1. Introduction

In the unsteady second decade of the 21st century, fictional representations of politics have taken a notable, centre-stage role. There are, for one, the many instances in which tropes from fictional television and cinema have migrated into the historical political discourse. Most recently, the case of comedian Volodymyr Zelensky, who went from playing an idealised president in the fictional series SLUHA NARODU (UKRAINE, 2015–2019) to winning the historical Ukrainian presidency in May 2019, has become famous the world over following the condemnable Russian invasion of his country in February 2022.

The three-finger salute from the dystopian cinema tetralogy HUNGER GAMES (Gary Ross, Francis Lawrence: USA, 2012–2015) has emerged as a highly charged symbol in several Asian pro-democracy movements starting in Thailand and appearing in Hongkong, Myanmar and Cambodia.[1] In Denmark, parliamentary opposition started an initiative to ban prostitution shortly after the issue had appeared in the internationally successful polit-series BORGEN (Denmark, 2010–2013, renewed for a sequel in 2022).[2]

In the US, both then-President Barack Obama and then-Vice President Joe Biden engaged with their respective fictional counterparts Frank Underwood (protagonist of the Netflix series HOUSE OF CARDS, USA 2013–2018) and Selina Meyer (from the HBO series VEEP, USA 2012–2019). In a video released on April fool's day 2015, Obama imitated Underwood's signature move of breaking the fourth wall and speaking ad spectatores, ironically stating into the camera, "Frank learned it from me".[3] In a clip streamed at the

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1   AFP, "Crowds gather outside court after Hong Kong dissidents charged", *Bangkok Post, March 1, 2021,* https://www.bangkokpost.com/world/2076319/crowds-gather-outside-court-after-hong-kong-dissidents-charged; Caleb Quinley, "Three-finger salute: Hunger Games symbol adopted by Myanmar protesters", *The Guardian*, February 8, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/08/three-finger-salute-hunger-games-symbol-adopted-by-myanmars-protesters.

2   Johannes Bongardt, Rieke Gießelmann, Matthias Jüschke et al., "Spiel der Kräfte. Politik, Medien und Familie in Borgen", in *Politik in Fernsehserien: Analysen und Fallstudien zu House of Cards, Borgen & Co,* ed. Niko Switek (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018), 179.

3   The Obama White House, "Happy 5th birthday, West Wing Week", published April 2, 2015, 04:02", https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hG1Nmy4gZIk&t=238s.

2014 White House Correspondents' Dinner, Biden engaged in a humorous exchange with fictional screen-VP Selina Meyer (alias Julia Louis-Dreyfus).[4]

In France, the seasoned socialist functionary Julien Dray first claimed, then disclaimed, to be the inspiration for the slick protagonist of the hit polit-series BARON NOIR (France, 2016–2019).[5] In the UK, then-Secretary for Digital, Culture, Media and Sports Oliver Dowden went on record to demand Netflix provide a 'health warning' to inform viewers of the fictional nature of its royal bio-series THE CROWN (UK, 2016-present).[6] It seems that in the 2010s, as Andreas Dörner remarks elsewhere, fictional series have gained such a significant media presence that politicians and citizens feel the need to respond to them.[7] Accordingly, in late 2021, with the French presidential election on the horizon and echoing established fears of political 'gamification' and US-American cultural hegemony, the French newspaper Le Monde published an opinion piece warning of the "netflixisation" of political life.[8] What is going on here?

Examining contemporary fictional TV series from various cultural and economic contexts, this thesis seeks to answer three fundamental questions:

(1) How does contemporary TV fiction present politics?
(2) Which factors inform and influence this presentation?
(3) How can scholarly analysis discern these various influences on a serial TV text?

While this thesis' interest and methodological approach are, above all, that of textual analysis, it is essential to consider that, in the 2010s, fictional politics, serial storytelling, and the highly dynamic medium of television itself have, in many ways, appeared as co-evolving phenomena. Following the development of more efficient ways for data compression and dissemination as well as multi-device means of reception, the much-discussed nonlinear 'disruption' of TV arguably accelerated early in the decade.[9] It resulted

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4   CBS, "Vice President Joe Biden meets 'Veep' Selina Meyer", video shown at the 2014 White House Correspondent's Dinner, May 4, 2014, https://www.cbsnews.com/video/vice-president-joe-biden -meets-veep-selina-meyer/#x.

5   "Finalement, Julien Drey dit qu'il n'est pas le 'Baron Noir'", *Le Monde*, March 17, 2016, https://w ww.lemonde.fr/big-browser/article/2016/03/17/finalement-julien-dray-dit-qu-il-n-est-pas-le-bar on-noir_5991934_4832693.html.

6   Lanre Bakare, "UK culture secretary to ask Netflix for 'health warning' that The Crown is fictional", *The Guardian*, November 29, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2020/nov/29/the -crown-netflix-health-warning-fictional-oliver-dowden.

7   See Andreas Dörner, "Politische TV-Serien und Politische Kultur: Ein Forschungsprogramm und Betrachtungen zu einem deutschen Sonderweg", in *Politische Kulturforschung Reloaded: Neue Theorien, Methoden und Ergebnisse*, ed. Wolfgang Bergem, Paula Diehl, and Hans J. Lietzmann (Bielefeld: transcript, 2019), 161. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839447475-008.

8   Solenn de Royer, "La domination culturelle de Netflix a des incidences sur l'écriture des récits politiques", *Le Monde*, December 21, 2021, https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2021/12/21/elect ion-presidentielle-2022-la-domination-culturelle-de-netflix-a-des-incidences-sur-l-ecriture-des -recits-politiques_6106855_3232.html.

9   As remarked by Amanda Lotz who identifies the year 2010 as a turning point: In Amanda Lotz, *We Now Disrupt This Broadcast: How Cable Transformed Television and the Internet Revolutionized It All* (Cambridge, MA/London: The MIT Press, 2018), see e.g., 50 and 114; also Amanda D. Lotz, "Portals: A Treatise in Internet-Distributed-Television", open access ed., *Maize Books: Michigan Publishing*,

in an (ongoing) overhaul of TV business models, viewer engagement, and arguably storytelling[10] and has since been regarded to have ushered in a new age of television alternately termed "TV IV"[11], "'post-network' or 'neo-network'",[12] or "the phase that comes after 'TV'".[13] Fictional serial formats, in particular, have historically played (and continue to play) a crucial part in the ascent of new, globally operating on-demand services, most prominently Netflix.

Initially, few series had been more tangibly linked to the recent transformations of contemporary TV than the US production HOUSE OF CARDS (HoC). The controversial success of the show about a sinister power politician arguably contributed much to putting politics back on the map for fiction in the 2010s. HoC has long been regarded as a turning point for Netflix[14] and general paradigms in recent TV history,[15] thus creating tangible links between fictional politics and the new TV era. The show is indeed a story of many firsts: it was the first high-profile series produced for the emerging streaming giant Netflix, crucial in aiding the portal's branding as a source for exclusive 'quality' content;[16] it was one of the first of its type produced using big data algorithms;[17] it was one of the first to see a full season release:[18] an initially much-contested format that has since become an industry standard. HoC's success arguably helped pave the way for major Hollywood celebrities to transition semi-permanently from the big to the small screen. It made its star, Kevin Spacey (who was dismissed from the show in 2017

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; see also Catherine Johnson, Online TV (London: Routledge, 2019), 2f.

10   As discussed in Amanda Lotz, We Now Disrupt This Broadcast: How Cable Transformed Television and the Internet Revolutionized It All (Cambridge, MA/London: The MIT Press, 2018); also Amanda D. Lotz, "Portals: A Treatise in Internet-Distributed-Television", open access ed., Maize Books: Michigan Publishing, Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, published 2017, last accessed September 9, 2022, https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/maize/mpub9699689/1:5/--portals-a-treatise-on-internet-distributed-television?rgn=div1;view=fulltext; also Catherine Johnson, Online TV (London: Routledge, 2019).

11   Mareike Jenner, Netflix & the Re-invention of Television (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan/Springer International Publishing), 14. And Mareike Jenner, "Is this TVIV? On Netflix, TVIII and binge-watching", New Media & Society, 18, no. 2, (July 2014): 257–273, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814541523.

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

13   Jan Olsson and Lynn Spigel, "Introduction", in Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition, ed. Jan Olsson and Lynn Spigel (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 2.

14   See Christel Taillibert and Bruno Cailler, "Video on demand platforms, editorial strategies, and logics of production: The case of Netflix France", in A European Television Fiction Renaissance: Premium Production Models and Transnational Circulation, ed. Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni (New York: Routledge, 2021), 105.

15   See Sarah Atkinson, Beyond the Screen: Emerging Cinema and Engaging Audiences, 1st paperback ed. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 225f.

16   Mareike Jenner, Netflix & the Re-invention of Television, (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan/Springer International Publishing), 176.

17   Atkinson, Beyond the Screen, 225.

18   Atkinson, Beyond the Screen, 225.

following numerous allegations of sexual misconduct and abuse), a prolific exegete and efficient marketing tool of the early streaming age and further dismantled notions of a cultural hierarchy between the 'superior' medium of film and the 'inferior' medium of TV. Remarkably, in the course of the 2010s, politics has featured prominently in serial TV productions across the globe and various production and circulation models, with a notable increase in non-English-speaking high-profile productions.[19]

As serialized fictional politics has become a leitmotif of the early streaming age, any analysis of contemporary TV's presentations of fictional politics must, therefore, almost inevitably coincide with an examination of popular seriality and the evolving affordances of the medium of TV itself.

Popular seriality seems to show a particular tendency to connect cultural, economic, aesthetic, and distinct textual affordances.[20] For its analysis, this thesis, therefore, acknowledges that TV series, with their double identity as aesthetic objects and cultural commodities, exist in a field of tension between three distinct but interdependent poles that highly increase their systemic and narrative complexity.[21] (1) the logic of the fictional world itself, (2) aesthetic textual, formal, and serial logic, and (3) historical social, cultural, and economic affordances. Consequently, the comparative analysis of contemporary TV series and fictional politics requires an integrated, structured approach that accounts for these three factors and their interplay.

The contextual analytical approaches of what has been called New Film / Cinema History and historical poetics – the latter term coined by David Bordwell to describe "the study of how, in determinate circumstances, films are put together, serve specific functions, and achieve specific effects"[22] – provide valuable methodological vantage points here. In his relatively recent study of the poetics of complex linear television, Jason Mittell accordingly refers to historical poetics as a helpful approach to situating TV's "formal developments within specific contexts of production, circulation, and reception".[23] The approach examines the medium's "formal elements [...] alongside the historical contexts

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19   My overview of pertinent series illustrates this.

20   See the research on popular seriality conducted by the "Popular Seriality Research Unit": DFG group no. 1091: "Popular Seriality: Aesthetics and Practice", DFG, last accessed July 7, 2022, http://www.popularseriality.de/. E.g., 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), 42f; 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), e.g., 13, 18 and 26–31; Ruth Mayer, *Serial Fu Manchu: The Chinese Supervillain and the Spread of Yellow Peril Ideology* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014), 12–21.

21   For the term and the systemic origins of complexity see, e.g., 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), 13.

22   David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 266f.

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

that helped shape innovations and perpetuate particular norms",[24] regarding a TV series' formal innovations as "the nexus of numerous historical forces that work to transform norms and possibilities".[25]

However, the specific narrative and systemic complexity of the phenomenon of a TV series poses a methodological and practical challenge. While it is possible to describe many of the varied processes that shape a TV series, it is impractical to ascertain all the discrete factors that determine this series as a complex system and impossible to discern the ultimate extent of their influence. What is more, beyond the contributions of individual agents, the "tension between systemic and agentic dynamics"[26] is itself an essential factor for understanding complex narratives as products of the "interplay of micro- and macrosystems".[27]

This structural complexity makes many historical approaches to textual analysis somewhat unwieldy and, at times, imprecise, which may be one of the reasons why scholarly practice has often avoided integrating contextual perspectives into textual analysis. The degree to which historical factors influence fictional TV series' presentation of politics and other tropes is, likewise, a controversial issue. It ties in with the contentious question of whether (and to which degree) fictional serial texts can be read as sociocultural "data",[28] thus allowing inferences about the society that shaped them in "symptomatic reading[s]".[29]

Given the structural complexity of TV series, I posit that textual analysis and the comprehensive identification of sociocultural influences within any TV series – if that should be a desirable goal at all – first requires a careful distinction between the various factors and dynamics that shape a serial text.

Therefore, this thesis will (1) provide a much-needed methodical approach for comparative textual analysis that integrates sociocultural, sociotechnical, narratological and aesthetic perspectives. It will (2) give a structured sense of where and how the contemporary affordances of (nonlinear) TV impact upon serial storytelling. (3) It will identify current narrative trends and themes in TV polit-fiction and aid in decerning whether (and to which degree) these are contingent on temporal cultural factors, production context, or inherent in the intrinsic structural affordances of popular serial narratives. Is there,

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

25   Mittell, *Complex TV*, 5.

26   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.

27   Grishakova and Poulaki, "Narrative Complexity", 13.

28   For a popcultural perspective see Kaspar Maase, *Populärkulturforschung: Eine Einführung* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2019), 204f. For related discussions of polit-fiction see James F. Davidson, "Political Science and Political Fiction", *The American Political Science Review* 55, no.4 (December 1961): 856 and 860. And Niko Switek, "Spiegel, Daten, Narrative. Politikwissenschaftliche Zugänge zu politischen Fernsehserien", in *Politik in Fernsehserien. Analysen und Fallstudien zu House of Cards, Borgen & Co*, ed. Niko Switek (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018), 12–14.

29   David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), XIII.

e.g., an intrinsic structural affinity between politics and serial storytelling, as has been suggested?[30]

As long as it can be assumed that media and "cultural representations do not simply mirror reality [but] also construct and fabricate it",[31] these are crucial insights that, in a globalizing, transnational media landscape, are closely tied to urgent questions of political participation, cultural dominance, hegemony, inclusion and exclusion. This thesis' integrated approach will, thus, contribute significantly to understanding one of the most popular and influential narrative TV genres of the 2010s and provide further insight into the structural landscape of contemporary serial TV fiction after the recent nonlinear turn.

Considering the structural complexity of TV series, this thesis will take up what has been described as the "methodological challenge" of analysing popular seriality: "to map in dense descriptive detail the concrete actions and carriers of action that come together, however disharmoniously, in a given serial narrative".[32] It will start by providing a structural model that combines various approaches to describing contemporary television, serial narratives, and systemic and narrative complexity into an operational, analytical tool. Drawing on perspectives from historical poetics, narratology, structural semantics, literary-, film-, TV-, and industry studies, systems theory, Actor-Network Theory,[33] mathematical game theory, game studies, and psychology, this model will provide a unified terminology to describe contemporary popular TV series as complex agential networks in a liminal state between fictional, discursive, and ontic reality. It will, furthermore, allow the modelling of fictional characters' interactions as regular, recurring 'games' that form narrative patterns in conjunction with systemic requirements. This combined approach will permit an analytic comparison across series, cultural contexts, and circulation formats.

For its subsequent textual analysis, this thesis takes a heuristic approach, examining a representative corpus of ten core series from various backgrounds through close reading. Popular TV series often extend over dozens, sometimes hundreds of hours of screen time. Such an overwhelming mass of material is impossible to manage comprehensively without the use of computer-based, quantitative macro-analytical methods (which, to

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30   Frank Kelleter and Andreas Jahn-Sudmann, "Eine interessante Affinität zwischen dem seriellen Erzählen und dem Thema Politik: Von Soap Operas zum Quality TV", interview by Jöran Klatt and Katharina Rahlf, *INDES: Zeitschrift Für Politik und Gesellschaft* 3, no. 4 (2014): 5–22. Doi. http s://doi.org/10.13109/9783666800092.5.

31   Sean Robinson and Bernice Alston, "Lavender Identity and Representation in the Media: The Portrayal of Gays and Lesbians in Popular Television", in *The Millennials on Film and Television: Essays on the Politics of Popular Culture*, ed. Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally (Jefferson, NC: Mc Farland & Co., 2014), *39*.

32   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), 26.

33   Following contentions building on the work of the "Popular Seriality Research Unit": Kelleter, "Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality", 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.

date, remain limited in their ability to process audio-visual texts meaningfully). For now, a heuristic approach is, therefore, appropriate. The TV series in my corpus are (by order of release): The Politician (USA, 2019-present), 60일, 지정생존자 [*Designated Survivor: 60 Days*] (Republic of Korea, 2019), House of Cards, season six (USA, 2018), Baron Noir (France, 2016–2020), The Crown (UK, 2016-present), Designated Survivor (USA, 2016–2019), Слуга народу [*Sluha Narodu, Servant of the People*] (Ukraine, 2015–2019), Eichwald, MdB (Germany, 2015–2019), Madam Secretary (USA, 2014–2019), and Veep (USA, 2012–2019). Other relevant fictional texts will feature as context in the analysis.

This thesis takes a synchronic approach, analysing contemporary TV series that aired throughout the second half of the 2010s and thus accompanied the most dynamic period of the early streaming age. I consider series that (1) position their plot in a political setting or the physical "workplaces of politicians";[34] and (2) series in which the political activity of protagonists, that is, the somehow institutionalized process of negotiating the distribution of power,[35] serves as the primary source of narrative dynamics. As I will show, this not only applies to fictional elected 'politicians' but also to the royal protagonists of THE CROWN, who likewise engage in the political business of retaining their positions.

In a tradition probably started by James F. Davidson,[36] scholarship has long used the somewhat misleading term 'political fiction' to describe texts that essentially feature what Sandra Nuy calls "*basal* presentation of politics",[37] that is, texts which present politics as a "narrative occurrence".[38] However, the term 'political fiction' implies that the texts it describes are consciously *political* as a "medium of criticism, agitation and propaganda".[39] Its generalizing emphasis on "fiction" likewise blurs the distinction between serial and non-serial texts in line with the widespread scholarly practice of ignoring seriality's distinctive narrative characteristics. This thesis, therefore, proposes to appropriate the somewhat vernacular German term *polit-series* [*Politserie*] as a more neutral and precise alternative.

It is crucial here to define what I mean by *TV series*. *(1)* Defining television in the multi-device, nonlinear post-network era has become somewhat difficult.[40] As Mareike Jenner notes,

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34   Annekatrin Bock, "Machtkampf, Intrigen und Manipulation: Die Negative Wahrnehmung von Politikgeschehen in Aktuellen Politikserien", *INDES: Zeitschrift Für Politik und Gesellschaft* 3, no. 4 (2014): 24. My translation: "Arbeitsplätzen von Politiker_innen".

35   See Max Weber, "Politics as Vocation", in *Max Weber: The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David Owen and Tracy B Strong, transl. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 2004), 33.

36   See James F. Davidson, "Political Science and Political Fiction", *The American Political Science Review* 55, no.4 (December 1961): 856.

37   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.

38   Sandra Nuy, *Die Politik von Athenes Schild: Zur dramaturgischen Logik des Politischen im fiktionalen Film* (Berlin/Muenster: LIT Verlag, 2017), 45f. My translation: "Narrativen Gegebenheit".

39   Nuy, *Athenes Schild*, 46. My translation: "eines Mediums der Kritik, Agitation und Propaganda".

40   For a more recent discussion see, e.g., Catherine Johnson, *Online TV* (London: Routledge, 2019), 4–19.

the term television has been used to describe different technologies, has been invested with varying degrees of cultural significance and 'value', and, thus, has meant different things at different times and in different social contexts.[41]

I will follow sociotechnical and discursive approaches to defining television not only by its material and technological shape but as a "medium", which derives "from textual characteristics, industrial practices, audience behaviors, and cultural understanding".[42] As Roger Silverstone notes regarding (TV) technology, television thus becomes "both a material and a social phenomenon".[43] As such, it is defined primarily by discourse, which is why Jenner notes, "By stating that Netflix is television, Netflix can become television".[44]

For the purposes of this study, television shall, therefore, be the diverse sociotechnical practice that surrounds (and includes) the "remote seeing"[45] and hearing (in any case: reception) of audio-visual signs by way of technical transmission. It can thus, as Ramon Lobato points out, denote both "an online service dispersed across an ecology of websites, portals, and apps, as well as a broadcast and cable/satellite-distributed medium."[46]

(2) For the moment, I understand the term TV *series* to mean a narrative with a common conceptual frame that unfolds over a number of distinct instalments[47] and is transmitted via audio-visual signs within the medium of television.[48] Setting aside, for now, more elaborate attempts at differentiating serial forms, I will use the term *series* to denote both narratives that feature self-contained episodic plotlines (often referred to as a 'series') and those that continue an ongoing plot over numerous episodes (called 'serial').[49] Notably, the core texts in my corpus happen to be serials with varying narrative emphasis on their overarching plotlines. Although it is purely incidental, this suggests that the continuous mode of 'serial' narration is generally more suited to the affordances of the nonlinear TV age than the self-contained episodic mode. Nonlinear TV affords audiences

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41 Mareike Jenner, *Netflix & the Re-invention of Television* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan/Springer International Publishing), 8.

42 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/mpub96 99689/1:3/--portals-a-treatise-on-internet-distributed-television?rgn=div1;view=fulltext. See the broader definition of "medium" by Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), 7.

43 Roger Silverstone, *Television and Everyday Life*, e-Library ed. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 84.

44 Jenner, *Netflix and the Re-invention of Television*, 7.

45 Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell, "Introduction: An Owner's Manual for Television", in *How to Watch Television*, 2nd ed., ed. Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 5.

46 Ramon Lobato, *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 7.

47 Tanja Weber and Christian Junklewitz, "Das Gesetz der Serie – Ansätze zur Definition und Analyse", *MEDIENwissenschaft: Rezensionen | Reviews* 25, no.1 (2008): 18, https://doi.org/10.17192/ep2 008.1.663. See also: Knut Hickethier, "Serie", in *Handbuch Populäre Kultur: Begriffe, Theorien und Diskussionen*, ed. Hans-Otto Hügel (Stuttgart/Weimar: J.B. Metzler/Springer, 2003), 397.

48 I will adjust and extend this definition for the purpose of my model in chapter 3.

49 See, e.g., Weber and Junklewitz, "Das Gesetz der Serie", 19. For a discussion of serial forms see also Hickethier, "Serie", 400–402.

greater control over schedules and the ability to rewind, repeat, and skip, thus facilitating engagement with more complex stories. The coming chapters will discuss this further. As the degree of continuity varies significantly between the series (HoC, or BARON NOIR, e.g., feature a prominent, ongoing plotline. EICHWALD, MDB, VEEP, or THE CROWN tend to focus more on episodic events, and SLUHA NARODU transitions from a more episodic to a more seasonal emphasis), the corpus remains sufficiently representative with regards to seriality.

As this thesis attempts to model the distinctive narrative effects of popular seriality, I will only consider series with *strong seriality*, that is, series whose eventual conclusion remained undetermined at the time of their first release.[50] Mini-series – a narrative relayed over a pre-determined number of instalments – are, as Aldo Grasso and Massimo Scaglioni point out, a *"weak serial form"*[51] and will therefore not be considered in this study. The same goes for anthology series.

This thesis aims to be transversal and thus considers a large variety of series from different cultural and industrial backgrounds an indispensable quality of its corpus. However, while it attempts to take a global perspective and explicitly aims to consider examples from non-English-speaking and non-Western backgrounds, there remains, despite my best efforts, an emphasis on series from the Global North. This bias is partly a result of material limitations of access to series or workable translations. It is partly due to significant pro-Western biases within existing scholarship and criticism, causing a notable imbalance in the prominence of different productions. However, it is also the consequence of personal limitations that stem from my being a researcher from the Global North, who speaks a limited set of European languages and comes with a specific cultural socialisation that inevitably influences my perspective. Despite my best efforts, these factors have inadvertently played a visible role in identifying my text corpus.

There are no pre-existing comprehensive lists of contemporary 'polit-fiction'. Compiling an overview of relevant series, I have been aware that existing scholarly and personal biases and the constantly increasing number of new releases means that simply referring to older existing overviews or personal viewing preferences would not suffice in creating a list that can make any claim at representativity. I have therefore undertaken extensive additional research in online databases like imdb.com, international media publications (at times using google translate to overcome language barriers), an array of informal websites, wikis, and forums, as well as targeted online searches into particular global areas and extensive surveys among friends and colleagues with different cultural literacies. The result is the most extensive list of contemporary polit-series to date (see section 11). However, it, by no means, claims to be exhaustive. Due to the number of relevant series and this study's focus on *contemporary* TV, I have ended my overview in the 1990es. Even though this study does not examine them directly, I also include a selection

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50   Chapter 3 will elaborate further on this highly relevant distinction.

51   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 Weber and Junklewitz, "Das Gesetz der Serie", 21. They write of a "schwache seriale Form". The original calls for "una *forma seriale debole*"(original emphasis).

of relevant mini-series. Mini-series constitute an essential part of polit-fiction's transition from individual films to serial TV and remain a popular (albeit decreasing) format for the presentation of fictional politics. Their inclusion in my overview thus provides valuable context and, in addition, a helpful starting point for potential future inquiries.

In the analysis of its corpus' presentation of politics, this thesis will begin by examining the series' narrative and formal strategies using its model for illustration. A particular emphasis here lies on modelling the interplay of guiding narrative principles and the distinct properties of popular seriality that have often been overlooked in previous textual analyses of polit-series. Furthermore, this study will contextualise its findings with relevant insights from political theory, especially concerning the mediatised construction of political representation and simulation, political and national imaginaries, and their historically controversial role in contemporary politics. This will further qualify the specific visions of politics evoked in the series.

Using its structural model, this thesis will then extend its perspective to discern various pertinent sociocultural, sociotechnical, and economic contexts of production, circulation, and reception. Where applicable, it will (1) identify the series' incorporation of economic and technical affordances, e.g., linear and nonlinear circulation backgrounds, into their narrative logic. Seeing that ongoing (or "open") serial narratives possess a unique ability to integrate historical factors into their own continuation,[52] this thesis will (2) examine how its sample series respond to distinct historical developments that occurred throughout their original run.

For its analyses, this thesis considers a variety of perspectives pertaining to the respective series and historical realities at hand. The chapters in this thesis thus provide a wide-ranging, though by no means comprehensive, examination of crucial developments and issues across the diverse landscape of contemporary polit-series as it presents itself at the beginning of the 2020s.

Chapter 2: Contemporary TV, Complexity, Power Struggles, and the Cynical Turn: Pertinent Research Perspectives on Polit-Series

Scholarly enquiry into polit-series can be divided into four disciplinary areas that have, so far, remained largely separate despite each providing valuable and unique perspectives on the same phenomenon. The first is the broader study of structural and narrative complexity. The second is the ongoing (and increasing) interest in transdisciplinary industry research that examines the political processes of production, circulation, and reception in popular culture and TV fiction. The third is the comparatively recent study of popular seriality as a distinct phenomenon. The fourth is the concrete textual analysis of TV series concerned with politics. The chapter reviews the existing literature, highlights major historical developments in (1) popular polit-fiction and (2) pertinent research, and indicates vantage points for combining these various perspectives.

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52   See, e.g., 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), e.g., 13f., 18, and 24f.

Chapter 3: Actors, Games, and Players: An Analytical Model for Serial Television Fiction

The complexity of the phenomenon that colloquially carries the name 'television series' derives from the unique properties of popular serial texts and their interplay with contemporary TV's dispersed, interconnected, and constantly evolving affordances. Presenting the theoretical and methodological framework for this thesis, the chapter draws on structural approaches from a variety of disciplines, ranging from narratology to Actor-Network Theory to game studies and psychology, to derive a unique original model as a tool for textual analysis that illustrates the specific principles [*Eigengesetzlichkeit*] of popular serial TV. The model structures the activity of a series' fictional and ontic actors as repeatable, comprehensible, and interconnected patterns. Moreovr, it illustrates the uneasy conjunction of the – at times contradictory – triple logics of (1) the fictional world, (2) dramatic composition, and (3) historical affordances that determine the agential dynamics of a popular serial text.

Chapter 4: Royal Performance and the Queen's Three Bodies: The Making of the British Monarchy in the Netflix Series THE CROWN

The section provides a textual analysis of the fictional bio-series THE CROWN, which follows Queen Elizabeth II and her family as their struggle with royal life. The series operationalises a well-established narrative trope for the fictionalisation of royalty: The concept of "The King's two Bodies" (K2B).[53] This dramatic device juxtaposes the requirements of the Queen's personal body natural and her conceptual body politic and serves as a conventional formula for turning the abstract phenomenon of a remote monarch into a relatable fictional character. THE CROWN extends the K2B trope by introducing the postmodern notion of a mediatised third body that unifies the monarch's body natural and body politic through the co-creative approval of his*her subjects. This turns the fictional Windsor family into decidedly political operators constantly occupied with taming public opinion and securing their position.

Chapter 5: Overcoming Omnishambles: The Changing Face of Polit-Comedy from VEEP and EICHWALD, MDB to THE POLITICIAN

Analysing three series from the beginning, middle, and end of the 2010s (VEEP; EICHWALD, MDB; THE POLITICIAN), the chapter demonstrates the changing ways in which polit-comedies have operationalized politics as a humoristic device. Following the tradition of mockumentary cringe humour of the 2000s, polit-comedy in the early 2010s essentially presents politics as a ruthless, simulative, and uncomfortable affair full of invective (VEEP), social discomfort (EICHWALD), and failure (both). Popular seriality's economically motivated aim at perpetuity endows these texts with a tangibly absurdist

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53   Referencing the famous homonymous concept in Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*, 7th paperback printing (Princeton, N): Princeton University Press, 1997).

outlook in which incompetence and depravity endlessly and aimlessly continue to spiral out of control. The emphatically 'woke' humour of THE POLITICIAN turns away from its predecessor's emphasis on transgression and absurdity and instead draws its comedy from a satirical inversion of the conventional coming-of-age progression visible, e.g., in THE CROWN. The series consequently presents an optimistic vision of realpolitik as a constructive way to meaningful change.

Chapter 6: The Curious Case of Volodymyr Zelensky and Vasyl Petrovych Holoborodko: Idealism and Populism in SLUHA NARODU

The Ukrainian production SLUHA NARODU (SN) arguably became the platform that launched Volodymyr Zelensky on his path to becoming his country's real-life president and, as of February 2022, its media-savvy defender against Russian aggression. SN follows the narrative traditions of "the populist telling of the quest"[54] and the American Monomyth in which an idealised, individualistic messiah-hero saves a potential Eden which had previously been failed by its institutions.[55] An inevitable consequence of this utopian narrative's dramatic logic is the implicit rejection of pluralism and representative democracy. As a dramatic trope, this populist construction of idealistic politics (and its unintended ideological consequences) reappears almost identically in a variety of cultural contexts (e.g., in the series MADAM SECRETARY, DESIGNATED SURVIVOR, and DESIGNATED SURVIVOR: 60 DAYS).

Chapter 7: Modelling Malfunction and Inverting the Populist Quest: BARON NOIR

On many levels, BARON NOIR (BN) is an inversion of the populist quest. The series' plot revolves around the threats facing representative, pluralist democracy through systemic dysfunction, the rise of populist agitators, and the decline of the "front républicain" against right-wing extremism. Centred around the ruthless Socialist Party functionary Philippe Rickwaert, the series presents a teleological vision of realpolitik unusual for a polit-series. In BN, it is the Machiavellian strivers who are charged with saving democracy from destructive idealists and populists alike. The series constructs its fictional polity as an emergent actor-network of rare complexity. Politics, in BN, appears as a multipolar system creating a highly complex narrative with an ambivalent sense of political morality. Moreover, the series demonstrates a remarkable ability to incorporate developments of contemporary French politics into its narrative and authentically model their interaction.

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

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

Chapter 8: Starting from "some kind of scratch": The Recalibration of HOUSE OF CARDS, Season 6

The sixth and final season of HoC is an example of rare clarity for the contradictory interplay of intradiegetic, dramatic, and historical dynamics that shape popular TV series. Perhaps this thesis' most (in)famous sample, HoC 6 had to implement far-reaching narrative changes under tight public scrutiny after the highly-publicised dismissal of its star, actor Kevin Spacey, following numerous allegations of sexual abuse. The series faced replacing its world-famous protagonist, accommodating inevitable associations with historical sexual abuse, and creating a reasonably coherent conclusion for an essentially irresolvable serial narrative while maintaining continuity with previous seasons. Essentially squaring the circle, HoC 6 thus draws on a remarkable variety of superficial allusions, compositional shifts, and formal embellishments to simultaneously simulate serial continuity, character development, the normative re-evaluation of its diegetic past and narrative resolution.

Chapter 9: Conclusion: Polit-Series, Politics, and (Progressive) Perspectives

Many of the famous series in this study come with a well-known historical context that often tends to impose a particular perspective on scholarly criticism (e.g., THE CROWN's treatment of its historical role models or SLUHA NARODU's relation to the 2019 Ukrainian presidential election). Aware of this seductive fallacy, this thesis will have provided some much-needed differentiation and clarification concerning a fictional phenomenon that arguably exerted a significant discursive impact on the (political) reality of the 2010s: polit-series. Moreover, this study's structural model contributes a unique methodical approach that allows the examination of popular TV series from various angles, encompassing perspectives from textual composition to industry dynamics. It shows that most series draw on a set of popular narrative formulas arranged in accordance with specific systemic logics. The chapter concludes by pointing out the possibilities and risks of present popular serial networks and the potential pathways for further scholarly inquiry.