
Special issue
Visual motifs

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Submitted
December 14th, 2020
Approved
January 11th, 2021

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Communication & Society
ISSN 0214-0039
E ISSN 2386-7876
doi: 10.15581/003.34.2.281-296
www.communication-society.com

2021 – Vol. 34(2)
pp. 281-296

How to cite this article:
Sorolla-Romero, T. (2021).
Iconographies of the present.
Political populism, economic
instability and migratory crisis in
Years and Years (BBC and HBO,
2019). *Communication & Society*,
34(2), 281-296.

Iconographies of the present. Political populism, economic instability and migratory crisis in *Years and Years* (BBC and HBO, 2019)

Abstract

In its six episodes, the British series *Years and Years* (2019) calls on images that resonate in the collective imagination of the contemporary media, although some of them have their roots in visual motifs with a strong tradition in Western visual culture. In this article, we attempt to identify these images, representing the political conflicts, social tensions, ecological disasters, and economic uncertainties of the end of the 2010s and beginning of the 2020s, and analyse their transfer from the media to television fiction. Among the references and other motifs analysed are images from the realm of contemporary photography appearing in the press and, for example, at the prestigious World Press Photo event. But an earlier pictorial and cinematographic tradition shows the survival of these visual motifs in the images from *Years and Years*, interweaving the public sphere with television fiction. Methodologically, we draw on contemporary image theory, including the legacy of Aby Warburg and Walter Benjamin, and textual analysis rooted in semiotics. The visual motifs analysed crystallise around the social unease and

humanitarian disasters unleashed by economic and migratory crises, the banalisation of politics in the media, the threat of authoritarian populism and the stylisation of images of war. They include the allegory of freedom and representations of popular revolt and hard times.

Keywords

***Years and Years*, TV Studies, TV series, BBC, HBO, Visual Motifs, Visual Culture.**

1. Introduction: *Years and Years* as a case study

The first image in the recent British television series *Years and Years* (2019), coproduced by the BBC and HBO and created by the scriptwriter and producer Russell T. Davies, consists of a televised close-up of a mature woman taking part in a televised political debate. Vivienne Rook (Emma Thompson) is labelled an “entrepreneur” and her first words –the first line of dialogue of the series– are an uncompromising statement: “I don’t understand the world anymore.” The increasingly indecipherable relationship between political discourse taking the form of utterly uninhibited populism, the mass media and audience reaction limited to social media is clear from the beginning of the pilot episode. The television set seems to offer,

contain, and contextualise political agents, their discourse and their policy programme. Moreover, the BBC logo on screen with Viv Rook's face recalls the television channel's promise to provide a quality public service in this close-up. However, pride in political incorrectness and provocation as a tactic are soon pressed into service as the brand image of a woman who, during the series, will become Prime Minister of the United Kingdom when she answers a question from a member of the audience about the Gaza Strip. "I suppose when it comes to Israel and Palestine... I don't give a fuck," she says. Rook, a female cross between Boris Johnson and Donald Trump, founds the Four Stars Party in honour of the four asterisks used to censor the letters of the word "fuck." The candidate's short, white bob of hair makes her look similar to the former Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May, who is approximately the same age as Thompson, the illustrious English actress who brings the character of Rook to life. The monochrome red, blue and dark wine-coloured jackets with big shoulder pads also stylistically link the fictional politician with May, and even with Thatcher. But this fictional politician, whose public duty involves understanding the world and looking out for the common good, adopts a discourse of incredulity which presumably connects with the audience in order to put herself forward as a dangerously discontented, indignant candidate without answers.

The media banalisation and *celebritisation* (Driessens, 2013; Oliva, Pérez-Latorre & Besalú, 2015; Quevedo & Portalés, 2017) of political candidates and their discourse can be exemplified in *Years and Years*, as we will see later, with Viv Rook's participation in game shows and programmes forming part of the spectacularisation of television news (González Requena, 1988, 1989; Imbert, 2008; Palao Errando, 2009). In addition, the series absorbs a whole set of visual motifs from the collective public imagination: manifestations of public desperation rooted in the economic crisis, the stylisation of a war that ends up being denied, human overcrowding in refugee camps, and immigrants' bodies stretched out on the sand. In this article we attempt to identify these images representing political conflicts, social tensions, ecological disasters, and economic uncertainties from the media iconography of the end of the 2010s and beginning of the 2020s in order to analyse their transfer to *Years and Years*. Here, we focus on the British series as subject of study. It has so far been virtually ignored in academic articles and books, except for an analysis of its contribution in *Queer TV* (Horvat, 2020). However, recent monographs demonstrate the academic interest in the view of the refugee crisis and the concept of Europe in film and on television (Marcos & Rubio, 2018; Echart & Russo, 2020; Lacalle, 2008), as well as economic and identity factors (Marzal *et al.*, 2018; Parejo & Sánchez-Escalonilla, 2016).

A degree of darkness has invaded contemporary television series from *Twin Peaks* (Showtime, 1990-1991; 2017) and *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007), to *True Detective* (HBO, 2014-), *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013-2019), *The Leftovers* (HBO, 2014-2017), *Chernobyl* (HBO, 2019) and *Sharp Objects* (HBO, 2018). As their prestige and legitimacy among critics and audiences have increased (Cascajosa, 2007, 2016), academics have increasingly become concerned with their narrative and aesthetics (Jacobs & Peacock, 2013; Nannicelli, 2017; Huerta & Sangro, 2018; Harris, 2007; Mittell, 2006). The latter is an aspect traditionally ignored by TV studies (Butler, 2010; Creeber, 2013). *Years & Years* is in line with the pessimism that began with the body of Laura Palmer and the unscrupulous cruelty of Tony Soprano and continued in television fiction in a wide variety of genres whose common denominator consisted of destroying

a basic principle of series for mass consumption: the domestic and family paradise that had constituted the moral principle of so many pieces of television fiction give way to a view of an infernal world –an indomitable hell intruding into everyday life to express its dark side (Balló & Pérez, 2018, p. 16).

The home as a prison rather than a refuge; political and police corruption; and delight in the exercise of pure evil have generated this “disintegration of a stable world” (2018, p. 16), of which *Years and Years* is another example. What were once represented as habitable spaces become “labyrinthine extensions of a voracious outdoors: a hostile world” (2018, p. 22).

In previous series that had contributed to the “new golden age” of television¹ (Bort, 2012), it was the drama or intimate discomfort that cannibalised the polyhedral darkness that appears to be a feature which cuts right across contemporary series. Frustrated sentimental and parent-child relationships, supposedly successful but unsatisfactory professional careers and social lives, or rebellious characters and communities genuinely inclined towards violent corruption permeate *The Sopranos*, *Six Feet Under* (HBO, 2001-2005), *Desperate Housewives* (ABC, 2004-2012), *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-2013), *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007-2015) and *Boardwalk Empire* (HBO, 2008-2014).

By contrast, the apocalyptic tone of *Years and Years* takes the causes that shake up the lives of the Lyons –the Manchester family at the centre of the series– outside of the home and away from individual dissatisfactions. Here we are talking about the voracious neoliberalism that leaves Stephen (Rory Kinnear) and Celeste (T’nia Miller) bankrupt and jobless, the attempted nuclear war that poisons environmental activist Edith (Jessica Hynes), and the migration policy that shakes Viktor (Maxim Baldry), pursued by the Ukrainian justice system for being homosexual to the point where, together with other immigrants, he sets off on to the sea, although many die in their attempt to cross the English Channel.

The link between *Years and Years* and the public sphere is established based on these (and other) issues that condition the narrative action, but the series is also literally tied to its time. It begins in 2019, the year it was first broadcast, and it used bold montage sequences² that rapidly summarise the subsequent years, transferring the action to a disturbingly plausible immediate future barely distinguishable from our present.³ This aesthetic, technological, communicative, economic, and political similarity encourages reflection on the risks involved in the present but still in some way represented as distanced from European citizens. The political tensions present in 2019 –the consequences of Brexit, Trump’s politics, the trade war between China and the United States, the side-lining of international diplomacy, the rise of the far right and Islamic terrorism, and the paranoia unleashed since 11-S– explode, sweeping away the well-being and way of life of various leading characters.

In his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Walter Benjamin wrote that “the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule” (2011, p. 23). In this permanent “state of emergency,” we can see the world health crisis unleashed by COVID-19, the financial crisis of 2008, whose consequences we are still suffering; the perpetual tension due to terrorism; the polarisation and arms race of the Cold War; and so on. Historically, there are always reasons to be vigilant. Benjamin also said that “to articulate the past historically [...] means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger” (2011, p. 21). As we will argue below, images and stories of the present articulate our fears reflecting this light of the past; this cultural sediment that reappears in the representation of constant conflicts which are never new. But what if a person who died on a boat was a British citizen rather than an African immigrant? And what if the racial segregation policies justified by populism that shamelessly advocates slashing individual rights took place in the main European cities? In

¹ The recurring journalistic use of the concept of peak TV in information articles evaluating the quality of the series draws on the media debate on the validity of this “new golden age” of television fiction.

² Montage with rapid cuts operating as a form of subjective flashback and often associated with the female point of view is a constant in contemporary series such as *Sharp Objects* (HBO, 2018), *Big Little Lies* (HBO, 2017), *Top of the Lake* (Sundance TV, 2013-2017), *Marcella* (ITV, 2016-) and *Liar* (ITV, 2017-2020).

³ *Years and Years* develops a dystopian family near future with echoes of the heritage of *Black Mirror* (Channel 4, Netflix, 2011-) in its perceptive reflection on modern Western society. However, it does not develop the hypothetical consequences of the technological development of mobile devices and social media in the alienation of citizens as much as that series does.

this article, we analyse how the exploration of these latent fears made by *Years and Years* gives us images that were already in the collective imagination of our media and which, in turn, form part of the symbolic importance of a previous iconographic tradition.

2. Theoretical framework and methodology

Methodologically, this study relies on two key areas: one related to the initial theoretical framework and the other concerning the analysis applied. On the second point, we use semiotically-based textual analysis to look closely at the visual imaginary and narrative resources of *Years & Years*, paying attention to concepts such as *focalisation* (Gaudreault & Jost) and the *meganarrator* (Gaudreault).

We also base ourselves on the theoretical work of the thinkers who have taken up the seminal legacy of Aby Warburg and Walter Benjamin, such as Didi-Huberman (2006, 2007, 2009), Michaud (2004) and Agamben (2001, 2004). They are interested in an open history of images that questions the static categorisations of supposedly homogeneous historical and artistic styles, schools, and periods. These authors recover and interpret concepts like the aura (Benjamin, 2004), pathos formulas (*Pathosformeln*), survival of gestures (*Nachleben*) and image comparison (using the *Mnemosyne* atlas⁴) and apply them to the analysis of contemporary visual culture to achieve an understanding of the insistent representation over time of certain visual motifs that seem to carry a specific emotional charge. As happened in Warburg's work, the visual impact of these motifs often lies in the gestural power they contain, associated with the representation of a degree of violence: a moving body; a gesture of pain, passion, or fury. In the words of Victoria Cirlot, "It is a matter of seeing [...], how images from the 20th century [in our case the 21st] can be resolved in accordance with such formulas which are, to some degree, recognised by the audience as if this formulaic repertoire formed part of our collective memory" (2019, p. 140).

Balló and Bergala recall the etymological provenance of the word 'motif': "It comes from the Latin verb *movere*, to move. It means: 'that which has the property of movement; producing movement,'" (2016, p. 16). It is not difficult, then, to look for an extension of these motifs in film, the ultimate vehicle for the moving image. In fact, it seeks a deeper relationship with Warburgian historiography in film montage. In his foreword to Michaud's book, Didi-Huberman points out that "the 'motion' is not a simple conveyance or narration from one point to another. It includes jumps, cuts, montages, harrowing connections. Repetitions and differences: moments when the work of memory becomes corporeal, becomes a symptom in the continuity of events" (2007, p. 16). Any montage is imbued with an idea of time. Burucúa (2011), and Borriaud and Hernández Navarro (2008) have reflected on this.

The visual motifs that survive over time, jumping between media "provoke a singular emotion in a flash of appearance; they have a tremendous capacity to make an impact on us" (Balló & Bergala, 2016, p. 14). The narrative dimension of film makes it an excellent device to "reactivate and renew certain motifs which were already part of an iconographic tradition" (2016, p. 12). These and other authors compile a whole range of visual formulas⁵ based on film in which gestures and action are interwoven with the object represented: a shout, an awakening, a falling tear, a woman behind a window, a falling body, a *pietà*, etc. Other recent monographs and contributions along the same lines looking at the theory of survival of images in film include (Chare & Watkins, 2015; Hernández & Martín, 2015; Quintana, 2014), television

⁴ This unfinished Warburg project is a montage of images divided into different panels, with little or no text, forming an anthropological organisation of the memory of Western visual culture. His montage breaks the affiliations that eulogise the classical beauty of the Renaissance and Neoclassicism but ignoring "items and works of art which, although in their outward appearance show a barbarous anticlassicism, are, paradoxically, the true heirs to the Classical inheritance" (Checa, 2010, p. 140).

⁵ These visual motifs can be linked to universal plots which have been feeding visual culture since classical antiquity in books, film, and television fiction (Balló & Pérez, 1997, 2005).

(Turquety, 2019; Huerta & Sangro, 2018; Pintor, 2017, 2019), and both media linked to the public sphere (Balló & Pintor, 2019).

3. Contemporary conflicts and iconographic survival

It is said that “the present is woven from multiple pasts” (Didi-Huberman, 2009, p. 48); *Years and Years* speeds up its narrative time to reflect on the contemporary world. To do so, it uses images containing repetitions: visual survivors linking the collective imagination of the modern media with other layers of the Western iconographic tradition. Montage is a key resource for articulating the discourse of the series, and, from the pilot episode –barely 15 minutes into the story– the televised news discourse is interwoven with family events. Using essential instants (Aumont, 1992), this marks the passage of time for the Lyons family: birthdays, engagements, weddings. In rapid sequences operating almost like *flashforwards*, the television news –and sometimes the reverse shot of the family’s reaction to it– shows that national and international political and economic instability is increasing. Instead of intertitles, the fireworks of successive London New Year’s Eve’s write the year in which the story is set in the night sky, stretching a hypothesis that begins in the current political situation of 2019, with its leading figures: a second mandate for Trump, the deaths of Angela Merkel and the Queen of England; a financial crisis that worsens, resulting in shortages of supplies and medicines; military coups in eastern European countries; politicians proclaiming themselves president for life, and so on. Among these future events we are shown the gradual but constant political rise of Vivienne Rook, and we see the leading characters reacting to her. The comments deriving from their reactions serve both to represent her character and its development and, in some cases, to comprehend the success of her aggressive media tactics.

3.1. *The TV is our home*

Years and Years restores the motif of television as a window around which the family sits at the end of the day –an image we might imagine had become outdated given the variety of screens used nowadays to look for information, entertainment or both at the same time. However, the motif is updated with more recent device than television. A kind of virtual assistant (a copy of “Alexa” or “Cortana”) who answers to the name “Signor” maintains a link between the different homes in which the large Lyons family is distributed. In fact, “family link” is the order given to the interactive speaker to establish the group call which they use to talk about current affairs in front of the television and, particularly, the growing and provocative leading role played by Vivienne Rook on the screen.

The discourses and responses at press conferences of the leader of the fictitious Four Stars Party could, in themselves, give rise to a study of the way the series uses the character to echo political populism. She holds people’s “ways of talking” literally responsible for her proposals. Examples of this are her plans to provide certain agents of authority (parents, teachers) with a kind of pen called a blink, capable of turning off all mobile devices within 30 metres or making the right to vote conditional on a minimum IQ. To the resulting question “Are you saying that some people are too stupid to vote?” Rook answers: “No. That’s what you say, millions of you, at work, at home, in the pub, you say ‘take away the vote’.” Alongside this, her television appearances offer a colourful and provocative mask concealing the same vacuum as the arbitrary nature of her political programme does.

Rook almost exclusively uses *politainment* (Berrocal, 2017) as a springboard for her public image, appearing in all kinds of hybrid formats –magazine programmes, interviews, chat shows, late-night programmes– which encourage the anecdotic, emotional presentation of political figures as ordinary individuals with extraordinary leadership capacity (Durántez-Stolle & Martínez-Sanz, 2018), and use humour and irony to make superficial, sentimental allusions to reality (Ellis, 2009).

If instead of paying attention to her verbal discourse we analyse her visual representation from among all the *politainment* television images featuring Rook –doing a dance routine, sobbing beside a soldier’s widow, competing with a young man in a general quiz show–, the picture of her on the set of a cooking show make the point across most eloquently. It is not an implausible image: there were good reasons why social media were only too delighted to pick up and metamorphosise Theresa May’s improvised dance to the rhythm of Abba’s *Dancing Queen* at a Conservative Party conference before giving her pro-Brexit speech in 2018. The same year, the Prime Minister also danced on several occasions on a diplomatic trip to South Africa. In Spain, in 2015, the then deputy Prime Minister, Soraya Sáenz de Santamaría, agreed to perform a prepared dance routine on *El hormiguero* (Antena 3, Cuatro, 2006-) on prime-time television.

Picture 1: Still from *Years and Years* (HBO), Theresa May dancing in South Africa (*The Guardian*) and Sáenz de Santamaría on *El hormiguero* (Antena3.com).



Viv Rook, who had already refused to participate in public debates and to appear on any TV station other than her own *Four Stars Channel*, campaigns on it even on election day. She argues: “This isn’t a campaign; this is my channel; this is my home.” In what she calls “her home,” and in the kitchen –a family space if ever there was one– she appears in a composition that draws on the reference of *The Last Supper* by Leonardo da Vinci. In the centre, and looking at the camera from behind the hob, with her arms arranged on the surface, she occupies Christ’s place. A light behind her gives her a halo, and the three spotlights on the table reproduce the composition of the three windows in the background of Leonardo’s fresco, standing out on a dark strip corresponding to the wall at the back. On either side, seated or inclined symmetrically towards her like apostles, three women and two young men look at her attentively, all arranged on the “other” side of the table, as in Leonardo’s fresco, respecting television’s “fourth wall.” Rook, who crosses the “wall,” claims that her channel is the only space for truth. Her claim matches the religious composition that puts her in the place of the Messiah: “You know where you can find the truth. Right here, *Four Stars Channel*. God help us. We’re the only ones.”

Picture 2: Still replicating the composition of *The Last Supper*.



Source: Own screenshot.

We said in the introduction that the logo and name of Rook's party correspond to the four asterisks censoring the four letters of the word "fuck" with which she began to attract attention in live television broadcasts. This gives visual form to the idea she uses to present herself in the media when she is still unknown: she puts herself forward as the voice of those censored by television because it is precisely the censurable and the politically incorrect that is the lure for her audience, in her case concealing everything from almost autarkic economic protectionism to the practice of genocide. The gesture she adopts to represent the party reproduces this "four" once again, raising both arms with the palms facing outwards and the thumb folded back, like the V for victory popularised by Churchill, then used subsequently by the United States presidents Eisenhower and Nixon and extended to the popular pacifist culture of the 1970s.

Away from the cameras, when Rook's –now prime ministerial– team is advising her about how to manage the growing volume of refugees distributed in different camps known as *Erstwhile* –former hospitals, military, or police training bases or, ultimately, empty institutions– those attending are reminded that "anything can be said within these walls, no consequences." Words said and not filmed can still disappear after being pronounced, particularly if they are harmful in the eyes of public opinion. However, like the images, they bring a historical echo with them. Rook warns the woman chairing the meeting that the word "camps" has negative connotations. The camera follows her movements from a low angle that makes her look bigger, while the Prime Minister explains that the concentration camps –related in the collective imagination to Nazi Germany– were, in fact, a British invention in the Boer War as a solution to house refugees whose farms had been destroyed by the conflict. Coldly, she develops the idea of the eternal return of certain historical movements, such as mass migrations. Faced with the premise that these refugee camps will continually fill up –because "these problems will never go away"–, she recalls the operation of concentration camps where "a natural selection process took place." With overcrowding, infectious diseases, lack of hygiene and food and increasing death rates (although Vivienne does not refer directly to death) among the refugees/prisoners "the population of the camps controlled itself." Fully aware that, from a humanitarian point of view such neglect could be considered genocide, she adds that it was also efficient because it worked. She appeals to the historical memory of the businessmen seated before her who are contracted to manage the camps, not to stir their consciences but to absolve them from all responsibility: "Have you read about it? Were you taught it? Do we remember it? No. We forget it, because it worked."

3.2. *Recovering freedom*

In the age of fake news (McNair, 2018; Grijalbo, 2018) and post-truth (McIntyre, 2018), both favoured by the malleability of the digital image, denial of war, genocide and political authoritarianism threatens to turn real war into a "war of images" (Mitchell, 2013) in the eyes of the public. The precedent of the images of the Gulf War, which made the conflict into a distant glow on the horizon –without death, dust, or blood– still applies in a present in which the same soldiers who drop bombs by piloting drones can avoid the image of the destruction, virtually making war from home, like a video game (Boyle, 2020; Bousquet, 2018).

In the series, Donald Trump⁶ decides to launch a nuclear missile at an artificial Chinese island –Hong Sha Dao– inhabited by more than 20,000 people on the pretext that it contains a military nuclear base. As the characters put it, he turns "a trade war into an actual war." The detonation of the American missile appears as a far-off explosion in the middle of the night, observed by a small group of activists including Edith Lyons, who is contaminated by the radiation. Although the UK government launches an immediate national alert, with alarms

⁶ From the time he was inaugurated as President of the United States, publications associating the former American president's media activity with the concepts of 'fake news', 'post-truth' and 'populism' have succeeded one another. Examples include Becker, 2019; Portmess, 2018; Wilber, 2018; Ramírez Nárdiz, 2017; and Kellner, 2016.

and television messages received on each individual smartphone, Edith later has to make a media statement to corroborate the fact that the attack took place, because the idea that it was just an exercise is dangerously prevalent on social media.

When the American missile sinks Hong Sha, Daniel Lyons (Russell Tovey), who works for Manchester City Council at one of the sites adapted to house refugees, leaves his husband behind at a family reunion at the home of his grandmother (Anne Reid) leaving his husband there in what feels like the end of the world –which the enunciation emphasises with the extradiegetic sound superimposed over the characters’ voices, the agitation of the camera, and rapidly changing shots– to go to the side of Viktor Goraya, a Ukrainian immigrant he has fallen in love with who lives in the camp where he works after being denounced to the Ukrainian police by his parents as a homosexual. The end of the episode uses montage to bring the first sexual encounter between the two of them –marking the beginning of their love relationship– into collision with the apocalyptic chaos that has seized hold of not only the Lyons family meeting but also the entire refugee camp. The crowds have lit bonfires and are dancing and jumping around them. Sinister effigies, presumably of current politicians –one of which particularly recalls Trump and Johnson– are waved and burned while, in the background, a large advertising hoarding demands the vote for Viv Rook. Printed like some sinister idol, she appears to observe from the top of the shot the petri dish she will use to exercise her repressive policies disguised as common sense from the streets. In the cathartic finale that intercuts the agitated bodies of the lovers with those of the refugees and the family hysteria in front of the television with the masses celebrating the chaos,

Eros is intercut with Thanatos; the fight to the death with desire; the symbolic assembly with the drive to destroy; the mineral fossil with the vital energy of movement; the lasting crystallisation of the images and the fleeting expression of the emotions. Here, the impersonal *momentum* of time is etymologically united with the *movimentum* of the body affected by passions (Didi-Huberman, 2009, p. 180).

Picture 3: Still of the refugee camp during the night of the alarm.



Source: Own screenshot.

From *Orphans of the Storm* (Griffith, 1921) to *One Nation, One King* (Schneider, 2018), taking in different versions of *A Tale of Two Cities* (Colman, 1935; Thomas, 1958) and other films devoted to different aspects of the French Revolution *The Century of Lights* (Solás, 1992), *Jefferson in Paris* (Ivory, 1995) and *The Lady and the Duke* (Rohmer, 2001), the image of the agitated people among bonfires destroying symbols of power –figures representing the aristocracy– presage revolution: the taking of power by force. What then represented the conquest by citizens that brought in the modern age, is reproduced in *Years and Years* as the recovery of democracy and individual freedom. In fact, this recovery calls on the visual motif of the allegory of

Liberty. Its survival comes as the former activists, who have now become clandestine fighters against the system, break into one of the *Erstwhile* camps where Viktor is locked up. There, the refugees/prisoners have been deprived of communication with the outside world with large frequency inhibitors. Some of the most famous representations of the allegory of Liberty show her as a human figure raising her arm and holding a torch. She appears on the July Column in Paris, *Liberty Enlightening the World* in New York –also of French origin and popularly known as the Statue of Liberty– and in the figure immortalised by Delacroix in *Liberty Leading the People*, where he replaced the torch with the flag of the French Republic. In *Years and Years*, instead of a torch, the item Edith holds up high, giving her the power to illuminate –to reveal what is going on in *Erstwhile*– is a mobile phone. The destruction of the great prison-like watchtowers that prevent the smartphones in the camp receiving or sending any signals makes it possible for everything recorded and photographed by the activists to be sent outside, and simultaneously reproduced on all television channels, with the involvement of a group of young people who are supposed to be working for the government.

Edith's raised arm, sending live images of dozens of immigrants held without rights and the armed guards threatening to shoot, is added to those of the prisoners who keep their telephones in secret even though they cannot use them. The accelerated images of all of them holding their small lighted screens recall the photograph that won first prize in the World Press Photo competition in 2014, *Signal* (John Stanmeyer), which showed African immigrants making the same gesture as they tried to get a Somali telephone signal in the middle of the night.

Picture 4: *Signal* (John Stanmeyer, *National Geographic* 2014) and the liberation of *Erstwhile*.



Source: Own screenshot.

While the masses are presumed to have collective intelligence and technological developments and social media created the illusion that it is managing to articulate itself politically (Guerra, 2017), in the course of the action of *Years and Years*, the technological factor does not determine citizen organisation. But, after tremendous frustration, it is recovered as a weapon. In fact, the montage has the shots of the raised phones colliding with images of police truncheons. Force is a *sine qua non* condition for the liberation of the refugees/prisoners. However, recovering a voice requires the conquest of the television screens, wherever they are located: on large advertising hoardings in the streets, on individual smartphones and tablets or, traditionally, in pubs and homes.

The series seems to want to insist on television as a receptacle for news content which will be understood by the audience as being true fact (Palao, 2009), not doubted by the characters or the viewers, regardless of any kind of political discourse. It is through these television screens that, with allusions to images from real contemporary news, we are kept informed of the political situation in the world of the series as its characters receive and comment on it.

3.3. *The economic crisis and the loss of their home*

The economic crisis and international political instability not only touch those living on the edge of the abyss like Viktor, fleeing the constant threat of deportation. Problems come to others through the worsening of the economic situation as the years go by. Stephen and Celeste lose a million pounds when, after selling their home to move somewhere smaller, the bank where they have deposited the money goes bust. The melodramatic motif of the woman behind the window shows Celeste in the background, behind the glass, watching men place the dispiriting “for sale” sign in her garden. She has reasons to be dispirited: Celeste will later be forced to go and live in the home of her husband’s grandmother, with whom she maintains an awkward relationship, although this gradually turns to tenderness when Stephen’s grandmother discovers he has another love relationship. Nor is there an easy life for him: the financial adviser who blotted his copybook by losing a million pounds moves becomes a delivery rider – a job where he meets the woman who becomes his lover.

The enunciation accompanies Stephen and Celeste in their growing anxiety, from unanswered calls to the bank to their visit to its headquarters. A general shot opens up, rising to show the whole street, allowing us to see a queue of people gathered at the door of the bank and tailing back right round the building. Echoes of previous depressions resonate in the motif of people forming a queue to beg for money. The ghost of *It Happened One Night* (Capra, 1934), *Modern Times* (Chaplin, 1936), *The Grapes of Wrath* (Ford, 1940) and *Sullivan’s Travels* (Sturges, 1941) returns in the shots of the line of humanity, referring back to other queues: for rationed food, to legalise personal documents, at job centres to look for work (or for unemployment benefit), and so on. Above all, the eloquence of the collage montage of *The Roaring Twenties* (Walsh, 1939), whose shots literalise the Wall Street Crash of ‘29 –exploding bubbles, buildings appearing to disintegrate–, is brought back in *Years and Years*, when the increasingly large crowd becomes desperate and breaks ranks to bang on the doors of the bank. The moment a police officer leaves his duty to join in the collective hysteria as an affected customer indicates the point of no return.

Eisenstein had already turned the masses into a political agent while, in exchange, taking the protagonism away from the individuals making up the crowd. The montage of anonymous faces turns them into carriers of a universal lament, a yell or a demand as they collide with great general shots and details charged with symbolism.

But the television image, which soon takes up the motif of the discontented crowd demonstrating in the streets in the series, depersonalises the masses still further: the banners and placards that can be seen in general shots replace the faces inserted in the film montage. Again, the fictional news extrapolates the multitude in the streets to various countries in Europe. It does so seeking references close to the real situation of the last few years: showing and labelling an economic and political crisis in Greece, a swing to the right in France and an unstable, ambiguous left in Spain, whose protests mix, among other symbols, emblems of the Civil Guard and pro-Catalan independence flags.

The loss of the home, or rather its reconfiguration, is the direct consequence of political and economic vulnerability. The violation of the right to a decent home in the series reaches such a point that any house with a particular capacity must, by law, house a certain number of homeless people. Viktor has no home of his own and, even when he becomes Daniel’s partner, the migration policy prevents him permanently living in a house. He actually spends more time on the run or in refugee facilities in both the United Kingdom and in other countries than at home. When Celeste reveals Stephen’s relationship outside their marriage, he is thrown out of his grandmother’s home and moves into a tiny room with Elaine, revealing the inconsistencies in their relationship. He is incapable of restoring the home he has lost. In this, the two of them appear atomised, like the silent, alienated characters from Edward

Hooper's paintings in an argument before their break-up (which the enunciation avoids for us with various ellipses).

The only home that survives is the old one, the ancestral home: the grandmother's Victorian house where no-one wants to invest in repairs, and which they never seem to manage to visit. Even the grandmother admits they have not been able to afford the repairs for years. But as well as being the meeting place for the family, her house provides shelter for four of its members when they lose their money. Despite everything, it is still a place undermined by painful losses: the death of the mother, the abandonment of the father, Stephen's departure, Danny's unexpected death and Edith's impending death from exposure to radiation.

A) Bodies on the beach

One of the most iconic images of the second decade of the 21st century is the lifeless body of the little boy Aylan Kurdi, stretched out on a Turkish beach. Drowned in the sinking of the inflatable boat in which his family, except his father, also died, the image became a symbol not only of humanitarian disaster resulting from the endless Syrian war but also of the migratory crisis which continues today, as bodies accumulate around the European coastline and stunned survivors are forced to live in overcrowded, insanitary camps, the most notorious of which is at Moira, on Lesbos. Several of the prizes given in the World Press Photo event over the last few years confirm both the aesthetic intensity and journalistic importance of the refugee crisis: the interactive documentary about Lesbos *The Waypoint* (2017) won second prize in the Digital Storytelling category; shortly before that, the report *Reporting Europe's Refugee Crisis* (Sergei Ponomarev, 2016) won first prize in the General News category; and *Rescue Operation* (Massimo Sestini, 2015) also obtained first prize with an impressive overhead shot of a boat packed with people looking up at the camera and hoping to be rescued.

Years and Years puts one of the Lyons family in the place of the drowned boy, inverting the fate which the viewer fears will befall Viktor. The enunciation sets out the drama of immigration in the heart of the United Kingdom –which viewers might assume is further than Mediterranean coasts from the arrival of fragile boats– from Danny's focalisation. Firstly, because he works managing resources for housing refugees, and secondly because he falls in love with one of them and brings him into the family as his partner. The enunciation underlines Viktor's fragility and the danger of death he faces from the beginning, showing the upheavals, changes of country and institutions of those tossed around by the political wind, even his intermittent return to Ukraine. It uses the resource, for example, of showing the young exile in his videoconferences with Danny so that when he does not answer, or when hostile thugs answer instead of him, the place where Viktor is out of shot is shown to be terrifying and inaccessibly far away.

After a desperate odyssey in which Danny manages to reach Viktor, the pair of them are forced to flee from Madrid –the last refuge where they can live with a degree of freedom– and they try to return illicitly to the United Kingdom. On the way, their papers and the money they are carrying are snatched from them. Finally, they get on to an obviously overcrowded motorboat, wearing the iconic orange life jackets in which it is impossible not to recognise contemporary shipwreck victims. An almost overhead general shot makes the crew look smaller and the camera is placed in the centre of the boat, as restless as the people piled up on board. The unnarratable terror of the sinking is represented with practically nothing. There is no epic shipwreck, as in the *Iliad*, nor the death rattle of *The Raft of the Medusa* (Géricault, 1818), nor the dead of the Acheron attempting to get on to Charon's boat, where Dante imagined himself with Virgil (Delacroix, 1822), nor the macabre, sensual mystery of *Ophelia* (Millais, 1852) shining through in the fleeting instants illustrating the sinking of the boat. Darkness, the roar of the sea and the intercut cries are the representation of the shipwreck, contained in three very short shots in which barely a figure can be made out. The

three shots, separated by cuts to black lasting several seconds, are much closer to Turner's revolutionary atmospheric paintings such as *Snow Storm. Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth* (1841), in which the snow, the sea, the rain and the wind are the focus while the human element practically fades into the mist. The logical association of illegal immigration with uncertainty and darkness has previously been portrayed photographically in work such as *Arrest of Undocumented Workers by US Border Patrol* (Susan Meiselas, 1989), and is still relevant today (*Under the Cover of Darkness*, Paul Hansen, 2016).

The series does not fictionalise something that also rarely appears in the press. The only elements usually broadcast or published are the consequences of a disaster that has taken place out of shot. Another ellipsis takes us to the next morning, leaden, calm, and silently funereal, where the British beach is strewn with orange life-jacketed bodies.

Picture 5: Aylan Kurdi (Nilüfer Demir, 2015) and drowned bodies in *Years and Years* (own screenshot).



The camera shows us foreshortened bodies scattered over the sand, like Aylan Kurdi's, pausing over Danny's corpse. Viktor, who is incapable of reacting to the questions of the woman helping him, mutters in Ukrainian with his eyes fixed glassily on Danny's body. The police number cannot reduce it to an object of mere forensic interest. The questions the woman helping Viktor asks are devastating because they put him in exactly the same place as he was at the beginning of the series: "Do you have your paperwork with you?" The reverse shot of Viktor's gaze is Danny's pale face, eyes and mouth half open as he lies inert, face up on the sand.

4. Conclusions

In episode two of *Years and Years*, the television shows the ruins of a bombed city. Blackened human silhouettes can be seen on the walls that are still standing, as if they were shadows stuck to them, corresponding to the traces left by the people who were there at the time of the explosion. Rosie Lyons (Ruth Madeley) tells her son: "Look, there were people! The bomb goes off and that's all they leave behind. It's the shadow." The terrible extrapolation of a Greek myth resonates in these shadows, a synonym for death. The story, included by Pliny the Elder in his *Historia naturalis*, explains the birth of the portrait based on a practically prephotographic tracing. A young woman called Kora or Callirhoe falls in love with a Corinthian boy and, before he goes away, she traces his profile around his shadow on the wall. From this portrait, her father, Butades, a famous artist, will mould his likeness in clay. It is the girl's desire to keep a faithful likeness of her lover that drives the making of this impression of the face in another image (drawing, sculpture). Even so, Foucault warns, any

representation involves “violence that we perpetrate upon things, [...] a practice we impose on them” (1987, p. 44). Meanwhile, concerning *Pathosformeln* and the metamorphosed survival of images in different layers of visual culture, Didi-Huberman explains that it is only the deepest tragedy that survives over the centuries:

The symbolic order cannot be understood beyond the relationship with these dark “forces” [...] to understand civilisation through its malaise, its symptoms, its dark continents [...] Culture is the tragedy of its memory [...] culture is always essentially tragic because *above all, it is the tragic that survives in culture* (2009, p. 136).

The symbolic violence observed by Foucault appears in the series weaving the order of representation together with that of reality: from Kora’s charcoal or the photographic camera as a device sticking the human silhouette to a surface, we jump to the explosion of a bomb. In line with Didi-Huberman, in the visual collective imagination of *Years and Years* we recognise wounds, social conflicts and cultural malaise from our own present. Proof of this is the constant reference to images shown in the contemporary media and prize-winners at events like World Press Photo. The principal *forms of pathos* we have seen in *Years and Years*, in which the form cannot be separated from the content, the emotional charge and the iconographic formula (Agamben, 2004), include this tragic imprint. They correspond to the woman with her arm raised bearing a source of light, the agitated crowd around the bonfires, or the inert body, stretched out face down. In them, we recognise “pathetic representations, dynamograms of desire, moral allegories, representations of grief, [...] visible symptoms [...] of a mental time that cannot be reduced to the simple connections of rhetorical, sentimental or individual odysseys” (Didi-Huberman, 2009, pp. 253-254). For him, the public and the private are woven together into the crystallisation of these *Pathosformeln*. They are vehiculised both by the Lyons family and by anonymous characters and the consequences of the different modern crises –economic, migratory, diplomatic– can be found in the plot: the media banalisation of politics and alienation of citizens. From all this, the conclusion can be drawn that, in *Years and Years* (following in the wake of the series mentioned in the introduction), images are not a mere vehicle for transparency of enunciation. On the contrary, they have powerful and meaningful strength that constantly gives them the status of textual markers, guiding viewers’ sense of interpretation, supported by their cultural baggage. A single line from the script condenses the value that the series places on the image; the scopic pulsion; the desire expressed through the will to see. With half the family ruined and her house falling down, grandmother Muriel decides to spend her savings on an operation to end her macular degeneration and recover her eyesight. Her words bring together the tragedy of her present, the passage of time and the enjoyment of sight as she exclaims: “It’s a terrible, terrible world, but I want to see every second of it!”

This study has been carried out as part of the research project “Análisis de identidades discursivas en la era de la posverdad. Generación de contenidos audiovisuales para una Educomunicación crítica (AIDEP)” (“Analysis of discursive identities in the post-truth era. Generating audiovisual content for critical edu-communication (AIDEP)”) (code 18I390.01/1), directed by Javier Marzal Felici and financed by the Universitat Jaume I through a competitive selection process for UJI research projects for the period 2019-2021

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