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## A Multilevel Analysis of the representations of Technology in *Years and Years*

**Abstract**

The analysis of science fiction narratives is valuable to explore possible futures. This article analyzes the representation of technology in the television series *Years and Years* (2019), a co-production by the BBC and HBO created by Russell T Davies. This audiovisual narrative depicts key problems of the present in a representation of the near future, enabling the identification of new socio-technological paradigms. We applied the method of Causal Layered Analysis (CLA), a prospective analytical tool used both for the study of diverse current phenomena and for the design of possible futures, which includes the levels of the litany, systemic causes, discourse/world vision, and myth/metaphor. The analysis showed that *Years and Years* offers a vision of a world in chaos, based on a global capitalist and technological project that threatens fundamental rights, and the existence of the human species. In the series, technologies are imbibed in all the fundamental systems of Western societies, pushing common people into obsolescence. Three narratives uphold the myth of the dominion of science and technology: the technological transcendence of human beings, the irrelevance of humans before technology, and the ubiquitous panopticon of digitized power. Through its bleak version of the future *Y&Y* puts into focus aspects of technological development that make us reflect critically and urgently about the present.

**Keywords**

**Representations of technology, television series, science fiction, Causal Layered Analysis, visions of the future.**

### 1. Introduction

Science fiction narratives can offer explanations and speculations about a present that engenders uncertain futures. The *MIT Technology Review* publishes every year the ten most influential technological achievements. In 2018, year in which the series *Years and Years* was produced, this journal highlighted technologies concerning the genetic prediction of diseases, artificial embryos, smart and sensitive cities, improvements in digital privacy, fighting neural networks, clean energies, 3D printing in metals, instantaneous translation, artificial intelligence in the cloud, and quantum technology. In the same year, the book *Homo Deus* by Yuval Noah Harari (2018), surmised that the “next objectives of humanity [would be] immortality, happiness [and] divinity. [The goal is] to overcome old age and even death” (p. 34).

The landscapes drawn by *The MIT Technological Review* and Harari's book commune with science fiction narratives from the mass media, in which humans are not only able to travel into space but also to interact with intelligent robots, and eventually transcend death. Even though the human brain distinguishes reality from fiction, such science fiction narratives question the convictions we have about reality outside its immediate truthfulness and reveal latent aspects of social life. In *Homo Sapiens* (2017), Harari states that power is not only exerted with the truth, but also through the ability to manipulate beliefs by creating myths. In other words, narrative is a powerful articulator of myths and a generator of symbolic universes.

According to Sparkes and Devís (2007), narrative constitutes an ontological condition of social life, and the human being is an essentially narrative species, that tells and listens to stories. Through them, human beings create meaning and experience the world, to the point that these authors assert that narratives are co-built cultural resources.

Be them real or fictional, narratives can be analyzed to identify the meanings that circulate in any given culture, because they offer keys to understand the present and build the future (Hirschman *et al.*, 2018). In particular, science fiction stories are valuable to explore possible futures because, beyond the classical tropes of the genre (i.e., robots, androids, interstellar travel, alien creatures, alternative universes, etc.), they offer *novum* and cognitive estrangement –which interpellate us in the double game of recognizing something that at the same time is strange to us (Suvin, 1972).

Scholars in the field of cinema studies have noted that films from popular genres stage the most urgent cultural dilemmas (Schatz, 1981), while Imbert (2006) points out that “television is without a doubt, within the discourses of modernity, the one that gathers with the most density the different floating discourses that reflect the evolution of the collective feeling” (p. 125). In this line of thought, science fiction stories would discuss those dilemmas connected to the imagined future of the society that engenders them. Science fiction as a genre promotes critical thinking, creativity, and curiosity; hence, it is possible to use it as a point of departure to analyze the present social order by glancing into possible futures.

This academic exercise has been commonly done in the past but even if the offer of science fictions narratives is copious, the titles that offer a grounded representation of trends for the futures are still a few. Among them stands the television program that we chose as a case study, the British limited series *Years and Years* (2019).

In the contemporary offer of science fiction, television series are key texts. With their extended and strongly serialized narratives, they have the necessary latitude to show events that take place in long periods, allowing them to describe rich imagined futures. The complexity of contemporary series (Mittell, 2015) opens the possibility of building stories with a wider variety of characters and multiple narrative arcs, organized in complex plots. This trait is advantageous for the worldbuilding in which science fiction excels.

In recent years the genre has created relevant titles like *Black Mirror* (2011), which offers a dark vision of the evolution of existent technologies (Gandasegui, 2014). In this same line of thought, *Years and Years* aims to understand the current world by showing the eventualities of the future through new socio-technological paradigms.

*Years and Years* (*Y&Y*) is a British mini-series premiered in 2019, created by Russell T Davies. Co-produced by the BBC and HBO, it had a mixed reception from the specialized critics (Anderson, 2019; Miller, 2019). Because of its self-contained narrative, the involvement of respected producers and performers, as well as its reliance on complex contemporary themes, it can be considered an instance of prestige television, as defined by van Arendonk (2017).

By combining science fiction and drama, *Y&Y* tells the story of the Lyons family for 15 years, from 2019 to 2034. The series shows a dystopian future in which the problems that Western societies are currently facing worsen progressively, in part because of the invasive presence of technology in all aspects of life.

The author behind *Y&Y* is Russell T Davies, a British television producer that has acquired an almost legendary status. In the early 2000 he created *Queer as Folk*, a television show that became a milestone for the representation of the LGBTQ+ community. Later, in 2005, he relaunched the science fiction series *Doctor Who*, which was received with enthusiasm by both the public and the critics. In recent years, Davies has written and produced the acclaimed *A Very English Scandal* (2018), and *It's a Sin* (2021), a series that deals with the HIV/AIDS crisis in the UK during the 1980s.

Davies is a public figure in his country, who has promoted the positive representation of gay characters on television throughout his career. In interviews concerning his most recent projects, he has been vocal against Social Conservatism, Brexit and the right-wing populism of figures such as Boris Johnson (Turchiano, 2019). The ethical and political points of view of Davies are clearly present in *Y&Y*, becoming the backbone of the story. Furthermore, he has admitted making political points on television by bringing them “into the kitchen” and “back to the family every time” (Lewis, 2018). This seems to be also the case for this mini-series.

Focusing alternatively on the vicissitudes of various family members of different generations, the show displays a great diversity of identities in terms of gender, race, social class, and political standing. By centering on a family, the program provides enough space for romance, teenage angst, sadness, and humor. This quality of closeness to daily life also explains its emotional strength, which fosters the identification with the characters.

A first glance to the series reveals that the narrative of *Y&Y* was built as a complex tissue that interlaces the characters stories, since every member of the Lyons family stars in one or two narrative lines. This complexity articulates the intimacy of the family drama with the wider repercussions of the worldwide events. Thus, the nuclear menace is experimented within the family, the same that the consequences of global warming and populism, creating an effect of proximity closer to real life.

*Y&Y* presents a convincing vision of many of the tendencies that currently shape modern societies (Horvat, 2020; Sorolla-Romero, 2021), like the rise of populism, illegal immigration, the increase in surveillance (Brown & Toh, 2021), the economic crisis, the deterioration of the environment, and the loss of jobs in professions that are being automated due to Artificial Intelligence (AI) (Kelly, 2020). It also displays the seduction of images that overfills the hungry glance of the spectator for the cruelty represented in the apocalyptic events shown in each episode of the series, which, “built on the foundations of a cinema of mainstream cruelty, seems to be the expression of pornography of horror and violence” (Fernández-Rodríguez & Romero-Rodríguez, 2021, p. 215).

Premiered in 2019, *Y&Y* also hinted at the imminent emergence of a pandemic, although in fairness it could not foresee all the global implications that this would bring. In other words, the series is clearly not an oracle but a very well researched narrative essay about the trends of today that could have a foreseeable impact in the next years. Besides, its capacity to offer speculations about the spatial and chronological coordinates of a realistic present, makes it a pertinent corpus for analysis, even when it is a production from three years ago.

Media representations of the future can be not only descriptive, but prescriptive as well (Urry, 2016). The series case study reflects on a variety of phenomena linked to the presence of technologies that affect our lives in the present and that, without a doubt, will continue to do so in the coming years. Therefore, the visions of technology that this series puts in display are worth analyzing. This aspect is the focus of our research.

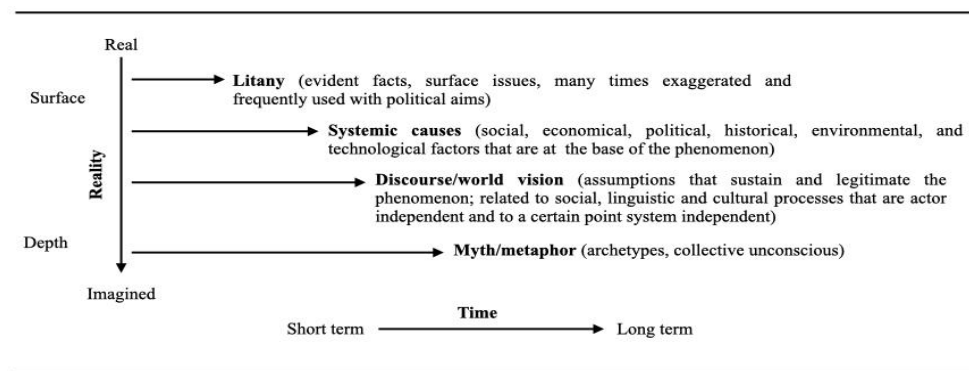
The guiding question is: How are technologies represented in the images of the future proposed by the series *Years and Years*? To provide an answer, we applied a methodology coming from the field of future studies, characterized by its rigorous pursue of insights regarding issues of current relevance and by its focus on narrative learning (Inayatullah, 2013).

## 2. CLA: a multilevel method for analysis

This project is located within the hermeneutical paradigm because it interprets an audiovisual narrative through Causal Layered Analysis (Inayatullah, 2004). Also known as CLA, the Causal Layered Analysis is a prospective analytical method used both for the study of diverse current phenomena and for the design of possible futures. It is commonly used for organizations to envision and create transformative change (Inayatullah, 2013), because it aims to rethink the underlying narrative of a situation.

The CLA methodology implies examining the main aspects of a given issue, placing them into four levels. These are organized in such a way that they go from the superficial to the profound, from the real to the imagined, and from the explicit to the implicit. The levels are organized according to the time span that would be necessary to promote changes in each of them (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** Causal Layered Analysis.



Source: Own elaboration based on Inayatullah (2004; 2013).

CLA has been used to analyze issues in fields like transportation, education, hospitality for disabled people, diplomacy, the future of organizations, among others (Inayatullah, 2004). Following the four levels, the analyst can scrutinize a concept or phenomenon, making its assumptions visible, and ultimately revealing the myths and metaphors that sustain it in the collective unconscious of a community. The phenomenon is deconstructed in such a way that the given –those notions accepted without question in the day to day–, is revealed and exposed, arriving up to the narrative level, the level of the shared myths. It is this quality that makes the CLA attractive to the analysis of media representations of the future, as the ones proposed by Y&Y.

CLA has been already used for the analysis of television series; in particular, the article by Izgarjan and Djurić (2016) about the metaphors of the future in the British drama *Spooks* (2002–2011) was useful to adjust the use of the method to the specificities of an audiovisual narrative. These authors recognize the difficulty of CLA for the interpretation of television; however, they consider valuable its cultural and interpretive approach of the future because it calls for an interpretation anchored in the historical contexts of the narrative itself. In this sense, narratives would not only be part of reality but also modelers and metaphors of it.

The analytical work for this article began by creating a database to describe every narrative sequence contained in the six episodes of the series. The main objective of this first phase was to identify those narrative lines where digital technologies played a primordial role. Each analyst identified the lines separately, comparing them in a second moment. Afterwards, we conducted a second phase of analysis to discuss those aspects where technology was central, placing them on each level of the CLA. The results are presented in the next section.

### 3. Technological visions in *Years and Years*

The analysis of the narrative lines focused on technology yielded the results summarized in Table 1, which are described in detail in the following subsections.

**Table 1.** Futures of technology in *Years and Years*.

Litany	Technology disrupts people's lives.
Systemic causes	Technology becomes a transversal element in all social systems.
Discourse / Worldvision	Persistence of the Western vision and nationalist discourses, global upsurge of the neoliberal model, technologization.
Myth / Metaphor	The dominion of science and technology.

Source: Own elaboration.

#### 3.1. *Litany*

In *Y&Y* technology is a factor that disrupts the life of people; this is, it changes it in unexpected directions, not necessarily negative. It is an element that fosters the emergence of new challenges, but also offers new possibilities.

In the first episodes, the series shows the presence of technology in daily scenarios, integrated into everyday practices. The characters use it for working, buying, talking to their families, and entertaining themselves, just as we viewers do. In fact, the strength that *Y&Y* obtains in its representation comes in good measure from a depiction of daily life that is very similar to ours. Even more so now, after the push that the COVID-19 pandemic gave to all forms of mediated social interaction. For example, in the first episode, we see Daniel's husband behaving as a cellphone addict, who gets carried away with all the conspiratorial theories that circulate in social network sites. He arrives to the point of doubting the existence of germs, or the fact that the Earth is round.

In fact, the issue of fake news is an important thread in the narrative of *Y&Y*. The series' portrayal of this topic is critical, and it shows the rising tendency for anti-scientific, conspiratorial, and hateful disinformation that has been documented by activists in the last few years (Avaaz, 2021). The argument is that advances in AI improve the realism of these hoaxes, but *Y&Y* also makes evident that technology is not the main variable. The depiction of fake news in the series reveals the uncertainty that affects citizens, not only because they doubt the manifest information but also the latent intention. *Y&Y* shows that the virulence of fake news would not be possible without the distribution system of social network sites, the fear and satiety of a society faced with insecurity and instability, as well as the populist discourses of ignorant and unethical politicians, embodied in the character of Vivienne Rook. The combination of these factors generates a breeding ground that predisposes citizens to believe what they want to (desirability bias). As a result, uncertainty and social fear rise, not only because of the objective situation, but also because of the expansion of the post-truth, which becomes feasible through the diffusion of fake news through socio digital networks, and the governmental control of the media.

The narrative depicts technologies that we already use but it takes them to the extreme, just as *Black Mirror* did in its time. For instance, emojis are reimagined, embedded in holographic masks that teenagers use to cover their faces. Hence, emojis get out of the screens to superpose themselves to real faces, substituting all gestures connected to emotions. This is not only related to the economy of expression but, at a deeper level, it turns itself into the masks behind which insecurity stays hidden. There are emojis for all kinds of emotion, which makes the expression homogeneous; this is, the emoji fixates the gesture associated to the

specific feeling; therefore, standardizing users' reactions. We are introduced then to the massive use of a predetermined set of caricaturized gestures, emptied of any relevant meaning.

*Y&Y* also illustrates the desire of pausing the vertiginous way of innovation. In one scene grandmother Muriel, the character that represents the oldest generation, rescues from the attic her personal assistant Signor –emulator of our Alexa– which is a concrete device and not an invisible entity connected to the walls –Internet of Things. For Muriel, the Signor 1.0 does not represent the nostalgia of vintage technology, but the need for the referentiality of the concrete and the need for company. “It is my little friend,” she says. Here, the series illustrates the use of technological devices that accompany the elder, given the changes in family lifestyle. In subsequent episodes, the representation of technology departs further away from our daily life, embodying tendencies that already exist in laboratories, but have not yet become commercially viable products. The show presents self-driving cars, bionic implants, food grown in laboratories, passports with biometrical identifications, holographic videoconference, and quantic security systems. In all cases, from the naturalized techno practices of our time to the elucubrations of the future, technologies in *Y&Y* are shown as an element that individuals have adopted gladly but somehow unconsciously, with no clear idea of how they can change their lives. At the same time, these technologies are depicted as indispensable components of all the systems of Western civilization.

### 3.2. Systemic causes

In this second level, the series reveals that technology is already imbricated in economy, education, health, commerce, science, etc.; this is, it undercuts the different social systems, constituting a digital environment (Bayne *et al.*, 2020). In *Y&Y*, technology can be freeing and dangerous, controlling and facilitating. This depends on the uses that the institutions that model social life would put them to. In this fiction, such institutions are in turn backed and sustained by the structure of capitalism, which expresses itself in all fields of social life, from geopolitics to organized crime. In the face of such institutions, families and individuals discover themselves impotent (Rifkin, 2000, p. 161).

Systems theory notes that the systemic is not only a comprehensive but also an ontological logic, which means that “the system is not only a set of logical descriptive rules, but that what we meet out there, in reality, is systems and not objects” (Jiliberto, 2003, par. 1). Therefore, the vision of the systemic in the CLA methodology allow us to see that the life of the characters in the series bends down in front of national and global forces. For example, Daniel, being a middle class educated bureaucrat, shows a certain agency to outwit the ever more asphyxiating immigration laws, to save from exclusion his partner Viktor, who is a homosexual refugee. But even then, Daniel faces the power of, and is ultimately defeated by, these clearly articulated systems.

In the series we can see crisis of all kinds. One of the most impressive ones takes place in the second episode, when a bank collapse and ruins several of the protagonists. This crisis bears witness to the ephemerality of money in the era of digital technology and highlights how vulnerable individuals are in front of this global interconnected system. In *Y&Y*, the financial crisis is followed by a political one, with the upsurge of xenophobic and classist populism, which is displayed in the erection of borders, both external (between nations) and internal (among social classes). Populist politicians, like Vivienne Rook, use computer generated imagery to create fake news that, at the visual level, are indistinguishable from the real ones. In addition, they establish surveillance programs that, in practical terms, leave no space for privacy.

Even when the series questions the foreseeable tendencies in technological development, and a few aspects of the global capitalistic system, it does not offer any alternative system. In

fact, its narrative resolution offers a return to a state of equilibrium that looks suspiciously like our present of deceptive freedoms in a context of ever-growing inequality.

*Y&Y* underlines the permanence and strength of the family systems as a last refuge of enjoyment and freedom for people. The familial is the space where individuals still exert a certain control over their lives, where they can sooth their fears and feel accompanied. But, as it has been noted, this realm is also crisscrossed by the daily presence of digital technologies.

### 3.3. *Discourse/World view*

Set in contemporary Great Britain, *Y&Y* has a clearly Western point of view. In episode six, Muriel, the family matriarch, scolds the family with a speech in which she remembers the optimism of the turn of the 21st century and says with irony: “Well done, the West!” We made it!” That West she is talking about, powerful and developed, is the place from where the series enunciates its visions of the future. It is the Great Britain before the COVID-19 pandemic, which was still processing Brexit, questioning the international policy of Donald Trump in the United States, and debating the issue of the immigration that would not stop arriving to its coasts.

*Y&Y* shows the cultural dilemmas of the British nation, which does not question its constitutional monarchy at any time –in fact, in the first episode the series alludes the future death of Elizabeth II and the rise of her successor–, but which exposes the weaknesses of a political system infiltrated by xenophobic populism. Thus, the series offers the point of view of a developed nation, colonial power, part of the global North, a crucial node in the international financial network, and a common destination for immigrants from around the world. The topics debated in the series belong to the United Kingdom but also, clearly, they touch several global concerns.

In the series there is ample use of a narrative device that consists of presenting fragments of fictional newscasts from the BBC. Through these montages, *Y&Y* offers a vision of the future in which the neoliberal system grows in strength. Consequently, there is a steady rise in international conflicts caused by commercial disputes, particularly those between China and the United States. Inequalities, exclusions, and the reduction of the middle class worsen, as a byproduct of the unemployment generated by the economical breakdown, and the further disappearance of jobs because of automatization.

National borders close in response to increasing immigration and endless waves of refugees, escaping from the poverty and violence present in all continents, including a fractured European Union that faces eruptions of political and religious conservatism.

The contradiction between the local and the global is enacted continually throughout the series, and in all instances, technology is at the center of the debate. This becomes apparent in a scene in which a populist politician raises the flag of luddism to win easy votes. Vivienne Rook dazzles the audience in a debate by showing the blink, a device that blocks all digital devices in a 30-meter range. At that moment, Rook positions herself as a defender of parents’ right to unplug their kids to protect them from pornography, and promises to put in jail the directors of the big American tech companies that make this possible. This anti-technological position is deceitful, since Rook would later use the blink as a tool in the “Erstwhile” concentration camps that the State sets up to control –through “natural selection”– the raise in the numbers of refugees coming to the UK from impoverished countries facing war or living under authoritarian regimes.

In *Y&Y*, technology seems unstoppable. The series illustrates how the speed of technological developments in medicine, food industry and transhumanism, generate a sensation of uncertainty, and the danger of obsolescence of the human being. In summary, the underlying vision of *Y&Y* is that of a world that agonizes from the expansion of global neoliberalism and technologization, in which the nations have not yet implemented joint

alternatives for well-being and social justice, and in which people stay relegated to the sudden changes of a world system characterized by growing precariousness.

### 3.4. Metaphor/Myth

In the CLA the fourth, and deepest, level pertains the collective unconscious, the realm of the imagined stories that serve as blueprints for our lives in society. These take the form of metaphors or archetypes that can be expressed in simple terms, but which sustains more complex narratives. In our analysis of *Y&Y*, the underlying metaphor is that science and technology are tools for humans to rule the Earth, control reality, and eventually conquer the future. This metaphor is at the base of a Western myth that could be titled “the dominion of science and technology.”

*Y&Y* offers the vision of a technologized world that asphyxiates the human condition as we know it. It does so by representing three manifestations of the myth: (a) the transcendence of the human being beyond the moral, (b) the irrelevance of humanity in the face of technology, and (c) the ubiquitous panopticon of power. These narratives constitute mechanisms of reproduction of the status quo, and they show voids of meaning regarding the emergence of complex socio technical realities, which need to be thoroughly discussed.

#### 3.4.1. The technological transcendence of human beings

The belief that human beings move forward toward stages of perfection, plenty or evolution can be traced back to ancient mythologies, in the different religious world visions, and even in the Darwinist perspective. Nietzsche (1891/2015), from a moral and antireligious point of view, assumes that the human being is imperfect but he can reach his maximum potential once he “kills God” and moves on from the lack of liberty (stage of the camel), to a uprising against this lack of liberty (stage of the lion), and arrives to the stage of the child where, with full consciousness, he has an all-new world to know and build. Even when none of these narratives is supported on technology, but on the moral, we consider that they constitute the substratum of the Western imaginary of the human transcendence that supports the postmodern myth of transhumanism.

According to Antonio Diéguez (2017) for those scientists who work towards the improvement of the human being through Artificial Intelligence, biotechnology and nanotechnology, sickness, aging and death are evitable: they are biological errors that can be corrected. This of course brings an ethical and political rethinking fundamental for current society, which is questioned in the fictional narrative of *Y&Y*.

Transhumanism is a cross-cutting topic that affects several characters through the series, but which is embodied primarily in the character of the teenager Bethany. From the first episode Bethany confesses to her parents that she is “trans.” At first, they encourage her, thinking that it was a question of gender, but they become horrified when Bethany explains that in fact she is not at ease in her body and, therefore, she wishes to abandon it to become data: she wishes to become “transhuman.” A reviewer of the series described it as follows: “The scene is simultaneously funny and horrifying; Bethany isn’t merely a young woman who spends too much time with her smartphone, she actually wants to be a smartphone” (Skal, 2019, p. 191).

The adolescent rejection of her own body is used as a point of departure to illustrate the wishes of the youngest generations to converge with technological devices. If nowadays smart phones are perceived as body extensions, in *Y&Y* we can see them literally integrating into the fingers and ears of the users. Later in the series, Bethany gets implants in hands, eyes, and brain, becoming even more fused with technologies and submerging herself into the Internet. For her, the body is a ballast from which she would like to scape. But, ironically, at the end of the narrative it is not Bethany who makes the transition to data, but her aunt Edith, who is dying because of the radiation she absorbed in an atomic explosion. It is Edith, then, who becomes the pioneer by transferring her consciousness.



Gottschall (2013) reminds us that all human tales have a moral intention. This becomes clear in the way in which *Y&Y* condemns, punishes, criticizes, and looks with suspicion at Bethany's attempts to get rid of her young body, while it embraces Edith's solution, because her sick body cannot continue living. According to *Y&Y*, if the healthy body is discarded, becoming data is a sin. If the digital realm offers an alternative after the body stops functioning, then it is a blessing.

Hence, the narrative line of transhumanism in *Y&Y* starts with the desire to reject the body, then it shows the steps of a human-technological synthesis that takes the form of ever more powerful implants, until arriving to the possibility of salvation when the body stops functioning. As viewers, we pass from rejection to hope. At the beginning we share Bethany's parents' horror in front of the possibility that her daughter will become "trans;" at the end, we join the family to celebrate Edith's transhuman consciousness.

The myth of the dominion of science and technology manifests here as transcendence. *Y&Y* asks: "what are we and where are we going?". Becoming data is the final –but not definitive– answer offered by the series. In the last scene, Edith's memories are transferred to water molecules, hoping that her consciousness will remain. Grandmother Muriel says the phrase that closes the whole narrative: "Edith, is that you?". The question, that could seem banal, has a deeper connotation: what is at play is identity, the permanence of consciousness once one has mutated to a non-biological entity.

### 3.4.2. The irrelevance of humans in front of technology

In opposition to the transcendent becoming of the human being thanks to the intervention of technology, there is the danger of obsolescence. This is represented in *Y&Y* with the transversal and naturalized installation of technology in the different social systems of the world, a fact that becomes responsible for the new inequities and the upsurge of the already existing ones.

For example, innovation in biotechnology –which could cure sickness, erase aging, and annihilate death– does not improve the wellbeing of the general population. In episode five, Bethany performs an online eye exam to Muriel, which shows a definitive macular degeneration of 96%. The access to these "do-it-yourself" diagnosis tools, seems to promise the long-awaited democratization of health; however, the treatment for the total and expedite cure of this malady would cost everything that Muriel has saved during her lifetime: her inheritance to her grandchildren. If she decides to get the surgery through the public health system, she will have to wait in a very long list and, at her age, death may arrive earlier than her turn for surgery. This is the same logic that also pushes Bethany to enlist in the government offers for technological implants, because she does not have enough funds to cover a series of costly operations. The technological divide implies that only those that have the economic resources could have access to health and the improvement of capabilities. It is a divide associated to social cleansing, where the poor become excluded, obsolete, and disposed of.

The series also represents the emergence of a useless class caused by the escalate of automatization in work posts. Practically all the characters with traditional jobs in gastronomy, bookkeeping and services lose them in the turn of the following 15 years, becoming in practical terms less and less relevant.

In fact, in *Y&Y* the characters experiment the technological advances as if they were marionettes instead of actors, trapped in a society where technology keeps moving forward in an unstoppable way, regardless of the nations' social, environmental, or political problems. The victims are the citizens, who watch how artificial intelligence and automatization eliminate millions of qualified jobs, while governments only make empty promises because, when faced with such structural changes in the economy, they become paralyzed and let the welfare state erode.

### 3.4.3. The ubiquitous panopticon of digitized power

Foucault offered to the field of social analysis one of the most powerful metaphors about control. The panopticon as the sentinel lighthouse in prisons –from Jeremy Bentham (prior to Foucault), to the Big Brother of George Orwell, and the vigilant eye of Sauron from J. R. R. Tolkien– they all recur to the idea of the external and all-knowing central point that sees all and controls all. This image matches the imaginary of authority –with God at the top, the king or governor, the *pater familias*, the chief– that traditional society assumes as a condition of order.

However, in informational societies new strategies of distributed and invisible control are identified (Carracedo, 2002). As civilization moves forward, ever more sophisticated forms of vigilance and submission emerge, from the exercise of physical force, passing through economical persuasion, the installation of fear, the internalizing of social norms and values, up to the use of algorithms and biometric data.

In *Y&Y* the metaphor of the panopticon of power finds its place in the ubiquity of every surveillance camera, cellphone, and digital device that the characters use or are exposed to. This form of control emulates the surveying glance that sees without being seen of Foucault's panopticon but it is more penetrating and, therefore, more dangerous because it is multiplied and personalized. The panopticon in *Y&Y* not only observes the hyperconnected mass but looks at the individual that carries and uses technology in voluntary, personalized, and continuous form and, hence, leaves a digital trace of what he does, what he wants and who he is.

Besides, the series considers a second level of surveillance: the biometrical one. The devices of control shown in *Y&Y* are breath scanners, chips located under the skin, connections and applications integrated into the body. Therefore, control is located in the sensors implanted in Bethany's fingers that allow her calling without the need of a cellphone; it is also in the microchip integrated into her brain, which allow her to log into the network like any other terminal. When Celeste, Bethany's mother, understands that her daughter is just like any other terminal, she realizes that it is possible to hack her and "read her thoughts."

The biometric control is possible, and highly effective, because it is based on the biological footprint that reveals the vulnerability of the subject; because her heartbeat, blood pressure, breath and adrenalin levels are the ones speaking. The consciousness of the subject cannot avoid the functioning of the organic machinery.

In the series, the metaphor of power is also manifested in the mechanisms of control that the State deploys, through the police force in the streets, in the regulation of de facto powers (the media), and in the urban control to segregate potentially dangerous neighborhoods (poor, delinquent and non-conformist) by raising barriers that will lock them down and exclude them –even temporarily– from the city. Besides, the series unveils the potential to generate surveillance and espionage soldiers, by paying the surgeries for the improvement of human capacities and the integration of technology into young people that wish to transcend their bodies.

In *Y&Y* the control is not only exerted by the State or Big Business to guard the social order or economic interests. Those same citizens literate in digital novelties engage in surveillance practices too. In this way, the public discourse of surveillance is diffused as the fractal of a hologram, until it also invades the private spaces.

In the series, control is a manifestation of the myth of the dominion of science and technology, present at all levels of society and deployed through several mechanisms; nevertheless, it is also clear that those mechanisms actioned through IA and biotechnology, permit a higher level of efficiency and refinement than ever before in history.

#### 4. Discussion and conclusions

*Years and Years* has been controversial since it launched back in 2019, being called overwhelming (Poniewozik, 2019), terrifying (MacInnes, 2019), an example of cinema of cruelty (Fernández-Rodríguez & Romero-Rodríguez, 2021), and even hailed as “the worst show to watch” during the COVID-19 pandemic (Delaney, 2020). The reason behind that last assertion is its accuracy in the portrayal of the contemporary trends that could shape the proximate future, primarily for Great Britain, but also for other regions of the world.

The CLA methodology was pertinent for this study for two aspects; on the one hand, to identify in the series the narratives about technology that interpret the contemporary world, because, as Finol (2006) sustains, they constitute mythical tales that “are the hyperbolic expression of deep structures of collective thought, that although they are not universal, as it was once intended... [create] a cognitive map that serves as an orientation in the midst of the unattainable chaos” (p. 15).

On the other hand, the CLA made the interpretation process transparent, under penalty of being overly descriptive in the first levels of analysis. Nevertheless, close to a thick description (Geertz, 1989), the CLA gave an account of the narrative threads that weave some of the myths that give meaning to contemporary Western culture present in the series *Y&Y*, allowing the conclusion that the three narratives about technology, that of transcendence, obsolescence, and the desire for control, all share the same matrix of meaning: the dominion of science and technology.

This narrative matrix, which emerged in the Eighteenth Century fed by the epistemology of ancient Greek culture (Gribbin, 2003; Harari, 2018; Vallejo, 2019), confronted and even displaced the magical-religious thought in some spheres – even though such worldviews coexist symbiotically in other narratives –, offering new explanations to ancestral human longings and fears. The scientific-technical rationality present in fiction has extended and strengthened in the past decades because the medical, technological, and general scientific advances are making feasible the desires of transcendence and control over reality (Mateos-Aparicio, 2020); therefore, the narratives of transhumanism, the substitution of human force, dexterity and intelligence, as well as the implantation of the surveillance society (Brown & Toh, 2021; Carracedo, 2002) remain in the human imaginary but its explanation is contextualized from the scientific and technical possibility.

According to Hirschman *et al.* (2018), the best science fiction is that which makes us question reality by showing us its contradictions and possibilities. *Y&Y* fulfills this criterion. Its strength resides in the fact that its narrative is nurtured from referents very close to our current reality, in such a way that we feel a chill when it illustrates problems that we see in the daily news with real actors and events –for example, the commercial wars between China and the United States, the unhinged behavior of Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin, the War in Ukraine, the economic crisis, or the emergence of a flu pandemic–. This narrative formula is effective because not only does it attract the public because of its verisimilitude –fictional level–, but also because of its speculative realism.

A complex narrative such as *Y&Y* can be analyzed from many angles. For example, its vision of the future regarding international politics and climate change is also very pertinent. The focus of the analysis developed in this article is technology, an issue that is pervasive and global in reach. Through the application of the CLA methodology, it was possible to delve into the deepest assumptions of a fictional representation in whose “visual collective imagination [...] we recognise wounds, social conflicts and cultural malaise from our own present” (Sorolla-Romero, 2021, p. 293).

It is worth interrogating television series because all narratives function as real-life simulations of possible problematic situations that would test our survival abilities. Narratives give us the chance to experiment vicariously what characters feel. Therefore, stories have also

a moral function, because when they show us the possibilities, they take a stand and force us to reflect on our own positions (Gottschall, 2013). Hence, the spectators of *Y&Y* can imagine ourselves dealing with the difficulties that technology will bring us when AI erases hundreds of jobs, when most of our food will be created in laboratories and when, at last, leaving behind our biological body, we will have the possibility of transferring our consciousness to continue existing.

Hirschman *et al.* (2018) assert that while science fiction offers us metaphors and alternative stories, sociology takes this contrafactual to understand the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, but also to propose our place in the world. In this comprehensive logic, the narrative of *Y&Y* alert us of a chaotic world and the advancement of a global techno-economical project where social justice and the survival of the human species are at risk. These topics should be in the arena of social discussion, not only among the designers of public policy but also in the realm of citizenship.

Science fiction narrative has a role that is not only reflexive but also creative of possible futures. In this sense, *Y&Y* is a good opportunity to analyze the social and ethical costs for the loss of the rights for survival and self-determination, for the discard of biological bodies, and the gap between the rich and the poor that technology is bringing.

These are neither fantasies, nor feasible but faraway possibilities; these are issues already in the agendas of international organisms and at the center of scientific and technological research and innovation.

Ultimately, through its bleak version of the future *Y&Y* puts into focus aspects of technological development that make us reflect critically and urgently about the present. With the help of methods like CLA, we cannot only identify the underlying narrative about this issue but also start thinking about alternatives to change it.

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