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Glancing, Gazing and Binging: On The Appeal of Contemporary Television Serials

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ABSTRACT

My aim in this paper is to explore the appeal of contemporary television serial drama. I argue that there are four main aspects of serials that inspire viewers' interest and long-term commitment: serials' overall aesthetics, its narrative complexity, strong emotional pull and serious mimetic aspect. I analyse each of these and I show how each stimulates our more general interests and emotional dispositions, primarily those related to aesthetic reward, intellectual challenge, moral clarity and entertainment. My analysis shows how these four elements unite and how their union inspires and maintains viewers' long-term commitment to the show. In the process, I explore viewers' emotional engagement with the characters, suggesting it is of secondary importance for their long-term commitment to the show. This commitment, I argue, is motivated by viewers' sense of care for the work developed in response to its repeated providing of pleasurable stimuli.

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TERMINI DI INDICIZZAZIONE

Keywords:

[tv aesthetics](#), [serial drama](#), [viewers' engagement](#), [aesthetic pleasure](#), [characters](#)

Parole chiave:

[estetica televisiva](#), [serie drammatiche](#), [coinvolgimento dell'osservatore](#), [piacere estetico](#), [personaggi](#)

[Torna su](#)

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TESTO INTEGRALE

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[1. Introduction](#)

1 Noël Carroll 2001.

2 Ellis 1992.

3 Bingeing is more common with platforms such as Netflix, rather than with traditional TV, which stil ([...](#))

4 Mittel 2006.

1 Praise and appreciation that some TV serial dramas are getting nowadays show that Noël Carroll was right when he argued, back in 2001, that TV programs are more valuable and rewarding than recognized by the scholars at the time.¹ Contrasting the metaphors of glancing and gazing, originally developed by John Ellis,² Carroll disputed those who claimed that TV programs inspire only a casual and dispersed glance, while films inspire and sustain gaze, i.e. long and focused attention of the audience. Many of Carroll's claims proved to be true: TV did develop in the direction he predicted, and viewers today not only gaze, but binge.³ My aim here is to analyse some of the reasons as to why that is, with respect to one particular segment of TV programs: TV serials, primarily those created since the early 1990-ties. As Jason Mittell argues, these programs challenged traditional episodic structures by implementing serial narration and extending storylines above the confines of individual episodes.⁴ The result of such merging are works that exhibit some degree of what he calls narrative complexity. Examples are multiple and varied. Random selection includes *Lost* (ABC), *Mad Men* (AMC), *Dexter* (Showtime), *The Sopranos* (HBO), *Breaking Bad* (AMC), *Sons of Anarchy* (FoX 21), and numerous others. The list is extensive and growing daily.

5 See McCabe, Akass 2007.

6 As Bignell argues, these works represent an "aesthetically ambitious program type with the literary (...)

2 Works that interest me are often referred to as quality TV, which signifies their distinction from soap operas and emphasises a high level of artistic excellence. Programs that qualify as quality TV explore serious topics of more general existential significance, they exhibit high level of artistry, significant formal properties, innovative camera movement and editing techniques, and a sense of stylistic integrity. As numerous scholars emphasise, these works invite a high level of audience engagement and reward sustained viewing involvement.⁵ Not surprisingly, some scholars suggest to think of these works as works of art,⁶ and with such artistic achievements as *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*, it is hard not to agree with this suggestion. However, rather than offering further reasons in its favour, here I am interested in exploring the grip these works have on the audience. It is quite likely that at least some of those aspects which make them appealing are also those that ground their artistic value, but I do not want to suggest that we gaze at them because they are works of art. As contemporary aestheticians know all too well, liking (even loving) a work of art often comes asunder from appreciating it for its artistic value. On the other hand, high artistic value may not guarantee a wide-ranging appeal – after all, more people gaze at Hollywood blockbusters than at Bergman's movies.

7 Vaage 2016.

8 In developing his account, Mittell argues that narrative complexity is "unique to the television me (...)

9 As Nannicelli 2017 argues, this is a differentiating aspect of TV works in light of which certain a (...)

3 Even though TV dramas are primarily related to the joys of entertainment,⁷ they are becoming rapidly appreciated, and the sources of that appreciation are not all that different from those we consider artistically relevant in film, literature and theatre. As I will argue, there are at least four loci that attract, maintain and reward viewers' interest in TV serials: narrative complexity, emotional appeal, mimetic aspect and the overall aesthetics. None of these is unique to TV,⁸ which encourages the view that these are works of art. I'll come back to this below; for now, I want to emphasise one aspect of these works that gives additional depth to the question of their appeal: their temporal dimension and extension in time. While some scholars see this as their distinguishing feature,⁹ I am more interested in exploring the impact of their longevity on our aesthetic experience.

4 By their very nature, serials are not available in one viewing experience; they develop episodically, over an extended period, sometimes for years, often with considerable breaks in between. And yet, viewers wait patiently for new seasons, bingeing on the episodes they have already seen. This signals a kind of insatiability on the part of the viewers, either forward looking, when they eagerly expect new episodes, or backward looking, when they engage with reruns, or both. It is my assumption that this kind of insatiability is less frequent with other forms of narrative art, and my analysis here is an attempt to explain why that may be the case.

10 Bandirali, Terrone 2021.

5The forward-looking interest concerns viewers' excitement and curiosity about the progression of the story, even after they have been attending to it for a considerable amount of time. This is interesting, because, although we tend to prefer what we are often exposed to, we also get bored of stimuli that are overly familiar to us, as their power to engage us cognitively and emotionally fades. This is all the more interesting in the context of TV, given that there is a sense in which any given serial represents the same story over and over again: *Lost* is about plane crash survivors trying to return home, and for all that is happening for 120 episodes, this structure does not change. As Bandirali and Terrone argue, the appeal of TV drama is to a great extent the appeal of individual instantiations of such structure.¹⁰ My question is, given its multiple repetitions – either at the level of episodes or at the level of seasons – why is that appeal so powerful as to hold our attention for years, and to inspire us to revisit episodes we have already seen? As the backward-looking interest suggests, series reward repeated engagements and viewers are motivated to return to the series even when they know how the story progresses. This implies that the reward that these series provide surpasses knowledge of what happens in the story, indicating that we should search for the source of viewers' interest beyond it. I start my search in the next part, focusing first on narrative complexity.

2. Narrative complexity

¹¹ Mittel 2006.

¹² Nannicelli 2009: 194.

6Building upon Mittel's work,¹¹ here I will understand narrative complexity as the specific manner in which an individual serial develops its stories, manifested in the way in which details of the fictional world are delivered to the viewers. I refer to it as complex, primarily to underline the fact that storytelling in contemporary TV is dense and convoluted – "It is all connected", as Ted Nannicelli describes it, demonstrating on the example of the *Wire* that contemporary TV serials develop many parallel narrative threads and demand of viewers to make connections of these threads that "reemerge sporadically and circuitously over greater periods of time".¹² Consequently, I argue, narration in TV serials is thick and it generates multiple layers of aesthetic, ethical and mimetic meaning. It is causally dense, in the sense that events from different narrative threads intersect and, given the open-endedness of serials, they can re-emerge at any point in time. Given that most of these series do not focus on one protagonist or a protagonist pair, but present multiple characters, numerous perspectives are developed, contrasted and juxtaposed, resulting in the depth of psychological portrayals: regardless of how marginal a role a recurring character may have, fictional worlds of contemporary serials are not populated with one-dimensional characters. Complexity of narration and serials' temporal extension come hand in hand with psychological depth and moral complexity of characters.

¹³ See Mittel's analysis of what he calls forensic fandom (I take this notion from Vaage 2016: 108).

7There are aesthetic and cognitive rewards to such complexity: viewers take pleasure in narrative strategies through which stories are told, as well as in representational and expressive aspects of the stories themselves. Acknowledging different story-telling techniques and narrative strategies employed by the serials is important for understanding the action, but it is also a powerful source of appreciation for the viewers.¹³ Partly, this appreciation is related to the generic norms: different genres provide different kinds of appreciative rewards, and viewers often engage with series because of their generic preferences – for example, the popularity of crime genre testifies to the joys of interpretive skills associated with identifying the culprit and solving the puzzle. In addition, particular narrative strategies may serve not only as *differentia specifica* for individuation of different shows, but as a source of reward in its own right. Engaging with *Lost* requires one to grasp how the show combines multiple genres (ranging from thriller and mystery to supernatural and romance) and to appreciate its dominant narrative strategy: telling the story about the plane crash survivors by shifting the temporal dimension from past to present and present to future by structuring each episode around the perspective of one survivor.

¹⁴ Relying on the research in psychology, Perez 2022 describes this process as one in which a viewer a (...)

¹⁵ Blanchet, Vaage 2012.

8Particular strategies employed to provide access into the fictional world structure the show by determining how the details of this world are delivered to the viewers. This is cognitively stimulating, as viewers need to be attentive to collect, memorise and integrate all the data that the work provides across the episodes in order to follow numerous interrelated storylines, make sense of them and generate interpretative predictions about future developments.¹⁴ Given the serials' longevity, this can be a demanding task. Memory is in particular important: because different clues are scattered throughout seasons, viewers need to be attentive to them and implement them in their viewing of subsequent episodes. The outcome of such long-term devotion and attention to what is happening is a heightened sense of pleasure and satisfaction for the viewers: as Blanchet and Vaage showed, the emotional intensity of our engagement with the characters is extremely high because of the accumulated knowledge of their actions.¹⁵

9Given that TV serials are by default open-ended and could potentially go on indefinitely, different plot twists are used to keep the action going. A refusal to provide closure, by continual insertion of new challenges for the protagonists, is the main such twist. This is often achieved by bringing in details from the characters' past. *Sons of Anarchy* (*SoA* afterwards) has been leaving bits and pieces regarding the fate of the main protagonist Jax's (Charlie Hunnam) father, J.T. from season 1; throughout seasons 3 viewers get a more inclusive references to his life, but they have to go through subsequent seasons before they learn of his fate (even though other story-lines are closed and new are opened). Such ongoing plotting and gradual dissemination of clues sustain and intensify viewers' interest and cue their interpretative and predictive skills, while also reinforcing, modifying or re-establishing emotional attachments to the characters.

10Series often progress by changing the protagonist's arc story, by having her change her goals, her ethical valence, or both. Jax's journey towards moral redemption of himself and his Club is filled with such changes, as his decision to quit the Club is counterbalanced by his desire to protect it from its external enemies, such as the FBI, and from the corrupted members within it, his stepfather Clay (Ron Perlman) in particular. Repeated clashing of these opposing forces in Jax put into motion various sets of events and give rise to new storylines. As I show below, such storylines not only push the action forward, but serve as an epistemic tool in creating contexts within which the show can explore themes of greater human importance and ground the overall mimetic concerns of the show.

¹⁶ Simplifying Smith's 1995 account, alignment refers to the traces provided by the work, which enable (...)

11Narrative complexity, used as a tool to prolong stories, is manifested also in seasons' ending in (morally) less-favourable way and in leaving some storylines open. A protagonist thus gets new chance to set things right: a repeated postponement of June's (Elisabeth Moss) family reunion at the end of the first three seasons of *The Handmaid's Tale* (Hulu) ensured continuation of a serial for another two seasons. Such postponement of closure raises diverse opportunities for unfolding of characters' personalities, generating further incentives for the viewers to (as Murray Smith puts it) recognize the characters, align with them and form allegiances.¹⁶ Consequently, their understanding of who any particular character is, is considerably more fluid than in films, as is moral assessment of characters.

¹⁷ Carroll 1984.

12One of the central functions of narrative complexity is to maintain viewers' suspense. While the narrative progression follows what Carroll calls erotetic structure, i.e. question/answer dynamics, the storytelling is often multilayered, entwining numerous storylines and generating an extensive network of causal relations among the events.¹⁷ Consequently, narration is extremely dynamic: the protagonist has significantly more challenges to overcome than in film, which is usually structured around one great task. Serials however keep reintroducing new problems, each of which raises new set of questions, and thus fuels viewers' suspense.

¹⁸ In some cases, story-arcs transcend boundaries of different works. Gus Fring's (Giancarlo Esposito) (...)

13One of the defining features of serials with a high level of narrative complexity is their piling up multiple layers of meaning that resonate through and connect numerous narrative plots.¹⁸ Consider the seemingly peripheral scene in the second episode of *SoA*, when Donna (Sprague Grayden) rejects Gemma's (Katey Sagal) financial help, claiming she and Opie (Ryan Hurst) want to distance themselves from the Club. Gemma responds by saying that the Club is a family which takes care of

its own. Not only does the scene reinforce Gemma's status as the motherly figure watching over the Club, it also signals to the viewer essential insights into Gemma's character: she believes in the moral superiority of the Club and does not allow its status to be questioned, or allegiance with it broken. This is crucial for understanding all of Gemma's actions throughout the show, including her role in the events that viewers do not see, like her involvement in the death of J.T. Furthermore, her statement gives meaning to numerous events in other narrative threads (like the Club coming to rescue Tig (Kim Coates) when he is captured by the bounty hunters) and it reinforces the thematic concerns of the show, primarily its probing of a loyalty to a social group.

¹⁹ I rely here on Hogan's (2016) account of cognitive aesthetics.

²⁰ Bandirali, Terrone 2021; Perez 2022.

¹⁴To say that contemporary TV serials are narratively complex and that viewers need concentrated gaze to follow the events in the fictional world still does not explain why doing so (repeatedly) is pleasurable. The answer comes from the research in cognitive sciences: demanding though it may be to keep all the information together, the cognitive satisfaction provided by successfully grasping all storylines and their mutual relation and causal dimensions is proportional to the complexity of the show.¹⁹ Complex though they might be, serials keep viewers committed to the show because they are particularly efficient in striking the balance between familiarity and innovation, and that is the formula that guarantees aesthetic pleasure. As research suggests, familiarity contributes significantly to our aesthetic preferences: we like things that are familiar to us, because we need less cognitive energy to understand what is going on. This is why the familiar setting of a show – what Bandirali and Terrone call the structure and what Perez refers to as a mental model²⁰ – is so important: it provides the cognitive background and focuses our interpretative strategies against which we make sense of subsequent events. For example, we know that each episode of *Lost* will focus on one character, and as we go into the episode we centre our interpretative strategies around that notion. However, we also need new incentives, since too much familiarity can breed boredom, and boredom may be off-putting. Viewers attend to new episodes gathering new details and inserting them into the mental model of the fictional world they designed. The question/answer dynamics contribute to the pleasurable dimension of this experience: new episodes provide answers to questions raised in previous ones, while also posing new questions that will be answered in subsequent episodes. In this way, the show keeps rewarding viewers' curiosity, while simultaneously feeding into it. The cognitive pleasure achieved when questions are answered is soon replaced by a newly formed suspenseful situation. While films are usually organised around a single climatic event which signifies the culmination of the suspense and a closure of the story, serials accumulate such climatic situations, stimulating viewers' desire to see what will happen, but not satisfying it till the very end of the show.

3. Affective engagements

²¹ Carroll 2010, 2013.

¹⁵Explaining the appeal of popular art, Carroll argues that these works develop stories which are purposely and intentionally designed to elicit emotions, primarily moral ones, that have strong biological and evolutionary roots.²¹ Such stories include the moral hero variations, in which a protagonist is fighting the bad guys for the good cause, stories of the underdog struggling to make it against all odds, and stories of social and family ties. In Carroll's view, when stories develop around these scenarios, viewers are immediately drawn to the work, developing pro-attitudes or sympathetic bonds with the protagonist (and by default, antipathy for the foes), as these matters have universal, cross-cultural significance. We root for the moral hero – even if only because he is not as bad as those who surround him – and pursue his story in order to see if justice will be served, and social ties re-established.

²² I develop this argument in Vidmar Jovanović 2023.

¹⁶Carroll's account explains why certain themes prevail in films and on TV, and why they so easily capture our attention. Given, for example, how numerous crime series feed certain (evolutionary implanted) concerns – injustice, harm, social order, punishment etc. – it is easy to understand why they are so popular. However, regardless of the immense explanatory power of Carroll's account, I

don't think sympathy for the character alone suffices to explain serials' appeal. Partly, this is because there are significantly more characters in any given show than in films to allow the sympathies to extend to one character: at one point, a viewer will have to "choose" between *Lost's* two moral heroes, Jack (Matthew Fox) and John (Terry O'Quinn), when they collide, and this is where reactions more complex than pro-attitude come in. More importantly, even if sympathies were channelled towards the main protagonist, I doubt that the emotional ties developed in response to paradigmatic scenarios – sympathy for the protagonist, aversion for his foes – suffice to maintain viewers' commitment *in the long run*. While the time frame in movies is sufficient for development of such emotional reactions – sympathy brought about by the particularities of the protagonist's situation, a desire to see her goals accomplished, fear and disappointment when she fails, excitement when she succeeds, etc. – serials' prolongation can easily frustrate viewers' patience. There is a limit to how long a suspension can inspire excitement and curiosity; at one point, the frustrated desire for the closure can prevail and viewer's interest may diminish.²²

23 Garcia 2016 and Vaage 2016 provide insightful analyses of this strategy, showing how it is employed (...)

17As I argued above, to fight off a decrease of viewers' interest, storylines are often inserted which change protagonist's goals, which is often accompanied by a shift in her moral character,²³ ultimately making protagonists on TV more complex than good vs. evil dichotomy allows for. The prolonged and open-ended nature of serials is hospitable to such shifts, as long as they are sufficiently inviting for the viewers. When they get a hint that J.T.'s death was an act of execution orchestrated by Jax's mother Gemma, their "allegiance" with Jax are strengthened, as they recognize the harm done to him. They remain committed to the show in great part to see what happened with J.T., but also to see how Jax will discover, and cope with, Gemma's role in his death. For viewers who sided with Jax due to his moral aspirations – his desire to continue his father's legacy and bring the Club on a more ethical path – his rejection of J.T.'s legacy in season three may be a cause to break off the allegiance with him, as well as an incentive to stay tuned to season four to see what is next for him. Our ethical assessment can also change in light of subsequent plot development: while we detest chief Unser (Dayton Callie) for his moral trespasses and unethical deals made with Gemma, the way in which the show portrays the consequentialist benefits of such deeds may make us reconsider, perhaps even revoke, our initial judgement, and, with the inclusion of Eli Roosevelt (Rockmond Dunbar), may invite us to contemplate the foundations of consequentialist ethics and compare it to the deontological one.

24 Such ambiguities can also result from the mixture of genres. Much of the sympathy directed at Jay, (...)

18Moral and psychological complexity of characters in TV serials often raises interpretive challenges for the viewer who needs to decipher not only what is happening but whether a particular character deserves her allegiance. This happens because layering has not only a narrative function in uniting seemingly dispersed elements of a story; it is also important for moral characterization. It is not entirely easy for the viewers to dismiss Jax as a villain, but they also struggle to embrace him as a moral hero. Layering of meaning to his actions invites multidimensional and often ambiguous responses from the viewers, both emotional and moral. Part of their interest in the show is motivated by their desire to untangle emotional and moral ambiguities towards certain characters. On my suggestion, such ambiguity stimulates viewers to continue their engagement with the work, particularly (as I show below) when they also result from work's mimetic dimension.²⁴

25 Blanchet, Vaage 2012.

26 I develop this view in Vidmar Jovanović 2023.

19If sympathy cannot maintain viewers' *long-term* emotional engagement with the show, what can? Robert Blanchet and Margrethe Bruun Vaage propose an interesting explanation: as they argue, one of the consequences of frequent exposure and familiarity with a given show is that we start to consider its characters as our friends.²⁵ While I have my reservations about this proposal, one aspect that is relevant for my project here concerns their emphasis on the positive feelings that shows we love inspire in us. What I suggest is that such positive feelings are not only related to viewers' appreciation of the characters, but extend towards the work itself.²⁶ This happens because the show repeatedly provides numerous aesthetic, emotional and cognitive rewards, and does so over an extended period of time. The motivating power of such rewards is a desire they generate in the viewers to experience them anew. Simple as it may seem, what motivates viewers' repeated

return to the show is the fact that they enjoy watching it, and want to re-experience it in new episodes.

27 Garcia, Nannicelli 2021.

20 Consider for example how viewers enjoy certain instances of a serial that gain attractiveness in light of their repetitions. Whether it is a characteristic behaviour of a character or a distinctive aesthetic motif of a show – think how the two come together in Dexter’s voice-overs – there is a particular satisfaction in experiencing them. Scholars often refer to these as “gags”. With repetition and accumulation in time, they become a point of appreciation and pleasure for the viewers (even if, by themselves, they do not add up to the progression of a story). As Garcia and Nannicelli put it, there is a particular cognitive pleasure in perceiving how gags are interwoven, in anticipating how they will be implemented, and, once realised, in reflecting back on the structural choices made to set it up.²⁷ On my suggestion, such gags are but one of the reasons why viewers develop emotional ties not only for the characters, but for the show itself. I say one of the reasons, because there are many others: we love a given show because we like its subject matter, its focus on particular thematic concerns, its mixture of generic norms, its assemblage of characters, the kind of problems it raises, originality of camera movement, the suspense it generates, the particular atmosphere it has, etc. As with other forms of love, we want to attend to the things we love.

4. Mimetic dimension and the overall aesthetics

28 Lamarque, Olsen 1994.

21 Unlike their soap-opera predecessors, contemporary TV serials explore what (in the context of literature) Lamarque and Olsen (1994) call “humanly important themes”.²⁸ On my suggestion, this adds another layer to their appeal: part of the reason why viewers repeatedly engage with these works is the fact that they provide different kinds of cognitive rewards in depicting thematic concerns we generally are curious about, and invite us to reflect on such concerns. These rewards depend as much on the mimetic dimension of the show, as on the viewers’ capacity to entangle its narrative complexity and engage with characters as psychologically and morally complex human beings. Consider some examples.

29 Berger, Alfano 2016: 144.

30 Eberl 2013: 4.

22 *SoA* may be a story about a motorcycle gang, but underneath the black tattoos and leather jackets, the show explores psychological complexities of family relations and friendship, asking us to consider our understanding of loyalty, betrayal, power and sacrifice. Thematic concerns of the show are not exhausted by pointing to the undeniable Shakespearean influence and the multiple ways in which the show engages with Freudian legacy – look no further than to Jax’s repeated attempts to figure out his identity, in trying to revive his father’s moral code, in abandoning it, and in bringing it to life in the show’s finale. As I argued above, such changes in a character’s arc story are important narrative strategies inserted to keep the story going, which function as powerful means of inciting viewers’ moral sensibility. They also serve as stimuli for reflections and provide opportunities for serious cognitive engagement, as viewers recognize how the serial serves as epistemic tools used to explore certain aspects of reality. *SoA* for example offers a powerful lesson in what Berger and Alfano call interactionist cognitivism, namely an exploration of “how context and character interact to produce action”.²⁹ Jax is smart and courageous; in the criminal context in which he is brought up, these virtues are rarely used for good, but are efficient in generating evil, which is why Jax succeeds in organising a porn industry, outsmarting other dealers and evading the authorities. On this basis Jason Eberl emphasises the show’s insight into Aristotle’s claim that “each person’s moral traits are cultivated through a combination of social influence and individual rational choice”.³⁰ *SoA* shows this by inviting viewers’ focus on Jax’s struggles to break free from the social influence and to act in accordance with his own moral judgement. Understanding what happens in the fictional world of *Charming* and why is only possible if viewers engage with such struggles, which demands keeping in mind the relations among different characters and their respective differences: Jax’s repeated clashes with Clay result as much from the impaired family dynamics as from their moral disagreements over the relevant value system. For a viewer to understand their conflict, she

needs to understand how each is guided in his actions by such values. Like many quality TV programs, *SoA* is in particular successful in presenting the incommensurate perspectives of different characters, which is valuable for serials' capacity to make us understand something about the human situation generally.

23Contemporary serials do not shy away from engaging with socially relevant issues. Shows like *24* (Fox), *Homeland* (Showtime) and the *Americans* (FX) probe political themes and engage with moral concerns related to the ethics of torture and war on terrorism. It is not a coincidence that these works appeared at the time when these were pretty much the concerns of the majority of viewers, some of whom most likely binged on these series to put their minds off of the gloomy reality of the post 9/11 world. What now seems like an ironic twist of fate, even shows which were not primarily concerned with reality are primarily understood as engaging with social issues: The *Handmaid's Tale* brought to the small screen Margaret Atwood's dystopian world, but little could its producer, Bruce Miller, predict the social impact the show would have once that legislators pushed USA on the path to Gilead by overturning *Roe vs. Wade*.

24It is not unusual for quality TV to deal with philosophical issues: *Westworld* (HBO) is a philosophical thought experiment inviting viewers to engage with scepticism, challenging them to rethink their capacity to know what the reality is. The overall thematic complexity of the series pushes it away from the "entertaining", onto much more cognitively demanding engagement, since philosophical content is inseparable from the particular narrative strategies employed to present the story. Dolores' (Evan Rachel Wood) turn from the moral hero into a vigilante is not only one of the main storylines for seasons two and three, but it relates to the thematic concerns of the show by probing human vs. nonhuman dichotomy, the ethics of treatment of nonhumans, the nature of cruelty or vengeance, development of consciousness, etc. The closure of season two, which hints that Man in Black (Ed Harris) may be imprisoned in the Park rather than being the mastermind behind it, while a classical sceptical twist, is an incentive to the viewers to stay tuned for season 3. Such a hint suggests that their previous interpretive assumptions and ethical evaluations need to be rectified. Forward looking interest thus aligns with a need to re-watch previous seasons in search for the clues that confirm this new interpretation of the show.

31 Ellis 1992.

32 Carroll 2001.

25Given the narrative complexity and serious mimetic dimension of TV serials, and the multilayered emotional reactions they inspire, it is not surprising that gazing is necessary to fully appreciate them. I will end my analysis of their appeal by suggesting that there is one other reason why gaze is invited, and that is the aesthetic identity of any given show, i.e. its overall aesthetics. Roughly, I use this notion to capture the union of all perceptual stimuli related to, and distinctive of, a given serial. It is important to emphasise this, given that Ellis' initial dismissal of TV as something to gaze upon was greatly motivated by his claim that the image available on TV cannot reward viewers' gaze, primarily because of the technological (in)adequacy of the television of the time.³¹ However, as Carroll emphasised, with technological advancements, the quality of TV significantly improved – just think of the mega sized plasma screens which are big enough to allow for the discrimination of even the slightest detail on Jax's tattoos!³² It is now appropriate to argue that TV works inspire and reward gaze because of the quality and appeal of their imagery. All things considered, I argue that we commit to certain serials because, in addition to providing cognitive satisfaction, they also reward our aesthetic interests and our desire to engage with things which provide pleasurable perceptual stimuli.

26Serials' overall aesthetics is a significant locus of appreciation for the viewers, adding to their forward and backward looking interests. We take pleasure in how a particular show is arranged visually and audibly, in actors and their performances, in scenery, camera movements and editing, etc. Serials develop different means to sustain such rewards by developing their significant aesthetic identity. I already mentioned the impact of narrative strategies in eliciting pleasure by pointing to *Lost*'s switching from present to past and future via the perspective of individual characters. There are other aspects of aesthetic identity that matter for our engagement with serials, as our brief exposition of gags revealed. In some cases, aesthetic motives provide the background of the story or characters' relations: *SoA* episodically romanticises biker's aesthetics, by depicting Harleys gliding over beautiful landscapes. The beauty of the riders coming together and driving as a unified body highlights the sense of togetherness, and serves as a visual confirmation of Gemma's claim about

the club being a family. Different aspects of the serials' aesthetic identity often serve to signal relevant mimetic motives, as when the naked bodies in *Westworld*' reinforce the unhuman status of the "hosts".

27Such coming together of narrative complexity, mimetic dimension and aesthetic aspects triggers a strong sense of appreciation on the part of the viewers and an admiration for the serial as a work (perhaps even a work of art), extending emotional engagement with it beyond the characters and towards the work itself. We watch new episodes to follow the action and to take further pleasure in the show itself. Appreciating the union of serials' aesthetics, narrative threads and mimetic concerns is relevant also for the backward-looking interest. Watching stories we are familiar with enables us to pay more attention to the formal aspects of production, to diverse aesthetic incentives, to the particularities of characters and the actors' performances, and to the subtleties of particular, previously missed, details. Knowing the story enables viewers to take a more interrogative attitude towards "how" the story progresses, rather than an interest into "what" will happen. On my suggestion, these factors, and the unique sense of achievement they generate, explain the appeal of contemporary TV serials.

5. Coda: television serials, aesthetic value and other forms of art

28My aim in this paper was to explore some of the reasons for the immense appeal of contemporary TV serials. I focused on cognitive and emotional aspects of these works and their overall aesthetic design. I argued that these aspects are interconnected and mutually dependent, generating a long-lasting aesthetic, cognitive, moral and emotional impact on the viewers. Each of these is pleasurable, which is why viewers develop positive attachment to the work. What motivates them to return to the serial is the fact that they care for it on the account of the pleasurable experiences the show provides with each new episode.

33 I am grateful to my reviewers for raising these issues.

29While there may be too much diversity among TV serials for my account to be applicable to them all, I hope it brings us closer to understanding the appeal of those we prefer and commit to, often repeatedly, with great enthusiasm and excitement. What remains to be explored is (i) whether my account is unique to TV serials, given that the four loci of interest that I focus on are available in other forms of narrative art (literature may lack the visual aspect but it certainly has its aesthetics), and (ii) whether my account is in fact better suited to explain the artistic value of the shows I am interested in.³³

30I do not have a ready answer to either of these. As I argued in the introduction, the appeal of certain works of art, high or low, is not necessarily related to their artistic value. However, narrative complexity, complexity of characters and serial's mimetic dimension, wrapped in innovative and original formal means of production and narration, surely make many contemporary serials valuable artistic achievements. If my account can help us understand better the nature of such achievement, I'll happily take the credit. But here, my aim was not to explore what makes them valuable but what makes them appealing, particularly given their prolonged duration in time. I find this to be a relevant philosophical concern, even if it falls more on the side of empirical or sociological research than armchair contemplation.

34 See Perez, Reizenzein 2019 for an analysis of the viewers' reaction to it. Their paper is insightful ([...](#))

35 Perez, Reizenzein 2019.

31My interest in the appeal of these works is motivated primarily by the rising philosophical interest in TV aesthetics on the one hand, and by the fact that there are so many engaging TV works that hold viewers' attention as strongly as they do – just recall the world-wide despair over Jon Snow's (Kit Harington) death,³⁴ or disappointment over the ending of *Game of Thrones*. Greatly under the influence of Mittell, Nannicelli, and Vaage, I am inclined to say that there is something distinctive in the appeal of TV, for the reasons they allude to, reasons related to narrative complexity, familiarity, prolonged subjective access to fictional characters, temporal extension and the like. I am also

inclined to say, following Perez and Reizenstein's (2019) account of how these works allow for greater fandom input, that viewers feel more personally related to TV than to other forms of art.³⁵ Much like Blanchet and Vaage argue, there is a sense in which we live with a given show.

³⁶ Kalle Puolakka's forthcoming account of the joys of repeated engagements with literature, centred a (...) [...](#)

³⁷ This work has been supported by the Croatian Science Foundation under the project number UIP-2020-0 ([...](#))

³² However, we also live with literary works and there are novels that are narratively complex, whose characters invite ambiguous moral assessment and complex emotional reactions not unlike those we have in response to Jax.³⁶ Production of serial films makes it harder to defend the distinctiveness of serials (ontological and aesthetic) on the account of their episodic nature (although the relevant difference may boil down to the time duration of individual episodes and the frequency with which viewers are exposed to them). So I am left wondering, is the appeal of TV serials specific, in the sense that other forms of narrative art do not provide it, and are we to explain that appeal by explaining the specificity of TV medium, by pointing to an intensely engaged mode of watching made possible by technological innovations and the exiting social practice of fandom, or by some other facts? Interesting as these questions may be, in this paper, I was focused on exploring the roots of the appeal in quality TV. Understanding how it differs – if it does – from the appeal of other works of narrative art is an interesting project in comparative aesthetics, which promises to deliver important insights into the nature of literature, cinema and television. For reasons of space however, it is a project for another time.³⁷

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NOTE

[1](#) Noël Carroll 2001.

[2](#) Ellis 1992.

[3](#) Bingeing is more common with platforms such as Netflix, rather than with traditional TV, which still organises its program in "a flow", mixing serials with informative program, documentaries, entertainment etc. However, since my intention here is to analyse the appeal of serial drama, rather than the nature of TV program, I will treat bingeing as the most radical form of gaze and assume that a wide-spread mode of binge-watching is at least partly a consequence of serials' capacity to inspire and maintain viewers' gaze.

[4](#) Mittel 2006.

[5](#) See McCabe, Akass 2007.

[6](#) As Bignell argues, these works represent an “aesthetically ambitious program type with the literary values of creative imagination, authenticity and relevance” (2007: 162). For a discussion on their artistic status, see Nannicelli 2017.

[7](#) Vaage 2016.

[8](#) In developing his account, Mittell argues that narrative complexity is “unique to the television medium” (2006: 30), and that it “encourages, and even at times necessitates, a new mode of viewer engagement” (38). I take this to be true in the context of discussing quality TV serials as opposed to soap-operas or pure series. But I leave open the question of whether it is unique to TV serials in comparison to other forms of narrative art. As I claim in the final part, more work is needed to properly delineate the specificity of TV serials from other forms of narrative art.

[9](#) As Nannicelli 2017 argues, this is a differentiating aspect of TV works in light of which certain aesthetic effects occur, primarily a subjective access to multiple characters provided over extended time-frame.

[10](#) Bandirali, Terrone 2021.

[11](#) Mittel 2006.

[12](#) Nannicelli 2009: 194.

[13](#) See Mittell’s analysis of what he calls forensic fandom (I take this notion from Vaage 2016: 108).

[14](#) Relying on the research in psychology, Perez 2022 describes this process as one in which a viewer assembles mental models of the setting, events, characters and their relations. Such models are the basic mechanism of viewer comprehension which enable her to construct meaningful experiences from the audio-visual stimuli.

[15](#) Blanchet, Vaage 2012.

[16](#) Simplifying Smith’s 1995 account, alignment refers to the traces provided by the work, which enable the spectator to follow the character and recognition is a process whereby she comes to understand who the character is. Allegiance is a process of evaluation of a moral judgment of a character.

[17](#) Carroll 1984.

[18](#) In some cases, story-arcs transcend boundaries of different works. Gus Fring’s (Giancarlo Esposito) motivation for destroying Salamanca family is not explicitly explained in *Better Call Saul*, and only viewers who know the background story from *Breaking Bad* can understand his motivation.

[19](#) I rely here on Hogan’s (2016) account of cognitive aesthetics.

[20](#) Bandirali, Terrone 2021; Perez 2022.

[21](#) Carroll 2010, 2013.

[22](#) I develop this argument in Vidmar Jovanović 2023.

[23](#) Garcia 2016 and Vaage 2016 provide insightful analyses of this strategy, showing how it is employed in anti-hero shows, which repeatedly have their protagonists go through various ethically charged situations, forcing them to act immorally, only to seek redemption in subsequent episodes. This manipulates viewers' allegiance but ensures their commitment. For reasons of space, here I cannot engage with antihero shows; but I warmly recommend Vaage's account of it.

[24](#) Such ambiguities can also result from the mixture of genres. Much of the sympathy directed at Jay, in light of which he is evaluated as morally acceptable, is the result of viewers' taking pleasure in his and Tara's (Maggie Siff) love story.

[25](#) Blanchet, Vaage 2012.

[26](#) I develop this view in Vidmar Jovanović 2023.

[27](#) Garcia, Nannicelli 2021.

[28](#) Lamarque, Olsen 1994.

[29](#) Berger, Alfano 2016: 144.

[30](#) Eberl 2013: 4.

[31](#) Ellis 1992.

[32](#) Carroll 2001.

[33](#) I am grateful to my reviewers for raising these issues.

[34](#) See Perez, Reizenzein 2019 for an analysis of the viewers' reaction to it. Their paper is insightful in highlighting another aspect of contemporary TV I could not analyse here: the fact that fans often actively contribute to development of certain plot twists.

[35](#) Perez, Reizenzein 2019.

[36](#) Kalle Puolakka's forthcoming account of the joys of repeated engagements with literature, centred around notions of routine, trust, and intimacy, is in spirit, if not in terminology, very similar to Blanchet and Vaage's account of viewers' engagement with TV.

[37](#) This work has been supported by the Croatian Science Foundation under the project number UIP-2020-02-1309. A previous version was presented at the SPSCVA & Film and Philosophy workshop in July 2020; I am grateful to the audience for their inspiring questions. I am also grateful to two anonymous referees of the *Rivista di Estetica* for their comments on the written draft, and to Enrico Terrone and Mario Slugan for their support in the process of finalising the paper.

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