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TV series and the unveiling of the unknown: a semiology of strangeness

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Abstract: The article proposes estrangement as a theoretical semiotic tool to explore the relation between subjectivity, the affective dimension, and the ways in which genres model our culture. By revisiting Julia Kristeva's concept of *inquiétante étrangeté*, it examines the idea that certain genres employ estrangement as a semiotic operation, not only to challenge processes of social and cultural normalization, but also as a highly effective defense mechanism against the emergence of signs that dislocate subjectivity. However, in an era where the supernatural and terror have lost their capacity for surprise, and following a global pandemic that unsettled the world, it could be worth questioning which signs are capable of revealing something as strange. Some answers will emerge through the study of *WandaVision*, a TV series that explores a specific sense of strangeness through a creative interplay of trauma, nostalgia for suburban utopia, and a problematization of long-standing conventions of television genres. Through a semiology of strangeness, it will be possible to elucidate how the TV series addresses various epochal symptoms of the pandemic era by capturing a subjectivity tethered to the fragility of its conception of normalcy.

Keywords: uncanny strangeness; TV series; artistic genres; subjectivity

1 Introduction

COVID-19 has largely receded, taking with it the pervasive sense of strangeness that defined the early months of a pandemic that thrust us into an extended pause – halting daily activities, silencing cities, and postponing personal connections. For many, during this period of isolation and growing misinformation, TV series became a refuge, filling the void left by an everyday life that had suddenly become unfamiliar. Now, with the benefit of hindsight, it is worth asking whether these series managed to narrate that strangeness in meaningful ways and offer new artistic

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approaches to making sense of those months of uncertainty, or if, conversely, they merely relied on familiar and repetitive formats to address such a profound global state.

It is true that, as soon as productions resumed, some TV series quickly sought to address that disorienting period. They encapsulated the atmosphere of the pandemic and inevitably incorporated some of its key themes, such as the onset of viral contagion (e.g., the second season of *The Morning Show*, AppleTV, 2021), the exhaustion of healthcare workers (*Grey's Anatomy*, Star+, 2020), and, of course, social distancing during the isolation period (*This Is Us*, NBC, 2020, or *9-1-1*, FX, 2021). In a way, these series appear to contribute to an extensive repertoire of shows that, for decades, have neutralized the unsettling nature of the plague: in this regard, the iconic *The Walking Dead* (FX, 2010–2022) has been exemplary, if not paradigmatic (see Gómez Ponce 2021a). One might ask a more pertinent question: is it possible to conceive that TV series – always capturing real-world events but also being shaped by market forces – can narrate something in terms of strangeness?

Answering this question requires, first and foremost, defining what we mean by “strangeness,” a concept to which semiotics has much to contribute. Specifically, I am referring to the effect of meaning recognized as strange, a concept long debated in literary and film studies, used to account for the ominous and uncertain in artistic forms. The Russian formalists referred to this category as *ostranenie* (остранение), which explains the “making strange” in art – a gesture that was primarily a “theoretical response” to the avant-garde movements in the Soviet Union (van den Oever 2010: 11), but which continued to resonate in twentieth-century literary and cultural criticism. Since then, many have theorized about the nature of the strange.

It will be seen, however, that there is a confusing proliferation of similar terms – an oscillation that is also reflected in many languages, especially in English, which exhibits an almost imperceptible difference between *estrangement* (“a feeling of not understanding something or someone, according to any dictionary definition”) and *strangeness* (“the quality of being unusual”).¹ In this article, the aim is to bypass this semantic variation in order to better explore an uncertainty that derives its strength from what Kristeva (1991: 183) has theorized as the uncanny strangeness: the phenomenon that, having once been familiar, is revealed as distressing and inadmissible, making “the familiar potentially tainted with strangeness.” If everyday things have become strange, it is because certain signs, which should have remained hidden, manage to manifest themselves for some subjective or cultural reason, as Kristeva suggests, under “certain conditions.” The question of these conditions, in effect, opens up a scenario of semiotic inquiry, to which some premises will be offered.

1 *Cambridge Dictionary*. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/> (accessed 10 July 2024).

Julia Kristeva's proposal offers a semiology of the uncanny strangeness, providing a theoretical framework to explore an affectivity that reveals an aesthetic dimension linked to subjective sensitivity. The first section will be dedicated to these theoretical issues, moving from the Russian formalists (Todorov 2001) to the cultural criticism of Fisher (2016) and Jameson (1998). This section aims to demonstrate how uncanny strangeness enables the discussion of topics ranging from sensitive perceptions to narrative modes and genre variations: a transition that Kristeva described as the shift from the semiotic to the semiological. The goal of this section is to define how, through the uncanny strangeness, art could challenge a process of cultural normalization – those natural automatisms through which society orders its reality.

A second section is dedicated to examining this semiology of uncanny strangeness in recent TV series that have, through various original approaches, attempted to portray signs of a pandemic era. This will be followed by an exploratory analysis of a highly successful narrative that captured the attention of many viewers: *WandaVision* (2021), broadcast on the Disney + platform. The series expands the cinematic universe of the Marvel franchise onto television, which has captivated mass audiences with its blockbuster films. However, other aspects are of greater interest here, beyond the typical conventions of the superhero genre. *WandaVision* is set in an idyllic environment, and it is precisely in this setting that we propose to explore the uncanny strangeness. Scenarios of disturbing perfection and excessive idealization appear to be privileged spaces for the strange to reveal the signs of our time, as well as some of the symptoms of the pandemic. Certain formal features of this TV fiction will allow for an elevation of general characteristics of serial narratives and a way of interpreting an epochal subjectivity that seems to make the strange their favored habitat.

2 Semiology of strangeness: theoretical foundations

The problem of the relationship between art and reality has been persistently theorized, and this discussion is clearly evident in the category of estrangement – a foundational concept in any literary theory manual. Around 1916, Viktor Shklovsky introduced it in what can be regarded as the manifesto of Russian Formalism: “Art as Technique” (Shklovsky 1988).

It is worth mentioning that ‘defamiliarizing’ or ‘singularizing’ are the common translations of *ostranenie* (остранение), a term that attempts to explain the physical action of withdrawing from or distancing oneself from something. This, according to

Shklovsky, is precisely what art should do: it should distance itself in such a way as to “turn strange – with a word, an atmosphere, or a comparison – the everyday” (Bertazza 2012, translated by the author).

In the face of the automatisms and laws through which we conceive and naturalize reality, art in general (and poetry in particular) disrupts habit by introducing a rupture in our perception of the world. As defined by the formalist theorist, the method of estrangement (прием остранения) makes “the familiar seem strange,” describing it as if we were seeing it for the first time (Shklovsky 1988: 21). Moreover, transforming something familiar into the unfamiliar means imparting “the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known” (Shklovsky 1988: 20). Through estrangement, literature disrupts ordinary and habitual recognition, offering a new perspective and rousing us from our passivity. In this sense, artistic materiality occupies a privileged position because, as Shklovsky’s theory suggests, “it retains an irreducible semantic remainder for the capacity of reason” (Amícola 1997: 57, translated by the author).

The technique of “making strange,” as described by Formalism (i.e., making the usual cease to seem so), appears to transform estrangement into the most precise way of understanding various effects of meaning, leading to a disruption in perception (van den Oever 2010). Other perspectives argue that it is reality itself that always contains something unrepresentable – certain gaps that cannot be semiotically translated into the languages of culture. Grüner (2017: 26) has already pointed out that what ultimately characterizes *ostranenie* and the entire spectrum of similar notions is the semiotic tension between presence and absence, sometimes tied to the search for a “representation of the unrepresentable,” a concept with a long history in human culture. Regarding these latent tendencies within reality, Suvin (1979: 4) has approached estrangement from the perspective of art’s attempts at the “domestication of the amazing,” as can be seen in tales of extraordinary voyages, fabulous travels, and the quest for utopias, narratives that have existed since ancient times. It could be suggested that an imprecise and sometimes inexplicable curiosity for the unknown, coupled with a taste for adventure, is nothing less than, as Suvin argues, a desire to find an ideal world in the unknown – a theme that science fiction has long demonstrated.

It is precisely within the conception of genre that a particular notion of the strange has been theorized, for example, in relation to the fantastic and the gothic. In this regard, Todorov (1975: 41) noted that, in contrast to those fictions termed *marvelous*, where new laws of reality are established (e.g., *Alice in Wonderland*), other narratives only introduce an ambiguity within the real world. According to Todorov, the latter constitutes a genre in its own right, which he calls “the uncanny.” This, however, is not a felicitous translation of the original French term *l'étrange*, whose closer equivalent would be ‘the strange’. Despite raising a doubt, the

ambiguity of the phenomenon remains susceptible to a rational explanation and could also be interpreted through prior experience or known facts. It is important to note that Todorov's description links the strange to a narrative operation and, in turn, to the realm of affect: as he himself states, "the uncanny (*l'étrange*) realizes, as we see, only one of the conditions of the fantastic: the description of certain reactions, especially fear" (1975: 47).

It may be of interest, however, to dwell on this imprecise translation, particularly due to the semantic weight it has carried. *Uncanny* is a recurring term in the English language when explaining strange phenomena, and as Fisher (2016) aptly notes, the Freudian conception that uses precisely this term (*Das Unheimliche*) has been highly influential in the study of horror and science fiction. There is no need to elaborate on this concept, whose etymology is linked to the notions of the "hidden" or even the "sinister" (concepts paradoxically traced by Freud in the Grimm brothers' dictionary, see Klimkiewicz 2014), and which has been theorized for more than a century due to the importance psychoanalysis has attributed to it in interpreting issues related to anxiety. Revisiting the psychological interpretation of our deepest fears, Fisher explores a "cluster of concepts that circulate in Freud's essay" (2016: 9), such as the *weird* and the *eerie*, understood not as genres, but as affects and types of sensations that manifest in cinematic and narrative modes.

Despite their differences, the focus here is on what Fisher suggests about these modes: they share a common concern with the strange. However, while the *weird* and the *eerie* perceive the strange from an external perspective (for example, a creepy entity or any kind of non-human force), "Freud's *unheimlich* is about the strange within the familiar, the strangely familiar, the familiar as strange" (2016: 10). Whether inside or outside of subjectivity, the *uncanny* appears to have monopolized the attention of narrative theory, thereby overshadowing the semiotic potential of other concepts.

This article would argue that it is Julia Kristeva's semiology (1991) that resolves this oscillation and conceptual drift, creatively combining the *strange* and the *uncanny* in the French circumlocution *inquiétante étrangeté* ('uncanny strangeness'). While Freud proposed his concept in relation to psychological and artistic issues (keeping in mind that his inquiries are centered on Hoffmann's work and influenced by German Romanticism), Kristeva recognizes that *uncanny strangeness* is linked to a subjective sensitivity tied to an aesthetic dimension. In her own words,

that which is strangely uncanny would be that which was (the past tense is important) familiar and, under certain conditions (which ones?), emerges. A first step was taken that removed the uncanny strangeness from the outside, where fright had anchored it, to locate it inside, not inside the familiar considered as one's own and proper, but the familiar potentially tainted with strangeness and referred (beyond its imaginative origin) to an improper past. (Kristeva 1991: 192)

In more straightforward terms, the concept seems to refer to a type of estrangement (*ostranenie*, in a Formalist sense) that describes everything which, while known and hidden, comes to light. In this regard, Klimkiewicz (2014) explains that *uncanny strangeness* has two facets: on the one hand, it is a feeling associated with fear that provokes anguish; on the other hand, it is an operation that transforms the familiar into something foreign through repression. This feeling pertains to the unknown and the indefinite, which, nevertheless, seeks some form of semiotic representation, particularly in cultural constructs such as artistic forms.

Simply put, we refer to a type of estrangement (*ostranenie*, in a Formalist sense) that describes everything which, while known and hidden, comes to light. In this regard, Klimkiewicz (2014) explains that *uncanny strangeness* can be understood both as a feeling associated with fear that provokes anguish and as an operation that transforms the familiar into something foreign through repression. This feeling pertains to the unknown and the indefinite, which, nevertheless, seeks some form of semiotic representation, particularly in cultural constructs such as artistic forms.

One should recall that, contrary to a common interpretation, Kristeva's (1974) theory regards semiotics as a dimension that encompasses affect and all other forms associated with the human body and non-verbal communication, such as gestures, intonations, rhythms, and even silence. In this view, semiotics is a significance practice that refers to sense prior to its semiological and symbolic translation, for instance, into language (Paris 2003). *Uncanny strangeness* addresses traumas, unfinished mourning, or any unbearable experience that cannot be symbolized by subjectivities, where "the strange appears as a defense put up by a distraught self" (Kristeva 1991: 184).

As previously mentioned, fictional constructs such as fictional narratives creatively transform this unintelligible semiotic dimension through a translation process that Kristeva defines as a "semiology of uncanny strangeness" (1991: 185). It should be emphasized that these particular symbolic processes reveal the fragility of every repressive mechanism and, along with them, the "weakening of the value of signs" (1991: 186) and the categories through which we attempt to understand our everyday world. In Kristeva's words, when confronted with uncanny strangeness, "the material reality that the sign was commonly supposed to point to crumbles away to the benefit of imagination" (1991: 186). This is a common device in horror films, where, for example, a child suddenly loses their usual references – i.e., an infant accustomed to care and protection – revealing signs of suspicion and even evil traits without clear reasons (see *Children of the Corn*, 1984, written by Stephen King).

Regarding these theories, it can be argued that what sets strangeness in motion is a semiotic twist: in the time and space known to the reader or viewer, which are firmly registered in memory and guide the interpretation of everyday life, something unexpected introduces not fear or anguish, but a sign that dislocates subjectivity. In

Kristeva's terms, the question then becomes one of the conditions that allow something familiar to reveal itself as strange. In contemporary times, it cannot be said that the supernatural causes this effect, since pop culture has accustomed us to creatures like vampires and zombies (Gómez Ponce 2020). As Campra (2008) pointed out, in the face of the uncertainty and horror of our real world, supernatural creatures at least provide a reassuring response, as we know – given the vast encyclopedia that the media and global culture instill in us – what to expect from them. This means that, in certain situations, our interpretation protocols are activated – nothing less than the knowledge we acquire through pop culture and the stereotypes it repeatedly reinforces. In such cases, Kristeva would suggest that the rules of discourse allow the effect of strangeness to be naturalized: “the generalized artifice spares us any possible comparison between sign, imagination, and material reality. As a consequence, artifice neutralizes uncanniness and makes all returns of the repressed plausible, acceptable, and pleasurable” (1991: 187).

However, some answers may emerge when reviewing artistic creations that have distinguished themselves by their approach to these conditions. H. P. Lovecraft, the master of weird fiction and cosmic horror (Houellebecq 2019), stands out as exemplary in his method of defamiliarization, showcasing the allure of the unclassifiable anomaly. It is important to remember that, in his stories, Lovecraft developed his characters with rigorous realism, constructing an objectively familiar situation and then allowing something incomprehensible to suddenly invade. In this sense, Fisher (2016: 20) argues that certain references function necessarily as “contours” to contain strangeness, and that foregoing them comes at the risk of descending into banality. This is equivalent to saying that certain signs of the familiar must be included to provide a sense of scale. Without these reference points that we can recognize, we would be unable to appreciate strangeness, which does not pertain to the indescribable, but rather to something displaced – like someone shifting the lens to reveal a certain cultural astigmatism. For this reason, Fisher suggests that it may be “useful to think of Lovecraft’s works as being about trauma, in the sense that they concern ruptures in the very fabric of experience itself” (2016: 22).

In its exploration of narratives, it can be argued that the affect evoked by uncanny strangeness is the suspicion that a semiotic rupture has occurred in reality. As this phenomenon intensifies and expands, becoming increasingly indistinguishable, anxiety grows within the spectators. For this reason, as Kristeva rightly observes, although strangeness is associated with anguish, it always goes a step further: it imposes something that cannot be eased, even by mourning.

For these reasons, it may be posited that, within the uncanny strangeness as a semiological operation, the most crucial element is the reading contract established between the viewers and the narrative. In the words of Bessière (2009), this contract is nothing more than the suspension of disbelief: an immediate engagement by the

viewer, essential for the functioning of a genre such as fantasy. It is noteworthy to remember that genres are both structured and structuring forms: they organize a specific cultural memory by standardizing various ways of interpreting the world, some more realistic and others more fantastic, but always providing frames of reference in the text that, as Eco (1979) rightly noted, anticipate the viewer's response.

The study that follows will acknowledge that numerous texts creatively play with such frames, demonstrating the originality that can be achieved through uncanny strangeness. This occurs, for example, in audiovisual narratives that differ significantly from those Fredric Jameson described as "reduced to the empty alternation of shock and of the latter's absence" (1992: 119). A fitting example of this is semiological operation the classic film *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, 1999), which follows a group of young filmmakers working on a documentary who get lost in the forest. The seemingly simple story, however, is interrupted by consecutive scenes intended to scare, sometimes bordering on the absurd. In Jameson's terms, this horror forces shocks, contracting the plot to a degree zero in favor of repeatedly surprising the viewer, who will eventually anticipate when something is about to happen.

Other films, by contrast, avoid violence and shocks, focusing instead on constructing a familiar scenario with subtle doses of strangeness that eventually lead to a complete inversion of what was initially presumed to be known. Two films from the early twenty-first century serve as prime examples of this horror approach: *The Others* (Alejandro Amenábar, 2001) and *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan, 1999), both of which were praised by audiences and critics alike. These narratives present a domestic, family setting that is easily recognizable, yet the suspicion that something is amiss gradually grows. The resolution of this tension defies the viewer's expectations: in this gap, uncanny strangeness takes over. Through "a progressive system of revelations," the familiar world gradually becomes strange, culminating in a surprising twist that disorients our interpretation, "leading us to reconsider the film from a completely different point of view" (Bessière 2009: 121, translated by the author). In this sense, these texts encourage a second reading, prompting a slow reflection on the themes they address (e.g., death, family, pain).

In terms of narration and representation, the distinctive approach is to create "an atmosphere of permanent strangeness" (Bessière 2009: 124, translated by the author). From this perspective, it can also be argued that genres normalize how we understand society and culture, and the uncanny strangeness serves to make us aware of these processes. These reflections lead to some significant conclusions: where uncanny strangeness is present, a cultural critique emerges. It is important to recall Jameson's (1998, 2005) proposition, where this effect of meaning functions as a critical exercise, uncovering ideological traces embedded in the various ways

cultures encode their “normality.” Notably, in his theory, Jameson incorporates Bertolt Brecht’s ideas, drawing on Shklovski and the Formalist tradition,² as well as Barthesian mythologies (Barthes 1975), to present strangeness as a critical operation that “underscores the artificiality” (Jameson 1998: 40).

For the Marxist philosopher, who creatively reinterprets the original sense of *ostranenie*, the intervention of what is known as uncanny strangeness reveals how what is habitual has been interpreted as “the natural” within cultural systems. In his own words,

Sometimes it is evoked in terms of the effect itself that names it. To make something look strange, to make us look at it with new eyes, implies the antecedence of a general familiarity, of a habit which prevents us from really looking at things, a kind of perceptual numbness: this is the emphasis most often given by the Russian Formalists, which offers a kind of psychologizing of the *Novum*, and a defence of innovation in terms of the freshness of experience and the recovery of perception. (Jameson 1998: 39)

In other passages, Jameson (2005) recalls how this operation serves a social function that, in literature studies, Suvin (1979: 4) defined as “cognitive estrangement.” To a large extent, this precision from Jamesonian theory is adopted here to maintain that, through certain genre conventions, uncanny strangeness facilitates the recognition of a reality that has become overly complex, difficult to describe, and therefore inaccessible.

For this reason, it can be argued that, within audiovisual fiction, uncanny strangeness works more effectively within the confines of the familiar, particularly when it prompts us to engage with the interpretation frameworks provided by pop culture: familiar genres, overly repetitive plots, clichéd characters, highly stereotyped settings, and all that to which viewers are accustomed. The most “worn” sometimes serves as a reference frame that acts as a perfect boundary to enclose strangeness.

Building on the preceding theoretical overview, the category of strangeness can be methodologically applied as an analytical lens to examine the affective disruptions and symbolic dislocations embedded in cultural texts, particularly those produced within the field of art. Rather than functioning merely as a thematic descriptor, strangeness operates as a critical device that exposes fractures within familiar discourses. Methodologically, this entails identifying specific “moments” within narrative, aesthetic, or generic structures in which the ordinary is rendered unfamiliar, thereby foregrounding a rupture in the subject’s interpretive

2 Regarding this relation, Jameson (1998: 39) notes that “Brecht offered many ‘definitions’ of this term, which seems to have migrated from the ‘ostranenie’ or ‘making-strange’ of the Russian Formalists through various visits to Berlin by Soviet modernists like Eisenstein or Tretiakov.”

framework. Applying this approach involves, first and foremost, mapping the expected generic conventions of a given cultural object – whether it be a television series, a film, or a literary text. It must also be emphasized that such conventions establish a kind of “contract” between genre and audience: an implicit agreement that guides interpretation through recognizable codes, recurring tropes, stereotypical characters, familiar settings, and aesthetic cues that together constitute the defining markers of each artistic genre.

A proper semiotic enquiry should then turn to those instances in which such conventions are subtly or abruptly displaced – whether through shifts in tone, mise-en-scène, narrative structure, or character behavior. These disruptions signal the presence of strangeness and, by unsettling the viewer’s or reader’s interpretive expectations, expose the fragility of the cultural contracts through which we attempt to make sense of reality. While Kristeva acknowledges that “uncanny strangeness allows for many variations” (1991: 187), this study aims to explore what contemporary TV series have to offer: true industries of strangeness in our current times. The goal, however, is to move beyond fantasy genres and weird fiction to examine how fiction manipulates various generic forms, installing contemporary uncanny strangeness at their intersection.

3 Strangeness and disrupted utopias: on *WandaVision*

WandaVision premiered on Disney+ in early 2021, coinciding with a period when COVID-19 isolation measures were beginning to ease worldwide. This TV series expands the Marvel franchise: a universe that, over the past decade, has dominated the big screen with its blockbuster films. *WandaVision* shifts the focus to two characters who played secondary roles in the Avengers saga: Vision (Paul Bettany) and Wanda Maximoff (Elizabeth Olsen), both introduced relatively late in the franchise (in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, 2015). Vision, a synthezoid android (i.e., a synthetic humanoid), and Wanda, a telepathic mutant, not only contribute to the well-worn battle to save the universe from evil forces but also develop an unexpected romance that ends tragically with Vision’s destruction by the saga’s primary antagonist. While this background provides the essential context for understanding *WandaVision*, the series appears to disregard much of the prior narrative, instead opening its story in a manner that is intentionally disorienting.

Wanda and Vision unexpectedly find themselves as a married couple living a blissful suburban life. This new context, seemingly naturalized by the characters, revolves around mundane domestic and neighborhood issues, far removed from

their previous mission to protect the Earth. In other words, the superheroes appear to have entirely forgotten their past. They now inhabit what is commonly referred to as “suburban bliss” – an idyllic lifestyle emblematic of the American Dream, arguably one of the most cherished utopias in American culture (Gómez Ponce 2021b). As we know, since the 1950s, American society has invested the suburban home with its loftiest aspirations: personal fulfillment, familial prosperity, and the realization of the self-made man – cornerstones of the American Way of Life. It has often been observed that TV series exhibit an obsession with this chronotope that *WandaVision* revisits and reimagines. Through its narrative, the series captures the stifling perfection of this lifestyle, portrayed through meticulously crafted settings, its most defining traits, and, notably, its quintessential characters: warm, friendly, and tolerant neighbors who epitomize the harmony of suburban community life.

This seemingly stereotypical framework gains significant depth and complexity. Episode by episode, the series delves into Wanda and Vision’s love story while simultaneously reconstructing the suburban setting across five decades, each aligned with a dominant television genre: the sitcom. More precisely, each episode serves as a tribute to iconic series such as *Bewitched* (ABC, 1964–1972), *I Dream of Jeannie* (NBC, 1965–1970), *I Love Lucy* (CBS, 1951–1957), *The Brady Bunch* (ABC, 1969–1974), *Step by Step* (CBS, 1991–1997), *Malcolm in the Middle* (FOX, 2000–2006), and the acclaimed *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009–2020). *WandaVision* appropriates and reflects on the sociocultural dynamics that these series engaged with during their respective eras of production: from the woman’s struggle to fulfill her role as a housewife and meet patriarchal and consumerist expectations in the 1950s, to the independent and modern female archetype emerging alongside sexual liberation movements in the 1960s, and the portrayal of family tribes in the 1970s, aligned with the neoliberal family model that would solidify in later decades. As Elizabeth Olsen, the actress who plays Wanda, aptly stated, *WandaVision* is “an actual love song to American Sitcoms” (in Baruh 2021).

Building on the preceding discussion, it can be argued that an element of strangeness pervades this fiction, significantly disorienting viewers and eliciting varied reactions. As Kristeva (1991: 191) observes, “to worry or to smile, such is the choice when we are assailed by the strange; our decision depends on how familiar we are with our own ghosts.” In the context of this case study, such familiarity seems intrinsically tied to the artistic genres interwoven within the narrative, which provides a methodological entry point for strangeness, insofar as generic conventions function as a measuring parameter. *WandaVision*, in particular, presents a form of generic readjustment, blurring – at least superficially – the codes of a genre that a seasoned Marvel audience would readily anticipate: the superhero genre, characterized by superhuman strength, formidable adversaries, and the recurring threat of

global annihilation, all accepted as “normal” within the bounds of an implicit reading contract.

Particular attention must be given to the aesthetic achievements that underpin *WandaVision*’s reappropriation of the American utopia – a creative feat that garnered the series twenty-three Emmy nominations and widespread critical acclaim. Across its episodes, the narrative meticulously updates the stylistic hallmarks of each decade, encompassing architectural and interior design, opening sequences, and musical curtain, for which “a basic design was made” (in Baruh 2021), subsequently adapted to reflect the evolving times. The episode titles themselves nod to television conventions, such as “Filmed Before a Live Studio Audience” (Episode 1), “We Interrupt This Program” (Episode 4), and “Breaking the Fourth Wall” (Episode 7), the latter engaging with the self-referential humor characteristic of more recent sitcoms. The production even recreated a multi-camera studio setup with a live audience, presenting a unique challenge for actors more accustomed to working with green screens and CGI. In both form and content, *WandaVision* emerges as a lavish homage to the sitcom genre, executed with remarkable precision and grandeur.

Given this, one might ask: why are we, as viewers, so fascinated by the fact that these characters are, as the saying goes, “living the dream”? Initially, it would not seem particularly odd for an android and a mutant witch to embrace “normality” in such a traditional setting. Since the inception of sitcoms in the 1960s, series like *Bewitched* (ABC, 1964–1972), *The Munsters* (CBS, 1964–1966), and *The Addams Family* (ABC, 1964–1966) have demonstrated that the suburban family can serve as an effective cover for witches, monsters, and all manner of eccentrics seeking to conceal their strangeness. In fact, it could be argued that one of the most persistent motifs of the American Dream is embedded in this suburban disguise: as Wanda herself remarks, the relentless pressure to “fit in” (Schaeffer 2021: episode 1), to conform to an environment defined by homogeneity and standardization. This constant search for belonging is vividly portrayed in the protagonists’ ongoing struggle to integrate into Westview, a town whose motto is “Home: it’s where you make it” (Schaeffer 2021: episode 2).

The sense of amazement, however, stems from the fact that, despite knowing the backstory of these superheroes, their immersion in such an idyllic environment consistently evokes a sense that something is amiss. To amplify this sensation, the TV series deliberately limits the information provided to the viewer in each episode. As Fisher (2016) aptly noted, withholding information is a clever technique to evoke and provoke various forms of strangeness. From the outset, there is a lingering suspicion that the story is dislocated by the emergence of the utopian chronotope of the American Dream, which, in *WandaVision*, becomes anachronistic and, at times, even unintelligible.

One might reasonably argue that this sensation is more accessible to a seasoned viewer of the Marvel universe – that is, this experience is fully realized only by those who have watched all the previous films and, therefore, they have an encyclopedia (Eco 1979) that provides them with the appropriate competencies. However, the feeling that something is amiss is not exclusive to such an audience, as the TV series continually reinforces this sense of dislocation through various techniques. These include sudden shifts in music, changes in shots and acting, the intrusion of color into black-and-white scenes, the appearance of enigmatic characters in the middle of the street, and, notably, a series of commercials that interrupt the narrative and invite multiple interpretations.

Fragmentedly, the comedy takes the form of something else, which we don't really know what it is, but which is marked by a drastic and ephemeral change in style that even abandons multi-camera filming (which, by the way, lends a more familiar tone to the story with a code widely recognized by viewers accustomed to sitcoms). To this end, Suvin (1979: 10) would have called it “transient estrangement”: a momentary shock, with an eventual return to tranquility in the system that, in the series in question, creates a strong contrast between the nostalgic and the disturbing. This is equivalent to saying that *WandaVision* constructs a well-known scenario that quickly activates our interpretation protocol, only to disrupt it, thus presenting us with a domestic and routine environment that, suddenly, no longer aligns with itself.

It could be assumed that what, in any case, we are experiencing is a change in generic framing. In other words, we refer to the transformation of a space regulated by the rules of simple humor and gags into a darker style that commemorates another classic television series contemporary to those familiar sitcoms: *The Twilight Zone* (CBS, 1959–1964). Regarding this variation, Elizabeth Olsen explains clearly:

To jump off the genre blending, even in the '50s and '60s episodes, we have moments of *Twilight Zone*, and instead of it being moments of today's horror, we take camera tricks from *Twilight Zone* to make you feel off-kilter. So in order to get to that cinematic feeling or sense of being off ... we use *Twilight Zone* tropes for that. (in Baruh 2021)

In other words, the creation of a television aesthetic was necessary only to disrupt it. However, it should be noted that this effect is achieved through small gestures that appear to be outside the “narrative” – a term that, in this series, takes on more than one meaning. Within the periphery of the sitcom in which Wanda and Vision live their love story, we encounter characters who are literally rewound, removed from the frame, or who display erratic behavior, such as asking whether the shot needs to be repeated or if they should re-enter the scene. Special mention should be made of the abrupt cuts in editing that are evident from the very first episode, as well as the changes in a script that, as viewers, we should not be aware of. This effect, which Olsen identifies as the “cinematic feeling or sense of being off” characteristic of *The*

Twilight Zone (in Baruh 2021), is a form of “frayed edges” that challenges the reading contract with the seasoned sitcom viewer and intervenes at moments when, for some reason, Wanda feels cornered.

This raises the following questions: What happens in this seemingly anachronistic story? Is it about time travel or a dream projection? Are we facing an alternative reality, a highly recurrent theme in Marvel’s narratives? The answers – which will require a more informed viewer within Marvel’s universe – begin to emerge when, midway through the story, the series takes an unexpected turn and expels us from the sitcom format, revealing that this idyllic life is nothing more than a staged illusion. It is then revealed that this peaceful suburban neighborhood is surrounded by a hexagonal space: an energy field that has kept its inhabitants isolated from the rest of the world, within a phenomenon that the authorities have named “the Westview anomaly” (Schaeffer 2021: episode 4). Biologists, astrophysicists, and chemists are working tirelessly to solve this enigma, which, in line with the recent pandemic times – and the anxieties pervasive in American culture – has been treated as a potential nuclear or biological attack. Those outside of this hexagonal boundary are, like us, mere viewers of this idyllic scene, which is, in effect, a “broadcast” (Schaeffer 2021: episode 4).

It turns out that the historical sitcom sequence is, in reality, a television program generated by Wanda’s mind, originating from a subconscious level that she does not fully comprehend. There are no alternative realities or multiverses at play here. Instead, we are confronted with a kind of manipulated reality because, as the other characters explain, “Wanda is rewriting reality” (Schaeffer 2021: episode 5). In other words, the protagonist has transformed an ordinary neighborhood into that perfect and harmonious suburb promoted by classic sitcoms, censoring anyone who dares to disrupt it, while also imprisoning its inhabitants, stripping them of their free will to the extent that they begin to hallucinate within Wanda’s fantasy. This explains why, on the periphery of the hexagonal space, some individuals exhibit erratic actions and repetitive behaviors, as if they were trapped in minor roles far removed from the central narrative, to which Wanda seems increasingly indifferent: as noted by actor Paul Bettany, the neighbors in the borders are “less well drawn by Wanda” (in Baruh 2021).

It is also worth noting that, at the edges of the simulated idyll, truly sinister gestures emerge. This, in fact, represents another characteristic of many utopias, which “often resemble dictatorships that impose a kind of happiness on their citizens at the cost of their freedom,” as Eco (2015: 315) once remarked. One may argue that contemporary fictions explore this uncanny strangeness with increasing insistence, particularly when they depict scenarios of disturbing perfection and excessive idealization, only to unfold narratives that blur the lines between horror and science fiction. Examples of this can be found in films such as *The Stepford Wives* (Frank Oz,

2004), *The Island* (Michael Bay, 2005), and the classic *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998), as well as more recent TV series like *Severance* (AppleTV, 2022) and *The Rehearsal* (HBO Max, 2022). This interpretive approach encourages us to remain wary of every seemingly aseptic setting, drawing us into the effort to expose simulacra, where, much like during the pandemic, society is frozen in time and space.

In any case, the focus is not on the explanations provided by the TV series, which ultimately lead to the familiar trope of dangerous femininity and witchcraft (all encapsulated in one of the strongest obsessions of American culture: the Salem witch trials). What is of greater interest for our analysis is not the magical exculpation, but rather what motivates the protagonist – an issue that warrants further exploration.

When questioned about the aberration committed against the inhabitants of Westview, Wanda states, “I don’t know how I did it. I only remember feeling completely alone. Empty. I just ... Endless nothingness” (Schaeffer 2021, episode 6). In this statement, we find the catalyst for her vivid fantasy: Wanda’s pain, caused by a series of traumatic events that have pushed her to a state bordering on psychosis. This sequence of losses begins with her parents, followed by the death of her brother (as narrated in *Avengers: The Age of Ultron*, 2015), and ultimately culminates with Vision (in *Avengers: Infinity War*, 2018), whom she is unable to say goodbye to, triggering the creation of this uncontrollable utopia. An entire world crafted to continue the unfinished love story, shaped by the material that served as a refuge during Wanda’s youth: television series, which also shaped her understanding of love. Art becomes both an escape and a pedagogy of love: through these popular fictions (which, by the way, emerge from the same historical context that consolidates suburban life, Gómez Ponce 2021b), Wanda constructs an entire “contract” of genre interpretation, the consequences of which will prove to be dire.

One might recall Slavoj Žižek’s assertion that when something is too traumatic, “it shatters the coordinates of our reality, and we have to fictionalize it” (Fiennes and Žižek 2006). Wanda pushes this idea to the extreme, and in each episode, she confronts different stages of her grief, from denial to acceptance. The protagonist opts for a safe framework, as the rules of the genre permit: within the semiotic structure of the sitcom, only trivial problems arise, each resolved by the end of the episode. These fictions even present a world where time seems to stand still, inhabited by amnesiac characters trapped in a loop that resets with each new encounter. In this perpetual present, both love and pain can be experienced without interruption – two emotions that are not as mutually exclusive as they may seem, as Vision poignantly observes: “What is grief, if not love persevering?” (Schaeffer 2021: episode 6).

Between trauma and escapism, *WandaVision* captures a subjectivity tethered to forces beyond its comprehension, thus skirting the contours of an epochal climate that made us oscillate between loss and the temporary consolation offered by fiction. However, what critics have highlighted regarding this situation is worth noting:

The show does champion entertainment as a safe and welcoming space for those looking for an escape, but it also acts as a cautionary tale for those who employ it as an unhealthy coping mechanism ... The show's release during a global pandemic, a time when people are turning to entertainment as a means of coping more than ever, drives home the point. As the audience looks to escape their reality by tuning into television shows, Wanda rewrites the fabric of her reality by living in one. (Sequeira 2021)

In conclusion, Wanda's fantasy suggests that "making strange" – as Kristeva has theorized when considering this notion – is a highly effective defense mechanism in the face of an unbearable reality, especially when concealed behind the façade of an idyllic time. However, we must not forget that the utopia represents an evasive dream, one that risks exiling us from our engagement with the present: that is, escaping the consequences of the past, from promises unfulfilled and affections postponed, and from the future that always remains just out of reach. This is the uncanny strangeness capable of placing us in a time and space that alienates us from our emotional and ethical responsibility toward the world, and, particularly, our own place in history.

The televised utopia reaches a rather bleak conclusion, although it resolves the emotional arcs with Vision and the other relationships, as required by the chosen genre – the sitcom. The series finale hinted that this strange event triggered a certain disorder in the world, one that the current Marvel films are likely to explore. Despite the nostalgic pull of recovering the aesthetics of classic sitcoms as part of television history, *WandaVision* effectively presents various forms of strangeness: some that disorient the typical Marvel superhero viewer, while others resonate with an audience who will recognize certain signs of past times. Notably, by the final episodes, one of the characters encapsulates Wanda's actions by stating that she ultimately "put up her own quarantine" (Schaeffer 2021: episode 4).

We immediately recognize that the TV series addresses various epochal symptoms of the pandemic era, albeit without directly alluding to it. By opting for the familiar setting of domestic life, it subtly reminds us that this environment also symbolizes a kind of self-imposed imprisonment: the constant feeling of being suspended in a time that refuses to move forward and in an unchanging space; a place where affections were postponed, along with the farewells to those who have passed, leaving no opportunity for closure. In other words, it is a space where the present encloses itself.

In either case, it seems that these recent TV series fail to alert us to the risks of our nostalgic retreat, of waiting for that idealized and utopian "normality" that captivates society. In that gesture lies, perhaps, the most significant lesson that mass fictions like *WandaVision* offer: that today, it is no longer necessary to create extraordinary or fantastical worlds to disorient viewers, as the mere ordinariness of daily life appears to suffice, thus losing its utopian quality. However, such a lesson

should not discourage us: after all, Fredric Jameson (2005) once stated that the best utopian forms are, in fact, those that fail, for they are the ones that make us aware of our ideological captivity.

4 Concluding remarks

Certainly, the uncanny strangeness has, in our time, shifted its meaning. As noted earlier (Gómez Ponce 2020), the supernatural no longer astonishes us: vampires, zombies, and other extraordinary beings scarcely disturb us, as they have become integral to our popular encyclopedia, much like serial killers who, rather than horrify, captivate us. The apocalypse is no longer a pressing concern either: environmental disasters, nuclear explosions, extraterrestrial invasions, and other eschatological fears have been exhausted to the point of parody, both by Hollywood and, ironically, by nature itself, which, in recent times, has displayed remarkable creativity in attempting to extinguish the human species. Fisher (2016) aptly observed that the twenty-first century has left little room for the strange.

TV series like *WandaVision*, however, illustrate that another form of uncanny strangeness is possible. One may say that this operation refers to the sensation left by COVID-19, one that managed to infiltrate the very concept of normality, revealing its fragility. This includes the dislocation we felt when returning to a world that suddenly seemed unfamiliar after the isolation period. Did we not experience uncanny strangeness when the streets were once again populated? Wasn't it perplexing to see faces without masks, people dancing or hugging, and engaging in other everyday activities? Along with the series of unusual events that recent years have brought, it has become impossible to remain unaffected: much like Alice adapting to the oddities of Wonderland, our society has gotten "so much into the way of expecting nothing but out-of-the-way things to happen, that it seemed quite dull and stupid for life to go on in the common way" (Carroll 1998: 14).

A semiology of uncanny strangeness, as we developed here with Kristeva, reveals that what appears strange today is, paradoxically, the most familiar. To put it more precisely: the inconceivable – if not the indiscernible – has been elevated to the status of "normality." This is no trivial matter, particularly in the post-pandemic era, which has hastily been labeled the "new normal," as if such a term could provide comfort by suggesting that everything will return to an idealized stage, a past period that we now romanticize with nostalgia, much like Wanda did with her beloved sitcoms. The study of a specific TV series thus allowed us to test a methodological framework grounded in semiotic inquiry, with particular attention to genre conventions, aesthetic codes, and affective registers. The analysis demonstrated how a series can manipulate familiar narrative structures – namely, the sitcom format and

the superhero genre – to generate a specific form of strangeness. However, different forms of strangeness may emerge across different narrative objects by tracking the displacement of generic frames, the intrusion of disruptive elements (such as tonal shifts, formal anomalies, and narrative discontinuities, or what we broadly refer to as transient estrangement, following Suvin), and, consequently, the cultural codes through which a viewer's interpretive contract is regulated.

In conclusion, it can be said that there are no inherently strange phenomena, but rather a “way of looking”: in the hidden signs that we bring to the surface, in what we signify as familiar, and in the semiotic procedures we employ to narrate certain phenomena that place us in the realm of the unknown. The uncanny strangeness confronts us with our approach to semiotizing the world, with the meaning we ascribe to what is real. It is evident that the purpose of art (even mass art) is precisely to address the fragility of the categories through which we interpret the world. This, after all, is its semiotic function: to question the ruptures in reality and the social fabric, particularly when they result from the profound changes and transformations in cultural mentality (Arán 2024).

It is within the realm of artistic creation that we must continue to seek new directions for investigating the semiology of the uncanny strangeness. After all, as Kristeva (1991: 188) would argue, why should we cease to interrogate those narratives, “depriving ourselves of both the dangers and the pleasures of strangeness”?

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