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Editorial

Sandra Laugier*

Taking TV Series Seriously

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TV series are gaining increasing attention in current research. However, their aesthetic potential for visualizing ethical issues and both forming and facilitating collective inquiry into democratic values has not yet been fully appreciated. Because of their format (weekly/seasonal regularity, home viewing) and the participatory qualities of Internet usage (tweeting, chat forums), series allow for a new form of education by expressing complex issues through narrative and characters. This education is both political and moral.

This topical issue elucidates the power, diversity, and richness of TV series and their moral and political purpose. TV series provide common reference points, which populate ordinary conversations and political debates. They become shared representations of moral reasoning and feelings. They arouse ethical reflection in their viewers – in the spirit of philosophy.

Taking TV series seriously means investigating the intentions of media creators, reconsidering the public's capabilities, and exploring how TV series structure our understanding of the world and our experiences of it. It seems that we have not yet taken the measure of the role that TV series play, and can play, in educating and constituting “publics,” in transmitting and sharing values, in creating awareness of terrorist or environmental threats, and in social inclusion and the integration of diversity in terms of gender, race, and sexuality. It is clear that the global distribution of US series (from *ER*, 1994–2007, to *Game of Thrones*, 2010–2018), as well as an increasing number of mainstream series produced in the EU (*The Bureau*, 2015–2020, *Money Heist*, 2017–2021) and in Asian countries (*Delhi Crime*, 2019, *Squid Game*, 2021) – to mention only the most spectacular ones – has made it possible to draw attention to a number of important social, political, racial, health, and security issues.

An increasing number of scholars in philosophy, history, media studies, sociology, and political science are therefore taking an interest in TV series. Yet, TV series often remain marginal to their main research agenda: used as simple illustrations, they are not seen as serious objects of analysis. As of today, the existing research on TV series has focused on their modes of production, formal features, or reception – always separately. Most publications on TV series and philosophy take them as an opportunity to illustrate existing philosophical theses, debates, or ideas. The ambition of the present issue is to demonstrate the intellectual and philosophical ambition of TV series themselves, as works of art.

Over the past fifty years, the relationship between cinema and philosophy has been explored by key scholars.¹ It has evolved into acknowledging film as philosophy rather than seeing film as an “object” for philosophy;² into analyzing film as sustaining an immanent ethics, thus following Cavell and his characterization of moral perfectionism through Hollywood film.³ TV series, which have taken over films in

1 Cavell, *The World Viewed*; Perkins, *Film as Film*; Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image*; Carroll, *Interpreting the Moving Image*; and Livingston, “Theses on Cinema as Philosophy.”

2 Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*; Rothman, *The “I” of the camera, Essays in Film Criticism, History, and Aesthetics*; Rothman, *Must We Kill The Thing We Love?*; Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*; and Rodowick, *Philosophy’s Artful Conversation*.

3 Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*; Laugier and Cerisuelo, *Stanley Cavell*; Mulhall, *On Film*; Pippin, *Hollywood Westerns and American Myth*; Sinnerbrink, *Cinematic Ethics*.

* **Corresponding author: Sandra Laugier**, Université Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne, Institut des sciences juridiques et philosophiques de la Sorbonne UMR8103 CNRS Paris1, Paris, France, e-mail: sandra.laugier@univ-paris1.fr

reaching the largest audiences worldwide, have seldom been the object of similar philosophical attention, though.⁴

Studying TV shows means paying attention to popular culture as moral resource. It is not a matter of drawing from a reservoir of past examples but rather of inverting hierarchies of what *matters*. Reconsidering the “popular” leads to rethinking the connection between culture and democracy, in order to organize both of them pragmatically around actual, shared practices and forms of life. Popular culture (movies and TV shows, videogames, music, Internet videos, and so on) plays a crucial role in re-formulating ethics and in the political and social constitution of democracy. Dewey defines the public as emerging from a problematic situation: individuals experience a problem that they initially see as arising from private life, and a solution is arrived at through the interactions between those who decide to give public expression to this problem. This leads to rethinking the connections between culture and democracy.

And yet what we are witnessing today is simply the realization of what Ralph Waldo Emerson and later John Dewey⁵ called for: an art anchored in the spectator’s experience and in everyday life; an art that is not cut off from ordinary life or placed upon a pedestal. A profound transformation of the cultural field and its hierarchies is underway, as evidenced by the academic world’s change in attitude toward television series. TV series, previously seen as either mind-numbing or ideologically driven mass-market products – or as guilty pleasures for intellectuals in need of entertainment – have come to be seen as sites where artistic and hermeneutic authority is re-appropriated, and where spectators are re-empowered through the establishment of unique experiences.

No reflection on ordinary aesthetics can ignore the issue Cavell confronted in refusing both the critic’s contempt for forms seen as degraded and the contempt of intellectuals who might comfortably claim an interest in popular culture while maintaining the conviction that they occupy a position of superiority with respect to it. It is even more difficult to convince people of the intelligence of popular TV series than it was for Cavell to convince readers of the intelligence of remarriage comedies, and today it is widely understood that there is a hierarchy between “quality” series and the rest; a distinction that mirrors the hierarchy between “important” films and commercial movies.

Panofsky and Cavell took as a starting point the popular nature of cinema, its relationship to reality: the integration of film into the viewer’s life, and its role in constituting the viewer’s experience. Today, TV takes over film’s ambition to spark and shape nations’ capacities for imagination and foresight. This means “educating one’s experience in such a way that one can be educated by it.”⁶ There is an inevitable circularity here: having an experience requires trusting one’s experience, then developing criticism and conversation. The present viewers of TV series build exactly this kind of trust in their own experience: they receive an education in criticism, in the practice of conversation.

TV series accompany us (or used to accompany us – today their life span seems shorter) over the years as the plot unfolds and evolves, as we unfold and evolve. The importance of TV series is further reinforced by audiences’ attachment to characters: viewers truly *care* about/for TV series protagonists. TV series provide communities with words for conversations and a common language to approach the world, empower individuals with moral judgment, and present varieties and differences in moral points of view.

These shows are increasingly important to the way we deliberate in the public sphere. They appear regularly in policy debates and impact both public perceptions and policymakers. They are repeatedly present in conversations, surveys, debates; they constitute an “interface” between the private and public spheres. They make possible a new way of “educating” the viewer’ and “creating” a public through the expression and transmission of values and problems. By virtue of their aesthetic format, TV series entail viewers’ initiation into forms of life that are not made explicit and are initially opaque and sometimes disturbing.

⁴ However, see Nannicelli, *Appreciating the Art of Television*; Laugier, “Popular Cultures, Ordinary Criticism;” Laugier, *Nos Vies en Séries*; Laugier, “The Conception of Film for the Subject of Television,” and Shuster, *New Television*.

⁵ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 4.

⁶ Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 11.

All the contributions to this issue, in their various topics and styles, take TV series seriously. They demonstrate the intelligence a show brings to its own production – the importance of the function of the screenwriter, the work of actors, the choices made by showrunners, and so on. Actors' modes of expression and embodiment of characters (moral texture, gait, style of speaking and behaving) in TV series are central to the moral education made possible by such works. All the studies here highlight the collective and individual moral choices, negotiations, conflicts, and agreements that are at the basis of this education; trajectories of characters or ensembles; narrative turns and arcs; plot twists; and so on. Series are linguistic, ethical, epistemological, and cultural references that structure understandings of the world.

What this topical issue suggests is also the possibility of an ordinary aesthetics. The vocation of popular culture is the philosophical education of a *public* (in Dewey's sense) rather than the institution and valorization of a socially targeted corpus. Popular culture does not refer to a primitive or inferior version of culture, but rather to a shared democratic culture that creates common *values* and serves as a resource for a form of self-education – or more specifically, a form of culture of the self, a subjectivation that occurs through sharing and commenting on material that is integrated into ordinary life.

The project of an ordinary aesthetics deliberately goes against the traditional critical approach, and the conception of art as a separate domain – a view criticized by Dewey – and the mystique of the individual creator, as well as with “representation,” to the detriment of public and ordinary experience. Popular forms of cultural production are democratic in the sense that, today, as demonstrated by the proliferation of blogs, amateur criticism, or even just any conversation about a popular series demonstrates, they ascribe to each individual the capacity to trust his or her judgment. TV series and the place that they and their worlds have come to occupy in spectators' lives demonstrate TV series' relationship to individual experience and the fact that they pursue the pedagogical task undertaken by popular cinema – that of an inseparably subjective and public education. It is thus important to acknowledge the place of TV series in the public sphere and to renew the way we think about the impact of TV series on democratic societies, both at the individual and collective levels.

All contributions brought together in this issue aim to grasp the political, societal, cultural, and aesthetic significances of TV series, and their centrality in shaping our moral and political views. The remarkable variety of the works analyzed in this issue – from “classics” such as *Battlestar Galactica*, *The Walking Dead*, *24*, *Homeland*, to hot and global shows such as *The Handmaid's Tale*, *American Crime*, *Fleabag*, *Earth Black Rising*, *Queen Sono*, *Unorthodox*, *The Expanse*, *Rick and Morty*, *Dear White People*, *I May Destroy You*, and so on is an illustration of the most important political topics today.

The papers gathered here show, for example, how race and gender and sexuality issues, as well as security and environmental problems, find a privileged expression in TV series today, which has certainly become a particularly effective site for political action. We thus hope to show how television series contribute to the current struggles for a more democratic world, for a society where everyone has a voice.

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