Research Article

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Television Series as Critical Theories: From Current Identitarianism to Levinas. *American Crime, The Sinner, Sharp Objects, Unorthodox*

Abstract: Critical theory with emancipatory aims today to find a source of regeneration in ordinary cultures, and in particular, in TV series. Certain series can play a role in reinventing critical theories, drawing on the tradition of the Frankfurt School but shifting some of that School's formulations through contact with current forms of interpretive sociology and pragmatic sociology. This requires a cross-border dialogue between the "language game" of TV series and the "knowledge game" of political theory, to use concepts inspired by Ludwig Wittgenstein. In this article, I will focus on four series: seasons 1 of *American Crime* (2015) and *The Sinner* (2017); *Sharp Objects* (2018); and *Unorthodox* (2020). The resources provided by these cultural works can help us formulate a critical decoding of important aspects of the current ideological context, in particular, the intersecting identitarian and ultra-conservative tendencies we find in France, Europe, the United States, and Brazil. These critical resources bear affinities to a political philosophy of the opening of being inspired by the ethical reflections of Emmanuel Levinas.

Keywords: conservatism, critical theory, emancipation, Emmanuel Levinas, identities, Ludwig Wittgenstein, political theory, popular culture, social criticism, TV series

1 TV series, social critique, and emancipation

Today's ordinary cultures (songs, movies, detective novels, and television series) can serve as bases for the renewal of an emancipatory social critique with ethical and political components. TV series, because of how they resonate with people today, how they circulate within ordinary forms of sociability, and their capacity to take on the problems of the present,[1] can be at the forefront of this renewal. Not all works produced as part of ordinary cultures, nor all series, are good candidates for this effort, since these mass cultural forms may express conservative modalities of social critique, logics that justify orders of domination, hybrid forms between conservatism and emancipation, or simply overarching indifference *vis-à-vis* critique. However, those zones of mass culture that can serve as sites for an emancipatory social critique contradict the homogenizing disapproval of the products of "the culture industry" and their reception contained in the classical critical theory inaugurated by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno.[2] This disapproval, in

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[1] See Laugier, *Nos Vies en Séries*.
[2] See Adorno's and Horkheimer's famous chapter on "The Culture Industry," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 94–136.

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simplified form, went on to become a commonplace of leftist critiques of the Hollywood movie industry, television, and media in general. However, it is possible to go against that trend, and, once we have shed the lens of hypercriticism, to trace the paths of an emancipatory social critique in the ways in which series reflect the dreams and disappointments of ordinary life. I prefer the expression "ordinary cultures" to that of "popular cultures" because these cultures circulate within ordinary sociabilities.

Historically, social critique – that is, the decoding of the negative – has often been associated with the possibility of a positive, and with action that would make it possible to move toward it. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, the word "emancipation" gradually came to designate this positive, in particular in the wake of Immanuel Kant's description of *Aufklärung* as "man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity,"[3] at the crossroads of external constraints and subjective acceptance – at least tacit acceptance – of these constraints. Thus, a horizon of autonomy stands in contrast to "self-imposed immaturity." Today, the problem of emancipation must be situated in the wake of the socialist workers' movement, the feminist movement, the anti-racist movement, the anti-colonial movement, the gay rights movement, etc., and in connection to the resources of the modern social sciences that are available to it. Thus, we can think of emancipation as the process of leaving behind forms of domination in constructing individual and collective autonomy, which pre-supposes certain social conditions.

By making some shifts, the link between social critique and emancipation can continue to be thought in the tradition of the Frankfurt School.[4] However, this "first critical theory's" over-estimation of the power of "alienation" on the masses and its correlative underestimation of the capacities of the oppressed have tended to weaken its emancipatory element. But, today, in the early twenty-first century, the practical, symbolic, and cognitive aptitudes at play in ordinary activities have been re-evaluated by the social sciences, using the contributions of interpretive sociology (which takes seriously the meanings that social actors give to their actions, within the perspective inaugurated by Max Weber at the beginning of the twentieth century) and pragmatic sociology (which focuses on the capacities – and in particular, the critical capacities – that social actors mobilize in everyday life, in line with the work done by Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot in the late 1980s). This calls for a renewal of critical theories, an effort that a number of works have undertaken, including the trailblazing work of Luc Boltanski.[5]

The emancipatory social critique that moves through ordinary cultures in general and TV series in particular can enrich scholarly critical thought and can itself be considered a specific critical theory, in the sense in which Cavell speaks of "the thought of movies."[6] However, two clarifications must be made. First, reception studies within the social sciences have demonstrated the plurality of readings, or "decodings," to use Stuart Hall's expression,[7] that a single work can give rise to, on the basis of the receiver's social group, generation, cultural socialization, biographical particularities, and the situational context of reception. Thus, reading ordinary cultures as critical theories is but one possibility within the spaces of their reception. Secondly, the theory potentially borne by ordinary cultures is not of the same kind as scholarly theories, whether philosophical or sociological, because it belongs to the registers specific to ordinary cultures. These two points converge on a hypothesis: the critical theory that informs ordinary cultures can only appear *as* critical theory in the strict sense – that is, explicitly conceptualized – through a cross-border dialogue between the "language games" of ordinary cultures and the "knowledge games" of philosophy and the social sciences.

"The term 'language game' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of a language is part of an activity, or of a form of life," wrote Ludwig Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*.[8] The advantage of seeing cultural forms such as TV series as "language games" – rather than, in traditional idealist fashion, as ideas – is that then it becomes possible to shed light on the non-deterministic

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3 Kant, "An Answer to the Question."
4 See in particular Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory."
5 See Boltanski, *On Critique*.
6 Cavell, "The Thought of Movies."
7 Hall, *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse*.
8 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Part I, §23.

connections (to be "part of" does not mean to be "determined by" in a causal sense) between them and practices within configurations of social relations ("an activity" or a "form of life"). The biologist Henri Atlan drew on this notion of language games to create that of "knowledge games":[9] philosophy and sociology can be considered knowledge games insofar as knowledge plays a greater role in them than in other language games. Hence, we can consider the knowledge games of philosophy and sociology and the language games of ordinary cultures as autonomous registers, based on "forms of life" and "activity" that are in part particular to them, with differences between them that do not exclude variable zones of inter-section. The knowledge game I will foreground here is that of political theory as a branch of political science that explores the dialogue and tensions between the knowledge produced by political sociology regarding "what is," and the exploration of "what ought to be" and/or "what could be" that is proper to political philosophy as it was defined by Jean Leca in a seminal text of French political science.[10] Within political theory, I will be working more specifically within the field of critical political theory, where the academic framework of political theory and the emancipatory commitment of critical theory converge. The language games of movies and TV series, in distinction to those of novels, entail visual images, dialogue, sound, and mise-en-scene, while being based on a more classically literary narrative form: the screenplay, which of course has its own particularities, given that it is written with the intention of being turned into images. Cavell notes that the thought that is proper to works of cinema would seem impoverished if one were merely to re-transcribe "words of dialogue on the page," without taking them "from the page and [putting them] back, in memory, onto the screen."[11] In the language game of movies, as in that of TV series, theory involves more than just words. Critical thought is indeed expressed, but in a different manner within these two language games.

There are also specificities to the language game of TV series that distinguish it from that of movies. In particular: (1) the serial format, by virtue of the succession of episodes and seasons, opens up a specific narrative space as well as new possibilities for reception; (2) in terms of creation, in TV series, it is the "showrunner" who plays a central role in the practical and intellectual co-ordination of the work, taking over the role that the director has in cinema.

If we translate the critical thought we can find at work in the language game of TV series into the knowledge game of critical political theory, it can be reformulated *as* a critical theory in the habitual sense. It is through such a logic of translation, which displaces the meaning and usage (understood from the perspective of Wittgenstein's later philosophy) of critical theory, that TV series can enrich contemporary critical theory as it comes to grips with the intellectual and political stakes of the moment. Like other forms of ordinary cultures, but taking advantage of more narrative possibilities, TV series are thus likely to refine our critical tools. I will apply this approach to four series from the late 2010s and 2020 that tackle a very current political problem: identitarianism, in the sense of a closed identity of individuals and groups. Seasons 1 of *American Crime* (USA, 2015) and *The Sinner* (USA, 2017); *Sharp Objects* (USA, 2018); and *Unorthodox* (Germany, 2020) appear heuristic from this point of view, shedding light on complementary aspects. These four examples raise, in particular, the question of what Cavell called "the uncanniness" of "the familiar,"[12] in the confrontation with the problem of political theory that constitutes identitarianism. And they will make it possible to sketch emancipatory alternatives, endowed with affinities with the problematic of the opening of the being that Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy outlines. The reading that I will propose will not have any exhaustive aim, but will be filtered by the problematic marked out by the couple identitarianism/openness of the being. This encounter will both enrich the reformulation of eman-cipatory social critique within the framework of critical political theory as well as stimulate the sociological and philosophical imaginations.

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9 Atlan, *Enlightenment to Enlightenment*.
10 Leca, "La Théorie Politique," 61, 66 and 151.
11 Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 11.
12 Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 57.

2 Our time: Between ultraconservative tendencies, identitarian enclosures, and possible openings

My hypothesis is that, today, the classical aim of the emancipatory social critique that was established in the late eighteenth century and which has constituted one of the intellectual pillars of "the left" is being disrupted.[13] This is one of the least visible modalities of the current retreat of the left/right divide – which emerged out of the French Revolution and spread internationally over the course of the twentieth century – as a way of grasping the political space. The connections between social critique and emancipation have been stretched thin in both the academic and the political fields. In the academic field, the logic of hyper-specialized knowledge and the dominance of "axiological neutrality" – especially in France with the fall of Marxism in universities in the 1980s – have played important roles in this. Within the political field, the crises of the two major political forces that, at the global level, claimed to uphold the link between social critique and emancipation – that is, Communist parties and Social-Democrat parties – had decisive effects on the increasingly wobbly dyad. The former was confronted with the impasse of Stalinism, the latter with massive conversion to economic neo-liberalism beginning in the 1980s.

This trend toward a separation between social critique and emancipation within the academic and political fields today leaves more room for ultra-conservative forces to make use of critique in the public space. We see evidence of this in France and across Europe (especially in Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, Latvia, Norway, Slovakia, Switzerland, Italy, and Great Britain), and in other countries across the world (in particular in the United States, with the election of Donald Trump in 2016, and with the "Trumpism" that is likely to take hold in American politics after his defeat in 2020, and in Brazil with the election of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018). We can observe ideological configurations that combine hypercriticism and discrimination (xenophobia, sexism, homophobia, etc.) gaining increasing power within nationalist frameworks.[14] These configurations are filled with identitarianist tendencies: a political focus on viewing individuals and groups through the lens of a homogeneous and closed core identity. The rhetorical devices of conspiracy-theory-driven hypercriticism often serve as means for expressing ultraconservative and identitarian themes.

There are other modalities of association between authoritarianism (of varying degrees), conservatism, and identitarianism (nationalist and/or religious) that, differing greatly from European, American, and Brazilian ultraconservatism, constitute important political forces across the world: the various, more or less authoritarian forms of Islamic conservatism (from Iran's political regime and the Gulf monarchies to the softer forms of Islamism that dominate Morocco's government or participate in Tunisia's, by way of the increasingly repressive Islamism of Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey) and its more deadly variants (different forms of jihadism), the Hindu nationalists in power in India, the nationalist power embodied by Vladimir Putin in Russia, and the radicalized, right-wing, colonizing governments under the authority of Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel. The decades since the 1990s have also seen the stabilization of a socio-political configuration in China that combines unbridled capitalism, the authoritarian political power of a single party, and nationalist discourses.

Given the influence that forms of identitarianism currently have at the global scale, the horizon of individual and collective autonomy in overcoming domination can no longer suffice to characterize emancipation. One path to explore consists in re-evaluating individual particularity within a politics of emancipation. From a sociological point of view,[15] individuality is a unique site where a variety of social relations, belongings, and collective experiences intersect and hybridize; the historically and socially constituted oneness of the individual makes him or her irreducible to any one of these. But the West does not have a

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13 The following is a schematic and partial synthesis of my much longer analysis in Corcuff, *La Grande Confusion.*

14 See in particular the analyses of Amselle, *Les Nouveaux Rouges-bruns*; Boltanski and Esquerre, *Vers L'extrême*; Corcuff, *Les Années 30 Reviennent et la Gauche est Dans le Brouillard;* and Traverso, *Les Nouveaux Visages du Fascisme.*

15 For a sociological and relationalist approach to individuality, see Corcuff, "Figures de L'individualité, de Marx Aux Sociologies Contemporaines."

monopoly on individuality; other civilizations and societies (Asian, African, Muslim, etc.) have developed various figures of individual singularity, as an edited volume co-ordinated by the Japan specialist Emmanuel Lozerand has amply demonstrated.[16]

The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, whose work lies at the intersection of twentieth-century phenomenology and the Jewish tradition, provides us with tools we can use on the emancipatory path out of identitarian enclosures.[17] It is not a question here of proposing a systematic reading of Levinas's work, but of drawing from it a problematic of the openness of being constituting a support in the face of identitarianism. In this perspective, Levinas's understanding of ethical inspiration can thus be extended into politics. Levinas does not deny the weight of identity-based stabilizations, but contrasts them with the possibility of "departure from being" as a characteristic of the human condition. Over the course of his intellectual trajectory, this opening of being took at least three forms: escape, the caress, and the face of the other.

In an early text on "escape," dating from 1935, Levinas calls into question the identitarian tendencies of philosophies and politics of being:

> Being is: … this is precisely what one states when one speaks of the identity of being. Identity … expresses the sufficiency of the fact of being, whose absolute and definitive character no one, it seems, could place in doubt.[18]

He contrasts these tendencies with the possibility of "departing from being,"[19] a possibility that, in literature and cinema, is expressed through the theme of escape.

In a text published after the Second World War, Levinas explores the figure of the caress, which may be associated with a socio-historically prevalent Western understanding of a dominated "feminine" erotic that stands in contrast to the erotic of "grasping" and "possessing," which can be connected to a socio-historically prevalent representation of a "masculine" erotic. He writes:

> The seeking of the caress constitutes its essence by the fact that the caress does not know what it seeks. This "not knowing," this fundamental disorder, is the essential. It is like a game with something slipping away, a game absolutely without project or plan, not with what can become ours or us, but with something other, always other, always inaccessible, and always still to come (*à venir*). The caress is the anticipation of this pure future (*avenir*) without content. Can this relationship with the other through Eros be characterized as a failure? Once again, the answer is yes, if one adopts the terminology of current descriptions, if one wants to characterize the erotic by "grasping," "possessing," or "knowing." But there is nothing of all this, or the failure of all this, in eros. If one could possess, grasp, and know the other, it would not be other. Possessing, knowing, and grasping are synonyms of power.[20]

The *elsewhere* of the caress is infinite exploration, one that cannot stop at an ultimate realization. The utopia of the caress does not constitute a state one attains, for it is an unending movement toward the "inaccessible." Thus, the metaphor of the caress can be used to trace a utopian politics. From this point of view, utopia can never be definitively achieved, it will always be "to come." The return of the fullness of being, the reduction of the other to the same, to identity – what I call *identitarianism* – takes the form of "power," understood as a pretension to total mastery and knowledge of the other.

Totality and Infinity and *Otherwise Than Being* are the two major works of Levinas's philosophical maturity, and in them he mobilizes the ethical figure of the face of the other, the expression of a singular distress that interpellates my responsibility.[21] Levinas shifts the question toward the impossibility of completely *understanding* [*comprendre*] the other, in the sense both of knowing totally and of encompassing. For there is something in the other that escapes my totalizing grasp: the irreducible singularity

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16 See Lozerand, *Drôles D'individus*.

17 For an exploration of how Levinas's thought can enrich the political theory of emancipation, see Corcuff, "Levinas-Abensour Contre Spinoza-Lordon."

18 Levinas, *On Escape*, 51.

19 Ibid., 62.

20 Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 89–90.

21 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*.

of their face. Levinas speaks of "ethics as that disruption of our being-in-the-world which opens us to the other."[22] The figure of the self does not disappear, but it loses its pretensions to a view from above and to exclusivity in the expression of personal singularity, by becoming decentered in the interhuman:

> I become a responsible or ethical "I" to the extent that I agree to depose or dethrone myself – to abdicate my position of centrality in favor of the vulnerable other.[23]

The three Levinassian figures of getting out of being – escape, the caress, and the face of the other – constitute resources for expanding the thought of emancipation to include extrication from identitarian enclosures, out of identitarianism. What is at stake in Levinas, according to Miguel Abensour, is "the otherwise than being, the otherwise than persevering in one's being,"[24] in a distancing of the Spinozist *conatus*. Levinassian ethics, initially open to an elsewhere, and then to the other, can lead to an exploratory and adventurous politics of open identities: open to disquiet, to disturbance; open to what is other, open to hybridization, to transformations, to the unprecedented – while at the same time drawing on relative social stabilizations. A politics that would both belong to identity and subvert it, while striving to avoid the pitfalls of identitarianism; what Judith Butler, who has helped bring Levinassian resources to bear on contemporary critical thought, sees as "the constitution of the subject by and in alterity."[25]

Four works rooted in the language game of TV series can help us refine, complete, and shift these Levinassian openings by drawing on lines of inquiry that come to us from the knowledge game of present-day critical political theory, thus expanding our political and theoretical imaginary.

3 *American Crime*: Between sociological enclosures of being and tentative openings

American Crime (*AC*) is a TV series that transposes certain characteristics of American noir fiction and Hollywood film noir into the language game of series.[26] It aired on the ABC network for three seasons between 2015 and 2017, and was created by the African-American novelist, screenwriter, and director John Ridley, who also served as its showrunner. It is an anthology series, meaning that the seasons are independent of one another, with each season presenting different characters in different settings. On this particular anthology series, many of the same actors return over the course of the three seasons, playing different roles. I will focus on the first season of the show, from 2015.

The season opens with the murder of Matt Skokie, a young, white veteran of the second Iraq War, and with the rape of his wife in the city of Modesto in California. The principal suspect is Carter Nix (Elvis Nolasco), a black drug addict. This season, along with the two other seasons – and within the language game of series – has affinities to the problematic of intersectionality in the social sciences.[27] The range of approaches that draw on the notion of intersectionality focus on the effects of the intersections between various social relations of domination: classism, sexism, racism, heterosexism, etc. Season 1 of *AC* mainly deals with the relations between social inequalities, racial discrimination, and gender stereotypes, treating them with a kind of sociological determinism, or even fatalism, analogous to what we find in the noir novels of David Goodis.[28]

Over the course of the narrative, it becomes increasingly clear that the "American crime" in question is not so much the factual crime with which the show begins, but rather the prejudices at work in American

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22 Levinas, "Interview with Richard Kearney, 'Ethics of the Infinite'," 59.

23 Ibid., 63.

24 Abensour, "Penser L'utopie Autrement," 598.

25 Butler, *Parting Ways*, 39.

26 See Corcuff, "'Jeux de Langage' du Noir."

27 See the article by the creator of the concept of intersectionality, the African-American legal scholar Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex."

28 For more on the work of the writer David Goodis (1917–1967), see Corcuff, *Polars, Philosophie et Critique Sociale*, 48–68.

society. It even seems that the show has little interest in the traditional question of who committed the murder and rape. The "American crime" turns out to be the structural underside of the American dream: oppressive social structures. The series is a journey through personal and collective disillusions, yet these are counter-balanced by hopes. In examining, with near-sociological precision, the American "dark side of the force" within the dynamics of social relations and within the particularity of individual lives, it offers American society it the opportunity for a therapeutic journey.

Racial prejudices are especially significant in this season, on the part of white characters like Matt Skokie's mother (Felicity Huffman), as well as black characters like Carter Nix's sister Doreen, who has converted to Islam and changed her name to Aliyah Shadeed (Regina King). But there is not a strict symmetry between the essentialism of the dominant and what the sociologist Abdellali Hajjat describes as the "inverted essentialism" of the dominated.[29] The first season of Ridley's series demonstrates that "inverted essentialism" can be a useful resource for collective mobilization around a cause – in this case, by activating a network of Black Muslim activists. This connects to a hypothesis formulated by the Indian post-colonial theoretician Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak regarding "strategic essentialism,"[30] that is, an essentialization of the collective identity of subaltern groups as a temporary ideological and political support in their struggle against domination. However, even as this essentialism helps stimulate resistance and unleash emancipatory energies, it also tends to shut individuals and groups into closed identities. The opening to an emancipatory *elsewhere* is self-limited in advance: the Same comes to constitute a resource in the struggle while the Other, within this framework, is an enemy. Justified by "strategic" reasons, this "positive essentialism" is revealed to be a rather banal fetishization of a collective identity, through a mechanism of political representation that further fetishizes the spokespeople of that identity.[31] In closing off the symbolic boundaries of a dominated group under the aegis of the spokespeople who participate in constituting it by speaking in its name (in the series, the leaders of the black Muslim community), this essentialism does not recognize the singularity of individualities, the ways in which they depart from or even contradict the supposedly shared norms of the group, and it ignores the composite nature of identity markers. The inverted identitarianism of this type of anti-racist struggle is still an identitarianism: its inverted usage can provide resources for emancipation from racist prejudices and discrimination, but it does not allow individuals under the double tyranny of a core identity and the representatives of that identity to deploy all the many components of their identities. At an individual as well as collective level, such an inverted identitarianism tends to crush the possibilities of the Levinasian opening of the being.

The first season of *AC* thus shows that identity-based collective action can achieve some success in Carter Nix's defense, but it also shows the differences and tensions between Carter and his sister. Their main conflict concerns Carter's white girlfriend, Aubry Taylor (Caitlin Gerard), also a drug addict. For example, in the following scene in which Aliyah visits Carter in prison and lays out some conditions before her black Muslim community will pay his bail:

> ALIYAH. What's happening here is bigger than you. This is about every black man who cannot get justice. You need to represent. You need to be the voice for people who do not have a voice. And you need to stay away from that girl.
>
> CARTER. Look, Aubry ... she's not what you're saying she is.
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> ALIYAH. She's bad for you. [...]
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> CARTER. I love her. You can hate white all you want. Aubry ... I love her.
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> ALIYAH. This is not a negotiation. It's a condition. (S01E04)

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29 Hajjat, "Les Dilemmes de L'autonomie."

30 Spivak speaks of a "strategic use of positivist essentialism" and of the "essentializing moment" in "political interest," in "Introduction," 13.

31 See Bourdieu, "Delegation and Political Fetishism."

Here, love appears as a "glitch in the matrix" of collective identity that allows for a unique opening, by inviting us to look at Levinasian resources. It even makes clear how unchecked resentment can feed a politics of closed identity. "Revenge is just a different prayer at their altar, darling, and I'm well off my knees," Maeve (Thandie Newton) tells Dolores (Evan Rachel Wood) in S02E02 (2018) of *Westworld*. The critical political theory that emerges from season 1 of *AC* simultaneously recognizes the kernel of truth in Spivak's hypothesis and questions its pitfalls, recalling Hajjat's analysis of the contributions and impasses of "inverted essentialism" in postcolonial struggles. Here we find something like a critical political theory embedded in the language game of TV series, bearing affinities to a critical sociology (Hajjat) and in critical, nuanced debate with a critical political theory (Spivak), while leaving a place for Levinas' philosophy; all three being couched in scholarly knowledge games.

Season 1 of *AC* ends badly: the couple is frowned upon by all parties. Interracial mixing, one modality of hybridization among the diversity of collective threads that constitute each unique individual, is still an "American crime," both for the dominant and for certain representatives of the dominated. The influence of relations of domination is not denied, for the series shows to what extent such relations underlie individual lives. Nevertheless, the real is not entirely determined by the iron rule of the dominant-dominated polarity. Emancipation is possible. This possibility takes the form of a dream in the final episode, episode 11, even as tragedy draws the series toward pessimism. Here, as in many of Goodis's novels, emancipation is just barely possible, but there remains an opening, a utopian escape hatch out of social relations of domination, an unlikely Levinasian breakthrough in social structures. Season 1 of *AC* gives a relationalist sociological answer to the question of evil, à la Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who wrote that "Evil is not created by us or by others; it is born in this web that we have spun about us – and that is suffocating us."[32] By leaving a philosophical door open to an elsewhere.

4 *The Sinner* and *Sharp Objects*: Openings in the wounds of being

The Sinner (*TS*) is also an American anthology TV series, created by Derek Simonds, adapted from a novel by the German writer Petra Hammesfahr (*Die Sünderin*, 1999), and distributed by the USA Network. The first season – which will be my sole focus here – dates from 2017, and a fourth season has been broadcast in 2021. The American mini-series *Sharp Objects* (*SO*) was created for HBO in 2018 by Marti Noxon and was adapted from the novel of the same name by the American writer Gillian Flynn, published in 2006. Its eight episodes were all directed by the same director (the Canadian, Jean-Marc Vallée), which is unusual for a TV series. From the point of view of critical political theory, there are interesting proximities between the main characters of the two series, the police lieutenant Harry Ambrose (Bill Pullman) from *TS* and the journalist Camille Preaker (Amy Adams) from *SO*.

The first season of *TS* begins with a seemingly inexplicable murder: in a small town in America, a young mother, Cora Tannetti (Jessica Biel), violently and publicly kills a young man without knowing why and without appearing to know her victim. Lieutenant Ambrose, whose marriage is on the rocks, attempts to untangle the threads of a drama that echoes his own inner upheavals. In *SO*, Camille Preaker, an alcoholic and a crime reporter, returns to the small town where she grew up, Wind Gap, Missouri, to investigate the murder of one girl and the disappearance of another. She stays in her childhood home, under the critical eye of her mother, a rich woman who acts as a sort of "lady of the manor" in this town defined by Southern traditions. In carrying out her investigation, Camille too will have to confront her most intimate demons.

The first temptation of both investigators is to close themselves off in the pains of being. This takes the form of physical violence against the self: the sadomasochistic humiliation and bruises that a waitress inflicts on Ambrose, and the many acts of self-mutilation done by Camille using a variety of sharp objects. It is as if physical pain made it easier to temporarily bear a more intense, deeper psychic pain. However, these

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32 Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 35.

two characters' respective investigations outline possibilities for emancipation from these forms of cementing the self in the self. Their investigations are investigations into themselves that also open on to what is *other*, thanks to interpellations and mediations that come from other characters. The psychological is inscribed within the flow of social relations: it is socio-psychological.[33] And this socio-psychology includes a critique of relations of domination: for Cora, the weight of a fundamentalist Protestant milieu that combines strict discipline with self-shaming; for Ambrose, the conformist tendencies of the police hierarchy, intertwined with local politics; and for Camille, the homology between the domination her mother exerts over the small town (see how she lords over a traditional Southern festival held on her property in episode 5) and how she dominates the family. Unlike a psychology detached from social relations, the socio-psychology calls for social criticism, but a comprehensive social criticism (in the sense of Max Weber), and in particular one that is sensitive to our fragilities as social beings.

The figures of departure from being that Levinas develops are thus displaced, hybridized, and pluralized in season 1 of *TS* and in *SO*:

– Certainly, Ambrose feels some responsibility for Cora's distress, but the dynamic of his investigation is informed by the mixture of proximity (Cora's condition echoes his own; he admits to her in episode 4 that he too is familiar with the "swamp" affecting her) and differences between the two characters. His encounter with Cora's situation does not lead to Levinassian radical exteriority, but blends the same with the other.
– Camille needs the mediation of others in trying to extract herself from narcissistic confinement: these include her editor-in-chief, Frank Curry (Miguel Sandoval), who is full of understanding and humanity; Richard Willis (Chris Messina), a police officer from Kansas City, with whom she begins a tentative romantic relationship; the brother of a victim who is a temporary suspect, John Keene (Taylor John Smith), with whom she has a one-night stand; and her half-sister Amma (Eliza Scanlen), with whom she has a relationship full of deep ambiguities and ambivalences. The psychological reconstitution supposes a social reconstitution. This occurs within an atmosphere of tension, doubt, and divisions.

For both Ambrose and Camille, the vagaries of an erratic and partial perfectionism do not enclose the self in itself, but rather are simultaneously troubled and strengthened by others. Here, Levinassian and Cavellian analyses seem to connect and complement one another through tensions, for tensions between the same and the other cannot be eliminated, and there can be no synthesis between identitarian protections and departures of being out of itself, as there is in Hegelian thinking. But Cavell warns us against the illusions of "perfection" – contained in the very word "perfectionism" – as "a state, the same for all, at which the self is to arrive, a fixed place at which it is destined to come home to itself."[34] Instead, if we follow Levinas, season 1 of *The Sinner*, and *Sharp Objects*, we find erratic displacements, troubled by what is *other* and obliging us sometimes to go out of ourselves. Cavell, as well as these two shows, adds that these displacements are aided by others. In his encounter with Cora, Ambrose glimpses that it is possible to "see some light at the end of all this," which requires trust: "just trust me" (S01E04). This potential emancipatory path is dotted with moments of reciprocity. Such perfectionist displacements have something to contribute to a critical political theory seeking to reformulate the question of emancipation by facing the current traps of identitarian thinking head-on.

5 *Unorthodox* and disobediences

Unorthodox is a four-episode German mini-series directed by Maria Schrader, created by Anna Winger and Alexa Karolinsky, and released on Netflix in 2020. It is inspired by the autobiography of Deborah Feldman,

33 In contrast to the Durkheimian distinction between the social (which is the object of sociology) and the individual (the object of psychology), the socio-psychological is the object of psychological sociology; see Lahire, "Esquisse du Programme Scientifique D'une Sociologie Psychologique."
34 Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 13.

Unorthodox: *The Scandalous Rejection of My Hasidic Roots* (2012). Esty (played by the Israeli actress Shira Haas) lives in an ultra-Orthodox Jewish community in Williamsburg, Brooklyn in New York. At age 19, she secretly leaves her Hasidic world, a year after her arranged marriage to another member of the community, Yanky (played by Amit Rahav, also an Israeli actor). She goes to Berlin, where her mother, who also fled Williamsburg, is living and is in a lesbian relationship. Esty hopes that in Berlin she will be able to pursue her passion for music, free of the obstacles imposed by her community. The community rabbi asks Yanky and his cousin Moishe (Jeff Wilbursch) to go and look for Esty in Berlin.

The mini-series bears resemblances to the 2018 British-Irish-American film directed by the Chilean director Sebastián Lelio, *Disobedience*,[35] in terms of the critical and emancipatory trajectories that inform its language game. *Disobedience* also deals with a break from an ultra-orthodox Jewish community, this time in Great Britain. In both *Unorthodox* and *Disobedience*, it is a matter of an individual disobeying a restrictive collective setting. Strong normative restrictions and the discipline that goes along with them (combining strict family and religious-scholastic teachings with control through the eyes of others' and internalized self-discipline) are suffused with a heightened religious identitarianism. We can understand attention to this form of identitarianism – extreme but actual, fictionalized yet based in reality – as a political warning against identitarian threats that are usually less pronounced in spectators' ordinary lives.

One of the major modern figures of disobedience was framed by the American Henry David Thoreau as an internal break, within a collective that has democratic ideals, that is made in the name of the values of the collective.[36] For Sandra Laugier, it is because a society, through its institutions and representatives, "disobeys its own constitution that Thoreau claims the right to withdraw from it."[37] Thoreau's understanding of disobedience is based on a social critique that can be called *hermeneutic*.[38] That is to say, it is a critique made in the name of the moral and political traditions of a collective; a critique that, in the name of a certain human group's values, points a finger at the way in which that group's institutions have strayed.

The figure of disobedience that emerges in the case of Esty in *Unorthodox* would appear to be distant from Thoreau's. Her dissidence implies sidestepping Hasidic moral traditions, but without abandoning all the values of her community of origin or forgetting the trauma of the Holocaust ("My grandparents lost their families in the camps," she declares in the first episode). Esty tells her new music school friends in Berlin that she wasn't in "prison" in Williamsburg, but that "God expected too much from me" (S01E02). And she adds: "I have to find my own way." The social critique associated with leaving the community requires a point of reference external to the perimeters of the community, and cannot be expressed solely in the register of internal (or hermeneutic) critique. There is indeed at stake something like the Levinasian opening of the being. True, Esty is also part of the American political collective, but she is somewhat removed from one of its founding values: individual liberty. For all that, do we have here a *utopian* critique,[39] one in search of a radically different society, to be invented by breaking with the dominant form of social relations within the ultra-orthodox community? Not entirely. The leeway that comes to exist in relationship to the community is made possible by the encounters between various social universes within the multi-cultural American space. A non-orthodox resident of Esty's neighborhood becomes her piano teacher in secret; non-orthodox universes are situated just next to the community and interact with it, constituting a point of opening for norms and identities. The opening to and by virtue of cultural pluralism is consolidated in cosmopolitan Berlin, where Esty's new friends come from Israel, Nigeria, Poland, Yemen, and Germany. Identity becomes hybrid through contact with others, the being leaves a little of itself toward what is other.

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35 For an initial analysis of Sebastián Lelio's film as part of a dialogue between the language game of cinema and the knowledge game of political theory by way of the thought of Stanley Cavell, see Corcuff, "Communautés et Dissidences Féminines."
36 See Thoreau, "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience" [1849], in *Walden*.
37 Laugier, *Une Autre Pensée Politique Américaine*, 30.
38 See Corcuff, "Pour Une Nouvelle Sociologie Critique."
39 For more on the particularities of utopian critique in distinction to hermeneutic critic, see ibid.

The political critique traced by the series has two main intertwined drivers: cultural pluralism, which, by means of the interactions between different universes, makes displacements within each one possible; and individual singularity, as a unique site where a variety of social bonds and experiences intersect. The series does not criticize, in the name of unity, the risks of communitarian enclosure, as a strong current within the French political tradition does. That current sees unity in the "one and indivisible Republic" as a beneficial weakening of human plurality, caricatured as "communitarian divisions." Rather, the show's critique is made in the name of a radical democratic individualism that takes the best of pluralism in order to nourish the common, understood as an infinite and controvertible process.

On the other hand, a hermeneutic critique might be found in Yanky, who, when he returns to New York, does not see things quite the same as before. Perhaps he will play a part in making changes from within the community?

Both *Unorthodox* and *Disobedience* tell us, within their own respective language games, that there are multiple modalities of social critique, and that critique can lead to various politics. The important point is that the critique of the negative leads to a positive – which may be more or less reformist or radical – and that individuality has pride of place in encounters with the communal; both individual being and collective being are open to what is *other*.

6 Despair and the possibilities of "maybe"

My explorations of certain tendencies currently at work in the cross-boundary dialogues between the knowledge game of political theory (itself at the intersection of sociology and philosophy) and the language game of TV series have entailed a back-and-forth between philosophical and sociological forms of knowledge on the one hand and the thought of TV series on the other. The interferences created between that knowledge game and that language game have made it possible to bring forth supplementary sparks of intelligibility, which would not have been generated by a strictly internal relation to the knowledge game of political theory or to the language game of series. This does not replace philosophical questioning, the empirically backed knowledge of the social sciences, or the political thought developed within social and/ or political movements, but it can be seen as making welcome trouble for the philosophical, sociological, and political imaginations.

A critical theory that is sensitive both to the resources and the pitfalls of the ordinary, to the individual capacities it pre-supposes, to the tragedy to which people are sometimes driven within the realm of the ordinary, and to the emancipatory openings that can be found there, in the clashes between its ethical and political elements, may thus be at work in contemporary TV series. This connects to the current revitalization of critical theories in the social sciences, which are less overbearing and more understanding of the daily activities of individuals, including the most oppressed of them. Cavellian perfectionism, with both its Wittgensteinian foundations and its interest in cinema, makes it possible to connect the thought of contemporary TV series and the renewal of critical theories: "Wittgenstein's insight is that the ordinary has, and alone has, the power to move the ordinary, to leave the human habitat habitable, the same transfigured."[40] The four series I have focused on here heighten the "uncanniness of the familiar" and exacerbate its tragic potential – what Merleau-Ponty refers to as "this web that we have spun about us – and that is suffocating us"[41] – but without giving up on the possibility of escaping from the heaviness of being and moving toward an *elsewhere*, in a Levinassian movement. It is thus, within a logic of ominous prophecy that condenses threats in a slightly disproportionate yet realistic imaginary construction, that these TV series can help us become aware of the risks of the identitarian and ultra-conservative closings-off that we find in our world today – and can even help us better understand them and attempt to counter them by cultivating

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40 Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, 47.
41 Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 35.

maybes. The "may be" and the "maybe" have philosophical and political import: the former encourages us to approach "being" from the perspective of the possible ("may"), whereas the latter guides us toward a relation to historical uncertainty.

In a context in which ultra-conservatism and forms of identitarianism are on the rise across the world, the analyses outlined in this article by means of cross-boundary dialogues lead us to integrate a certain amount of pessimism – yet without losing sight of the ironic melancholy contained in a certain form of Jewish humor: "Never give in to despair: it doesn't keep its promises."[42]

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42 An aphorism by the Polish Jewish writer Lec published in *More Unkempt Thoughts*.

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