but unavoidable fact in the reflexively impotent tradition of "Capitalist Realism".<sup>44</sup>

*POLITICIAN*, on the other hand, offers a highly optimistic image of *realpolitik* and representative democracy as a flawed but ultimately effective way to meaningful change. While acknowledging postmodernity's metaphysical insecurity and the harsh realities of politics, *POLITICIAN* ultimately presents representative democracy as a functional and fertile ground for cooperation, compromise, and productive political action. The series thus follows a modernised version of a more idealistic fictional tradition represented, e.g., by *THE WEST WING* (USA, 1999–2006). *POLITICIAN* likewise rejects the earlier comical tradition of impotent surrender to the gruesome and lamentable absurdity of a cynical political reality that had long formed the basis of what had seemed like the universally accepted formula for a 'realistic' portrayal of politics.

### 9.2.3 SLUHA NARODU and the Remarkable Tale of a Populist President

With his fierce resistance to the Russian invasion of his country in early 2022, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has become famous the world over. The same goes for the series that arguably launched his political career. At the start of the war, the curious tale of SN and its comedian-protagonist, who rose to Ukraine's real-life presidency in 2019, became a much-discussed media favourite. In the series, Zelensky plays the 'President of the people' Vasyl Petrovych Holoborodko, who shakes up his country's corrupt polity through common sense and strong moral fibre.

Gathering the essential facts about the unusually close entanglement between SN's fictional portrayals and Zelensky's historical presidential bid, I examined how the show came to (somewhat superficially) be regarded by some as a "three-year political campaign".<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, its merging of fiction and reality endowed a previously inexpe-

44 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Lanham: John Hunt Publishing, 2009), 21. See also: Joe Conway's similar discussion of "*political satire vérité*" in: "After Politics/After Television: *Veep*, Digimodernism, and the Running Gag of Government", *Studies in American Humor* 2, no. 2, Special Issue: *American Satire and the Postmodern Condition* (2016): 182–207.

45 Stephanie Petrella, "Volodymyr Zelensky: Ukraine's servant of the People?", *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, May 8, 2019, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/05/volodymyr-zelensky-ukraines-servant-of-the-people/>.

rienced celebrity comedian with the very real political clout of an entirely imaginary TV President.

I demonstrated how the unusually dominant pragmatic logic of its star producer's political ambitions made SN the most 'political' series in this study, in the sense that it arguably had a far-reaching impact on the historical distribution of power in Ukraine. However, I maintained that, as far as its actual narrative goes, SN remains a largely conventional example of what Liesbet van Zoonen has called "the populist telling of the quest"<sup>46</sup> in which a morally pure idealist becomes the immediate envoy of a unified populous.<sup>47</sup> The series largely follows the established "populist tradition" of building an opposition between supposed elites and 'the people'.<sup>48</sup>

Examining SN's populist vision of idealpolitik, I posited that, following populist conventions, the series juxtaposes its morally flawless outsider-hero Vasyl Petrovych Holoborodko (played by Volodymyr Zelensky) and a corrupt and illegitimate political elite.

In SN, the antagonistic political *inside* operates according to the cynical laws of an uncooperative *Zero-Sum* game, while the upstanding *outside* plays a cooperative game whose morally simplified rules are ensured both by the protagonist's moral superiority and dramatic intervention.

Following this line of inquiry, I contended that Vasyl Petrovych Holoborodko is a messiah-type saviour hero in the tradition of the narrative archetype of the *American Monomyth* (AM) whose utopian prowess quite literally ends up covering Kyiv's Maidan Square in a mountain of gold. Despite its Ukrainian origin, SN follows this popular US-American narrative archetype in almost every way. It portrays an individualistic outsider hero who saves a potential Eden after the previous failure of its institutions,<sup>49</sup> an emphatic endorsement of individualism over institutions and regulated procedures, and a distrust of personal intelligence and human sexuality (both markers of the corrupt outgroup), which culminate in an anti-systemic and anti-democratic impetus.

This thesis demonstrated that SN's narrative construction in accordance with the principles of populist idealism and the AM ultimate leads to the series rejecting notions of pluralism and democratic representation in favour of a simplified vision of organic and immediate leadership as a frictionless translation of 'the people's will'.

However, I noted that this underlying impetus is not primarily a result of ostensible anti-democratic tendencies within the series' historical network but of the narrative requirements for dramatising utopian, idealistic politics itself. Following the assumption that categorical morality as an exclusive benchmark of political legitimacy can only endure in a highly simplified binary moral universe, I argued that this construction almost

46 Liesbet Van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 112.

47 See Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen*, 112.

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

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



inadvertently leads to delegitimizing political opponents and, consequentially, a negation of pluralistic principles, despite the series paying frequent lip-service to liberal progressive values. Thus, as a structural foundation for fictional narratives, this paradoxical dramatic construction of idealpolitik usually results in the binary character spectrum of a corrupt elite vs a morally pure 'hero of the people' as it appears in SN and other AM examples.

To further illustrate the common paradox of fictional political idealism resulting in anti-democratic and anti-pluralist narratives, I examined three other sample series from various contexts that closely resemble SN's narrative AM formula down to small compositional details like their protagonist's respective mentor-profession. These examples were: MS, DESIGNATED SURVIVOR (DS US) and DESIGNATED SURVIVOR: 60 DAYS (DS 60). I indicated that the series' anti-democratic and anti-institutional populist impetus, at times, goes so far as to delegitimise even democratic elections (DS US) and the institutions of representative democracy to the point where they legitimise a potential direct intervention by 'the people' in a de-facto revolution (MS, SN).

I illustrated that the AM's inadvertently populist narrative formula – and its ideological consequences for the portrayal of polit-fiction – in many ways coincided with the requirements of linear serial TV and its classic guiding principle of Least Objectionable Programming (LOP) by providing superficially uncontroversial content with an easy-to-follow protagonist-antagonist structure and an unambiguous moral universe. The series' ultimate rejection of pluralism and representative democracy thus appeared primarily a result of established dramatic conventions, which themselves result from *pragmatic* considerations regarding a series' circulation, market placement, and audiences' viewing habits rather than from ideological positions within a series' network.

A final comparison of SN's narrative development with the evolution of Volodymyr Zelensky's historical campaign revealed how the series developed from a relatively conventional AM polit-comedy into a highly biased commentary on the 2019 Ukrainian election, complete with savage satires of Zelensky's political opponents.

I posited that the series thus ran the risk of – and arguably attempted to – transferring its simplified populist undertones and the resulting moral elevation of Vasyl Petrovych Holoborodko onto real Ukrainian politics and Volodymyr Zelensky, respectively. As this thesis is finalised in the summer of 2022, the final verdict on Zelensky's presidency is still out. However, I indicated that, while the melange of political reality and populist fictions is a hazardous manoeuvre for any democracy, Zelensky's skilful use of various mediated 'us vs them' narratives has arguably played an important role in rallying Ukraine's population and much of the international community behind the cause of his country's defence.

## 9.2.4 BARON NOIR: Inverting the Populist Quest

A subsequent analysis of the French canal+-production BN showed that the principles of the AM and the 'populist quest', while common in popular polit-fiction, by no means constitute inevitable dramatic laws for the fictionalisation of politics. I illustrated that BN, in many ways, constitutes a dramatic and normative inversion of the populist quest and a fictional refutation of simplified populist idealpolitik.

Arguably the most structurally complex series in this thesis' corpus, BN juxtaposes populism and pluralism, thus presenting a vision of teleological realpolitik unusual for polit-fiction. As a direct inversion of the previous sample group, in BN, the pseudo-Machiavellian strivers are charged with saving democracy and pluralism from what are now destructive idealists and populist agitators. In BN, politics still appears as a largely uncooperative *Zero-Sum* game in the dramatic convention of earlier conflictive agonal plots. However, the series' vision of realpolitik is not that of a cynical, dystopian wasteland but that of a space fit for consolidating a variety of legitimate interests across a dispersed fictional actor-network.

Consequently, I asserted that, in BN, 'healthy' politics as the ongoing negotiation of the distribution of power can exist only in the pluralist vision of realpolitik with its aim to consolidate legitimate opposing interests through, at times, morally ambiguous means.

I demonstrated that, in order to integrate political pluralism into a narrative structure, BN applies unusual tactics for (French) popular storytelling. The series presents the fictional polity as a complex actor-network with dispersed interests and breaks with the established taboo of dramatising the otherwise largely sacrosanct institution of the French presidency. Indeed, BN goes so far as to present the president's unusually dominant role as a primary cause of systemic malfunction. The series, likewise, bypasses polit-fiction's traditional executive bias by focussing on a protagonist (Philippe Rickwaert) who holds no government office for the greater part of its run and is, instead, primarily engaged in dispersed parallel power struggles within the fictionalised *Partie Socialiste* and other pluralist bodies of institutionalised governance and civic leadership.

At this point, I illustrated that BN's notable narrative focus on the political left results from a pragmatic consideration of the series' target audience functions which – as subscribers to the prestigious cable channel Canal+ – tend to be part of progressive urban populations with above-average cultural capital and a high degree of political literacy.

Analysing the various fictional micro and macro actors that constitute BN's comparatively complex political universe, I contended that the series derives most of its plotlines from relatively complex renderings of the interplay of pluralist democratic institutions and organisations like political parties, parliament, trade unions, student movements, old and new media and even the European Union.

A structural analysis illustrated that BN elaborately comments on the dangers of systemic malfunction and the rise of populism in various guises. Many characters, like the left-populist Michel Vidal, illustrate the perils of hazardous idealpolitik, which would rather see a flawed but functional polity destroyed than compromise its morally stringent path.

Discussing BN's main antagonists, I demonstrated that the series applies the unusual narrative device of what I termed a *dispersed antagonist*. Instead of presenting the plot's antagonistic force as a direct result of a single personified agency, in BN, antagonisms such as political extremism appear mainly as the result of various distinct but interconnected struggles within its diegetic multi-polar actor-network. This narrative device makes the diegetic political tension appear as a systemic rather than interpersonal phenomenon and thus serves the effect of avoiding the toxic discursive dominance of polarising extremist positions.

An examination of the series' personified antagonists, Christophe Mercier and Lionel Chalon, showed that they, in many ways, mirror the construction of the positive saviour heroes in SN, MS, DS US and DS 60. They are, e.g., explicit representations of populism displaying the inevitable anti-democratic tendencies of othering dissent and a violent antagonism towards political 'enemies'. Christophe Mercier even starts as an unassuming science teacher communicating with 'his' people over social media, thus repeating the recurring mentor-trope and notions of frictionless immediacy typical for AM series in the tradition of the populist quest. However, the same qualities that made Vasyly Petrych Holoborodko and his fictional comrades in MS, DS US and DS 60 into positive saviour-heroes turn BN's Christophe Mercier and Lionel Chalon into systemically dangerous madmen.

This thesis contended that BN is ultimately a (simplified) fictional model of the decay of representative pluralist democracy, a fictional examination of the dangers of unipolar idealpolitik, and an exploration of the creative possibilities of contemporary realpolitik. Systemic malfunction occurs (1) through the moderate forces alienating the increasingly marginalised masses; (2) through a divided and largely reactionary political left occupied with ideological infighting; (3) through a political establishment no longer willing to support the Front Républicain against right-wing-extremism because of (3a) idealistic delusions or (3b) the miscalculation of being able to harness populism's destructive dynamism for political reform.

With the moderate liberal candidate Emmanuel Macron winning the 2022 presidential election against right-wing-candidate Marine Le Pen by a 10%-reduced margin as compared to 2017, various political leaders on the left and right refusing to endorse the Front Républicain against the extreme right ahead of the election's decisive second round, and French society demonstrating a growing degree of refraction, BN's vision of systemic malfunction shows many troubling parallels to historical French politics. While this is not to suggest any historical clairvoyance on the part of a fictional TV series, I posited that the case of BN demonstrates how a narratively 'authentic' series with a reasonably complex and coherent narrative and diegetic configuration can, at times, unfold significant illustrative – rather than instructive – potential.

This study maintained that, together with *POLITICIAN*, BN is a rare example of a fictional vision of constructive, representative, and democratic realpolitik. The series shows that – contrary to some scholarly opinion – popular serial storytelling is well-equipped to dramatise a variety of complex political systems beyond the mono-directional confines of a personified executive with either morally depraved or messianic presidential incumbents.

## 9.2.5 Recalibrating House of Cards, Season 6

While this thesis' analysis of BN focussed mainly on the series' diegetic presentation of politics, its final analysis of the sixth (and last) season of HoC aimed to illustrate the many interdependent ways in which pragmatic logic moves to shape a series' narrative. Caused by the highly publicised dismissal of its star, Hollywood celebrity Kevin Spacey, after mounting allegations of sexual abuse and misconduct, the unusual magnitude of

(and public insight into) HoC 6's recalibration constitutes an example of rare clarity for a serial network's extensive and, at times, contradictory dynamic.

Dominated mainly by pragmatic logic, the recalibration of HoC 6 is undoubtedly an example of remarkable operational skill on the part of its historical production actors. However, the series' ultimate collapse also illustrates the many difficulties that come with the contradictory triple logic of serial TV storytelling, which requires a narrative to be at once intradiegetically plausible, dramatically engaging, and pragmatically successful. Given the accumulation of narrative material throughout a long-running series, it is no wonder that even undisrupted serial narratives often fail to end in a satisfying resolution. However, I demonstrated that, with the significant challenges of a major recalibration under public scrutiny of rare intensity, HoC 6 unsurprisingly struggled to overcome the many insurmountable obstacles on its way to providing a satisfying conclusion.

Examining the remarkable extent of HoC 6's recalibration, it became clear that the series (1) faced the almost impossible task of replacing its former protagonist Frank Underwood with the previous deuteragonist, Claire Hale, by creating an intradiegetically plausible reason for her ascent (and Frank's disappearance) and endowing her with sufficient character depth to sustain the narrative. Likewise, HoC 6 had to contend with the extratextual shadow of the historical Spacey scandal. Thus, the series (2) faced the challenge of maintaining enough structural continuity to make its audiences accept the various adjustments as part of its narrative evolution while, at the same time, morally dismissing HoC's anti-hero (Frank Underwood), whose depravity the series had spent its previous five seasons training its viewers to enjoy. Anticipating the fallout from Spacey's alleged historical actions, HoC 6 thus noticeably incorporates contemporary discourses surrounding female empowerment and the overturning of discriminatory and exploitative structures. This marks a significant shift for a narrative that had previously hinged on – and excessively indulged in – showing a privileged, white cis-man manipulating an unjust system for his own benefit.

A structural and formal analysis demonstrated that HoC 6, in many instances, accomplishes this complex undertaking by simulating the required change, continuity, or resolution (sometimes all at once) through formal allusion rather than coherent diegetic development. I, e.g., noted that the season frames Frank's death (the diegetic reason provided to explain his pragmatically motivated disappearance) as a conscious commentary on Kevin Spacey's dismissal and a moral re-evaluation of the formerly popular anti-hero. The episode's frequent use of motifs evoking spiritual cleansing and emotional liberation – e.g., Claire saving and releasing a trapped bird under somewhat sinister circumstances – make Frank's replacement appear almost like an exorcism.

However, Claire's seeming emancipation from Frank and his methods, while frequently alluded to through dismissive commentaries, is not supported by an actual moral reform of the new protagonist. Instead, I asserted that, given seriality's inherent need for structural stability and repetition, any emancipation from Frank Underwood's Machiavellian style ultimately had no choice but to remain superficial in order to preserve HoC's signature serial appeal.

Accordingly, it became clear that HoC 6's recalibration entailed elevating Claire from Frank's accomplice to an independent protagonist who could – in an allusion to historical events – demonstrate believable moral distance while simultaneously retaining the

show's signature ruthlessness. I, e.g., demonstrated how the recalibration of Claire being a survivor of sexual abuse served the *pragmatic* purpose of positioning her (and the series) on the opposite side of any historical associations with sexual misconduct while remaining without significant consequences for the plot.

A structural analysis furthermore revealed a central problem in HoC's narrative premise. With its characters having attained both the peak of their moral depravity and their ambition (the presidency) early in the series, Claire – like Frank before her – becomes a largely reactive, static character unable to create an engaging plot dynamic on her own. This problem is amplified in HoC 6, whose recalibration involved replacing the series' previously central *Macbeth* game. HoC 1–5 had largely hinged on Frank and Claire's extraordinary complicity following the *Macbeth* game's classic patriarchal convention of forming an exceptional transactional unit consisting of a male frontstage player (Frank) and a female backstage player (Claire). In the largely action-based HoC 1–5, the game's frequent evolution and subsequent regression had served to simulate character development while ultimately avoiding any significant 3<sup>rd</sup>-degree changes in the series' basic configuration. However, with the loss of the Underwood's *Macbeth* game, HoC 6 lost this central means to interactionally simulate character development.

Examining HoC 6's formal composition and especially its most prominent feature, the protagonist's parabasis, it emerged that the series' metaleptic 'breaking of the fourth wall' takes an essential role in creating its various simulations of narrative evolution and resolution. I postulated that Frank's famous so-called 'asides' had served primarily as a means to express himself while doing little to advance the narrative itself. In the recalibrated HoC 6, on the other hand, the protagonist's parabasis takes on a highly complex and decidedly cinematic narrative function by formally linking different spatial and temporal planes within the diegesis and creating formal illusions of development and coherent resolution.

The section illustrated that while pragmatic logic is ultimately a decisive factor in a series' narrative composition, this by no means negates the influence of dramatic and intradiegetic logic. Indeed, the unusual clarity of the circumstances of HoC 6's recalibration made it clear that, while extratextual factors may motivate significant narrative overhaul, in ongoing popular serial narratives, the scope of the change will always be influenced, limited, and redirected by dramatic and intradiegetic requirements.

### 9.3 Some Conclusive Comparisons

After the structural and narrative analysis of ten series from various cultural, production, and circulation backgrounds, five key comparative insights into contemporary polit-series emerge: (1) Polit-series' limited narrative patterns result in relative, contingent compositional variety; (2) similar narrative patterns can produce disparate normative frames; (3) popular fictional politics is partially globalised and transcends cultural affordances; (4) the "cultural logic of gentrification" is evolving; (5) popular seriality conditions implicit ideological conservatism. I will now detail these in turn:

(1) *Limited narrative patterns result in relative, contingent compositional variety*

It became clear that the series' need to consolidate the opposing requirements of structural repetition and limited innovation result in their reliance on a relatively limited number of recurring games. As I demonstrated, most series drew heavily on variations of the M2B game, the CoA game, the *Macbeth* game and the *Zero-Sum* game to create their plot.

However, my analyses showed significant variation in the concrete design and normative evaluation of these patterns. Few examples illustrate this better than the evolution of gender relations in the series throughout the 2010s and following the ascent of various empowerment discourses such as "Me Too" and "Black lives Matter" into the discursive mainstream. In HoC, e.g., the *Macbeth* structure with its classically patriarchal undertones initially served as the series' central distinguishing feature. Following its recalibration after a sexual abuse scandal and significant historical developments in the discourse surrounding the disadvantaged position of women in popular entertainment (among other things), HoC 6 reframed its previously central *Macbeth* structure as a toxic source for interactional exploitation and transgression.

In *THE CROWN*, the RM game likewise initially followed established patriarchal tradition, starting as a seemingly self-evident source of interpersonal conflict. While the game's narrative position as one of the primary sources of conflict remained, its normative evaluation changed with the introduction of a fictional Princess Diana and the motifs of justified rebellion against royal rigidity historically associated with the historical *Diana* trope.

In BN, the configuration of the *Patronage for Pleasure* game (P4P game) essentially served as the underlying structural formula for dramatising the asymmetrical binary relationships between materially superior, powerful males and reductively 'beautiful' females. In HoC 6 and the last season of DS US, on the other hand, the P4P game appears with reversed albeit still binary – gender connotations as powerful older female players dominate physically attractive younger males. Once again following the various discourses of social empowerment at the end of the 2010s, the P4P game thus evolved its implicit normative evaluation of gender relations while retaining its underlying (binary) structural narrative pattern.

(2) *Similar narrative patterns can result in disparate normative frames*

While Dörner's truism that polit-fiction either presents idealistic politics, realpolitik, or power politics unsurprisingly remains true, the series' presentation of politics and their corresponding normative evaluation turned out to be remarkably varied.

Depending on narrative complexity and the corresponding depth of character portrayals, the narrative construction of populist idealpolitik, e.g., could appear either as a positive ideal (in SN, DS US, DS 60 and MS) or as an undue, systemically dangerous simplification (in BN).

The inversion of idealpolitik: (i) featured as toxic, simulative, and post-democratic power politics. This was especially the case in series from the first half of the 2010s, e.g., in VEEP, HoC, or EICHWALD. However, both types of series, those focussing on populist idealpolitik and those emphasising dystopian power politics (or their satirical inflexion), ultimately share a binary moral universe. The idealist saviour heroes are as categorically

moral as the dystopian anti-heroes are depraved, and the latter could easily serve as the formers' antagonists.

(ii) The second inversion of idealpolitik turned out to be teleological realpolitik, where moral ambiguity and compromise are essential requirements for the correct functioning of pluralist representative democracy itself. The resulting ambiguous moral universe significantly diverges from the previous binary construction (see i). Examples of this were *POLITICIAN*, *BN* and, albeit more implicitly, seasons 3 and 4 of *THE CROWN*.

(3) *Popular fictional politics is partially globalised and transcends cultural affordances*

Having analysed series from various national contexts, it became clear that the cultural background of a series and the historical political conditions underlying its fictional polity are ultimately secondary influences on its respective complexity and normative evaluation of politics. Indeed, the noticeable appearance of similar narrative patterns and motifs across international productions suggests a globalised set of variable narrative formulas for popular polit-fiction. The Ukrainian series *SN*, e.g., followed what has often been described as the narrative archetype of the *American Monomyth*. The American series *Veep* and *HoC* adapted a political cynicism previously regarded as a feature of European fiction. Moreover, the complexity of historical political systems such as the French or the German ones had, until recently, often been regarded as an insurmountable obstacle for engaging popular fiction altogether,<sup>50</sup> making the successful *BN* a series that should, according to some scholarly opinion, not exist. Likewise, both *BN* and *THE CROWN* paid little heed to previously established taboos of fictionalising their respective sacrosanct head of state. Economic considerations of production and circulation often seem to play a much more immediate role in determining a series' pragmatic logic.

(4) *The cultural logic of gentrification is evolving*

There is a notable temporal component to the series' general narrative design and their presentation of politics, indicating sensitivity to shifting historical discourse typical for serial TV. The overwhelmingly cynical examples of the early and mid-2010s (*VEEP*, *HoC*, *EICHWALD*) still largely followed the traditional transgressive "cultural logic of gentrification".<sup>51</sup> Established mainly by the uncensored subscription-based 'Quality TV' producers of the 1990s and early 2000s (above all: *HBO*), it traditionally assumed a degree of controversy or transgression (e.g., through sexually explicit content, violence, or invective) as

50 Karl-Rudolf Korte, e.g., has argued accordingly for the German polity in *ibid*, "Warum eigentlich nicht? Über die Unmöglichkeit, deutsches Politikmanagement im Fernsehen abzubilden", in *Politik in Fernsehserien: Analysen und Fallstudien zu House of Cards, Borgen & Co*, ed. Niko Switek (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018), 364.

51 Dan Hassler-Forest, "Game of Thrones: The Politics of World-Building and the Cultural Logic of Gentrification" in *The Politics of Adaption: Media Convergence and Ideology* ed. By Dan Hassler-Forest and Pascal Nicklas (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 189f. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137443854\\_14](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137443854_14).



a unique selling point for prestige audiences.<sup>52</sup> Traditionally paired with more complex narratives and designed for audiences with high cultural capital, fictional transgression has often been equated to creating authenticating effects of dramatic 'realism'. Accordingly, most of the influential early series presenting a cynical view of politics still originate from a subscription-based production context: VEEP is an HBO production, and HoC is a highly marketed early product of Netflix. EICHWALD is a meritocratic niche production of the German public service broadcaster ZDF.

However, later prestige productions of the decade, while remaining firmly in the hand of typical subscription-based 'Quality TV' providers with high cultural capital, feature a more nuanced portrayal of politics and political morality and a notable decrease in openly transgressive motifs, e.g., THE CROWN (Netflix), BN (Canal+), and POLITICIAN (Netflix). The higher narrative complexity of these series and their typical nonlinear turn away from the LOP principle is unsurprising, given how more flexible ways of reception enable diverse viewing practices. However, the series' noticeable decrease in transgressive material and their turn towards less dystopian politics point toward a potential shift in the "cultural logic of gentrification". It would be worth exploring this further using a larger corpus.

#### (5) Popular seriality conditions implicit ideological conservatism

A final, remarkable feature in the series' presentation of politics is their varying attitudes towards systemic change and representative politics as a means to achieve that change.

(i) A first group, which contains HoC, VEEP, EICHWALD, and THE CROWN, ultimately assumes an iron rigidity of existing structures. Essentially focused on presenting the fictional mechanisms of creating and maintaining the simulacra of political myths (e.g., a presidency or a monarchy), the series implicitly reproduce, in their diegesis, the "conjuring trick",<sup>53</sup> which Roland Barthes has described as an essential quality of myth: "overturning culture into nature or, at least, the social, the cultural, the ideological, the historical into the 'natural'".<sup>54</sup> They make discursive realities (such as a diegetic nation, its symbols or institutions) appear as pre-existing, a priori conditions. By rigidly sustaining diegetic political affordances (in order to maintain their basic *dramatic* configuration), the series in this group, thus, to a certain degree, duplicate the veristic pretensions of the very political myths they claim to unmask.

(ii) In a second group containing SN, MS, DS US and DS 60, reform is possible but must occur outside the political system following the AM's anti-institutional impetus.

(iii) It is only in the visions of *realpolitik* presented in BN and POLITICIAN that meaningful change can occur within the system.

52 See Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, "Sex, Swearing and Respectability: Courting Controversy, HBO's Original Programming and Producing Quality TV", in *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, ed. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 63f.

53 Roland Barthes, "Myth Today", in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: The Noonday Press/ Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1972), 142.

54 Roland Barthes, "Change the object itself: Mythology today", in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 165

Interestingly, no matter how pessimistic the vision of their respective fictional polity may be, none of the series ever contends with the notion of a complete systemic overhaul. HoC's ruthless anti-heroes, Frank and Claire, plot to corrupt but never actually overthrow the seemingly inevitable structures of US governance. The idealist messiah-hero Vasyl Petrovych Holoborodko, likewise, dreams of redeeming instead of changing the fictional presidency of Ukraine. Notably, those series in group (i), which emphasise the problematic or deplorable state of political institutions and morality, thus portray the "reflexive impotence"<sup>55</sup> typical of Capitalist Realism with its vision of an inevitably neoliberal state of the world after the alleged "End of History".<sup>56</sup> In the "apparently real"<sup>57</sup> defeatist cynicism of their presentation of politics – akin to what Alan Kirby calls "Digimodernism",<sup>58</sup> which "intensifies postmodern logic insofar as it reinforces and augments antihistorical thinking"<sup>59</sup> – the series thus, as Conway has argued in his discussion of VEEP, lean "toward some overly credulous notion of authenticity"<sup>60</sup> that seemingly capitulates in the face of and reproduces postmodern refraction.

However, once more, it should be noted that these series' structural conservatism is, ultimately, much more a result of the dramatic logic of serial repetition than of a pervasive neoliberal conviction among their historical actor-networks. As long as a popular polit-series is ongoing, protagonists can neither overthrow nor completely redeem the political system. This would either change its basic configuration beyond recognition (imagine, e.g., Claire Hale rising to be a full-fledged dictator) or remove the foundation for its conflict (What will Vasyl Holoborodko do after having saved Ukraine?).

## 9.4 Final Remarks and Vantage Points for Future Research

This thesis set out to contribute new insights to the analyses of one of the most controversially discussed TV subgenres of the 2010s: popular polit-series. It revealed a highly complex phenomenon whose extent across a variety of interconnected fictional and on-tic realms made it impossible to grasp using the existing approaches of any one scholarly discipline. Even for those directly involved in a series' creation, these complex and partially independent systemic dynamics are often hard to comprehend and even harder to

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- 55 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Lanham: John Hunt Publishing, 2009), 21.  
 56 A term famously coined by Francis Fukuyama referencing the assumption of liberal democracy as the final stage of humanity's ideological development: Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), xi.  
 57 See Alan Kirby, *Digimodernism: How Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure Our Culture* (New York/London: Continuum, 2009), 140f; also Joe Conway, "After Politics/After Television: Veep, Digimodernism, and the Running Gag of Government", *Studies in American Humor* 2, no. 2, Special Issue: *American Satire and the Postmodern Condition* (2016): e.g., 182 and 186f.  
 58 Alan Kirby, *Digimodernism: How Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure Our Culture* (New York/London: Continuum, 2009).  
 59 Joe Conway, "After Politics/After Television: Veep, Digimodernism, and the Running Gag of Government", *Studies in American Humor* 2, no. 2, Special Issue: *American Satire and the Postmodern Condition* (2016): 185.  
 60 Conway, "After Politics/After Television", 186.

control. It is a fact that Peter Morgan, credited showrunner of *THE CROWN*, unknowingly acknowledges when he compares his series to a defective supermarket trolley, stating: “The wheels on this show want it to do satire [...], but I’m not remotely interested in that”.<sup>61</sup>

The analytic model laid out in this thesis presents a unique new tool for textual analysis that uncovers these – often contradictory – ‘wheels’ by structuring and combining historical and narrative scholarly perspectives on serial TV fiction. The unique agential and systemic dynamic created by the interplay of dramatic composition, economic and political affordances, the logic of the fictional world itself and the distinct characteristics of popular seriality can now be discerned, modelled, and operationalised. This marks a decisive shift from established scholarly practice and a turn away from isolated notions of historical, economic, or narrative determinism or cultural hierarchy.

Accordingly, the possibilities of the approach laid out in this thesis extend far beyond the analysis of *polit-series*. It offers a structured approach to examining all serial TV storytelling and opens new perspectives on the study of popular fiction in general by providing vantage points for various angles of scholarly interest, from textual analysis to inquiries into industry dynamics.

In the volatile third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this perspective is essential if one is to make meaningful assertions about current *polit-series*, which, after all, constitute a fictional subgenre with notable influence on the discursive political realities of our time. This thesis provided insights beyond previously self-evident approaches of historical immediacy and misunderstood notions of ‘realism’. They have often been taken for granted due to circumstantial parallelisms between *polit-series* and historical reality, such as physical assaults (BN), impending democratic decline (BN, HoC, VEEP, EICHWALD), or implicit coup d’états (MS).

Instead, the approach developed in this study lays bare the ‘wheels’ that steer a *polit-series* in one direction or another. SN, e.g., proved to be more than a simple product of linear political opportunism and a result of specific dramatic mechanisms that determine the creation of fictional idealpolitik. Despite its featuring exclusively fictional characters, it became clear how BN’s inherent narrative complexity allowed for the series to be read as a surprisingly authentic (rather than accurate) modelling of historical possibilities. *THE CROWN*, on the other hand, despite its featuring characters based on historical personalities, turned out to rest on a formulaic narrative convention to dramatise monarchy that is so established that it easily seduces audiences into (erroneously) reading it as historically accurate. The ‘wheels’ of HoC, while massively influenced by the historical scandal surrounding its former star, likewise turned out to have been steered and veered by the contradictory requirements of the series’ diegetic past and its dramatic structure, thus creating an ultimately insoluble compositional conundrum.

This thesis showed that *polit-series* rely on a limited total of recurring tropes and formulas, which appear and reappear according to various, often contradictory de-

61 Valentine Low, “Writer braces royal courtiers for Netflix series *The Crown*”, *The Times*, September 9, 2019, [https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/writer-braces-royal-courtiers-for-netflix-series-the-crown-hqgg5g88f?wgu=270525\\_54264\\_15682818054572\\_2607def8c7&wgexpiry=1576057805&utm\\_source=planit&utm\\_medium=affiliate&utm\\_content=22278](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/writer-braces-royal-courtiers-for-netflix-series-the-crown-hqgg5g88f?wgu=270525_54264_15682818054572_2607def8c7&wgexpiry=1576057805&utm_source=planit&utm_medium=affiliate&utm_content=22278).

mands that, as a result of my model, can now be discerned. The comparatively few ways to dramatise politics are so established in popular TV fiction that they seem like – and have often been regarded as – unshakeable principles. This perspective might justifiably cause some additional pessimism regarding the subversive possibilities of popular (polit-)fiction.

However, I want to conclude this thesis with some careful words of consolation, as well as encouragement for further scholarly inquiry. The variety of the political visions in this thesis' corpus vividly illustrates that most of these seemingly inevitable narrative formulas are ultimately little more than storytelling conventions applied in accordance with distinct network dynamics. Those networks constitute their own realm in which there is no central agency to approve or deny a request for reform. Therefore, and without indulging in the fallacy of previous notions of the democratisation of capitalist popular culture, there is cause to regard intrasystemic change as a real possibility.

Particularly with regards to the recent notable increase in diversity throughout all areas of popular TV fiction, not least as a result of the changing affordances following TV's nonlinear turn, this gives one grounds for hope (despite polit-fiction notably trailing behind this development). This study showed that a popular TV series' respective network – given the appropriate circumstances – can produce a wide variety of more or less complex portrayals of fictional politics, politicians, political morality, and political systems, as well as diverse and complex visions of societal and cultural realities, that extends far beyond the narrow confines of a dystopian, white, heterosexual and cis-male Oval Office.

However, there is also cause for caution. For now, structural affordances have allowed many networks of serial TV to take a more progressive turn without changing much about their underlying systemic logic. Given the wrong impulses, this systemic endurance enables networks to reverse even the most progressive motion just as quickly if the 'need' arises (or if a reversal appears profitable). Thus, one will do well to keep a continuously close (scholarly) eye on the evolving functionalisms of popular culture and to consider the possibilities for enduring change.