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# Aesthetic Cognitivism and Serialized Television Fiction

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**ABSTRACT**

In this article, I defend the cognitive value of certain generic television series. Unlike media and television scholars, who have been appreciative of the informative capacity of television fiction, philosophers have been less willing to acknowledge the way in which these works contribute to our understanding of our social reality. My aim here is to provide one such account, grounded in aesthetic cognitivism, that is, the view that fiction is a source of knowledge. Focusing on crime and courtroom dramas, I start by offering some examples of the cognitive benefits available in some of these series and I argue that the more beneficial cases establish superior mimetic relations with reality, enhancing their capacity to present ethically challenging issues. I then examine whether the fictional dimension of these works presents an obstacle to their informative potential and I conclude that it does not. A central aspect of my account is the claim that the degree of cognitive benefit depends on the underlying narrative strategy of the series. Specifically, there are clues in any given show, including the treatment of ongoing characters, which signal the extent to which it can be taken as mimetically reliable and thus, cognitively valuable. I complete my account by addressing anti-cognitivists' arguments which call to doubt the informative aspect of television series and their capacity to address ethical concerns.

## I. PRELIMINARY REMARKS

Having given his terminal patient, Jane Crewson, a lethal dosage of morphine, Doctor Henry Richards found himself on trial, accused of murdering her. Resolutely denying such charges, he claimed that the morphine drip was not meant to euthanize the patient, but to relieve her pain. When asked if he knew she would die if given that dosage, he responded: "Yes. But legally, I believed I stayed within bounds. And morally, when a terminal patient in severe pain asks that she be allowed to die with a modicum of decency, I listen. And I listened to Jane Crewson."

One does not have to know much about the doctrine of double effect to recognize that there is something problematic in what Dr. Richards is saying. His statement arouses not only an emotional response but a reflective and moral one. A listener is challenged to evaluate Dr. Richards' reasons for giving his patient a lethal dosage and to come up with one's own judgment on whether these reasons are valid. Contemplating his deed, one may come to negotiate the value of a life spent in unbearable pain and to consider whether an act of accelerating the death of someone in such circumstances should count as an act of murder. Reflecting on whether Dr. Richards should be convicted of murder, one may become aware of what is at stake when we, as a society, need to develop a set of laws that regulate the kind of actions that are permissible in the context of medical treatments. If that is the case, does it matter that Dr. Richards is a fictional character, populating the fictional world of the TV series *The Practice* (episode "The Blessing")? I argue that it does not and that the rhetorical power of his claims nevertheless invites serious reflection on the ethical and legal standing of assisted suicide, the meaning of life, and the legitimacy of our legal institutions and medical practice.

In claiming this, I join forces with aesthetic cognitivists, that is, philosophers who argue that fictional works are a relevant source of knowledge (including ethical knowledge) and other epistemic

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gains, such as understanding or acknowledgment.[1] Traditionally, aesthetic cognitivists shined away from TV series, believing them to be low art, trivial, and formulaic, lacking in psychological depth.[2] In contrast, media and TV scholars were more appreciative of the cognitive character of these works, seeing them as reliably depicting certain aspects of our world (see Alvarez 2010; Jenner 2015; Moorti and Cuklanz 2017; Potter and Marshall 2009; Twomey 2020; Vaage 2017; Vest 2010; Villez 2009). Convinced by their arguments, my aim here is to provide epistemic grounding to the view that some TV series are cognitively valuable. Building up on my previous analysis of the cognitive value of TV works, primarily the crime genre, I argue that these shows provide epistemic access into a particular aspect of our social reality—criminal behavior and institutionalized practices and forces designed to combat it—while also engaging our ethical concerns and soliciting our moral judgments. On my view, these series are informative: they tell us something about our world and invite us to consider some of its complex moral, social, political, economic, and so on aspects. Through fictional portrayals of our human situation, they inspire various kinds of reflective processes in the spectators, the outcome of which is a changed perspective, reconsideration of values, reevaluation of commitments, and, on the whole, a more informed understanding of our experience.

Two problems emerge for my account. First, there is a sense in which epistemic reliability attributed to these series is misplaced, given that these are primarily works of fiction intended to entertain, not to inform. As anti-cognitivists argue, fictional works do not set out to factually represent our world; rather, they use it as a frame of reference against which they dramatize certain events, primarily for the entertainment of the viewers. A decision to focus the action on, for example, the methods commonly employed by the police to solve crimes is not motivated by an epistemic desire of *NYPD Blue*'s (ABC) makers to shed light on police work, but by their artistic desire to explore the generic conventions of police procedurals. Consequently, not much is there to look for in terms of epistemic gains for the viewers. Second, many generic series are not informative because they misrepresent reality. If we were to form beliefs about society on the basis of, for example, *Castle*'s (ABC) portrayal of it, we would end up with deeply confused and mistaken views on why some people engage in criminal activities and how police go about dealing with them. How then are we to know which series are sufficiently informative and deserving of epistemic praise?

These are legitimate concerns and my aim here is to address them and to show that, at least in some cases, they are unfounded. While numerous generic series are primarily entertaining with little, if any, informative capacity, anti-cognitivists err in generalizing such negative verdicts to all generic shows. To make this point clear, I compare and contrast shows that deserve epistemic praise and those that do not. The two categories are not as neatly separated as my phrasing suggests: cognitive value is often gradational and relative to different aspects of the social practice that any given series is focused on. However, as I show, the crucial difference between cognitively valuable series and those that primarily entertain lies in the way in which the former represents the real world by building epistemically reliable mimetic relations to it, which is evident in the particular narrative strategies employed by the show and in the function of the characters. With that in mind, I explain why the fictional dimension is not an obstacle to the series' informative capacity, which enables me to mitigate the force of certain anti-cognitivist challenges.

## II. COGNITIVE VALUE OF TV SERIES

My defense of the cognitive value of certain TV series is based on their realistic portrayal of the particular domain of social reality, and on their capacity to make us aware of certain complex ethical issues that permeate our social and private experiences, while simultaneously inviting us to reconsider our understanding of these issues and to re-evaluate our moral judgments on them. Many generic series are praised for their social realism: *Hill Street Blues* (NBC), *Homicide: Life on the Street* (NBC), *NYPD Blue,* and *Law and Order* (NBC) franchises are the most often cited examples of shows that depict our social reality and describe it through the established genre of crime and courtroom drama. Particularly relevant in this context is *The Wire* (HBO), repeatedly praised for presenting corruption and the different forms it takes in various institutions.[3] Margrethe Bruun Vaage, for instance, claims that the show focuses on "those marginalized in mainstream popular culture by virtue of their social economic status of ethnicity, and on how their problems are created by society—people

who are disenfranchised by poverty and lack of opportunity" (2017, 262). I take such comments to represent the epistemic force of works that interest me. The relevant cognitive gain here relates not only to viewers picking up factual information about our social reality, but in their becoming aware of how various social forces come together and create the particular environment in which we live, in developing a more profound understanding of how certain issues manifest themselves, how they affect our lives, and why they are such powerful forces in shaping our experience. Consider Rafe McGregor's analysis of how *Broadchurch* (ITV) "reveals both the ubiquity of rape myths, false beliefs about sexual assaults . . . and the propensity of the public for victim blaming" (2021, 84), or Jason Vest's claim that *NYPD Blue* probes "the intricate social forces that keep racial tension, anger and misunderstanding alive" (2010, 54). These scholars see fictional works not only as reliably depicting our reality, and thus delivering knowledge and understanding about it, but in doing the actual epistemic work of exploring certain social issues or phenomena that may otherwise go unnoticed. *NYPD Blue*'s repeated depictions of how racial issues manifest themselves in various contexts raise one's awareness of numerous ways in which racial prejudices impact one's day-to-day functioning, the efficiency of social institutions, and the experience of those who are either the victims of racism or who engage in such behavior. Through fictional portrayals, viewers may realize what it feels like to be in a certain position, undergo certain experiences, or hold a particular worldview or set of values.

A further grounding of the cognitive gains available through engagements with serialized fictional works relates to their capacity to provide case studies that viewers rely on in developing their opinions about those issues that are at the core of the series' thematic concerns. From one episode to the next, *Law and Order*: *Special Victims Unit* depicts sexual assault, with each episode contextualizing it by focusing on different factors that generate such behavior. These range from one's misconstruing another person's actions as consent, to one's using physical power, emotional and physical abuse, or hierarchical superiority to engage another in unwilling sexual intercourse, and numerous others. As Sujata Moorti and Lisa Cuklanz argue, "with its continued focus on the prosecution of sexual assaults . . . this prime time series has become a site from which a new millennial *understanding* of sexual violence . . . is being crafted" (2017, 3, 15, emphasis added). I emphasize understanding, in order to highlight that the cognitive gain is not reducible to the accumulation of facts or statistical data. Rather, it is related to the show's providing a coherent and illuminating account of what is involved in various forms of sexual abuse, to its capacity to explain how a specific series of events unfolded, how it felt like for those involved in them, and how it affects them in the long run. As I show below in my discussion of anti-cognitivism, such an account is not scientific and it does not aim to be. Rather, it presupposes a humanistic approach, one that prioritizes the subjective experience of individuals.

Series' repeated portrayals of ethically challenging and legally ambiguous cases have an important philosophical dimension. The courtroom drama is in particular important in this respect. These shows create their storylines by juxtaposing competing views on certain issues related to ethical, political, social, religious, sexual, economic, and other aspects of our lives. Episodic cases in *The Practice* often serve as an entrance into the ethical and legal complexity of issues such as same-sex marriage, euthanasia, healthcare policies, the underlying logic of the criminal justice system and client-attorney privilege, discrimination, death penalty, and so on. Engaging with these themes through the way they are depicted in the show can contribute to viewers' understanding of them. By depicting instances of euthanasia, the death penalty, manslaughter, murder, and execution, *The Practice* asks us to think of what it means to take the life of another human being and to consider the circumstances in which one should be held responsible for doing so. By simultaneously engaging with incommensurable perspectives of different characters, viewers can be led to reconsider their own understanding of the issues at hand. Someone sympathetic to euthanasia in their abstract reflections might have failed to think of a context in which a decision to terminate a patient's life is based on less than conclusive evidence about that patient's mental state. "The Blessing" can amend this omission in one's reasoning, by focusing one's attention on such possibility.

The mimetic aspect of cognitively valuable series is important because of the thematic concerns to which they bring viewers' attention. Because of the series' episodic structure, the same thematic concern can be depicted in numerous episodes, from different perspectives. This creates possibilities for the viewers to re-evaluate their own understanding of the relevant issue and to see whether their judgment is resistant to changing circumstances. If an act of assisted suicide is performed by a family

member rather than medical staff, does it still count as euthanasia, or does it amount to murder? And does it matter which methods are used? These are the questions that "Death Penalties" (*The Practice* 2000: S4, E18) raises in depicting a case of a husband who fulfills his dying wife's request to terminate her suffering by shooting her in the head. The rhetorical power of the episode is strengthened by the search for a difference between (as one character puts it) "allowing a terminal person to die and executing a healthy one on a death row."

## III. LEARNING FROM FICTION

For my account of the cognitive value of generic series to hold, I need to show that their fictional dimension is not an obstacle to their capacity to inform us and engage us in ethical deliberation. Contemporary theories of fiction provide means to do so.[4] These theories recognize that the distinction between fact and fiction cannot be drawn on the account of fiction being false and claim instead that the challenge lies in explaining how viewers differentiate between those elements of a work that are fictional (and should thus be imagined) from those which are real (and should be believed). Matravers' (2014) take on this is helpful for my aim of explicating the cognitive benefits that such engagements have for us. Having examined extensive psychological research on viewers' understanding of fictional and nonfictional representations, Matravers argues that the audience's processing of representations and their attitudes toward them are neutral with respect to whether a given representation is fictional or non-fictional. While a spectator's awareness of the fictional status of a representation gives a reason to evaluate its truth more carefully, such status does not immediately speak against representation being true, and it does not ask one to reject its potential contribution to one's body of knowledge. More importantly, there is an interaction between spectators' existing beliefs and those derived from fiction, which suggests that fictional content is not compartmentalized from the body of beliefs one already has—this is, after all, why we can understand fiction.

I take this interaction to show that fictional portrayals can be used as input for one's consideration of a particular problem. When a given episode deals with a particular ethical dilemma, the fact that a fictional situation is a vehicle through which such a dilemma is presented does not disable spectators from reflectively engaging with the problem presented. When a spectator hears Dr. Richards' points in favor of euthanasia and district attorney Helen Gamble's (Lara Flynn Boyle) points against it, the viewer attends to these claims and evaluates their plausibility by relying on their existing structure of beliefs and experience, much as one does in evaluating other claims encountered in everyday experience. Since the spectator is aware that the background to the show is realistic, they can reflect on the particular thematic concerns regardless of their fictional setting, because they recognize that the thematic concerns of the episode relate not only to the fictional world of the series but to our reality—the question of assisted suicide is a problem that we, as a society, have to address. Relevant here is viewers' capacity to recognize, as Matravers puts it, if particular information "is specific to the fiction or applies to the world outside of fiction" (80). On my view, when the viewer recognizes that the information relates to the real world, the viewer can use such information to develop his or her own understanding of those aspects of reality that particular information relates to. The challenge then is to explain how a viewer is to recognize when he or she can form beliefs about social reality on the grounds of its fictional depiction. There are two aspects to this: a general aspect concerns recognizing which shows can be taken as reliably depicting the real world and a particularist aspect concerns recognizing which details within the particular episode of a particular show apply to the real world. I start with the general one.

## IV. RELIABLE AND UNRELIABLE FICTION

I argue that a crucial difference between epistemically reliable series, on the basis of which viewers can form true beliefs about the real world, and those less reliable, concerns the degree to which the former build mimetic relations with the real world. This degree is most evident in the narrative strategies any given series employs to present its stories, and in the particular function that characters have within the series' fictional world.

As a rule, shows considered cognitively valuable are more focused on establishing strong mimetic relations with the real world. Such series also insist on inserting ethical issues that we experience in

our everyday lives, or that relate to the underlying rationale of the social practice at the core of the series. These concerns are not confined to the fictional world but resonate with the intellectual concerns that we have as epistemic and ethical agents who need to negotiate with other such agents in a shared social environment. In contrast, series that lack epistemic and ethical force do not build mimetic relations with the real world, and they neither invite viewers' ethical judgments nor provide an opportunity for one's evaluation of one's beliefs, values, and commitments. Such series are primarily entertaining: they present one-dimensional stories focused exclusively on the relations among the main characters, feeding into viewers' hedonic desires related to cheap romances, melodrama, and happy endings. Quite often, mimetically unreliable series combine conventions of the crime genre with those of romantic comedies and comedies of manner. As a way of example, consider series like *The Mentalist* (CBS) or *Castle* (ABC). They pertain to crime fiction, but if we were to take them as factually true about police work or criminal acts, we would end up with multiple inaccurate beliefs.

On my suggestion, experienced viewers can recognize whether a given series invites a focus on the character(s), as is the case with *Mentalist* or *Castle*, or on the set of social issues, practices, and concerns as *The Practice* or *The Wire* do. While these are two opposing points on a continuum, in most cases one is aware of where the series' focus lies. As a rule, series that channel viewers' attention on the characters are less epistemically suitable for the task of informing us about the world, or of depicting ethically relevant concerns. They entertain by exaggerating the uniqueness and idiosyncrasy of the main protagonist(s), and by doing so, leave very little that the spectator can translate back into the real world (other than rather trivial notions that people fall in love or kill for money). In contrast, series which develop their stories by inviting attention to some aspect of the social reality or a certain social practice are epistemically better suited to provide us with access to that reality. This is not to suggest that characters in such series are not idiosyncratic or entertaining, it is only to point to the fact that their idiosyncrasy is not what the show focuses on and what the viewer is first and foremost asked to attend to.[5]

To make this distinction obvious, compare *Castle*'s portrayal of a drug-related, mafia-ridden underground, as in "Deep in Death" (*Castle* 2009), with the one represented in *The Wire*. While in *The Wire* every segment of the story represents different aspects of running a drug trafficking business or fighting against it, the *Castle* episode uses this motif to show *Castle*'s (Nathan Fillion) poker-playing skills. When the focus is on the character in *The Wire*, the episode is concerned with exploring the aftermath of doing a police business and the impact that has on the personal and social relations of that character, which can be understood as representing a police officer more generally. This is why it is plausible to argue, as Vaage does in explaining the roots of social realism in *The Wire,* that "When watching a fictional work of social realism the spectator understands that both the characters and events in the story are made up, and thus merely call for imagining. Nevertheless, she expects them to be true in the sense of being representational or typical of the (real) group that she perceives the work to make claims about. The spectator expects a certain accuracy and authenticity in the type representations" (2017, 263). On this view, fiction makes true claims with respect to types (of people, places, events), not to tokens (i.e., not of individuals).

To bring some formal distinctions to this contrast, I refer to the underlying narrative strategy in the series such as *Castle* as *world-to-character adjustment of action*: the fictional world of the series is adjusted to the character so as to bring forward his or her idiosyncrasies, and the main interest of the viewers is to see how each episode offers new opportunities for the development of such idiosyncratic traits. On the other hand, the dominant narrative strategy with series whose epistemic force comes forth is *character-to-world adjustment*: in these cases, the overall features of the characters and their arc stories are put at the service of highlighting or pinpointing those concerns that are central to series' mimetic focus. Consider again a difference between *The Wire* and the *Castle*. *Castle* is a highly individualized token, which is, within the fictional world, sufficiently distinctive in its features to allow the spectators to recognize that the series aims to entertain them by focusing their attention primarily on Castle and his love interest, detective Becket (Stana Katic). The setting of the series may well be New York but representative features of the series are only marginally at the service of informing us about this great city. Rather, each of its aspects serves to promote Castle's personal story. Consequently, the crime aspect—factors that give rise to it and procedures implemented to solve it—is always secondary to the characters and it is built on the trivial and explanatory empty premise of bad people

doing bad things for selfish reasons, without providing any account as to why that may be and how they are to be handled with. The motives of these baddies are hardly ever grounded in the wider context, such as the social background or the character's psychology. In contrast, the details of fictional worlds in *The Wire* or *Law and Order* serve as a coherently created explanation as to why people act the way they do, in the sense in which Aristotle formulates this view in his *Poetics.*

In Noël Carroll's summary, Aristotle argued that art "teaches us certain scenarios—certain regularities or tendencies in the course of human affairs—that are apt to occur when people with this or that set of dispositions or character traits are placed in various situations" (2016, 86). On my view, this is precisely what cognitively valuable TV shows do. The narrative of *The Wire*, the elements within the story world, and its particular focus on social institutions and their impact on individuals, all add up to creating a greater picture of the crime, depicting social, political, and institutional aspects that give rise to it, as well as psychological properties of the agents involved, with particular emphasis on their motivation.

Recognizing this kind of educative power of art, Jacob Berger and Mark Alfano develop "interactionist cognitivism," a view according to which "art teaches how context and character interact to produce action" (2016, 144).[6] What I would add to this claim is that works of social realism are in particular concerned with focusing on those aspects of the contexts that are specific to the mimetic interest of the show, and on how those aspects impact individuals. Such interest in the interaction of context and character is absent from series that lack cognitive value: *Castle* never provides an explanation for the criminal activities of the baddies it depicts. This is why a character or a scene in *The Wire* can represent a type, and characters or scenes in *Castle* cannot. Consider the death of *The Wire*'s character Wallace, a sixteen-year-old drug dealer working the corner and taking care of the children whose parents died. Wallace is not a fiction-typical baddie, but a complex character trying to survive in particularly unfavorable social circumstances (all of which are recognizably realistic for the viewers). As one critic argues, in establishing the limits of *The Wire*'s social realism, Wallace's death "signals that the *Wire* is serious about the class and race-based injustice it depicts" (Twomey 2020, 72). Because of such signals, the audience can come to see particular social circumstances described in the show as a framework within which children become drug dealers, and can come to understand why that is so, with respect to the real world. Producer Ed Burns' comment on Wallace's death exemplifies the point: "You are staying true to the characters and you're just trying to share what they are going through .... They're on this course, and tragically enough, very little can steer those kids, those people, away from that particular course that they've started out" (Twomey 2020, 72).[7]

Attention to the particularities of the real world enables courtroom drama to bring forward ethical complexities which emerge in various social and private contexts. By juxtaposing two lawyers with opposing views on the moral standing of euthanasia, "The Blessing" enables the audience to focus on argumentative dialectics in favor of or against euthanasia. Since argumentative negotiations are at the center of the episode, the audience cannot dismiss them: what they attend to in this episode is the question of euthanasia's moral and legal status. The fictional element comes in only when both lawyers reveal their personal experience with euthanasia, related to their personal stories: Helen's grandmother and Bobby's mother were euthanized. While this information provides a dramatic background to both characters, such merging of a legal (ethical) problem and a character's story is not coincidental. While this is another sign of a work's fictional dimension, it is a repeatedly used narrative strategy that has important functions in promoting the series' mimetic and ethical dimension, and in maintaining viewers' commitment to the show and interest in its focus.[8]

Through merging, characters often stand as advocates or representatives of certain moral values, political views, or social issues that are related to the series' mimetic dimension, or that provide a context within which certain concerns are raised. Characters in *NYPD Blue* exemplify the point. Via the personal story of Diane Russell (Kim Delany), the show raises issues concerning alcoholism and domestic abuse; Andy Sipowicz's (Dennis Franz) racism generates numerous opportunities for the show to probe racial concerns, and the homosexuality of the squad's administrator John Irvin (Bill Brochtrup) made it possible for the show to depict prejudice, mistreatment, and hostility that homosexuals experience privately and in their workplace. In contrast, consider how merging functions in *Castle*: Beckett's obsession with finding the man who killed her mother to prevent her from exposing political corruption disables her from developing a romantic relationship with Castle, but the series does not use this motif to probe the problem of corruption or misuse of political power.

In this case, merging does not have a mimetic function; it is used as a romantic trope, an obstacle keeping lovers apart.

Merging is particularly successful in generating cognitive benefits for the viewers because of the episodic nature of serialized fiction and the viewers' familiarity with the story arc of individual characters. Consider how *NYPD Blue* exposes the multifarious aspects of racism by accumulating episodes that expose Sipowicz's racist attitudes. From one episode to the next, viewers get to see how such attitudes prevent him from successfully doing his job and from developing cooperative relations with his colleagues. By contrasting Sipowicz with characters who are the victims of racial prejudice, viewers can experience various ways in which racism manifests itself in different social and institutional circumstances.

My concern so far was to explore the difference between series that are cognitively valuable and those that are not. In the next part, I engage with anti-cognitivists challenges and I address the particularist aspect of knowing which beliefs from fiction can be applied to the real world.

## V. ANTI-COGNITIVISTS CHALLENGES

The gist of anti-cognitivists' arguments is their insistence on severing the mimetic relation of fictional works and the real world and in denying the epistemic reliability of these works. Currie (2020) invokes institutional factors underlying the production of fiction to show that fiction neither aims to convey the truth nor complies with the standards of epistemically reliable practices. Unlike science, which relies on expertise and verificationism, our fictional practice endorses divergence from how things are. This is all the more problematic, because the audience, for the most part, does not have expert knowledge of the police procedures or legal practices, and thus cannot evaluate the reliability of their fictional portrayals. Given the research on the so-called fictional persuasion, which suggests that the audience does not consider the veracity of beliefs based on fiction but applies them to the real world nonetheless, we need to be careful in attributing cognitive praise to these shows or in claiming a cognitive gain for the viewers.[9] An additional issue here is the idiosyncratic nature of insights that fiction allegedly provides. As Currie argues, "audiences vary a good deal in their emotional and intellectual responses to fictions" (147); consequently, one has no reason to accept one's response to a particular fictional portrayal of, for example, a certain moral dilemma, as an instance of knowledge gain. After all, what evidence do we have, wonders Currie, to claim that engagements with fiction make us better evidenced and closer to the truth?

Currie's arguments against the cognitive value of fiction are plausible, but they do not vindicate the anti-cognitivists' case. He may have a point in arguing that fiction-makers are not experts on social conditions giving rise to criminal behavior or on (moral) psychology. However, experts, ranging from policemen and lawyers to journalists with extensive experience in the criminal milieu, are often involved in the production of these works.[10] Critical commentaries on these series testify to experts' impact on the development of stories. They also evaluate the degree to which shows are mimetically reliable, and, occasionally, criticize them for misrepresenting certain aspects of reality. This shows that TV works are subject to critical evaluations regarding their cognitive character.

What about the problem of fictional persuasion, that is, the claim that viewers, for the most part, do not consider the veracity of fictional portrayals, which may cause them to form wrong beliefs? To some extent, this is a justified worry, related to the particularist aspect of knowing which information from fiction can be applied to the real world. When Helen Gamble states that seventy percent of all deaths in hospitals are due to doctors' decision to let the patient die, a spectator who lacks medical training or who does not consult scientific medical journals does not have reliable grounds on which to accept or reject this statement. Were a spectator to make any decisions regarding their own medical treatment on the account of statistics provided by the show, they would act irrationally and without epistemic justification. Such action, however, on the part of the spectator, would be the fault of their epistemic character and not an inherent flaw of the series. Aesthetic cognitivists are not committed to the claim that spectators can accept everything that the show presents as factually true, without additional evidence.

They are also not committed to the claim that all the details in each episode are accurate. While I did argue that the informative aspect of TV series relates to their informing us about a particular social

practice and about a particular chunk of our shared social reality, I am not claiming that everything presented is true. TV series paint a picture of our world, but they do so with very broad brushstrokes, giving contours and sacrificing details, misrepresenting some and simplifying others.[11] However, such simplifications do not necessarily diminish their epistemic significance, particularly if we do not evaluate them (as anti-cognitivists tend to) against those practices that are solely dedicated to discovering the truth. TV series are not meant to substitute scientific resources or documentaries and are not supposed to turn common viewers into legal experts or experts on the causes of criminal behavior. But that does not mean that they are cognitively trivial.

As I argued, the setup of any given series provides viewers with the clues to negotiate what is plausible and what is not; that is, to differentiate between those aspects of the series which serve as types and those which are at the service of dramatization. Repeated engagements with the series enable viewers to accumulate relevant knowledge regarding the social practice dominant in the shows, and the familiarity with this segment extends over time into the viewer's capacity to differentiate, somewhat reliably, when any given story makes too sharp a turn from how things are, or might be, in the real world.[12] Familiarity with the series, and the experiential knowledge one generally has, often provide a sufficient background against which a viewer negotiates the reliability of what is presented. Consider, for example, how departures from reality are handled in series which apply the world-to-character adjustment. Following the long story arc of searching for the man who killed his wife, at the end of *The Mentalist*'s season three, the protagonist Patrick Jane (Simon Baker) kills Timothy Carter (Bradley Whitford), a person whom he takes to be the killer. Given all the physical evidence, witnesses, and Jane's confession, his subsequent acquittal at the trial has no grounding in reality but fits perfectly with the series' overall theme: that of Jane's capacity to sweet-talk his way out of any situation. And that is precisely what viewers recognize: a series' makers' intentions to entertain by playing with the character's traits, not by providing a frame of reference to the real world.

This example helps us to mitigate the particularist aspect of the challenge of knowing when particular information from fiction can be applied to the real world. While there will always be instances when a viewer cannot be certain (and should suspend judgment or consult expert sources) about something, a viewer should be able to judge if the fictional portrayal of a certain issue corresponds to their experience: the fact that racism is never an issue in *Castle* should make them skeptical of the show's capacity to depict the social reality of a city as racially diverse as New York.

Currie puts a lot of weight on the claim that we cannot learn from fiction because the practice of fiction does not comply with the norms of reliability characteristic of science. But if these were the only norms that matter, many other aspects of our everyday lives that we consider valuable sources of knowledge would not pass the test of reliability. We consider the experiences of others relevant to our actions and beliefs and we act upon the advice of those around us without necessarily turning to science to corroborate their views. Therefore, there is no need to hold TV series accountable to the standards of science. But that does not mean that there are no standards: epistemically responsible viewers should refrain from forming judgments about the world on the basis of *The Mentalist* once they recognize the series' narrative strategies.

Currie would disagree, claiming that cognitivists are imprecise in explaining how engagements with fictional works make us better evidenced and closer to the truth. However, a plausible account of what it means to be closer to the truth and of what is involved in getting there has been provided by epistemologists who develop a plurality view of epistemic values. Against the dominance of truth, epistemologists now recognize that numerous reflective processes (considering alternative explanations, formulating hypotheses, weighing evidence, advancing a certain perspective, changing a worldview, and so on) matter epistemically because they contribute to our overall epistemic aim of knowing what is right and avoiding errors, and they help us develop our reflective skills, critical thinking, and argumentative reasoning. (See David 2001, and Kvanvig 2005.) Thus, when a given work serves as an incentive to question a certain concept or re-evaluate one's moral commitments, these are genuine epistemic processes that enable one to come up with a more informed perspective on an issue, which contributes to one's overall cognitive economy and enriches one's conceptual framework.

An additional reason to discard Currie's skepticism regarding fiction's capacity to make us better evidenced and bring us closer to truth is the fact that, for most of the ethical and social concerns that these works tackle, we still lack a proper account of *the* truth. As evident by the mounting

disagreements among philosophers, there are no universally accepted answers to issues concerning euthanasia, same-sex marriage, rights of non-binary people, consent and rape, sexual harassment, and the like. It is a particularly informative aspect of the series I analyze here that they show just why it is so hard to come up with determinate answers to these questions. Thus, if we were to reject series' cognitive value on the account of their inability to provide us with one true perspective, we should reconsider the cognitive value of philosophy, which also falls short of providing one true perspective on these issues.

In addition, while it is an open question whether there are moral experts, most of our moral decisions are made without consulting any experts. Most of the people we interact with on a daily basis have no particular knowledge of moral theories, but we engage with them on matters concerning ethics, and we make judgments about our collective moral demands without consulting philosophers or moral psychologists. Therefore, Currie's dismissal of the value of fictional portrayals of moral concerns (on the account of fiction makers not being moral experts) is not detrimental to my project.

In a similar way, we can mitigate the charge that our answers to fictional portrayals are emotional and idiosyncratic. The claim here is that, if fiction were in the business of providing true insights and moral lessons, all spectators should react to it in the same way. Notice, however, that this demand is too strong. In fiction and non-fiction, our responses to ethically challenging situations are emotional and idiosyncratic: consider the emotional bent of those defending one's right to die, met with equally passionate arguments of those who oppose euthanasia. To argue that there are no moral lessons in "The Blessing" because some viewers side with Dr. Richards and some with Helen misrepresents the educational value of the episode. It is not in defending one attitude on euthanasia over the other that grounds the cognitive value of the show, but in its showing how both perspectives may be ethically justified, and in extending the contexts in which the ethical problem of euthanasia emerges. The fact that viewers' responses to the episode differ testifies to the fact that people differ with respect to their values, beliefs, and commitments about ethical issues.

Furthermore, I would suggest, that idiosyncratic responses are all the more welcome here. TV series engage us, collectively, to face certain issues and discuss them in our conversations about these series. They, thus, motivate us to participate in public discussions about a presented ethical issue. This is important for understanding moral disagreements. In addition, many of the series I discuss presuppose a moral framework for our community. By presenting ethically challenging stories, these series have a unique power to force us, collectively, to negotiate the capacity of our established moral framework to cope with new problems that we experience.[13] It is in doing so that the cognitive value of TV series is at its strongest.

The final question, however, remains: what evidence do we have to justify the claim that, even if so much cognitive power resides in TV works, the viewers in fact benefit from them? Currie has in particular been concerned with this question, stating that aesthetic cognitivism cannot be defended in the absence of empirical evidence supporting the view that we learn from fiction. As he sees it, there is no such evidence.[14] But not everyone agrees. With reference to literary fiction, James Young is convinced that we learn from fiction and claims that "recent psychological literature provides empirical support for H, the hypothesis that reading literary fiction makes some people more virtuous" (2019, 105). Psychologists Bushamn and Huesmann (2006) explore the negative impact of media violence on children, claiming that children who are exposed to violence on TV are more prone to act violently. They also believe that violence is an acceptable way of solving problems. Such findings suggest that engagement with fiction changes our beliefs and our behavior.

In light of such contradictory findings, some scholars suggest more research is needed to settle the issue, while some raise skeptical concerns over the possibility of conducting research in the first place (see McGregor 2018; Nannicelli 2020; Winner 2019). In light of such an impasse, can we nevertheless defend the cognitive value of TV series? In other words, if we can neither show that *Law and Order* has provided us with a profound understanding of sexual violence nor test its disposition to do so, if we have no way of determining whether *NYPD Blue* enabled spectators to become more sensitive to the widespread racism, what is left of the cognitivists' arguments?

While I agree with Currie that aesthetic cognitivists cannot ignore the empirical challenge,[15] I am not as quick to dismiss the cognitive and ethical benefits of fiction because of the problems involved in solving the empirical challenge. On my suggestion, what might be at stake in this debate is not solely

the ethical or epistemic character of the work, but that of the spectator. We should not be concerned solely with art's (in)capacity to deliver knowledge, including moral knowledge, but should take into consideration the moral and ethical agency of spectators and certain empirical findings regarding the manner in which people reason, behave, and decide how to act.[16] A racist viewer may side with a racist detective and fail to see the ethical and epistemic harm done to a Black person whose testimony is ignored on the account of his skin color, much like someone who subscribes to deontology may remain unmoved by Dr. Richards' explanation of his deeds. But this does not show that *NYPD Blue* or *The Practice* lacks cognitive value, just like a person's decision not to skip chocolate after seeing a documentary about sugar's harm does not render the documentary cognitively impotent.

## VI. CONCLUSION

In this article, I defended the cognitive value of certain generic TV series pertaining to crime fiction and courtroom drama. I offered some examples of the cognitive benefits available in these series and I argued that these benefits depend on their mimetic relations with reality. I also argued that such series present ethically challenging situations related to distinctive social practices that the series depict. I examined whether the fictional dimension of these works presents an obstacle to their informative potential, and I concluded that it does not. A central aspect of my account is the claim that there are clues in any given show, related to narrative strategies and the role of regular characters, which signal the extent to which a series can be taken as reliable. I completed my account by addressing anti-cognitivists' arguments that call to doubt the informative aspect of TV series and their capacity to address ethical concerns.

While my intention was not to develop an account of what makes TV series cognitively valuable *as TV series*, my analysis revealed that some features characteristic of TV works—their episodic nature, prolonged duration, and merging of character's generic function with various social and ethical concerns of the show—contribute significantly to their capacity to provide cognitive benefits. It remains to be seen how other forms of art, high and low, exploit these features for viewers' cognitive gain.

While an anti-cognitivist may still insist that we always run the risk of trusting fictional portrayals that are false, particularly those related to formal and technological details of the relevant social practice, I insist on series' more broadly conceived cognitive achievements. They do not substitute scientific accounts and are not of equal epistemic status as science. But they make us aware of certain aspects of the complexity of our social reality and our shared human predicament that may otherwise go unnoticed, they reveal some factors that contribute to such complexity and they force us, collectively, to reflectively engage with it. As I argue, these are all valuable cognitive achievements.[17]

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## END NOTES

1 Critical discussions of aesthetic cognitivism include Davies (2016), Green (2022), Harold (2016), and Vidmar Jovanović (2019, 2021a).
2 An exception here is Carroll (1998, 2013).
3 Alvarez (2010); Potter and Marshall (2009); Vaage (2017); Twomey (2020).
4 See, in particular, Abell (2020) and Matravers (2014).
5 This distinction is blurry; the pilot of *Boston Legal* (ABC television) entertains us by portraying an array of highly unrealistic lawyers, while also drawing attention to a particular manifestation of racial discrimination we may be unaware of. Crucial for my argument are examples like *Law and Order,* where the characters' story arcs do not impact the series' mimetic capacity.
6 I am thankful to a referee for alerting me to Berger and Alfano (2016). I do not have the space here to engage with the details of their view (and how it differs from more traditional cognitivism), but I trust the gist of interactionism cognitivism is true to the account of the cognitive value of generic TV series I developed in Vidmar Jovanović (2021a).
7 See also Twomey's (2020) analysis of Bubbles and Omar Little for discussion on *The Wire*'s (mis)representing types of people.
8 See Vidmar Jovanović (2021a) for a more detailed account of merging.
9 For fictional persuasion, see Friend (2014), Steglich-Peterson (2017), and Sullivan-Bissett and Bortolotti (2017).
10 See Villez (2009), Vest (2010), and Twomey (2020). For comments on expertise in relation to *The Practice*, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aTK7hXv2fWo&t=1517s.
11 In Vidmar Jovanović (2021a), I refer to such misrepresentations as simplifications, and I argued that they are necessary in order to meet (what Carroll [2013] calls) the accessibility condition. The point is, if these shows were factually true in a way in which scientific works are true, they would become too technical and therefore inaccessible to ordinary viewers.
12 My argument here is circular, but I do not think this circularity is a conclusive reason to reject viewers' capacity to evaluate the reliability of a particular portrayal of an episodic case. For example, even a viewer with limited knowledge about the legal system can recognize that the pilot of *The Practice* misrepresents the charges of drug possession in order to highlight the main theme of the episode (defending the innocent ones) and to bring to focus lawyers' devotion to their clients. I am thankful to my reviewer for pressing me on this.
13 I develop this in Vidmar Jovanović (2021b; 2023).
14 Currie frames the challenge in dispositionalist terms: if a cognitivist claims that fiction has a disposition to instill knowledge and ethical benefits in the audience, we need some evidence showing that this disposition has been actualized and that someone learned something from fiction.
15 For my views on the importance of empirical challenge to aesthetic cognitivism, see Vidmar Jovanović (2021b).
16 I develop this in Vidmar Jovanović (2023).
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