



More in
Common

s

The Endless Sea

"If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work, and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea."

Antoine de Saint Exupery

The Endless Sea is a new narrative project by More in Common inspired by Antoine de Saint Exupery's words. Over the course of our navigation we will explore a broad array of topics with the aim of shaping a bold new body of thought and practice in favor of social and environmental transformation.

JOURNAL DE BORD 02

"Where are you headed?" someone asks the travellers in a famous German novel¹.

"Always homeward bound" is the answer.

The journey is circular; one begins at home, crosses the ocean, the globe, and then returns home, albeit to a home that is different from the one left behind, different mainly because it has gained meaning from the departure, and from what one has learned during the course of navigation. Ulysses returns to Ithaca, which would not be Ithaca if he had not left it to go to the Trojan War. And it would not be Ithaca if, after the war, he had not had to face another ten years of adventures before finally being able to return home.

We too are, after all, at least metaphorically, headed home. Our aim being the search for a narrative that allows those of us who feel they have lost control over their lives, to return to inhabit their worlds, once more themselves, in a time of increasing uncertainty: a holistic vision of what a 'good life' might mean in the 2020s and beyond for our communities and our

¹ *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* by Novalis, quoted in C. Magris, *L'infinito viaggiare*, Milano, Garzanti, 2005.



societies. Being at home in the new normal implies departing from our current location, in order to return to where we are with a new perspective. Before we reach our destination though - assuming that such a destination is a place to be reached and not, as is more likely, an open-ended process - there are still many detours ahead of us, favourable winds as well as moments of lull are to be expected.

The first Journal, toured some outstanding utopias. This time I propose we venture into more familiar terrain, still little explored in terms of its political potential.

DETOUR 02 - TV SERIES

In the early 1990s, anthropologist Florence Dupont proposed somewhat provocatively to establish a link between "Homer and Dallas"². Her main argument was that TV series perform the same function that Homeric songs did in antiquity, that of "epic celebration". A spectacular tribute to a system of representation of the world that is shared by a large community of people who identify with it.

Unlike a novel or a film, a TV series consists of a succession of "ephemeral performances", at the same time similar and different. Like the song of the bard in antiquity, each episode adopts a circular temporality and is part of a ritual based on repetition. Like the Iliad and the Odyssey, TV series are susceptible to infinite ramifications and exploit an area of culture in which they are rooted and which viewers recognize: while the Iliad was about war and the Odyssey about sea travel, "Dallas" celebrated advertising images, and the American consumer culture common to all of that show's potential followers.

Based on these reflections, the anthropologist came to ask what was then considered an outrageous question, "What if Homer is the Dallas of Antiquity? What if Dallas is the Homer of the 1980s?".

² F.Dupont, *Homère et Dallas. Introduction à une critique anthropologique*, Paris, Hachette, 1991.



Thirty years later, the question seems less transgressive than it did when Dupont's book was first published. Today, series are recognized and celebrated as one of the greatest cultural expressions of our time and entire university courses and ponderous monographs are dedicated to their analysis.

I am not sure that Duncan Robinson, the Brussels correspondent of the Economist, has read the study on Homer and Dallas (also because he must not have been more than two or three years old when the book came out in France...), but his reasoning in a [very recent column](#) seems to follow the same logic.

"If Europeans are to share a currency, bail each other out in times of financial need and share vaccines in a pandemic, then they need to have something in common - even if it is just bingeing on the same series. Watching fictitious northern and southern Europeans tear each other apart 2000 years ago beats doing so in reality."

There is no denying the fact that TV series have become one of the few common narratives capable of federating millions of viewers across the European continent and beyond. Which is not to say, however, that they have produced a positive impact on the psychological and political outlook of the public. Not just because, as we saw in the Journal 01, most series tend to represent the future in dystopian terms. But also because, even when they take place in the present, series tend to offer a negative representation of the public sphere in general, and of the political one in particular, almost always portrayed as a world in which cynicism and conspiracies are the only game in town.

In the nineties, a climate of widespread optimism had allowed the development of series like "The West Wing", in which politics was represented as a competition of ideas between generally well-intentioned, decent people and policymaking as "a virtuous technocratic debate". The 2000s however have been dominated by much darker visions of the political process.



Series like “Scandal” and “House of Cards” portray politics as a place of intrigue and plotting ruled by Machiavellian characters that are totally lacking in values and morals, let alone any concern for the public good. Sitcoms turn the seat of power into a sick joke to the detriment of its citizens. [According to David Sirota](#), for example, “Veep” shows Washington for what it is: not merely a Hollywood for trolls, but “a place where painfully average and often untalented drones follow their star-fucking ambitions only to be caught in a soul-sapping system that devours whatever last remaining shreds of humanity they still possessed”.

I've never seen any opinion research on the subject, but frankly I wouldn't be surprised if political series were shown to have contributed to the public's disaffection with the political class. Even outside the field of the more strictly political ones, it is difficult not to notice that most series propose a depiction of reality in which only those who manage to bend the rules of the game in their favour win, while honesty and loyalty are almost never rewarded.

In his latest book³, Spanish journalist Esteban Hernández noted that most of the successful series, from “Breaking Bad” to “Game of Thrones”, are based on a Hobbesian representation of society, in which all blows are allowed and the strongest and most unscrupulous always prevail. For this reason, according to Hernández, series play a role in the epidemic of cynicism that currently runs through Western societies (not to mention conspiracy theories, which represent the narrative backbone of popular series such as “Casa de Papel” and countless others).

On an even more fundamental level, in her [wonderful Nobel lecture](#), Olga Tokarczuk, attributes a hypnotic power to today's new series over their audiences. According to her opinion, the way they continue endlessly from one season to the next means that they can never produce a liberating catharsis, but keep the viewers imprisoned in a sort of spell that is renewed from season to season without ever finding an outlet.

It is hard to dispute the validity of these (and other) criticisms. This said, I think you will notice as we proceed along our journey that the attitude of this

³ E.Hernández, Así empieza todo. A guerra oculta do siglo XXI, Barcelona, Ariel, 2020.



Journal is infused with a certain pirate spirit, whereby we will aim to accumulate a copious booty no matter what, from each of our incursions, in order to increase our travel supplies.

That's why it seems to me that there are at least two very valuable lessons we should learn from the boom in TV series.

1. FICTION AS A GATEWAY TO POLITICS

Notwithstanding their various flaws, series should still be regarded as a most remarkable collective endeavour, that mobilizes the best minds in the entertainment world and beyond (including writers, historians, political scientists, etc.) with the aim of providing the world's complexity with a palatable narrative form. In practice, it is as if all of these people had been brought together to produce a gigantic effort of analysis and storytelling based on the reality that surrounds us.

From the trafficking of diamond merchants in Antwerp to life in the black ghettos of Baltimore, from the internal conflicts of a newspaper's editorial office to those that run through a small community of miners in Alaska, there's not a single facet of what constitutes the human experience on our planet today, from the most banal to the most extreme, that has not been dissected by a showrunner or a screenplayer with the aim of giving it the form of a story, communicable and understandable far beyond the space-time frontiers in which it was originally located.

When an interviewer asked Adam Price why he had created the series "Borgen", the screenwriter replied that he wanted to make a boring and rather obscure subject like Danish politics understandable and exciting. And in fact, his series succeeded in doing just that, transforming the dark fortress that dominates Copenhagen into the site of human and political events that have fascinated millions of viewers across Europe and the world. An opportunity, not only to humanize and restore depth to the figures involved in public affairs, but also to address some of the most complex and controversial issues of political debate and the functioning of Danish political institutions.



In this sense, the best series have become a new route to political participation. Watching them means exposing oneself to politics in its broadest sense, becoming informed and developing new forms of reflexivity, thus taking part in public life. This is an alternative way of expressing an interest in public affairs which, although it starts from fiction, at times even happens to produce a retroactive effect on reality⁴.

Thus, in Denmark, the appointment of Byrgitte Nyborg to the post of Prime Minister in the TV series preceded by a couple of years the rise of Helle Thorning-Schmidt, the first woman to hold the same position in reality.

I had a conversation about this with Maxime Calligaro, who is a Senior political advisor at the European Parliament in Brussels and, above all, a writer looking for ways to renew the stale narrative of European integration. To do so, Maxime first wrote a thriller set in the corridors of the European Parliament and then even a sitcom, called "[Parlement](#)" produced by France Télévisions. The series recounts the vicissitudes of a young parliamentary assistant, Samy, who lands in Strasbourg without any prior experience and goes through an endless string of gaffes and faux pas trying to navigate his way through the two seats and 24 official languages of the European legislative body.

"The European Parliament is an arcane world," says Calligaro, "endowed with its own codes, difficult for any outsider to penetrate. For this reason, our first problem was to understand how to allow a normal spectator to enter that dimension. In his *Postscript to the Name of the Rose*⁵, Umberto Eco explains that he encountered the same difficulty in his work: how to let the reader gently enter the reality of a sixteenth-century Benedictine monastery that is now alien to us, with its long-forgotten theological disputes? The solution to which he resorted was to take a young novice, Adso, who has the same relationship of exteriority as we do to the world of the abbey and who, by his presence, justifies the explanations of his master, William of Baskerville, from which the reader also benefits.

⁴ R.Lefebvre – E.Taïeb, *Séries politiques. Le pouvoir entre fiction et vérité*, Louvain-la-Neuve, De Boeck, 2020.

⁵ New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1984.



In the case of “Parlement” we have done the same thing, having our young apprentice guided by a series of more expert figures, who slowly introduce him - and with him the audience - to the complexity of the parliamentary machine”.

Thus, the viewer follows the tragicomic events of the main character, but at the same time discovers, almost without realizing it, the way in which European laws are created, the role of political forces and that of lobbies, the need for compromise that is at the root of the entire European construction. What's more, the screenwriters of “Parlement” wanted to give an additional spin to their narrative.

"Of course, we were inspired by precedents like Armando Iannucci's (the creator of “In the Thick of It” and later “Veep”) sitcoms or like “The Office”, but in those cases you always witness the trajectory of a character who becomes progressively more cynical as the story progresses”. In the case of “Parlement”, however, they wanted to follow the reverse path. “Samy arrives in Strasbourg somewhat unprepared and certainly not particularly motivated by the idea of working in the European institutions. All the more so since the Member of Parliament he is in charge of following is far from being the best role-model and most of the topics seem uninspiring. But then he slowly gets passionate about the amendment (on shark protection) that he has to follow and ends up being a real fighter.”

In some ways it can be said that, thanks to the constructive wisdom of Calligaro and the other creators of the sitcom, Samy rises to the role of one of those “Unlikely Heroes” that More in Common research tells us are the messengers judged as most credible by the categories of the population that have stopped giving credit to experts, politicians and mainstream media.

“Parlement” is not above any criticism, but it represents the most advanced attempt I’m aware of as yet to put the power of TV fiction at the service of a great political project such as the construction of Europe. An attempt that’s still in progress - the second season of the series is scheduled for the end of 2021. And, perhaps, an attempt from which to draw useful insights as we go in search of our optimistic future narrative. Who knows, maybe that’s



precisely what Europe would need to counter the national-populist backlash: a few more good TV series and a little fewer conferences on multilateralism.

2. THE POWER OF THE EVERYDAY

In addition to reducing complexity through storytelling, another good reason for our interest in series is their incredible ability to realistically capture the texture of ordinary life.

In his collection of essays dedicated to "L'Infra-ordinaire", Georges Perec asks himself: "What really happens, when we live, the rest, everything else, where is it? What happens every day and returns every day, the banal, the obvious, the common, the infra-ordinary, the background noise, the habitual, how to account for it, how to interrogate it, how to describe it?"⁶.

Contemporary television series seem to have fulfilled Perec's wish. Through a complex game of repetition and variation, the regular presence of characters throughout dozens, if not hundreds of episodes, series stage the most minor details of the everyday, from that of the most banal employee to that of the most extravagant character in order to achieve a convincing feel to their viewings.

Those who watch "Mad Men" or "Desperate Housewives" from a distance, without paying too much attention to any detail, may get the impression that it's always the same thing, but those who follow them more closely discern variations from episode to episode, and see the characters evolving, changing little by little: they savour the passage of time, the depth of human existence that is constituted by everyday life⁷.

Because of their essential characteristics, TV series celebrate the everyday first and foremost. They apprehend everyday life as no other narrative form has managed to do before them.

⁶ G.Perec, *L'infra-ordinaire*, Paris, Seuil, 1989, p.10.

⁷ H.Glevarec – T. de Saint Maurice, *Élargir la vie: les séries contemporaines*, in "Le debat", 2017/2.



In the era of Big Data, TV series propose a different form of granularity. If data analysis allows the Doctor Strangeloves of digital marketing to accumulate an increasingly detailed knowledge of people's preferences and habits through numbers, TV series accomplish the same operation with the weapons of psychological dexterity and storytelling.

If the granularity allowed by Big Data has the coldness of calculation that reduces our lives to an algorithm, that of TV series preserves the warmth that comes from the lived experience of our shared humanity, favouring the development of a form of empathy.

Today political parties and campaigns have developed an increasingly granular understanding of their voters' preferences through Big Data, but the kind of knowledge that comes from online political micro-targeting techniques has nothing to do with the ability to capture the lived experience of people. That's why the celebration of everyday life enacted by TV series deserves our attention.

In his latest book⁸, Marc Stears describes the role played in Britain by authors such as George Orwell and Dylan Thomas, who thought that everyday life had a unique role to play in giving the country its purpose and its meaning. Their lesson has been largely forgotten by political forces that, in Britain as in the rest of Europe, have thought they could compensate for their increasingly scarce presence in the everyday life of society with a surplus of data analysis stemming from social networks.

If data allows us to grasp the contours of a situation, or a relationship, in quantitative terms, however, their ability to grasp the qualitative dimension, that which pertains to the deepest feelings and emotions, is [much more reduced](#). More so in a period, such as the current one, in which individuals and entire societies are going through an unprecedented existential crisis, which is leading us to question some of the premises upon which our pre-Covid life was based.

⁸ M.Stears, *Out of the Ordinary: How Everyday Life Inspired a Nation and How It Can Again*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2021.



After the policy-driven politics of the past and the identity-based politics of the last few years, my belief is that the next phase will belong to those who will be able to develop an “existential politics”, that is able to address the question of meaning and agency that mainstream politics has evacuated by finding refuge in technocratic answers, and to which identity movements consistently respond in divisive and often regressive forms. This is, after all, an assumption that our entire project is based on.

But what form would a political program based on the "extraordinarily redemptive potential of everyday life" take today?

Before even attempting to answer this question, we still have many more explorations to make across the turbulent waters of the Endless Sea.

(As you can see, among the lessons I believe we can learn from TV series is to always end an episode with a cliffhanger...).



Thank you for reading this second instalment in our log book as we set sail for an unknown destination. Please get in touch with Giuliano da Empoli giulianodaempoli@usa.net if you want to embark on this journey with us.