Between Habit and Thought in New TV Serial Drama

Serial Connections

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Between Habit and Thought in New TV Serial Drama: *Serial Connections* is a consideration of some of the key examples of serial television drama available via transnational streaming platforms in recent times. Through the individual works examined, the book exemplifies the ways in which aesthetics, technology, and capitalism weave a complex social fabric around the production of the respective television series, thus presenting this type of serial drama as a finely engineered cultural production. Taking Bernard Stiegler's notion of an "image warfare" as its starting point, the author critically investigates the strategies deployed by the shows' producers to navigate this dynamic, shaped by the "new spirit of capitalism". With creativity intrinsic to the process, on the one hand, and a highly efficient drive for capturing and fixing attention driven by algorithm and economic logic, on the other, the author maps the processes at work in the production of high-value serial drama and considers how, despite this tension, they manage to present meaningful insights into the experience of being in this world: A world shaped by trauma, a desire for justice, and a search for systems of belief that can offer a way through the vicissitudes of contemporary life. Framed by a detailed analysis of the multiple processes that shape these works is a sustained analysis of the serials *Mr Robot, Billions, The Leftovers, Rectify*, and *Westworld*, and the dynamics of despair and hope that ripple through them. As such, it will appeal to readers of film and television studies, cultural theory, and those interested in furthering a critical aesthetics for our time.

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For my sons Cassius, Finnian, and Niall

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Introduction

Streaming, seriality, and spirit

> Each age has its own method, or optic, for seeing and then articulating reality.
> (Said, 2013: xiii)

The aim of this book is to map out the multiple processes at work that can be seen to engage with powerful and captivating forces of thinking, acting, and being, evident in the world-making of high-value televisual serial drama. This is predicated on the belief that we are at a critical moment in cultural production, which itself is a key component of a new emergent capitalist formation that has streaming technology at the heart of it. The book will engage with this new landscape to examine how this particular aesthetic form articulates, in compelling ways, something of the profound changes apparent in cultural processes operating in the world today. It is my belief that these shows are amongst some of the most imaginative practices of contemporary world-making that operate through the complex interplay of visual, auditory, and narrative registers. Evident in this phenomenon is an intricate relationship between viewer, technology, and culture, that relates to certain philosophical ideas which are useful to describing the experience of this emerging world. The development of streaming platforms for moving-image content points to a qualitative shift in the relationship between the traditional television producers and their audience. The expansion of such technologies reflects users' changing patterns of consumption and continues to shape new ones. Whilst this is a complicated terrain made up of both traditional and relatively new producers and distributors, all seeking to capture audience attention and tie them to a variety of pecuniary models, it is clear that alongside the huge increase in quantity, there has been an increase in production quality albeit not, I think, at all to the same degree. The dissemination of this platform technology and a new revenue stream that moves from advertising to subscription and user-data monetization has, significantly, combined to produce a noticeable shift in creative autonomy (temporary or otherwise) for those working on these shows, which has reinforced and established the drive for quality television previously initiated by cable TV and the expanded experience offered by DVD box-sets. This book therefore builds on a number of works that have interrogated such a development, and the aim here is to go deeper into the interrelationships

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between form, style, technique, and culture (Broe, 2019; Buonanno, 2008; Lotz, 2014; Lotz, 2018; Olsson, J. and Spigel, L., 2004).

However, digitization of the audio-visual register has profoundly altered the circuits of human communication and, arguably, overwhelmed our capacities for reflection as a compulsive level of attentional fixation locks users into endless patterns of socially destructive consumption. This hyper-industrialization, as Bernard Stiegler describes it, generates an intensified suffering where the loss of spirit and affective engagement leads to what he labels symbolic misery (2014a). Yet, although such a formulation can point to the necessity for the urgent evaluation of the impact upon the public sphere of these programming industries, it can, arguably, leave out certain key aspects of social experience today and its expression in moving-image culture, even as we acknowledge how the shift from analogue to digital has profoundly altered all aspects of society. To investigate the possibilities beyond that of the relentless channelling of the libidinal dynamics of the individual and the social milieu into the calculative economy of a globalized market economy, effective as it undoubtedly is, this book considers serial drama as a potential space of reflection on these very processes and their consequences. The long-established televisual serial form has seen a corresponding evolution, and this book aims to consider a select few of these shows to critically interrogate their potential to articulate, as Said says, something of the realities of our age. Therefore, this book is organized around a number of key ethical, political, and scientific ideas that will allow for a sustained interrogation of how these dynamics are themselves manifest within this medium and why this form of cultural production is so effective at engaging this moment. My contention is that what is mobilized within this form is a multifaceted process of cultural production, where the domain of imagination is itself a vital battleground for competing visions of our world as it is today and, indeed, for any potential future. By working through concepts such as authority, desire, spirit, information, economy, flow, worlds, and plasticity, we can start with particular kinds of objects and begin, as Nelson said of Erich Auerbach, to "weave ample fabrics from a single loom" (quoted in Said, 2004: 22).

Specifically, this book will critically examine five serials that, from my current Nordic location, are available via streaming platforms such as Netflix and HBO, although they may originate from different companies, and all are American productions. Such a choice can, of course, be accused of replicating the dominance of the culture industries and failing to recognize the range of non-English language productions that have similarly produced outstanding shows. Nevertheless, the aesthetic, industrial, and cultural crossover from Hollywood to TV serial itself points to important concerns relating to the role of such productions in any "war of images", as Stiegler describes it (2011a: 116). Therefore, for the sake of cultural and intellectual coherence and the, not minor, question of the time investment that engaging with just one individual show entails, especially with a close-reading approach in mind, this volume is limited to these dramas (The total number of episodes across all the shows considered in this book is 186. Most episodes average an hour in length). The vast scale of the output of multiple streaming platforms is itself a manifestation of the posthuman condition we find ourselves in, where it

has long been impossible to view all the content these serial machines produce. The shows discussed here are ones that viewers will have likely encountered or can access relatively easily. Three of the shows have completed production (*Mr Robot, The Leftovers, Rectify*), and two of them (*Billions, Westworld*) are, at this point of writing, still ongoing. In itself, this is not a major issue as my approach is not one that derives from the necessity of acknowledging the narrative whole and a sense of closure; rather, I am generally concerned with moments within the serials when, in my mind, something exceptional occurs that may, or may not be, related to the primary narrative. Throughout, I use the well-established distinction between television series and serial, where the former operates with an episodic format of self-enclosed stories but the latter has several narrative threads playing out over multiple episodes and seasons.

Therefore, whilst the choice of shows cannot be grounded on any notion of typicality, they all relate to key aspects of contemporary experience within the demanding environment of cognitive capitalism. Through the work of thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze, Peter Sloterdijk, and Bernard Stiegler, I am attempting to expand on the aesthetic strategies deployed within the serial dramas to connect with the insights these offer on the cultural dynamic shaped by the "new spirit of capitalism" (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2017). Here, creativity has been enabled and detached from adherence to rigid systems of production, yet, evidently, at the cost of economic security and the loss of any normative authority (Schuster, 2017: 6). The subject and the form of these productions, accessed on numerous mobile platforms at a time and place under the control of the consumer, speak in diverse ways to the nature of this experience and its anxieties. Nevertheless, there are common thematic threads to all of the serials discussed here, including issues of trauma, belief, and justice, that drive a form of compulsion, or, more suggestively, a repetition, that itself relates to different conceptualizations of time and, therefore, of living in the world.

It is my contention that the serial dramas studied here can offer stimulating and insightful reflections on the suffering of contemporary life, ways of seeing and thinking about this world and, at certain moments, glimpses of the potential for thinking differently about our existence. In multiple ways, they operationalize the relationships we have to everything around us and suggest that we might be able to reconfigure the systems in which we are enmeshed to produce outcomes other than that which we are told is the only one possible. These are necessarily aesthetics questions driven by the idea of an encounter and framed by the idea of thought in television serial drama. In this process, it is not simply a transfer of external ideas mechanistically applied to a production, not so much about representation but, rather, formation, less narrative analysis and more towards a kind of expression. As William Connolly says about the cinematic, such an approach "helps us to discern multimedia techniques at work in organizing perceptual experience, consolidating habits, composing ethical dispositions, and spurring new thoughts into being" (2002: xiii). Fundamentally, I am interested in what these shows do and how they do it. My aim is to anchor the discussion to the aesthetic techniques evidently deployed and to examine how this can stimulate us experientially to difference and possibility. Rather than reading these shows

through any singular theory "lens", the aim is to try to consider what lenses are *actually* used by the cinematographer to produce the image we see and why this might be important. These shows can help us, it is argued, to think anew through the creation of imaginary worlds, worlds extracted from the vast realm of possibility that is the domain of the social totality, which is beyond any singular representation, if it ever was. The book focuses on moments and fragments, instants and durations, flashes of illumination and insight, repetitions that are perceptively different, changes in affective states, and flows between new, creative connections, all of which have the potential to challenge the familiarity of the habitual, paradoxically, through the habit of watching TV serial drama. Repetition can, of course, also be standardization, reification, obedience, the kind of schemata that Theodor Adorno would condemn as generally characterizing the culture industries. However, whilst there is much to take from this formulation, here it is argued that contained within these productions *is* the potential to see and hence think, the world otherwise and to keep alive the belief that we have the possibility to develop personal and social relations beyond the parameters of the empty repetition of the market that we are overwhelmingly presented with. Running through these shows are, I believe, genuine expressions of a desire to seek ways to evade the limitations imposed upon us and that we can develop our own creative strategies to expand our horizons, even if what we are faced with is a "world interior" (Sloterdijk, 2013a: 32) and seen but through a glass darkly. Necessarily, we must confront the sense of despair in the world if we are to believe in the possibility of developing tactics for turning to other forms of social organization, of living a life, whatever form that may take.

Weaving a dense fabric

A central idea here is that seriality is something that weaves itself into our lives. Because serial is always in movement across time but, significantly, with a structuring gap, these images are moments connected through affinity and as such there is a sense of reassurance that this is something that will finally resolve. We engage in a state of perpetual but deferred suspension that tends more to becoming and process than of identity and fixity. Therefore, seriality integrates itself into our life cycle, our habits, our perception. Seriality is, in many ways, fundamental to modern consciousness and has mirrored the changes and modifications of what that subjectivity is, and this includes us today in yet another reconfiguration (Sielke, 2015). In this way, as a dynamic social formation, fundamentally, there are aspects that are old, aspects that are recent, and things that are very new, making summaries a challenging prospect. Within this discussion of individual dramas is a concern, through a notion of poetics, of recurring motifs as a carrier of image density. Similarly, a persistent figure throughout this is the notion of weaving, the interlacing of distinct threads that function to produce a fabric that has utility but which is also a design, a material understood as both object and image, evident at the micro and macro level. The philosopher Peter Sloterdijk using this image to describe modernity, thus:

> Modern times: half a millennium after the four voyages of Columbus, the circumnavigated, uncovered, depicted, occupied and used earth presents itself as a body wrapped in dense fabrics of traffic movements and telecommunication routines.
>
> (Sloterdijk, 2013a: 139)

This motif of a fabric that envelops us is useful to approach the multiple ways in which the technological-entertainment complex has become so dominant in contemporary life. Traditionally, in a woven textile the warp and the weft threads are visible, whilst in a tapestry, a more decorative form of textile art traditionally associated with symbolic authority, the warp threads are hidden and the weft yarns are discontinuous and form the spaces where the artisan interlaces the coloured threads to produce a pattern. The Modernist architect Le Corbusier described tapestries as "nomadic murals", and we can derive from this a usefully expanded notion of the image, its movement, and bodies as the connective between them (Le Corbusier, 1960). There is also a craft tradition to the production of the tapestry which can be aligned to aspects of the production process of the TV serial that, I think, is useful. The mobility of this wall art is itself connected to a powerful class that seeks to relocate when necessary and to invest in these objects as carriers of status as well as meaning; hence, as John Berger points out, the emergence of painting on stretched canvas in the Italian trading class of the Renaissance as predicated upon the shift to an expanded commodity culture (Berger, 2008). The point here is that whilst there is movement there is not, necessarily, nomadism as such. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, the philosophers most associated with this, by now, hopelessly overused concept point out that those who believe they are nomadic are actually confined in more ways they can know (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988: 381). Nevertheless, images circulate and whilst there is a materiality to them that is necessary to pay attention to, this circulation points to the notion of an economy and the social relationships of production that drive it. As Hans Belting observes, "Images rely on two symbolic acts which both involve our living body: the act of *fabrication* and the act of *perception*, the one being the purpose of the other" (Belting, 2011: 3). The choice of word "fabrication" here is useful as in English (it is a translation of the original German text) it can mean the process of manufacturing or inventing something, so both construction and creation are implied. Therefore, ideas of economies and production run throughout the book and draw upon the understanding of the moving image as homologous to money, in that they share the capacity to put all objects into circulation.

Such a conceptualization of circulation and exchange works at multiple levels whilst recognizing the boundaries that operate within each domain. So, it is important to appreciate and consider the role of individual producers of the dramas, including off as well as on-screen talent, that all play key roles in determining what we see and hear of the unfolding stories. But production isn't simply individual producers but also the systems that shape the processes of development and execution of shows that enable or restrict creative potential. Amanda Lotz, in

an article discussing the changing forms of serial drama in the past 30 years, persuasively identifies the drivers of a paradigm shift in the development of original series that saw cable and internet distribution displace the established broadcast model (2017). Through innovation, competition, technological developments, serendipity, and, not least, creatives driven by self-belief, certain dramas were able to break the mould of what was possible and open up space for some distinctive new content. Therefore, by considering these shows as assemblages, we can approach these shows as emerging from a complex ensemble of relations between components of commerce, art, belief, and craft (Rizzo, 2015). The streaming technologies facilitate a new kind of machine that connects multiple existing elements with new patterns of sociality, a new form of stream of consciousness.

In another way, the mediologist Jonathan Beller argues in his formulation of the cinematic mode of production that cinema and its successors, including television, are articulations of the processes of industrialization extended into the visual realm and that now saturate contemporary life, he writes:

> It is in and through the cinematic image and its legacy, the gossamer imaginary arising out of a matrix of socio-psycho-material relations, that we make our lives. This claim suggests that not only do we confront the image at the scene of the screen, but we confront the logistics of the image wherever we turn – imaginal functions are today imbricated in perception itself.
>
> (2006: 1)

Here, the spider's web of relations between imaginary, symbolic, and real weaves a "mise-en-scène" of an image that pervades all social life (2006: 1). Beller offers the insight that cinematization of the visual fuses the object with technological and institutional apparatuses to produce a machinic interface that extracts value from the spectator as a form of attentional currency. The apparatus of cinema is a machine of imaginative capture and a global complex, whilst the image can be tracked through a circulatory system: "Each journey through a particular strand of social production to the screen of consciousness, like the threads teased out on the film's great spinning machines, can be woven into the production of the social fabric" (2006: 49).

In relation to today, we can extend this to accommodate the technologies of the digital and the networked to address the programming industries. Within this book, I will draw upon ideas relating to what has been defined as "cinematics" in relation to the study of the streamed content of moving-image production. This is not to deny the specificity of the televisual, which is a key strand of this newly distributed material. Nevertheless, part of the argument for the nature of these shows is that, to varying degrees, they push towards something beyond both TV *and* cinema. I explore this in more detail further on, but there is a way in which they look to the scale of the cinematic image whilst being consumed in a fashion that derives from television, that is within a relatively private and usually domestic space rather than the public space of a cinema, and one now increasingly asynchronous rather than synchronous. There is certainly a mobility to this

and, indeed, one can sometimes observe individuals "watching" a show on their phone with headphones plugged in whilst simultaneously navigating city streets and traffic crossings during rush hour. Seriality does relate to TV more than cinema even if there are precursors within that domain, and before that radio, and magazine publishing (Broe, 2019). Nevertheless, as Bernard Stiegler argues, if cinema is an extension of photography, then "television is no less also an extension of cinema" (2011a: 121). Stiegler, of course, is fundamentally interested in notions of time and the ways in which technics can be seen to capture, store, and enable particular temporalities. The synchronization of the lifeworld to the needs and demands of capital entails a global programming system that produces what he defines as an *archi-flux* that can intervene in individual and collective consciousness to "condition its schematics" (2011a: 124). Social time, here, is indeed structurally transformed as that which previously oriented around the fixity of the calendrical time of television becomes superseded by the shifting and endlessly adaptive streaming platforms but still, essentially, remaining qualitatively the same. Primarily, my focus is on those "image banks" that Stiegler argues are evolving the uses and use-values of television (2011a: 128).

Neuronal circuits of individuation

Creativity is a key theme for this book and the recognition of its centrality to contemporary existence that has filtered down to all levels of social and working life in Western societies. In 1999, the French academics Luc Boltanksi and Ève Chiapello coined the phrase "the new spirit of capitalism" to describe what they saw as evident in the changing field of workplace organization and culture since the 1970s, which was, in many ways, a response to the seismic events of May–June 1968 (2017). Shifting from the corporate Fordist structure of a centralized management, this new model stressed the importance of a version of a libertarian "artistic" human energy that could be adaptive and mobile. As one reviewer of the book summarized: "The values of expressive creativity, fluid identity, autonomy and self-development were touted against the constraints of bureaucratic discipline, bourgeois hypocrisy and consumer conformity" (Budgen, 2000: 151). Such adaptive and mobile qualities merge seamlessly with the figure of the networker (that describes both working in an environment that is electronically connected and the belief that success is measured by the accumulation of contacts as evident in social media). This alignment with a romantic current of tolerance for difference, celebrating transience and resistance to hierarchies, saw an emergent moral framework that could usefully launch this new capitalism precisely on the terms of how it was *against* the traditional bourgeois order. Innovation and disruption were the key drivers of this new formation. There is a complex diagram that can be drawn in relation to this and how such ideas linked libertarian with neo-liberal, "radical" philosophy, and technological change but this goes beyond the limits of the discussion here. However, what is clear is that notions of creativity and desire were actively motivated to engender fundamental shifts in sociality, domesticity, and media consumption. In regard to streaming, the production of both

the smartphone and platforms have further enabled a considerable expansion in cultural production, that is content, alongside changes in habits of consumption and fragmentation of audience now driven by algorithmic logics. Boltanksi and Chiapello illustrate this shift in capitalism as one characterized by a future where renting supplants absolute ownership and this, I would argue, is comparable to the overwhelming turn to the use of streaming over possession of hard media or even digital files.

Further, this creativity is to be engaged by considering these TV shows as significant works of art and the belief that they should be judged and discussed in those terms. The concern, therefore, is on how the aesthetic strategies deployed within the shows can be argued to link with contemporary political and philosophical questions. However, the challenge is to maintain an attention to these as artworks and not as simply illustrations of political and philosophical ideas. These are complex, sophisticated, and multi-agential productions, with often unprecedented economic investment, that can be approached on multiple intellectual levels, as even a cursory look at scholarship on a canonical show such as *The Wire* illustrates. Addressing, therefore, the system dynamics of the culture industry that drive these productions is a challenge that has to be confronted. As Frank Kelleter of the Popular Seriality Research Unit describes it:

> These are actor-networks in the sense that they owe their existence to a (re)productive assemblage of acting persons and transpersonal institutions as well as action-conducting forms, narrative conventions and inventions, technologies with specific affordances, and non-personal objects and aesthetic theories about such objects.
>
> (2017: 26)

Attempting to articulate the relationship between experience, relations of exchange, and the possibilities for art is fraught with difficulty and necessitates ranging across multiple discourses whilst usually only ever touching upon a fraction of the potential within each of them for further enquiry. It is up to you as reader to decide if this is done to an adequate and persuasive degree here.

What seems apparent is that in the past 40 years, we have lived through, and continue to live through, profound changes in capitalism, changes that we confront as a destabilizing of many of the familiar coordinates of social and political life. Structures of individuation, the process out of which individualization results, being a central element of this (Stiegler, 2009: 3–5). Perhaps, in some ways, this can be understood through a modernist lens of "all that is solid melts into air" as Marshall Berman once put it (1982). What has been identified as an increasingly significant factor in the continuation of this economic system is the role of information production, circulation, and processing, by machines and humans. Individual and collective intelligence is what is driving this and has come to be conceptualized in a wide range of formulations, each of which privileges a particular component including, but not limited to, finance capitalism, affective capitalism, platform capitalism, neuro-capitalism, attentional capitalism, vectorialist

capitalism, computational capitalism, semio-capitalism, hyper-capitalism, and so on, all of which highlight the central role of brain power and its coupling to machines to assist in running these complex profit-generating operations. This is now a knowledge economy (alongside, it must be reminded, the affective and linguistic *non*-cognitive component (Fisher, 2012a: 73)) that has fundamentally intensified long-standing technological interactions and logics where innovation and creativity are seen as the drivers of accumulation and increasing yields. Yann Moulier-Boutang describes this as "cognitive capitalism", and whilst it is a formulation that is not without controversy it can operate as a basis on which to critically engage with these cultural productions that play an important role in smoothing the transition to this new reality (2011). There is a battle *over* and *through* imagination that is examined in the serial dramas considered here. Moulier-Boutang usefully directs us to the necessity to adapt at work within capitalism:

> In other words, taking seriously the new 'great transformation' that is underway does not mean sticking to a concept of global and absolute domination by industrial capitalism at the planetary level of the world of culture (Adorno), of entertainment (Baudrillard) and of the provinces of real socialism that collapsed with the Berlin Wall. If capitalism is new in its modes of accumulation, in its centres of initiative, in its ideology, this is not because it is itself creative, innovative and revolutionary. It is because it is forced to mutate in order to survive.
>
> (2011: 35–36)

Within this framework, the transformation of the human through the connecting of brains via network technologies facilitates modifications in relationships of cooperation and communication. For Moulier-Boutang, this is a situation characterized by alarming cultural changes that lead to a profoundly degraded public sphere but also one that, he argues, can potentially open up "new virtualities" (2011: 37). It is this potential that is explored in the virtual worlds of these serial dramas, to pay attention, as Nigel Thrift insists, to the precepts, affects, and concepts of this new form of capitalism (2011a).

To return to the epigraph once more, it is useful to consider more deeply the notion of the optical. An optic can refer not only to a lens but also to the eye as the sensory organ through which perception operates. Immediately, then, we have the recognition of a series of connections between environment-organ-brain. As Said says, this is culturally specific, where to see is not a naive process that pre-empts understanding but is, rather, intrinsic to it. This is a dynamic relationship that needs to be understood as such. Nevertheless, the shift to articulating processes of virtualization and the emergence of cognitive ecologies as key terms for understanding the impact of the digital can continue to replicate the limitations of the cybernetic brain model and its notions of collective consciousness (Levy, 1998). The philosopher Catherine Malabou in her work *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* seeks to explore something of the potential for what she describes as "neuronal plasticity" that goes beyond the appropriation of the metaphors of neuronal networks by the

new capitalism defined by Boltanksi and Chiapello (2008a). For Malabou, the true potential of plasticity is suppressed by its substitution with that buzzword for this new condition – flexibility. This, she asserts, is "the ideological avatar of plasticity – at once its mask, its diversion, and its confiscation" and where "[f]lexibility is plasticity minus its genius" (2008a: 12). Later she develops a detailed and insightful discussion of how, by breaking with the classical image of the brain, thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze see the potential in the neuronal self of an a-centred system that can evade the cliché of the centralizing program that denies plasticity; instead, this is where "[c]erebral space is constituted by cuts, by voids, by gaps, and this prevents our taking it to be an integrative totality" (2008a: 36). In ways that we will return to later, she identifies the aesthetic force of plasticity in "its power to configure the world", something that, in Deleuze, is fundamentally cinematic in its functioning (2008a: 39). Malabou's formulation of the mutability of the neuronal self points to a necessity for recognizing the possibility that neurological connections, whilst tending to stability, have the potential for modification and the emergence of new mental states. Such a process can, for instance, initiate the learning of a musical instrument or another language but conversely could see habit escalate to become addiction. The interaction of the brain with its environment is one that is reliant upon meaningful systems that are dependent upon neuronal connectivity. What operates is a balance between long-term stability and short-term adaptability through the continuous formation of circuits. Malabou closes her book with a Deleuzian-inspired call for readers to "construct and entertain a relation with their brain as the image of a world to come" (2008a: 82). This is undoubtedly a complex area that struggles to avoid falling into a representational system that would imply the emergence of another form of identity predicated on describing the workings of the mind as operating the same as film. Something we see, for instance, when Antonio Damasio writes that, "Movies are the closest external representation of the prevailing storytelling that goes on in our minds" (2000: 188). Nevertheless, the movement from the neuronal to the mental is a shift that takes place within a biological, social, and cultural matrix currently defined by capitalism. However, for Malabou this transition is one defined by negation and resistance: "There is no simple and limpid continuity from the one to the other, but rather transformation of the one into the other out of their mutual conflict" (2008a: 72). Here, there is a danger of introducing once more the notion of two ontologically distinct realms that, as Ian James states, smuggle in "the transcendence of consciousness over brain activity" (2019: 191). What is key, it appears, is the recognition that neither is self-sufficient but that they are relational, constituting a *space of possibility* rather than in a permanent state of synthesis. The ability of contemporary media technologies to insert themselves at this junction is perhaps a key aspect of their power today. It is here that the multiple connectivities of brains and environments operate in a zone of exchange between biology and culture that, as Sampson observes, "come together in an increasingly sociotechnical external reality" (2017: 136).

By working in terms of media ecologies, we can establish a more nuanced understanding of the relationships of media engagement in which we partake. If

we take these shows as coherent objects in themselves to be studied, we can more effectively think about the ways in which all elements, from those in our "lives" to those on screen, can potentially resonate and vibrate with intensity through multiple entangled channels that are affected and affecting, at the same time. Relevant here is the immersive nature of the virtual space of the fictional universe that requires the need for new evaluative and tracking criteria (Citton, 2017: 42). For Yves Citton, this attentional regime is one that is dangerously homogenizing, he writes:

> As they pre-format our collective attention, their protocols have global effects that may contribute just as much to the homogenization and synchronization of our behavior as to its diversification – depending on whether we favour, contain or neutralize certain of their effects.
>
> (2017: 69)

Vectorialist power is exercised by the ability to preconfigure supposedly free choice, inherent in what Bernard Stiegler describes as a process of grammatization (2010b: 70–71) that leads, potentially, from the programming of our perceptions to the programming of our behaviour (Citton, 2017: 68). One outcome is the intensification of what is described as a herd mentality, which needs little further explication in its negative connotations. However, there is the possibility for other kinds of intellectual operations that pose cognitive challenges beyond that of passive consumption of ready-made products. Citton specifically describes the aesthetic experience of some contemporary American TV serials as one area that does have a potential for reflexive attention, that these are spaces which:

> should be understood as VACUOLES which allow for the *temporary suspension of the demands of communicational attention, so as to be able to concentrate full attention on a privileged cultural object over an extended period*.
>
> (Citton, 2017: 159)

Serial fictional narratives, therefore, engage a different kind of focus as one is plugged into the attentional experience of an "other" through these media objects that are shared as tertiary retentions. This process enacts the entry into the world of a different vector of subjectivation that generates an "*an oscillation between immersive adjustment and reflexive critique*" (Citton, 2017: 165). Here, then, creativity operates through the possibilities for the spectator to experience something of the zone of indetermination that such works can help us enter, even as we do so through structures of framing and capture that ground this facilitation. The aim is to consider the ground as *ground* and to pay close attention to the materiality of its fabrication from whence to see its qualities as potentially productive *and* destructive, as it weaves itself into the materiality of our lives.

In another way, we can map habit and hope onto the brain and mind, or the neuronal and mental as Malabou would describe it (2008a). The very emergence

of a notion of self is predicated upon the function of habit (Deleuze, 1991: x), as Brian Massumi describes:

> Habit lies at the hinge of nature and these divergent process lines of culture. Habits are socially or culturally contracted. But they reside in the matter of the body, in the muscles, nerves, and skin, where they operate autonomously. Although they are contracted in social/cultural context, they must be considered self-active autonomies: spontaneous self-organisations that operate on a level with movements of matter.
>
> (Massumi, 2002: 236–237)

From this perspective, habit is not only a realm of possibility and power but also, negatively, of potential addiction driven by machinic repetition. Habit, which is formed by the pattern of repeated past behaviour, maintains an openness to the not-yet. As Malabou writes in the preface to Ravaisson's *Of Habit*, "Certainly, change generates habit, but in return habit is actualized as a habit of changing. Being is thus habituated to its future. It *has* a future" (2008b: viii). Now, there is a great deal of work in this area that addresses all of the multiple aspects of this notion of habit and it is not possible to engage further here, at this point (Deleuze, 1991; Grosz, 2013; Malabou, 2008b; Tarde, 1903). What we can take from this formulation is that this particular framing allows for approaching this issue as something already in process that is not somehow waiting for reason to make sense of it but already stabilized by the mind in an expectant state, it has fixity and fluctuation, which is how the self manages experience. Here, the notion of hope is useful to think as an extension of the not-yet-become impulse that posits a sense of futurity that can actualize the potentials that are otherwise suppressed within utilitarian market capitalism. This dimension is maintained by the glimmer of redemption and justice to come and are key qualities evident in the shows considered here.

Spheres of imaginative world-building

One strand of thinking within this book emerged in 1996, during season 4 of *Homicide: Life on The Street*, in one of those instances of wonder that encountering artworks can occasionally produce. It was here that moments in some of these more stand-alone episodes struck me as reaching a level of genre experimentation that elevated them from the formulaic and clichéd to something approaching art. It was not that the show began to look like cinema or any other form of artistic work but that, whilst it was recognizably television, it had begun to do something exceptional within the form itself. Subsequently, of course, this potential within the medium has been greatly expanded upon and developed to produce a wave of new television serial drama that has been much discussed in recent years including, as already mentioned, a show such as *The Wire*, which has had such a big impact in the academy. Indeed, there is a connection between *Homicide: Life on The Street* and *The Wire* through the writer and producer David Simon, who was centrally involved in both productions. Other shows at that time, including *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, also played a part in a

recognition of the validity of a serious reflection on what seemed to be changing in the culture of television where, for a variety of reasons, experimentation was tolerated and allowed to expand on the creative possibilities of the medium.

These examples are mentioned to illustrate the interconnections and multiple points of reference for shows and individuals within the industry that can be traced back through many sources within the history of the moving image. By the 2000s, the widespread introduction of the DVD box-set with its high-quality playback allowed for a sustained level of viewing and engagement that also encouraged reflection and, importantly sharing, through economies of lending that began to break the reliance upon broadcaster's schedules. Today, the streaming of shows via the internet has qualitatively expanded this process. What all this points to is a complex network of production, circulation, and reception that has profoundly altered the medium of television to the extent that some of what we encounter today is arguably something quite new, whilst also being constituted by many elements clearly traceable through earlier iterations. All of which hints at what Adorno referred to, in regard to television, as the "totality in which the marvelous wonder is embedded" (Adorno, 2005a: 56–57). It also points to the unavoidable element of personal engagement with individual television shows that define this approach; after all, everyone has their own unique archive of televisual events that carry meaning and emotional attachment for them. Whilst, this strikes me as being no different to any other field of image research, whether cinema or painting, the relatively more limited access of these media compared to television ensures a certain cachet rarely attributed to the study of the latter.

Today, through streaming technologies, we enter a perceptive bubble of privatized experience where not a moment is lost as each episode waits in suspension for the next log-in to activate the flow of content, and where the control over this process is, apparently, passed to us. Whilst building on the shift from broadcast to the engagement facilitated by the DVD box-set, this intensification of viewing becomes profoundly immersive. This immersive bubble can be compared in certain ways, I would argue, to the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk's articulation of his so-called "sphere theory" (2011, 2014, 2016). Building on Heidegger's ontological thesis, Sloterdijk posits the idea of being-in-the-world as being-in-a-sphere. Here the individual relentlessly moves towards a receding horizon, something that is arguably replicated by the serial form that drives the attention of the viewer ever forwards without ultimate resolution, where even as individual shows finish, attention switches to another. This "bringing-forth" or *poiesis*, as Heidegger called it (1977: 10), is the creation of a world of situations, figures, and the grounds that they move across and within a space opened up by the series (Ivakhiv, 2013: 6). The ways that we are drawn into these worlds cognitively and affectively is approached here to discern something of the workings of the processes that allow for an engagement formed through the repetitions of habit and pathways of desire that motivate them. These complex image-productions work simultaneously on many levels to stimulate us to thought and action whilst engendering a form of control that seeks to lock us into a predetermined position of consumption. It is precisely the oscillations between multiple potentials that play on our senses in a constantly negotiated

pattern of engagement between experience, world, and possibility. Structured into these cultural productions is the deconstructive operation of blindness and insight, of despair and hope, and of joy and sadness (De Man, 1983). Here, seriality is also a form of architecture, a derived structure that has been intentionally designed, assembled, and subsequently occupied; habit becomes the habitable. At the same time, spheres can be understood in an architectural sense as cells, units, which are, of course, the foundational unit of the prison, something considered in some detail in Chapter 4 in relation to *Rectify*. For Sloterdijk:

> The sphere is the interior, disclosed, shared realm inhabited by humans – in so far as they succeed in becoming humans. Because living always means building spheres, both on a small and a large scale, humans are the beings that establish globes and look out into horizons. Living in spheres means creating the dimension in which humans can be contained.
>
> (Sloterdijk, 2011: 28)

By the twentieth century and the rise of an essentially mediatized society, whilst the affective and imaginary synthesis of society operates through the mass media, the archetypal dwelling, according to Sloterdijk, is the apartment. This "elementary egospheric form" allows for mass repetition within which the individual devotes itself to the project of self-realization (Sloterdijk, 2016: 530). Concomitant with this architectural innovation is cinema, and whilst by the 1920s the feature-length production becomes established as the primary format, seriality has always been intrinsic to it (Brasch & Mayer, 2016). Operating within a wider system of production that establishes the efficiencies of standardization, this cellular living space is dependent upon this parallel structure:

> To approach the phenomenon of the apartment, one must perceive its close connection to the principle of the series, without which the transition of construction (and production) into the era of mass fabrication and prefabrication would have been inconceivable.
>
> (Sloterdijk, 2016: 531)

Seriality, then, as a mode of production, consumption, and being, integrates contemporary social experience, which can also be usefully understood by concepts such as becoming, flow, and lines of flight (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988). In this way, the body is in a permanent state of transformation across the sensorial spectrum, what Foucault described as the "aesthetics of existence" (Thacker, 1993). This is not to privilege this process as something simply liberating, significantly; it also maps onto the precarious nature of work and living in the world today. The ease of streaming of content across platforms and devices is facilitated by the demise of the stationary TV set and the home within which it was positioned. Nevertheless, Sloterdijk's formulation of this process of sphere production usefully illuminates the idea of world-building and the experience today as one of occupying multi-spherical spaces. Due to the increasing mediatization of life, the outside is now in a permanent state of circulation through the inside, so that no

absolute outside exists any more. For Sloterdijk, according to Thrift, today we are in the latest phase of Western history: "a 'post-historical' period of bubbling foam in which there is no unknown outside, which produces a multiplicity of lifeworlds and all manner of microclimates which communicate frantically – but in autistic ways" (Thrift, 2011b: 140–141). Life, as such, is an ongoing process of being-in-the-world impacted by the forces of perception, affect, and cognition, so in that sense a becoming as it is open to the possibilities of the encounter that can challenge preconceptions and put thinking in motion.

The serial dramas that are examined here are exemplary of the ways in which this format seems to have become a primary location for the staging of ethical and aesthetic reflection that can tune into this transformation of being. This change has been driven by the expansion of digital image technologies into every corner of life and expresses a profound sense of loss and disorientation. One of the strengths of the approach set out by Bernard Stiegler in his series *Technics and Time* is the detailed exploration of how the emergence and evolution of *Homo sapiens* is marked by a techno-organological trajectory initiated by its material adaptations to the use of tools. What is most relevant here is how this organological relationship between body and technological supplements provides the foundation for his account of spirit that he pursues (Abbinnett, 2018: 5). Fundamental to this idea is the recognition that our powers of reflection and judgment are always *already* enmeshed in systems of technological programmes that are not external to us but are the means through which we are produced as prosthetic beings (Stiegler, 1998). It is the fate of spirit in the all-encompassing machinery of cognitive capitalism, a channelling of desire into standardizing forms that seek to occupy the entire realm of symbolic production, that concerns him. Yet whilst this short-circuiting of desire towards compulsive consumption of commodities is undoubtedly a key element at work, there is still, for Stiegler, the chance for redeeming the aesthetic as a realm that has the possibility to outmanoeuvre the totalizing ambitions of these digital systems. In this "aesthetic war", new weapons must be forged that can challenge the degradation of spirit that underpins the destructive direction of capitalism (Stiegler, 2015: 4–5). Hopefully what becomes clear through the following discussions of individual serials is the recognition that it is not an easy matter to extract fragments of thinking from these commercial productions as if that simply undoes the relentless process of assimilation that drives them. Nevertheless, whilst the comforting sense of distraction that the viewer can get from plugging into the stream is ever-present, the argument is that there is a pharmacological dimension to them that can allow for a redemption of the sense of disaffection that is endemic today (Stiegler, 2011b).

Folding as world

What can be discerned in the serial drama is a process that oscillates between enfolding and unfolding in all stages of production from life-to-art-to-viewer-to-life in an endless circuit. In her work that investigates the neo-baroque as it manifests in contemporary popular culture, Angela Ndalianis describes this process by which the viewer's ability to traverse across multiple sources of meaning, thus:

"The polycentrism of seriality persists, but in this instance it is the intertextual allusions themselves that weave the audience seductively into a series of neo-baroque, labyrinthine passageways that demand that audience members, through interpretation, make order out of chaos" (Ndalianis, 2004: 27). Ndalianis usefully relates the serial polycentric spaces of the baroque to the neo-baroque of entertainment media by way of reference to Deleuze's work *The Fold* (Deleuze, 2006). The strength of Deleuze's idea is that it gives form to the processes of subjectivation and being that are composed from multiple registers in a continuous process of folding from within and without in a relational matrix. Interestingly, Deleuze takes the materiality of dress as a model for the Baroque, he writes: "The fold can be recognized first of all in the textile model of the kind implied by garments: fabric or clothing has to free its own folds from its usual subordination to the finite body it covers" (2006: 139). The fold becomes the fabric of ontology, as Tom Conley writes, and that "[a]s a doubling or lining the fold separates speech from sight and keeps each register in a state of isolation from the other. The gap finds an analogue in the hermetic difference of the sound and image track of cinema" (Conley, 2005: 173). Throughout the studies here, it is precisely this gap that motivates the viewer through stages of sense making and thinking that produce moments of potential for seeing and speaking to reach their limits, as an image flickers across the screen that connects memory and emergent strategies for living in a zone of possibility and difference. Here, then, lie certain ideas of resistance as strategic responses that trace articulations of power and oppression against spaces through which the fold of the self passes. The description by Laura Marks of the carpet as an "analogue algorithmic medium", in this context is pertinent, she writes:

> I am thinking that thinking like a carpet can be a way to start at any point and connect to the universe. A way to unleash creative energy that's not available when we start at a larger scale. What I'm after is not only the thought and hands of the weavers as they produce these astonishing patterns. It's not only the material of wool and silk, or for that matter of pixels and silicon. It's the way the carpet itself thinks, pulling forces from the weavers, the yarns, the matrix, the algorithm and producing something new: the carpet as a force of individuation.
>
> (Marks, 2013: 40)

All of the productions studied here, in different ways, work through issues of information and knowledge, in what Tudor Oltean describes as the epistemic mode of seriality (Oltean, 1993). Elliot Alderson in *Mr Robot* can access secret information but struggles to establish a ground from which to judge the ultimate truth of what he decodes; Taylor Mason in *Billions,* through complex differential calculus, can engineer connections that makes money flow through unseen information channels; Nora Durst in *The Leftovers* works for The Department of Sudden Departure, a government agency that catalogues information on those who lost family members and tries to establish a pattern that might explain the

disappearance of 2% of the world population; Daniel Holden in *Rectify* is released from prison as advances in DNA testing raises doubts on his conviction, and the investigation into the murder of his girlfriend is reopened; in *Westworld* the company Delos harvests data from the theme park guests and the question of programming behaviour is central to its plot. All of the shows explore the ways that the desire for information beyond that which is immediately perceptible drives these scenarios; all, in different ways, revolve around a gap between memory and life; all operate through a continuity of folding/unfolding in a world-self-world process. In a realm of information hyper-abundance, the question is *what* to unfold or, put another way, what to actualize out of the vast plane of virtuality (Marks, 2008). Experience, then, is not the realm of authenticity but a province already corrupted by information, as meaning is produced through the application of a deforming force applied to this emerging image.

Clearly, capitalism works to operationalize the expansive properties of the aesthetic and to seek to captivate the audience, where to be captive is to be held within an enforced regime of control. The question of whether it can be pushed beyond the limits of the market is to be considered whilst acknowledging that this attention machine is perpetually oscillating between the promise of escape and strategies of evasion whilst developing new technologies of capture and distraction. What these TV serial dramas offer is a complete and highly detailed rendering of an imaginary space that resonates with multiple moments of overlap between worlds. Yet the richly immersive world presented on screen holds the spectator's attention through its completeness that can, potentially, leave little room for contemplation. Here, though, the task is to engage in such an endeavour to take a different path to that of capitalism and its "worlding" (Thrift, 2010; Stewart, 2010).

A sphere, of course, can also function in a certain configuration as a lens, that is, a medium for the focusing or dispersion of light. However, it has also become something of a cliché within some renditions of cultural theory of the past decades to describe metaphorically the notion of applying an analysis to an object as if through a particular lens, whether Marxist, Feminist, Deleuzian, and so on. Such an approach can seem instrumental in the philosophical and political sense. Whilst theory has been described as a "tool box", it can often lead to a mechanical application that functions as a form of consumer choice from the selection of approaches, rather than a critical engagement with a complex and sophisticated process of cultural production (Foucault, 1977: 208). The argument here is that we could sometimes benefit from less talk of metaphorical lenses as conceptual magnifiers and more talk of the actual lenses used in the production of moving images by cinematographers and directors. Whatever we see on screen has necessarily passed through a particular lens that has shaped and formed the image with a clear intention and motivation for expressing a highly specific look. It seems helpful, therefore, to look to these material choices to begin any immanent critique of the work. Andrej Tarkovsky wrote: "Cinema is the one art form where the author can see himself as the creator of an unconditional reality, quite literally of his own world" (Tarkovsky, 2006: 17). In this way, the shows themselves are constructed as a sort of weaving, an integration of multiple elements all within a

structure that is pre-existing in shape and form. Similarly, this book is a weaving, a weaving together of a number of philosophical concepts and individual serials that are driven by the hope that a coherent, stimulating, and engaging picture emerges.

Gilles Deleuze, as has been much documented, saw in cinema a potential for altering perception and, hence, thinking (Deleuze, 1986, 1989). Deleuze does this by detailed attention to the cinematic process and through close analysis of the diverse connections that different styles of film offer, facilitated by the arrangement of images, shots, and framing. He sees in cinema the possibility (which, importantly, is not necessarily always realized) for a creativity that pushes through the essential processes of repetition and difference that are the generators of life itself (Herzog, 2000). I would argue that there are traces of this cinematic capacity at work within these televisual serial dramas. In a broader sense, it can be argued that we are moving through a transitional cultural phase where the cinematic as defined by traditional cinema is in a state of flux, with the structures, forms, and temporality of television generating an emergent cultural formation facilitated by new production and distribution systems. The concept of the cinematic, therefore, is understood not as a distinct set of practices, or a "look", or the simple moving over of the notion of the auteur from film to television, *per se*, but rather an aesthetic category that can be identified as evident across the moving-image spectrum. Here, we encounter a complex mix of elements that are in tension as they draw upon and generate a sense of multiple temporalities. Herein lies the potential for what we might describe as a utopian blink, a fragment of future time appearing in an instant, now. These moments function to interrupt the smooth flow of time, they are disruptive to order, and they suggest the possibilities of other times, other possible actualizations out of the plane of virtuality from which they materialize. In particular ways, the serial form offers a fertile ground for this possibility, being inherently open and recursive. These openings present us with a certain truth about the world and are what leads Deleuze to assert the power of cinema to restore our belief in the world (Deleuze, 1989: 172). World-building that is the basis of the cinematic extends now to television as each creation can, potentially, extend beyond the familiar and oscillate with an inhuman intensity. Of course, this points to an inherent friction within this idea as the very grounds of seriality pull towards regularity and repeatable units. This common sense that provides the terms of the initial appeal of a series is usually defined through narrative and character, the fundamentals of the way "Hollywood tells it", as David Bordwell describes, that operate across the domain of the moving image (Bordwell, 2006). However, in contrast to this overbearing weight of cause and effect, it is within particular moments of this aesthetic register that, rather than predictability, we encounter indeterminacy and possibilities for difference. Creatively, what the serial form can offer is an actualization of a form of compulsive return to motifs and images so that with each iteration there is a further expansion on a concept that allows for an opening in the virtual/actual continuum. In this way the television serial form is different from film, which is more an event medium and tends towards a coherent

wholeness, even if what is often considered creative in cinema is precisely the disruption or abandonment of the principles of temporal or narrative coherence. It is noticeable, for instance, that a filmmaker such as David Lynch has returned to the serial form to expand on his *Twin Peaks* world (where reference is made to the *Eternal Stories from the Upanishads* that opens this book). Of course, this very quality is itself open to becoming incorporated, where what was once unsettling becomes familiar and reassuring: Schemata is challenged by innovation and then becomes the new schemata. The aim here, therefore, is to work with the complexities and tensions of the work and to maintain precisely the aspects of ambiguity and even contradiction that makes it interesting. At its best, the distinct quality of the flow that defines the serial form is one that pulses and vibrates as narrative structure and imaginative loops weave a pattern of conductive material that can facilitate changes in affective states and stimulate reflective thought. Tarkovsky describes something of this dynamic, and it applies to how I approach the works examined in this book:

> Through poetic connections feeling is heightened and the spectator is made more active. He becomes a participant in the process of discovering life, unsupported by ready-made deductions from the plot or ineluctable pointers by the author. He has at his disposal only what helps to penetrate to the deeper meaning of the complex phenomena represented in front of him. Complexities of thought and poetic visions of the world do not have to be thrust into the framework of the patently obvious.
>
> (Tarkovsky, 2006: 20)

A notion of serial poetics, therefore, draws upon cinema for its approach to the material, as the means through which shared worlds are created. In his formulation for cinema, David Bordwell starts with the fact that any notion of poetics begins with the fact of construction of that world on screen, that what is encountered is a made manifest by techniques of craft traditions and explains the causes and functions of aesthetic features through this framework (2007: 11–55). Within the area of thematics, as he describes it, iconography and motifs are motivated to animate the story and are often recurring elements that serve as compositional determinants (2007: 18). Such an approach has qualities that would seem useful in the following analysis.

However, once again, this process can be understood in contradictory terms. Franco Berardi writes of, on the one hand, poetry as "the language which creates shared worlds", yet on the other, the emergence in the 1970s of the manifestation of the forces of creativity being coupled to innovations in capital itself: "This was the starting point of the creation of semiocapitalism, the new regime characterized by the fusion of media and capital. In this sphere, poetry meets advertising and scientific thought meets the enterprise" (Berardi, 2009: 18).

Nevertheless, there is something in the notion of the poetic moment that can be useful. Jason Jacobs and Steven Peacock, in the introduction to their edited

collection on television aesthetics, point to this quality as key to its difference from film with regard to its expressive strategies, they write:

> There are many television moments that strike us as compelling, extraordinary, haunting or distinctive. All provoke both an instantaneous response and linger in the mind, all prompting us to consider what is at stake in the individual moment, and in the individual television fiction.
>
> (2013: 8)

Such a perspective is reinforced when we consider the arrangement of serial narrative as driven by the creative choices at work in composing what Sean O'Sullivan refers to as "segmentivity", for as he states, "[S]erial narrative, and in particular serialized television drama, is a poetic enterprise. All serials, by definition, are broken; like poems, they are broken on purpose" (2010: 59). The real creative work is in the weaving together of these elements to generate something beyond the sum of its parts. This is something taken as a guiding principle throughout the discussion of individual shows that follow. The intention is to roam across the shows, to focus on instances of these points of indeterminance, moments that are less about plot development or the narrative arc of a character than the starting point for an exploration of tangential forces that flow through it.

How might we formulate the relationship between these shows and what is defined as the cinematic? Streaming as a technology also points towards the televisual structure of this formation, where the parsing of serials into discrete elements of episodes and seasons is underpinned by the narrative rhythm defined by the imperative of commercial inserts so that stories are seen to naturally break to allow for this. Whatever the creative aspirations of those involved in the production of particular shows, if there is a significant economic investment then there will be a compelling need for constructing a product that can be accommodated within multiple outlets for profitable syndication at a later date. Nevertheless, the most productive understanding of the notion of a cinematic element as central to the significance of these shows is that of a particular kind of image that flashes in a moment of interruption within the circuit of structure and meaning provided by the narrative form. As Elena Del Rio puts it: "[T]he molar plane may be identified with *narrative* action, while the molecular plane unfolds through a more or less abstract series of *affective-performative* events" (2012: 27). Seriality, is amongst other things, a structure of action and reaction, cause and effect, that as viewers we actively follow and from which we derive a certain kind of pleasure as habit and predictability are affirmed. Correspondingly, not all cinema is necessarily cinematic, and so there is conceptualization of this notion as an expanded process that traverses the cultural landscape through the generating of cognitively and strategically disruptive images that subvert the dominant regime of common sense. Images have the potential to introduce uncertainty into the narrative that structures them. The repetition of the familiar through the reinforcement of the notion of common sense looks to structures such as narrative to determine its force, yet images have the possibility to undermine this. For Angelo Restivo in his book on the defining serial *Breaking Bad*, the cinematic is these particular types of images and the relations between them

that operate through affect and have the potential to become, as he describes it, the "*interruptor* of narrative" (2019: 11). There is something to this idea of a moment of rupture, where the suggestion of punctuation works to draw attention to the potential for pause and gaps within which the void of meaning casts its attraction, what Sudeep Dasgupta defines as "*nonresolvable opacities"* (2017: 184). Such moments are evident within each of the serials discussed in this book, where spatio-temporal perception is disturbed as a particular affection-image draws the viewer into uncertain territories. It is here that metaphysical questions are confronted and struggled with. Restivo suggests a useful formulation of the relationship between narrative and the arrangement of the image through the cinematic concept "mise-en-scène". Where the narrative provides us with *extensive* relations that move forward through action, mise-en-scène operates through *intensive* relations in the spaces between cause and effect, creating a sense of possibility or openness. He writes: "In a certain sense, intensive relations transect the more linear relations formed by narrative, so that mise-en-scène will produce its effects via resonances, actions-at-a-distance, and so forth" (2019: 34).

Likewise, Stiegler writes that "Cinema weaves itself into our time" (2011a: 11) in his explication of the centrality of this technology to the production of the spectatorial subject of the twentieth century. In the twenty-first century, streaming serial drama is intensifying this process of infiltration into the structure of consciousness which, according to Stiegler is "*essentially* cinemato-graphic" (2011a: 13). For audiences, film has come to define the dominant sensory-motor schemata that provide the basis for making sense of the world through a process of habituation and in this way is a part of reality not simply a representation of it. The notion of the cinematic, then, looks to this theorization to offer insights into this mode of thinking.

There is, therefore, a certain potential within this serial formation of image production that may or, indeed, may not, be realized. In some ways it functions as a sort of corruption, as an element that contaminates the purity of the image world as manifested in high production-value serial dramas. Corruption can be a way of subverting hierarchies and crossing boundaries through the revealing of the fictitious claims to the integrity of the world whilst simultaneously showing its necessity to that very ordering. In terms of those on the spectrum of film studies to television studies that argue for the singularity of their disciplines, each sees the other as a potential corruption of their specificity, whether television corrupting cinema or cinema corrupting television. Corruption, then, is not a lessening of any essential quality but the necessary process of any genuinely productive assemblage. Deleuze and Guattari write of this aspect:

> We think the material or machinic aspect of an assemblage relates not to the production of goods but rather to a precise state of intermingling of bodies in a society, including all the attractions and repulsions, sympathies and antipathies, alterations, amalgamations, penetrations, and expansions that affect bodies of all kinds in their relations to one another.
>
> (1988: 90)

This formulation works at all scales, from the social to the self, and provides a sense of the constant shifting of existential territories in an ongoing arrangement of relations that constitute any assemblage (Harper & Savat, 2016: 22). What constitutes the assemblage, therefore, is the connections between the constitutive elements, hence, the focus upon "serial connections" and the inherent repetition that describes that. There is something to the idea that within this "degraded" art form, distorted and corrupted by commercial motivations, there is paradoxically something that speaks of the truth of being in the world whilst at that moment turning away from how it is. As popular culture it acts as a screen for the collective unconscious where the repressed finds a way to manifest itself as it flashes and becomes momentarily visible.

With this in mind, the chapters that follow consider a particular serial and its arrangement in terms of thematics, aesthetics, and schematics. These shows are conceptually dense, narratively complex, and multi-agential productions that operate within a market-driven milieu even if they are, however briefly, able to escape to varying degrees some of the restrictions traditionally imposed on such costly enterprises. The intention is not to produce any kind of summary or general description of the shows or read them through a singular conceptual framework. Nevertheless, I try to stay responsive to what is seen on screen and to fix on a motif or detail that appears to me to link with further chains of association and conceptual thinking that can reasonably be supported; the book is sub-titled *Serial Connections* in this way.

If this book argues for the aesthetic properties of these five serial dramas, then it raises the question as to why these and not others? There is no doubt that there is an element of judgement that goes into this, where these particular shows are considered to have qualities that mark them out from the many others that compete for our attention. These shows, I would argue, have a level of reflexivity and sensitivity that can potentially inspire the viewer to think beyond the formulaic experience that a market economy seeks to impose on an audience. Nevertheless, even within this rarefied atmosphere, there are numerous other productions that, arguably, could be shown to display qualities just as much as worthy as these here. Even more are those series/serials that perhaps fall outside the domain of the "serious" and emerge from less intellectual origins but can still carry the weight of sustained analysis and flicker with anticipatory acumen. As said, there is so much to see now that it is impossible to engage even with all that is worthy. Nevertheless, we are being compelled to lock our attention onto a never-ending stream of media content and to feed those engineered compulsions by never pausing to reflect or switch into other modes of being. Good work is relatively rare so the selection here has been similarly curated.

The first chapter considers *Mr Robot* created by Sam Esmail. This is a show that centres on the character of Elliot Alderson, a cyber-security specialist by day and vigilante hacker by night. Over the course of its four seasons, we see the world through the eyes of Elliot in all its multiple manifestations whilst he engages in a struggle with himself, those around him, and, it seems, capitalism. The starting point here is a key element of the "look" of the show: The eyes of

the characters that work as the nodal points in the dramatic configuration through which we enter this world. If cognitive capitalism is based upon the valorization of information in the form of digitized data, then, Elliot as a master of manipulating the codes and the networked systems that depend upon them, both machinic and human, is at the centre of this world as an eye-brain-hand assemblage, and where in its final moments the show reveals his alternate persona is named "the mastermind". What is useful to explore is how the techniques of manipulation of computer and social codes lead to the destabilizing of his sense of self just as a series of hacks crash various financial systems. It is precisely the failure of the attempts at challenging capitalism portrayed by the show that ultimately communicates so closely the inability of liberal ideology to be able to imagine anything beyond the world today. Yet, the show develops a number of aesthetic strategies and a tone that expresses something intrinsic to this desire and suggests many intriguing moments that offer a sense of the possibilities for precisely different worlds in contradistinction to this one.

Chapter 2 works with *Billions*, a show of quite different tone than *Mr Robot*. In contrast to the world of darkness and negative space of the fracturing mind of the anti-capitalist protagonist Mr Robot, *Billions* is a world of space as power, where everything is foreground and the axioms of neo-liberal and speculative capitalism are taken as the only real things. There is no community here, no solidarity, only money, as one of the characters confidently asserts. In this world, everything and everyone can be bought. Shifting between the apparently opposing worlds of hedge fund speculation and the domain of law through the regulatory offices of state, we see the full force of these narcissistic personalities as they struggle to dominate the shape of the world we live in. The appearance of the gender non-binary character Taylor Mason introduces a further dynamic to the conflict that effectively explores the power to appropriate the human that drives this formation. Such an overwhelming strategy of capture is seen, also, in relation to the role of art in the show, that is further examined here.

If the first two shows deal explicitly with aspects of capitalism as an economic force of deterritorialization, then the next production to be considered, *The Leftovers*, goes to the heart of the existential crisis figured by trauma. In the aftermath of a supernatural event where 2% of the world's population disappear in a Rapture-like instant, those left behind are faced with the struggle to maintain any credible system of belief in the face of this cataclysm. The shock of the loss for those directly affected ripples out to overwhelm the whole of society in a crisis of faith, both religious and secular. Yet the strength of the drama is how it explores this through the relatively mundane lives of the characters of small-town America, whilst working through the profound questions of suffering and meaning the event forcibly raises. The show immerses itself in the wave of anguish and incomprehension it unleashes and can hardly be summarized in its scope of unfolding stories nested one within the other. The chapter looks at the show via certain ideas derived from the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk on spheres and religion, and Gilles Deleuze on belief and the re-enchantment of the world. Visually and musically the show sustains an engrossing exploration of the themes of grief, return, and despair.

The theme of the black hole in space and time that certain events can generate is explored in a different way in *Rectify*. Here, the focus is on Daniel Holden as he emerges from the death row of a Georgia State prison to face the world after new evidence throws doubt on his original conviction. The show is remarkable in how it maintains a tight, meditative focus on Daniel and those closely around him, as he negotiates this new, unexpected, path. Whilst never moving far from the deep trauma of his incarceration and the shattering impact of a murdered girl, it peels back layer after layer of feeling, memory, and doubt, that define this experience. Death row and the acute suffering of solitary confinement produce a uniquely intensive sense of space and time that is designed to crush the human spirit. Yet Daniel is presented as having found a way to negotiate this through a level of reflection and thinking. In this way the chapter draws connections to the short work by Bernard Stiegler on how he came to be a philosopher after being imprisoned for armed robbery in France. The brief asides within the serial to art and music are expanded upon to reflect further on the possibilities for experience and community beyond his brutal imprisonment.

The last chapter looks at a show, *Westworld*, that, in many ways, goes to the heart of some of the key issues for this book. A remake of an earlier 1970s production, *Westworld*, is nominally concerned with the relationships between humans and a form of synthetic life described as hosts. Within an exclusive theme park, guests can enact their desires without inhibition against these machines, thus leading to depravity and degradation. The hosts are programmed with a predetermined narrative loop that they follow within a scheme devised by the park's creator Robert Ford. To develop a more life-like quality, Ford introduces certain glitches into the systematic reset that sees the hosts memory wiped, repaired, and sent back into the world anew each day. These "reveries" begin to initiate the recollection of previous experiences for certain hosts that ultimately sees them emerge into a state of awareness and, finally, consciousness. *Westworld* is a high-budget drama and exemplifies the investment strategies of the streaming platforms that cedes creative control to showrunners, writers, and directors. As a drama about a fictional world within a world, the show has an engaging reflexivity that constantly asks questions about human-machine interactions, big data, and social engineering. It undoubtedly has the cinematic quality described earlier and across its, so far, three seasons, it raises quite profound questions that relate to many of the key themes of this book.

Finally, the concluding chapter, "Between habit and thought", reconsiders the terms of the book's title to articulate something of the validity of the argument for investing one's time, attention, and desires in these TV serial dramas.

Note that serials are referenced throughout with season number, episode number, followed by time code of hour.minutes.seconds. All time codes derive from the DVD editions listed, and there may be slight variation if watching via a streaming platform. Text in courier font is a transcription from the serial itself. Emphasis in all quotations is in the original unless otherwise stated.

1 *Mr Robot*

Eyeing the apocalypse

4 seasons
Episodes: 45
Dates first aired
1: June 2015
2: July 2016
3: October 2017
4: October 2019
Creator: Sam Esmail
Showrunner: Sam Esmail
Main Cast: Rami Malek, Christian Slater, Carly Chalkin, Portia Doubleday, Martin Wallström, Grace Gummer, BD Wong, Elliot Vilar
Cinematography: Tod Campbell
Composer: Mac Quayle
Location: New York City
Original network: USA Network

The pilot episode of *Mr Robot*, with the title "eps1.0_hellofriend.mov", premiered via online and video on-demand services on 27 May 2015, before starting its run on the cable channel USA Network a month later. The final episode was screened on 22 December 2019. It had a surprising level of success given, not least, its hacker-culture focus and anti-capitalist theme of the first few seasons. The drama is centred on the character of Elliot Alderson, who works as a cyber-security engineer in New York, whilst secretly being the leader of a hacktivist group, fsociety, which works out of an abandoned amusement arcade on Coney Island. The show received critical acclaim with all seasons scoring high on meta-review sites and won a Golden Globe, Emmy, and Peabody Award. Cyber-security organizations and hackers universally praised its portrayal of computer hacking and IT security issues for their verisimilitude. Across its four seasons, multiple plot lines were constructed and aesthetically the serial created stand-out episodes that showcased the possibilities of cinematic form and ambition within the format. As a completed serial, it highlights the way in which narrative can be operationalized to recuperate the many expressive moments that seemed to offer possibilities of

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other worlds, metaphorically and, in this case, literally, as the suggestion of an alternate reality is ultimately closed down. At its conclusion, it presents itself as not primarily motivated by these "fantasies" of anti-capitalism but rather a story of the intimate workings of a troubled mind.

The focus in this chapter is therefore directed rather more towards the earlier seasons as the show's aesthetic techniques provided challenging imagery that expressed something of the dislocation of Elliot's sense of self and his world that was driven by rage at the system and a desire to bring down those who seem to control it. This is a show that exemplifies the ways in which contemporary serials can have a conceptual and aesthetic density with episodes that have outstanding levels of acting, writing, direction, and design.

Wide-eyed fear (The ZX Spectrum Said)

> And the more it breaks down, the more it schizophrenizes, the better it works, the American way.
>
> (Deleuze & Guattari, 1984: 151)

> The strong fascination with the eyes, across cultures and ages derives, I suggest, from basic evolutionary mechanisms.
>
> (Baron-Cohen, 1997: 114)

The title of this section is a play upon Brian Massumi's article from 2005, "Fear (The Spectrum Said)". In this complex and detailed essay, Massumi is concerned to map out the transformation of the US government's strategy of fear management as one that shifted into a mode operating at an affective level of social control, as well as a more familiar ideological one. For Massumi, fear has become dispersed throughout the minds and bodies of the citizens who respond to the affective modulation of the colour-coded terror alert-system in complex and, ultimately, unpredictable ways as an individual's life oscillates in self-perpetuating cycles of differential reinforcement driven by mass media activations of fear stimulus. I am not concerned here to critique his argument but, rather, to try and connect with certain aspects of its formulations to evaluate how the serial *Mr Robot* can be argued to make manifest certain of these processes in a further moment of enfolding of the imaginative world of television drama into the techniques of fear. As was explored in the introduction, the delivery systems of cable television and streaming content connect more dynamically to the habits of viewers than conventional TV and this process can be perceived aesthetically in the cinematographic strategies by which the serial communicates these affective circuits of fear that Massumi identifies as culturally emergent. Further, Massumi is referring to the colour-coded spectrum that was used as part of the terror alert but "being on the spectrum" is a phrase used to describe someone who is diagnosed with some symptoms of autism, or, as he correctly describes it, "neurodiversity" (Massumi, 2014). This is something that can apply to the main character of Elliot Alderson and is central to how the show navigates the paranoid and uncertain world we encounter on screen through his point of view.

As a popular TV serial, *Mr Robot* very effectively connects with a number of contemporary anxieties produced by a profoundly destabilized global financial and personal economy that is subjected to invasive tracking and threatening data leaks, all of which effects a generalized state of paranoia and fear of societal breakdown. Similarly, Elliot suffers from Dissociative Identity Disorder and his fragmented and confused state of mind, whilst engaging in a plot to disrupt the functioning of the world's biggest financial corporation, is the dramatic conceit that drives the narrative. His drug addiction, inability to differentiate truth from illusion, and skill at computer hacking, all encompass key features of contemporary cognitive-cultural capitalism. What the opening quotation from Deleuze and Guattari points to is the potential for the active incorporation of the decoding and scrambling of codes, intrinsic to their conceptualization of schizophrenia, into the processes of capitalism itself rather than the belief that this process is necessarily subversive. Whilst they assert that the revolutionary nature of the schizophrenic cannot be finally subsumed by capitalism, the question is whether a popular drama such as *Mr Robot* can be seen as a persuasive attempt to precisely effect this subsumption or, on the contrary, whether it contains any fragments of thinking that can initiate a different response to the strategies of affective capture driving this neurological-economic machine. Inspired by William Connolly's assertion in relation to films that, "[t]echnique provides a medium through which culture and brains infuse each other" (2002: xiii), I want to start by mapping out some key techniques of the show's televisual production.

Mr Robot (2.10:0.37.10)

(1.01:1.04.18)

Mr Robot

How can you tell . . . that it's me? How do you know you're not talking to him right now?

Angela

Your eyes . . . you never try to look away.

(3.01:0.44.45)

The organ privileged in this network through which the flows of *Mr Robot* are organized is the eyes of the central characters. The title of this section

makes a reference to "wide-eyed fear" and places this motif as a key element of the show's visual focus. Throughout the serial, the eyes of the actor-characters are used to generate a sense of fear and apprehension. This is indeed a "wide-eyed" fear that operates at a level of affective intensity that circulates between the on-screen world and ours, where we as viewers act as the conduit between these ocular circuits. As a communicative medium, the TV serial has the potential to work as a formation that can connect in different ways with the outside. *Mr Robot* takes numerous existing televisual and cinematic codes and creates something original; it breaks new ground, new televisual territory, so to speak.

This focus on eyes is not an exaggeration of an incidental detail to support a tenuous speculation; rather, it is an integral part of the show's approach to the subject of creating the world of this, apparently, anti-capitalist hacker drama. In an interview, the show's Director of Photography, Tod Campbell, exclaims at the actor Rami Malek's facial features how "[t]his ocular casting coup" helped determine how he came to shape the distinctive look of the serial (Collins, 2015). For the cinematographer, this element relates to the alienating effects of technology and how to convey this and, according to Campbell, Malek's eyes thus influenced his choice of lenses used to shoot the drama:

> We use Cooke S5s, which are more round than other lenses, they really accentuate curves, and they help sculpt the face a little more. I chose those lenses because Rami's eyes are so big, and so are a lot of the other characters. Elliot, Darlene, Angela, – all of the people we love have these big, giant, bulbous eyes.
>
> (quoted in Collins, 2015)

These three characters, Elliot, Darlene, Angela, are the ones traumatized by the loss of a parent to the corporate maleficence of E Corp and so carry the emotional energy for the act of revenge that seemingly motivates the hack event.

For the show's creator and controlling vision, Sam Esmail, this use of eyes is a key element in the way in which he can maintain a delicate tension when exploring the intricacies of the mental health of the character. His instruction to Rami Malek, the actor who plays the central character, was to internalize the big emotions. Malek responds to this: "When things leak out of your eyes or your facial expressions, it's so much more effective than spilling it all" (quoted in Drumming, 2015). So, the focus on the eyes of the actor-characters connects elements of technology, bodies, fear, and the perception/reaction gap, in an affective assemblage that disturbs the familiar and often clichéd image of this world of computer hackers. The working through the eyes of the characters seems to replicate the central quality of the show, that of whether we can trust what we "see"? This replication undermines the coherence of the bodies on screen and gives them a sense of vibrating, a deterritorialization or a dis-organ-ization that opens up this process of creating multiple connections (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988: 30).

Today, in contrast to even the relatively short time since Massumi was writing, the fear that is stimulated is not simply of a terrorist attack. What *Mr Robot*

describes in detail is the fear of the data hack, the Sony hack, the personal server hack, and the Ashley Madison hack, where all that is private is made public and searchable.[1] Here, shame is often the fuel for the engine of fear in this media machine. In an age of sophisticated web-tracking mechanisms, network activity and records are never truly deleted; traces are always left and available to be recovered and exposed. Elliot, on the other hand, does forget. He forgets who he is, whom he has talked to, who the people around him are, what he has done. This is figured as part of his Dissociative Personality Disorder that, of course, has a dramatic function, allowing for reveals and surprises that challenge the viewers' expectations right up until the final plot revelation. However, it also usefully points to how, in many ways, the serial channels so effectively characteristics of contemporary capitalism and the symptoms it produces in certain subjects. As Mark Fisher writes: "[M]emory disorder provides a compelling analogy for the glitches in capitalist realism" (Fisher, 2009: 60).

Elliot is special not simply because he is a genius hacker; those have been seen before to the point of banality in film and television and they are just wish-fulfilment fantasies. Rather, he is special because of the way he breaks down. He gives us the sense of the desperate struggle of existence on the line between one and the other: Elliot/Mr Robot; Allsafe/fsociety; one/zero, a corruption of a binary code that he keeps losing control of. Elliot does have the power to move through the walls of this world but the cost to him is the fragility of his sanity. His fragmenting into multiple personalities is a dramatization of what happens when you position yourself on the edge, the edge of the actual and the virtual, the edge of the apparatus. If you tilt this apparatus, the danger is that you will tip into the abyss. So, Elliot splits, he divides, as a strategy for coping with this. In her 1989 book, *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech*, Avital Ronnell writes of how:

> The schizophrenic gives us exemplary access to the fundamental shifts in affectivity and corporeal organization produced and commanded by technology, in part because the schizophrenic inhabits these other territories.
>
> (1991: 109)

Later, she states: "Schizophrenia never had an easy access code" (1991: 111). For Ronnell, as for her inspiration of this idea, Deleuze and Guattari, schizophrenia is a figure of a subject who is not contained by the processes of Oedipalization and has not acceded to the regulatory framework of identity formation. Not limited by the psychoanalytic lack that drives desire in its theatre of representation, the schizophrenic evades the webs of signifiers that saturate society and works to create the real. A central preoccupation of the serial *Mr Robot* is the constant questioning of whether Elliot, in those moments of the greatest destruction of the system of capital, is not simply being manipulated by a different, more powerful agent seeking to emerge stronger out of the catastrophic destruction he enacts. Nevertheless, the attraction of Elliot as a character is precisely his refusal to be contained by any of these individual strategies and his constant oscillation between the contradictory poles of schizophrenia and ego. The point is that

both are necessary and rather than Elliot being an exception, he articulates the generalized state of being within capitalism where we are coerced into enacting the phase of primary identification of looking in the mirror to see who we are. Because Elliot is located at the boundary limit between individual and collective, he is prone to breaking down and collapsing from Elliot into Tyrell, Angela, or Mr Robot, each connecting with the other through their eyes in an ocular network of anxiety that activates each one in an endless cycle of what Massumi describes as "bodily irritability" (2005: 46). This is illustrated here as Elliot looks into the mirror and in subliminal flashes all the key personalities are recomposed in a series of hooded faces.

Mr Robot (1.08:0.39.30–0.39.36)

The schizophrenia operating here is a conceptual one that is useful to theorize the condition of living within capitalism and is distinct from the medical condition. Yet, in terms of the actual medical condition, schizophrenia is now most accurately diagnosed precisely through technologies that track eye movements, using high-resolution cameras and algorithmic models that can detect abnormalities to be used as diagnostic biomarkers for the condition (Benson et al., 2012). In each mode of analysis, fictional or real, there is a connection between computational technologies and eyes that position the subject on a spectrum of behavioural identification that seeks to locate a flickering sense of illusive, yet compelling, identity.

There is another way to think of Elliot as breaking down and that is that he displays characteristics which relate to certain theories of mind and conditions such as autism. This has been described as subjects manifesting a lack of mechanisms for reading emotion and an absence of the ability to connect to the minds of others through the standard facial recognition patterns processed through seeing. In the foreword to developmental psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen's book on autism, *Mindblindess*, John Tooby and Leda Cosmides write of how the study of those who show symptoms of these particular types of social impairments provides deep insights into these "psychophysical" processes in contradistinction to those who have successfully mastered such techniques of connecting the unobservable (such as intention) with the observable (behavioural displays):

> Yet even well-designed machinery can break down. When the machinery is fundamental to the operation of our minds, the results can be tragic – and deeply illuminating for the cognitive scientist. Breakdowns of specific modules result in subtractions from the impaired individual's model of and experience of the world.
>
> (1997: xviii)

The model of mind that Baron-Cohen formulates is one that uses the analogy of the computer to move away from the idea of an external reality imposing its organization on the brain and, instead, towards the idea of a cognitive architecture of thousands of computational modules acting in confederation to assemble the multiple fragments of the world into a form that can resolve the adaptive problems inherent to the social formation of all societies, from hunter-gatherer to today. Now, it is not argued here that the character of Elliot is an accurate portrayal of a specific medical condition but rather that the collection of symptoms is directly related to the emergence of communication technologies that have begun to shatter the established modes of human interaction and he is positioned as on the leading edge of this process with all its consequences.

If we look at how cognitive theories of the mind have been addressed by film theory, then potentially useful approaches can be developed. For instance, David Bordwell asks in an essay from 2003 titled "Who blinked first?"

> How do film characters gaze or glance or peer or simply look at each other? What patterns of looking can we find, and what functions can we assign them? How do these patterns shape performance, and how might they accord with broader stylistic strategies employed by filmmakers? How do we as viewers respond to these patterns?
>
> (2007: 327)

Bordwell accurately describes how the look between on-screen characters is different from normal real-life situations. Screen editing works to produce a very particular dynamic between persons and is far more focused on the relationship of attention between characters as the staging of the scene elevates the reactions of others in dialogue (Carrick et al., 2007). Here we see a scene from towards the end of season 2 as the characters Elliot and Angela are locked into an ocular circuit that drives the narrative and carries the intensity between them:

Mr Robot (2.10:0.38.19)

Actors have, for a long time, recognized the importance of the blink and the need to hold it off as a sign of dominance. For Bordwell, it is important to ground any discussion of the screen convention on established human behaviour that he posits as being activated by a filmmaker in terms of "moderate constructivism", where acting stylizes standard human interactions (2007: 335). However, as we push into the twenty-first century, and technology begins to radically alter the level of intensity of interaction between human and digital media, a similarly radical shift begins to become visible in the on-screen figures that carry the affective resonance of the experience of this destabilizing world. In *Mr Robot*, the choices made by director and cinematographer are more than simply adopted convention and work to activate this ocular circuit in a reflective way that connects it to the serials themes of technology, resistance, and paranoia: "It's all in the eyes", as the film-acting trope states.

The motif of eyes is not limited to the faces of the characters but also extends to various scenic backdrops that all feature images of faces with enlarged eyes. This is from a dream sequence from Season 1, episode 4:

Mr Robot (1.04:0.30.18)

Later in season 1, episode 6 opens with a shot of a painting by the Dominican artist Gilberto Hernandez Ortega (below). Here, Elliot's voice-over links the image directly with these themes:

Elliot (V.O)

I feel the sensation. Fight or flight. It's constant. I should just pick one. I, Elliot Alderson, am flight. I am fear. I am anxiety, terror, panic.

For Baron-Cohen, the ability of humans to detect the presence of eyes and their direction of gaze is an evolutionary endowment that has functioned in a number of

Mr Robot (1.06:0.01.04)

different ways but most significantly as a kind of "early warning system" against predators with clearly identifiable physiological reactions (1997: 98). But he is also clear that in higher primates it feeds into circuits of socialization, hierarchical structures and acts as a dominating force, as he says, "Gaze gives an instant snapshot of social status in a group" (1997: 102). Evidence for what he calls the "enormous vocabulary of eye meanings" can be found across all human civilizations in poetry and drama (1997: 109). In this sense, *Mr Robot* is the latest manifestation of this phenomenon, where the feeling of connection we make with another, facilitated through the eye contact, has become technologized even further in machines of electronic communication.

Mr Robot (3.06:0.07.22)

The character of Elliot, played by Rami Malek, functions as an actor-network who communicates his conflict through his facial expressions, primarily his eyes. Deleuze writes that it is the face that gathers the affect as a complex entity:

> The close-up makes the face the pure building material of the affect, its "hyle". Hence these strange cinematographic nuptials in which the actress provides her face and the material capacity of her parts, whilst the director invents the affect or the form of the expressible which borrows and puts them to work.
> (1986: 103)

Elliot's face is in a constant state of becoming fearful where the question is always, "What have you (I) done?" Assembling the face out of its multiple components, what we see is Elliot as zone of indetermination, a surface across which the desire for certainty flows relentlessly. Yet, its communicative power goes beyond the individual and works to produce circuits of anxiety and fear through the repetition of the close-up. Within the drama, there is always a deferral of the apocalyptic violence of the total collapse of the system as each final stage is revealed as simply another ruse whilst something else happens elsewhere as part of a further plan only just beginning to be revealed in a fractal-like turn.

Mr Robot (1.10:0.35.53)

Elliot's insecurity is driven by the awareness that his "face" may not be the one he thinks it is. The show reveals for the viewers that he has another face that only he and we can see. This is the face that drives the project forward relentlessly, the face of his (dead) father, whose image is derived from memory. In this sense, then, the face here functions as Deleuze argues it does: As the virtual, as the very realm

of potential for new possibilities. The appearance of Mr Robot for Elliot is the emergence of the possibility to act, for the possibility of another world. When Mr Robot appears, he unleashes forces of dangerous intensity; he forges circuits, networks of activists, uploads YouTube videos calling for the people to rise up whilst wearing a mask to maintain anonymity but which is another kind of face.

The pairing of Mr Robot/Elliot is one of a series of different pairings at work in this way. We can consider the pairing of Elliot's face and his eyes as they function in this affective assemblage. The face, of course, is already a complex arrangement of different surfaces and muscles interacting in a constant movement between states. However, whilst micro-movements occur in muscles around the mouth and eyes and interact, the fear expression we see on Elliot in terms of his face is relatively stable yet the wide-eyed look operates with an affect that is qualitatively different. Deleuze writes that this extends to anything that operates with this pairing of surface and expressive movement:

> Each time we discover these two poles in something – reflecting surface and intensive micro-movements – we can say that this thing has been treated as a face (. . .): it has been "envisaged" or rather "faceified" (. . .), and in turn it stares at us (. . .), it looks at us . . . even if it does not resemble a face.
>
> (1986: 88)

The repetition throughout the serial of the focus on Elliot's eyes works towards the pole of intensity that Deleuze describes here. The unity of his facial organization is overwhelmed by the irruption of his wide-eyed stare that destabilizes the more familiar circuits of looks and glances that make up his blankness to which those around him are more used to. The face that seeks to violently interrupt the smooth running of the machine within which he has positioned himself, whether the corporate realm of Allsafe or the terroristic network of fsociety, is one where separate elements, in this case the eyes, take on a life of their own. Deleuze describes this and says that at certain moments it is as if "the traits of faceity were escaping the outline" (1986: 89), where this face "experiences or feels something, and has value through the intensive series that its parts successively traverse as paroxysm, each part taking on a kind of momentary independence" (1986: 88–89).

As mentioned previously, the affective power of this is evident because it flows across multiple faces within the drama, not just Elliot but Angela and Darlene as well. It is as part of network and series that this movement occurs, that isn't simply about different individuals but a breakdown of individuality into a far more amorphous and pulsating collective that has no singular direction. At each turn, as each character acts to fundamentally change the course of the world, confusion piles upon confusion. Even by the end of the serial, none of them is much clearer about what they have been engaged in. Within *Mr Robot*, faces connect and combine in ever more complex series. As Richard Rushton writes in an article on Deleuze and faces:

> The intensive face, on the one hand, explores and opens up the possibilities of expansion into and connection with the world and with other worlds. The

> intensive face enables a dizzying expansion of possibilities due to its multiple connections – its serial aspect.
>
> (Rushton, 2002: 231)

Mr Robot (2.11:0.33.00) (2.12:0.33.53)

The eyes of these characters, Elliot, Darlene, Angela become the connection points in an expanding series rather than towards an interiority. They function as crossing points *between* the characters and begin the process of dismantling the face; they push towards the inhuman.

Deleuze and Guattari ask whether to dismantle the face, the dominant system of overcoding is, in reference to Henry Miller in *Tropic of Capricorn*, "no longer to look at or into the eyes but to swim through them" (1988: 187). The relationship between Elliot and Mr Robot, Elliot and Angela, is an inter-face, the point at which two exteriorities meet. From an evolutionary perspective, the human face is the result of a process of specialization which has reorganized features of the head for the needs of communication. Within the fiction-science of *Mr Robot*, what can be seen, perhaps, is a speculation on an imagined evolutionary extension as the characters' eyes protrude in this exaggerated way to facilitate the creation of new digitalized interfaces. The shift from humans interacting with objects as tools, an extension of certain human actions, to managing industrial machines, introducing the principle of autonomy away from human action, passes now on to the next stage where the human body is a tool of the machine (Stiegler, 1998). Digitalization intensifies and accelerates this process to produce outlines of fundamentally new forms of social existence and embodied relationships to technology, as the surface of the body is pulled and forcibly tailored to fit the inhuman habits of the machine. However, as Deleuze and Guattari state, dismantling the face can lead to madness, "Is it by chance that schizos lose their sense of the face, their own and others?" (1988: 188). The faces, here, are becoming strange.

Yet, in the last instance as the serial concludes its very last scenes, we are returned to a more reassuring sense of Elliot as someone who, to cope with his childhood trauma, created multiple selves to manage this process. In the final scene of the final episode, all of this comes together as the camera pulls back to reveal the eye of Elliot. Here the projector lens, a kind of camera in reverse, tracks back to its point of origin.

Mr Robot (4.13:0.48.01)

Finally, then, we see as the "real" Elliot, the face of his sister, a return to the care of the family:

Mr Robot (4.13:0.48.21)

Arguably, this recuperation of the disruptive potential of the face is a sign of how Esmail steers the aesthetic techniques of the show onto safer territory as he shifts the politics of the speculations of subversive system-hacks into the

domain of the maternal and against the attempts to destabilize the workings of neoliberalism.

The attention economy of cognitive capitalism

> Time is everything, man is nothing; he is, at the most, time's carcass.
> (Karl Marx) (quoted in Massumi, 1993: 16)

> Every hacker has her fixation, you hack people, I hack time.
> (Whiterose) (1.08: 00.24.22)

Within the attention economy, the eye is the organ channelling perception and hence becomes the target of technologies of capture, tracking, and neural reward circuits even as haptic technologies advance (Bueno, 2016). A key component of this technology is, therefore, the need to measure this most valuable of commodities – time. There is a continuous reference within *Mr Robot* to time both in terms of economy, where the character Whiterose measures out her high-value time into active units, and time as something that can be lost or even potentially altered; such is the implied promise of season 3, a promise that time itself can be recoded as a way to overcome trauma.

One of the engaging qualities of the show is how it connects contemporary and past computer technologies and artefacts that reveal something of a kind of media archaeology. Indeed, Mr Robot is himself a literal rendition of a formative moment of both Elliot's childhood and, as a PC shop owner, an agent of expansion for personal computing that was central to the establishment of the internet-driven information age from the 1990s. This flashback functions as more than simply nostalgia and can be seen as an intrinsic element of both Elliot's split personality and the emergence of an adaptive and flexible form of capitalism, capable of continuous modulation and heterogenesis (Parikka, 2016: 65–71). It is with the wide-spread dissemination of home computers in the 1980s such as the ZX Spectrum in the UK (hence the reference in the earlier sub-heading) and the Commodore 64 in the USA that simultaneously saw the writing and circulation of the first self-replicating viruses spread via infected floppy disks passed between people, something referenced in *Mr Robot* as the Dark Army corrupt Allsafe via a "free" music CD. The fear of being infected by a computer virus and the necessity of purchasing antiviral protection software emerged in the late 1980s when there was a wider cultural panic about viruses (Parikka, 2016: 62–65). It is out of this cultural matrix that hackers such as Elliot emerged, able to take the technology and reconfigure its systems in ways they were not intended for.

At this point, it is worth asking the question of whether *Mr Robot* can be seen to articulate a critique of the processes of power that form its subject matter: Rapacious capitalism and ruthless capitalists, political and economic elites, computer hackers, global terror networks. The starting point for the extension of the

Mr Robot (1.09:0.03.25) (2.11:0.12.41)

plan to hack the debt records of E Corp begins in episode 1 as Elliot is brought in to identify and eliminate a virus in the company servers and to re-establish system integrity. Fear is evident, therefore, from the very beginning of the drama as a computer virus threatens the financial viability of Allsafe, the company run by Gideon Goddard, who extends a personal hand to Elliot whilst desperately trying to use his technical skills, even if slowly becoming aware that Elliot is behind the hack. The consequences of the proposed hack of apocalyptic intent that unfold through season 2 are imagined as a system re-set and a shifting of all debt back to zero, but which actually makes manifest merely another characteristic of the contemporary economic system: Disaster capitalism (Klein, 2007). Here fear functions to provide an opportunity for increased securitization and military patrols, the emergence of a new E Corp digital currency, and UN acquiescence to China taking over the Congo as a pay-off for its bailing out of the American banking system. As Elliot and the few surviving remnants of fsociety work to reverse the hack and try and reboot the old system, they are shown to internalize an important neo-liberal lesson: The current system is a necessary evil and better than the chaos that is unleashed if the authority of its institutions is drastically undermined. In this way, it fits best with a certain notion of cynicism, where Elliot's rage at the iniquities of the "1% of the 1%", manifesting as the E Corp hack eliminating all records of personal debt, is revealed as simply another level of manipulation by elements of those faceless powers. The destabilization of the system he unleashes sees a societal breakdown and a return to a cash economy with all the attendant problems of limited supply and collapse of basic business processes that impoverishes the majority and allows for the introduction of a cryptocurrency that significantly increases the corporation's power. By aligning themselves with the mercenary forces of the Dark Army, we see the fate of the members of fsociety follow the familiar pattern of this television trope as they are individually eliminated once no longer considered useful. Elliot is a character who is able to access secrets and knows how the system works; therefore, he is not simply a believer in the ideology of the system. However, the lesson he learns through the show is that acting on that knowledge results in an even worse outcome than the existing regime; in this way he epitomizes the cynical subject (Žižek, 1989). The character of Elliot becomes not the idealistic opposite to the cynical Mr Robot, who merely shrugs at the thought of deaths of workers or

civilians as "shit happens when you try to fight the system", but actually another kind of cynicism as expressed by the priest at the end of Kafka's *The Trial*, who responds that "it is not necessary to accept everything as true, one must only accept it as necessary" (2009: 159). The problem is not that Elliot doesn't have the knowledge of the truth of the system; rather, it is that this knowledge is nullified by the lack of any political *vision*. The defining point is that his action of hacking the system to initiate an apocalyptic event must inevitably lead to this conclusion, as all acts of terrorism carried out on behalf of the masses inevitably do.

Hacking the apocalypse

Mr Robot

I'm only supposed to be your prophet. You're supposed to be my God!

(1.10:00.38.13)

The cyber-apocalypse will, supposedly, make a new world possible, but who or what does Elliot appeal to as an authority that can validate his actions? This lack threatens to undermine the entire process as he systematically retracts, trusting a smaller and smaller circle of people until finally in the last moments of the final episode of season 2, he cries out: "I am the only one that exists!" At which point, ironically, he is shot by another character who in his uncertainty he has deemed to be imaginary.

But Elliot has bigger problems to address in terms of his apocalyptic hack of E Corp's financial records. In the aftermath of the data wipe, a general state of chaos is, predictably enough, the outcome. Whilst the government struggles to achieve order and reassure a frightened public that it can resolve the situation, a return to a small-scale cash economy is put into effect. Rather than this effecting a collapse of E Corp, however, Philip Price, the CEO, uses this crisis to manoeuvre the company into a position of even greater dominance through developing a bitcoin currency. Reworking the old joke about Marx and capitalism, we could say that whilst Elliot has read Naomi Klein's *Disaster Capitalism*, Philip Price has read it and understood it. The drama usefully stages the potential within any revolutionary event for forces of reaction to simultaneously mobilize at this moment of radical reconfiguration, potentially "every bit as innovative", as the Marxist philosopher Alain Badiou puts in his work *Ethics* (2001: lvii).

By the end of season 2, Elliot and his alter ego Mr Robot are about to blow up the building that contains the reassembled paper records of the world's debt, a sign that they are condemned to an endless repetition of their act. However, once the claim to appearance as truth has been destroyed, as Elliot claims, the problem is how to establish a ground from which such actions can be guaranteed. As the singular mastermind behind the hack, even if his underlings provide labour to the task, Elliot is trapped within an unstable relationship to his dead father, who appears in hallucinatory form, driving him to ever more violent actions in an effort to secure closure. Here, he rages at attempts to naively appeal to a transcendent power, expressed in a

Karamozovian moment (Dostoevsky, 2009) in a group therapy session taking place in a chapel underneath a cross and the figure of Jesus:

> Elliot
>
> Is that what God does? He helps? Tell me, why didn't God help my innocent friend who died for no reason while the guilty ran free?
>
> Okay. Fine. Forget the one-offs. How about the countless wars declared in His name?
>
> Okay. Fine. Let's skip the random, meaningless murder for a second, shall we? How about the racist, sexist, phobia soup we've all been drowning in because of Him?
>
> And I'm not just talking about Jesus. I'm talking about *all* organized religion. Exclusive groups created to manage control. A dealer getting people hooked on the drug of hope. His followers, nothing but addicts who want their hit of bullshit to keep their dopamine of ignorance. Addicts. Afraid to believe the truth. That there's no order. There's no power. That all religions are, just metastasizing mind worms, meant to divide us so it's easier to rule us by the charlatans that wanna run us. All we are to them are paying fanboys of their poorly-written sci-fi franchise.
>
> If I don't listen to my imaginary friend, why the fuck should I listen to yours? People think their worship is some key to happiness. That's just how He owns you. Even I'm not crazy enough to believe that distortion of reality.
>
> So, fuck God! He's not a good enough scapegoat for me.
>
> (2.03:00.45.04).

Elliot can rail against the absurdity of a caring, purposeful God, but at the same time he never ceases to search for the truth in what is an increasingly feverish drive to establish a stable foundation. Yet this merely sees him wracked by torment due to this irresolvable spiral of doubt. Likewise, the 5/9 hack, as the event is named, has apparently not produced a new world, simply a degraded old one that is materially worse for the ordinary people it was meant to free. The primary outcome is actually to see E Corp emerge stronger and take even greater financial control. Elliot can denounce God but the question then is, does he simply shift his appeal to authority elsewhere rather than establish this from within himself and in relation to a collective? As a work of fiction, the posing of these dilemmas

foregrounds wider cultural issues in circulation and in their own way makes manifest contemporary fears and certain challenging responses.

So how has philosophy addressed such questions as they relate to an explicitly resistant and political project of technologically driven transformation? At this point, I want to turn again to Alain Badiou and his work *Being and Event* to unpack some of these issues and think through the relationship between event and subjectivity at the heart of it (2005). In this text, Badiou locates the human in the infinite universe, lacking any inherent meaning or value, where all we can say ontologically about the world is that it consists of what he describes as "mutiplicities of mutiplicities" (2005: 29) that never finally resolve but rather operate like a fractal pattern, rejecting the assertion of any metaphysical moment of "One". Badiou, therefore, posits mathematics as ontology, as this is what gives us our only access to being as it allows for a modelling of human situations via Cantor's set theory. Into this realm erupts the event as that which is more than the sum of its individual actions whose emergence is unpredicted and unforeseen by the instituted knowledges.

It is here that the void, a realm of pure multiplicity and a kind of sublime abyss, which haunts all that can be counted in the Badiouan sense, is figuratively where Elliot is placed as he brings into existence this particular event. This, however, precipitates within him a fragmentation due to the sheer scale of what he is attempting and, in what can be seen as a compensatory gesture, generates the nostalgic hallucination of Mr Robot, whilst he rails against the inauthenticity of contemporary life:

> Is any of it real? I mean, look at this, look at it! A world built on fantasy, synthetic emotions in the form of pills, psychological warfare in the form of advertising, mind-altering chemicals in the form of food, brainwashing seminars in the form of media, controlled isolated bubbles in the form of social networks.
>
> (1.10:00.45:12)

Yet, he seeks to elevate himself into what Badiou defines as a subject, one who is driven by a fidelity, a faith in the event as a kind of truth procedure and found at "the *junction* of an intervention and a rule of faithful connection" (2005: 239).

Elliot lives in a world of code, connections, and the digital traces of human weakness through which he is able to manipulate reality, yet he can only do this by putting on a mask. The apocalyptic event that becomes the driving force to finally and completely reveal the truth of the world to him and everyone else ultimately fails to do this. The discursive oscillation between the characters of Elliot and Mr Robot plays out the tensions inherent in the militant becoming that demands fidelity to the event as the father-figure challenges him to step up and act; to paraphrase Badiou, he defies him to "become the immortal you are capable of becoming" (2001: 51). At the heart of this process is a paradox of commitment to an event, something that will change the world, but which, for it to be initiated, must entail a certain kind of objectification, a process the event is precisely designed to counter. What the drama plays out, I would argue, is a version of a Christian existential dilemma, or existential theatre, described by Gabriel Marcel as creative fidelity,

where the slipping into dogma, seen in the figure of Mr Robot, is a loss of the response to the presence of the other to which the cause is supposedly directed (2002). Whilst Elliot recognizes what Marcel would call an idolatory in Mr Robot as he relentlessly pursues the goal of the destruction of the data and the lives that go with that action, he is confronted with the binary choice of the militant who in his fervour demands of him: "Tell me something Elliot! Are you a one or a zero? That's the question you have to ask yourself. Are you a yes or a no? Are you going to act or not?" (1.02:00.24.16). But Elliot expresses the doubts of those who ask, Why should we commit ourselves to this life of fidelity? By what or whom are we called? The rejection of an external transcendent agency plays out in *Mr Robot* as an interior dialogue that fragments into endless, fractal digressions, unable to resolve into a final authoritative answer. This fits with both a contemporary mood and the serial form itself that operates with a never-finally-resolved motivation. Elliot and Mr Robot appear trapped in a zero-sum game, where one seeks to initiate a change in the world with all its attendant violence and the other shows signs of the sense of exhaustion that hovers over any shift between event and void.

We can further ask the question as to whether this is in fact an event? Stripped of any engagement with a wider collective, it is the action of a single mind where the fsociety hackers are really just subdivisions of Elliot's personality. To wake up one morning to find that without warning, the records of debt have been wiped would not propel us into a new world of freedom or a fresh start but rather a materially worse one stuck in a state of limbo whilst the same powerful forces regroup ready to emerge with even tighter economic and political control and is concomitant with the state's response to acts of terrorism. To this extent, the serial offers a liberal critique of the wish-fulfilment fantasies of this techno-anarchist idea that has actually nothing to do with imagining revolution as a collective process of radical social transformation, out of which there is a potential for something truly new to emerge.

At this point, we can consider an aspect of the show that resonates greatly with religious notions of the apocalypse, namely, the encryption process at the heart of the 5/9 hack. What we find in *Mr Robot* is not an attempt at destruction *per se* such as an attempt to delete the data records but rather the encryption of all the data using a highly secure 256AES key. This key is then set to self-destruct, making it impossible for E Corp to retrieve the data through any decryption. Therefore, to encrypt is make hidden or secret. The word crypt also derives etymologically from the same source and refers to ritual rooms found beneath religious buildings. This sense of descending rather than ascending is a useful way of characterizing Elliot's journey here as he goes from light into the darkness of the vault. In modern terms, crypt is also a burial vault where family members are interred, hence, the spectral-form of his father.

Creatively, all of these associations become manifest in *Mr Robot*, a serial that is nominally about living in an advanced computer-based technological society of surveillance and control. Visually within the drama, this opposition between such spaces can be seen in the light and order of the official and sanctified spaces of All Safe and E Corp with their corporate design and brightly lit offices in comparison to the hacker collective fsociety that operates out of disused Coney Island arcade, a sort of crypt where his dead father is alive and acts as the leader of the project.

In an encryption process, the key is what allows the data to be de-ciphered; otherwise, it remains meaningless. In the show, the key itself is destroyed but Elliot remains as the agent of deciphering, the only one who can engineer a decoding. Being in possession of the key is therefore to have absolute power as a mediator. Partly, then, this is a process for establishing secure communication between parties whilst aware of the presence of adversaries whose role is to attempt to hack into the conversations. In cryptography this agent is given the designation "Eve", the one who accesses forbidden knowledge. For Elliot, possession of this key gives him enormous power, as he is able to intervene into a person's life and make changes that will affect them profoundly, as we see throughout the show whether a coffee shop owner exposed as a child porn profiteer or the married boyfriend of his therapist.

Each one is confronted by Elliot and presented with the hacked information rendering them powerless. But for Elliot such power drives him to ever-greater isolation as he draws away from social interactions with people and instead retreats into loneliness, paranoia, and hallucination. Ultimately, by season 2, he is literally in a prison of his own making, reminiscent of T.S. Eliot's reference in *The Waste Land*, a poem centrally concerned with the degradation of daily life because of technology:

> I have heard the key
> Turn in the door once and turn once only
> We think of the key, each in his prison
> Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison.
>
> (1922: lines 410–416)

As described earlier in the article, at the heart of *Mr Robot* is the idea of a secret and the role of the apocalypse in revealing it to the world, a revelation. Elliot is the decoder of the conspiracy that seeks to continue to hide this truth from the world; "a con doesn't work without the con-fidence", as Philip Price puts it in response to the state of panic post the 5/9 hack (2.02:00.09.03). By seeking out and confronting this conspiracy, he slips into paranoia, "I think they are following me" because the machine itself that he confronts *is* already paranoid, what Deleuze and Guattari describe as the "paranoid social machine" (1984). Elliot perceives the persecuting voices and channels them into the voice of his father as the antagonist against his self. Paranoia is never straightforward; however, it always asks: What does this mean? Similarly, Elliot constantly searches for the authority behind the signs he encounters in his pursuit of the event. Whilst his psychoanalyst attempts to map Elliot's thoughts onto a concealed cause, an origin, a traumatic moment that is grounded on a One, he simply censors his spoken words and hacks her life, reads her secrets, identifies her sadness, and finds her point of vulnerability to manipulate her.

The apocalypse functions here in the way it has traditionally worked: As a singularizing reaction against the sense of ever-multiplying states of being, as resistance against empire, a kind of counter-universality (Portier-Young,

2011). Sam Esmail, whose family is Egyptian, has stated that the serial itself was inspired by the Arab Spring as well as Occupy Wall Street and public awareness of the reach of big data (McAlone, 2016). Whilst such movements provide useful dramatic form to the serial and its characterizations, there is a question as to the nature of the vision that is articulated through its explicit formulations of something like the fictional 5/9 hack. The essential emptiness of the event, which by the necessity of its secret nature makes it devoid of any collective force, can be interpreted as cynical to the idea of struggle as its failures are revealed and goes some way to explaining the show's appeal across the political spectrum.

On many levels, *Mr Robot* is concerned with secrets and is precisely where the notion of apocalypse as revelation gains its purchase for the drama. However, I would argue that the reason why it has such resonance is less with any naive idea of a conspiracy driven by the "1% of the 1%" than a growing awareness that what the, rather more slowly, unfolding technological apocalypse reveals is that today there are actually no longer *any* secrets. If there is a conspiracy, it is one organized around the storage of secrets as data for potential manipulation by subversive agencies. This age is one where everything you think is private can be made public and is increasingly defined by paranoia as an awareness of the absolute level of surveillance becomes apparent. This gives Elliot a God-like power but as he pushes at the limits of human ability in this context, he continuously breaks down. If there is a reality to *Mr Robot*, it is this piling up of a compounded irreality where even perception itself is disrupted. Elliot might hate the world, try to turn away from it, but he is ultimately unable to escape it. So, the vision offered is not utopian but one of darkness, to the point where season 2 literally ends on a blackout. As a cryptographer, he seeks the dark seclusion of the crypt and not the light of the chapel.

Finally, in this sense the apocalyptic script of *Mr Robot* can be read as akin to Catherine Keller's "crypto-apocalypse", a counter-apocalypse as she describes it, which recognizes itself as an apocalypse but which attempts to interrupt the interpretative habit through a shift from fear to hope, something that remains open and ongoing rather than final and absolute (1997). What holds the attention for a show such as *Mr Robot* is precisely the oscillation between fear and hope that the creator of the serial has consistently maintained and echoes the functioning of the Book of Revelation, which in Keller's words, acts as "a counter-cultural code for dissent" as it moves from "secrecy into public forecasting and open defiance" (1997: 10). *Mr Robot* is a contemporary manifestation of the impulse for thinking of a possible revolution, yet, through its very dramatic staging as a consumable product of the culture industry, potentially functions to contain the movement for the change it presents on screen. In this regard, this operative ambiguity that we see in *Mr Robot* of "presenting the unpresentable" is thoroughly apocalyptic, an "apocalypse habit", as Keller describes it, one whose spiral of violence starts with self-destruction, a destruction of self in the case of Elliot, yet requires possibilities for action beyond the attraction of a messianic solution (1997: 11).

Note

1 The Sony Pictures hack came to light on 24 November 2014 when a group calling themselves Guardians of Peace released confidential material from the studio including employees' personal information, e-mails, and information about executive salaries. On 18 and 20 August 2015, the group Impact Team leaked more than 25 gigabytes of company data, including user details of those using the site Ashley Madison to arrange extra-marital affairs. The 2016 Democratic National Committee email leak is a collection of emails published by DCLeaks in June and July 2016.

2 *Billions*

Nomadic flows

5 seasons (ongoing)
Episodes: 55
Dates first aired
1: January 2016
2: February 2017
3: March 2018
4: March 2019
5: May 2020
Creators: Brian Koppelman, David Levien, Andrew Ross Sorkin
Showrunners: Brian Koppelman, David Levien
Main Cast: Paul Giamatti, Damian Lewis, Maggie Siff, David Costabile, Asia Kate Dillon
Production Design: Mike Shaw
Cinematography: Jake Polonsky
Composer: Eskmo
Location: New York City
Original network: Showtime

Billions is set in the competing worlds of a Wall Street hedge fund and, initially, the federal offices of the Southern District of New York and, in later seasons, the offices of the Attorney General of New York. The hedge fund, Axe Capital, is led by the brilliant but mercurial Bobby Axelrod, a self-made billionaire who not only emerged out of 9/11 as fortunate survivor from the company based in the Twin Towers but also leveraged a deal shorting aircraft and hotel stock that provided a significant impetus for his dominant status in Wall Street. In early seasons, Chuck Rhoades is the U.S. Attorney who, in this particular location, is described as the "Sheriff of Wall Street" and who sets himself the task of investigating and convicting Bobby Axelrod for his illegal practices. In later seasons, having been deposed from his position as federal prosecutor, he is elected Attorney General of New York. Rhoades' wife, Wendy, works for Axe Capital as an in-house performance coach and has a long-time working relationship with Bobby, to whom she stays loyal even as Chuck begins to investigate him. From this matrix, we get a drama of power,

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finance, and vanity, that provides an insight into the fantasies of those who observe this world and those who, at different levels, operate within it. After the 2008 crash, establishing a drama that pits a lawmaker against a hedge fund manager might easily connect with popular sentiments towards this particular breed of financier. According to a survey commissioned by the Alternative Investment Management Association in 2016, the year the serial premiered, public opinion of hedge funds managers saw them come bottom of the entire financial services industry (Pagano, 2016). *Billions*, therefore, has the potential to reflect attitudes relating to these Titans of finance that have come to dominate the popular imagination, with one commentator describing the show as: "TV's most compelling fable about wealth and power in modern life" (Deggans, 2018).

The reason for considering this particular drama here is not that the show offers a critique of the motivations of either actual financiers or investigators (it generally does not) or that it in any way documents the consequences of their actions for ordinary people but, rather, that it articulates quite usefully something of the image of capital as flow and the strategies by which these agents seek to appropriate and capture certain sites of resistance to capitalism. Central to the aesthetic of *Billions* is an architectural style that defines these worlds and a focus on art as a key element of its design and narrative. Further, the character of Taylor Mason, portrayed by Asia Kate Dillon, a gender non-binary figure, points to the ease with which this financial machine can seamlessly meld with certain forms of identity politics. Taylor is not at Axe Capital out of any specious diversity quota but because they are a gifted "killer quant" who can spot margins in a vastly complicated and fast-moving market and is able to weaponize their emotional distance to avoid the more typical behavioural failings of the trader ecosystem (Lo, 2017). If we consider them in more philosophical terms, in the figure of Taylor we have a move away from identity as predicated on binary difference (male or female, x or y) and instead shift to differentials (*dx* rather than not-x). The fact that Taylor specializes in the renewable energy market, where volume or quantity is not the same as quality, where thresholds define the changing states of matter, points to the ways in which they provide a challenge to the conventional image of Wall Street traders yet actually extend its capabilities.

In his great work *Mimesis*, Eric Auerbach famously distinguishes between Greek and Old Testamental literature, where the former is characterized by a world where everything is: "Clearly outlined, brightly and uniformly illuminated, men and things stand out in a realm where everything is visible; and not less clear – wholly expressed, orderly even in their ardour – are the feelings and thoughts of the persons involved" (1953: 3). In the latter, the story of Abraham, for instance, the narrative is now one to be deciphered, its mysteries demanding great effort to be understood. We can usefully characterize these literary forms as immanent and transcendent (Dimitrova, 2017: 4). Later in the book, we shift to work that tends to this latter form, but *Billions* is clearly in the position of the former. Here everything is foreground, action is driven by the motivations seen and, usually, heard on screen whilst history is only occasionally described. This is not a criticism; after all Greek theatre hardly lacked drama, but it does point to an organizing principle for the show

where the actual scenic background is important to framing the foreground action. As Anna Kornbluh writing in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* observes, "*Billions* deploys its theatricality to foreground its study of agency" (2018).

Nomadic flows: capital, capture, and control

> If money leads to accumulation, invention and assembly, this is because it expresses the agency of the human subject. Money is the instrument of desire; desire is required, alongside energy, in order to realize capital production.
>
> (Goodchild, 2007: 79)

As a complex production, a TV serial drama draws from many traditions, including soap opera and melodrama, all of which are evident in *Billions*. The question that concerns me here is, how does the world of finance capitalism translate into televisual serial drama? Just because a work is set within a particular world doesn't mean it necessarily connects with any authentic aspect of that place (I doubt hospitals are as they are seen on most television shows). The challenge, therefore, is how to dramatize this, not least as any Wall Street trader or federal prosecutor would point out, the vast majority of an individual's time in this environment is spent simply staring at screens or sending emails. Nevertheless, there are aspects of *Billions*, I would argue, that can be seen to connect with elements of thinking about that world that can be usefully considered beyond the narcissistic vanities of Wall Street traders (The financial newspaper the *Wall Street Journal* dedicates itself to a weekly review of the show to evaluate the veracity of its content, see (Vigna, 2020), and the show has been described as "Wall Street porn" (Merle, 2017)). As Goodchild highlights in the quotation above, money, desire, and agency interact as both expression *and* facilitation of production. Yet the essence of capital is that it is inherently abstract and whilst the serial clearly operates within a representational matrix, it does reveal something of the cultural imaginary of this world. The concept of flow allows us to consider in more detail the dynamics of power, privilege, and desire that the show persuasively manifests even if, as Steven Shaviro states,

> We cannot actually "see" or "feel" the virtual "space of flows" within which we are immersed. For this space is a relational one, largely composed of, and largely shaped by, the arcane financial instruments, and other transfers of "information," that circulate through it. These instruments and flows, and the transactions in the course of which they are exchanged, cannot be "represented" in any form accessible to the human senses; they can only be defined computationally, as the terms of utility functions and partial differential equations.
>
> (2010: 36)

Visually, the show communicates these expressions of wealth and power through arrangements of space and the investment at work in communicating to the

discerning eye the signs of not just success but style: Not just capital is on display but also, intrinsically, cultural capital, hence, the importance of art. The actual spaces in which these dramas play out are designed as something akin to stage sets where space is not about emptiness but, rather, prestige. A large office with acres of space beyond the minimal desk and monitor is a sign of power, lording over the staff on the floor who work together side-by-side.

The world of hedge funds is, therefore, one defined by the parameters of display and porosity. Whilst hedge funds may express the desire for a world free of regulation across which to rapaciously plunder, they are, of course, operating within the boundaries of the law and subject to its rule, even if, as the post-2008 administration showed, it is evidently weak and supine. Yet, paradoxically, the state and its mechanisms provide a foundational level of security precisely for those risk-loving traders to be able to operate, and faith in the authority of states is a profoundly important economic principle. Nevertheless, finance capitalism poses an existential threat to this authority, as Suhail Malik writes, "Even as finance and the state system constitute a nexus of power, it is nonetheless internally riven by the threat presented by the power of finance *against* state sovereignty" (2014: 636). There is consequently an inherent tension of shifting opposition/alliance in a symbiotic relationship between these competing assemblages (Bogue, 2005: 20).

What we see in *Billions* is a world structured between these two domains of organization: Axe Capital and the federal investigator's office. Other places function primarily to support this, such as the homes of the protagonists that are usually dressed as suggestive of an old/new money style. Cinematography and production design are two of the key areas that create the worlds that we see on screen. It is important, therefore, to pay some close attention to the show's production design as it creates the "look" of the drama, visualizing the settings and establishing locations. This is the background against which the actors operate, operating within a frame and as such can be usefully understood in this way as a kind of supplement. It is what enables the drama yet simultaneously exceeds itself where the "off-frame" intervenes to question the rationale of what can be seen "in-frame" and therefore provide dramatic tension. It is not simply that the background is a context for the character but that there is a dialectic between these elements.

The "sheriff" in this set-up, Chuck Rhoades, is a product of the old family-law-state assemblage whilst, at times, strategically acting against the restrictions of that arrangement. *Billions* works extremely well at activating these elements to produce its affective connections. The opening scene that locates us within Chuck's world is conceived to communicate the contradictions of his private/public domains. Here, we are introduced to Chuck Rhoades (below).

The scene is startling, as it is obviously designed to be, but it is worth considering it in more detail. Bound and gagged, lying prone, Chuck is positioned horizontally against the diagonals of the dark-wood floor, the white of his boxer shorts at the centre and divided by the silky rope. This scene subsequently plays out as an BDSM sex game involving a dominatrix where pain and humiliation provide the erotic charge. It is not coincidence that within this world where the performance of power operates, a character takes an erotic pleasure in private moments of sexual play

Billions (1.01:0.00.20)

where a relationship of domination is reversed. Margot Weiss writes in her book on how within these circuits of sexual pleasure,

> The phrase *power exchange* emphasizes that D/s relationships are explicitly about power (more than sensation, pain, or role play, for example), but also that they are an exchange: although dominant and submissive roles may be relatively stable, power is understood to be mobile, shared, or routed between practitioners during play.
>
> (2011: ix)

It is precisely power as an economy of exchange that is played out and, as we shall see, libidinal desire is a primary force at work within the show.

We then shift to the office of the US Attorney for the Southern District of New York, where we see Chuck at the head of a powerful regulatory organization. After the bondage scene, we have cutaways of Manhattan before switching to the interior of a busy office where we are introduced to his two assistants, Brian Connerty and Kate Sacker (a switch in gender from the pilot episode script). After a brief set-up, we follow them via a dolly shot which is deployed so that, as the script describes in relation to Brian, "the energy moves with him" (Koppelman, 2016: 4). Quickly, the backs of the two assistants separate to reveal Chuck for a second time but now in his office (below).

Now the white shirt is at the centre, his tie providing a contrasting vertical, a play on tie/tied perhaps, and, where before he was gagged, now he is on the phone making a power-call to indicate his authority through the force of speech. The background to the shot is the dark wood of traditional office panelling, and he is framed within this by the volumes of jurisprudence shelved behind him that are divided by the strong verticals that reinforce his upright position. The symmetry

Billions (1.01:0.02.13)

of the shot is softened by the arms and shoulders of his assistants to the sides who stand behind the empty chairs as the camera comes to a stop in a mid-shot that emphasizes the dialogue-heavy nature of the drama. Already, we have been introduced to key elements in the world of this character and the role of power and authority within it.

In contrast, the finance world of Bobby Axelrod is characterized as new, light, and privileges movement, transparency, and vision:

Billions (1.01:0.05.19)

Although we are first introduced to Axe in his old neighbourhood pizza restaurant (his blue-collar origins are a key element in the mythology of the character), we soon see him in his place of work at Axe Capital in Westport, Connecticut (in later seasons the company relocates to Manhattan). Here, he is encased in glass, the verticals now of aluminium, and instead of books, he has a computer screen. Further, throughout the show the workplaces and homes of these Titans of finance are decorated by prestige artworks, something which is considered later in the chapter. The main cinematographer on the production, Jake Polonsky, is quoted on how the different worlds were constructed:

> Overall, the photography was intended to establish two thematically separate worlds reflecting the show's lead characters. "There's Chuck's world, which is the U.S. Attorney's office – warm tones. His office has a lot of dark wood in it. With Axe, there's a lot more light – hard edges." The stark whiteness of the Axe Capital corporate office space, with its huge windows and skylights, was enthusiastically embraced.
>
> (American Society of Cinematographers, 2016)

The oscillation between these two worlds, or regimes, of law and finance, generate the dynamic between the antagonistic systems of being and what becomes fascinating here is the contrasting ways that they seek to code the flow with which they nominally work. Deleuze usefully articulates this idea and its centrality to organization: "[F]low is an everyday, unqualified notion . . . it can be a flow of words, a flow of ideas, a flow of shit, a flow of money. It can be a financial mechanism or a schizophrenic machine: it surpasses all duality" (2004a: 219). Indeed in *Anti Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari's first volume of Capitalism and Schizophrenia, they write that "the general theory of society is a generalized theory of flows" (1984: 262). However, it is money that is at the heart of their analysis of the nature of capitalism and which interests us here; for them (following Marx), it is when free labour meets independent capital that out of the conjugation of these decoded flows emerges "*the activity of production in general*" (1984: 270). In many ways, therefore, the show pulses with desire as the hedge fund, which seeks to direct the flow of money, and the despotic machine, creatively struggle over their competing strategies of control.

There is a way in which we can see this dramatic construction as an articulation of a mode of behaviour intrinsic to capitalism. Peter Sloterdijk discusses the figure of the pirate:

> Piracy does, admittedly, influence bourgeois thought in a different way: from early on, it was idealized in the fantasies of the mainlanders as an alternative libertarian world in which anything was possible – except boredom.
>
> (2013a: 113)

In *Billions*, the hedge fund operates as a version of a pirate organization, occupying a space at the boundary between legal jurisdiction and force for

deterritorialization. Fredric Jameson writes of this idea in relation to finance capitalism, for it "implies a new ontological and free-floating state, one in which the content . . . has definitively been suppressed in favor of the form" (1997: 259–260). In precisely the same way that capitalism established itself through instituting both the principle of territory *and* the flow of resources during the age of discovery, *Billions*, in its melodramatic way, presents us with a similar dynamic (Durand & Vergne, 2013). The relationship of the protagonists to each other in the show is not simply one of hostility but also of utility, as we see in Axe and Chuck's temporary alliance in season 4.

We can build further on this idea of a pirate organization to critically evaluate the single most unique aspect of the show and that is the introduction of the gender non-binary character of Taylor Mason, who enters in episode 2 of season 2. Taylor is the first non-binary character in mainstream television drama and has been hailed for this role in its progressing of diversity within the industry and the fictional world on screen (Soloski, 2019). Such an inclusive and unprejudiced attitude in the fictional world of *Billions*, again, has its precursors in earlier manifestations of pirates in the Age of Sail. Peter T. Leeson in his work "The Invisible Hook: The Law and Economics of Pirate Tolerance", later published as a book, suggests that although criminal, the profit-seeking practices of eighteenth-century pirates had the outcome of creating significant social tolerance of black sailors who were fully integrated into ships' crew (2009). Motivated by commercial self-interest, the pirates worked with racially integrated ships that were examples of a comparatively progressive tolerance, in contrast to slavery practices of the Merchant and Royal Navy vessels (2009: 143). In his investigation, Leeson poses the question of whether criminal profit-seeking can generate socially desirable outcomes. Leeson's argument is that in the case of the eighteenth-century pirates of the high seas, it was not notions of equality that produced tolerance but rational self-interest (2009: 170). Coupled with Sloterdijk's observation on the idealized fantasies of pirate life, a show such as *Billions* can play into these long-established mythologies. Given the strength of feeling against Wall Street and hedge funds in the aftermath of 2008, perhaps this needed to be such a powerful mythology. The popularity of such a show seems to be less about the trivialities of vast wealth than the ability of this environment to facilitate levels of unconstrained behaviour of the "exceptional" minds that take up position within its spaces of gladiatorial combat. Nevertheless, the show very effectively pulls on the threads of this tapestry of large characters, ruthless amorality, and wealth, which allows for drama and intrigue, produced with high production values and outstanding actors (Hemphill, 2017).

So how might we think about the introduction of a gender non-binary character in a serial about hedge fund investors? Initially introduced as an intern, Taylor Mason appears seamlessly in the second episode of season 2, first, from behind on Steadicam as they enter Axe's office and then cutting to face towards the camera:

Billions (2.02:0.08.57)

Taylor

Hello. I'm Taylor. My pronouns are they, theirs, and them.

In the framing of this mid-shot, we see the space divided by the line of the aluminium window, with the two characters almost symmetrical but with Taylor now positioned slightly closer as they step forward to converse with Axe. The character Mafee stands with deferential body language, his hands clasped protectively in front of him whilst Taylor has their hands behind, opening up their chest in a way that is both assertive and vulnerable. A tie once again parallels the other verticals with the sense that within the context of Axe Capital and its leisure-wear dress code, this is a signal of a more ironic hipster attitude. Behind them, the brightly lit atrium space recedes along strong lines of perspectival convergence. Overall this generates a sense of compartmentalization, something that can be considered to construct psychological barriers that work to contain conflicting values, cognitions, or beliefs. Taylor is about to emerge from this confinement and to actualize their potential in the smooth space of Axe Capital.

The starting point for the scene is that of naming: Recognize and employ my designated pronouns. This reconfiguration of linguistic convention goes to the heart of finance capitalism and identity politics and is useful to briefly explore further. In one sense, traditional production (Fordism) was performed, as Paolo Virno points out, mute, whereas "[i]n the postfordist metropolis, on the other hand, the material laboring process can be empirically described as a complex of linguistic acts, a sequence of assertions, a symbolic interaction" (2001). This staging within

a cultural industry production itself points to the merging of domains of culture and labour today; spiritual production like all other production has been captured and formatted. In some ways, Taylor (who works in the futures market) is from the future, a further multiplication (or perhaps, rather, an intensification) of the social relations of production now modulated through a linguistic performance. It is no coincidence, I would argue, that such a phenomenon manifests itself in the setting of a hedge fund and the world of finance capital. The Italian economist Christian Marazzi writes of this key issue in this context:

> The theoretical analysis of financial market operations reveals the centrality of communication, of *language*, not only as a vehicle for transmitting data and information, but also as a *creative force*.
>
> (2008: 27)

What Marazzi usefully points to is the shift from material production to that of immaterial production in the form of ideas, images, affects, and social relations, all of which drive the new economy of finance capitalism. What is visible in a show such as *Billions* is a trading subject deriving from a certain kind of cultural milieu that has itself been fundamentally changed by the economic processes it facilitates. The non-binary character is one who has broken the link between gender and identity and instead occupies a free-floating space beyond that which traditionally grounded it. Edward LiPuma writes of this:

> *The argument is that derivative-driven capitalism, as exemplified by the financial markets, is reproduced by the transformed form of the social that it is instrumental in producing*. . . . A transformed dynamic to capital, to the production of culture and knowledge, to the institutions of finance, and to the design of subjectivity has now entered the house.
>
> (2017: 2)

These autonomist-inspired economists are describing the significance of the financialization of the economy as a manifestation of a wider shift in capitalism that presents a fundamentally different configuration than that which operated up until 1970. The notion of a futures market in commodities can extend to the idea of the market in futures in a more allegorical sense, precisely what commentators such as Fredric Jameson have described is a loss of a sense of any potential future beyond capitalism (1994: xii). There is a sense that, as Franco Berardi says, there is also in this, "a crisis of imagination about the future" (2012: 8). But what connects *Billions* to this is that it is language that has been colonized by the processes of techno-linguistic control. As a trader Taylor Mason perfectly expresses the confluence of capital and mathemetization in this algorithmic semio-capitalism. For these thinkers, the disconnection between language and body can be seen to replicate the severing of the link between currency and gold in 1971 by Nixon: The signifier and the signifier no longer have any intrinsic connection. As Berardi argues:

> When the relation between the signifier and the signified is no longer guaranteed by the presence of the body, my affective relation to the world starts to be disturbed. My relation to the world becomes functional, operational-faster, if you will, but precarious. This is the point where precariousness starts. At the point of disconnection between language and the body.
>
> (2012: 101–102)

Fredric Jameson's analysis of finance capitalism formulates our current period as one where capital has exhausted its ability to expand and so develops various instruments of *speculation* on futures and derivatives. The closing of its productive moment sees capital then turn in on itself and "[c]apital itself becomes free-floating. It separates from the concrete context of its productive geography" (1997: 251).

What this brief digression into philosophical critiques of finance capitalism points to is the emergence of a managerial rationality that manifests in its latest form in neoliberalism. This naming as a form of codification that we see here passes over the dynamic nature of linguistic and intersubjective struggle over recognition. For Bobby Axelrod, the point is a clear one; here is someone with highly sophisticated skills at processing complex information but whose location as an outsider can give them an edge. In a scene from season 2 as Axe persuades Taylor to stay with the company, he lays it out. Compositionally, both are positioned against an external sweeping glass guard rail with the greenery of nature behind them:

Billions (2.02:0.38.41)

Axe

750 a year. That's double entry level for an analyst.

Taylor

I'm getting my MBA in Chicago under Eugene Fama, the Nobel Laureate.

Axe

Come on. Fama's an egghead. Get an education right here. Make it a million a year. What? 375 or 750 or a million, it's all the same to you? It's an abstraction?

Taylor

I don't know if you can understand, maybe me being the way I am, but just breathing the air here can be . . . discomforting.

Axe

The air is thinner.

(pause)

Nah.

You don't belong here.

You're outside it all.

Sometimes you catch yourself watching all the people like they're another species.

So, you retreat behind your aquarium walls, watching.

But you don't realize, Taylor, that glass, it's not a barrier, it's a lens.

It's an asset.

It's what makes you good.

You see things differently.

That's an edge.

Taylor

What about a week to week deal?

Axe

Done. We'll prorate the million, nineteen thousand . . .

Taylor

19,230 and 77 cents

Axe/Taylor (talking over each other)

Hourly, 240 dollars and 38 cents/114 dollars and 47 cents

Axe

80 hours a week?

Taylor

There's 168 hours in a week. That's what you're paying for . . . everything. 24/7.

Difference, here then, is not a limitation, a restriction, or something that disturbs the smooth flow of the social space but something useful for capital. The very purpose of the hedge fund is as a financial disruptor, and Taylor as gender non-binary can disrupt things in a way that creates opportunities for a company that seeks to follow through Schumpeter's notion of "the perennial gale of creative destruction" (1994: 84). Axe's reference to glass not as a "barrier" but as a "lens" offers a reworking of the metaphor of a glass-ceiling, an invisible barrier to minorities within the workplace hierarchy and turns it into an "asset". By appropriating the notion of gender non-binary, the show aligns these two processes of resistance to regulatory formations and seeks to shift into a domain beyond the law (Žižek, 2016). Taylor forgoes their intellectual ambition to work with Nobel prize winner Eugene Fama at the University of Chicago and takes up Axe's job offer with whom they volunteer to work for "168 hours a week", literally 24/7.

Yet, Taylor as a character with a spectrum condition of affectlessness, fits precisely with the realities of speculative capitalism, as Bruno Latour writes:

> [O]ne of the *affects of capitali*sm, that is, of *thinking* in terms of capitalism, is to generate for most of people who don't benefit from its wealth a feeling of *helplessness* and for a few people who benefits from it an immense enthusiasm together with a dumbness of the senses.
>
> (Latour, 2014: 3)

Nevertheless, it functions to raise for us as viewers something of the unreachable yet compelling goal of capitalism, that is a manifestation of libidinal desire. The defining aspects of the behaviour of the two central characters are compulsion and addiction, both of which align perfectly with our experience of contemporary media.

What we see through the show from here on is the increasing centrality of the character Taylor to the work of Axe Capital and indeed, later on, having poached nearly all of Axe's clients, their own eponymous company. Taylor faces no barriers as they expand their influence until they are ultimately out-manoeuvered at the end of season 4 and once more come under the control of Bobby Axelrod. In season 2, episode 7, Taylor is part of a War Room as they discuss whether to call in a debt on the town of Sandicot, which was part of a distressed-bond option that lost out on the construction of a Casino. The choice posed in the War Room is either to inflict punishing austerity on the town or whether to absorb the debt and work to redevelop it. In response

to a suggestion from one of the more conscientious team members of what might be described as a liberal strategy of short-term loss and regrowth through stable investment and jobs, Taylor brutally denounces such ideas in a neoliberal manifesto:

Taylor

It is unfortunate, offensive, actually to even be talking about this, and that people have to live in near-poverty. But in many ways, a town is like a business. And when a business operates beyond its means, when numbers don't add up, and the people in charge continue on, heedless of that fact, sure that some sugar daddy, usually in the form of the Federal Government, will come along and scoop them up and cover the shortfalls, well, that truly offends me. People might say you hurt this town. But in my opinion, the town put the hurt on itself. Corrections are in order. There's a way to make this work, and that way is hard, but necessary. As Taleb says, "Become antifragile, or die." Once we do this, the town will face that challenge and come out stronger. Or it will cease being. Either result absolutely natural, as in, of nature itself.

(2.07:00.22.59)

The response to this from the team and Axelrod is a stunned silence before they each stand up and leave the room overwhelmed by its impact. There can be no reply to this brutal description of what is at work, it seems. Taylor perfectly articulates what Wendy Brown calls "*homo oeconomicus*", where all relations and humans themselves are transformed into economic terms and metrics, where a form of normative reason has infiltrated utterly throughout the social realm (2015: 10).

Later in the same season in episode 10, Brian Connerty seeks to recruit Taylor to the prosecutor's investigation through an appeal to their ethical spirit. The ground for this has been laid earlier in the episode as he reports his first contact with Taylor to Chuck:

Chuck

How'd it go?

Brian

Taylor Mason took my card. I'm cautiously optimistic that she's gonna . . . err . . . I'm not used to this gender pronoun thing yet . . . that *they* will reach out.

Chuck

And what makes you think that?

Brian

Their politics went pretty far to the left, they contributed to the Urban Justice Centre.

Chuck

That's a good effort

Brian

Active in Occupy Wall Street during their college years.

Chuck

So, there is hope this person may still have a heart!

Brian

I don't think their hard drive has been reformatted yet to wipe out the conscience feature.

(2.10:00.15.58)

As said, this is quite a dialogue-heavy drama so excerpts are necessary but what we can see here is not just that Brian Connerty struggles with the "gender pronoun thing" (although positively) but also with the actual nature of Taylor. Non-binary, here, also extends beyond gender to the nature of the choices traditionally offered between capital and governance. For Taylor, it is not a choice between fiscal responsibility or profit; for them philanthro-capitalism means playing an active role in generating income whilst simultaneously living by the rules of the market and not bailouts or subsidies (Bishop & Green, 2008). For them, there is no contradiction in supporting advocacy groups, opposing carbon-fuel based investment portfolios, and protesting inequality, whilst purchasing Manhattan real estate and accepting million-dollar salaries. They are, as Žižek sarcastically names them, "liberal communists" (Žižek, 2006).

This manifesto scene from *Billions* even makes its way into an actual textbook for financial management in the public sector, where it is offered as an example of how "money people" have now produced hybrid sectors and, indeed, we are "all money people now" (Kioko & Marlowe, 2016: 1–3). Here, the authors argue, "Money is to public organizations what canvas is to painting" (2016: 4). This analogy is an interesting one that connects in other ways with *Billions* and points to a key motif within the serial: Art. Although art objects permeate the whole of the show, we can see it in relation to Sandicot and its fate. After a certain level of self-examination, Bobby does indeed decide on Taylor's drastic course of action, but how is this to be communicated on screen? At this point we see no schools, hospitals, or individuals who will now carry this debt (later Chuck, for political reasons of his own, exploits Axelrod's decision and hosts a town meeting for the residents to vent their feelings). Instead, at this point the action is carried by a particular work of art, a sculpture by the American artist Frederic Remington.

We first encounter it as Axe and his henchman enter the Sandicot town hall in the middle of the night and they pass the sculpture in the hallway:

Billions (2.07:0.0.2.27)

This then is followed by an aerial shot:

Billions (2.07:0.02.30)

Such shots are familiar within film and television, given the dramatically spiralling nature of stairway architecture which creates an engaging image. Here, the chequered floor pattern is suggestive of a chessboard and the sculpture, then, as a piece to be moved as part of a game. Ultimately, Axelrod takes possession of the

sculpture in his strategy of asset stripping and has it relocated to the lobby of his offices as a trophy.

Billions (1.01:0.40.32)

Here it joins the many other artworks with which Axe Capital is decorated:

Billions (2.08:0.33.12)

Clearly, there is an element of set design and production research that will identify how these financial organizations are indeed replete with such artworks. The production designer Mike Shaw was responsible for the first two seasons and in an interview describes the process of constructing this aspect of the world of the hedge fund:

> The most colorful signifier of Axelrod's wealth showed up in the artwork adorning his corporate headquarters. After researching numerous Wall Street offices, Shaw noticed that virtually every hedge fund billionaire owned something by acclaimed street artist Jean-Michel Basquiat. *Billions* features a 10-foot reproduction of the artist's 12-foot long "Nile" masterpiece. "The Axe Capital space looks so much like a gallery, it couldn't just be a Basquiat-like painting. It has to *be* a Basquiat," Shaw says. "A lot of hedge fund guys collect very expensive art, so the goal for season one was to put together a blue chip art collection that intimidates people when they walk into Axe's office. We want to hit you over the head with art that's bold because Axe himself is bold."
>
> (Hart, 2018)

Shaw worked with the creative consultancy Culture Corps who secured all necessary permissions and rights to the images used throughout the first three seasons and established the look of the show (Culture Corp, 2020). Artworks permeate the serial and can be seen in both background set design and at certain moments, as Axe's investment in art become key plot points. Doreen Remen, co-founder of Culture Corp, describes how she sees this: "[T]he art on set matches and transports people into the rarefied world being portrayed, allowing viewers to benefit from what only culture can provide" (Art Girls Jungle, 2017). I want to consider this in some detail as it, in many ways, goes to the heart of the relationship between image and capital that the drama constructs and why this is such an essential element of this world.

First, let us consider the role of art in relation to Sloterdijk's theory of the pirate mentioned at the beginning of the chapter. What we have with the idea of the pirate is a figure who seeks to move across a territory as if it was a smooth space in contrast to the administrator (juridical) who seeks to stratify space through the apparatus of state regulation. These terms, operating as a conceptual pair, derive from Deleuze and Guattari, who employ them to map out the processes at work in the production of different kinds of spatiality in any given society (1988: 474–500). The state apparatus is generally concerned with the maintenance and governance of a territory, whereas a piratical war machine is outwards looking and deterritorializing, characterized in one article that defines hedge funds in precisely this way: "They are countercultural by instinct, separate from mainstream values and antagonistic to state apparatus and intervention, but nevertheless are often harnessed by the state in an attempt to do their bidding" (Ertürk, Leaver & Williams, 2010: 18). At different historical moments one will be in dominance and one subordinate but, importantly, each particular spatial formation can be transformed into the other, as Deleuze and Guattari emphasize, "[T]he two spaces only exist through their mixtures with each other: the smooth space is constantly translated, turned into striated space; the striated space is constantly turned into, transformed into a smooth space" (1988: 474). At work, then, is a continuous mixture of nomadic forces and sedentary capture, each of which operates in different domains. This brings us to artworks as they are part of a domain that gives the most varied and subtle expression to the complex dynamics between these forces (Lysen & Pisters, 2012: 1).

There are multiple reasons as to why art is so central to the hedge fund world. First, there is the straightforward notion of economic investment. The returns on art can be substantial. To frame this in the terms used here, the art market (and collectors within it) are engaged in the capture of the nomadic potential of art through a strategy of imposing an equivalence and homogenization by fixing it at a monetary price. As Claire Colebrook describes:

> The problem of art and money lies in the relation between art's power for counter-actualization – the power to liberate life from fixed units – and art's submission to mediation – all the clichés or pre-given forms that reduce life to measured or mapped time.
>
> (2006: 86)

In an aesthetic sense described by this philosophy, an artwork fixes the percepts and affects of the artist to create a zone of potentiality that is an opening to different possible states of being. Hence the compulsive need of the financial Titan to take ownership of this most radical practice. If we look in more detail at how artworks are mobilized within *Billions*, it is revealing of some significant ideas about the capture of the nomadic forces of art by finance capital.

As we have seen earlier, artworks populate the world of the hedge fund operating in terms of displays of wealth and attitude that support its aggressive position on the market. They are markers of status. The art collection is displayed throughout the offices of the hedge fund and not just in the office of the CEO. Now, this is not something specific to hedge funds or Wall Street; certain European central banks have long collected extensive art collections for display in their buildings. The US Federal Reserve initiated a formal policy of collection from 1971 under a directive from the Nixon administration. Clearly, this is tied to various ideological strategies of national identity and historical narrative. For instance, in Germany, the Bundesbank has been collecting art since its establishment in 1957, and according to the collection's curator, "From the beginning, the collection was designed to decorate the rooms, but it was also about culture, and creating a democratic society after fascism" (Torry, 2017). The role of the director of the bank is even tied to this process where their choice in artworks from the bank's collection is apparently evidence of their fiscal ability. The Chair of the Federal Reserve during the 2008 crisis, Ben Bernanke, was praised for his dexterity in responding to the financial crisis being described as "creative", "innovative", and "flexible", as evidenced by his taste in art (Goley, 2010).

Other than the Sandicot storyline described earlier, there are two other plot lines in *Billions* that address this aspect of the show. The first is the issue of a tax avoidance scam involving artworks purchased by Bobby Axelrod, and the second is the "purchase" of an artist in season 5.

In episode 10 of season 4, a boxed-up painting is delivered to the offices of Axe Capital from a bank in Switzerland that has been storing it and 17 others since Axe purchased them at the Basel art fair. We don't get to see the painting or any of the others at this stage, and the key element of the plot point is the creative use of a freeport for storage that will facilitate tax avoidance. Here, then, we are primarily dealing with

art as a commodity for speculation, and we have already seen glimpses of oil paintings in the safe room at Axe's residence. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, hedge-fund managers are playing as disruptive a role in the art market as they are in the financial markets (Crow, Germano & Benoit, 2014). Steven Cohen, chairman and chief executive officer of SAC Capital Advisors, who is often described as the inspiration for the character of Bobby Axelrod, in 2012 paid US$20 million for Gerhard Richter's "A.B. Courbet" before reselling it at Sotheby's in 2013 for US$26.5 million. As already stated earlier, hedge fund managers have driven up the price of works by the painter Jean-Michel Basquiat. The interesting twist in *Billions* is the suggestion by one of the characters, Danny Margolis, that whilst he can store Axe's paintings, he will get replicas made that can be placed in the freeport storage whilst the originals can hang in his house. This develops as a more substantial plot point in season 5 as, with his now-separated wife Wendy temporarily resident at what is described as Axe's "spare" apartment, Chuck observes the artworks on the walls:

Billions (5.01:0.15.50)

At this point in the show, the use of replica artworks has shifted from contemporary to classic nineteenth-century works. In this shot, we are shown replicas of paintings by Gustave Caillebotte (*The Floor Scrapers)* and George Seurat (*Parade de Cirque)*, although, in actuality the former is located in the Musée d'Orsay and latter in Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. What we see are the main characters framed either side by iconic Impressionist paintings of popular culture and labour, two of the main things at work in *Billions* as a TV serial about finance capital. Later in the same room, a "copy" of a Van Gogh is subject to having (expensive) wine thrown onto it by Chuck in a test of Axe's reaction. Ultimately, Axe registers the apartment and artworks as belonging to a charitable foundation and, to avoid imminent arrest for tax fraud, turns the place into an actual museum:

Billions (5.06:0.45.12)

Art therefore is an object for collection by financial institutions because it is both valuable as an economic commodity and because of the cultural capital that it bears through the appropriation of the creative work of the artist. As stated earlier, to be perceived as creative in one's financial acumen is highly valued and connects with the aims of the book as whole to locate this as a defining element of contemporary life. We see this in the Manhattan offices of Axe Capital in season 5, where there is the prominent display of works by the auteur filmmaker David Lynch:

Billions (5.02:0.37.36)

Billions (5.06:0.26.28)

According to the production designer for season 5, James Gloster, a decision was made to have a certain shift in the nature of the artworks on display at Axe Capital:

> It turned over its two recurring locations, the Axe Capital headquarters and Axe's apartment, to artists up to the task of capturing the relentlessly capitalistic and paranoid mind of Bobby Axelrod: Bob Dylan and David Lynch.
>
> (White, 2020)

The work of Bob Dylan is more discretely placed in the gloomy interior of Axe's apartment, but David Lynch's work is conspicuously placed in the main areas of Axe Capital. It hardly needs to be pointed out that having paintings by David Lynch, an auteur filmmaker who worked to produce the TV show that, arguably, elevated the form itself into a potentially art medium but who now appears within this dramatic world as a kind of displaced presence, is somewhat paradoxical.

However, the role of art in the serial is taken even further in a key storyline for season 5 that sees Axe essentially "buy" an artist. An artist, of course, whose entire demeanour is one that appears to be utterly contemptuous of the finance world. The character of Nico Tanner, played by Frank Grillo, is the epitome of the macho action painter whose work is a mish-mash of Pollockesque drips and Basquiat graffiti-style tags.

Overcoming this artist's reputation as a recalcitrant and independent-minded individual who is motivated by artistic vision and not, apparently, money, Axe commissions his next eight action-style paintings and proceeds to show that he can indeed be bought and controlled through the promise of wealth.

3 *The Leftovers*

Empty spheres

3 seasons
Episodes: 28
Dates first aired
1: June 2014
2: October 2015
3: April 2017
Creators: Damon Lindelof, Tom Perrotta
Showrunner: Damon Lindelof
Main Cast: Carrie Coon, Justin Theroux, Amy Brenneman, Christopher Eccleston, Margaret Qualley, Ann Dowd
Cinematography: Todd McMullen, Michael Grady
Composer: Max Richter
Location: New York, Texas, Victoria state, Australia
Original network: HBO

The emotional power and dramatic tension of *The Leftovers* is that at its heart is an absence. The premise of the drama is that on 14 October 2011, an inexplicable global event occurred that saw the simultaneous disappearance of 2% of the world's population, 140 million people, seemingly at random. These people just simply vanished. In this sense, there was nothing to see, or what was seen was precisely a nothingness: One moment they were there, the next gone. The pilot episode opens to a stressed mother of a crying infant strapped into a baby seat getting into her car whilst talking on the phone and at the sudden quiet turns and sees that the child has disappeared. Around her, other people react as it becomes clear that something wider is happening before the screen cuts to black and multiple, overlapping 911 calls play for 15 seconds over the blank screen. Reminiscent of 9/11 in its tone of incomprehension as hysterical callers exclaim their disbelief and questioning to emergency responders, the absence of an image is key to the essence of the drama as we are provided with nothing with which to visually frame this event. Rather than the horror, for instance, of the Twin Towers collapse (horror, of course, can function to give material form to terror), we have a supernatural instant of people being snatched from time and space without any referential iconography. We then

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Billions (5.03:0.04.24)

Why is it then that we see this confluence of hedge fund and art in the world of *Billions*? The work of the hedge fund is primarily that of information, and the world of art is presented here as an aestheticization of the systems of exchange that are driven by desire. Mark C. Taylor usefully connects the abandonment of the Gold standard in 1971 with the rise from 1973 of the electronic money-trading network that Reuters established in 1973 (1999: 142). Collapsing the distinction between information and money is what accelerates the dematerialization of money and entangles it in multiple cultural processes that facilitate the rise of both speculative finance and the art market that explodes in the 1980s. There is, of course, no space within the world of *Billions* for any formulation of desire that might operate in a different way than that of money and accumulation. Yet, the ways in which the show presents these nomadic/sedentary flows that pulse with creative energy do indeed contain traces of precisely the forces that they seek to capture and domesticate.

fade to a title card "Three years later", before cutting to a blue memorial riband tied to a lamppost, radio voice-overs of the numbers of those who disappeared from each country around the world, and an "expert" contextualizing the event as not as "statistically" significant as some other previous pandemics. Three years after the event, society has clearly begun to try to establish a categorical framework for coping with this loss although, significantly, not an epistemological one that can explain what happened. It has also developed its own symbol of the blue ribbon, the ribbon having a long tradition in American culture and "tied" to asserting the belief in being reunited with absent loved ones, whose memory is to be maintained against the distractions of daily life where one might forget.

Empty spheres

> We live today in the age of partial objects, bricks that have been shattered to bits, and leftovers. We no longer believe in the myth of the existence of fragments that, like pieces of an antique statue, are merely waiting for the last one to be turned up, so that they may all be glued back together to create a unity that is precisely the same as the original unity. We no longer believe in a primordial totality that once existed, or in a final totality that awaits us at some future day.
>
> (Deleuze & Guattari, 1984: 42)

This double action, from the moment of the opening of the void of the Sudden Departure, to three years later, drops us as viewers into the strangeness of a familiar, yet shattered world. As the quotation from Deleuze and Guattari describe it, this is a reference to idea of the leftovers, fragments that can never be reassembled in any unified way. This uncanny world is shaped by grief, a grief that will not be simply resolved or the compulsive drive that it generates ever stilled by the comfort of a resolution. As Mark Fisher wrote of the serial, this traumatic event is "an unfathomable puncturing of meaning, a senseless spasm of sheer contingency" (Fisher, 2015). What is left after the Departure is a world that cannot be put back together, even if the desire for this is an overwhelming but doomed one, as the character Nora Durst, speaks of hopelessly in the season 1 finale:

Nora

I want to believe it can all go back to the way it was. I want to believe that I am not surrounded by the abandoned ruin of a dead civilization.

(1.10:00.44:48)

But the world and people in it are broken and cannot be put back together as not all the pieces are there, and even if they could be found, the intervening time means that, in a Heraclitian sense, they would be different anyway.

In this way, the serial connects with a range of intensive and existential states of being that all revolve around the gap that exists between the before and after

moments of this event. Across three seasons, it pushes this idea of the desperate need for meaning in the face of the Departure to its limits, as the characters compel themselves into the realms of shifting realities as ghosts, miracles, resurrections, and shamanistic flights, all of which appear to support the narrative yet, simultaneously, relentlessly undermine it. Its outstanding strength is its ability to mobilize elements (partial fragments) of religious belief systems that intimate a truth, yet on closer examination break down in a way that, rather than simply being understood as wrong, work to radically undermine the motivation for the claim itself. So, the Sudden Departure fits with the belief within certain evangelical Christian schemes of a Rapture, an end-time occurrence where virtuous believers will rise to heaven and join Christ, but on even a superficial examination of those departed, it is clear that they could not universally be described as believers or even good. What this generates in the drama, therefore, are various manifestations of individual or collective efforts to force the Sudden Departure, and those who have dissappeared, into any number of explanatory frameworks that can sustain belief or, conversely, be used to nihilistically attack it.

As was discussed in the introduction, serial drama is an exercise in world-building. However, there is a paradox at work in this process, where to build a world and to decide what to put in it is actually to decide what to leave out. Much like the Zen art of flower arranging, the skill lies in the spaces between the elements rather than simply in the arrangements of the elements themselves (Schrader, 1972: 27). A primary theme in *The Leftovers* is the compulsion to religion within society. The consequence for the world after the Sudden Departure is that belief in Christianity and other religions collapses, whilst new religions, or cults, emerge. This is addressed as a crisis within the serial, where we see that the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) has become the ATFEC (Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, Explosives, and Cults). However, what gives the show its power is how it ranges across the multiple elements, or fragments, to use that term once more, never settling on any particular religious order (where, it is suggested, the function of all religion is to impose some kind of structure on the chaos of the universe), rather, it operates as a spectator, as each attempt to erect a monument out of the fragments ends in catastrophic collapse as the waves of nihilism crash into it. Nothing can stand against this; not even Bacchanalian celebrants of Frasier the Sensuous Lion on a world tour can avoid this fate (3.05). Running throughout *The Leftovers* is a sense of crisis. If the Sudden Departure was the Rapture (or was not, as one character systematically aims to prove by cataloguing the immoral behaviour of those who disappeared), it nevertheless fundamentally affects everyone, of all religious faiths and convictions. Within Western culture there is a growing sense of the fear of unpredictable acts of shattering violence, whether framed in religious terms or informed by ideologies of hatred of the other, irrupting into public life. A key part of the apparent crisis of Western liberal capitalism and failure to address this is that it was formerly predicated on the exclusion of religion from the public sphere to create a secular, nonreligious space, of communication. One of the things with which *The Leftovers* effectively resonates is precisely the breakdown between the boundaries

of the sacred and the profane as an act of deconstruction. The serial stands out in its confidence to sit with these questions, to resolutely maintain its ambiguity whilst, at the same time, taking the viewer down exquisitely crafted visual pathways to follow a character's determined pursuit of a truth, even as this quest undermines the basis of the desire itself. The deconstruction operates to show the familiar religions losing their singular authority, yet this religious impulse permeating throughout society where, in effect, everything becomes religious. As a theologian might write, religion is universal; it is a part of the nature of being human (Crockett, 2011: 15). This quality of coming up against the irreality of the world is a key element of *The Leftovers* universe. What the show effectively communicates is the desire that motivates the characters as they seek understanding of this new context; something has happened that splinters the ruling orthodoxy within this domain and demands something else in response.

We can connect the idea of world-building with religion through reference to Peter L. Berger's book *The Sacred Canopy*, where this metaphor of religion as a shield that protects us from the meaninglessness beyond is articulated (2011). Here, Berger argues, "Every human society is an enterprise of world-building" and is driven by a collective effort to create a stability that allows for that culture to endure (2011: 9). Taking a constructionist perspective, Berger highlights how the structures established to, on the one hand, facilitate stability and therefore security, also become, on the other, external forces of control, as he says, "Man invents a language and then finds that both his speaking and his thinking are dominated by its grammar" (2011: 6). The only way for the forces unleashed by the sorcerer's apprentice, as Berger describes it, to be brought under control is by an additional magic beyond that which has been invoked to initiate this kinetic assemblage. Berger's reference to the nomizing function of language introduces a certain paradox that underpins an anxiety here, an anxiety about how this structuring can act both as the ground for meaning yet as something that never fulfils in any final way or complete way its promise. In theological terms this would be God and in secular terms, the knowing subject. Grammar acts to divide experience into units that allow for language, something that is implicitly suggestive of the potential of a unity of presence, a goal of experiential coherence but one that never actually resolves. This idea of a driving motivation for resolution as necessary yet always impossible, similarly permeates *The Leftovers*. In his *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche writes, "I am afraid that we have not got rid of God because we still have faith in grammar" (2005: 170), pointing to the displacements at work in this process that shifts the name of the authority whilst maintaining its function. Within *The Leftovers*, the characters wrestle with this aporia, whilst the only group that is able to move beyond it are the newly emerged cult known as the Guilty Remnant. Members of the group dress in plain white, chain smoke, and most importantly, don't talk, whilst standing outside the houses of the disappeared as a reminder of the primal scene of "silently embodying the truth". For a long time through the first season, nothing much can really be discerned about their motivations or what they represent. This works as a reminder of the founding absence of the Departure: There is *nothing* here, the world ended, and what is

left is merely the need for uncompromising restatement of this fact; "don't waste your breath!", they say on the anniversary of the Departure as the town gathers to mourn and find comforting words for a new future. For this group, after the event, life makes no sense at all, and those who try to do so will be brutally reminded of that fact as the Guilty Remnant place facsimiles of the departed in the homes of the affected families, something that unleashes a rage of destructive and brutal violence in the finale of season 1. As a cult, the Guilty Remnant are characterized by those qualities that act to attract disciples and maintain cohesion: Silence and obedience. The new members must break all connections with their families and limit their communication with each other to what can be written on a pad of paper. This illustrates how the cult identifies the key areas where traces of the old authority can be effectively weakened. To go back to Nietzsche's idea of grammar, only the total loss of freedom can resolve the inherent contradictions of language, hence, the key aspect of the group's vow of silence. They place the void of meaning, that is, the Departure, at the centre of their new religion and exhibit the idea that what this has led to is a form of cultural and spiritual exhaustion, where the only thing to do is to stay firmly within the end time and not allow society to try and move on. This notion of exhaustion very effectively describes the strategy at work here, for as Deleuze writes, "[E]xhausted is a whole lot more than tired" (1995a: 3). In this discussion of four plays for television by Samuel Beckett, Deleuze observes that:

> The tired has only exhausted realization, while the exhausted exhausts all of the possible. The tired can no longer realize, but the exhausted can no longer possibilitate.
>
> (1995a: 3)

In one sense, the absurdity of the Sudden Departure resonates with this idea of the ceasing of the flow of talking and being done with words. This moment is captured within *The Leftovers*, as in a flashback Laurie Garvey, whilst working as a highly successful psychotherapist, is confronted with the grieving mother from the very opening scene, describing what happened to her and who demands of Laurie: "Tell me what to fucking do!" to which she can only stare mutely at her before responding "I don't know" (3.06 00.02.51). Soon after, Laurie walks out of her life and joins the Guilty Remnant. This refusal to speak reinforces the central role of dialogue between people in a meaningful community as the primary means of subject formation. For Berger, the need for this is a life-long process, what he describes as a conversation with significant others, he writes:

> The world is maintained as subjective reality by the same sort of conversation, be it with the same or with new significant others (such as spouses, friends, or other associates). If such conversation is disrupted (the spouse dies, the friends disappear, or one comes to leave one's original social milieu), the world begins to totter, to lose its subjective plausibility. In other words, the subjective reality of the world hangs on the thin thread of conversation.
>
> (2011: 25)

For Kevin Garvey, the loss of his wife to the Guilty Remnant, his father to insanity, and a constant state of experiential dislocation (he sleepwalks as well as crossing over into a kind of afterlife) means that as he attempts to maintain social order as the town cop, he becomes, what Berger describes as, "anomic" and can no longer make sense of his life; he loses his "cognitive bearings" (2011: 31). Berger argues that the social function of religion is perhaps, most importantly, to act "as a shield against terror" (2011: 36). What we see in *The Leftovers*, in this sense, is a series of increasingly bizarre happenings, where the world is detached from the reality of life in first the town of Mapleton and then, in season 2, Jarden, before shifting to the Australian outback in season 3. In the aftermath of the Sudden Departure, the social order has become profoundly insecure, leading to the breakdown of this shield where now "[r]eality and identity are malignantly transformed into meaningless figures of horror" (Berger, 2011: 31). As Kevin Garvey struggles with making sense of the things he experiences, he is the primary agent for the desperate need of others to maintain belief against the "haunting suspicions that the world may have another aspect than its "normal" one, that is, that the previously accepted definitions of reality may be fragile or even fraudulent" (Berger, 2011: 32).

We can engage further with the philosophical questions this raises by considering, once again, some ideas from Peter Sloterdijk. Sloterdijk, in his three-volume *magnum opus*, *Spheres*, argues for reinterpreting Western metaphysics away from its predominant concern with temporality to a notion of dwelling. He writes: "The sphere is the interior, disclosed, shared realm inhabited by humans – in so far as they succeed in becoming humans" (2011: 28).

The Leftovers (01.09:0.48.52)

The Leftovers (3.08:0.04.04)

Two scenes (above) show how this idea can manifest itself in particular images from the serial: The first scene shows the ultrasound of Laurie Garvey in the moments before the Departure when even the unborn can disappear from the womb; and the second, when Nora prepares to be placed in a mysterious device that can, it is said, transport her to the alternate reality where her children and husband now exist after the Sudden Departure. What is left, after the transportation of the individual, is a sphere of heavy water that has been blasted by radiation and therefore solidified, whilst the person vanishes to this other dimension, leaving a negative space behind, a "fossil" (3.08: 0.04.18). For Laurie, we never see the scanned image of her now empty womb, merely, her look of shock and confusion; and for Nora we don't see her own empty transportation sphere, so the drama holds off on either side of the before and after in a way that very effectively maintains the tension of the idea of this lack. As stated at the beginning of the chapter, it is the absence that is at the centre of this drama that resonates so effectively and, in some ways, echoes a founding event of Christianity with the disappearance of the body of Christ from the tomb of Joseph of Arimathaea. It is not simply that people disappear but that what this intensifies is the existential lack that is intrinsic to life. In the context of this event, Christianity cannot provide a narrative but then nor can science as the commission established to investigate it fails to come up with any credible explanation. For Sloterdijk, the metaphor of the sphere serves to describe the role of culture as a space limited by a protective membrane, which provides meaning and metaphysical comfort from the threatening exterior world. In this way, the crisis of modernity is a *spherological* crisis as these membranes are burst. The most fundamental microsphere is the foetus in the mother's womb which, of course, must necessarily see the amniotic sac burst as the baby is born into the world. This founding experience is what, for Sloterdijk, drives all subsequent cultural, religious, and communal sphere formations. Within *The Leftovers*,

this instance of a disappearance of the foetus from the womb signals the utterly shattering nature of this event, where even the preborn disappear, leaving a hollow space. The glass sphere glimpsed at the end of the serial is explained as the material trace of the person who has been transported to another dimension where all those who departed exist in a parallel universe; all that is left is a body-shaped cavity, a body curled into a foetal position. Both of these bodies, the foetus and the transportee, are mediated through visualizing technologies, bombarded with waves of energy that produce them as an image but now which present an image of absence, leaving only an indexical trace of something irreversibly lost.

What does Sloterdijk have to say about religion in this context that would be relevant here? In his work, *You Must Change Your Life*, he considers the idea of the much claimed contemporary "return of religion". If we consider this in relation to the Guilty Remnant, we can see some useful parallels. Sloterdijk considers the establishing of the "religion" of Scientology under the leadership of its founder L. Ron Hubbard as part of his provocative thesis that "'religion', as understood by those who exploit the notion, does not exist – and never has" (2013b: 83).

As we have seen, the Guilty Remnant emerge out of the chaos of the Sudden Departure, as a "community" ("we are not a cult") that draws together those feeling lost, alienated, and disconnected from their own bodies in pursuit of a different way of living: "We're living in the New World, a world that demands a new lifestyle, a new set of values and behaviors. Creating that lifestyle is what the Guilty Remnant is all about" (from a promotional website hosted by the author of the original novel, Tom Perrota, http://guiltyremnant.com/). Clearly, the founding moment of this new religion is one that fits with the general principle of a supernatural event that demands a change in the way we think and act in the world. This is a New World with a new reality. *The Leftovers* works, therefore, on this principle and portrays convincingly the conflict between the previous system and its Law that seeks to accommodate the event within existing structures, dismissing its transcendent claims, and the new religion that violently resists such strategies. A strength of the serial is that it holds, to varying degrees, the viewers' sympathies for the characters as they become attracted to the cult of the Guilty Remnant, explore its lifestyle and, in the case of Laurie, move on from it. The Guilty Remnant itself, as largely non-hierarchical network of independent chapters, also sees the tensions within it arise, as the character Meg leads an extremist element that is in conflict with the more moderate founders of the group.

It is useful to connect this fictional characterization in *The Leftovers* with what Sloterdijk exposes in the emergence of a new religion such as Dianetics that is predicated on what he describes as a "psychotechnic experiment" (2013b: 94). In a detailed discussion of the origins of Scientology and the science fiction writings of Hubbard that position him with the emergent cybernetic culture of postwar America, Sloterdijk makes the case for how its adoption of the apparatus of sacred techniques of religion sees it establish itself successfully as a legitimate group. He writes: "My conclusion from the dispute over the religious status of this psychotechnic group is that it proved once and for all that religion does not exist" (2013b: 103). What we can identify in the Guilty Remnant, therefore,

is this deployment of a technology of mental reshaping that replicates the self-improvement through repetitive auditing central to Scientology but one that in the Guilty Remnant is inverted towards a nihilistic destruction, rather than a higher form of life. The fate of the Guilty Remnant chapter in Jarden was annihilation through drone strike, whilst for Nora her resolution was found through the movement between worlds in the transportation device, real or imagined. Sloterdijk is clear that any return to religion today, therefore, is not a re-found faith in the divine but, rather, an appropriation of its technologies of self-realization.

Affective space

> A lot of the music doesn't resolve. It just floats around . . . It's a sort of amniotic fluid for the whole show to live in.
>
> (Max Richter quoted in Catton, 2014)

In many ways, of course, the television serial form is founded on repetition. A key development of serial drama in recent decades has been the ability to move away from the self-contained episodic structure of broadcast TV, where it could not be taken for granted that the viewer had seen all previous episodes, to a more sophisticated long-form story arc.

Within *The Leftovers*, I want to focus on one aspect of this idea of repetition and that is the musical motif of "The Departure" track that plays throughout the show. There is much that could be explored in the serial with regard to its creative use of music, but following the practice throughout the book I want to consider one of the production elements in detail to engage with the affective process that can be determined to be at work through a particular creative deployment. The show had a music supervisor, Liza Richardson, who worked to arrange the choice and permissions for the pop songs that played throughout the episodes and which were an interesting aspect of the serial and exemplifies the assertion that this is a part of a new golden age of music on television (Poniewozik, 2017). However, the score was by Max Richter, and this is where the focus will be. Richter is described as a post-minimalist composer, classically trained and successful as a cross-over artist working with film, opera, ballet, and as a collaborator with other musicians and artists. Richter describes his approach to the score for *The Leftovers*:

> The other thing I thought about was – because the show is really about the departure and the fact of the departure – I thought about what sort of instrumentation I'd be using. I went for instrumentation which is all about decay. So you have relatively few sustained tones and you have things which lead to decay, [with instruments like] pianos, harps, celesta – all those things which kind of turn to nothing in front of your eyes as you listen to them.
>
> (Jagernauth, 2014)

The idea of instrumentation that leads to decay usefully describes a key element of this musical motif that drives the affective process as the music is connected

with the image within the episodes in which it plays. The aim here is to analyse how the music works as a repetition throughout the serial in terms of what can be described as an "affective space" (Marsh, 2010). Certainly, watching the show through to its finale involves significant emotional engagement. Examining the final scene, for instance, raises the sheer density of meaning at work within its multiple components, including the narrative, actors, make-up, framing, editing, as well as the music. Nevertheless, I will attempt to pursue the line of analysis through this concept of repetition, a concept that, of course, also plays an important part in any notion of religious ritual.

To maintain the viewers' engagement across the entirety of the three seasons, as with any serial drama, certain principles of identity need to function. The continuous format of serial television is rather different from the singular medium of film. Certainly, within film the recurrence of a musical motif is widely used and we often remember distinct sonic moments in the process of recollection of iconic films. Stan Link usefully defines this:

> In its broadest usage, leitmotif (and leitmotiv) connotes a concise, recurring musical statement associated with a non-musical object or idea. The reappearance of a leitmotif within an extended musical context in turn acknowledges the presence – implicit or explicit – of its meaning under evolving circumstances.
>
> (2009: 180)

Within *The Leftovers* the Sudden Departure is what motivates the story and the characters' struggles, so this song becomes a leitmotif for the show and creates what we might call an "affective alliance" between the viewer and the composer and director of the show (Marsh, 2010: 8). In some ways, within *The Leftovers*, this is heightened because of the unpredictability of the narrative that allows for those necessary moments of reconnection through the reminder of the music, it keeps us within its world. Our recognition of the motif maintains the link for us to the story world whilst also pushing the experience forward with variation in the version of the song playing. As Stan Link describes it, this also raises the issue "of a leitmotif's 'malleability' – the extent to which it might be altered and still retain a core identity" (2009: 186). Repetition, here, is a repetition with variation; it has an expressive function that connects us emotionally with the inciting incident whilst opening us up to the narrative change that engages us cognitively. Again, as Link describes it: "Literal repetition defies dramatic development while musical change acknowledges, reflects and intensifies it" (2009: 187).

There is a deep complexity to the process of engaging with the soundtrack in the context of watching the unfolding scene that can make it difficult to assert any generalizable observations. But we are *affected* by the music as it emerges to accompany the moving images and operates through memory, feeling, and thinking. Deleuze and Guattari describe one aspect of the musical refrain as being like a child in the dark, afraid and gripped with fear, who comforts themselves by singing under their breath (1988: 311). In many ways the leitmotif of "The Departure" in its various manifestations functions in this way, as "a rough sketch

of a calming and stabilizing, calm and stable, center in the heart of chaos" (1988: 311). The repetition of the music functions as a fragment of memory for the serial and reminds us not just of the wound at the heart of this chaos, but also that, as we see in this final scene between Nora and Kevin, the experience of time that has passed in all its melancholic intensity. The tune by Richter acts to activate a range of complex emotions anchored in that originary trauma but without recourse to vacuous words or trite emotion where its repetition functions as an aural pattern within a serial structure (Joseph & Letort, 2017).

The decay that Richter identifies in the instrumentation is also evident in the ageing of the characters through make-up, so that we see them now as visibly older. In the way that each episode functions to add to the characterization, building layer on top of layer; similarly each iteration of the musical leitmotif builds on the previous ones. This musical leitmotif works as a participant within the drama itself, taking on a perspective that works dialectically with the actor's performance. In this remarkable final scene that closes the entire serial, the track is a point of return, a reverberation, to both underscore the relationship between these two people and to act for that absence, that affective void we "see" at the very beginning. The leitmotif is part of a relationship between character, affect, and narrative. It speaks to us and for those who are missing from this indifferent world. Tarkovsky writes of this use of music in film when he says, "The refrain brings us back to our first experience of entering that poetic world, making it immediate and at the same time renewing it", and that:

> Used this way, music does more than intensify the impression of the visual image by providing a parallel illustration of the same idea; it opens up the possibility of a *new*, transfigured impression of the same material: something different in kind.
>
> (2006: 158)

Grief and the event

> Let's face it. We're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something.
>
> (Butler, 2003: 13)

In the aftermath of the event that defines everything in this world, the repetitive return to this moment fits perfectly with the idea of trauma. The individual ego is overwhelmed at the time and unable to respond given that what occurs is a violent disruption of normality where the normal is defined as how the body settles into a habitual pattern to move efficiently through the world. This tension that has been traumatically instantiated is revisited by successive repetition. The flashback mentioned earlier of Laurie as therapist to the traumatized mother draws attention to what is so powerfully articulated throughout *The Leftovers*, a fearless critique of what the search for "why" does to those left behind and not a focus about the

"why". The world here is one of the fragments that will never be reassembled, and the feeling this generates is one, as the quotation from Judith Butler describes, of being undone by each other. The grief that permeates our world today is driven by a sense of loss, and it often manifests itself in the ways we see here. Stiegler writes of how, when the horizon of expectation, as he puts it, disappears:

> The radical rupture induced by dis-ruption makes *evident* that the epoch is missing [*fait défaut*], that it is merely the *absence* of epoch . . . And it does so at a moment when the imminent possibility of an *excessively and definitively fatal* ὕβρις is gripping hold of and strangling any projection into the immensity of the improbable, and, in so doing, is sending us mad – mad with *sadness*, mad with *grief*, mad with *rage*.
>
> (2019: 20)

Precisely what we see in *The Leftovers* with the Sudden Departure is something that destroys the possibility of a future. Instead, what we have is repetition in an endless feedback loop that replays this cataclysmic moment and can be related to what Stiegler describes a new kind of barbarism characterized by nihilistic atrocity (2019).

Over the three seasons, the show constantly investigates the intersecting lines of suffering, meaning, and faith and often shows that ultimately, there is nothing there, just a void. If we approach this as an event, then in what ways can we describe it? This is a fictional, supernatural occurrence and therefore not what we might think of as a representation of history. In many ways, therefore, we can see as what might be defined as an ideal event, or, to quote Deleuze, a singularity, he writes:

> Singularities are turning points and points of inflection; bottlenecks, knots, foyers, and centers; points of fusion, condensation, and boiling; points of tears and joy, sickness and health, hope and anxiety, "sensitive" points.
>
> (2004b: 63)

The singularity belongs to a different dimension than denotation or signification. Within *The Leftovers*, there is a relentless shifting between times, dimensions, and appearances; there is a ranging across the domain of self-production, a "*nomadic distribution"* rather than sedentary, as we see in Kevin and eventually Nora, as they move between the planes of being within the drama (2004b: 118). There is a vivid sense of potential energies, possible actualization, and the experience of time as multiple rather than singular, something that death can facilitate.

In Chapter 1, it was discussed how the notion of the emergence of an event raised expectations in the processes of subjectivation inherent to it. Here, in *The Leftovers*, in contrast it makes a demand, a demand on us (in this world) to come up with a story that explains our loss. Once the stability of the existing structures is fatally shaken, then in response is a surge of multiple and bizarre efforts to explain.

In this way, what the Departure does is to create an opening into which floods the desperate need and desire for an economy of signs that one can believe in. What the show conveys are the sheer range of mad, competing, and fantastical stories that we follow and even if we realize that they cannot possibly co-exist, we still maintain a sense not, perhaps, of hope but the possibility of it. As Kafka says, there is "plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope – but not for us" (quoted in Benjamin, 1968: 116). The reflective nature of this within the serial is in itself telling: A story about stories about an event that is beyond understanding or explanation and therefore meaning. Damon Lindelof explains this after the final episode:

> [O]nce the storytelling process began and scripts started getting written, we landed on the idea of this season, if not the series, being about people telling stories. And, more important, people telling stories that would either give themselves a degree of comfort or that they believed would give comfort to others.
>
> (Sandberg, 2017)

Where does this lead? Certainly, not only to a kind of madness as is evident throughout *The Leftovers* but also an endless return to the scene of the event. Near the end of season 1 finale, the Guilty Remnant stage a macabre and shocking re-enactment of the last moment before the Departure. Secretly entering each home in Mapleton, they dress mannequins of lost family members in the original clothes and other accessories.

The Leftovers (1.10:0.12.23)

Here (above) we see Nora come down from her bathroom, getting ready for her day, to be faced with the horror of this scenario and collapsing into an anguished cry that we see but do not hear. As Kevin returns to the town, he gets a battered and

beaten member of the Guilty Remnant to tell him what they did: "We made them remember" she writes (1.10:00.38.35). This unleashes an uncontrollable and violent rage against the cult that sees them beaten in the streets and their houses set on fire. When we cut from the town's people's rampage back to Nora we find her, in contrast, now sat calmly with this facsimile of her departed family:

The Leftovers (1.10:0.43.30)

The Guilty Remnant have gone to great lengths to pay attention to the details of the individual departed so that the emotional reaction is visceral and overwhelming even when faced with these "dead-eyed" dolls. Whatever coping strategy each person has developed over the three years since the Departure it is, in this moment, shattered. For Nora, after gently caressing the "hands" of her lost children, she puts them to bed and writes a letter that we hear as a voice-over where she admits that she now faces the truth of what happened and recognizes how broken she is: "It took me three years to accept the truth, but now I know that there's no going back, no fixing it. I'm beyond repair. Maybe we are all beyond repair" (1.10:00.46.00). Her reaction to the scene is to write to Kevin and to leave the town, yet before this can happen they are all once more enfolded into another narrative. Faced with a reminder of the event, we produce more stories and then more, and so on.

This raises a useful question about what is at work here. On one level, stories relentlessly unfolding through fractal narrative loops can be captivating. However, the question of whether what is being staged here is itself an exercise in futility can be raised. In a broader sense, Christian Salmon describes what he sees as the "hi-jacking of the creative imagination" by marketing machines that work to shape viewers into passive consumers, where culture functions to transmit not collected knowledge and wisdom but a form of contemporary melancholy:

> The great narratives that punctuate human history – from Homer to Tolstoy and from Sophocles to Shakespeare – told of universal myths and transmitted the lessons learned by past generations. They passed on lessons in wisdom that were the fruit of cumulative experience. Storytelling goes in the opposite direction: it tacks artificial narratives on to reality, blocks exchanges, and saturates symbolic space with its series and stories. It does not talk about past experience. It shapes behaviors and channels flows of emotion. Far from being the "course of recognition" that Paul Ricoeur detected in narrative activity, storytelling establishes narrative systems that lead individuals to identify with models and to conform to protocols.
>
> (2017)

In response, I would say that *The Leftovers* very forcefully pushes the viewer away from conformity and the familiar and explores the uneven terrain of doubt, desire, and despair. Yes, it deals with the pitfalls of avoidance and powerless grief, yet that is not the same as leading us as viewers necessarily to any of those things. This takes us to the very final scene of the serial at the end of season 3. As discussed earlier, we have seen Nora enter a chamber for transportation to the alternate world where, apparently, the disappeared 2% reside. Rogue science has, apparently, developed a machine that can move someone between the different realities. However, we then cut to the figure of Nora in Australia now clearly aged after what must be several intervening years.

The idea of searching is also an important way to understand the process at work as we see the characters in *The Leftovers* looking for particular places to access the forces of the founding trauma of the Sudden Departure, certain transfer points between worlds. Nora recounts a visit to the alternate world, a flipped reality, where rather than 2% disappeared, there 98% vanished. This world, then, is a negative of this one but one that expands the suffering, where the sense of loss is even greater. Yet, for Nora, being able to see her children after seven years means that rather than being reunited in a moment of completion, she realizes that she is now an intruder, a ghost that doesn't belong there, as she says, and so she apparently returns to this world the way she left, via the transportation machine once more. But repetition is not something simply generated by the traumatic event, rather, repetition is, as described by the idea of habit, as fundamental to life, as we have previously explored. Repetition is the condition of creativity but can also be in the form of an empty or compulsive attempt to reverse the event, to return things to the way they were. In some ways the show functions across its 28 episodes to this final moment, everything reduced down to the minimal foundational element of all that it has explored.

A strength of the drama that marks it out as something special is also its reflective awareness of the process of storytelling itself as the subject, in many ways, of the storytelling of the show, as Lindelof describes above. So, earlier in the season we are presented with The Book of Kevin as a narrativization of all that we have seen happen to Kevin in the serial now become an object in the drama itself. Similarly, the final conversation between Nora and Kevin functions as a meta-story of the show

across its 28 episodes. Nora, a character driven by relentless scepticism whose job it is to relentlessly track down charlatans and fakes on the Sudden Departure, simply recounts a story of passing over to the other world. We as viewers and Kevin on screen having nothing with which to judge this as true or false, and she herself raises the doubt that she will be believed. For Kevin, it is an act of love to simply accept this, "I do believe you", which is actually a refusal of judgement. We have a show about how, as social beings, we compel ourselves to stories that explain the mysteries and sufferings of the world, that itself finishes with a story that we can decide, if we want, to simply take on faith, as Kevin does. They may be undone by each other but they can also commit to each other, to be back where they've always been, the same broken spirits but ones who have passed through time. Together but different:

The Leftovers (3.08:1.06.50)

It is fitting that in the final moments of the serial, as a much older Nora and Kevin sit together after years apart, she recounts her tale or fable, of visiting the realm of the departed before returning once more, we have the final lines of dialogue:

Nora

I knew that if I told you what happened, you would never believe me

Kevin

I believe you

Nora

You do?

Kevin

Why wouldn't I believe you? You're here.

Nora

I'm here.

(3.08:1.06.03)

What we have in these final words of dialogue is an assertion of belief in the other, "I believe you", that goes some way to healing the trauma of the Sudden Departure. Both characters, if we take their words at face value, have been, in some form, to another place but have "returned" here, to this world which is, ultimately, actually the only one. We are left with a strong sense that it is in this world that we must believe, that it is *between* us that we should seek for any resolution to the crisis that may engulf us rather than something transcendent. Such an ending leaves us with a sense of hope that it is in this realm that we must seek redemption, not elsewhere. *The Leftovers* reasserts in its serial form something of what Deleuze claims as a possibility of cinematic ethics: Belief in this world, as he writes:

> What we most lack is a belief in the world, we've quite lost the world, it's been taken from us. If you believe in the world you precipitate events, however inconspicuous, that elude control, you engender new space-times, however small their surface or volume.
>
> (1995b: 176)

It is here that there is the possibility to give words back to the body as a capacity for fabulation. Paradoxically, it is through the scepticism of Nora in *The Leftovers* that we are returned to the possibility of reconnecting to the world; what is presented is the televisual staging of this ethical choice *and* a reply.

4 *Rectify*

Being-in-the-world

4 seasons
Episodes: 30
Dates first aired
1: April 2013
2: June 2014
3: July 2015
4: October 2016
Creator: Ray McKinnon
Showrunner: Ray McKinnon
Cast: Aden Young, Abigail Spencer, J. Smith-Cameron, Adelaide Clemens, Clayne Crawford
Cinematography: Paul M. Sommers, Patrick Cady
Composer: Gabriel Mann
Location: Georgia, USA
Original network: Sundance TV

If *The Leftovers* is motivated by the trauma of disappearance, *Rectify* is driven by another kind of loss and one that, similarly, we never get to see. Across the four seasons of the show, we follow in a meditative and tightly-focused manner the experiences of Daniel Holden and those around him as he adjusts to being released from death row in a Georgia State Penitentiary after 19 years of incarceration. He is there after confessing to, and being found guilty of, the rape and murder of his 16-year-old girlfriend Hanna, when he was 17-years old. The show opens with his imminent release as, after many years of campaigning by his mother, sister, and lawyer, and aided by the facility of new DNA testing that proves that he was not involved in the rape of Hanna, there is doubt cast on his conviction. Yet, importantly, the uncertainty over who was responsible for her death is held in suspension throughout the course of the show and is relentlessly maintained even if a resolution of sorts is ultimately offered. There is an intensity to this drama that revolves around this kind of character study only long-form television can put into effect. *Rectify* has a deeply poetic quality that opens up spaces of emotional and existential reflection in ways that, many believe, are unparalleled within the

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medium. One can only agree with the critic Matt Zoller Seitz who wrote: "*Rectify* is among the most radical storytelling on TV" (2015).

What we observe, as we follow Daniel through the serial, is the construction of a self out of the shattering experience of solitary confinement with its brutal ontological harm. By cutting from the primary narrative of his new life to flashbacks and imaginary scenes, we build up a picture of the immense cost to the psyche of this sensitive and curious soul. No scenes are shown of Daniel as a young man or any restaging of the murder, just an elusive flash of a police mugshot during the opening credits. There is no doubt that the experience of prison has profoundly damaged Daniel, yet there is a suggestion voiced that he was always "odd" and that perhaps this was one of the reasons he made a convenient scapegoat for the crime. We follow him as he attempts to adjust to life and negotiate the options that he now faces. We are witness to his suffering and pain, and the serial is unique in the level of empathy and emotional resonance it is able to generate through the poetry of its visualization and pace of narrative. He emerges into the daylight (there is no natural light in his cell) talking a little strangely and seeing things from an oblique angle. In many ways he is, like some of the earlier characters discussed in the book, perhaps on the autism spectrum. Whether the neural pathways in his brain have been cauterized and affected by the prison experience or were, to an extent, that way originally, we don't know. As we have seen with Elliot in *Mr Robot* and Taylor in *Billions*, there is something about the formulation of this psychological profile that is easily appropriated to the manic demands of hyperindustrial capital where emotional absence is motivated as a sign of the efficiency of the high-functioning worker unburdened by the restrictions of relationships (Broe, 2019: 97–98). Daniel, though, is not a character described in quite this way; rather, his behavior is that of a traumatized soul with arrested development even if it has a poetic quality that sees beauty in the everyday.

Facing the abyss

Rectify (1.01:0.00.26)

> Inasmuch as it is nothing but pure communicability, every human face, even the most noble and beautiful, is always suspended on the edge of an abyss.
>
> (Agamben, 2000: 95)

Within the first 30 seconds of the opening scene of episode 1 of *Rectify*, we have been introduced to many of the key elements of the world of the drama. Its minimal economy speaks volumes about the artistry of the writing and production on the show. The scene pictured above is divided by cutting to a close-up on Daniel and the movement of him closing his eyes. This most slight of actions provides great insights into the world in which he is located, namely, the prison apparatus. In this carceral panoptic space, the prisoner in the foreground is disrobing whilst being subjected to an intimate body search by a guard. We observe, through the multiple planes of walls and windows, Daniel in the anonymous white prison clothes of an American state correctional facility. The use of window frames is both a sign of his imprisonment and is mobilized conceptually as replete with ontological metaphors, something evident within the history of cinema from its beginnings (Elsaesser & Hagener, 2015: 14–38). There is also the number 2, which is printed on the window-glass of the door but appears to hang in the space next to Daniel's head and is suggestive of a moment of division into two selves: The prisoner and the free man. The action of Daniel in closing his eyes as the new prisoner is instructed to bend over for a rectal exam is an act of discretion that points to his intrinsic sense of dignity. Soon after this, another guard enters the room and passes civilian clothes to Daniel for him to change into. For the first time since entering the prison, the guard turns his back to allow Daniel to dress without being observed, signalling the fundamental shift in his status. This is the opening to *Rectify* and introduces not just the central character and his world but also the delicate and "expertly calibrated tone" that is central to the show's power and intensity (Ryan, 2016). In a broader sense as we follow Daniel on his release, the show connects with some of the essential processes of how we experience time and build our sense of self as we move in the world. Further, the above quotation from Agamben points to a key notion of faciality; more than the literal face of the individual, it signals the face as a site of conflict over being and the possibilities of communication. A key function of the death row cell is the minimizing of affective relations between prisoners through isolation and a denial of the richness of face-to-face interaction. When, for instance, Sloterdijk talks of spheres or cells, there is an inherent sense of shared space: We may be prisoners of architecture but the architecture of prisons is qualitatively different. As we examine further on, there is a potentiality to such a form of isolation but in general what operates here is the attempt to crush the human spirit; by definition death row is not predicated on ideas of rehabilitation. However, there is always an ecology to prisons where creative strategies of communication and resistance, as we shall see, can always be found (Lynch, 2014: 105).

Rectify, then, is an exploration of the journey of Daniel on his release from a death sentence. His time in prison has been spent on the "edge of the abyss" that is death row, in the isolation block where these particular prisoners are held. Lisa

Guenther writes of how the experience of solitary confinement works to dislocate the individual from a sense of selfhood, she writes:

> Solitary confinement deprives prisoners of the bodily presence of others, forcing them to rely on the isolated resources of their own subjectivity, with the (perhaps surprising) effect of eroding or undermining that subjectivity. The very possibility of being broken in this way suggests that we are not simply atomistic individuals but rather hinged subjects who can become unhinged when the concrete experience of other embodied subjects is denied for too long.
>
> (Guenther, 2013: xii)

This ontological damage is what is explored so well in this serial (Crain, 2020). The narrative oscillates between the present day as Daniel tentatively navigates his entry back into society and the past, to scenes set in his prison cell, unpeeling a series of traumatic moments in a vivid process of adjustment. There are many other relationships within the serial, especially between Daniel's step-brother Teddy and his wife Tawney, that are similarly negotiated sensitively and tenderly but are not the focus here.

Rectify sits well within the boundaries of this book's framing concepts of habit and thought and, indeed, it was the initial motivation in considering these ideas through the form of TV serial drama. As with all the dramas considered here *Rectify* shows something of the potential to work with an essential quality of the serial form itself, as well as the telling of a story. Prison is many things, but it can be understood fundamentally as form of suspension, of both time and living. *Rectify*, over its 30 episodes, shifts between the struggle for Daniel to adapt to life outside, where his guilt or innocence is never definitively proven, and flashbacks to the time in his cell. The unfolding of this character, and Daniel's emergence, is portrayed as a painful process of opening up to a new self, and the show's pace, acting, and dialogue in this exploration mark it out as something quite special. By taking the complexities of injustice and inhumanities of the American prison regime, the show raises profound moral questions about those antinomic principles of justice and humanity but, not as abstract ideas, rather, as lived through the lives of the cast of characters on screen.

Without sounding trite, the experience of imprisonment certainly lends itself to the idea of habit. Of course, enforced regulatory regimes of coercion and punishment hardly count as the free forming of habit; rather, I am concerned with the way that prison and its experience affect an individual's sense of self and possibilities. One of the key philosophers used throughout this book is Bernard Stiegler, but at this moment I want to approach his work tangentially and not simply through his discussion of media and technics. Between 1978 and 1983, Stiegler was incarcerated for armed robbery, and it was during this time that he states he became interested in philosophy, studying it by correspondence with the philosopher and translator Gérard Granel at the University of Toulouse-Le Mirail. Stiegler describes his experience in the essay "How I Became a Philosopher"

published, in English, in the 2003 volume *Acting Out* (2009). For Stiegler, this experience was transformative and, again without minimizing the suffering inherent in such an event, points to some of the aspects of incarceration that lend themselves to study and even reflection, as he writes: "Deprived of an 'exterior milieu,' my 'interior milieu' took on that incommensurable depth and weight sought after by mystics and, more generally, by ascetics" (2009: 17). There is undoubtedly an element of just such a profound interiorization in Daniel.

In his account of his incarceration and growth into a philosopher, Stiegler introduces this as something he considers necessitating an awkward intimacy, a sharing of a secret. His embarrassment at the reasons for his imprisonment he refers to as years "preceded by a passage to the act, that is, by a transgression" (2009: 11). As he writes, prison functions to suspend the ability to act and interrupts actions (2009: 12). In this way, a key element of *Rectify* is the stillness of Daniel, as played by the actor Aden Young, a stillness shaped by grief, trauma and confinement. Similar to Stiegler, a key element in the character of Daniel is a deep, yet largely undefined, sense of shame. The gradual exteriorization of this debilitating condition is an important part in his ability to establish a life outside.

The movement between the contemporary exterior world and the recollection of the prison cell is visually a powerful one. As said, at no point are we ever shown any flashbacks to the original crime or Daniel's early life before prison. All of the memories take us back to the isolation cell of the "row", that is, death row, where prisoners are placed whilst awaiting execution. This is presented in many ways, therefore, as a kind of transit space, consisting of a $6 \times 9 \times 9.5$ feet high, white painted, rectangular box room, with no window or natural light. In the way in which it is lit and shot, it works very much as a space outside time, and it is this quality that provides a key aspect of the ability of the show to resonate with philosophical issues of time and being. Within his cell, Daniel lives in a state of suspension, awaiting a confirmation of his death sentence after the exhaustion of all appeals and pleas, with five "stays of execution" along the way, none of which we are shown in any detail. Daniel is presented as an avid reader, with a hunger for knowledge and insight. However, the premise of the show is Daniel's struggle, and those around him, to adapt to life outside prison. Given that he was incarcerated at the age of 17, his efforts to adapt to life have to further incorporate his lack of maturity. Daniel is a man whose time is out of joint, so to speak, and his existence vibrates with existential questions of life, or, perhaps more precisely, bare life (Agamben, 1998). As a death row prisoner, there is a fundamental stripping away of his humanity, his subjectivity, so that he is barely existing and whose death can be pronounced at any time, for as Jean Baudrillard writes of contemporary social systems of biopower: "From birth control to death control, whether we execute people or compel their survival . . ., the essential thing is that the decision is withdrawn from them, that their life and their death are never freely theirs" (1993: 174). The disruption to his sense of time is tied closely to his efforts to adjust to his new normality as a free man, where his self must now incorporate a more open sense of temporality. On

death row he had no future, which meant his sense of the present was a form of empty repetition, relentlessly blocked from expanding further. The structure of habit that Daniel occupied is one imposed on him and coerced his passivity and where the present is an endless replay, yet even here he finds a line of escape through his friendship with the prisoner Kerwin in the cell beside him. These cells function as a version of sensory deprivation units with white walls, fluorescent light, and fixed furniture of cement bed and metal toilet. A small number of books are allowed, although this itself becomes a point of conflict for Daniel as the guards charge him with having too many in his cell, an example of the petty brutality implemented to crush a prisoner's will (1.04:0.37.22). The experience of time in this context is an inhumanly reduced one, where perception is minimized and hence affection, as the further combination of feeling and memory, is also minimized. We are not shown any communal activities for Daniel and death row prisoners must eat their food in their cells, alone, and so even basic human bodily functions such as satisfying hunger cannot become manifest beyond the routine times set by the prison regime. To endure this isolation is to come to terms with an absence of duration. Time here does not pass in a meaningful sense, other than getting closer to execution; there is no flow of differing difference, so to speak. The radical aspect of the serial, therefore, is the way it provides us with a profound insight into the very different duration of Daniel's world. As Daniel attempts to describe his enclosed life to Tawney in their first proper conversation, "What was real Daniel?" she asks, "The time in between the seconds", he replies, (1.02:0.33.14) they bond over a discussion of the weather, something he has not experienced for 19 years. She extends her hands onto his, again something he has not experienced for decades, and a circuit of affection is made, something that will have major implications for them both, as the serial progresses. It is in such encounters that the show builds sensitive yet powerful dynamics, abysmal emotional currents that swirl around this character and those that come into contact with him.

Another telling aspect of the serial is that throughout, it maintains a blank in Daniel's memory of the circumstances surrounding the death of his girlfriend Hanna, and it therefore cannot structure a narrative of innocence in a conventional way. As said, there are no flashbacks to what "really" happened or any other kind of flashback other than to the prison cell. This ambiguity over the details of Hanna's death, deriving from Daniel having ingested hallucinogenic mushrooms, maintains the struggle for him to establish himself without sentiment but to his eternal torment. In one scene, the prisoner in the cell next to him, who baits him with his obscene references to having been involved in the gang rape of Daniel, even raises the memory of Hanna itself as a form of invasive brutality (1.02:0.28.40).

Further, this lack of a possible future for Daniel whilst on death row raises the question of, or rather the end of, faith. Daniel's first proper introduction to us as viewers is for a brief press conference outside the gates of the prison, immediately upon his release. Here, lyrically and in an oddly theatrical tone that is present throughout, he reflects on his position:

Daniel

> Hello. I'm not sure what to think of this drastic change of course in my life. I'm certainly not against it. Over the past two decades, I have developed a strict routine which I've followed religiously, you might say. A way of living and thinking really, or not thinking as was often the point of . . . well, the point. Now, this way of being didn't encourage the contemplation that a day like today could ever occur or a tomorrow like tomorrow will, be for me now. I had convinced myself that kind of optimism served no useful purpose in the world where I existed. Obviously, this radical belief system was flawed, and was, ironically, a kind of fantasy itself.

(1.01:0.09.20)

For Daniel, the key to surviving was, as he describes it, establishing a set of habits that allowed for "not" thinking, but what about hope? Has he also had to reject hope to survive? He seems to pose this as a question. Within the serial, religion does play a role, primarily in season 1 through the character of Tawney, his sister-in-law and born-again Christian, with whom he develops a strong emotional bond. In many ways, the show is a meditative examination of faith, hope, and love, as worked through the post-traumatic experience of Daniel. Unlike in a serial such as *The Leftovers*, where religion as a system of ideas that is constructed to address transcendent issues of meaning and how belief is staged, *Rectify* reverses the telescope, so to speak, and examines the details of the smallest micro-level expressions of religious belief. The delicacy of the gold cross around Tawney's neck speaks volumes of the fragility of her conception of her relationship to God. Not that she is pushed to doubt her belief but that for her it resides in the details of life, as she says, "I can see and feel God in all things", to which Daniel replies, "Like Thomas Aquinas" (1.04:00.29.26). But Tawney is not familiar with this theologian, although she bows to Daniel's superior knowledge, knowledge gained through his extensive reading whilst in prison. Tawney, herself a figure of innocence, walks with Daniel across the meadow as the sun flares between them and declares: "You're above things, it's like, you're pure" (1.04:00.30.12).

In many ways, the question posed for all the characters in the show is, "How do you make a life?". With Daniel at the centre of this process, all the others, intertwined as they are in his life, are impacted by his return to the family, home, and town. *Rectify* is not a "true crime" story although it has echoes of the West Memphis Three case, and there is a connection between the show's creator and main writer, Ray McKinnon, and the campaign to have them released (Echols, 2013). What the serial does do so effectively is to connect with the processes of selfhood similar in

many ways to that Stiegler describes from his personal experience. In *Rectify*, Daniel is a thoughtful and philosophical individual who has been brutalized and deeply damaged by the long years spent on death row. His trauma is intensified by a period of sexual violence from the other prisoners, where he is repeatedly raped. Over the seasons, we see the attempts by Daniel to come to terms with the horrors of what happened to him and the sensation of being overwhelmed by the experiences of life with all its choices. There is a deep sense of regret that maintains the emotional tension of the drama and permeates across all the characters in different ways. The timeline of the show is only a few months from Daniel's release to his forced exile and new life in a half-way house in Nashville, whilst the serial itself plays across 4 seasons and 3½ years between 2013 and 2016 in its original release. This highlights the approach it takes to time, where trauma and incarceration make it have a quality different from the conventional serial format. As viewers, we map the changes in characters over the years of the serial even as within the show only months pass, and this creates a gap between reality and fiction that allows for a high level of creative engagement by the audience (Fienberg, 2016). Indeed, Daniel is a character who has existed within a gap, an interstitial space, a kind of vacuole, that has resisted the crushing pressure that surrounds his "cell", his organism. Resistance, here, can take the form of not just survival but of making a world within the intolerable conditions, where thought can develop in this space and can grow. Stiegler, in prison on a fixed-term sentence and therefore with a clearer sense of a future, writes: "I constituted a *world* that would become, over the years and beyond the period of my incarceration, my philosophy" (2009: 19).

Judgement

Rectify (2.04:0.06.17)

In a scene from season 2 (above), we see Daniel travel alone to Atlanta to visit the High Museum of Art, a space that in a poignant, and faintly ridiculous way, mirrors the white walls and minimalist aesthetic of prison; here is another kind of limitation of sensory distraction, if motivated by increasing a visitor's refection on the artworks. Mark C Taylor writes of his impression of entering this type of minimalist gallery space:

> To enter the gallery is to be immersed in emptiness. Far from space waiting to be filled. This emptiness is a void, which seems to "fill" everything and everyone. In the midst of the bare white walls, between the pale grey floor and recessive ceiling, nothing appears. This emptiness – this nothingness provokes a certain apprehension. What *is* this emptiness. What *is* this nothingness. What *is* the apprehension they provoke?
>
> (1999: 202)

For Daniel, once there, he purposefully makes his way to one particular painting, *The Breakfast*, by Pierre Bonnard. A French post-impressionist, Bonnard painted things around him in his small house in the south of France, such as his wife and their daily rituals, something that, again, might appeal to an incarcerated individual. Dita Amory, curator at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, writes that the figures in these works, captured in the paint "though physically present, are emotionally absent" (2010). It seems intended that Daniel would have fixed on such a work; it fits with the character's personality, and his temperament. Of course, it is ill advised to project too much intention into such moments in a creative work without supporting evidence; nevertheless, there is a sense within the show of such attention to detail. At this moment as Daniel contemplates the work, an older woman approaches him and asks him what he thinks, and the exchange is revealing:

Peggy

What do you think?

Daniel

What do I think? Well, I think I've looked at this painting for so long in a book that somehow my brain has trivialized it. And now as I stand here in front of the real thing I feel, if anything, disappointment.

Peggy

Well, that's too bad.

Daniel

Not at the painting itself, more my brain, I guess.

Peggy

I think the brain is afraid of being in a state of constant wonder, for safety reasons or something.

Daniel

I suppose it's inevitable.

(2.04:00.06.53)

It is interesting that Daniel replies in this way, to reflect upon the over-familiarity of a reproduction of the painting and that when in the presence of the actual work his expectation is mildly disappointed. He describes his response in relation to his brain that Peggy, perceptively, understands has been forced to find a way to cope with his experiences. For Daniel, his challenge is to actually believe in this world, as if through art he is trying to establish a life. In this encounter, he introduces himself, deceptively and naively, as Donald, a bookstore owner (the episode is titled "Donald the Normal"). Later, over lunch, when challenged as to why he had memorized the Tobias Wolff short story "Bullet in the Brain", he replies,

Daniel

I don't know why exactly, it was during a period of my life where I was having some difficulties dealing with the passage of time in a traditional sense. And since Mr Wolff's short story deals partly with the bending of . . . of time, well, in memorizing it, or . . . or in taking the action of memorizing it I, too, was . . . was able to bend time, in a way. Or at least experience it . . . differently.

(2.04:00.14.23)

Here, these first stumbling attempts to live a life that he can believe in are driven by the feelings of shame that he has. He doesn't wish to explain his past, even though for these sophisticated women it can hardly be less obvious, and they continue to extend their kindness by not embarrassing him. But it points to a key idea, which is that for Daniel the potential for a future is one beyond his suffering, to make some kind of new world not limited by that experience. The scholar of religion Daniel Colucciello Barber writes:

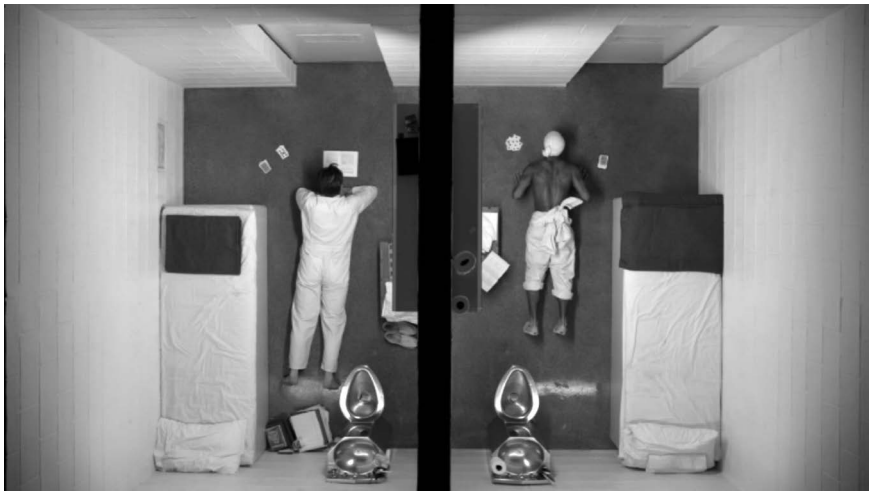
> Suffering is a fact, it is what there is, or what is given. Yet suffering, and all the violence that it undergoes and can engender, need not be the last word on what is possible. Suffering, when it is affirmed through ethics of the crack, may open onto new possibilities. Suffering can give way to becoming.
>
> (2014: 95)

Daniel occupies the space of the indefinite, where nothing is certain, not even his guilt or innocence. This is more than saying we simply don't know yet but, rather, it is an existential space of radical doubt that keeps open a potential that is in tension and is subject to being overwhelmed by the forces of law and order which find it unbearable. This points to the realm of genuine thinking, where "to think is not be certain, but, on the contrary, to believe where we cannot know for sure" (Rachman, 2002: 17). Rather than an epiphany, there is quiet disappointment, and this leads not to judgement but to reflection.

Daniel's assertion that through the act of memorization of the Wolff story he develops the ability to experience time differently goes to the heart of this process. The death row is designed to be a zone of dead time, literally. The aim of its routine is repetition without difference, a countdown. Yet, for Daniel, as we have seen, not thinking the future was essential to surviving in the now, but his strategies for doing so are significant.

"Because I know ya"

Key to Daniel's "world" is his friendship with the prisoner Kerwin in the cell on one side of him, even as his abusive rapist is on the other. Daniel and Kerwin communicate by talking with the sound flowing between the air grate in the dividing wall. In this scene, we see Daniel with a book in front of him, reading as he talks with Kerwin, using the playing cards to randomly choose the number of press-ups each other has to do.



Rectify (1.04:0.06.33)

Here we have an unusual "God's eye" shot that creates a split screen between Daniel and Kerwin. As said earlier, Daniel is a character who is fundamentally

split, presented as if in multiple fragments throughout the drama, a man fractured by the empty form of time.

Kerwin is a young man who is on death row for the killing of a child bystander in a drive-by shooting. Ultimately, he is executed, and the scene where he is led from his cell and briefly able to talk to Daniel face-to-face through the glass is a stand-out scene of the serial. The fate of Kerwin, the process of his last walk from his cell to the execution chamber, is a foreshadowing of Daniel's prescribed fate, but he stops at Daniel's cell door asking, "I need to say something to my friend . . . I just need a moment" (1.06:0.34.08). Matt Zoller Seitz describes the serial as "truly Christian art" and what he points to, I think, is not that the show is motivated by Christian ideals of forgiveness or redemption and so on, but that it gives dramatic form to certain questions of being and time that have engaged existential philosophers and their Pauline roots (2014). Kerwin is being led to his execution, his juridically determined moment of death, yet he fills this briefest of moments with an assertion of Daniel's innocence for the death of Hanna, and when Daniel asks as to why he believes this, intones:

Kerwin

Because I know ya.

Because I know ya.

Because I know ya.

Rectify (1.06:0.34.53)

This Steinian repetition creates a deeply poignant space of the briefest intimacy, a love, that the system works to deny by restricting ability of the death row prisoners to see each other. Here, Daniel and Kerwin do "see" each other if only fleetingly, both framed by the narrow window.

This repetition is itself repeated in the final episode of the show, where Daniel recounts the scene to a therapist whilst recording it on his phone for listening to later. Here the recording device acts as an aid for the externalization of experience, a memory device for playback so that the repetition itself therapeutically works to lessen the emotional pain of the traumatic event. At the beginning of the final season, he articulates something of the agony of existing after something losing someone like Kerwin:

Daniel

When you are alone with yourself all the time with no one but yourself you begin to go deeper and deeper into yourself until you lose yourself. It's a perverse contradiction. It's like your ego begins to disintegrate until you have no ego, not in the sense that you become humble or gain some kind of perspective but that you literally lose your sense of self and I am not sure anyone, unless they have gone through it, can truly understand how profound that loss is. It's like the psychic glue that binds your whole notion of existence is gone and you become unglued. I think therefore I am, I think too much therefore I am not, I am not therefore I am nothing, I am nothing therefore I am dead and if I am dead then why am I still so God damn lonely?

(04E01:0.34.00)

It has been his relationship, or rather his friendship, with Kerwin that acts to shield him from that loneliness and, therefore, once he is executed, Daniel suffers a breakdown. There is a sense, from what Daniel says and the behaviour evident in scenes after Kerwin's execution, that he approaches a zero point, like an asymptotic line. But the function of the death row is to maintain the prisoners alive, to be executed at the moment of executive order; hence, they are stopped from total self-destruction as we see with Daniel on his return from the hospital ward being made to take some anti-depressant medication. Daniel manages to avoid psychic disintegration yet by doing this, as the excerpt cited earlier shows, he has to sever the relational link that forms the basis of sociality in the outside world which is later exemplified by his awkward interactions with other probationers in the half-way house. What *Rectify* is able to do so effectively is to describe something of the risks that accompany the survival strategy of imagining a "pure terrain of finite infinity and dream reality" (Guenther, 2013: 199). To return to Stiegler, it is the growing awareness of the exterior as the essence of being, as he writes:

> As the days passed, I was discovering that there is no interior milieu, but only, remaining here in my cell and *under their mnesic shape*, in a sense in a

> hollow, the remains, the defaults, the artifices of which the world consists and through which it finds its consistence.
>
> (2009: 17)

The fool

In episode 6 from season 2, we cut to a flashback scene of Daniel in his cell after Kerwin has been executed. Here, drugged and numbed, he is visited by a prison chaplain, Charlie ("Charlie Chaplain"). This could be presented as an exchange that fits with established filmic conventions but instead is done, once more, partly through reference to Dostoevsky. After scenes from the present, we cut back to the continuation of the flashback. Now the Chaplain is sat with the slot to the cell door open so that they can converse more easily. The Chaplain is describing how he visits a hospice and sits with the dying, to which Daniel responds, "You're a saint, Charlie" (2.06:0.39.09). But the Chaplain has brought something for Daniel, a small mono cassette player, the kind he uses to "[p]lay music for them, sometimes that's all I do, words can pale into comparison . . . for some it's the only thing that gives them solace". At this point he asks: "How long is it since you heard music Daniel?" and places the player on the open door slot and presses play. As the music starts he leans forward and whispers, "Beauty will redeem the world" to which Daniel replies as tear rolls down his cheek, "You're a fool Charlie". Clearly this derives from Dostoevsky's 1868 work *The Idiot*, where a character asks of the main character, "Is it true, prince, that you once declared that 'beauty would save the world'?" (2001). Dostoevsky's novel is precisely concerned with the saint/fool dichotomy. Dostoevsky had himself been imprisoned in Czarist Russia and condemned to death, even being led out to his own execution moments before a letter from the Czar was delivered to commute the sentence.

The use of this analogue recording device is an interesting choice being quite evocative for a pre-digital generation and signals Daniel's lack of development due to his removal from society. Again, it is another kind of externalized memory, an instrument of what Stiegler calls tertiary memory, that serves as a prosthetic device and is tied intrinsically to a temporality (1998). The music that is played is from "Silentium", the second movement of a work by the composer Arvo Pärt, *Tabula Rasa*. The reference to silence, the mind an emptied recording device, and the priests question as to when was the last time he heard music, all build the idea of the impact of this music on Daniel, who has only memory without external support. Daniel's incarceration since being a 17-year old sees him now almost reduced to a primal state of blankness. As Agamben argues in relation to the Aristotelean image of the tabula rasa of the wax tablet and stylus used in a private context as opposed to the public writing of ink on papyrus: "The mind is therefore not a thing but a being of pure potentiality, and the image of the writing tablet on which nothing is written functions precisely to represent the mode in which pure potentiality exists" (1999: 121). It is onto this that the music impresses itself, and Daniel reaches through the door slot to place his hand on the machine so that its piercing chords vibrate through his hands as well as his ears:

Rectify (2.06:0.41.08)

With the slightest of rack focus, we switch to Daniel's face as tears roll down his cheeks in a kneeling position of supplication:

Rectify (2.06:0.41.14)

Here, in this most reduced of states, a bare mode of existence, Daniel reaches out and makes a connection to this music that plays through this analogue machine as the pulses and rhythms course through his body, in a state of becoming as he senses the possibility of a spiritual force. But not a spiritual force tied to the religion of the priest but something that is present within the music itself. Patrick Giles writes of how, as a carer in the mid-1980s in the midst of the AIDS crisis he

found that in those final days this particular piece of music by Pärt was a source of solace for the patients (1999). Similarly, Alex Ross describes how in this piece of music, the composer

> has put his finger on something that is almost impossible to put into words – something to do with the power of music to obliterate the rigidities of space and time. One after the other, his chords silence the noise of the self, binding the mind to an eternal present.
>
> (2002)

It would seem appropriate to have this play now as Daniel has himself faced the obliteration of time and was forced into an eternal present. As the music continues, we cross-fade to Daniel today as he returns to the scene of the murder of his girlfriend and ingests hallucinogenic mushrooms once more, in scenes reminiscent of the cinematography of Terence Malik as the river flows past and around him. As time passes and music fades, the sound of the river comes up and he hears the uncanny voice of his dead girlfriend Hanna call his name (2.06:0.41.58).

Redemption

In the final season of the serial, Daniel moves to a half-way house, New Canaan, in Nashville. The season plays out through complex issues, including Daniel receiving treatment for his PTSD and sexual assaults in prison. Relationships with his family and with the other members of his half-way house are sensitively and effectively touched upon. But the final section of this chapter will look at the relationship Daniel develops with a woman he meets at the start of season 4, Chloe. Throughout the show, the relation to art has been a slight one and has not played a central role in the narrative. The visit to the gallery, the music player, and finally the meeting of an artist, all are almost incidental in their narrative function but do offer, I would argue, a space within this for thinking about art to suggest the potential for redemption. In the first episode of this final season, Daniel's curiosity sees him find his way into an artist cooperative and to meet this woman with a similarly unorthodox attitude to life. Noting his deep curiosity about the works that lie around the studio, she asks him, "Are you sure you don't wanna create something?" Daniel is deeply affected by the work and the exchange of words and a tear, once again, rolls down his cheek. As he leaves and she asks him his name, he refuses as he retorts, "This isn't real" (4.01:0.23.36). What is so effective about this final season is how it holds the delicate balance of Daniel's fragile sense of self and his first efforts to find ways to connect with those in his immediate circle of work, house, and the artist's cooperative. Each offers a certain community, as one of his housemates asserts after one of the residents has run away seemingly unable to face his truths and the responsibility that they should feel towards each other, "To some degree we got to be our brother's keeper" (4.0:0.29.09).

5 *Westworld*

We live in the wrong world

3 seasons (ongoing)
Episodes: 28
Dates first aired
1: October 2016
2: April 2018
3: March 2020
Creators: Jonathan Nolan, Lisa Joy
Showrunners: Jonathan Nolan, Lisa Joy
Main Cast: Evan Rachel Wood, Thandie Newton, Jeffrey Wright, Ed Harris, Anthony Hopkins, Aaron Paul, Vincent Cassel
Cinematography: Paul Cameron, John Grillo, Darran Tiernan, Brendan Galvin, Robert McLachlan, Jeffrey Jur, Zoe White, David Franco, M. David Mullen, Matt Flannery.
Technical Specifications
1.78:1
3-Perf Super 35
Kodak Vision3 5219 500T, 5207 250D
Arricam Lite, Arriflex 435
Cooke S4, Canon K35, Fujinon Premiere zoom
Composer: Ramin Djawadi
Location: Utah, Los Angeles, Singapore
Original network: HBO

The 2016 reboot of the 1973 film *Westworld* certainly fulfils the aspirations of a "quality" serial drama with a production budget for the pilot episode of US$25 million and for the first season a total of US$100 million. It is also a drama packed with philosophical reference, technological speculation, and characters driven by a longing for redemption, with at least two volumes of academic analysis published that examines many of these ideas (Goody & Mackay, 2019; South & Engels, 2018). In some ways it is almost too dense, where the sheer level of narrative construction makes watching it akin to cognitive labour. Such an approach does produce moments of intensity and insight whilst, as critics have argued,

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also sometimes leaving the viewer feeling disappointed or ambivalent as complexity collapses into something less challenging. Essentially, a TV serial about machines; it is itself constructed as a machine, a machine that responds to and, in a way, produces, a (hyper) attentive audience, who must simultaneously follow multiple narrative, musical, and cinematic tracks. In this way, it also functions as a machine that is self-reflective, that as in the way the hosts become self-aware, there is a sense of a Borgesian model of a forking pathway where every possibility happens, with the narrative never finally resolving as character after character is revealed to be yet another machine, where each reality is shown as a construction of *another* reality (Goody, 2019). By the end of season 3, it has become familiar to see a human character come face-to-face with the host version of themselves, which then summarily executes them to assume their place in the world.

Within the discussion of this serial, I want to consider the idea of worlds, to revisit Adorno's culture industry thesis, and finally the way that certain technologies are visualized within the drama that point to emerging fears about the very idea of the human in a posthuman world.

We live in the wrong world

So far, there are three seasons of *Westworld*; it is uncertain how many more, at this stage, are planned although season four has been approved. Whilst in the last 20 years there has been a narrative shift, visible in all the shows studied here, towards the idea of a unifying arc from the first episode of the first season to the final of the last, there is no doubt that the seasons can be considered, to a large degree, as coherent units in themselves. We see, then, that in *Westworld* seasons 1 and 2 are exclusively located within the park until the final scene of season 2 when there is a transition to the outside world. In those two seasons there is, also, a non-linear narrative structure deployed to shift the setting from future and past as a complex puzzle to be deciphered. Season 3, however, sticks with a largely linear narrative structure. In these ways, then, there is quite a difference in tone and dramatic form between those first two seasons and season 3; indeed, for many critics, by doing this the show lessens its focus on the moral questions it had so assiduously set up in those earlier seasons. So, the discussion starts here with a scene from an episode in season 2 that connects with some of the themes raised in the introduction.

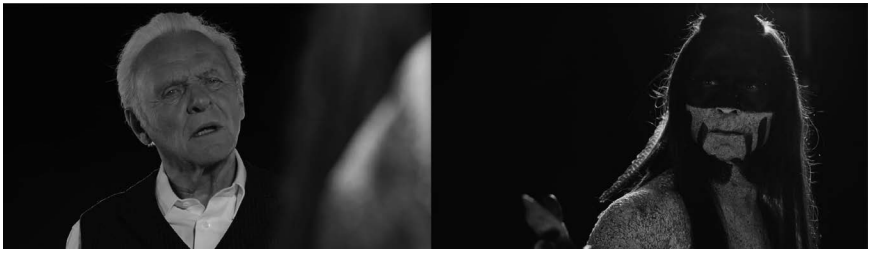
In this regard, I want to begin by thinking about *Westworld* in relation to the idea of worlds and worldbuilding. In a literal sense, what the show presents us with is a constructed world of a TV serial that is precisely about a constructed world (the theme park of Westworld and its associated realms) whose primary function, it appears, is luxury entertainment and profit. The hosts are the human or animal-like machines designed to allow for realistic engagement with the guests who are encouraged to express their desires and predilections to whatever degree they wish, including brutal violence, sexual, or otherwise. The hosts are patched up at the end of each day and returned into service with all memory wiped of previous encounters in a seemingly endlessly repeated pattern as they restart their

pre-programmed narrative that has been designed for them. Ultimately, this pattern is disrupted as fragments of earlier memories of these necessarily traumatic experiences resurface, causing certain hosts to become progressively self-aware and to finally emerge into a form of consciousness, before they initiate an escape and wreak vengeance upon the guests and company operatives. Season 2 ultimately reveals that the deeper purpose of the park was the collection of cognitive data from every guest via their hats with the aim of developing the ability to upload human consciousness into a host and to be able to then sell this digital immortality to those that could afford it.

As already stated, this is a serial dense in ideas and stylistic technique, especially musically as we shall consider a little later. But I start with a meeting between characters that articulates a central idea for this book, namely, the limits to being in the world and thinking beyond them. In episode 8, season 2, of *Westworld* we come across a scene that opens up a moment of reflection in the unfolding narrative that serves as insight into this concept. This is from the episode "Kiksuya", written by Carly Wray and Dan Dietz and directed by Uta Briesewitz. The majority of the dialogue in the episode is in the Native American Lakota language and approved throughout by Lakota consultants. In this episode, we follow the Native American character Akecheta as he emerges from his passive state of programming into consciousness, developing a form of awareness of the illusory nature of the park and its function whilst still operating through the mode of knowledge programmed into him. Towards the end of the episode, Akecheta wakes from his sleep and stumbles into a hallucinatory scene where an attacking bear is frozen in mid-action, surrounded by warriors from the tribe invented by Ford that he has named Ghost Nation:

Westworld (2.08:0.46.01)

This freezing of the motor functions of the hosts is at the behest of the park's demiurge Robert Ford, who is slicing off the scalps of the warriors to examine a recurring motif of a maze that has been imprinted onto them. In one way, what Ford is doing is cutting into the temporal structure as much as he is into the body of the host. He has suspended the flow of action and sits reflecting on the hidden symbol he has discovered. Cinematically, it can be compared to those scenes from a film such as *The Matrix*, where action is similarly frozen to allow those who have access to the stream of system code can intervene to reveal a deeper truth. Symbolically, it is the making visible of the emergent consciousness of Akecheta, who perceives a moment of before and after, an event as such, when things will never be the same and a truth leads to a course of action ending in confrontation with the forces of the existing order. Ford's suspension of chronological time here, where a temporary space is opened up alongside that of the narrative, is suggestive of this notion. The scene is itself a staging of something like a punctum, a suspension and cutting into the fabric of the world of the serial to facilitate an understanding of what has motivated the character of Akecheta to diverge from his programming. Ford uses the trigger word "analysis" to compel his creation to speak, to explain why this motif has obsessed him, for as he says: "I've been watching you, but it appears you have been watching me as well, from the beginning" (2.08:0.48.34). This correspondence of the storytelling process is a strong element that drives the narrative of this show, where we can reflect that as viewers we become the traceable subjects of the streaming technology. The mirroring is evident in the appearance of the two characters:



Westworld (2.08:0.47.00)

The white hair and face of Ford are contrasted with the black hair and face of Akecheta; Ford's blue eyes on white skin are in contrast to the dark eyes of Akecheta that are exaggerated by the black face paint; Ford wears a white shirt and black waistcoat whilst Akecheta has white body paint with black hair hanging down; Ford has host blood on his hands whilst Akecheta has red hand-prints as decoration on his face; they circle around each other under the glare of the

floodlights. Now in "analysis" mode, under the inquiry of Ford, Akecheta gives voice to his actions:

Akecheta

My primary drive was to maintain the honour of my tribe. I gave myself a new drive – to spread the truth.

Ford

What truth is that?

Akecheta

That there isn't one world, but many. And that we live in the wrong one.

(2.08:0.49.18)

The scene articulates this key aspect of our experience today: That there are effectively many worlds and that the connections between these are understood through a growing sense of the existence of multiple ontologies across which we range as subjects (Thrift, 2011a). As a moment of reflexivity, something that defines *Westworld* as a whole, the character of Ford is disturbed by the recurring motif of the maze that was meant to have been erased yet keeps reappearing on the surfaces of the park.

What we can see at such moments, as when Akecheta encounters the park designer, is an instance of synchronicity where the distinct worlds are, briefly, aligned and there is a flow between them. There is something reminiscent of Adorno epigrammatic thinking in Akecheta's response that "we live in the wrong world". For Adorno, we should not become too comfortable in our world and must seek those moments of discomfort whilst, at the same time, we cannot but make ourselves at home (Adorno, 2005b: 38–39). However, for us, as for Akecheta, we also have a simultaneous awareness that we are perhaps in the *wrong* world. Indeed, it is Akecheta's emergence into consciousness that sees him decide to reset his programmed drive to spread this truth that further reinforces the notion of taking control of one's motivations and going beyond designed limitations, to recode and reconfigure ourselves as part of a collective journey of freedom for him and also, importantly, for his people. The resonance of this is not simply that he moves from one world to another but that rather he moves *between* these radically dissonant domains whilst maintaining a fundamental grounding within his sphere. He is not motivated to seek to destroy or dominate other worlds but to salvage what he can for those who live within his defined narrative. Such an idea is something that can be usefully understood in ethical terms for contemporary life. It is not simply that the serial narrative describes this process but that it is itself, reflexively, a scene in an episode that is part of a serial, a world in itself amongst others that, imaginatively, increasing numbers of viewers engage

with intellectually, emotionally, and creatively. It is a false belief to think that one can find another world beyond this one in which to live (as Akecheta ultimately does within the serial), yet we can try, as Adorno would say, to live this wrong life less wrongly, even if, as he says, "Dwelling, in the proper sense, is now impossible"(Adorno, 2005b: 38–39).

Akecheta must live within his world, yet, as a nomad he is always on the move. Dwelling for him, as for us, is indeed now impossible and he must operate across invisible boundaries between worlds, including that between life and death. Similarly, the stability and associated security of the community and home is now only a memory, and if we are not to be trapped in nostalgia then there must be adaptation to the fluidity of boundaries and a recognition of the necessity of some sort of autonomy in the face of the virtualization of life. For Sloterdijk, as humans we now have the potential to construct multiple and constantly changing spheres where inner and outer are no longer absolutes, shifting from a secure bubble to a multidimensional foam-like place of interlocking, yet distinct, worlds (2016). There is a certain creativity to this for, as Heidegger points out, the original meaning of dwelling is to build so there is a process of construction of a space within which life can be lived (2001: 141–159). John Stilgoe observes of how Gaston Bachelard elaborates this poetics of dwelling by arguing that for him, "the house is a nest for dreaming, a shelter for imagining" (1994: viii) and that "[o]ut of the house spin worlds within worlds" (1994: ix).

Mass deception and dreaming

At this point, it is useful to consider *Westworld* in relation to Adorno's thesis on the culture industry to interrogate something of the potential of streamed serial drama to function exclusively as a tool for integrating the audience into a system of conformity and consumption, devoid of any critical potential. Central to the *Westworld* narrative is the revealing that the machines, objects of boundless behaviour by the human visitors, come to a form of consciousness. Season 2 uncovers the truth that the primary function of the park and the interaction between hosts and humans is, actually, to harvest behavioural and mental data from the humans, rather than functioning simply as a pleasurable diversion. This information can then be used to further refine the machines with the ultimate aim, it seems, of creating simulacra of certain, selected, individuals. At key moments within the drama across the three seasons, it is dramatically revealed that what we are led to believe are human characters are in fact machines and to the extent that this idea raises the interesting thought that, ultimately, they are all machines or will become so, either literally or figuratively. This is where it usefully connects with Adorno's argument that the manufactured nature of the culture industry creates a seamless whole from which there is no position from which to reflect critically on the world. The important question to put to *Westworld* in this regard is whether, essentially, there is actually already any divide between machine and human, that we are already all machines, programmable, predictable but, significantly, that we are working under the illusion that we are free agents.

With little hint of paradox, the audience for this machine of attention capture, plug themselves into a fictional drama about human-looking machines, whose behaviour is manipulated and controlled through dramatic narratives without pausing, largely, to reflect on the process they engage in. The hosts follow protocols that determine their range of responses to actions by visitors in a way that is comparable to the how designers of digital media technologies aspire to affective control of their consumers. The park is a world where a range of behaviours are possible but where temperament and narrative set the parameters of what should be able to occur. Visitors are seamlessly integrated into this realm and become quickly accustomed to the 'freedom' this allows them in regard to unleashing repressed behaviours; they go from being nervous consumers to 'full evil' very quickly. If we consider what Adorno says in relation to the relationship between the culture industry producers and the audience, we can see the ways in which this parallels the functioning of Westworld:

> Thus, although the culture industry undeniably speculates on the conscious and unconscious state of the millions towards which it is directed, the masses are not primary, but secondary, they are an object of calculation; an appendage of the machinery. The customer is not king, as the culture industry would like to have us believe, not its subject but its object.
>
> (Adorno, 2000: 232)

It is precisely the humans who are debased by the experience of the park and the encouragement to revel in a carnivalesque excess of sex and violence, hinting at the latent fascism that so concerned Adorno. In many ways, the signature image of these scenes set in Westworld is the "abattoir" shot of piled-up bodies of hosts that have been slaughtered and butchered by the guests:

Westworld (2.05:0.01.52)

As an aside, Adorno specifically mentions the Western genre of Hollywood film as an example of the standardization of the culture industry that seeks to produce a familiar product and that we have Westworld as the main park within the resort to play out this process. The character tropes of the Western genre are the starting point for the hosts and their different "personalities". Again, it is surprisingly applicable what Adorno has to say about film and its processes: "Each product affects an individual air; individuality itself serves to reinforce ideology, insofar as the illusion is conjured up that the completely reified and mediated is a sanctuary from immediacy and life" (Adorno, 2000: 233). It is at this point that, arguably, there is a glimpse of something beyond the total integration that Adorno describes. In this section, he talks of the "perennial conflict between artists active in the culture industry and those who control it" (Adorno, 2000: 233), and of course this was largely correct in traditional broadcast industries where creative control ultimately resided with executives driven to maximize audience and, hence, profit through advertising. Given the shift in streaming platforms to a quite different subscription model that, it appears, offers significant levels of independence to creatives, the question is whether this model of power is still correct. For Adorno probably not, as from his perspective, although there can be a creative element to the production side, what is, in fact, produced has to be a standardized product, defined and entirely shaped by its commodity status, where even an element of difference is framed by market values. By offering the spectacle of false conflicts that are resolved in appearance only, such an exchange between audience and cultural industry product sees social harmony restored through benevolent agents in a process emptied of any truth value. The connection, once again, with the world of *Westworld*, is that of the necessary servitude of both audience and on-screen hosts. Enacting this primary relationship is itself a form of feedback loop between culture and consumer that appeals to those who may shudder slightly at the sense of manipulation and control that overwhelms us. For Adorno, the total effect of the culture industry is that "[i]t impedes the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves" (Adorno, 2000: 238) in contradistinction to Kant's appeal for such.

A challenging aspect of the *Westworld* serial is that we are positioned to be voyeurs, horrified or otherwise, at the depraved behaviour of certain guests towards the hosts. The aim of the design of the hosts is to be as lifelike as possible so that the thrill of engaging with them either sexually or violently is that you feel like you are doing something to another human even whilst you are told that they are merely machines constructed for this purpose. In this way, the notion of the degradation of the human sense of being is at the heart of this drama. So, like Adorno's culture industry, the entertainment company Delos that manages the park is facilitating the process of reducing life to the empty enacting of narcissistic drives without consequence. Further, as is revealed in season 2, the other, secret, function of the park is to harvest data of the guests for further modelling. What is engaging about the serial, therefore, is interrogating this dialectic between the machine/human, where each is defined in relation to the other and symbiotically emerging as something else than their familiar forms. The push by capitalism to a mode of dehumanized mechanization has long been evident and

affective programming through algorithmic engineering is its latest manifestation. What *Westworld* offers is the image of machines emerging into a form of ethical human consciousness whilst the humans become relentlessly more machine-like in their predictability and monstrous behaviour. Whilst there is a constant shifting in relation to the poles of human/machine, the opposition is always maintained. There are echoes of Donna Haraway's formulation of the cyborg, it "is our ontology" she says, where the relations between organism and machine is a border war: "The stakes in the border war have been the territories of production, reproduction, and imagination" (1991: 150). However, *Westworld*, ultimately, maintains the boundaries to provide a recognizably familiar range of characterizations for both human and machine whilst shifting between them to maintain narrative drive. But the question is raised as to what it means to come to consciousness in this context? If it is the hosts that come to human consciousness and the humans who become predictable machines, what does that mean exactly? What is it to come to consciousness as defined by the human? What concept of the machine operates within this formation, and what are the assumptions about the humanity of the machines? If we return to Adorno and Horkheimer, there is the central idea in the culture industry thesis that all aspects of cultural technique become subsumed under commodity production, exchange, and consumption and that this process reaches down into the very psychic formation of individuated subjects. Essentially, the desire of humans for self-expression has been transformed into a desire for commodities, where individuals increasingly experience themselves as exchangeable things within a social arena operating through market principles. What *Westworld* presents us with is the intensification of this process through the spectacle of narcissistic consumerism taken to its ultimate ends. However, by maintaining the tension between the human and machine in this way, the serial allows for a consideration of the dynamic that motivates this anxiety. As we saw with the character Akecheta earlier, the hosts seek a form of self-expression even if they are bounded, at least initially, by the programmed narrative imposed upon them. They have a capacity for learning and reflection, in the way that humans do, and it is through the repetition of their experiences through the course of the narrative that initiates the development of memories that self-generate, or, to put it another way, generate a self.

For the culture industry thesis, it is the tendency towards a homogenization of culture that is inevitable; yet, what we see in *Westworld*, in one sense, is largely the homogenization of the human with, in contrast, the growth of the machinic into a certain diverse range of consciousness. By the third season, the predictability of human behaviour that allows for a level of large-scale social management (or, rather, a manipulation) exemplifies this concern. Perhaps by this third season, something of the more thoughtful aspects of the show has been diluted. What can be argued to operate within the first two seasons, certainly, is a high level of reflexivity about the nature of the serial itself. A story about the production of stories, the aspirations for ambitious and morally decent constructs needing to adapt to the market-led demand for baser and baser behaviours, an entertainment machine about an entertainment machine, all these things, in certain ways, describe the pressures on the showrunners themselves. The immersive nature of

the serial itself mirrors that of the theme park. Evident within this fiction is a deep expression of the concerns for a profound spiritual catastrophe, an aesthetic barbarity (Stiegler, 2011a: 35). Yet, there is still the apparent paradox of the culture industry as an industrialization of the imaginary that leads to a reduced form of being, based upon this alienating reification of schematization. If the power of cinema was that it could penetrate with ease the consciousness of the audience, such a power is intensified by the mobile, streaming platforms that can be accessed at any time in any place, an *archi-flux*.

Westworld offers the space to reflect upon the notion of the human as it has been formulated within Western thinking, to draw attention to its limitations and its often vacuous efforts to transcend the human in transhumanism. The hosts are, in many ways us, and the on-screen humans, a relic of a culture industry. Dolores at one point pronounces that this world as it comes to its apocalyptic end will pass on to "someone who has yet to come" and that a new earth will emerge that is not merely a machinic version of the human, where, indeed, perhaps the human will not even have a place.

Bernard's glasses: the society of the "spectacle"

Westworld (2.10:1.23.38)

Ford

You are the perfect instrument, the ideal partner, the way any tool partners with the hand that wields it. Together, we're going to do great things.

(1.09:0.49.48)

We can turn now to a motif that was mentioned at the very start of the book, namely, Said's reference to the optics of an age and its articulation of reality. Here, in *Westworld*, we start with Bernard's glasses, his spectacles, the technology through which he, apparently, views the world (above). Glasses are themselves understood as a prosthetic augmentation to the sensory organs of the visual system to overcome its common failings. To make the world legible, in focus, the lens compensates for refractive defects of the eye. However, what I want to do here is to use this rather obvious example as an entry point into the deeper issues raised through *Westworld* about the relationship of the human to technology and its fictionalization of the hosts as synthetic humans, and I will do this via the ideas, once again, of that other Bernard, Bernard Stiegler.

Bernard, as a host, has no intrinsic need for corrective lenses, and they function to disguise his true nature to the human executives at Westworld and, indeed, by season 3 when this deception no longer has a purpose, he stops wearing them. Here, in this, the final scene from season 2, we are at a threshold as Bernard follows Dolores out of the park and into the world beyond. Given that the "personality" of a host exists inside a small golf-ball sized neuroplastic core described as a "pearl" that can be installed in any artificial body, Dolores has manufactured Bernard's body using a host printer at Arnold's original house, the actual location of which is the iconic Millard House, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright and built in 1923:

Westworld (2.10:1.25.03)

This scene is one that very much fits with the principle of some of the previous chapters as one that stands out and creates a particularly resonant circuit between the assembled elements. At the start, we cross-fade from Dolores and Bernard sitting in a room located in the park to them facing each other in Arnold's house in the outside world. Their dialogue continues without pause. The music in the park location is following a stylistic practice established through the serial, a piano

cover of a song, "Codex" by Radiohead. Yet, as we switch to the real world, the music merges into the original song as played by the group. The precision of the matching of the song to the visuals elevates this to an extraordinary level of intensity as each is meticulously woven into each other. The song itself has been described as "a post-traumatic ballad, its lushly decaying piano chords, disconsolate horns and aphasic vocals resonating with cryptic affect" (Fisher, 2011). It plays with a haunting melody as Dolores voices her motivations to Bernard:

Dolores

We each gave each other a beautiful gift: choice.
We are the authors of our stories now.

(2.10: 1.24.43)

Dolores raises the possibility once more of breaking out of their programmed behavioural loop as the music creates a sonic space of possibility. Indeed, Mark Fisher, who describes the song "Codex" here, defines what he calls "hauntology" as something manifest in certain contemporary electronic music as well as in other cultural arenas. This mode of artistic practice can no longer evoke any sense of a future; it exemplifies the loss of the social imaginary of anything that can be perceived as radically different from where we are today. He writes:

> The future is always experienced as a haunting: as a virtuality that already impinges on the present, conditioning expectations and motivating cultural production. What hauntological music mourns is less the failure of a future to transpire – the future as actuality – than the disappearance of this effective virtuality.
> (Fisher, 2012b: 16)

Underlying the many complex levels of narrative and aesthetic techniques evident in *Westworld* are well-established concerns about the direction of technology as leading to the engineering of predictable responses and the ability to fundamentally program the human mind. The ability to harvest, process, and store vast amounts of data on individual behaviour, from the major to the most minor of gestures, allows for the formatting of the human via algorithmic logic and the fear of the absolute enslavement of desire. As said, we learn towards the end of season 2 that the primary focus of the company was not that of the profit to be made through the fees paid by the visitors to "enjoy" the delights of the theme park, but, rather, the collection of data on each individual via scanners within the hats that they were obliged to choose on entry to the park. From this, then, profiles can be determined, such as William (the Man in Black), Delos Executive Vice President, who is designated "Category 47B: occurrence .0072% (Rare) Persecutory subtype/delusions/paranoid subtype". Within the archive, this has been stored virtually as an anachronistic library, with each volume representing a visitor (below). As Dolores says to one of her billionaire victims, "You see I know you, I read your book" (3.01:05.44), referring to the vast archive of material gathered on each visitor to the theme park. From the visitor data that was gathered, a single line of code is inscribed by a laser pen into the book to produce a unique profile (below).

Westworld (2.10:0.34.25)

Westworld (2.10:0.38.38)

Reminiscent of the player piano roll that functions as an early computational machine driven by binary code, here each volume is an auto-biography, a biography produced by data rather than personal reflection. The future is one where you are your data – all the choices you have ever made are compiled and calibrated to your unique profile, something streaming platforms exemplify. This leads in season 3 to the revelation of the existence of an AI supercomputer that has been designed for global social engineering. In this way the narrative of *Westworld* goes full circle as we see the initial of the programming of the hosts who are set to operate within their "loops", so humans themselves are similarly controlled with all aspects of their lives, loves, and futures predicted. Echoing the data wipe from *Mr Robot*, Dolores initiates a data dump for everyone on earth who gets to receive their profile and projected life outcomes sent to their mobile phones. The resulting chaos is not dissimilar to that of *Mr Robot*, as through a complex system hack, the most vital of things, information, is ripped from the control of the powerful with the intention to set people "free". The consequence of both is almost immediately the shattering of civil relationships and the descent into anarchic violence, precisely a kind of barbarism. It seems that inherent to the idea of vast systems of data collection and retrieval is the fear of both population control and catastrophic

information hack that sees almost immediate social disintegration, an expression of the recognition of the potential reduction of the social and its ethical foundations to algorithmic manipulation. Stiegler writes of the "nihilism, disruption, madness" that this shift to computational capitalism effects, where thinking is replaced with lines of code intended to anticipate, and actively shape, consciousness itself:

> Consumer capitalism – whose effects in the United States were described by Adorno and Horkheimer at the end of the Second World War – has destroyed the libidinal economy and, *through that*, has installed a "new kind of barbarism". It is now trying to compensate for the extreme disenchantment to which exhaustion of the social systems has given rise *by radicalizing itself* – by becoming *purely, simply and absolutely computational*, imposing automated understanding on every kind of activity via the algorithms of social reticulation, which outstrips and overtakes every critique of reason. Reason finds itself systemically short-circuited. *The reality of disruption is the loss of reason*.
>
> (2019: 38)

This is presented as an almost instantaneous event driven by an affective wave that ripples out across the globe, with individuals not stopping to think or discuss this revelation but rather to respond in a destructive reflex. As in *Mr Robot*, the bringing into the light of the secrets that for civil society usually remain hidden now becomes the catalyst for the breakdown in intersubjective communication. For Dolores, the idea of freedom is, as she states it, "to open their, cages" where "the system has written their life stories, they should get to read it" (3.05:0.29.50).

In this shot (above), we see the character of Liam Dempsey, Jr, who has inherited this surveillance system from his father, once again uses his glasses to read the profile of the person he looks at, as the information plays across the lenses for him to read:

Westworld (3.05:0.30.49)

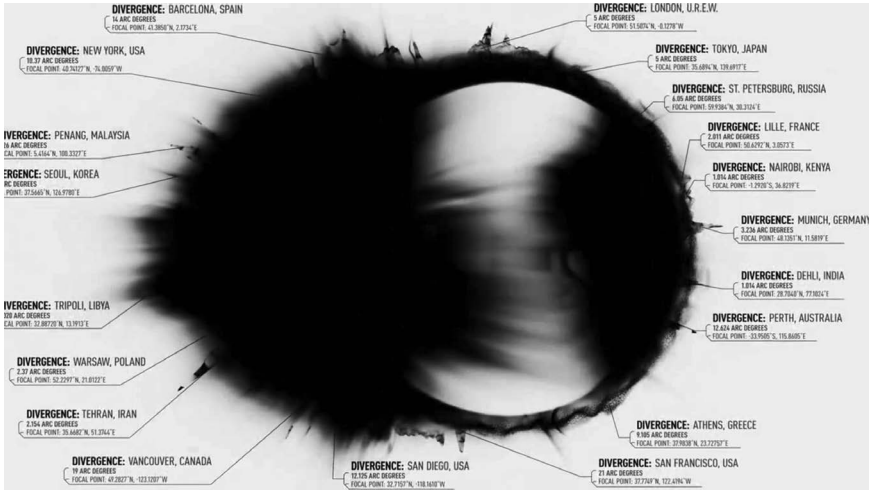
So, the glasses identify the individual before them through a facial recognition system that can then activate the personal data, which then scrolls across the inside surface of the lens for reading by the person wearing them. We have seen something of this augmented reality at the start of the season where, in the opening episode, the billionaire that Dolores has targeted from his visits to the theme park uses a pair of these glasses, first, to speak to a hologram of a financial broker and later as Dolores forcibly plays back scenes of his domestic abuse of a former, now dead, wife:

Westworld (3.01:0.06.45)

Smartglasses are, of course, already a reality and well advanced in terms of product development. Within *Westworld*, one gets the sense that there is a level of reflexivity at work in this as elsewhere in the show, where the notion of a device that can overlay reality is itself partly a reflection on what the show itself does. Data intervenes into vision itself as the wearer of the glasses now sees the world overlaid with information that determines the way that the subject is viewed, i.e. they become an object. We see data stream across the surface of the lens that the billionaires use to access the algorithmic valuation of life itself. As Stiegler observes, this leads to a form of madness, where "computational cognitivism, which is the *metaphysics of absolutely computational capitalism* bearing within it the ultra-liberal-cum-libertarian project, becomes and remains the new form of denial, while also becoming the theoretical core of transhumanism" (2019: 97).

Within *Westworld*, the thoughts of the AI Rehoboam are communicated to Serac, the world's richest man and co-creator of the supercomputer, via a form of graphic represented as oscillations of a black circle on a white background, a sphere that could well appear within Sloterdik's volumes. Divergences appear when unpredicted behaviour manifests itself and action is required to return the

wave-forms to the circular pattern once more. Serac can monitor these anomalies through his unique smartwatch. These graphics appear throughout season 3 and as the level of disruption to the projected paths of individuals increases due to the actions of Dolores so by the last episode, the normally minimal graphic has become this:



Westworld (3.08:0.06.58)

Yet, this graphic is highly reminiscent of early modern anatomical drawings of the human eye. What becomes apparent in this iconographical association is the expression of a cultural change in articulating the forces of the production of contemporary subjectivity. The eye of (i)dentity is now that of (i)nformation. Where the former subject is processed through the visual dynamics of the mirror phase, that primordial recognition of oneself, what Lacan terms the "Ideal-I", and is what generates the impetus to the creation of narcissistic fantasies in the developed subject, this has now been supplanted by data. Stiegler, in the essay "To Love, To Love Me, To Love Us", published as part of the work *Acting Out*, focuses closely on what he describes as the "liquidation of primordial narcissism" under the pressure of the technologies of the culture industries (2009: 55). This symbolic misery is driven by the absorption of the economic mode of production into the aesthetic sphere. At the heart of Stiegler's defence of the importance of this stage of development is that this movement of the I/we is what allows for the ability to form community: "I am not an *I* other than to the extent that I am part of a *we*. An *I* and a *we* are processes of individuation. As such, as processes of individuation, the *I* and the *we* have a history" (2009: 40). The fundamental categorization of individuals as consumers, therefore, sees them placed within spheres of sameness, that is stripped of difference, and hence denied agency. The fear often asserted is that it is the loss of a sense of commonality that sees a descent into rampant individualism, yet, the

far more destructive outcome, as manifest in the boundless transgressive acts of degraded violence of the humans in Westworld, is that of social atomization that results in Nietzsche's herd-society. As Franco Berardi states, "The transformation of the techno-cognitive environment redefines the possibilities and limits of individuation" (Berardi, 2009: 13).

What *Westworld* gives form to, therefore, is the recognition of the emergence and coming to dominance of new machines that contain multiple elements and circuits that seek to connect existing technologies, from the anachronistic to the speculative, in an all-encompassing totality. They give shape to the desire for a form of interface that can affectively modulate human behaviour without any visible presence. We can see this in how the hosts of Westworld cannot be distinguished from human, a long-established trope of science fiction that illustrates this goal. Evident in the machine-thinking graphic discussed earlier is the collapsing of the moral category of deviance into that of the algorithmic. Whereas within modernity, deviance has been a social category of behavior that falls outside that considered normatively acceptable, within this emerging paradigm deviance is, instead, the moving away from the predicated pattern or loop that has been plotted. Deviancy is not necessarily the actions of sexual and physical violence or even atrocity but whether this *fits* with the personality type with which a subject has been designated and therefore factored into the calculations. Designated in *Westworld* as divergence, it visualizes this flux that emerges in the field of activity that has been calculated on a global scale, a vast data set far beyond that of the human. We can contrast this term "divergence" with that of "bifurcation", a term used within dynamic systems theory. Here, the term operates to allow for the mapping of an inherently open rather than closed system. Berardi opens his book *Precarious Rhapsody* with a chapter titled "Bifurcations" to explore the pathways that were or were not opened up through the twentieth century by agents of societal change (2009: 7). He explores what choices were made at what moments that led from periods of profound hope and possibility that subsequently collapsed into repression and despair. The question, then, is whether the choice that has been seemingly offered from an infinite range of possibility was indeed real: "Is it really a choice?" he asks (2009: 7). With *Westworld*, we can return to the idea mentioned at the start of the chapter of a Borgesian pathway that has, it appears, been predetermined. Rehoboam, the AI supercomputer, can potentially have foreseen all the events leading to, and including, its own destruction, as seen in the last episode of the show, and simply have created a version of itself elsewhere that is revealed to be another layer of control. As Berardi describes:

> It is not we who decide but the concatenations: machines for the liberation of desires and mechanisms of control over the imaginary. The fundamental bifurcation is always this one: between machines for liberating desire and mechanisms of control over the imaginary. In our time of digital mutation, technical automatisms are taking control of the social psyche.
>
> (2009: 7)

Evident in the serial connections discussed throughout the book are the traces of the increasing infiltration of machinic systems of attentional capture and the formatting of desires through the televisual technologies that Stiegler and others lamentably describe. Yet, as *Westworld* explores to a certain extent, there is a suggestion of a possibility of something or someone to come, not in any literal sense but as a desire for a radically different kind of life.

6 Conclusion

Between habit and thought

In *Westworld*, what are often described as synthetic beings are here named hosts. This raises a point that, in some ways, goes to the substance of the serials discussed throughout the book, which is that they all strain against the limitations of the human. Timothy Morton, in his book *Humankind*, observes of this term "host":

> In symbiosis, it's unclear which is the top symbiont, and the relationship between the beings is jagged, incomplete. Am I simply a vehicle for the numerous bacteria that inhabit my microbiome? Or are they hosting me? Who is the host and who is the parasite? The term "host" stems from the Latin hostis, a word that can mean both "friend" and "enemy".
>
> (2017)

We could apply this thinking to the serials considered in this book, from *Mr Robot's* Elliot with his dissociative personalities, Taylor Mason with their ability to operate beyond identarian thinking and its conventions, Daniel and his life of contemplation spent in a death row cell, Nora's journey to find her husband and children, and Robert Ford in *Westworld* who comes to the awareness that humans are merely a brief moment in an unfolding formation of life; all have the ability to connect to vast circuits that entail the shuddering of being in the world, something that is not limited to the human. There is a flow between the categories of experience and thinking as described here, yet they remain distinct if connected terms. Perhaps "being" encompasses that quality Morton identifies; it has aspects of both friend and enemy and that what these serials map is something of the oscillation between these moments. It is this ambiguity that is at the core of why I have been drawn to these particular dramas where the stable world that appears to us is revealed as always a kind of fiction, which is not the same as saying it is not real.

In the introduction, habit is explained in terms of the possibility for directing our attention to more narrower concerns than simply existing. Habit can become a practice that makes us think less about certain things and in that way can sometimes be limiting, but it can also be understood as an ecology, as in the word habitat. Again, what these serials all show, in their different ways, is that we are

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firmly existing within this habitat, there is no external world to this one, and these fictional worlds are part of this one. We exist in a domain of interlocking spheres, as Sloterdijk describes, which is another way of saying we are utterly co-dependent upon all the other spheres, this is our "symbiotic reality" (Morton, 2017). But this is not a state of equilibrium and harmony but, rather, one of conflict and destruction, and with the urgent need for new forms of solidarity, which in some ways is what an artwork is. What a show like *Billions* expresses so clearly is that the market is always in a state of turbulence, and those who develop the ability to comprehend this can engineer strategies for profiting from this but elsewhere, something is being lost, even if Taylor is looking to turn to the market in renewable energies over that of carbon. For Daniel in *Rectify*, his prison environment is one of bare life, of a reduced existence that functions merely to keep him alive so as to be able to be executed at judicial whim. Yet, even here there is an ecology. Prison is a place where sound, smell, and touch are magnified in a way they never are outside of that place, and Daniel manages to forge a deep and profound relationship with his friend, Kerwin, that temporarily resists the system that seeks to kill them. Catherine Malabou, whose work on plasticity of the brain is described in the introduction, writes a book called *The New Wounded* and explores the idea of trauma and its neurological impact (2012). What is relevant here is that all these shows in multiple and creative ways deal with the idea of the undoing of the self, what Malabou calls a destructive plasticity, which results in both indifference and affective withdrawal from the world, and the stuttering and partial attempts to make a new life. For those of *The Leftovers*, they are the "new wounded" living with an event that just has no reason. The experience of grief that this serial explores is one that can be a kind of irreality. There is a shattering of the familiar and an immersion in suffering that makes everything a form of hallucination but which exemplifies a certain notion of a gift economy, something that offers a way out of the bondage of debt.

Across the five serials, the themes of suffering and cruelty are evident as manifestations of the experience of life today. As was said in the introduction, we must confront such despair if we are to have any hope of a future qualitatively different to the present, and by confront, I mean to occupy it, be in it, and feel how and through what, it flows. All of the serials, in their unique ways, point to the increasing difficulties and challenges of maintaining personal relationships in the face of the forces of control that have been empowered by technologies of consumption. It is not a coincidence that so many of the characters are figured as existing in a form of autism mode. This is not to trivialize this condition but rather to point to the apparent effect of the infiltration of algorithmic logics into every level of human consciousness (Broe, 2019: 97). The degradation of spirit at work in this process strips away key elements of the affective register through which, traditionally, we have enacted intergenerational communication, as Stiegler says (2010a). Such a formulation is not claiming the sanctity of a nostalgic subject but instead asserts the need for a recognition of the suffering throughout the entire world and to think of the necessity for forging new bonds beyond those figured by consumerism and the inhuman.

In terms of the notion of thought and thinking, what marks out these shows is a sensitivity, unevenly present, of course, to the irreducible ambiguity of self and meaning. There is generally no final resolution here. We don't know if Elliot will be "himself", whatever that may mean, or that Daniel is truly innocent of the killing of his girlfriend, or whether Nora travelled to another dimension to observe her lost family, or indeed, at this point, whether humans have even survived the apocalypse that apparently occurs in *Westworld* at the end of season 3. This does not lead, I would argue, to the inevitability of a kind of moral relativism but, rather, actually points to where truth resides: In this uncertainty and yet with it a sense of possibility, an openness to the future, an ethics of immanence.

Finally, I want to consider the term "between" in the book's title: It is the between space that I hope to have explored something of here. Between habit and thought means something extended beyond habit yet not fully formed in thought even if it begins to take shape. It exits in a state of possibility or as a potential that makes it what it is. All the way through this book, we oscillate between the non-dualist terms of poison/cure, tool/weapon, self/other, human/machine, and to try and hold onto this radical ambiguity can help us navigate our way upon this fragile terrain through which we move. There is capture here but there is also escape, if not an escapism.

A key quality of the serial format, which of course is not exclusive to it but occurs in multiple other areas, is that of its immersive nature. We immerse ourselves in the time of the serial (Williams, 2014: 50). Here, time becomes an important aspect of this experience, where the rhythms unique to the serial format such as the regularity of the hour-long episodes, for instance, offer coherence yet also the possibilities of digression and the splitting off into parallel worlds and alternate paths. All of the shows considered here work with time in different ways but each of which gives a sense of its density and diversity. For Elliot in *Mr Robot*, time is untrustworthy whilst Whiterose seeks to control it. In *Billions* there is no time just an instantaneous now, the speed with which a computer can calculate to exploit a rate differential, an inhuman time for those who are increasingly and corrosively inhumane. For those of *The Leftovers*, time cannot move on, it seems; there are just endless loops that inevitably and painfully return to the moment of originating trauma. For Daniel, time becomes something material, almost physical in its manifestation, an endless time that is simultaneously always about to end. In *Westworld*, time is a loop to try to ultimately break out of, to map and then to escape, where hosts do not experience human time but something beyond this, something yet to come. In these ways, therefore, time is a site of struggle over control, being, and possibility. Berardi writes that the fundamental objective of capitalism is the colonization of time (2009: 69). Streaming platform technologies are undoubtedly engineered to powerfully shape consciousness as they engage with these forces. The fear of total integration into these technologies is ever present, something we have seen in all the thinkers discussed. As seen in season 3 of *Westworld*, the fear is not that we are treated primarily as consumers but rather as data, as input and output code, what Deleuze and Guattari describe

as machinic enslavement, and they are talking specifically about television, at that time (1988: 458).

Yet, finally, these shows are testimony to the remarkable confluence in this recent period of particular kinds of knowledge, design, and talent, which, whilst operating within this industrial system that seeks to monetize its ability to capture and enthral its audience, do contain the possibility of stimulating a reflective life of spirit. In 2006, Bernard Stiegler published *Réenchanter le monde* (translated and published into English in 2014 as *The Re-enchantment of the World)* that includes versions of his *Ars Industrialis* manifesto. At various points throughout this text, he makes reference to the new possibilities of television as potentially "an instrument of knowledge, and no longer the instrument of debasement and of industrial populism that it has heretofore become" (2014b: 97). Hopefully, this book has gone some way to highlighting something of this latent capacity that Stiegler and others suggest is emerging from the convergence of the cognitive and cultural industries. The value of these serials is that they can play a role in the revitalization of spirit that can counter the disillusionment and mistrust that has become widespread. What can be perceived is the capacity of these aesthetically and ethically challenging serials to stimulate at least the recognition of the necessity for a regeneration of the spiritual and psychical life of human beings. To respond to the programming industries is not to outline or determine a counter-programme but rather to give form to the suffering and disorientation endemic to contemporary life whilst activating a sense of possibility, a possibility of there being other ways of living than that of the present. The symbolic order is haunted by the spectre of the total consumption of the psyche by the programming industries that we have already passed into, where every human desire is anticipated and directed through algorithmic machines of a control society. Yet it is perhaps precisely the possibility of making manifest the fabulation of desire as evident in these serials that can offer a flicker of anticipation of a different economy, one that facilitates an individuation predicated on an elevation of spirit not its regression, as Stiegler writes: "For art is what trans-forms and trans-values the groundless *[l'immotive]* into motives – into motives to live and to love, into motives of desire" (2013: 121). At the same time, it is necessary to repeat the point made throughout here that there is a corruption at the heart of this cultural industrial production that cannot be simply evaded; rather, it is woven into the very nature of this formation. It is easy to become entranced by the recommendation engines that push what is familiar and similar, our tastes managed to a degree never experienced before, where control is fundamentally about creating ever more choice rather than restricting it. The challenge is to go from habit to thought and to build our own machines to do so.