

## THE RISE OF SERIES

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In 1988, two scholars from the University of the Basque Country, Santos Zunzunegui and Juan Zubillaga, published a short essay through the Episteme publishing house, titled *Tengan mucho cuidado ahí dentro* (Hill Street Blues o los variados matices del gris) [Let's be careful out there: Hill Street Blues, or the Many Shades of Grey]. The booklet contained a textual analysis of the American crime series *Hill Street Blues* (1981-1987), which was extremely popular in Spain at the time. I came upon this study years later, at the beginning of a new millennium, while starting work on my doctoral thesis in the library of the Department of Communication at the University of Seville. Any suggestion that television studies might have a place in Spanish scholarship was exciting to me in those days, and the fact that the text was co-authored by Santos Zunzunegui, whose book *Mirar la imagen* [*Watching the Image*] (Cátedra, 1984) was required reading for audiovisual media students, was especially encouraging.

In the two decades since, the prestige of television fiction among scholars has grown exponentially. Books about TV series are no longer a rarity in university libraries, and they are even given specific attention in academic programs. One of the reasons for this is that television series now offer possibilities for a level of formal innovation similar to that of contemporary film. The growing number of filmmakers involved in the creation of series (and their consequent inclusion at film festivals) is a sign that the boundaries between film and television are dissolving. Twice in recent years (in 2014 with *P'tit Quinquin*, and in 2017 with *Twin*

Peaks: The Return), the French film magazine *Cahiers du cinéma* has ranked a television series as the best film of the year.

TV series have also become a privileged way of understanding the world. Dominique Moïsi's book *La géopolitique des séries ou Le triomphe de la peur* [The Geopolitics of Series, or the Triumph of Fear] (Flammarion, 2017) explains this point well, observing that the social imaginaries of series like *House of Cards* (2013-2018) help to explain the spirit of the times better than any other contemporary cultural product. A cursory glance at the opinion pages of the newspapers or the social media accounts of politicians confirms it: TV series are now their points of reference for connecting with their readers or potential voters. For years, the Danish series *Borgen* (2010-2013, 2021-) was invariably cited when discussing coalition governments, while the *Iron Throne* in *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) has become the quintessential metaphor for power struggles in any organisation. The Spanish series *Money Heist* (*La Casa de Papel*, 2017-2021) turned into a worldwide phenomenon when its depiction of a bunch of thieves with anarchist inclinations was embraced as a symbol of social protest. It was followed by the South Korean series *Squid Game* (2021-), with its representation of the alienating effects of capitalism.

The rise of the TV series, however, refers not only to the quality or relevance of these cultural products, but also to a quantitative reality. Series production has accelerated thanks to the emergence of transnational video-on-demand services, a phenomenon that the American executive John Landgraf baptized in 2015 with the name "Peak TV": in 2010, a total of 216 seasons of TV series were produced in the United States, rising to 389 in 2014, and to 532 in 2019. It is no longer clear whether these productions should continue to be referred to as "television" series, however, given that they are designed for viewing on any device chosen by the spectator. This boom in production, which is now worldwide, has been articulated around processes of internationalisation, co-production formulas, and the transformation of certain elements of market logic that were once thought to be immutable, such as audience ratings. The success of a series is now determined by the companies themselves by means of very specific and somewhat opaque criteria. And although the opportunities for creators of series have never before been so great, the information on the profits those series are really making has never been so limited.

Television series are now an appealing object of study thanks to a vast, multifaceted, and constantly changing context. And scholars are becoming increasingly interested in analysing questions such as changes to creative industries, new narrative formulas and aesthetic strategies, their relationship with the present or with perspectives on the future, and the representation of new social imaginaries. What was once a niche field is now a major focus for researchers interested in audiovisual media and popular culture.