

## Preface

*Meta in Film and Television Series* grew out of my previous work on Quentin Tarantino. I realized that research on meta-phenomena had mainly been carried out in the fields of literature, drama and transmedia, and that film and television studies had pretty much taken for granted terms such as metacinema and metafilm, and had mainly focused on reflexivity, specific devices such as the mise en abyme, or on a genre like the movie about making movies. *Meta in Film and Television* thus seeks to remedy this lack by confronting the writings on the movie about making movies and reflexivity in film and television (most of which date back to the 1980s and early 1990s) to the seminal works carried out on metafiction in the 1980s and metareference in the 2000s. And though I recognize the value of transmedial approaches, I believe it is equally important to focus on the specificities of phenomena in a given medium. *Meta in Film and Television Series* also seeks to respond to the increasing presence of the term “meta” to designate films and series in the writings of fans and journalists. It assumes its timeliness by analyzing phenomena that have been circulating for years but that seem to have intensified and crossed over into the mainstream in the digital age, perhaps as a response to the audience’s increasing awareness of self-conscious works. The book’s main thread lies in this convergence between academic and popular discourses. The popular usage of “meta” points to a profoundly entangled set of practices and discourses, and suggests that audiences have somehow sensed this entanglement. It is the scholar’s job to untangle and make sense of it.

*Meta in Film and Television Series* is highly indebted to prior work on metafiction, metareference and reflexivity—the writings of Gérard Genette, Linda Hutcheon and Patricia Waugh, Christian Metz and Robert Stam, Werner Wolf and many others—and the preliminary theory of meta presented in Part I devolves from discussions of these important texts. The purpose of this book is not to invent new terms, and the only terms coined herein, metamoment (i.e., a moment that can be interpreted as meta) and hypermeta (i.e., works whose “meta-ness” is evident and overt), are fairly transparent. Rather, it aims to homogenize the existing terminology, clarify distinctions and gauge their overall relevance and usability to analyze meta. In this respect, my main

model in composing this book has been theorist Linda Hutcheon, whose theories of metafiction, parody, postmodernism, irony and adaptation were based on discussions of her predecessors' theoretical propositions. I do not believe that this book will fix these terms once and for all, but I do believe that clear definitions are a prerequisite to analysis, even if one ends up redefining them in the process.

This book is, above all, a study of a certain kind of analysis and interpretation. Meta supposes an interpretive act. And even when it is diegeticized, as has increasingly been the case since the 1990s, it makes demands on its audiences. Meta offers a framework with which to engage a given work and its relationship to its conditions of production and reception, its materials, and to its existence in the world. We are free to ignore this framework, just as we are free to interrogate its functions and intentionality. Although meta can very much be critical, it is always, at heart, a lesson in, and a celebration of, the powers of fiction and art, and of our own capacity for emotional and intellectual engagement. Contra the charge of narcissism and solipsism, I argue that meta is relevant because, by playfully inviting audiences to take on the role of hermeneutists, it develops sensibilities and skills that are relevant in our day-to-day lives. *Meta in Film and Television Series* is a book about making meaning; it recognizes that meaning-making is one of our key activities and pleasures as audiences and scholars. And if the risk of misinterpretation exists, meta-phenomena invite us to analyze works, see beyond the surface, and unravel and question the forms and discourses that energize them. The theory of meta-phenomena proposed in *Meta in Film and Television Series* aims to offer a methodology with which to interpret a certain quality in art and fiction—that is, how a work invites commentary on itself and its medium. My final theoretical propositions result, however, from the analysis of the works in Part II because meaning-making of this sort requires rigorous formal analysis.

The films and series studied herein range from the 1950s to the 2010s (silent cinema is only touched on in Chapter 3) and only include works that have been distributed through mainstream channels. Attention is paid in equal measure to art cinema and more popular fare (documentary and the avant-gardes are only broached in Chapter 3 and the Conclusion). Most chapters put the spotlight on several films and at least one series. *Meta in Film and Television Series* revisits some of the most obvious examples of movies about making movies, movies about movie-going and/or reflexivity in film, many of which have received critical attention (*Sunset Blvd.*, *Rear Window*, *Contempt*, *Blow-up*, *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, *Scream*, *Funny Games*, *Mulholland Dr.*, *Adaptation*, the films of Jean-Luc Godard). But attention is also paid to less obvious examples (*Fellini Roma* compared to *8½* or *Intervista*, *JFK* compared to *Natural Born Killers*) and to works that have received less critical attention (*My Name*

*Is Nobody*, *Family Viewing*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *American Splendor*, *Inherent Vice*, the films of Pablo Larraín). The book also aims to demonstrate that meta is present in realist works such as the films of Pedro Costa and Ken Loach. In the end, the corpus of films and series was the fruit of a constant negotiation between what seemed to be the most paradigmatic examples and my main areas of expertise (US-American and British cinemas), and thus my own limitations. This explains the presence of works by Jean-Luc Godard (which I had never previously studied), and of David Lynch and Steven Spielberg (which I had studied copiously) in several chapters. It also explains the lack of balance in Chapter 5, which does not focus on a twenty-first-century film or series because the most compelling examples were, to my mind, from the 1950s to the 1990s. Finally, it was easier to step out of my comfort zone for film than for series (those studied are exclusively US-American and British) because I am newer to the field of television studies and had less access to series other than those available on streaming platforms. Because of the breadth of the works explored herein, and even more so because *Meta in Film and Television Series* is ultimately a study of interpretation, my analyses rely on my own insights into the corpus while building on the critical writings devoted to them.

The book is divided into two uneven parts. The three chapters of Part I seek to propose a theoretical and historical framework by answering the basic questions posed by meta. My theoretical propositions emerge from the discussion and confrontation of key theoretical texts from film and television but also literary and media studies. The aim is to formulate a theoretical, historical and methodological framework for the analysis of meta-phenomena in film and series. Many of the observations made in this section remain relevant for the study of meta in other media.

Chapter 1 starts with a consideration of the circulation of the adjective “meta” in the popular media today, before attempting to define meta in light of existing definitions of reflexivity and various meta-phenomena; it concludes that meta can be defined as a high degree of reflexivity in which the work appears to comment on itself and/or its medium: it is characterized by its aboutness. Chapter 2 opens with a discussion of the typological approaches that have heretofore dominated studies of meta-phenomena; it is followed by a series of theoretical proposals that refine the definition proposed in Chapter 1: meta is playful interpretation. Chapter 3 presents a brief history of reflexivity and meta-phenomena before discussing specific points that are taken for granted in writings on the subject; tentative answers are provided based on existing research, but the aim of this chapter is, above all, to raise questions that will be broached in Part II and that will hopefully pave the way for historical-based research by other scholars.

The case studies of Part II are meant to be illustrative of the theoretical framework established in Part I, but it is also from these studies that a more definitive theory of meta will emerge in the Conclusion. The chapters explore the variety of concerns meta-works or -moments can address, moving from the facet of meta that has received the most critical attention—artistic creation in an industrial context and the movie-about-making-movies genre—to the main criticism that has been addressed to all things meta: their solipsism and lack of engagement with social and historical reality. The eight chapters can be organized into three groups: Chapters 4, 5 and 6 analyze films and series that focus on their conditions of creation, modes of reception, and medium and materiality; Chapters 7, 8 and 9 explore how such works engage with their hypotexts, architexts and format; and Chapters 10 and 11 how films and series can address their relationship with the real world both as subject matter and as a target for change. Of course, the cases studies will regularly spill out of the bounds the composition of this book imposes on them, one of my main arguments being that meta inevitably resists such neat categorization because the modes and concerns of meta-phenomena are as entangled as their devices.

Chapter 4 opens with a discussion of the movie about making movies. These films do more than explore the tension between economics, aesthetics and politics; they also reflect on the medium's properties and potential. Similar concerns traverse films and series that function on a more allegorical mode. Chapter 5 follows a similar trajectory as Chapter 4 by taking us from films portraying audiences to metaleptical fantasies of escaping or crossing over into the fictional world, to allegories of spectatorship. These works offer a multifarious view of spectatorship and movie audiences whose various activities and responses confirm, anticipate and counter theories and observations put forth by film scholars. They also reveal how a concern for spectatorship is intimately interweaved with a concern for creation, its materials and its relation to the world. Chapter 6 completes the study of meta from the perspective of the apparatus by focusing on the medium itself—that which connects the creator and the spectator (and thus Chapters 4 and 5). It also pursues two lines of inquiry raised in Chapter 3 by addressing the avant-age concern for the material properties of a given medium. This is often effected through what we now call intermediality or remediation, for instance by confronting film to other arts and media (architecture, painting, video, comics, Internet) to interrogate the ontology of moving pictures and its potential as a syncretic medium. Together, the three chapters demonstrate the entanglement of meta whose concerns regularly spill out of the boundaries of each chapter.

Chapters 7 and 8 both explore what Genette calls “metatextuality.” Chapter 7 focuses on instances where an adaptation or a remake engages

with its secondary nature, such metamoments often occurring in the opening scenes. It then returns to one of the questions raised in Chapter 3 concerning the influence of literature by assessing the quality of meta in adaptations of famous metafictional novels. Special attention is devoted to what adaptation scholars have recently called “metadaptations,” i.e., works that not only consistently engage with the question of adaptation but turn it into an allegory of life or film history. Chapter 8 shows how films and series can also assert their modes of engagement with a given genre in a programmatic fashion, indicating the degree to which a genre’s conventions will be subverted and/or its politics revised. It then tries to answer one of the questions raised in Chapter 2—is parody essentially meta?—through an analysis of three Western parodies. Finally, it examines how a surface concern for genre can actually serve as a framework for a more profound metadiscourse on the ethics of fiction. Focusing exclusively on series, Chapter 9 opens with an overview of the modes and functions of meta-phenomena. Eminently metanarrative and sometimes justified by industrial stakes, the discourse on seriality often takes the form of a motif that functions as a metaphorical *mise en abyme* of the work as a whole. Special attention is paid to how seriality can serve to build up and complexify meta in specific series. Together, Chapters 7, 8 and 9 demonstrate that formal concerns are frequently grounded in profound ethical questions.

Chapter 10 opens with a discussion of “historiographic metafiction,” a term coined by Hutcheon to describe works that interrogate “the epistemological and ontological relations between history and fiction.” It then seeks to answer a similar question regarding parody in Chapter 6, that is, whether an *allohistory* (i.e., alternate history) is always meta. Attention is paid to historical movies that address their role in our remembrance and understanding of history, notably through the use of (mock) archive footage, echoing the intermedial concerns explored in Chapter 6. Chapter 11 starts with a discussion of Stam’s study of the politics of reflexivity and Christopher Carter’s study of the materialist rhetoric of specific metafilms. Grounded in Jacques Rancière’s writings on the politics of aesthetics, the chapter then analyzes how meta can question the political efficacy of a given work or medium, that is, its capacity to change the world. Chapters 10 and 11 both contest the assumption (and criticism) that anything meta is fundamentally disconnected from real-world concerns, and pursue the conclusions of Chapters 7, 8 and 9 that meta involves ethical and political questions just as much as formal ones.

