

# Lucrecia's step back: Discursive disputes between films and TV series

## *O passo atrás de Lucrecia: Disputas discursivas entre filmes e séries*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper intends to analyze the discursive disputes that permeate the comparative debate between films and TV series in the contemporary cultural criticism. We take from the arguments of Argentinean filmmaker Lucrecia Martel against TV series in order to understand, diachronically, the historical tensions between cinema and television and its perpetuity in the current scenario. To do so, we come up here with three dominant axis in the comparative evaluation: espectral experience, style and narrative. With this, we aim to discuss the arguments of an aprioristic superiority of film over TV series, without forgetting the distinctive nature of this ongoing symbolic dispute.

**Keywords:** Serial fiction, film, cinema and television, discursive disputes, cultural criticism

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### RESUMO

O objetivo deste artigo é analisar as disputas discursivas que permeiam o debate comparativo entre filmes e séries no contexto da crítica cultural contemporânea. Partimos dos argumentos da diretora Lucrecia Martel contra as séries televisivas para compreender, diacronicamente, as tensões históricas entre cinema e televisão e a sua perenidade no cenário atual. Para isso, proporemos aqui três eixos dominantes na avaliação comparativa: experiência espectral, estilo e narrativa. Com isso, vamos problematizar os argumentos da superioridade apriorística do filme em relação às séries, sem perder do horizonte a natureza distintiva da disputa simbólica em curso.

**Palavras-chave:** Ficção seriada, filme, cinema e televisão, disputas discursivas, crítica cultural

## INTRODUCTION

THE 44TH ISSUE of the French magazine *CinémAction*, published by Hennebelle e René Prédal, brings an extensive dossier entitled “The Influence of Television on Cinema” (1987). That was a singular moment of the presence of cinema in the European television, especially in French television, because of the growing drop in ticket sales in commercial theaters, in addition to the need for regulation of distribution for cinema and television, reflecting in a now paradigmatic legislation concerning the timing of exhibition outlets. The imbroglio between the Cannes Film Festival and Netflix, which occurred in the 2017 edition, about the programming of films from the platform on the festival’s screens is quite symptomatic of the complexity of political and economic relations regarding film distribution on the European scene (Fresco, 2019; Lobato, 2019).

Back to the 1980s France, the country had just approved the Law 86-1067, dated September 30, 1986, which aimed to ensure freedom of the press and regulating audiovisual production and distribution, to ensure the economic balance among industry agents, which would be monitored by the National Cinema Council (CNC). One of the main questions, largely debated on the *CinémAction* issue was the need to preserve the economic exploration of films in the different available outlets at the time (theaters, VHS, cable TV, network television). There was also the matter of inserting the actors who had an interest in the distribution of these films within the very process of promotion, through the contribution of the television companies to the production funds. Gilbert Gregorie (1987), chair of the National Federation of Film Distributors, writes in one of the magazine’s articles that, at the time, “the audience of a French filme was 96% from television and only 4% from the theater” (p. 41). In this sense, beyond the aesthetical and cultural matters present in the debate, Gregorie explains that the cinema business model, as shaped from the 1980s onwards, could only exist because of television.

This economic centrality in the relationship between television and cinema, beyond the very own intermedia nature of the audiovisual means, has never actually been, a well-resolved issue. Film critics, filmmakers, festivals and academia, in their own ways, to this day contribute to emphasize, between cinema and television, more the fissures separating than the bridges connecting them. One interesting example to Picture, in the Brazilian context, the separation of research between cinema and television is the meeting promoted by the Brazilian Society of Cinema and Audiovisual Studies (SOCINE). SOCINE (s.d.) had as their main objective, according to its Statute, article 2, “a) aggregate, systematize, and disclose experiences related to the study of image in motion, in its

different media, and correlated areas”. However, their meetings are occupied, for the largest proportion, by cinema research *tout court*, for which the audiovisual – and television, above all – is a circumstantial appendix, a safeguard to the inconstancies of exclusivism.

Through a research in the summary notes from the past four meetings<sup>1</sup>, we find that the word “television” appears as follows in titles of works and abstracts: in 2016, the word appears fourteen times; in 2017, ten times; in 2018, eight times; and, lastly, only three times in 2019. For comparison, the word “cinema” appears 730 times in 2016, 664 times in 2017, 647 in 2018, and 694 times in 2019<sup>2</sup>.

In this work, it is not for us to determine the reasons, of political, cultural and, above all, epistemological natures that account for such gap. Nor is it our purpose to require any kind of determined attention, as if the research in television lacked a screen quota in SOCINE’s meetings – there are other forums, in different bodies and research societies, which fruitfully survive in their singularities. Hence, what interests us is to understand, in today’s terms, the discursive nature of the disputes between films and series, and between cinema and television, in the contemporary debate. Thus, a critique of the audiovisual can also have on its horizon the complexity of the relationship between the media, their connections and mismatches, without falling only into their cultural distinctions.

The starting point, which appears in the title of this work, came from the headline of an article presenting an interview by the Argentine director Lucrecia Martel, for the Buenos Aires newspaper Perfil, on the occasion of the release of *Zama*, her latest film. “Series are a step backwards” (Domínguez, 2018), prints the article, in a clear desire for a polemical statement from the renowned director, to get the famous clicks. However, when researching other interviews by Lucrecia Martel, her diatribes against television, video-on-demand services, and especially television series, remained a constant. They made evident her interest in throwing light in a debate that many thought was outdated. TV series, so prominent as a socio-historical phenomenon of contemporaneity, with its logic of domestic viewing, highly serialized, worldwide distribution, and suggestions often defined by algorithms and stimulating excessive consumption, would be, in the words of the director, a “step backwards in the audiovisual language”. We are, after all, in a *series culture* (Silva, 2014), a singular and highly globalized moment of production, circulation, and consumption of serialized audiovisual works. The statements by Martel, therefore, served to bring once again to the forefront of the debate the symbolic disputes between cinema and television that, at least since the post-war period, illustrate the complex cultural, economic, and political tension that crosses the fields.

<sup>1</sup> Given the Covid-19 pandemic, the SOCINE Annual Meeting was cancelled in 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Information sourced from the SOCINE website: <https://bit.ly/3paFZrO>.

When analyzing the literature on the interface between cinema and television, two perspectives have imposed themselves as dominant: we have a large tradition of research with a socio-historical bias, which investigates the relations between media based on the articulations between institutional agents (channels, studios, and producers), creative instances (playwrights, directors, directors), and the public spheres of circulation and reception. Works such as those by Hannah Andrews (2014), on the convergences and divergences between cinema and television in England since the 1990s, and Lucy Mazdon (1999), who investigates the presence of cinema in British television, invest in this approach to emphasize the *unquestionable close relationship* among media, often viewed with demerit by critics. This depreciation usually interdicts, as the author argues, “both close analysis of this interconnection and an understanding of the processes of exchange and transformation which occur as films move between the two media” (p. 72).

From a national point of view, an inescapable matrix to understand the articulations between cinema and television is Renato Ortiz (1995). This is because of his interest in investigating the cultural formation of the country, observing how both cinema and television historically tensioned the subsumed positions of popular culture, erudite culture and mass culture, creating specific crossings and rearrangements for the construction of ideas of national identity and Brazilian culture. This tension is evident in the very formation of industrial conditions for film production in comparison with the particular dynamics of infrastructural and economic consolidation of television during the first decades of this media in the country. Along this line, an important reference are the works that analyze the history of tensions between cinema and television in Brazil (Bahia, 2014; Bahia & Amancio, 2010), further deepening the need for a less biased understanding of the comparative disputes between the media.

On the other hand, we have the perspective that is interested in the study of language, investigating the expressive possibilities of the media, its strategies for addressing signs, its framings, its sonorities, and the sensitive texture of the images themselves. Here, approaches can vary from specific interests ranging from narrative and fictional constructions (Balogh, 2002; Butler, 2018; Machado, 2014; Smith, 2018), the ontology of film and video images (Caldwell, 1995; Hart, 2004; Machado, 1997), and conformations in genres and formats (Edgerton & Rose, 2005; Mittell, 2004).

However, beyond an attempt to exhaust the references in a retrospective synthesis, what interests us here is to understand the distinctive nature of this debate (Bourdieu, 1996, 2007; Newman & Levine, 2012); observing how,

transversely, the tensions between cinema and television unveil in the crossing of different analytical dimensions. Thus, for the purpose of this article, we will systematize three axes that underlie the historically most used arguments to depreciate series in comparison with films: spectatorial experience, style, and narrative.

These three categories do not exclude the presence of other discursive logics. For instance, the issues of production and reception practices. These, when thought of in an articulated way, can deepen our view of the conflicts that cross cultural criticism, especially at a time when large streaming services native to the Internet reconfigure the global market, in the face of the urgencies of social isolation and closing of movie theaters caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, beyond historical raids and economic disputes, understanding the inseparability of the ties that unite television and cinema seems, as we intend to point out here, an inescapable path for the understanding of audiovisual culture in contemporaneity.

### **SPECTATORIAL EXPERIENCE: GAZE, GLANCE, AND THE TECHNOLOGIES OF IMMERSION**

During the release of *Bacurau* (Mendonça Filho & Dorneles, 2019), the film's team circulated a curious piece of information on social networks: the theaters in which the work would be released should turn the volume up by one point (+1), so that the sensation caused by the shooting in the film could immerse the viewer in the scene. This technical determination, which aimed to heighten the audience's experience of the film's sensory engagement, is very reminiscent of the inevitable imbrication between the discursive/narrative nature of film and its public viewing model. Authors such as Jacques Aumont (2011) and Fernão Ramos (2016) endorse this link, highlighting the ways in which expanded/instant cinema, by reconfiguring the viewer's relationship with moving images/sounds, no longer circumscribes the conceptual field that has been called cinema from the beginning.

It is not about establishing a value chain between different forms of artistic expression with moving images and sounds. Neither cinema is equal to the universe of arts that deal with moving images, nor is the universe of arts with moving images and sounds restricted to it. Some developments around the concept of "expanded cinema" make cinema and the set of moving images on different devices equivalent, with prejudice to both sides. (Ramos, 2016, p. 39)

In this way, the device of uninterrupted immersion of the spectator inside a room architecture that guides attentive gaze and ears towards the projected film, standard to cinema, constitutes one of the marks – if not the most recognized – of its spectatorial experience. The social, economic and political aspects related to this activity have always been at the core of its valuation as a cultural practice, thus structuring an entire productive chain that thinks of the movie theater as the first (and main) window for commercial film exhibition. Moreover, the emphasis on the spectatorial experience as distinction marker in relation to the TV, with its exhibition in domestic devices, open to distractions and dispersion, represents a value attribute to exclusive attention that, many times, speaks more of the aesthetic horizon in which the criticism is within than of the perceptive experience in the relationship with images and sounds.

As if this were not enough, the critique for seriality sharpens the logic of distinction among media. As early as in the 1980s, Omar Calabrese (1984) drew attention to the set of assumptions that, historically, cut the interest of the aesthetic debate to single, closed works of immersive experience. To go a step beyond this – and thus better understand the serialized dynamics of audiovisual production, circulation, and consumption within mass culture – he directly criticizes these assumptions and proposes, in the end, the idea of an aesthetics of repetition:

The negative judgment on repetitiveness is the fruit of ideology, that is, of a negative judgment on the first sense, that of serial production, which also falls on the serial product. Because this product also holds the characteristics of its peculiar internal structure and a structure of enjoyment, the negative judgment automatically turns to them. This is inadequate, after all, because the preconceived idea of a unitary aesthetic value prevents one from recognizing in some contemporary products the birth of a new aesthetic (or the rebirth of an old aesthetic, similar to it); precisely, an aesthetic of repetition<sup>3</sup>. (Calabrese, 1984, p. 72)

As this was not enough, Milly Buonanno (2008) reminds us of an important historical fact: in its genesis, television was not configured as an ontologically domestic medium, having its first exhibitions occurred in public spaces (bars, churches, shopping centers, squares, museums, etc.), where TV sets remain to this day. However, television was gradually *domesticated*, from a cultural process mobilized, during the 1950s, by the growing organization of broadcast companies, by the technical development of transmission and reception structures, and, finally, by the interest of consumer goods industries in expanding advertising and, consequently, the consumption of their products.

<sup>3</sup> In the original: “El juicio negativo sobre la repetitividad es fruto de la ideología, es decir, de un juicio negativo sobre la primera acepción, la de la producción de serie, que recae también sobre el producto de serie. Y como del producto de serie forman también parte las características de su peculiar estructura interna y de una estructura de la fruición, el juicio negativo se traslada automáticamente también a éstas. Inadecuada, en fin, porque la idea preconcebida de valor impide reconocer en algunos productos contemporáneos el nacimiento de una nueva estética (o el renacimiento de una vieja estética, igual da); precisamente, una estética de la repetición”.

In reality, television has never become a completely domesticated medium, or a totally domesticated and domestic material object, however much an affirmation of this kind clashes with common sense (including the common sense that is scientifically credited). Not merely because its presence, even though it has become part of the geography of inhabited space, continues to cause alarm, suspicion and the surveillance kept for things that one knows cannot entirely be trusted (and again, nothing like that happens with fridges or dishwashers); but also because television sets and screens have never in fact abandoned the public spaces that they originally occupied; rather, they have continued to spread exponentially in areas outside the home during and after the phase of domestication. (Buonanno, 2008, pp. 16-17)

Domesticating television, in this sense, implied not only taking the television set into the home, but also organizing the programming in terms of specific family habits – in a grid, therefore – and formatting its contents according to the political, economic, and cultural determinants that this domestication presupposed. This included, of course, the domestication of the films themselves, which started, at first, to occupy the programming grids through agreements between broadcast services and movie studios, and then to be produced and distributed by the channels themselves, through the telefilm format. This process would be completed with the emergence of home video, then the segmented cable television channels, until reaching the video on demand services that are so central to audiovisual culture today. Television, therefore, due to its domestic, daily, trivial, and serialized character, would forever be detained within the narrow limits of a dispersive spectatorial fruition, even though films, resized for the small screen, have entered the home ordinary life and put down deep roots of circulation and consumption.

For this reason, it has always been important for film criticism, even though it has never lost from its horizon the matrix of popular spectacle that marks its origin, to reaffirm its distinction as a medium with its own language and artistic ambitions, linked to a perceptual origin, to a genesis from which all other audiovisual forms unfold. Defining itself within a device structured for immersion and contemplation, without the possibility of external dispersion, in a public session aimed exclusively at this purpose, undoubtedly contributed to this process.

As John Ellis (1982) explains, cinema's emphasis on the "attentive gaze" (which he calls gaze) was crucial for the production of specific aesthetic effects, as well as for the creation of consequent technical developments. This "attentive gaze" implies its own uses of image and sound, capable of triggering relationships – of addition, collision, fuzziness, etc. – highly multisensorial. Television,

on the other hand, did not need this “attentive gaze”, but rather a “glance”, given its domestic spectatorial structure, its serialized language in flux, its redundant use of image and sound to avoid dispersion.

Cinema offers a large-scale, highly detailed and photographic image to a spectator who is engaged in an activity of intense and relatively sustained attention to it. Broadcast TV offers a small image of low definition, to which sound is crucial in holding the spectator's attention. The spectator glances rather than gazes at the screen; attention is sporadic rather than sustained. These forms of attention enable different modes of narration to develop in each medium. (Ellis, 1982, pp. 24-25)

The conflict between gaze and glance has become deeply rooted in the debate between cinema and television, being recurrent in much of the criticism of television series, like *Lucrecia Martel's*, for example. Many demand from television and fictional series an aesthetic emphasis on gaze, disregarding the very technical nature of the production modes, distribution, and consumption of television. In spite of it, recent technical changes in production (sophisticated cameras, audio capturers and digital editing tables), distribution (inside and outside the traditional television flow), and consumption (giant flat screen televisions, with very high quality sound and image) have allowed television directors to explore even more the expressive use of the audiovisual form, sophisticating the potentialities of its language.

In this sense, the end-to-end technological development in the production of television images, which is now part of the everyday viewing experience, offers material conditions for the enhancement of television's stylistic possibilities in a scenario of intense global competition for serialized content. The same question extends, for example, to sound, but in other terms. It is curious to notice how Ellis' book (1982), from the early 1980s, when the forms of television transmission and reception were still precarious and, to a large extent, composed only of over-the-air television, already pointed out the differences between cinema and television without relying on an a priori hierarchy. It was mainly based on technical and narrative aspects that supposed a superiority of film in relation to serialized fiction. To continue in the example of television sound, it is important to see how recent research, from different approaches, has addressed the material specificities of television production, circulation, and reception with regard to the treatment of audiovisual material (Baade & Deaville, 2016; Carreiro, 2019; Edgar, 2017). These works emphasize how the soundtrack has specific functions in the dispersive medium and, from them, may experience new aesthetic and sensory unfoldings.



Sound can be heard where the screen cannot be seen. So sound is used to ensure a certain level of attention, to drag viewers back to looking at the set. Hence the importance of programme announcements and signature tunes and, to some extent, of music in various kinds of series. Sound holds attention more consistently than image, and provides a continuity that holds across momentary lapses of attention. The result is a slightly different balance between sound and image from that which is characteristic of cinema. Cinema is guaranteed a centered viewer by the physical arrangement of cinema seats and customs of film viewing. Sound therefore follows the image or diverges from it. The image is the central reference in cinema. But for TV, sound has a more centrally defining role. (Ellis, 1982, pp. 128-129)

Observing, therefore, these differences in the spectatorial experience between films and series without considering the nature of the media, the history of their distinctions and, above all, the contemporary state of audiovisual forms, only reinforces the divergent gap in which cinema and television are entrenched. In the case of television series, there are plenty of recent works that maintain the appealing role of sound, its imagery reiteration and even the dominance of dialogue in the equalization of tracks, as to also build atmospheres – the French *L'Enffondrement* (Desjardins et al., 2019) and the Icelandic *Ófærð* (Kjartansson, 2015-present) are great examples; dissociative and experimental tracks – the German *Dark* (Müsch et al, 2017-2020), the American *The Leftovers* (Lindelof et al., 2014-2017), and the third *Twin Peaks* season (Frost et al., 1990-1991, 2017) –; and subjective listening points, in primary hearing – from *Breaking Bad* (Gilligan et al., 2008-2013) to *Atlanta* (Glover et al., 2016-present). The quality of television sets, the narrative invitation to the attentive viewer, and the creative logic behind contemporary serialized production are all indications that point to the development of television works that, rather than the distinctive retreat, seem to point with strides toward the artistic constitution of a field of inevitable approximations.

## STYLE AND NARRATIVE: CROSSINGS AND DISTENSIONS BETWEEN FILM AND SERIES

In the aforementioned interview for *Perfil* magazine, Lucrecia Martel deepens her critique of contemporary series through the comparison of the narrative forms of television and cinema:

There are possibilities [narratives] to which cinema was getting to, and the series occupied the consumption of auteur cinema, in addition to what that meant in

<sup>4</sup>In the original: "Hay unas posibilidades a las que estaba llegando el cine, que las series han ocupado el consumo del cine de autor y lo que eso significaba en la cultura, en términos de intercambio. Son narrativas muy conservadoras, y con una dinámica de televisión, de los diálogos cargados de información, mucho mejor hecha".

the culture, in terms of exchanges. These are very conservative narratives, with television dynamic, information-laden dialogues, no matter how good they are<sup>4</sup>. (Domínguez, 2018, para. 5)

We return, here, to the core of a intrinsically ontological distinction: an immersive medium (cinema) and a dispersive medium (television), if compared, will inevitably resort to different narrative procedures to cater the capture of spectatorial engagement, attention to information flow, and, of course, the sequential articulation of narrated events in their unitary (in films) and serialized (in series) enunciation logics.

Expository dialogues, often addressed directly to the viewer – like the ones Martel criticizes – are actually fundamental to the understanding of narrative events in dispersive devices. Even series usually celebrated for the sophistication of their narrative models resort to repetitive, reiterative, recapitulative, and redundant strategies (Zanetti, 2009) to engage viewers in the stories. About this, it is worth recalling the analyses of *The Wire* (Simon et al., 2002-2008) and *Breaking Bad* (Gilligan et al., 2008-2013), especially in their emphasis for the investigation of serialization logics and their relations with the generic matrices of television melodrama (Araújo, 2015; Williams, 2014).

Thus, it is important to realize how the serialized narrative forms relate to the possibilities of accessing the story available to the spectator, who is now highly connected and able to handle the audiovisual work in a number of digital devices. If cinema can waive overlaps between image and dialog, working with a more sensorial immersion in the narrative, within a unitary and uninterrupted dramaturgy, television needs to constantly call the spectators' attention, ask them to immerse in the story, and even allow mobile situations of multiscreen consumption not to represent suspension of narrative engagement. In other words, television series need to constantly address the viewer, recovering them from the inexorable dispersion, and finally leading them back to the narrative thread from where they may have eventually derailed. To do so, they resort to countless strategies of style and narrative. Some are already consolidated in the common language of the television flow – such as the opening calls or the recapitulative excerpts (in the *previously on* model). Others, however, are used with ingenuity and inventiveness, many times breaking with the transparent logic of classical television narration (Thompson, 2003) and demanding, therefore, a more attentive look at the proposed narrative dynamics so that one can, in the end, discern the traditions and ruptures in the televisual language.

Hence, it is not surprising how Lucrecia Martel, later in her interview, makes comparisons about the field of television series and then between this and

cinema, in order to problematize the narrative possibilities used. Thus she goes: “You can’t compare *House of Cards* [Fincher et al., 2013-2018] against *CHiPs* [Rosner, 1977-1983]. But if you compare them against to the possibilities that cinema was reaching, the narrative-audiovisual complexity, [the series] are a step backwards” (Domínguez, 2018, para. 5)<sup>5</sup>. It is crucial to establish here the assumptions of the presumed comparison.

First, Martel establishes a focus within the field of television series, operating a hierarchy between works of different genres, formats, distribution models, and times to indicate an evolutionary hierarchy in progress. The aforementioned *CHiPs* was a police drama, procedural in nature, centered on a pair of highway cops who, on motorcycles, tried to solve the crimes that presented, developed and solved themselves in each episode. The series aired on NBC between 1977 and 1983, at a time when the serialized models of American television were in transition, both by the entry of independent production companies in the creation of original content, and by regulatory changes in thematic and social terms (Feuer et al., 1985; McCabe & Akass, 2007; Thompson, 1997).

*House of Cards* (Fincher et al., 2013-2018), on the other hand, is a drama series produced in 2013 by Netflix, a video on demand (VoD) service that started producing and offering original content by streaming, still in the early 2010s. By doing that, Netflix pointed the way to the creative economy of the contemporary audiovisual that, as of 2019, counted with the entry of major players of the entertainment market in this digital logic of serial consumption (Bianchini, 2018; Jenner, 2018). Developed by Beau Willimon, a renowned playwright<sup>6</sup>, from a British series of the same name, *House of Cards* quickly became a success. It was largely guaranteed by the quality of the dramaturgy that staged the interstices of American politics, and by the strength of the performances, both of its protagonists – Kevin Spacey as Frank Underwood and Robin Wright as Claire Underwood; and supporting actors – the highlight is certainly Mahershala Ali, playing Remy Danton.

This association between a Shakespearean representation of the political dynamics of the USA, and a topicality of the crisis of democracy around the world, which found in *House of Cards* a mirror for its institutional fractures, help to explain the importance of the series as a cultural phenomenon of the 2010s (Jones & Soderlund, 2017; Palmen et al., 2018; Reichman, 2017). Even with the downfall of its lead actor, removed from the series after accusations of sexual abuse on younger actors, the relevance of *House of Cards* as a milestone of the productive turn towards VoD services and as a serial work whose narrative must be warped, considering the new dynamics of sequential consumption (so-called binge watching), remains well determined.

<sup>5</sup> In the original: “No podés comparar *House of Cards* con *CHiPs*, ponele. Pero si comparás con las posibilidades a las que estaba llegando el cine, la complejidad narrativa-audiovisual, es un paso para atrás”.

<sup>6</sup> His play *Farragut North* was adapted to a film in 2011, then called *2 The Ides of March* (Clooney, 2011), which earned Willimon, Grant Heslov and George Clooney (who is also the director) an Oscar nomination for Best Adapted Screenplay.

However, the Netflix series seems to be a turning point within a rather unique trajectory of sophistication of narrative form and audiovisual style of serialized fiction. A number of studies point, in the last twenty years, to a profound transformation in the narrative logic of television series, breaking away from the excessive standardization of serialized formats (unitary, anthology, or serial) and thus producing recognizable innovations in the tradition of television narrative (Bucaria & Barra, 2016; Harlap, 2017; Nahs & Wheleham, 2017; Ryan & Thon, 2014; Weinstock & Spooner, 2016). When we consider narrative form, the concepts of narrative complexity (Mittell, 2006, 2015) and contemporary serialized drama (Silva, 2014, 2016) help to understand how television storytelling has become a vast field of aesthetic experimentation, introducing forms of storytelling, to this point, circumstantial in the television tradition. With such purpose, it is worth looking diachronically at the very notion of narrative complexity, understood as “a new model of storytelling has emerged as an alternative to the conventional episodic and serial forms that have typified most American television since its inception” (Mittell, 2015, p. 17).

In poetic terms, the narrative complexity accounts for a tense construction between the unitary nature of the episode and the long arc of the serialized narrative, so that the very spectatorial engagement with the stories tends to change, thus requiring a deeper dive into the fictional universes, now themselves inhabited by ambiguous characters and interwoven narrative threads. The narrative concatenation does not necessarily progress in a linear fashion, and with this, the internal coherence of the story is often only completed with more than one assistance. In this regard, it is curious how Mittell himself (2015) will resort to a comparison with American cinema to highlight the qualities that complex series possess and for which they will be recognized in the future.

Yet just as 1970s Hollywood is remembered far more for the innovative work of Altman, Scorsese, and Coppola than for the more commonplace (and often more popular) conventional disaster films, romances, and comedies that filled theaters, I believe that American television of the past 20 years will be remembered as an era of narrative experimentation and innovation, challenging the norms of what the medium can do. (Mittell, 2015, p. 31)

A list of complex works would inevitably be robust and exclusionary, given the quantity of productions, and even haughty, as if aiming to counter Martel's arguments by attributing, per se, other logics of distinction and critical validation. It is not our goal to reinforce a distinctive thesis that narrative complexity operates an epistemic split in the tradition of television narratives. However,

it is worth pointing out that much of the distinctive prejudice between films and series is due to the articulation between the aesthetic assumptions of the classical unitary work and an only superficial knowledge of the possibilities and traditions of fictional television narrative.

The same happens with the question of audiovisual style. Although they have long established as central creative instance the figure of the writer/producer, also known as showrunner, television series have found material possibilities and productive logics that allow the exploration of the hearing-imagery texture of television by directors, in order to build expressive possibilities beyond the classical transparency and redundancy between text and image. In the case of material possibilities, we are talking about the aforementioned sophistication of equipment for capturing, editing, and digital transmission, in high definition, of television information. This allowed television directors to invest in new expressive possibilities for the sounds and images of television series, which now, in a scenario where production logics deal with the intense commercial dispute between over-the-air and cable channels and VoD services, need to dedicate themselves to the creation of unique works both in narrative and style.

This even involves renowned television directors at the creative core of series, in a tradition that goes back to celebrated film directors who worked on miniseries and television specials – such as Ingmar Bergman, Jean-Luc Godard, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Krzysztof Kieslowski – now having as its epitome David Lynch's role in *Twin Peaks* (Frost et al, 1990-1991, 2017). Nevertheless, this also includes names like Martin Scorsese, *Boardwalk Empire* (Winter et al., 2010-2014), *Vinyl* (Scorsese et al, 2016), David Fincher, *House of Cards* (Fincher et al., 2013-2018), *Mindhunter* (Kono et al., 2017-2019), Jane Campion, *Top of the Lake* (Sherman et al., 2013-2017), *Steven Soderbergh*, *The Knick* (Jacobs et al., 2014-2015), *Mosaic* (Silver, 2018). These are accompanied by Ava DuVernay, *Queen Sugar* (DuVernay et al, 2016-present), *When They See Us* (Skoll et al., 2019), Woody Allen, *Crisis in Six Scenes* (Aronson, 2016), Bruno Dumont, *P'tit Quinquin* (Dumont, 2014), Sussane Bier, *The Night Manager* (Farr et al., 2016), and Spike Lee, *She's Gotta Have It* (Lee, 2017-2019).

Again, the list of possible references is only circumstantial and points, ultimately, to a yet-to-be-explored horizon, in analytical terms, of audiovisual works whose style needs to be understood beyond poorly justified hierarchical comparisons. Not only that, but we also believe that the creation of television styles is not solely the result of the incorporation of renowned authors from the cinematographic field for the televisual making, in the sense of a value dependence of one field in relation to another. What interest us here, precisely, are these interconnections, which put into perspective the usual distinctive

discourse in face of quite unique experiences and experimentations in the history of television.

In theoretical terms, two concepts really helped us to understand the specificities of the television audiovisual: one, the exploration of the very concept of style for television (Butler, 2010) and, second, the return to the concept of televisuality as an operator for the analysis of serialized fiction. John Caldwell (1995), in a seminal work, argues that televisuality is the specific form through which television – from the most popular to the most erudite – produces and performs style, understood here more in its decorative and appealing dimension, than in the logic of historical patterns and authorial schemes.

With increasing frequency, style itself became the subject, the signified, if you will, of television. In fact, this self-consciousness of style became so great that it can more accurately be described as an activity, as a performance of style, rather than as a particular look. . . . In short, style, long seen as a mere signifier and vessel for content, issues, and ideas, has now itself become one of television's most privileged and showcased signifiers. (Caldwell, 1995, p. 5)

To ensure, therefore, the maintenance of the viewer in the program, inside a technical device of zapping or dispersive digital socialization, television resorts to serialized forms, with narratives and styles, whose historical matrices precede it; yet in it, they seem to have found a determining means for their continued perpetuation. Serialization, therefore, is not a mere commercial imperative, based on hidden purposes of exhaustive proliferation, but a technical-aesthetic way of organizing contents, as well as a way of sensorial and affective engagement of audiences. Therefore, the exploration of narrative and stylistic aspects are part of the creative routine of authors and directors, who increasingly seem to find in serialized works a vast field of experimentation to be explored.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Beyond spectatorial, stylistic, and narrative comparisons, the relationship between cinema and television is also intertwined in the business models peculiar to each medium, but that, especially since the second half of the post-war period, have become increasingly mixed. By business model, we mean the different ways in which the media organize themselves to enable the structure of production, distribution, and consumption of their products. Here, cinema and television often differ, only to meet again soon afterwards. Within a multi-screen scenario that demands the circulation of works in different windows, the experience of

the exhibition outlets does not limit cinema to this dominant space, but rather establishes itself as an initial window of appreciation. As if this were not enough, both the big studios – today strengthened in media conglomerates – and the independent production companies need to increasingly produce for television and streaming services too. This is either because of screen quota laws (such as Law no. 12.485/11, in Brazil), or because of the high demand for content from different exhibitors, bringing to the horizon of economic disputes the tensions between cinema and television.

To get an idea – and here we bring data made available by the Brazilian Film Agency (ANCINE, 2018) – between 2011 and 2016, 701 films were commercially released in Brazil with theaters as their priority exhibition outlet. Of those, only 64 were not later released in other segments. The rest had over-the-air TV (15), cable TV (241), VoD services (163), and home video (218) as their second exhibition outlet. In addition, of these 637 films, 515 had a third outlet, 266 a fourth, and finally 101 had even a fifth outlet.

To think, thus, of cinema and television as disparate media, hierarchically distinct, is not consistent with what it is to produce audiovisuals in Brazil and in the world today. Their strategies, languages, and devices can always point to different uses of the audiovisual text – and it is good thing that they do. However, and this is the argument we are defending here, understanding the complex dynamics that bring together – aesthetically, economically and culturally – television and cinema should be an important discursive – and even political – matrix of what it is and will be to produce and reflect about audiovisual today. Epistemologically, it seems determinant to insert the debate about contemporary television series precisely in this nebulous intersection of the fields of cinema and television studies, in which some see the evidence of a cultural elitism, but others see the dynamics of the media interweaving of contemporary audiovisualities.

In methodological terms, it is also important to point out paths that untie the knots of these biases, to understand the particular cases in the historicity of their manifestations and, from this, to weave the eventual generalizations that define the processes more broadly. This articulation between induction and deduction constitutes an indispensable step for the rupture with the solipsisms of the most biased cultural criticism, so that the place of television series in the tradition of audiovisual forms may be understood within its own complexity.

Newman and Levine (2012) remind us that the legitimization process of television, whether in academia or in cultural criticism, is an endless movement that always needs to be reinforced, debated, disputed. It is not just a distinctive delimitation of a field that needs to be appreciated to its satisfaction, but an effort to understand the cultural history of the media, the poetic and aesthetic

transformations of the works, and, finally, the authorial dynamics that configure the singularity of serialized production and its acute incidence in the contemporary cultural scene. Serialization, therefore, cannot represent a *step backwards* – as if, in the end, the development of the language were a rectilinear evolution led, of course, by authorial cinema –, but it is certainly a *step further*, a path of expressive possibilities grounded on an increasingly common road of intermedia approaches.

By analyzing diachronically the discursive processes of distinction between films and series, we established in this article three central axes that grounded the debate: spectoriality, stylistics, and narrative. As we argued, these axes do not exhaust the issue, since other elements, within the historical conditions of production, circulation and consumption of each specific medium may be recovered to picture the issue. When revisiting the literature on the subject, however, it seems clear that this distinction crosses not only the points of view of production instances, as is the case with filmmaker Lucrecia Martel, but also those of cultural criticism, consumption, and academia itself. This presents a discursive dynamic that presents its own specificities in each country, but that, in Brazil, manifests itself in a perennial difficulty in thinking of the fields of television studies and film studies as much more transversally articulated areas than our research agendas presuppose.

What we advocate here, in the end, is that this distinctive effort be criticized based on the questionable effects it imposes on the effective understanding of contemporary forms of audiovisual production, circulation, and consumption. With the Covid-19 pandemic, the shutting down of film sets, studios, theaters, and film festivals, in addition to the strengthening of streaming services in the production of original content and the distribution of diverse, domestic, and technologically accessible programming, thinking about the audiovisual field in this articulation among cinema, television, internet, and interactive media seems an inescapable path to understanding a present in profound transformation and a future that is radically anticipated. ■

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