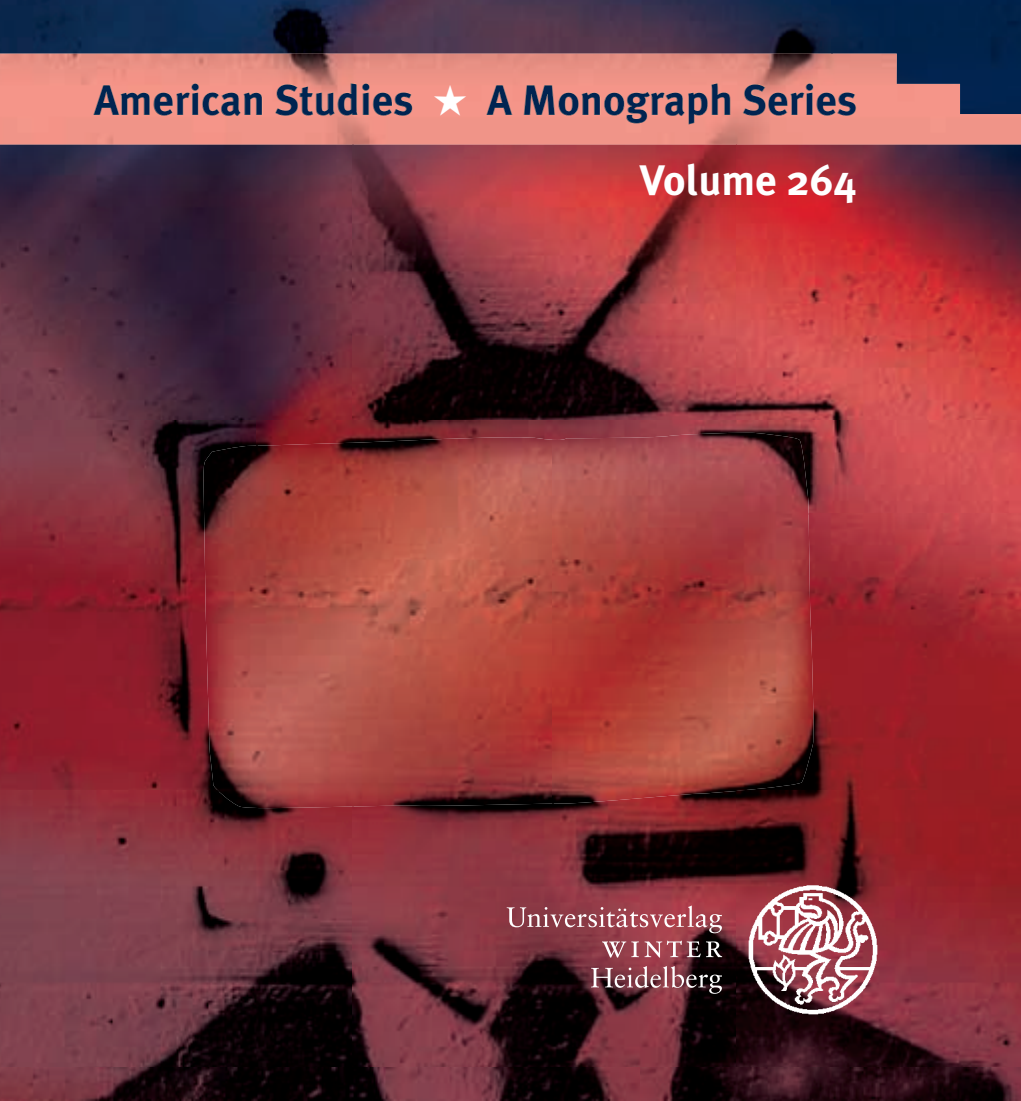
BIRGIT DÄWES
ALEXANDRA GANSER
NICOLE POPPENHAGEN (Eds.)

# Transgressive Television

## Politics and Crime in 21st-Century American TV Series

American Studies ★ A Monograph Series

Volume 264



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# Season Recap: A Preface

This volume began, like any prototypical scene from an American sitcom, with a few people sitting casually around a table over coffee and sodas, vividly discussing recent developments in political U.S.-American TV series. The setting was the U.S. Embassy in Vienna, and if this text were an episode of one such series, the scene would now flash forward to show the results of that conversation: in October 2014, the American Studies team of the University of Vienna (the focalizing instance of this visual prolepsis) co-organized, in cooperation with the U.S. Embassy's Cultural Affairs Division, an international academic conference on what we perceived to be a dominant topic in discussions regarding the development of television at the time: the transformation of the production and viewing conditions of American TV series. In between seasons two and three of its most successful original series, *House of Cards*, Netflix launched its on-demand streaming services in France, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Belgium, and Luxembourg in September 2014, and as this volume is going into print, Italy, Portugal, Spain and Iceland are joining the list of countries served by its programs. In conjunction with such technological and economic developments, U.S.-American TV series have become increasingly transgressive in form and content in the twenty-first century. For this reason, the conference in Vienna brought together television experts, journalists, and scholars from Austria, Germany, France, and the United States under the heading "Transgressive Television: Politics, Crime, and Citizenship in Twenty-First-Century American TV Series" in order to discuss new formats of programming, and to focus on their consequences for the serial representation of politics, crime, and citizenship on both levels of production and reception.

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With a focus on what we term "transgressive television," the present volume contributes sixteen essays to the fledgling field of research on recent American TV serials. Contesting and unmasking the ideological foundations of the term "quality TV," the articles collected here—by authors from different disciplinary backgrounds in the United States, Australia, and Europe—provide a critical analysis of an increasingly popular genre by methodically investigating its production-related, thematic, structural, and formal constellations. The volume is subdivided into four sections: in a first part, entitled "Paving Pathways," articles by Birgit Däwes, Gary Edgerton, and Alexandra Ganser set the theoretical and historical ground for the case studies. Opening this section, "Transgressive Television: Preliminary Thoughts" traces some of the origins, recent transformations, and scholarly reception of twenty-first-century American serials. While challenging the widespread concept of "quality TV," Däwes argues that the criteria commonly applied provide meaningful points of orientation in a newly politicized landscape of TV seriality. The keynote contribution to both our conference and this volume, "The Countdown to Y2KTV and the Arrival of the New Serialists" by Gary Edgerton, recounts the development of the contemporary serial in the context of American television history, emphasizing the role of *The Sopranos* as breaking new ground in serial formatting and the evolution of the crime genre. Looking in more detail at one of the historical origins of those new serials, Alexandra Ganser's article examines how transgressive serializations and a serialization of transgressions make the drama series *Twin Peaks*, first broadcast in 1990 and 1991, a precursor of contemporary American shows, introducing a play with seriality that have since become a staple of "quality TV."

The second section, "Representing Power: Formats of Political TV Series" pays tribute to the insight that transgressive television is intricately intertwined with politics, not only but quite prominently on its subject level. Marjolaine Boutet's contribution on "The Politics of Time in *House of Cards*" demonstrates how journalism and politics are altered in a world defined by social media, connectivity, and immediate access to news. Focusing on the role of time in *House of Cards*, Boutet examines how the viewing experience is changed by Netflix's policy of making the series available in its entirety all at once. Like Beau Willimon's *House of Cards*, Shonda Rhimes's *Scandal* presents audiences with an image of politics that spin doctors and glossy media usually

overwrite: morally ambivalent politicians bending actual events into presentable narratives. In "Another *Scandal* in Washington: How a Transgressive, Black Anti-Heroine Makes for New 'Quality TV,'" Simone Puff not only examines how this serial's stylistic and narrative features establish its status as a "quality" show, but also analyzes how the representation of the Black female protagonist transgresses racial and gender stereotypes that often still dominate today's television landscape. Finally, in "The Humane Face of Politics? Political Representations, Power Structures, and Gender Limitations in HBO's Political Comedy *Veep*," Dorothea Will focuses on linguistic and generic boundary transgressions in the show *Veep* and argues that the criticism and commentary offered by political comedy on TV are crucial for democracy at large.

While many contemporary serials—from *The West Wing* to *The Good Wife*—address politics directly, the next section is particularly interested in the implicit political dimensions of transgressive television. "Normative Crossings: Institutions, Gender, and Ethnicity" testifies to the fact that questions of identity, ideology, and social control still take center stage in current cultural production, not only in the United States. Fabius Mayland's "Institutions and Personal Conceptions of Reality in HBO's *The Wire*: Spatial Transgressions and their Consequences" examines *The Wire*'s institutional critique by focusing on its spatial politics with particular reference to the outdoor couch in the housing projects' court and its role in the serial's development. Kimberly Moffitt also addresses *The Wire*, discussing the portrayal of Black motherhood in the context of drug crime and violence. She convincingly demonstrates that even in this much-acclaimed series, the range of images of motherhood existing for White women remains unavailable to their Black counterparts, who are reduced to being either flawed and neglectful or entirely invisible. In spite of many critics' claim that contemporary television serials are largely liberal in their political agendas, this look at race and gender in one of the most highly praised television serials shows surprisingly conservative subtexts. A similar claim is made by Cornelia Klecker, whose chapter "Symbolic Annihilation and Drive-By Misogyny: Women in Contemporary U.S.-American Television Series" proves false the assumption that women's representations in contemporary formats are progressive. In exemplary analyses of *Grey's Anatomy*, *The Big Bang Theory*, *Modern Family*, and *Sons of Anarchy*,

Klecker unmasks various instances of what she terms "drive-by misogyny" and makes a strong case for the continued relevance of feminist analysis and awareness. René Dietrich then shifts the perspective to masculinity, examining, in "Secret Spheres from *Breaking Bad* to *The Americans*: The Politics of Secrecy, Masculinity, and Transgression in Twenty-First-Century U.S. Television Drama," the narrative logics and politics of gendered secrecy underlying such shows as *Breaking Bad*, *Homeland*, and *The Americans*. Rounding off this section, Stephanie Scholz approaches the question of ethnicity through the lens of Native American studies. Her contribution examines the perpetual stereotype of the "Casino Indian," which is critically engaged—although not completely undermined—by the Native-produced serial *Cashing In*.

The volume's final section honors the fact that more often than not, transgressive television redraws the boundaries of social normativity through the genre of crime and its thematic disruption of law, order, and justice. With an overview of recent tendencies, Karin Hoepker's "No Longer Your Friendly Neighborhood Killer: Crime Shows and Seriality after Dexter" opens this section, analyzing the aesthetic and generic diversification of crime series such as *Hannibal*, *The Following*, *True Detective*, and *Bates Motel*. The inherent instability of legal and social boundaries is often translated into narratives of marital, professional, or medical crisis in contemporary television, as Janina Rojek shows with reference to the illness narratives of *Breaking Bad*, *The Sopranos*, and *Boss*. In her "Crime, Control, and (Medical) Condition: The Illness Narratives of *The Sopranos*, *Boss*, and *Breaking Bad* as Boundary Transgression," she shows how the discourse of health often functions as a trigger for and expression of a wide variety of other transgressions central to these shows. Both Matthew Leroy and Felix Brinker then focus on NBC's *Hannibal*, a spin-off of Thomas Harris's novels with Hannibal "the Cannibal" Lecter as a central character. In "Death Art: Representations of Violence in NBC's *Hannibal*," Leroy uses the show to argue that the notion of violence as both an artistic product and an artistic performance is central to contemporary television. Brinker's essay shifts the attention to viewers' reactions: focusing on what he calls the "politics of audience engagement," he argues that *Hannibal* not only relies on complex serial narration and intertextual references, which demand constant viewer attention, but also profits from fans' online engagement with the serial. Rounding off the volume from a linguistic

perspective, Christoph Schubert analyzes the serial killer narrative of *Dexter*. In "*Dexter* in Disguise: A Stylistic Approach to Verbal Camouflage in a Serial Killer Series," he investigates the discursive strategies the protagonist uses in order to conceal his crimes and the ironies and ambiguities they create.

This volume's focus on a selection of U.S.-American (and one Canadian) productions is owed to necessities of scope and does not carry any implications toward other television programs equally classifying as "transgressive TV." European shows such as the British *House of Cards* (1990), *Sherlock* (2010-present), or *Downton Abbey* (2010-2016), the Danish *Forbrydelsen* (2007-2012, adapted as *The Killing* in the U.S.) or *Borgen* (2010-2013), the Danish/Swedish *Broen* (2011-present, adapted as *The Bridge*), the Swedish *Äkta människor* (2012-2014, adapted as *Humans* in the U.S. and the U.K.), and the German *KDD—Kriminaldauerdienst* (2007-2010) or *Deutschland 83* (2015-present) doubtlessly deserve equal critical attention and promise to redirect the discussion of American "transgressive television" into more transnational contexts in the future.

***

In *Hannibal*'s second season, Will Graham once says to Hannibal Lecter that "[g]ratitude has a short half-life." We are firmly convinced otherwise when we express our thanks to everyone who has helped us to see this project come to life. The conference at which this volume originated would not have taken place without the generous support of the Embassy of the United States of America to Austria, and the editors wish to express their profound gratitude to H.E., Ambassador Alexa Wesner, Counselors for Public Affairs Jan Krč, Robert Greenan, and Kellee Farmer, as well as Harald Lembacher for their continuing kindness and cooperation. A particular debt of gratitude is owed to Karin Schmid-Gerlich at the U.S. Embassy, who has accompanied this project all the way, from its earliest ideas to its publication and beyond, with much appreciated and highly fruitful conversations and with an outstanding talent for efficient organization and networking. We also thank Michael Draxlbauer, Alexandra Hauke, Yvonne Thumpser, Petra Ladinigg, Stephanie Adam and Johanna France for their dedication and assistance; all contributors to the conference, most prominently Gary R. Edgerton

(Butler University) and the Head of Films and Series at ORF 1 and 2, Irene Heschl, for their key contributions; as well as Anna-Maria Wallner and Katrin Hammerschmidt (*Die Presse*) and Johannes Lau (*Der Standard*) for accompanying and adding to our discussions. Finally, the pathway of turning the conference into a publication would have been a much rockier road had it not been for the kind support of the series editors, Alfred Hornung, Anke Ortlepp, and Heike Paul, for the unfailing expertise of Monika Fahrnberger in all format-related matters, and for the kind assistance of Eléonore Tarla and Ronja Ketterer. Not least, a major debt of gratitude is owed to Andreas Barth and his team at Universitätsverlag Winter in Heidelberg for their ceaselessly reliable, efficient, and friendly publishing services.

Birgit Däwes, Alexandra Ganser, and Nicole Poppenhagen
(Flensburg and Vienna, October 2015)

*Paving Pathways*

BIRGIT DÄWES

# Transgressive Television: Preliminary Thoughts

The war was lost
The treaty signed
I was not caught
I crossed the line.
[…]
The story's told
With facts and lies
I had a name
But never mind.
—Leonard Cohen,
"Nevermind"

In the opening credits to the second season of Nic Pizzolatto's *True Detective,* viewers encounter a style of presentation already familiar from the highly acclaimed first season.[1] Accompanied by the words of Leonard Cohen's "Nevermind," desolate industrial landscapes are blended into the body contours of people. These double-exposure shots symbolize the overlay of interior and exterior landscapes, visualizing the conflicts of the show's characters, the "neo-noir" atmosphere (Weinreb), and the various crossings of spatial, social, and moral borders. The partial views of Californian freeway interchanges[2] or of the sepia-tinted

[1] I would like to thank Christoph Schubert as well as my co-editors, Alexandra Ganser and Nicole Poppenhagen, for their thoughtful feedback and critical comments that have immensely helped to develop this chapter.

[2] German critic Lars Weisbrod generally diagnoses a shift in *True Detective*'s season two from a focus on characters to a focus on space: "hier geht es überhaupt nicht mehr um die Figuren. Die dienen nur dazu, mit ihnen wie auf einem Spielbrett die Gegend erkunden zu können. Wofür sich *True Detective*

production sites of Louisiana's petrochemicals, together with the fragmented, darkened portraiture, signal a mode of detachment, ambivalence, and multidirectionality that seems to have become typical of many recent U.S.-American TV serials. These opening credits—and many transitional scenes in the show proper—focus on road networks, concurrencies, crossings, and overlaps that may be read as structurally emblematic of what this volume calls "transgressive television": a remarkable blurring of conventional boundaries of genre, of fictional time and space, of plot patterns and character types, of social and ethical norms, of language, and of visual representation.

Since the 1990s, television series and serials have become increasingly complex in their narrative patterns and time structures. From the proliferation of characters and symbols in *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991) to the real-time narrative structure of *24* (2001-2010), the techniques of what Jason Mittell terms "complex TV" have contributed to "a new paradigm of television storytelling […], redefining the boundary between episodic and serial forms, with a heightened degree of self-consciousness in storytelling mechanics, and demanding intensified viewer engagement focused on both diegetic pleasures and formal awareness" (*TV* 53). Shows such as *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Breaking Bad*, *House of Cards*, *Homeland, Scandal*, *Dexter*, *True Detective*, or *Hannibal* all feature morally ambivalent protagonists, non-conventional narrative patterns, and a strong emphasis on visual aesthetics. Furthermore, and this is the driving hypothesis of the current volume, the most successful serial formats of the recent decade are characterized by their multiple transgressions of political, social, ethical, generic, structural, and representational boundaries.

It has been a long time since Frank Lloyd Wright defined television in the 1950s derogatorily as "chewing gum for the eyes" (qtd. in Wasko 11). By contrast, it has become almost a commonplace today to emphasize the artful character of recent television serials. In 1995, *New York*

diesmal wirklich interessiert, ist das Spielbrett selbst: die Orte und Wege, die Räume und das, was dazwischen lauert" (50). ("This show is no longer about the characters, who only serve as a device for navigation, as on a game board. What *True Detective* is really interested in this time is the game board itself: the locations and pathways, the spaces and that which lurks between them" [translation mine]).

*Times* critic Charles McGrath praised the "considerable degree of originality" and the "truthfulness, or social seriousness" of shows such as *Chicago Hope*, *Homicide: Life in the Streets*, *N.Y.P.D. Blue*, *Picket Fences*, or *My So-Called Life*, arguing that they "have grown in depth and sophistication into what might be thought of as a brand-new genre: call it the prime-time novel." In 2013, Christopher Bigsby similarly argued that TV series had taken on the role previously performed by political plays on the stages of Broadway, "targeting the kind of audience that might equally have responded to theatre" (12). Even if Jason Mittell warns that these descriptions of television as "literary" or "cinematic" open distorting analogies, "drawing both prestige and formal vocabulary from these older, more culturally distinguished media" when "we can better understand this shift through careful analysis of television itself rather than holding onto cross-media metaphors of aspiration and legitimation" (*TV* 2), the analogies testify to a rising need for new terminology. Even if one remains skeptical about Alan Sepinwall's thesis of a "revolution" or a "big bang" (3) in recent developments, something about television seems to have decisively changed.

Whereas seriality has been part and parcel of television entertainment since the 1940s—from *The Lone Ranger* and *I Love Lucy* via *Days of Our Lives*, *Peyton Place*, *Bonanza*, and *Dallas* to *Star Trek: Enterprise* and *Desperate Housewives*, and even though many an era—first from 1947 to 1960, then again in the 1980s (Thompson, *Television* 11-12), and yet again from the mid-1990s to the present (Bigsby, n. pag.)—was adorned (in hindsight, of course) with the label of a "golden age" of television, the more recent landscape of American television has been transformed in terms of formats and generic conventions. The series as a concept is, of course, closely linked to industrial production, as Umberto Eco reminds us: it means "the correct application of an already known law to a new case" (83). In the U.S. and Europe, at the same time as television became a national mass medium ( Edgerton, *History* 129-37 and Spigel 103), art movements such as Minimalism and Pop Art put this principle into practice, famously iconized in serial prints, such as Andy Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Cans* (1962) or *Marilyn Diptych* (1962). Based on repetition, efficiency, and normative order, seriality clearly dovetails with modernity at large. In the wider sense of the concept, it is thus no coincidence that serial narration becomes particularly popular in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, from Friedrich

Schiller's *Der Geisterseher* ([*The Ghost-Seer*], 1787/89) to Charles Dickens's *The Pickwick Papers* (1836).[3] While these early forms set a number of lasting standards, including the cliffhanger, the use of a frame tale, and the proliferation of temporal markers, the format of serial storytelling was long neglected or even frowned upon by literary and cultural criticism. Horkheimer and Adorno's influential critique of the "culture industry," in which "all mass culture under monopoly is identical," amounting to "nothing but business" (95), continued to resound in European culture studies for decades, and since television was considered an inferior medium from its beginning, the television series was met with particular disdain. More recently, however, in addition to having overcome those hierarchical reservations, analyses of seriality have largely shifted their emphasis in various ways.

For one, the generic distinction between series (a form of episodic narration that provides closure within each episode, with a limited cast of characters being confronted with changing antagonists) and serial (in which larger, continuing storylines are developed, and a larger number of characters drive the plot, often with alternating roles of protagonists and antagonists; Williams 56-57; Oltean 13-18) has become increasingly blurred, or "hybridized" (Creeber 11). The diversity of the global market, the development of DVD and Blu-ray technologies for home viewing, and the synergies of television and the Internet through online streaming services have brought forth new conditions of production and new patterns of viewing, which transcend the limitations of viewers' attention spans and render the need for intermediate closure obsolete. For another, the targets of critical attention have shifted, as well. As Dominik Maeder suggests, seriality can been seen as a poetic mode rather than as a mere narrative form (95),[4] and Mittell calls for criticism

[3] Vincent Fröhlich notes that serial narration begins with the *Arabian Nights* collection in the Middle Ages, or even earlier with Homer's *Odyssey* (130); see also Wiles's classic *Serial Narration in England before 1750*. For interdisciplinary engagements with seriality as a concept, see the volumes edited by Kelleter and Blättler.

[4] "Das Serielle ist damit zu bestimmen als eine epistemologische Form, die allererst eine spezifische, prozesshafte Ordnung der (Selbst-)Erkenntnis stiftet, der einerseits qua Wiederholung ein hoher Grad an Technizität zukommt, andererseits jedoch gerade mit dem Fokus auf die Möglichkeit der Differenz in der Repetition eine Kontinuität in der Verkettung, d.h. die Narrativierung

that takes into account the poetics of series, i.e., "the specific ways that texts make meaning, concerned with formal aspects of media more than issues of content or broader cultural forces" (*TV* 5). Understanding seriality as a structural concept, Sabine Sielke further reminds us of its potential to understand processes of thinking and remembering, and of biological and cultural evolution at large.[5]

For lack of appropriate terms, many of the television series that "greatly expand the boundaries of this universe, and the way we viewed it" (Sepinwall 3) have been categorized as "quality TV," an uneasy description in evaluative terms that attests to critics' struggles with these recent changes. This highly controversial moniker, first used by Jane Feuer in 1984 with reference to the economic targeting of young, urban, affluent viewers (145; Klein and Hißnauer 17), has become highly popular for the description of those "literary and cinematic ambitions beyond what we had seen before" (Thompson, "Preface" xix). Often closely associated with companies such as HBO and Netflix, the term is used for a variety of different serials from *Oz* and *The Sopranos* to *Mad Men* and *Game of Thrones*, with a large number of overlaps but also with many disputes over its applicability to individual shows. While the

dieser Wiederholungen erlaubt. Serialität wäre daher primär keine Erzählform, sondern ein poetischer Modus, der vor allem durch seine ordnende Kraft prozesslogische Erkenntnisse darstellbar werden lässt […]" (Maeder 95). ("The serial is to be defined as an epistemological form, which first provides a specific, processual order of (self-) recognition. On the one hand, by its repetition, this order is characterized by a high degree of technicality; on the other hand, through its focus on the possibilities of difference within this recurrence, it allows for continuity and chain-linking, i.e., for the narrativization of these repetitions. Seriality is thus not a narrative form but a poetic mode, which, by its ordering power, renders processual insights representable" [translation mine]).

5 Her declared aim is to use seriality as a productive trope for the conceptualization of fundamentally divergent phenomena of memory. Seriality, she writes, can operate as a principle of understanding both the ways in which our brains work and the processes of biological and cultural evolution: "[...] Serialität für die *Konzeptualisierung* dieser grundsätzlich divergenten Phänomene von Erinnerung produktiv zu machen. Serialität […] kann als ein Prinzip operabel werden, mit dem sowohl die Art und Weise, in der unser Gehirn [...] funktioniert, als auch biologische und kulturelle Evolution erfasst wird" (384).

term itself suggests highly subjective judgments of taste and sociocultural hierarchy, the criteria associated with it are still useful, if only as make-shift descriptors of changes and developments that are only beginning to be academically explored. In his seminal *Television's Second Golden Age: From* Hill Street Blues *to* ER (1996), Robert J. Thompson outlines twelve criteria for "quality TV," including (1) its distinction from conventional formats and habitual patterns; (2) its "quality pedigree" through artists' reputations in film; (3) its "blue chip demographics," i.e., "the upscale, well-educated, urban-dwelling, young viewers advertisers so desire to reach"; (4) its "struggle against profit-mongering networks and non-appreciative audiences"; (5) its "large ensemble cast[s]"; (6) its "memory" through cross-references and character developments; (7) its creation of "a new genre by mixing old ones"; (8) its "literary and writer-based" programs; (9) its self-conscious allusions and self-reflexivity; (10) its liberal political tendencies; (11) its realism; and (12) its notable critical acclaim (*Television* 14-15). From shows such as *Hill Street Blues* (1981-1987) and *Homicide: Life on the Street* (1993-1999) onward, these characteristics become increasingly associated with the unique legacy of HBO, a "change agent" (Edgerton, "History" 17) whose original series (including *Oz*, *The Sopranos*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *Six Feet Under*, *The Wire*, *Game of Thrones*, and *True Detective*) have helped secure the company's reputation as "the prototypical entertainment corporation of the twenty-first century" (Edgerton, "History" 18) or even within "an aristocracy of culture" (Anderson 29).[6]

Obviously, not all criteria apply to all "quality" shows equally; and while Thompson finds it "hard to imagine a right-wing 'quality TV' series" (15), serials such as *24* or *The Walking Dead* are usually listed among critics' favorites—regardless of their conservative celebrations of masculinity, xenophobia, patriotic heroism, and their Social Darwinist

[6] In their summary of "HBO's Ongoing Legacy," Edgerton and Jones identify seven features that characterize HBO's success: (1) its breaking of new ground in four different programming groups—comedy, documentary, sports, and drama, (2) its impact of "raising the bar" for others (319), (3) the fruitful cooperation between its producers and artists, (4) its "strongly masculine" programming appeals (322), (6) its excessive use of "profanity, nudity, violence" as part of "an ongoing reformulation of standardized television genres" (325), and (7) its fundamental impact on "changing the viewing expectations of contemporary television audiences" (326).

implications. Similarly, *Homeland,* another example of those serials widely showered in awards, will not be praised unanimously for its cultural work when considered from feminist or post-colonial perspectives. As this volume as a whole suggests, "quality TV" is too vague, too hierarchical, and too ideologically burdened a term to aptly describe the recent developments of contemporary American television serials. Considering their forms, structures, characters, and themes, the TV series addressed in this book—*Twin Peaks*, *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *House of Cards*, *Veep*, *Scandal*, *Breaking Bad*, *Boss*, *Homeland*, *The Americans*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *The Big Bang Theory*, *Modern Family*, *Sons of Anarchy*, *Dexter*, *The Following*, *Bates Motel*, *Hannibal*, and *True Detective*—as well as many others are probably better understood in terms of their transgressive poetics than by their popularity or by the supposed sophistication of their subjects. My suggestion here is that "transgressive television" might liberate the debate from its elitist and exceptionalist implications by effectively replacing the term of "quality TV" as such. This is not limited to American television, of course, but also involves European and Asian projects featuring what Mittell calls "storytelling pyrotechnics" (*TV* 47), including, for instance, the German *KDD: Kriminaldauerdienst* (created by Orkun Ertener, 2007-2009) or *Im Angesicht des Verbrechens* (created by Dominik Graf, 2010), next to many others (see Däwes, Ganser, and Poppenhagen in this volume). Contemporary television series like these are predominantly characterized, as this volume argues, by transgressions of political and moral codes, of identity and social limitations, and of conventional demarcations of form.

While many critics understand "transgression" in new American TV series mostly as the violation of visual or linguistic taboos in depictions of sexuality, violence, death, and blasphemy (Ritzer 31; Jahn-Sudmann and Starre 104-105), this volume explores the concept's intersections with politics, power, and representation as well as its wider theoretical implications—building on Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's acknowledgement that the boundaries between commonly held cultural codes are fluid, and that "cultural categories of high and low, social and aesthetic, [... and] also those of the physical body and geographical space, are never entirely separable" (2). Obviously, graphic depictions of violence, sex, and death have become key elements of these series. Death had already been the defining core of Alan Ball's *Six Feet Under*

(2001-2005), and more recently, all kinds of taboos about visually representing sex and crime (or even cannibalism) have been violated: in the first four seasons of *Game of Thrones* alone, critics have counted 133 violent on-screen deaths (McGeorge), not to mention the show's candid sexual and incestual scenes; the bloody stabbing of people's or zombies' faces is one of the most habitual sights in *The Walking Dead*, which also presents the execution of a child in a favorable light in season four; *Breaking Bad*'s antagonist Gustavo Fring walks out of an explosion with half his face blown off in the fourth season's finale; in *Sons of Anarchy*, Gemma kills Tara with a carving fork (S06E13) and Jax in turn shoots his mother (S07E12); *Hannibal* features scenes equally hard to stomach, not to mention the bloodbaths of *Dexter* or *Fargo*. While "body horror" has been a defining feature of horror fiction and film for the longest time, as in Kurt Neumann's (and later David Cronenberg's) *The Fly* (1958; 1986), Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), or Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979), for example, critics agree that its dominance in mainstream television is a recent phenomenon. However, these effects are not the defining feature of transgressive television, nor are they an end in themselves. Much rather than mere sensationalism, the genre displays a new politics of the body, which strongly relies on what Julia Kristeva calls the abject: a casting off of the other by "loathing" (230), "repugnance," or "disgust" (238). Abjection is an experience in the face of "an intrinsically corporeal and already signifying brand, symptom and sign" in which the boundary between Self and Other is erased:

> In a world in which the Other has collapsed, the aesthetic task—a descent into the foundations of the symbolic construct—amounts to retracing the fragile limits of the speaking being, closest to its dawn, to the bottomless 'primacy' constituted by primal repression. Through that experience, which is nevertheless managed by the Other, 'subject' and 'object' push each other away, confront each other, collapse, and start again—inseparable, contaminated, condemned, at the boundary of what is assimilable, thinkable: abject. […] Great modern literature unfolds over that terrain. (243)

It is obvious that crime and horror shows have a particular affinity for such effects of abjection, but similar displays of the fragmented, torn, or bleeding body are also seen in series belonging to the genres of science fiction (e.g. Cameron Porsandeh's *Helix* [Syfy, 2014-2015]), western

(e.g. David Milch's *Deadwood* [HBO, 2004-2006]), or historical drama (e.g. Bruno Heller et al., *Rome* [HBO, 2005-2007]) and/or hospital narratives (e.g. Ryan Murphy's *Nip/Tuck* [FX, 2003-2010], or Steven Soderbergh's *The Knick* [HBO, 2014- ]).[7] Furthermore, transgressions of the boundary between Self and Other are not limited to corporeality: if, as Kristeva notes, transgression is one of the modalities of negation, which—in contrast to desire—"challenges the theory of the unconscious" (234), it is no coincidence that so many transgressive television serials conflate the roles of protagonist and antagonist. The main characters we find ourselves rooting for are highly ambivalent in their moral and ethical points of view, from Tony Soprano (*The Sopranos*) and Walter White (*Breaking Bad*) to Lester Nygard (*Fargo*) and Rustin Cohle (*True Detective*).

Any attempt at defining transgressive television will have to take into account the remarkable position of politics in the genre. Francis J. Underwood, the Macbethian-Machiavellian hero of Netflix's *House of Cards* (2013-present) literally walks over dead bodies on his way to the presidency, and in Armando Iannucci's comedy *Veep* (2012-present), viewers accompany vain, ruthless, and helpless Vice President Selina Meyer through an endless number of embarrassing or awkward situations—not quite along the lines of the public image commonly associated with the nation's leading politicians. As the title to this volume acknowledges, politics is a central anchor of contemporary transgressive television—in terms of themes, figurative meanings, cultural codes and norms, as well as reception. On August 3, 2015, the cover of *Time* magazine showed George W. Bush and Bill Clinton to advertise a feature on the presidential nomination campaign for 2016: the headline underneath the two former Presidents reads, in bold white letters, "Game of Thrones" to allude to the power struggle between Bush's brother Jeb and Clinton's wife Hillary. Transgressive television has doubtlessly reached the mainstream, and the junctures between contemporary TV series and politics are manifest not only in the former's increasing representations of Capitol Hill or The White House (in *The West Wing*, *The Good Wife*, *House of Cards*, *Veep*, or *Scandal*), or in their widespread

[7] As Janina Rojek argues in this volume, the diseased body in general is a prominent feature in contemporary television serials.

function as a "vehicle for social commentary" (Bigsby 19), but also more generally in these shows' politics of representation.

In this regard, transgressive television frequently crosses boundaries between reality and fiction, resulting in highly self-reflexive formats. The concept of "transgressive television" thus not only incorporates "the 'modern' dialectic between order and innovation" (Eco 96) that is at the heart of all television serials, but it acknowledges, names, and describes the various acts of border-crossing that keep this dialectic stable in the first place. To give just one well-known example, references to *The Godfather* and *Goodfellas* are densely scattered across *The Sopranos*. In the pilot, inaugurating this central theme, Carmela says to Father Phil that "Tony watches *Godfather II* all the time. He says the camerawork looks just as good as in the movie theater" (S01E01). As much as it provides comments on the viewing of television and thus on itself, transgressive television also frequently refuses to stay within the limits of genre: in addition to the hybridization of series and serials (Creeber 11), many contemporary shows are difficult to place in the subcategories of either "crime show" (*Better Call Saul*?), "historical series" (*Downton Abbey*?) "fantasy" (*Game of Thrones*?) or "comedy" (*Fargo*?). One criterion they all seem to meet is that of the "family show," in one way or another—but those families (whether in ABC's *Modern Family* or in HBO's *Togetherness*) are a far cry from those of *Little House on the Prairie* or *The Cosby Show.* And given that many shows expand their scope across different media and platforms, including video games, websites, and collages or parodies on Youtube and other platforms, this elusiveness and the accommodation of "transmedia storytelling" (Mittell, *TV* 292) have evidently become part of the agenda of contemporary television shows (see also Edgerton's and Brinker's contributions to this volume).

Boundary transgressions in terms of genre and form are also closely tied to an increasing tendency of multiplying spaces and time levels. Narrative complexity is driven by the proliferation of plotlines and characters, but as Mittell emphasizes, "seriality itself is defined by its use of time" (*TV* 27) across episodes and seasons. This use of time is often experimental, featuring flashbacks, foreshadowings, and parallel perspectives on a singular event. FOX's *24,* for instance, hides its conservative ideological agenda behind a clever structure suggesting real time, with clocks ticking through entire seasons; and in both *Breaking Bad*'s

"Seven Thirty Seven" (S02E01) and *The Walking Dead*'s "What Happened and What's Going On" (S05E09), the opening scenes show us images (of a teddy bear with half its face burned off or a shovel digging a grave, respectively) that will not be explained until later. In Andy and Lana Wachowski's *Sense8* (Netflix, 2015-present), this multiplication of plotlines, characters, spaces, and time levels is taken to an even more radical level, demanding unusually high amounts of viewers' trans-episodic attention. This also affects transgressive television's relationship to the viewer: Mittell, for instance, notes that many of these shows encourage what he calls "forensic fandom," which "invites viewers to dig deeper, probing beneath the surface to understand the complexity of a story and its telling" (Mittell, "Forensic"). And as Felix Brinker and Christoph Schubert emphasize in their contributions to this volume, viewers' reactions to these shows are clearly a central aspect of their making, not only through what Gary Edgerton and Jeffrey Jones have termed "the expectations game" (315).

To come back to the twisted roads and winding byways of *True Detective,* "the line" that Leonard Cohen's lyrical I "crossed" seems to be mostly legal or moral, but it alludes to the ways in which a spatial metaphor of transgression expands easily into other fields of signification in contemporary American television serials. In figurative terms, while much of contemporary transgressive television addresses politics directly, many shows engage with political issues more implicitly, through both form and content. This is a playful way of engaging, exposing, and promoting a specific politics of representation, but it also ties in with television's more general role in the cultural production of meaning. As John Fiske seminally stated in 1987, television "attempts to control and focus this meaningfulness into a more singular preferred meaning that performs the work of the dominant ideology" (1). In its contemporary serial manifestations, therefore, the medium of television, which has always been "a technology, an industry, an art form, and an institutional force" (Edgerton, *History* 414), emerges more than ever as a key agent in the production and circulation of cultural meanings: we watch these series not simply for pleasure—even though that, too, is a central part—but because of their acceptance or dismissal of particular discursive structures. In this context, transgressive television serves as an ideal laboratory for the diagnosis of contemporary American epistemes and cultural codes, much in the sense of Douglas Kellner's 1990 definition

of television as "a highly conflictual mass medium in which competing economic, political, social, and cultural forces intersect" (14). In contrast to a mere marketing label, a set of sensationalist features, or to simply representing what Ivo Ritzer discards as the "leaden pathos of transgression"[8] of most contemporary U.S. television series, the multiple dimensions of transgression in American television thus function as an operational principle of border-crossing and intersection, in which space, time, social norms, genre, form, and ethical standards become fluid and negotiable, and in which concepts of individual or national identity, of sameness and difference, are understood as profoundly processual. It is here that we may hope for the next episode, for the continuation of dialogues into research conversations, for the expansion of plot lines into open stories, and into new transnational contexts. If television serials perform cultural work not only in mirroring contemporary society, but also in envisioning alternatives to common cultural codes, norms, and values, the political potential of transgressive identities may well go beyond its poetics. At a time when 60 million refugees move away from violent homes, when over 10,000 people from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and across Africa arrive on the borders of the European Union on a daily basis alone, Cohen's devaluation of a fixed, recognizable individual status and privilege—"I had a name / But never mind"—seems timely.

[8] Ritzer reads the transgressive elements of shows such as *Sex and the City*, *True Blood*, or *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* as mere devices of drawing attention: "Von einer […] Leichtigkeit denkbar weit entfernt sind die neuen US-Serien mit ihrem oft bleischweren Transgressionspathos, das letztlich immer auf Seite der Simulationsmacht bleibt. Sie scheinen als Agenten eines Sichtbarkeitsregimes zu fungieren, das nun mit expliziten Darstellungen von Nacktheit, Sexualität, Gewalt und Vulgärsprache angereichert wird, ohne den Zwang zur Visualisierung zu reflektieren" (109-110). ("Far from lightness, the new U.S.-American series rather feature an often leaden pathos of transgression, which, in the end, remains on the side of the simulational power. They seem to serve as agents of a regime of visibility, which has been supplemented with explicit depictions of nudity, sexuality, violence, and linguistic vulgarity without reflecting back on the compulsion to visualize" [translation mine]).

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