

Sympathy for the Devil: Adorable Antiheroes in Contemporary TV Series

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“When a good man is hurt, all who would be called good must suffer with him.”

(Euripides)

But what's confusing you

Is just the nature of my game

Just as every cop is a criminal

And all the sinners saints

As heads is tails

Just call me Lucifer

Cause I'm in need of some restraint

So if you meet me

Have some courtesy

Have some sympathy, and some taste

(“Sympathy for the Devil”, Rolling Stones)

1. Introduction

According to its creator, *Breaking Bad* describes the moral corruption of a normal man, the conversion of "Mr Chips to Scarface". The final two episodes of the third season see an escalation in the violence used by Walter White, the protagonist of the series. In "Full Measures" (3.13) the moral and emotional complexity of the story is encapsulated in a seemingly incidental scene. We see Walter White in his living room, giving little Holly her bottle. A close up shows how the baby grabs at his glasses and in this moment of paternal tenderness, the writers cunningly re-humanizes a character who just executed two thugs and minutes later ordered the death of his lab partner, as if to remind us that, at heart, “he's really just a family man”. This important step in the metamorphosis of Walter White is again mitigated by several factors: children, the family, everyday domestic life. Self-defense is of course the justification for these deaths, but Holly’s bottle and the devotion of a father also enter into the moral and emotional equation that characterizes *Breaking Bad*.

Like the AMC's acclaimed hit, contemporary series—especially those on cable TV—are full of characters that we love, despite the many vile actions they have committed: Titus Pullo, Tony Soprano, Nancy Botwin, Don Draper, Jackie Peyton, Jaime Lannister, Al Swearengen, Nicholas Brody, Patty Hewes.

Among the characteristics that define this golden age of television fiction are an extremely sophisticated serial narrative, hybridization of genres, the creation of specific niches of interest thanks to the commitment of cable TV channels to produce fiction and hence, to strengthen the image of their brand, an expansion of the limits to what can be shown on TV, and the popularity of antihero's as protagonists. The latter is the focus of this article, *a work-in-progress* that awaits further input from suggestions and ideas from the forthcoming workshop in October.

The main thesis of this article is that TV fiction, given its serialized nature, is better equipped to develop a “structure of sympathy” (Smith, 1995, 5) that allows us to identify with morally defective characters who commit crimes, who abuse and deceive; the type of person that would repel us in real life. The possibility of expanding a story over many hours allows, as will be discussed, an emotional structure to be constructed that “forces” us to sympathize with protagonists who are not only dramatically complex but also morally contradictory. In other words, what we will investigate is how this moral contradiction influences the narrative engine in many of the most influential contemporary TV series and we will unravel the emotional responses demanded of the viewer.

2. Emotions, antiheroism, posmodernism and TV

Like cinema, televised fiction is explicitly and implicitly emotional. To narrate is to produce emotions. As Ed Tan explains, “films are designed to produce a particular effect and as an artifact, they display a functional design and develop a certain consistency. This orderly structure and consistency are both reflected in the systematic affective reaction of the viewer, a reaction that they themselves are not aware of” (1996, 3). In the same vein, Noël Carroll emphasizes the emotional determinism of commercial

audiovisual fiction¹, which is designed to generate a specific emotional response: “Fiction film events have been emotionally predigested for us by filmmakers (...). The filmmakers have selected out the details of the scene or the sequence that they think are emotively significant and thrust them, so to speak, to our faces” (1999, 29).

Consequently, the series discussed here, including *The Sopranos*, *Mad Men* and *Boardwalk Empire*, are “emotionally predigested for us” so that we sympathize² and identify³ with the characters—antiheroes—that combine admirable traits (professionalism, intelligence, courage) with other less savory characteristics (violence, meanness, deceit, cruelty).

The definition of antihero may be overly broad. Authors such as Northrop Frye describe antiheroes as ironic heroes, “inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves, so that we have the sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration or absurdity” (2006, 151). However, the most common type of the antihero of more recent times is closer to the Byronic hero. Instead of mediocre and listless, the predominant traits of today’s antihero are a mixture of hero and villain characterized by moral ambiguity, a Machiavellianism with regards to the achievement of certain ends, and a contradiction between ideals (if any) and actions. Generally, as Shaffer and Raney write, antiheroes are “criminal but redeemable (...). Despite clearly doing improper things for (at times) corrupt reasons, antiheroes still function as ‘forces of good’ in many narratives” (2012, 1030).

To explain the emergence of so many antiheroes in today’s television, we must first consider an ideological issue that is beyond the scope of this text: postmodernism cultivates anti-heroism. There is an intellectual substrate guided by moral relativism that

¹ Avant-garde, peripheral cinema and many documentary films are excluded from this type of emotional determinism described by Carroll.

² In the field of cognitive film theory, with which this article is concerned, there are semantic discussions that we will not address here. One such discussion concerns the suitability of the terms “empathy” and “sympathy”. Although we will not enter into this level of detail, it is important to be aware of this difference. As Neill emphasizes, “with sympathetic response, in feeling for another, one’s response need not reflect what the other is feeling, nor indeed does it depend on whether the other is feeling anything at all”. On the other hand, “in responding empathetically to another I come to share his feelings, to feel with him; if he is in an emotional state, to empathize with him is to experience the emotion(s) that he experiences” (1996, 175-6).

³ A similar terminological dispute arises with the term “identification”. Authors such as Murray and Plantinga argue that “engagement” is more accurate, while Noël Carroll, for example, prefers the word “assimilation”. In any case, the argument over the appropriateness of the term can be followed in Gaut (1999, 208 et seq.).

has given rise to the idea of good and evil—central themes in classical heroism—to be replaced by cynicism and contradiction. The mainstream has been taken over by a pessimistic and defeatist intellectual atmosphere, particularly since 9/11, and this has influenced TV fiction. Moreover, cable TV has always sought to differentiate itself from traditional networks.

This has generated a virtuous circle whereby competition has spurred artistic and aesthetic vitality. If HBO led the charge with *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under*, Showtime quickly followed in its footsteps, exploring the sympathetic antihero with Dexter Morgan (*Dexter*), Nancy Botwin (*Weeds*) and Hank Moody (*Californication*). If FX showed that a corrupt and criminal police force (*The Shield*) or depressed alcoholic firefighters (*Rescue Me*) could earn the applause of the audience, AMC emulated them with *Drapers* (*Mad Men*) and *Whites* (*Breaking Bad*). This elevation of the antihero as a paradigm of better quality television combines ideological and entrepreneurial elements in order to generate a thematic constant that can be very effectively developed in a serial narrative.

This trend is unprecedented. While there were many excellent series 20 years ago, though not as many as now, in the most influential shows anti-heroism was the exception and not the rule⁴. This is not to say that only the contradictory protagonists (part hero, part villain) generate quality drama. Take for example *The X Files*. Its protagonists, who adhered to the traditional heroic profile, experienced many internal and external conflicts but they never ceased to be positive characters. They were morally exemplary, courageous in the face of adversity, willing to sacrifice themselves for the greater good of society; the villains were identified and corruption uncovered in the institutions, not in Mulder and Scully themselves. This is also seen in network television: while *The West Wing*, *Lost* and *The Good Wife* feature dramatically rich characters, they lack the moral equivocation that defines the protagonists of contemporary cable TV series⁵. From *Oz* to *Ray Donovan*, anti-heroism has been a key dramatic element and the internal contradictions of the protagonists serve as a seed from which the deepest conflicts of the story develop.

⁴ Perhaps the most successful exception can be found in the character of Andy Sipowicz in *NYPD Blue* (1993-2005, ABC).

⁵ Some recent examples of antiheroes on terrestrial television include Jack Bauer in *24*, Benjamin Linus in *Lost*, and Gregory House in *House*.

3. Identification with the character: alignment and allegiance

At first glance, identification with a character seems to be fomented by certain elements, be it the protagonist's professional efficacy (Omar Little, Francis Underwood), courage in the face of adversity (Spartacus, Tony Soprano), ingenuity (Walter White, Gregory House), or the charisma of the actor portraying the character (Don Draper/John Hamm, Tom Kane/Kelsey Grammer). However, further analysis reveals that these elements are subordinate to what Murray Smith called "levels of engagement". Smith makes a distinction that helps us to understand the moral judgment and attitudes of the viewer towards characters like Mia of *Hit & Miss*, Frank Gallagher of *Shameless* and John Luther of the eponymous series, to give some British examples. He highlights two narrative/dramatic processes, *alignment* and *allegiance*: the first being a feature of the film, while the latter is an audience response provoked by the audiovisual work.

First, says Smith, *alignment* "concerns the way a film gives us access to the actions, thoughts, and feeling of characters" (1995, 6). Consequently, we *align* with a character through a "spatio-temporal relationship" (i.e.: the story shows what the character does in their environment) and a "subjective access" (the story also reveals how the character feels and what he desires). Except for ensemble casts such as *The Wire* and *Deadwood*, most of the series in which we are interested present a clear protagonist, who we follow, with whom we *align*, through both their the domestic and professional lives.

Meanwhile, *allegiance* "concerns the way a film attempts to marshal our sympathies for or against the various characters in the world of fiction" (6). Through this process the character gains the viewer's approval, a complicity that Plantinga describes as being "rooted in the spectator's evaluation of the moral traits of a character. If a character is held to have morally desirable traits, the spectator will be led to sympathize with the character. Such sympathies in turn partly determine the emotional responses of spectators to the narrative situations of the film" (2010, 37). This is not to say that our *allegiance* is unconditional. Our ability to feel sympathy for these characters is not unlimited and can be combined with contempt for immoral or violent actions, or as discussed later (in section 4.1.), can result in a dramatic turnaround in our relationship with a character.

In this sense, the novelty introduced by the American cable TV series, as compared with films, is that they question our *allegiance* to the protagonists as a strategy to advance the plot, build suspense and renew dramatic conflicts over and over. The protagonists have to cyclically revive the sympathy we feel for them, despite the sins they commit, so that these conflicts can multiply and the story can expand over the course of several seasons.

A dramatically rich character carries out good deeds, questionable actions and even despicable acts. The key to the alliance between the viewer and the character is that at all times we judge these anti-heroic protagonists with a degree of goodwill. We create our own value system with which to approach a fictional story. In short, we establish an specific “moral covenant”. Sympathy for a character is not only evoked because they exhibit exemplary ethical behavior. As can readily be seen in many of the protagonists discussed in this article, all commit horrific acts and yet we remain committed to them, feeling emotionally close to them. Why? Because, as discussed further below, fictional TV drama use three strategies to ensure that the viewer maintains an overall positive emotional attitude towards the protagonist: victimization of the character, the perversity of the antagonists, and the presence of family.

4. Moral judgment and emotional identification strategies

Even a sophisticated cannibal like Dr Lecter can produce a “perverse allegiance” in us (Smith, 1999) and a genocidal character such as Hitler can evoke compassion in his final moments (Von Motke, 2007). As explained by Noël Carroll, the moral judgment we form in response to audiovisual fiction is largely influenced by emotional responses, and therefore, that are easily manipulated: “[We] tend to think of moral judgments as being issued after a chain of reasoning. However, although this may happen sometimes, there is evidence that a great many moral judgments are based on gut reactions (...) Moral judgments are generally fast, automatic, intuitive appraisals; in short, they are emotions” (2010, 8).

This is due to the enormous emotional power of the moving image. The emotional identification/moral judgment that we are dealing with here is not only produced by the

plot, but also by the audiovisual form itself: the musical background⁶, revealing dialogue, extended close-ups⁷, epic slow motion scenes, symbolic lighting, unusual camera angles, magnetic performances, intimate voice overs⁸, etc. The audiovisual story uses many strategies to “criterially prefocus” (Carroll, 1999, 30) our emotional reactions, strengthening our allegiance to a particular character and avoiding the negative moral evaluation that would occur in real life. Beyond these rhetorical tools, contemporary TV series, as described above, use three clear dramatic strategies to reinforce the identification of the viewer with these antiheroes and mitigate their despicable actions.

4.1. Character Victimization

According to Plantinga, “we sympathize with characters when we believe that they are in danger and must be protected, when they are suffering or bereaved, or when we believe that someone has been treated unfairly” (2010, 41). Let’s take two antiheroes that have been the subject of much discussion in recent months, the protagonists of *Breaking Bad*: Walter White and Jesse Pinkman. From the beginning, we are presented with a situation that demands our *allegiance*, generating a “structure of sympathy” (Smith, 1995, 5) that

⁶ It is very common for music to be used to emotionally alter our relationship with the actions we observe. A notable example is the use of music in series *Hannibal*, where the music is the key to humanizing the monster. For example, in the infamous gastronomic/musical sequence of “Sorbet” (1.7.), the operatic rhythm provides a festive atmosphere and accentuates Dr Lecter’s passion for the kitchen. Moreover, together with the delicate surroundings and the stylized, sterilized environment, the music “absolves” the cannibalistic Dr Lecter by forcing the viewer to admire this gastronomic symphony, and the pleasure with which the elegant psychiatrist so gently handles the “ingredients”. The melody then ends to invert the dynamic of evil described by Freud, instead of being pleasant and familial, the scene takes on strange, abominable nuances, and the rhythmic sequence is revealed for what it is: the preparation of human organs as a refined domestic task.

⁷ Plantinga calls them “scenes of empathy”: “The narrative momentarily slows and the interior emotional experience of a favored character becomes the locus of attention (...) The prolonged concentration on the character’s face is not warranted by the simple communication of information about character emotion. Such scenes are also intended to elicit empathetic emotions in the spectator” (1999, 239). *Mad Men* stands out from other current TV series in the use of these “close-ups of empathy”. With its leisurely pace, Weiner’s series adopts an aesthetic of reaction rather than a rhetoric of action. Thus, episode endings are typically contemplative, with no hint of cliffhangers; the resolution of the narrative gives way to the emotions that are implied by close-ups of the characters, a deliberate ploy that reinforces our sympathy for them.

⁸ *Dexter* provides the most striking example in this regard. In the presentation of his character—a serial-killer—one specific visual element is vital: the voice-over. This facilitates our allegiance *a priori* to a despicable character, because it allows us to get close to him: he verbalizes his doubts, laughs at himself, and explains his modus operandi and the justification for his bloody deeds (Harry’s code).

predisposes us emotionally, and as a consequence morally, towards these two characters. Walter White begins the story as a loser, who is laughed at even by his own students at the car wash where he works. A *nobody* who also is diagnosed with incurable cancer. Jesse is not much better: despite his roguish character, we soon discover his addiction to drugs, his dysfunctional relationship with his parents, his depression. And if this were not enough, he seems to be a magnet for trouble. Both are victims. Furthermore, one of the talents of the creators of *Breaking Bad* is their ability to hide from us the potentially brutal consequences of the criminal acts of Walter and Jesse, particularly in the first season. The pernicious effects of methamphetamine are barely shown and the impact of Walter's actions on his inner circle is zero. These acts without consequences help to form an initial affinity between the viewer and the "new entrepreneurs", forcing us to establish a convoluted relationship with these characters: we root for them, we want them to succeed, despite not approving of some of their actions.

A similar strategy, albeit in a much more violent context, can be seen to work for another of the most paradigmatic antiheroes of contemporary TV fiction: Tony Soprano. From the pilot episode he suffers anxiety attacks that oblige him to visit a psychiatrist, he fails to control his family, stress overcomes him at work and his relationship with his mother is toxic and abusive. This is a character in who combines the extreme violence and evil of a gangster with a helpless, familial side that is at times even infantile.

Despite the clear differences, we can also apply this same "moral gap" to *Dexter*. The main character is also, at heart, a victim, as his "urge to kill" comes from a bloody and traumatic childhood episode in which his mother was killed in front of him. Dexter is not therefore guilty of his evil deeds, as they do not stem from his own conscious decisions. Furthermore, this vigilante is presented as a kind of moral Robin Hood who does not kill indiscriminately but rather he applies a code whereby his blood lust is quenched only by killing savage criminals who have escaped the net of justice, *i.e.*, he only acts when the system fails.

In these three cases a sense of no escape plays a role in the victimization of the protagonist; they have to carry out these morally reprehensible actions because they cannot do anything else given the situation in which they find themselves. This idea of a protagonist who is "up against the ropes" is well illustrated by Jack Bauer. From the

first season of *24* Bauer is presented as a martyr who has paid a high price for defending his country, suffering the cruelest physical punishments and losing his wife, who was killed because of his work at CTU. Moreover, unlike his enemies, who are usually sadistic and selfish, he does not enjoy the torture and death of his opponents; on the contrary, such bloody acts are always presented as the only possible solution to a moral dilemma. This dual strategy, the victimization of Bauer and the “lesser of two evils”, serves to defend all his actions. As Lewis writes, “he is not acting for himself, but for a greater good” (2011, 115).

Like *24*, many of these TV series convey the feeling that violence is the inevitable last resort, thus diminishing the responsibility of the protagonists. However, this absolution has its limits. As mentioned above, the serialized format helps the viewer to identify with the protagonist, at times even going back to square one. There are unforgivable acts that cause the viewer to question their *allegiance* with the protagonist. In *Breaking Bad*, for example, our complicity with Walt falters during the first half of the fifth season, when he terrorizes Skyler, kills Mike, and is unfazed by the death of the boy on the bike. In *The Shield*, which, lest we forget, starts with another unforgivable act (a shooting in the pilot episode that will haunt the characters for seven seasons), we also end up despising Vic Mackey for the tragic events of the last episode. In both series, however, the sad fate of its protagonists—pure poetic justice—allows the recovery, *a posteriori*, of that *allegiance*; we see them pay for their crimes, for the harm they have caused, and this restores the comprehensive moral framework we established with them throughout the series.

4.2. The lesser evil and the depravity of the antagonists

As part of their narrative and dramatic evolution, the dark side of many TV antiheroes comes to the fore as the story progresses. This is seen with Rick Grimes (in his biblical confrontation with Shane in *The Walking Dead*), Tony Soprano (who leaves Chris Moltisanti to die), Nucky Thompson (who shoots his disciple) and the Jennings couple in *The Americans* (who murder innocents), to name but a few. However, we usually continue to be connected with these characters emotionally and morally as a matter of “dramatic balance”. The protagonist needs an antagonist. Thus, we side with Dexter Morgan, Nick Brody or Tom Kane of *Boss* because there is always someone much

worse than they are, such that we unconsciously compare them with other characters and we reach the conclusion that our protagonists, despite their violent methods and their crimes, are “the good guys”. Therein lays the moral ambiguity that has so vitalized current TV drama, as it forces you to choose the “lesser evil” and, consequently, it reinforces our sympathy for the protagonist.

A typical example is the biker gang of *Sons of Anarchy*. Among their activities are gun running, extortion, theft, pornography and settling scores with rival gangs. However, they have a code of values that contrasts with the brutality and ruthlessness of their enemies such as Damon Pope (who burns Tig’s daughter alive), the Real IRA (who brutally torture their victims) and agent Sthal (responsible for kidnapping Jax's infant son). A similarly relativism can be applied to HBO's *Rome* if we compare the violent protagonists with the merciless and treacherous Atia of the Julii.

The pilot episode of *The Shield* visually exposes this moral Machiavellianism. Vic Mackey may be a despicable cop but he is a tremendously effective agent who, lest we forget, is also presented in the first episode in his role as a parent (with two autistic children who require special care). One of the subplots of the pilot concerns a case of pedophilia. Faced with the imminent death of a kidnapped girl, only Mackey’s unorthodox methods can save the kid. The closing montage of the pilot visually reinforces the ethical ambiguity that defines the series: we need Mackeys out there, doing the dirty work, to enjoy the tranquility of our own homes. It is no coincidence that in each season—in a dramatic balancing act well planned by the writers—the Strike Team, despite their violent and sometimes illegal methods, has to face villains far more savage and ruthless than they are, and they always win. If, as Carroll argues in relation to Tony Soprano, we look at the “moral structure” of the fictional world of *The Shield*, we realize that Vic Mackey “is far from the worst character”. There is no denying that the leader of the Strike Team is “morally defective, but only to suggest that among an array of ethically challenged characters, he is one of the least deplorable” (2004, 131-32). This does not make his misdeeds good but it means that the viewer, on experiencing events that have been “emotionally predigested for us”, form a positive moral evaluation, driven by our emotional identification with the characters and the agonizing environment in which they are presented.

4.3. The family as source of emotional and moral support

When reflecting on the relationship between dramatic identification and emotion, one must take into account a key element that acts as a powerful buttress: the family. Blood ties destabilize the moral framework of the antiheroes, both internally and externally. On the one hand, the presentation of the family serves as an alibi to justify the need for many of their reprehensible actions but, on the other, the home environment brings out the best in these characters, their romantic, altruistic or selfless side. Thus, in series such as *Game of Thrones*, *Sons of Anarchy* and *Weeds*, which differ greatly in terms of both genre and theme, the family serves to justify the more reprehensible deeds, while simultaneously allowing us to view these characters in a different light, in an environment in which moral rectitude and the sincerity of their intentions is clear.

Thus, although the characters shift their moral compass to ensure the welfare of the family, we tend to empathize with them and convince ourselves of their self-justifications, because in the end, they do what they do to feed their children (*Weeds*), to maintain a legacy (*Sons of Anarchy*) or ensure the survival of their dynasty (*Game of Thrones*⁹).

Why does family exert such a strong influence in this type of series? Mainly because the serialized story, by its very nature, encourages the combination of the public and private lives of the protagonists. This means professional life—usually the most amoral—and personal life—through which we emotionally reconnect with these characters—. The nature of the series gives the viewer access to the most intimate qualities of the character, forming a naturalistic, all-encompassing story that in the words of Xavier Perez (2011, 27), aims to capture "the wounds of time" in the life of the characters. As Creeber summarizes: "With its combination of a continuous narrative structure contained within a clearly defined, it allows television to exploit its tendency towards 'intimacy' and 'continuity' yet without dispensing with the power and possibilities offered by its gradual movement and progression towards narrative closure and conclusion" (2004, 9).

⁹ In *Game of Thrones* the family's presence is also a political issue as the plot explicitly divides the characters into familial groupings. Cersei Lannister makes this clear at the beginning of the story: "Anyone who isn't us is our enemy." (1.3.). Later, her father, the bloodthirsty and efficacious Tywin, concludes: "It's the family name that lives on. That's all that lives on. Not your personal glory, not your honor but the family."

Indeed, series such as these have redefined—with their novelistic approach—the hallmark of serial television dramas. The complex network of characters, relationships, political alliances, bloodlines and all kinds of conflicts of that exist in series such as *Deadwood*, *The Wire* and *Boardwalk Empire* would have been unfeasible a few decades ago. These artistically ambitious series can develop over 10 storylines per episode, using a boundless narrative flow that reminds us of writers from the 19th century. Moreover, by using more footage to develop the plot—without the need to waste time repeating plots and motifs, as was the style of earlier series—the conflicts and dilemmas multiply, enriching the moral, emotional and political diversity of the story. As Nelson wrote: “A scope of between eight and twenty four hours’ screen time allows for more complex storytelling and character-developing in relation to changing circumstances. It can in short, deal with shifts in fortune and the consequences of actions over time” (2007, 121).

It may be interesting to mention here the distinction that Plantinga establishes between mere “sympathy” towards a character and the more solid concept of “allegiance”: “We might consider sympathy to be more flexible and protean than allegiance, and its causality more diffuse and unpredictable. We might consider allegiance—our allying ourselves with, focusing on, rooting for a character—to be a relationship established only after appropriate narrative and character development” (2010, 41). Thus, “allegiance” implies a long-term investment in the character, something that serial fiction is in a privileged manner to allow. In this environment it is easier for us to reconcile with the characters when they commit unpleasant acts that distance them from us emotionally. The expanded narrative favors emotional redemption and, consequently, “realignment” with the characters once we are shown their familial, sentimental, friendly qualities. This is what happens to Don Draper after his descent into hell in the sixth season of *Mad Men*. In the end, his redemption comes through Sally, his daughter, and he ends up with his three children outside the house in which his painful childhood was played out.

It would be reductive, given their dramatic complexity, to think that for many of these antiheroic protagonists their families and children are simply an excuse to justify their criminal selves. By contrast, the primacy of the family in these TV series serves as a rich source of moral and emotional tension, as it can act as an excuse but also, as in the *Mad Men* example cited above, as a genuine lifeline. In both scenarios, the family is

“positive” for the character’s image, as the presentation of the family environment acts as a moral balm and a powerful trigger of sentimental complicity.

This strategy of “sweetening” the protagonist’s evil deeds by showing their intimate domestic life is in no way unique to television fiction. For example, *Downfall*, a German film that relives the last days of Adolf Hitler, is a *tour-de-force* in this regard. However, there is something in the serialized story—not in the autoconclusive stories but rather in those that develop a powerful background plot—which favors certain ambiguity in the life of the protagonist.

By taking 60 hours instead of two to develop conflicts, the very nature of the story allows us to modulate our anger towards the terrorist Nick Brody in *Homeland*: in the warmth of home we discover both the magnitude of his trauma (victimization) and the love of a father who adores his children. Thanks to the serial format, we have more time to see Tony Soprano kissing his children goodnight after crushing the skull of Ralph Cifaretto, or forgetting about the stress of his day job while eating macaroni and watching a Gary Cooper movie with child-like excitement. We see how the Jennings’, the KGB spies of *The Americans*, make breakfast for their children after a night spent hunting CIA agents in the Washington of the Reagan era.

This same expanded story format allows for the 180 degree turn in our feelings for a character. After 25 episodes, Jamie Lannister, who is introduced in *Game of Thrones* via two repulsive acts –incest and the attempted murder of a child– is humanized by humiliation, amputation and his admission of a painful secret to his captor. Thus, the serial narrative allows internal and external conflicts to multiply, increasing the complexity of these violent antiheroes who are also family men.

Conclusion: the serial narrative and our moral vitality

As Rothman writes, “the existence of evil helps maintain our vitality as moral creatures” (2011, 207-08). This is one of the reasons why series based on antiheroes have had such success: the serialized narrative puts us in a privileged position from where we fully appreciate the complexity of the human soul, because we can devote more time to understanding the contradictions between the private and public lives of the characters, we can better understand the consequences of their actions, and we can

even follow the gradual evolution of these characters and their conflicts. In addition to the narrative pleasure that this provides, it also serves a didactic function: “Empathizing with others also makes available to us possibilities for our own emotional education and development” (Neill, 1996, 192).

The characteristics discussed here—pending further additions from the workshop—demonstrate how our moral evaluation is influenced, even manipulated, by the emotional relationship that TV series establish for us as spectators. “Do we feel an allegiance with—a sympathy for—a character *because of* the perverse act that they engage in or *in spite of* that act?” asks Murray Smith (1999, 223). The serial format allows us to constantly revisit our dilemma between *because of* and the *in spite of*. The serial narrative ensures that our *allegiance* to these antiheroes will always be “in spite of” their despicable acts, because as spectators, we feel empathy not for the pain they cause but for the pain they suffer.

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