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AI, POPULAR CULTURE, AND ORDINARY ETHICS

Sandra Laugier[1]

[1]*Université Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne, Institute des sciences juridique et philosophique de la Sorbonne ISJPS, UMR CNRS 8103*

Abstract

Despite the growing number of publications and studies on TV series, little attention has been paid to their role in transmitting and sharing values, developing democracy, raising awareness of various threats (such as terrorism or health and climate crises), and promoting social inclusion, gender equality, and diversity. This article argues that television series constitute a central space of contemporary ethical life, where viewers engage with moral dilemmas, social conflicts, and forms of collective imagination. Drawing on philosophical approaches to ordinary ethics and pragmatist aesthetics, it highlights how popular culture contributes to moral education and democratic reflection. It examines the growing role of artificial intelligence in shaping cultural consumption through recommendation systems, raising new ethical challenges related to visibility and diversity. By situating TV series at the intersection of culture, politics, and AI, the paper calls for renewed analytical frameworks capable of addressing their transformative social power.

Keywords

Television series; Ordinary ethics; Popular culture; Artificial intelligence

Despite the growing number of publications and studies on TV series, little attention has been paid to their role in transmitting and sharing of values, developing democracy, raising awareness of various threats (such as terrorism or health and climate crises), and promoting social inclusion, gender equality, and diversity.

When Stanley Cavell's "The Fact of Television" was published in *Daedalus* in 1982, it was a new theme for philosophy. Since the early 1980s, however, the field of television studies has entered the mainstream academy and TV productions became the subject of numerous philosophical investigations. In the 2020s, we no longer need to contend with a legitimation crisis: there is a corpus of good television and a shared competency for reading it among both the audiences and scholars alike. At the same time, there is also a growing need for deeper analysis, which can be explained, at least in part, by the effects of the pandemic that led many to turn with a renewed attention to the small screen. Additionally, television fiction has recently undergone profound transformation due to digital media, networks, and platforms, which have expanded exponentially beyond the origins of the traditional television set.

I aim here to examine the ethical, political, and cultural significance of television series and popular culture in contemporary societies. TV series are not merely entertainment but key sites of moral education, democratic reflection, and collective experience, shaping how individuals understand social issues and forms of life. The first part traces the philosophical foundations of studying popular culture, drawing on Stanley Cavell as well as pragmatist aesthetics to show how television extends the ethical role once attributed to cinema. The second part explores how TV series function as instruments of social awareness and transformation, addressing themes such as democracy, terrorism, gender equality, and political conflict while fostering viewers' moral and emotional engagement. The last part is dedicated to the geopolitical dimension of popular culture, analysing TV series and global phenomena like Korean cultural production as forms of soft power that influence international perceptions and democratic values. It discusses the challenges posed by the explosion of streaming content and algorithmic recommendation systems, arguing for new ethical tools that empower viewers and recognize their interpretive agency.

My claim is that TV series and popular culture constitute a central arena of contemporary ethical life: by shaping shared experiences, political imagination, and forms of judgment, they function as powerful tools of democratic education whose analysis requires both philosophical attention and new AI frameworks. In this context, artificial intelligence emerges as both a mediator and a stake of the analysis: AI-driven recommendation systems

increasingly shape what audiences watch, how cultural visibility is distributed, and which narratives gain prominence. This raises new ethical questions about algorithmic bias, cultural diversity, and the autonomy of viewers, positioning AI not only as a technological tool but as a key actor in the contemporary ecology of popular culture.

From Film to TV Ethics

Popular culture—and especially TV series—are a central arena where ethics, politics, technology, and everyday experience intersect. .The reality of television today is also the power of TV series and their grip on contemporary viewers. This power appears to emerge from television's integration into everyday life, and through the constancy of our contact with fictional characters, which can continue for years or even decades. Cavell defined the ontology of film by "the question of what becomes of particular people, and specific locales, and subjects and motifs"—and adds that the "source of data for its answer" is "just those objects and people that are in fact to be found in the succession of films, or passages of films, that matter to us"[1]: this is also our form of life with TV series.

Erwin Panofsky in his 1936 essay "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures," was the first to insist on the fact that "film was first and foremost created as popular entertainment without aesthetic pretension, and 're-established that dynamic contact between art production and art consumption, which…is sorely attenuated—if not entirely interrupted—in many other fields of artistic endeavor.'"[2] Today, this understanding and defense of an art that has not lost contact with its audience extends beyond cinema and into TV series and other popular cultural practices. TV series, previously seen as either mind-numbing or ideologically driven mass-market products—or as guilty pleasures for intellectuals in need of entertainment—have now become objects of study. Above all, and in line with the thinking of Cavell and with the pragmatist aesthetics that came before him, they have come to be seen as sites where artistic and hermeneutic authority is re-appropriated, and where spectators are re-empowered through the constitution of unique experiences. The question of their status as *art* remains.

Reflection on popular culture and its "ordinary" objects—such as "mainstream" movies—leads to a transformation of theory and of criticism, as Cavell was one of the first to realize. Cavell is less concerned with inverting artistic hierarchies or the relationship between theory and practice than with the transformation of the self, necessitated by our encounter with new experiences. The framework that he proposed for cinema—that of cultural democracy—is also valid for TV series. To use it, we must also prove the need for TV criticism, and define its form—a challenge raised by the great critic and analyst of popular culture, Robert Warshow, who, in *The Immediate Experience* (a title that has the ring of a pragmatist proclamation), maintained that:

> We are all "self-made men" culturally, establishing ourselves in terms of the particular choices we make from among the confusing multitude of stimuli that present themselves to us. Something more than the pleasures of personal cultivation is at stake when one chooses to respond to Proust rather than to Mickey Spillane, to Laurence Olivier in Oedipus Rex rather than Sterling Hayden in The Asphalt Jungle. And when one has made the "right" choice, Mickey Spillane and Sterling Hayden do not disappear; perhaps no one gets quite out of sight of them. There is great need, I think, for a criticism of "popular culture" which can acknowledge its pervasive and disturbing power without ceasing to be aware of the superior claims of the higher arts, and yet without a bad conscience.[3]

In this context, we may redefine popular culture: no longer as "entertainment" (even if that is part of its social and moral mission), but also as a collective labor of moral education, as the production of values and ultimately of reality. This culture (comprised of blockbuster movies, TV series, music, videos shared on the Internet, etc.) plays a crucial role in re-evaluating ethics, and in constituting real democracy on the basis of images, scenes, and characters—on the basis of values that are expressed and shareable.

In spite of the progress that has been made in the philosophy of film, we are lacking analyses of the ethical stakes, modes of expressivity, and moral education at work in TV series and in the experiences of their viewers. Over the past few years, a debate has emerged in the study of ethics over the importance of the ordinary. Many continue to think of ethics as principally concerned with producing a list of rules to follow and infringe upon, and as a domain constituted by judgements that take a step back from the whirl of activity in everyday life. But in contrast with this conventional view, proponents of *ordinary ethics*, often in conjunction with the ethics of care, have argued that ethics neither can be grasped by reference to a set of preexistent rules, nor by attending to a

[1] Stanley Cavell, "What Becomes of Things on Film," Philosophy and Literature 2, no. 2 (Fall 1978): 257

[2] Quoted by Marc Cerisuelo, "L'importance du cinéma," in *Stanley Cavell: Cinéma et philosophie*, ed. Marc Cerisuelo and Sandra Laugier (Presses de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2001), 19.

[3] Robert Warshow, *The Immediate Experience: Movies, Comics, Theatre & Other Aspects of Popular Culture*, Expanded Edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), xxxvii.

metaphysically autonomous realm of moral action. Rather, they see ethics as embedded in human situations, affects and practices - that is, in a whole human form of life continually being remade and expressed in TV series.
A further, related need has emerged for thinking about the possibility of *ordinary aesthetics*, which while intimately linked with ordinary ethics would merit its own investigation. By ordinary aesthetics I mean aesthetic concerns are intrinsic to human forms of life and not merely within a bounded domain of rarefied social action, occupied with the production of general rules governing form or content or criteria for "great" or "modern" or "innovative" art. I mean everyday life itself is a site of aesthetic interest and criticism. While connected to the aesthetics *of* the everyday (Cavell 2004) ordinary aesthetics emphasizes what gives life to aesthetic concepts, that is their embeddedness within human forms of life. It is part of the texture of the everyday, in poetry and painting for sure, but also watching TV.

The expansion of art audiences and the creation of new forms, agents, and models of artistic practice have transformed the very definition of art, challenging elitist notions of "great art." Dewey' *Art and Experience* was essential to this transformation. An ordinary aesthetics must defend not the specificity of the individuals who create works, nor works as such, but a common and shareable aesthetic experience. One of Cavell's aims and greatest achievements is to have shown the "intelligence that a film has *already* brought to bear in its making," which amounts to letting a work of art *have its own voice* in what philosophy will say about it.[4]

Understanding the relation of cinema to philosophy thus implies learning what it means to "check one's experience," to use the expression from *Pursuits of Happiness*[5]—that is, what it means to examine one's own experience and "let the object or the work of your interest teach you how to consider it."[6] This means that one must educate one's experience so that one can be educated by it. There is an inevitable circularity at work here: *having* an experience requires trusting one's experience. This role of trust in education makes popular culture an essential resource for moral education.

That which Cavell claimed for Hollywood popular movies—their capacity to create a culture shared by millions—has been transferred onto other corpora and practices, in particular, onto TV series, which have taken up, if not taken over, the task of educating the public. Cavell's argument in *Cities of Words* was ethical if we redefine morality in new terms: no longer in terms of "the good" or judgment, but rather the *exploration* of forms of life. For Cavell, there is an affinity between cinema—*good* movies—and a particular understanding of the good, an understanding that is foreign to dominant moral theories The importance and benefit of extending this aesthetic and ethical method to include TV series is equally ethical, for these works are as shared and public as movies were in the 20th century; they reach a significant audience and play a moral and educational role.

TV Series that Change the World

Television series have long been undervalued as a private genre. Their reception has been built up not in cinemas, which are public spaces but first and foremost in the domestic sphere, where the TV is a piece of furniture, and the public is often women. They have a long-term presence in our ordinary lives, as we follow the characters for year or even decades (15 years of *ER* and even longer for *OnePiece*). Historically, the series has been a minor medium, focusing primarily on the world of the family or close sociability. The strength and innovation of series lies in their integration into everyday life over the long term, in the ordinary association with characters who become close to us, no longer on the classic model of identification, but of association and even attachment.

Popular culture plays a crucial role in building a genuine democracy based on values that are expressed and shared. The vocation of popular culture is the philosophical education of a *public* (in Dewey's sense) rather than the institution and enhancement of a socially targeted corpus. Popular culture does not refer to a primitive or inferior version of culture, but rather to a shared democratic culture that creates common values and serves as a resource for a form of self-education. Public and popular forms of cultural production are democratic in the sense that, today, as witnessed by the proliferation of blogs, amateur criticism and discussions, they give each individual the ability to *trust his or her own judgement*. TV series and the place they and their universes have come to occupy in viewers' lives demonstrate the relationship of series to individual experience and the fact that they continue the educational task undertaken by popular cinema, that of an education that is indissociably subjective and public.

The material of television series allows for contextualisation, historicity (thanks to the regular rhythms of viewing and their long-term duration), familiarisation and the education of perception through attention to the expressions and gestures of the characters we are getting to know and become family. One example is the series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Joss Whedon, 1997-2003), a feminist work designed to morally transform a mixed teenage audience, featuring a seemingly ordinary teenager capable of fighting evil.

[4] Stanly Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 10.
[5] Ibid., 12.
[6] Ibid., 10.

TV series provide strong common cultural referents that populate ordinary conversations and political debates, creating a new public space. The study of television series is, therefore, not only a resource for reflecting on current issues but also a tool for social and political transformation. Since the 1990s, TV series have had the ambition to provide moral education: among the most classic, *ER* (and today *The Pitt*) constantly articulated the demands of private life and work, and the internal conflicts involved in patient care. In its 15 seasons, *ER* covered a number of public health issues, such as AIDS, inequality of access to care, disability, the end of life, etc. Today, many series are highlighting political issues that have hitherto been insufficiently dealt with, whether violence against women in the mini-series *Unbelievable*, racism in *When They See Us, Watchmen, Lupin*, or the difficulties of the *care* professions in *Maid* - in each case with an educational and transformative ambition, the desire to draw our attention to neglected or forgotten situations.

The rise of post-apocalyptic series (such as *The Dead, The Leftovers, The Handmaid's Tale, Chernobyl, The Last of Us)* signals a greater attention to the risk of environmental or other catastrophes and a of general loss of values and freedom.

TV Series and Terrorism: US Soft Power

In recent decades, TV series have played an important role in raising awareness of the risk of terrorism. There has been a significant increase in the number of films and series revealing what goes on behind the scenes in democratic regimes grappling with the terrorist threat (*24h, Hatufim, Homeland, The Looming Tower, The Bureau; Fauda, False Flag, Kalifat, Teheran; Our Boys; The Girl from Oslo; No Man's Land; The Undeclared War; Lioness,The Agency etc.*). These works and themes are certainly indicative of the moral state of the world, and can be analysed in terms of holding up a mirror to societies and their crises and anxieties. But they can also be understood as instruments for educating the public as part of a *soft power* that needs to be analysed, criticised and controlled, which both opens up innovative perspectives and creates a certain number of risks (influence, propaganda, etc.). The reflexive capacity of these works, gives them a role in a collective democratic conversation.

The upheaval of narrative practices in the 21st century, combined with real inventiveness on the part of creators, has led to a change in the moral ambition of series. This has also led to an expansion of production beyond the American classics. In addition to the Israeli series, which really *defined the subject* of "security series" through the richness and topicality of their output, we should note the quality and originality of European political series (such as the French *Baron noir* and *Le Bureau des Légendes*, then *Sentinelles* and *Cœurs noirs*, which analysed French action in Africa, the Norwegian *Occupied*, the Swedish *Kalifat*, the Danish *Conflict* the British *The State* and the German *Deutschland 1983-86-89*). It's as if this genre of security series was an opportunity to undermine American domination of series by multiplying the political points of view and demanding more from the viewer. From the outset, *Le Bureau des Légendes* aimed to be better and truer than *Homeland*, more realistic and sometimes boring.

By virtue of their aesthetic format (long running, weekly and seasonal regularity, often viewed in a domestic setting), the attachment to the characters that they engender, the democratisation and diversification of the ways in which they are viewed, their growing presence on platforms and with new players (Apple TV+ has become a specialist in the genre with *Teheran*), security series allow, on many subjects, a specific form of education and *audience* building (through the expression and transmission of values and problems). This does not mean going so far as to devise ways for series to influence decision-making processes and have an impact beyond their moral power, but we can try to take into account the powers of popular fiction in the analysis and perception of violence (terrorist violence, but also State violence). This means taking into account and demonstrating their degree of *reflexivity*, while at the same time reconsidering the question of 'realism', here too, no longer as verisimilitude or resemblance to reality, but understood in terms of impact and action on the 'real'.

The invention of the cinema was a radical transformation of the human form of life, the end of what Dewey called the "chasm between ordinary and aesthetic experience" (*Art as Experience*). It is necessary from now on to take into account a new transformation, the end of the dichotomy of the public and the private space: the "privatization" of the public and the "publicization" of the private introduced together by the transformative power of TV series. It's clear that the global circulation of US series (from *Homeland* to *Game of Thrones*), as well as a growing number of ambitious series produced in European countries (*Borgen, Lupin, The Bureau*), now in Asian countries (Korea) has helped to draw attention to a number of social, health, political, racial, environment and security issues.

Among the most classic, *ER* has always articulated the demands of personal and professional life and the internal conflicts of patient care. In its 15 seasons, *ER* addressed a range of public health issues, including AIDS, unequal access to health care, abortion, disability, end of life. Another 20th century classic, *The West Wing*, was a powerful reflection on freedom and democracy. Today, many series e.g. *The Pitt* wich inherits *ER* in its educationall ambition, highlight political and social issues that have been insufficiently addressed - whether violence against women underfunding of hospitals and destruction of public health, - in each case with an educational and transformative ambition, a desire to draw our attention to neglected situations.

The characters of television fiction are so well anchored, morally guided, and clear in their moral expressions—without being archetypal—that they can be released and opened to the imagination and usage of all viewers, entrusted to us—as if it were up to each of us to take care of them. The television actor or actress has the mysterious capacity for what Cavell defined as "photogenesis" (*The World Viewed*): the ability to constitute the spectator's experience. Thus, the modes of expression of TV series' actors (their moral texture, style of speech and gesture) is a moral resource offered by popular culture. This leads to revising the status of morality, and locating itnot in rules, transcendental norms, or principles of decision-making, but rather in attention to ordinary behaviors, to everyday micro-choices, to individuals' styles of expressing themselves and *textures of being.*

There is a logic of *empowerment* that allows viewers to perfect their skills in an area that is unfamiliar to many, and gives them a better grasp of political situations. In that respect, series like *Homeland* and *LBDL* serve as intelligibility matrices that enable their viewers to understand the world around them, but also to demonstrate their creativity.

The series *24* (2001-2010) raised awareness of the risk of moral degeneration in democracies engaged in a global fight against terrorism - while at the same time visually preparing the way for the figure of a black president. In 2004, *The West Wing* featured a minority president, a character inspired at the time by a brilliant young black senator from Illinois. Against this backdrop of the development of political series, it is hard not to be struck by the radical rapprochement between fiction and reality with the emergence of a TV series actor, Volodymyr Zelensky, hero of the Ukrainian series *Servant of the People* (2015-2019), which enabled him to enter politics and to be elected President of Ukraine in 2019 when the 3rd season of his series began. Zelensky *directs* the script for his series, supported by a political party that bears the very name of the series. This is not the first time that a TV series has touched on reality, as we saw with *The West Wing* and Obama, but never has the impact been so direct. It's remarkable that this extreme example is not a US series, but a Ukrainian one, clearly highlighting the globalisation of series production. TV series have become such an integral part of viewers' lives that they are not only, as they say, "a mirror of society", but also *act* on the world precisely through this serial mode.

The Handmaid's Tale anticipated the formidable attacks on women's rights by the Trump administration and the US Supreme Court, to be followed by growing attacks against women in general and black women in particular. *La casa de Papel* has provided slogans and sounds for the mobilisations of recent years. *Homeland*'s fifth season 5, written in 2014, featured European jihadist cells, and with the November 2015 attacks taking place during the season's broadcast, the series' dialogue was changed in post-production months after filming, using the voice of a character in the background. In four magnificent and brutal first seasons, the Israeli series *Fauda* presents a group of Israeli anti-terrorist *agents undercover* in the occupied territories. It even proposed an episode in which Hamas managed to attack Israel by destroying the fences, but the production rejected the idea for lack of realism. The final season of *Fauda* showed the team of heroes ambushed in Gaza (Actor Lior Raz, who plays Doron Kavillio, the hero of *Fauda*, travelled to southern Israel to help the population targeted by Hamas attacks, deliberately mixing his popular role with the reality of the war).

But... Martin Sheen was never President of the United States, nor was Dennis Haysbert, who played David Palmer in *24*. Zelensky, on the other hand, became the *showrunner of* Ukraine's destiny. It was a series that gave him the role of a lifetime and enabled him to move from *soft power* to hard power. *Now, even in a war situation, Zelensky is still working with scriptwriters to determine his media and political agenda, using all the new tools of political propaganda: Twitter-X, Instagram, viral images, memes, videos, and broadcast public speeches.*

Series and Anticipation

The series *For All Mankind* (Apple TV+, 2019-) takes anticipation a step further. After Zelensky's accession to the role of the President he played in *Servant of the People*, it is further proof of the anticipatory power of TV series.Unlike *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Westworld* or *House of Cards* or *Black Mirror*, *For All Mankind* is neither space science fiction nor one of the dystopias that have shaped our TV and political culture in recent years. It's an uchronia, or an alternative future based on a simple and brilliant premise: what would have happened to space exploration if the USSR had not abandoned it space program in the 1970s? Consider, for example, the staggering opening scene: it is 1969 and the whole world awaits man's first step on the moon. There are classic images of television viewers glued to the screens around the world, and shots of NASA's control room. A cosmonaut emerges from the module, climbs down the ladder and plants the flag of the USSR in the lunar dust. *For All Mankind* shows the U.S., and the rest of humanity, taking a different path, transformed by the pursuit of space conquest and an East-West rivalry that causes all kinds of political changes. And like any good series, *For All Mankind* is rooted in a cast of characters, mixing figures inspired by history (Wernher von Braun, Deke Slayton) and fictional characters who bring this alternate history of humanity to life: such as Ed Baldwin (played by the excellent Joel Kinnaman), an "old-fashioned" astronaut and Danielle Poole (Krys Marshall), a black engineer who takes her place as mission manager. Baldwin learns the hard way that values don't make you happy. Men are vulnerable... and women take over.

The originality of *For All Mankind* lies in its feminism. In this alternate reality, the USSR sends a woman to the moon in the second episode, prompting NASA, in its ever-competitive spirit, to put women on rockets in the early days of space conquest. This makes viewers wonder why they weren't there in the first place. But more directly, the element of fictional storytelling leads to a broadening of the cast of *For All Mankind*, introducing a whole troupe of female characters, not just the "wives": women are astronauts, engineers, heroines, and soon, presidents! This expansion cleverly leads us to question the concept of humanity in the title of the series (the *Mankind*). Why "Mankind"? We should be talking about Womankind instead, through strong characters like Margo Madison, who makes it to NASA command and finds herself at the heart of the Cold War. In this alternate reality, women are everywhere and in positions of power. They are equal to men, but black astronauts still take longer to establish themselves. The series present us with a form of life that is no longer based on consensual liberal values, while pointing towards issues of systemic racism that could be overcome. By staging ordinary lives within other presents, reinvented pasts or forked futures, series create a new public space. They are a terrain for experimentation and political critique; they are also a place for political anticipation and collective reflection on the future, creating new futures.

Power and Recommendation

The number of TV series available to viewers has grown at an unprecedented rate. This is mainly due to the proliferation of various streaming platforms, which, in addition to their original productions, broadcast series from different channels and different countries. One consequence of this profusion is the increasing difficulty for viewers to navigate through this selection and make informed choices about the programs that are likely to interest them. In 2022, 31% of viewers reported spending more than 30 minutes finding a new series to watch after finishing one. The increase in the number of series on offer has not been accompanied by improvements in selection and recommendation tools or critical advisory practices. Viewers therefore often have no choice but to follow the platform's algorithmic recommendations. Alternatively, they rely on very general descriptions based mostly on metadata and presented in the form of lists, directories, or rankings, without explanations or analysis. They end up relying on hunches or the advice of friends. When you consider that on average, each viewer uses 2.2 different SVOD services (*Subscription Video On Demand*), this makes recommendations incomplete and frustrating, because they are not cross-platform. As viewers become more demanding, they seek new evaluation criteria that are not addressed by current recommendation tools, such as the type of aesthetic experience offered, the themes addressed, hybrid genres, or the objectives targeted (e.g. ethical or educational objectives).

As discussed above, TV series have an ethical and political impact on viewers. Series viewers enrich their experiences and refine their judgment by projecting themselves into worlds that are often inaccessible to the general public, becoming attached to all kinds of characters, integrating series in everyday conversations, and exploring specific genres,. Therefore, we need to empower viewers by allowing them to build and mobilize their cultural, ethical, and political experience with greater autonomy and to circumvent the algorithmic biases resulting from platforms' economic interests and the arbitrariness of certain thematic groupings based on metadata. Since series contribute to the construction of a common representation of democratic life, how can we leverage this knowledge of series by viewers who are also citizens? What is needed is a breakthrough in the recommendation systems design.

Amidst the mass of video data that series constitute, both individually and even more so collectively, how can we find a motif, a scene, a particular statement, a particular character, or, for an even greater challenge, a particular idea, atmosphere, or emotion? Are there scenes or episodes that are more important or memorable than others, and if so, how can we identify and locate them? Here again, the tools available to the public are insufficient. They underestimate viewers' cultural, moral, and technical capabilities, their agility in moving from one platform to another, and their ability to form judgments. This reinforces our view that ethical TV series search tools, as opposed to traditional TV series search tools, are technological tools with enormous potential in the audiovisual industry and beyond. Viewers' lifestyles have changed. Platforms have undoubtedly strengthened the position of English-language productions, but have also led to the circulation of Turkish, Korean, Israeli, and African series with fans in every country. One problem with existing systems is that they rely on simple algorithms that only take into account a limited set of factors, such as past user ratings or the popularity of the series (understood in a simplistic way). Often, they recommend series similar to those the user has already seen or series liked by other users who have a similar viewing history. As a result, they fail to recommend series that the user *might* enjoy, what the user would like to watch or discover.

Popular Culture and Soft Power

Popular culture is a vital strategic resource for the defense and promotion of democratic values. In the current geopolitical landscape, characterized by intensifying conflicts, deepening ideological divides, and rising environmental and social crises, the urgency of this mission has never been greater. The Russian invasion of

Ukraine, China's increasingly aggressive stance towards Taiwan, the growing alliances between authoritarian states, and the war in Gaza exacerbate global instability. The advance of authoritarian and populist movements in both the United States and Europe further challenges the normative foundations of democracy.

TV fiction represents a major opportunity in terms of the classic opposition between "hard power" (military and economic) and "soft power" (culture, ideology), as explained by Nye about "soft power"[7], a concept that becomes much more relevant today: the intangible components of power and non-coercive means of asserting one's own interests may be as important as someblatant demonstrations of force. EuropeanTV producers consider fiction to be an essential component of contemporary strategic power: films and series can contribute to the fight against disinformation, propaganda, and conspiracy theories by dispelling myths and fantasies about the contemporary security environment. Security films and series are then presented as possible responses to the strategies deployed by certain actors on the international stage.

Because of its wide reach, popular culture enables diverse audiences to reflect collectively on sensitive political issues, formulate counter-narratives, resist authoritarian discourses, and rebuild social ties. We need to treat popular culture and the cultural and creative industries as essential tools for moral and political education, societal empowerment, and democratic participation, and as creative catalysts for conflict prevention. Popular culture provides a window into ever-changing societies and a space where powerful narratives are continuously (re)created. With the weakening of US cultural soft power and the development of alternative creative centers like Korea and Europe, there is a critical imperative to explore the potential of popular culture for the defense of democracy, to broaden the perspective on popular culture by extending an essentially US-oriented field of research to Europe and Asia, thereby decentering and challenging still-dominant conceptions of popular culture.

It is too early to say how US soft power will evolve and if the US CCI will still be conveying democratic, inclusive values. The various attacks on contemporary creation and on DEI in culture should alert us, even though the recent TV series production from Netflix, Showtime, and Disney seem yet immune to governmental pressures. We still need to acknowledge the shifts in cultural hegemony. The Korean Wave stands as a powerful case of soft power in action—demonstrating how a non-Western country can achieve global cultural influence without coercion. In recent years, global phenomena such as *Squid Game*, *Parasite*, and BTS have amplified Hallyu's reach, fostering transnational proximity—a sense of emotional and cultural closeness that transcends borders. Through shared narratives and symbolic meanings, Hallyu facilitates cross-cultural understanding and empathy among diverse global audiences. Hallyu has opened new pathways for emotional connection, mutual understanding, diversity and the formation of transnational cultural communities—communities that move beyond nationalist frameworks and contribute to a more inclusive and interconnected regional and global identity. Korean popular culture, particularly K-pop and K-dramas, deeply resonates with the values and sensibilities of young people around the world. This generates emotional engagement and civic activism. For instance, K-pop fans have participated in global social movements, transforming cultural fandom into platforms for solidarity and political expression.

Hallyu disrupts traditional West-to-East media flows and highlights the growing importance of cultural diversity in shaping global discourse. One of Hallyu's most significant impacts lies indeed in its ability to reshape historical perceptions and promote reconciliation, particularly in the context of Korea–Japan relations. Korean popular culture has gained widespread popularity among Japanese youth since many years. This cultural engagement has not only improved Korea's national image but also sparked dialogue around shared East Asian values, emotional sensibilities, and aesthetic traditions.

At the same time, the South Korean government actively promotes popular culture as a tool of public diplomacy to enhance its national image. Without relying on military or economic force, South Korea has succeeded in communicating messages of peace, inclusion, social justice and modern identity through cultural content. Initially noted for its violence, the *Squid Game* series offers a powerful critique of capitalism and social inequality by presenting a large number of endearing characters with diverse stories. In its third season, the series goes so far as to produce a strong critique of the democratic mechanisms that lead a dominant group to vote for the death of an individual.

Netflix's invention of Hallyu

Netflix and its recommendations system have been instrumental to the establishment of Hallyu's soft power. *Squid Game* owes some of its international success to being branded a "Netflix Original", which, in a narrow sense,

[7] Joseph S. Nye, Soft Power. *The Means to Success in World Politics*, Public Affairs,New York, 2004; "Get Smart: Combining Hard and Soft Power," *Foreign Affairs*, 2009 (88), pp. 160-163; *The Future of Power*, Public Affairs, New York, 2011.

means its is content that is commissioned, produced, and distributed by Netflix. However, many licensed Korean titles released via Netflix are also branded and recognized as Netflix Originals.[8] As has been convincingly demonstrated by Sojeoung Park and Seok-Kyeong Hong[9] viewers who are not particularly interested in Korean content, first perceived series like *Kingdom* (Lee, 2019) and *Extracurricular* (Yoon, 2020), among others, as Netflix Originals rather than as Korean content.

For them, it is this denomination that plays a critical role in their decision to watch these shows, since Netflix users equate Netflix Originals with high-quality, innovative, and addictive content. As noted by Sylvie, a 58-year-old French woman: "I watched it [Kingdom] because it appeared that Netflix co-produced it."

As Netflix segments their audiences based on taste rather than nationality[10], it lowers the entry barrier for foreign viewers who may not be familiar with Korean content or Korea. With the trust built through multiple experiences with Netflix Originals, viewers are less hesitant to try out foreign content if they are marked as Netflix Original. Also the Netflix strong and voluntarist subtitle politics for their originals (no mediocre AI subtitles, real subtitles for all countries and languages dubbing) has given a great advantage to Korean TV series. We can thus ask whether algorithmic work contributes to cultural imperialism or, rather, to cultural pluralism.

Viewers of Korean pay attention to the new cultural sensitivity of Korean Netflix Originals. While even fans of Korean content do not distinguish between the true Korean Netflix Originals and internationally Netflix-exclusive content produced by Korean studios, there is a growing perception among them that Korean Netflix Originals offer new cultural sensitivity due to the fact that they are targeting global audiences.

For instance, *Itaewon Class* (Jo, 2020), which featured diverse characters in terms of race and gender, was praised by for showing a new aspect of Korean content. See these interviews by Sojeoung Park and Seok-Kyeong Hong (*art. cit.*):

> This would not have been the case if the drama was produced by a Korean broadcasting company. [. . .] It was refreshing because previous Hallyu dramas rarely featured black or foreign characters. (Maria, 20-year-old Brazilian woman)

Hallyu now needs to be discussed as a wider phenomenon of reception, beyond a fandom culture or violent subculture, and works as mainstreaming taboo themes as noted by a viewer:

> However, Itaewon Class covers various taboos, and also includes an African Korean character. [. . .] I found this drama refreshing because it features main characters who are an ex-con, a transgender, an African Korean, and there was a character who was mentally unstable. These characters are different from the typical ones we have seen so far in Korean dramas. (Antonio, 33-year-old Brazilian man)

Netflix provides another significant momentum for Korean content to reach out to a wider audience. For viewers who do not necessarily distinguish between true Netflix Originals and Originals in a broader sense, this improvement in Korean content may be perceived as a change driven by the new platform. Netflix, as an investor and commissioner, guarantees a higher budget and less regulation of production and, as a content provider, facilitates distribution through high-quality streaming services and the ease of global access. This may be why other recent Korean content, such as *Parasite* (Kwak, Moon, Jang, & Bong, 2019) and *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021), have been winning recognition around the world. Allegorizing the common malaise of capitalist societies, the message of this content can be played out in multiple social contexts and appeal to global audiences.

In addition, watching Korean content can foster cultural sensitivity among non-Asian interviewees. Previous studies on the cultural and political implications of Hallyu's non-Western and non-white aspects have mostly focused on fandom engagement. Extending this phenomenon, Netflix exposes Korea to a global audience beyond its fan community. In contrast with the increased discrimination against Asians in France during the COVID-19 pandemic, Ann, a 30-year-old French woman, noted a positive change in her perception of Korea after accidentally watching Korean content during the lockdown:

> I used to have no interest in Asia, nor was I a fan of it. I never found their food to be particularly good and never had much interest in their culture. When I thought of Asia, China and Japan were the only countries that came to mind. Korea was not on my list. I also did not have a good image of Asian tourists. When I told my friends that I had started watching Korean dramas, they were like, "what happened?" Anyway, I accidentally started watching Korean dramas through Netflix. [. . .] I also planned a trip to Korea, persuading my friends

[8] Robinson, 2018.

[9] Sojeoung Park and Seok-Kyeong Hong, "Reshaping Hallyu: Global Reception of South Korean Content on Netflix » International Journal of Communication 17(2023), 6952–6971.

[10] Lee, 2022

> who had discriminated against Asians to come along. (Anne, 30-year-old French woman, quoted in Park and Hong 2023)

Korean content is now being consumed by a broader audience according to their personal tastes. Netflix plays the role of a cultural mediator first based on its recommender system, exposing users to a diverse range of Korean content. Korean Netflix Originals are attracting a wider audience by showcasing values, such as diversity and inclusion, compared with preceding Korean dramas. This suggests a new direction for future Korean content. Korean content industry is now tasked with satisfying ethical sensitivities around the world. By orienting toward diversity, and authenticity, Korean content is able to deliver a message that can be played out in multiple social contexts and appeal to global audiences, reinforcing Korean soft power at a moment when American soft power is threatened.

Conclusion and a Look Ahead

TV series and popular culture are not peripheral cultural artifacts but central sites where ethical reflection, political imagination, and democratic values are produced and negotiated. By bringing together cultural studies, ethics, and the contemporary challenges posed by digital platforms and AI-driven mediation, we have tried to open new avenues to rethink both the role of viewers and the design of cultural technologies. We hope to have succeeded to position popular culture as a crucial resource for understanding moral life today while opening a research agenda on how AI can be developed and evaluated in ways that support cultural diversity, critical judgment, and democratic empowerment.

Given the potential weakening of US soft power and the emergence of alternative creative centres and cultures, it is thus crucial to explore the potential of Korean culture in defending democracy and moral values. It significantly broadens the perspective on popular culture by extending the field of research, which is essentially Western, to North and Eastern Europe and, above all, to Asia, thereby decentering and decolonizing the TV experience.