

## **Introduction**

(Alberto N. García)

Ever since the Parisian spectators at the Grand Café ran away terrified at the sight of the train that approached La Ciotat station, it has been clear that cinema is an emotion generating machine. In fact, to narrate is always to produce emotions. Munsterberg, one of the pioneers of film theory, saw this as early as 1916: ‘Picturing emotions must be the central aim of the photoplay’ (Münsterberg 48). Even that early in the history of film, he was already conscious of how emotions affected spectators: ‘On the one hand we have those emotions in which the feelings of the persons in the play are transmitted to our own soul. On the other hand, we find feelings which may be entirely different, perhaps exactly opposite to those which the figures in the play express’ (53).

Just as with other forms of art and expressions of popular culture, TV fiction can be at once a reflection of, and a normative guide for, social life. As Keen writes: ‘That narratives have the potential to transmit not just shared positive values but also disciplinary models of social control (including hierarchies, norms, and discriminating standards) over the societies that share them has been a commonplace of contemporary theory since at least Foucault’ (‘Introduction: Narrative’ 12). Often, social traits and predominant values—which are expressed in specific trends or lifestyles that are symptomatic of social life and become socially binding—emerge from the study of these fictional works. Contemporary TV series reveal some of the most singular expressions of the contemporary Western lifestyle.

From that starting point, the book, *Emotions in Contemporary TV Series*, particularly focuses on analysing the role of emotions in these narratives as well as how they relate to personal and collective identity in specific contemporary TV shows and

genres. Over the past twenty years, TV fiction has become one of the most powerful and influential trends in popular culture. Shows like *Mad Men*, *Lost* and *The Wire* have shaped a vigorous televisual landscape where innovations in narrative form, aesthetic engagement and an exploration of ethical issues have brought TV series to new heights.

In the following pages of this introduction I will examine how, over the last few decades, the social sciences have returned to the study of emotions; I will then specifically focus on the role that emotions have played in film theory since its beginnings. Next, I will briefly explain the causes behind the TV boom over the last fifteen years in order to explain the ever increasing academic fervour that TV series have awakened. This will allow me to show that, in spite of the extensive amount of existing literature, the study of emotions in TV is a largely unexplored field. To conclude, I will outline the contents of this volume in order to offer a guide to the reader about the structure and object of study of each essay.

## **1. Emotions in social sciences and the different ‘affective turns’**

Over the last few decades, there have been extraordinary developments regarding the study of emotions, not only in the realm of psychology, medicine and neurology—areas in which the interest in emotions is something to be expected—but more generally in the realm of humanities and the social sciences, where emotions are not simply a subject of research but rather are the prism through which a new epistemological turn is taking place. Furthermore, as Keen explains, we are not really facing an ‘affective turn’, but rather an ‘affective return’ - a focus on emotions which the aesthetics of the early 20th century instigated but left unresolved (‘Introduction: Narrative’ 18). As González and García point out in the first chapter, with a few notable exceptions, emotions have been mostly relegated to the background for much of the modern age, largely because of the

undisputed, decades-long dominance of a rationalist and utilitarian paradigm, in which affective elements were labelled as irrational. The traditional Cartesian opposition between mind/body and reason/emotion is one example of this.

Emotions by nature include both cultural and cognitive aspects, as well as evaluations and physiological changes which, ultimately, generate practical dispositions. Because of this inner wealth, emotions serve as an especially appropriate anchor for the study of society, and reveal contemporary social structures and cultural trends. Numerous disciplines have focused on emotions, but the latest multidisciplinary research attempts to integrate them into a less rigid analytical framework.

This is what this book expects to achieve by choosing TV series as its object of study: to find a multidisciplinary perspective that will allow delving into the emotional side of one of the most relevant products of cultural consumption of recent years. However, in order to understand what is original about TV in recent times, it is first necessary to examine how film theory has approached the study of emotions.

## **2. Emotions in film theory**

TV is the child of the film industry, and has inherited much of the latter’s treatment of emotions. In spite of their importance for spectators (as previously highlighted when discussing the events that took place during the first exhibition of the Lumière brothers’ invention), in the history of film theory and film critique, the role of emotions has predominately been secondary or even buried, due to the assumption that the emotions created by films are something mysterious and impossible to grasp.

If we were to undertake a brief survey—necessarily synthetic (see Plantinga; Smith; Grodal)—of the history of film theory, we would discover that both formalist and realist theories arose—in an attempt to ‘legitimize the medium’ (Rushton and

Bettinson 11). To this end, a greater focus was placed on the specificity of film with respect to other arts (Balázs, Arnheim), or on the ontological status of the image in movement (Bazin, Kracauer), than on the nature of emotions in movies. There was little concern for the mechanisms by which the stories that were being told produced emotions in the spectator. In the words of Zumalde, there was no interest in measuring 'the sentimental involvement of the subject in the artistic text' (43).

Among classical theorists, it was Münsterberg who specifically paid attention to emotion as an aesthetic phenomenon and an epistemological reality. He sought to develop an analogy between mental mechanisms and the reception of film images, a process in which emotions are essential, much like attention, memory and imagination: 'It is as if that outer world were woven into our mind, shaped not through its own laws but by the acts of our attention' (39).

The cultural revolution of the 1960s, a growing trend of cinephilia and the arrival of film theory in the academy caused the appearance of a series of new theories whose main concern was 'analysing cinema as a system of social and symbolic meaning' (Rushton and Bettinson 11). As Elsaesser and Hagener write, 'The dominant theories of the 1960s and 1970s privileged the act of seeing even more than earlier theories' (109). Consequently, emotions were once again relegated to a second level by theorists and analysts. This happened, for example, in structuralism, which emphasised the importance of discovering the underlying structure of the film. With the 'apparatus theory' of Baudry, under the influence of Althusser and his 'ideological state apparatuses', there was an attempt to define the 'politics of cinema', stressing how the Hollywood style perpetuated bourgeois ideology through an emotionally captive spectator. Something similar occurred in the debates in *Screen* magazine, where,

starting from the necessity of an emotional distancing of a Brechtian type, affect was once again subordinated to their ideological potential.

During those decades, emotions only emerged—though never in a central way—in psychoanalysis and feminism, masked by terms such as ‘desire’ or ‘pleasure’. Thus, for example, Morin and his heirs used the Lacanian notion of ‘desiring the desire of the other’ to reflect on identification—mirroring—and establish a parallelism between the film screen and the psychological mechanisms of the spectator. Subsequently, this idea of identification was further developed by Metz, who, combining methodological tools taken from semiotics and psychoanalysis, established a difference between primary identification processes (the act of watching) and secondary identification processes (identification with characters). As for feminism, it made use of concepts such as ‘scopophilia’ (Mulvey) or ‘arresting images’ (Klinger) in order to explain how desire and emotion are linked to a patriarchal view that has become institutionalised by the ‘dominating’ film industry.

This trend started to change during the 1970s. One of the first theorists to counteract the predominance of post-Freudian and post-Marxist theories was Perkins. He defended the importance of the emotional experience of the spectator as a crucial part of the process of film reception: ‘Vicarious experience can bring us a valuably extended experience and a broadened range of sympathies, but it cannot be isolated from our more active pleasures’ (138). Also Deleuze, from his very personal and eclectic point of view, rescues the centrality of emotion, given ‘his special interest in intensities, energies, connections, affective states and sensory perception’ (Elsaesser and Hagener 157). Elsaesser and Hagener point out that the Deleuzian notion of ‘movement-image stands for a cinema of perceptions, affects and actions in which the sensory-motor schema of the human body is a functioning unit’ (159). As for the

neoformalists, with Bordwell at the helm, they developed an aesthetic approach in which they defended the active role of the spectator in the construction of meaning, according to the successive clues that the film provides. Therefore, when they study the effects generated by films, they see emotion as an essential element, capable of being cut up and analysed.

However, above all, it was the cognitivist philosophers who—based on Bordwell’s constructivism—approached the phenomenon of emotion in films in a more systematic manner, partly as a reaction against what they considered to be excesses in the psychoanalysis-based theories and semiotics that had been influential for decades. Along these lines, several authors have dedicated complete works to the study of cinematographic emotion. The cognitivist approach holds that a spectator, while watching a film, puts into motion the same mental mechanisms that they use in daily life, namely, ‘affect-drive mental processes’ (Nanicelli and Taberham 345). Therefore, because they consider the spectator’s response to be something rational and analysable, cognitivists pick apart the emotional processes that take place while watching a film, analyse the affective strategies of distinct genres and discuss the difference between empathy and sympathy. ‘Visual fiction is viewed in a conscious state, and is mostly about human beings perceiving, acting, and feeling in, or in relation to, a visible and audible world [...] The viewer’s experience and the phenomena experienced often demand explanations that imply non-conscious activities; but the emotions and cognitions must be explained in relation to conscious mental states and processes’ (Grodal 6).

To conclude this brief account of the role of emotions in film theory, it is necessary to make reference to two more recent contributions. On the one hand, there is the phenomenology of Sobchack, who claims that films have thoughts and feelings of

their own and, therefore, the relationship between a film and its spectator is a back and forth process: 'an expression of experience by experience' (qtd. in Elsaesser and Hagener 116). Thus, Sobchack's theory tries to find continuity between physiological and emotional reactions, focusing 'on the carnal sensuality of the film experience and what—and how—it constitutes meaning' (Sobchack 56). On the other hand, Laine argues that films not only express, but also embody emotions. Laine tries to combine the Deleuzian (affect) and the cognitivist (emotion) traditions: 'I attempt to approach cinematic emotions as unified states or processes that involve both affective appraisals and emotional evaluations, affect being an implicit quality of the stream of emotion' (2).

My review of the role that emotions have played in the history of film theory ends here. However, what about TV fiction theories, the subject of study to which the present academic volume is devoted?

### **3. The growth of TV series and their interest to the academy**

TV studies and in particular the analysis of TV fiction is one of the areas of research that has grown the most within the humanities during the last decade. The popularity of TV series has increased enormously all over the world (see Mittel; Lotz; Sepinwall). The competition among networks and globalization has created a virtuous circle in which TV narratives have become increasingly complex and their audiences more numerous and participative; nowadays the emotional relationship between the spectator and a TV series can extend itself through emotional communities which are created around blogs, wikis and other cross-media extensions by the community of fans. That is, new TV narratives have not only developed riskier products and unprecedented channels of consumption, but also new identities for the spectator (the multi-screen spectator, forensic fandom, fan fiction, etc.) and unusual and novel ways of relating to

and interacting with other spectators, with even the creators of the TV series being ‘consumed’ by the process (many executive producers are on Twitter during the broadcast of their episodes).

This popular interest has also infiltrated the academic world. TV series are the subject of university courses and academic conferences all over the world; there are academic journals devoted exclusively to their analysis (there is even an extreme case of a journal devoted to a single TV writer: *Slayage: The Journal of the Whedon Studies Association*) and there is an ever increasing number of publishers that are turning their attention towards the small screen. The most common format is that of a book devoted to unravelling the key elements of a particular series; it would be impossible to enumerate all the existing books given almost every series with a sufficient degree of relevance has its own corresponding academic study. For example, even before broadcasting its fourth season, *The Sopranos* already had four academic volumes devoted to it. Something similar has happened with the TV series, *Mad Men*; to date, more than five academic books have been written about this program—this refers only to those originally published in English, as more have been written in other languages—and the series has not even come to an end yet.

However, in the world of TV studies, there are also more broadly oriented works that aim to examine the key theoretical aspects of TV fiction. For example, earlier studies have focused on narrative (Nelson; Mittell; Creeber), media industries (Miller; Lotz; Proulx), genres (Sanders and Skoble; Jowett and Abbott), cultural studies (McCabe and Akass; Dant), specific TV channels (Leverette, Ott and Buckley) and even philosophical approaches (the ‘Popular Culture and Philosophy’ collection by Open Court).

Nevertheless, the systematic study of emotions has been neglected in publications devoted to contemporary TV series. It is in fact a topic that has surfaced in other areas of TV studies, such as the link between emotions and authenticity in reality TV, the uses and gratifications of entertainment TV, or the tendency towards a sentimentalisation of news reporting in the so-called infotainment sector. However, in the specific field of TV fiction, there is no book devoted to the study of emotions as a central element in TV series. So far, it has been Vaage who has delved the most into the specificity of emotion in TV narratives, pointing out that the small screen offers a type of narrative that differs from that found in films in two ways related to temporality: its textual duration and its broadcasting rhythm. Also, from a cognitivist point of view, Vaage has written several articles explaining how the extended narrative that is characteristic of TV benefits from an emotional standpoint and a stronger familiarity with the characters, which in turn influences the degree of sympathy that spectators feel towards them; this can even affect the moral judgments placed upon their actions ('Fictional Reliefs'; 'Blinded by Familiarity'; 'Don, Peggy'). García discusses this topic in his article devoted to studying the limits of allegiance in relation to the figure of the antihero, while Nelson reflects upon the mechanisms, specific to the television medium, through which TV narratives construct an intense emotional climax, which is in turn supported by the spectator's memory and the accumulation of the narrative.

Consequently, given the lack of bibliography, our focus on *Emotions in Contemporary TV Series* will open up a new area of discussion that links key notions of television narrative regarding emotions, cognition, fiction and popular culture. What makes this volume unique is its interdisciplinary approach, since the series are analysed from the perspectives of television studies, literature, sociology, philosophy and media studies. In addition, the essays contained herein serve as a demonstration of the

methodological validity of the theories mentioned earlier: Bishop uses a psychoanalytical approach, Weissmann follows in the footsteps of feminist studies, Pérez adopts a rigorous cognitivist perspective, Agger relies on a cultural studies approach and Nelson—just to give one last example—draws from the Deleuzian tradition, among others.

Several key concepts are engaged across the various chapters: these include the relationship between moral emotion and character identification; how serial narrative builds into ‘affective moments’, thereby producing a distinctive mode of aesthetic experience; the politics of emotion in collective identities; the intersection between gender and emotions; and how popular genres, such as horror films, political thrillers and science fiction manage the ‘emotional return’ that postmodernism has made visible.

#### **4. The structure of the book**

The book is divided into three parts. Part I examines diverse theoretical issues concerning the relationship between emotions and the TV narrative. García and González offer a sociological panorama, which explains the reasons behind this recent interest in emotions and why the TV medium offers an optimal way of exploring them. Next, Nelson’s article takes into account technological advancements and viewing habits in order to explore how ‘a particular kind of textual construct under digital circumstances affords the mobilisation of a distinctive kind of experience’. Thus, in his chapter he develops the notion of ‘moments of affect’ that ‘has become a significant structuring principle to sustain engagement in long-form serials, augmenting linear narrative hooks’. García analyses the popularity of antiheroes in high quality Anglo-American TV drama, paying close attention to the relationship—especially privileged by TV narrative—between moral emotions and the spectator’s engagement with the

characters. As a transition, this first section ends with an article from Pérez in which he proposes a theory concerning the rhetorical, narrative and aesthetic mechanisms that differentiate individual and group empathy (that is, feeling emotions with a character).

Part II includes four essays that deal with the subject of TV series and collective identities, both gender and geographically based. This section is an example of how the interdisciplinary approach of this book reinforces dialogue and permits a greater depth of analysis of the emotion-identity-TV triad from complementary perspectives. The two first essays focus on how one of the most popular and culturally influential series—*Mad Men*—engages the politics of gender. In contrast to her more positive reading of *SouthLand*, Weissmann—whose approach is rooted in the feminist studies tradition—denounces how *Mad Men*, in spite of offering a feminist critique, ‘is unable to escape the traditional gendered perception of women as emotional and as bodies’. Flamarique, in contrast, chooses a socio-historic perspective in which Weiner’s series serves as a laboratory of the social changes that Western civilization has gone through: ‘Emotions create a forum for communication and interaction: that is the place where identity and social recognition are achieved’. The next two chapters from Part II expand this volume’s reach by addressing how emotions—linked to collective identity—play a central role in two highly successful TV traditions of the last few years: the British historical melodrama and *Nordic noir* (originating in Denmark and Sweden). In Chapter 7, Baena explores the idea of Englishness and the relevance of nostalgia as a trope in contemporary British popular TV, following the extraordinary success of *Downton Abbey*. She analyses the narrative, rhetorical and ideological strategies by which many contemporary period dramas sustain a powerful nostalgic mood in their recreation of the by-gone Victorian and Edwardian eras. In turn, Agger (‘Nordic Noir - Location, Identity and Emotion’) starts from emotions conceived of as ‘structures of feeling’ (Williams)

and unravels how *Wallander*, *Forbrydelsen* and *Bron/Broen* employ landscapes and cityscapes: 'combined with a focus on social and cultural changes, dramas evoke certain types of emotion, especially when applied metaphorically' as these Nordic noir products do.

Part III deals with specific TV genres: horror, political thrillers and science fiction. These three genres were not arbitrarily chosen: horror is the only genre that defines itself by the emotions it awakens in the spectator; political thrillers have become fashionable, with trauma serving as the plot-engine, as a consequence of the unhealed wounds left by the 9-11 terrorist attacks; finally, science fiction, owing to the extended narrative that TV offers, has been able to create complex layers of emotion around one of its traditional themes: the limits between humanity and an entity initially devoid of emotions (for example, the machine/the android).

The first two chapters of this last section address horror from stances that are complementary both thematically and methodologically. Abbott focuses on how the expanded narrative in recent TV horror allows for an exploration, even prior to the fear of death which is traditional in the genre, of the network of dagger-sharp emotions surrounding loss, sorrow and mourning. While Abbott focuses on habitual stereotypes such as the ghost, the vampire and the zombie, Bishop concentrates on the most popular product ever created based on zombies: *The Walking Dead*. In Chapter 10, Bishop shows how, in a chaotic, ruined and hopeless environment, various characters find themselves forced to confront their 'repressed emotional traumas'. In so doing, they are able to get past their condition as 'damaged people' and develop new identities as 'strong, independent and self-actualized individuals'.

Echart and Castrillo also deal with horror but from a much more realistic, dry and contemporary point of view. They offer a broad definition of the political thriller

subgenre and analyse the two emotions that makes it distinct: fear and distrust. For their analysis, they take as a reference point the popular series, *Homeland*. In the last article, Wassmann explores how the science fiction genre has dealt with emotion, beginning with the appearance of foundational landmarks, such as *Star Trek* and extending her reach to the great work of science fiction on contemporary TV: *Battlestar Galactica*. Her reflection on the emotional wealth of these futuristic series connects with a classic trope of the genre: is it possible for an artificial intelligence to experience genuine emotion? Wassmann argues that the underlying concerns behind the discussions between Cylons, androids and humans show how TV science fiction has become a privileged object of study for those who wish to delve into the issue of whether or not emotion—with all its consequences—is what makes us truly human.

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