

Solidarity, dystopia, and fictional worlds in contemporary narrative TV series

MIŁOSZ WOJTYNA

*Received 12.12.2017,
received in revised form 3.09.2018,
accepted 4.09.2018.*

Abstract

One of the most spectacular cultural macro-events of the last five years, the rise of high-brow narrative TV series has proven to be indicative of several tendencies in contemporary audio-visual culture, both in Europe and in the US. The presentation of dystopian fictional worlds in *Mr Robot*, *Westworld*, *Utopia*, *Legion*, and several other series is perhaps the most significant manifestation of both the maturity of the TV series form, and the unfaltering interest of audio-visual culture in the utopian/dystopian subject matter. This paper illustrates the connection of the TV series to both solidarity and dystopia, and explains how contemporary TV series has decidedly manifested its artistic ambitions.

Keywords

narrative TV series, dystopia, genre, narrative, fictional worlds

Solidarność, dystopia, światy fikcjonalne we współczesnych narracyjnych serialach telewizyjnych

Abstrakt

Rozwój narracyjnego serialu telewizyjnego, który dało się zaobserwować w kulturze angloamerykańskiej w ostatnich pięciu latach, w dużej mierze zbiegł się z zainteresowaniem narracją dystopijną. Teksty takie jak *Mr. Robot*, *Westworld*, *Opowieść podręcznej*, *Legion*, czy *Utopia* w istotny sposób przeddefiniują konwencje, które kojarzyliśmy z narracjami telewizyjnymi. Artykuł przedstawia artystyczne aspekty wybranych współczesnych seriali telewizyjnych, analizując jednocześnie fikcjonalne światy dystopijne, które zostały w tych utworach przedstawione.

Słowa kluczowe

narracyjny serial telewizyjny, dystopia, genologia, narracja, światy fikcjonalne

Serialized shows with narrative or quasi-narrative content have been the domain of American television at least since 1931 and CBC's *The Television Ghost*. Their charms have been of various sorts, but fictionality and seriality seem to have defined their very nature from the very beginning. The form has evolved in a myriad of genres, developed a wide range of conventions, explored numerous thematic areas, and – through a convoluted mechanics of marketability rules and audience preferences – solidified as a characteristically consumerist middle-class form of popular entertainment. What in hindsight seems to be formal and artistic mediocrity of a significant part of serialized TV shows contributed to the relatively low status of the form in the hierarchy of cultural communicates. For this, and other reasons, Jason Mittell was right to claim that “conventional episodic and serial forms [...] have typified most American television since its inception” (Mittell 2006: 29). It seems that for the majority of its historical development the TV

series has remained highly stable when it comes to its position as an essentially popular form of entertainment.

Still, however, it was also Mittell himself who in 2006 noticed a significant development in the area that had altered the rather stagnant landscape:

Just as 1970s Hollywood is remembered far more for the innovative work of Altman, Scorsese, and Coppola than for the more commonplace (and often more popular) conventional disaster films, romances, and comedy films that filled theaters, I believe that American television of the past twenty years will be remembered as an era of narrative experimentation and innovation, challenging the norms of what the medium can do. (Mittell 2006: 29)

The goal that Mittell sets for himself – “to chart out the formal attributes of this storytelling mode, explore its unique pleasures and patterns of comprehension, and suggest a range of reasons for [the] emergence [of complex TV series] in the 1990s” (2006: 29) – is indicative not merely of his academic ambition, but also of a certain growing maturity of the TV series form that – in the eyes of scholars and audiences began to manifest nothing less but an artistic quality (understood in line with Victor Shklovsky’s definition of art as a complex set of mechanisms that result in a deautomatization, defamiliarization, estrangement of perception).¹ Indeed, although Mittell fails to diagnose the changes as furthering the status of the TV series as work of art, deautomatization – resulting in the highlighting of both audience engagement and of the artifice of the material, is what critics have referred to as the increasing “complexity” of the form. The exponential quantitative and

¹ “When studying poetic language – be it phonetically or lexically, syntactically or semantically – we always encounter the same characteristic of art: it is created with the explicit purpose of deautomatizing perception. Vision is the artist’s goal; the artistic [object] is “artificially” created in such a way that perception lingers and reaches its greatest strength and length, so that the thing is experienced not spatially but, as it were, continually. ‘Poetic language’ meets these conditions. According to Aristotle, ‘poetic language’ must have the character of the foreign, the surprising” (Shklovsky 2015: 171).

qualitative growth that could be observed between 2006 and 2015² (when Mittell published a more systematic monograph on the TV series), confirms the increasingly mature focus on the use of “device” as organizing principle. As he puts it,

Often [changes in television storytelling] are framed as television becoming more “literary” or “cinematic”, drawing both prestige and formal vocabulary from these older, more culturally distinguished media; [...] In the past 15 years, television’s storytelling possibilities and practices have undergone drastic shifts specific to the medium. What was once a risky innovative device, such as subjective narration or jumbled chronology, is now almost a cliché. Where the lines between serial and episode narratives used to be firmly drawn, today such boundaries are blurred. The idea that viewers would want to watch – and rewatch – a television series in strict chronology and collectively document their discoveries with a group of strangers was once laughable but is now mainstream. Expectations for how viewers watch television, how producers create stories, and how series are distributed have all shifted, leading to a new mode of television storytelling that I term *complex TV*. (Mittell 2015: 2–3)

Still, the momentum of current developments has proven incomparably larger, and more promising both to the audiences and to academic scholarship. Unprecedented changes brought to audio-visual culture by the omnipresence of screens (and the resulting further promotion of the rules of spectacle described five decades ago by Guy Debord [1967/1995]) have accelerated the redefinition of the TV series: not only have the means of dissemination and reception of the series changed (thanks to the rise of streaming platforms that have reorganized the poetics of audience experience and of reception

² The developments in the period can be illustrated by such diverse narrative TV series as *Dexter*, *Jericho* (2006), *Californication*, *Mad Men* (2007), *Breaking Bad*, *The Wire* (2008), *The Walking Dead*, *Boardwalk Empire* (2010), *Game of Thrones*, *Black Mirror* (2011), *House of Cards*, *Rick and Morty* (2013), *Fargo*, *True Detective*, *The Affair*, *The Knick*, *Olive Kitteridge* (2014), *Better Call Saul*, *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, *Mr. Robot*, *Narcos*, *Sense8* (2015).

processes³), but also the structure and format of the series have developed surprisingly original aspects. Pierre Bourdieu's argument about "the correspondence between good production and taste production" seems to be confirmed again (Bourdieu 1984). With a plethora of texts that have appeared since the publication of Mittell's monograph⁴, it has become evident that with the increasingly ambitious narrative organization of contemporary series we can observe the emergency of a fully original, critical, mature cultural form. Today, it no longer seems extravagant to talk about the TV series as an art form; defamiliarizing formal means such as metalepsis, significant violations of logical chronological presentation of the story material, meta-fictional and meta-narrative passages, and even the most striking instances of *trompe l'oeil* no longer seem out of place in the TV series. The TV series is coming of age as we speak.

To announce the maturity of a given cultural form is to position it as part of a larger cultural continuum. I would like to claim that a large body of contemporary narrative serialized TV texts have made a claim to belong where television genres did not easily belong before – to the category of aesthetic objects (that is, high-brow forms central to the culture they originate from)⁵. While hierarchies of cultural forms and genres are rela-

³ Debord's "immense accumulation of spectacles" happens to be an accurate description of the organizing principle of streaming platforms such as Netflix. The specific rhetorical organization of such libraries of texts is aimed at organizing a relationship between authors and audiences "that is mediated by images" (Debord 1995). The tendency is evident in historical records of the material watched by a given user, as well as in the algorithm-based offers that the platforms make for individual users. *Horror vacui* is essentially countered by such formal means as autoplay, personalization features, and language tools.

⁴ The most striking examples include *Westworld*, *Stranger Things*, *Atlanta*, *The Night Manager*, *The Night of*, *The Get Down*, *The Young Pope* (2016), *Mindhunter*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Legion*, *Dark*, *Dear White People*, *American Gods*, *Big Little Lies*, *Taboo*, *13 Reasons Why*, *Manhunt: Unabomber*, *She's Gotta Have It* (2017) as well as further episodes of *Black Mirror*, *Narcos*, *Bojack Horseman*, *Mr. Robot*, *Twin Peaks* and *House of Cards*. Some of these will be discussed below.

⁵ Mittell in a careful way observes the status of specific television forms and genres. Aware of what is often perceived as immaturity of television culture, he employs a most cautious parlance: "We might conceive of television

tively easy to determine for the pre-digital era (thanks to large critical debates devoted to such categorizations on the one hand and the evidently dominant positions certain forms occupied in the canon of a given epoch on the other),⁶ to specify criteria for the maturity of contemporary cultural forms or genres is a daunting task, especially because the dynamic between Bourdieu's "field of production" and "field of consumption" (1984: 230) has been made more complex in digital participatory, user-oriented culture. In other words, as the increased production and commodification of culture has been followed by a radical diversification of taste judgements, contextualizing criteria for maturity of cultural forms, difficult as it may seem, can allow us to monitor major cultural changes that have appeared on the screens and beyond. For the sake of this argument I would like to list the following six criteria, which by no means extinguish all possibilities:

- (1) self-reflexivity,
- (2) global and local intertextuality,
- (3) genre blending/genre bending,
- (4) significant levels of recalcitrance and indeterminacy,
- (5) investment with comprehensively organized fictional worlds,
- (6) comprehensive utopian/dystopian preoccupations.

As self-reflexive narratives comment on their own narrative and fictional nature, they tend to manifest a significant awareness of cultural practice they stem from. Genres and forms that prove broadly capable of incorporating intertextual material effectively aspire to position themselves within or outside a larger cultural tradition. Generic experimentation proves a lineage of affiliation and negotiation, and either makes a given text more intelligible or increases its level of difficulty. Recalcitrant texts – or texts that insistently make use of egre-

genres as clusters of cultural assumptions and discursive practices constituting categories of programs" (2003: 36).

⁶ Which makes the epic poem, the sonnet, the tragedy, the novel, the short story, and narrative film the dominant forms of cultural production in modern and early modern Western culture.

gious lacunae – are mature in themselves inasmuch as they do not have to rely on over-determination to be understood. If one assumes these four criteria, the sonnet, the crime novel, film noir, the Gothic short story can surely be considered mature, while twitter fiction, the Youtube video clip, and the photographic essay might perhaps not.

My principal interest here lies with features five and six. I would like to propose that we consider the emergence of TV series with highly complex fictional worlds that address utopian/dystopian questions to be a part of a larger development in the aesthetic of contemporary narrative TV series – a development indicative of the maturity of the form itself. If the below argumentation is correct, I believe we might wish to consider the various narrative worlds that appear in the TV series to be a benchmark of some larger developments in Western culture. To paraphrase, it seems that the contemporary TV products discussed below (delivered by television broadcasters and streaming platforms) both respond to and organize a specific habitus – Bourdieu’s “system of dispositions [...] characteristic of the different classes and class frictions” (1984: 6). If we watch the TV series today, we watch “an active cultural practice that works to both reproduce and produce social systems and hierarchies” (Mittell 2003: 37).

Comprehensively organized, intelligible fictional worlds have become the favourite domain of contemporary narrative TV series not only because audience experience can be neatly organized along the sequential (episode by episode) exploration of a large fictional universum,⁷ but also because the possibility of an alternative has been increasingly tempting in a post-communist, post-Cold War, post-modernist, post-industrial world of post-politics and post-truth. Fictional worlds of dystopian or utopian kind, “imaginative projection[s], positive or negative, of a society that is substantially different from the one in which the author lives” (Claeys and Sargent 1999: 1),

⁷ Which, incidentally, offers the viewer a certain cultural equivalent of Heidegger’s *Dasein* for all things fictional.

allow for a profound anchoring of themes and characters in a spatiotemporal semiotic construct. Without such anchoring, as one might expect, building social relationships between authors and audiences – a basic process needed in any serial narrative that depends on audience engagement – would be impossible. Thus, it is the semantic capacities of fictional worlds, and the contemporary focus of dystopia go hand in hand. Lyman Tower Sargent's definition of dystopia naturally overlaps with the preoccupations of fictional worlds theory:⁸ “a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived” (Sargent 1994: 9).

As Artur Blaim and Ludmiła Gruszevska-Blaim claim, “apparently imperfect worlds, plagued by such afflictions as social unrest, anarchy, coups d'état, totalitarian regimes, lethal systems of coercion, sensual, emotional and intellectual deprivation of citizens, that is, by less spectacular misfortunes transpiring on a smaller scale, could hardly compete with visions of mass destruction and annihilation of humankind” (2011: 7). All of these could hardly compete with the social drama that the TV series used to prefer in the era of the soap opera and sit com. This is no longer the case, though. In the dystopian fictional worlds of the latest high-brow serialized shows, the artistic ambitions of the TV series culminate. The proliferation of dystopian fictions in contemporary narrative TV series is a phenomenon that proves both the increasingly high ambitions of television storytelling, and a large, unorthodox capacity of dystopias to permeate any fabric of contemporary cultural discourse. While Jean Pfaelzer claims that dystopian fiction is

⁸ Artur Blaim and Ludmiła Gruszevska-Blaim note an interpretive advantage that results from Sargent's definition: “What is interesting in Sargent's definition is that he does not set out to define the characteristics of a genre, or mode of discourse, but conceptualizes dystopia as a certain way of constructing the represented worlds. In other words, all other elements, often distinguished in formulating a normative poetics of the genre, such as the mode of narration, plot pattern, standard motifs, or typical characters and events, are not taken into consideration” (2011: 8).

a “formally and historically, structurally and contextually [...] a conservative genre” (1984: 78), contemporary employment of dystopian fictional worlds in the TV series seems to point to inexhaustible capacities dystopia manifests for making itself accessible to “the contemporaneous reader” (Sargent 1994: 9). Thus, the correlation of dystopias and of the TV series form results in a need for a reappraisal of the two phenomena: dystopia today hardly seems to be as conservative as Pfaelzer claimed it to be three decades ago, and the TV series appears to have effectively abandoned its position in the territories of low-brow culture.

The radical increase of ambitions of the TV series form is reflected in a “dystopian turn” that could be observed in the most significant series of the last five years. Such a turn is a logical part of the developments of the form; with more and more ambitious artistic, narrative, visual and thematic preoccupations of the TV series, it seems only natural that one of the most structurally complex and prominent cultural paradigms – the utopian/dystopian model – has become an important ambition for creators of the form. The escalation of oppressive practices in the world that “the contemporaneous reader” lives in, is also a significant factor. Tadeusz Sławek comments on the intersection of utopia and reality in the following way:

No utopian impulse is conceivable in the situation where we remain harmoniously connected to the world because utopia is energized by disharmony, not by the ‘marriage’ of the individual and the world but by their ‘divorce’ which always necessitates a critical appraisal of the past and present as a mandatory condition of any authentic thinking of the future. The question “what now?” inaugurates utopia”. (Sławek 2012: 35)

One is tempted to claim that nothing promulgates dystopias more today than the trumpization of politics and of public discourse, in which audiences are mercilessly confronted with discordant, aggressive messages, and with what seems to be

a revival of newspeak (as in the case of Kellyanne Conway's unabashed reference to "alternative facts"). Alternatives are, indeed, sought for, but their status has to be altogether different. The examples of TV narratives I will now discuss propose solidarity to be a promising counter-solution.

In *Mr. Robot* (USA Network, 2015–2017), a narrative critique of capitalism and the alienations of technological progress, the attempts of a group of hackers who call themselves "Fociety" and struggle to dismantle the dominance of a villainous enterprise called E-Corp, are paralleled by the individual psychological struggle of the main character. The devastatingly grim dystopian series focuses on the entrapment of individual subjectivity in a social system governed by mass media, consumerism, and corporate greed. The main character is at some point interviewed by his therapist:

Christa: "What is it about society that disappoints you so much?"

Eliot: "Oh, I don't know. Is it that we collectively thought that Steve Jobs was a great man, even though we knew he made billions off the backs of children? Or maybe it's that it feels that all our heroes are counterfeit, the world itself just one big hoax, spamming each other with our running commentary on bullshit, masquerading as insight, our social media faking its intimacy. Or is it that we voted for this? Not with our rigged elections but with our things, our property, our money. I'm not saying anything new, we all know why we do this – not because Hunger Games books make us happy but because we want to be sedated. Because it's painful not to pretend. Because we're cowards. Fuck society!" (*Mr Robot* season 1, episode 1)

The text continuously underlines its investment with the present.⁹ Protesters in the series parallel the activities of Occupy Wall Street, and the presentation of American politics features a striking commentary on the presidency of Donald Trump:

⁹ *Mr. Robot*/Mr. Edward Alderson (Christian Slater) suggests this specific focus early in the series: "Exciting time in the world right now. Exciting time" (season 1, episode 1).

Whiterose: I need you to start an image rehabilitation on Tyrell Wellick. He's an ex-E Corp employee who's about to be blamed for the Five/Nine hack. No matter how public it gets, it is important that he stays in a positive light.

Frank Cody: Huh. Any chance Obama goes after him? People love to defend anything he hates.

Whiterose: Also, there's a new narrative I would like you to explore. I need you to put fsociety's origin on Iranian soil.

Cody: Iran, huh? It's brown enough, shouldn't be too hard.

Whiterose: One last thing – I may have a potential candidate for president I want you to back.

Donald Trump speaks from the TV screen.

Trump: Now, I've created tens of thousands of jobs over my career, tens of thousands.

Cody (laughs): Look, the country's desperate right now but you can't be serious. I mean, the guy's a buffoon. He's completely divorced from reality. How would you even control him?

Whiterose: If you pull the right strings, a puppet will dance any way you desire.

Trump [on the TV screen]: Right? Make America great again. I say it. (*Mr. Robot*, season 3, episode 3)

The dystopian fictional world the series presents¹⁰ hinges on such contemporaneous preoccupations. Their aim is to convince the implied audience, though, that – to refer to Sargent again – the conditions presented “in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view” are hardly worse than those in which the reader lives. Indeed, the dystopian *Mr. Robot* is a piercing critique of the present – with all the poignant allusions to the overwhelming ways in which

¹⁰ While the dystopian paradigm is crucial for the entire narrative, the relationship of an individual with power (and its consequences on human psyche) is especially prominent. The main character, Eliot (Rami Malek), struggles against a double power. “Sometimes I dream of saving the world, saving everyone from the invisible hand, the one that controls us every day without us knowing it” (season 2, episode 1), he claims, referring to both the institutionalized power and the personal influence of his father, whose absence/presence is a crucial conveyor of narrative instabilities in the series.

conspiracy theories, fake news, cyberattacks, and political hassle undermine the image of the US as a realized utopia.¹¹

Westworld (HBO, 2016), an adaptation of Michael Crichton's 1973 science-fiction film of the same title, explores the awaking of individual consciousness in robotic individuals operating in a theme park that has been built by a corporate concern for the entertainment of affluent customers. A bold criticism of both totalitarian regime (which aims at creating man through propaganda, while the owners of *Westworld* do so through technological construction) and of technological progress that blurs the boundary between human consciousness and robotic artificial intelligence. The series focuses on a developmental paradigm in which the androids observe repetitive loops, learn and, curiously, unite across ontological borders. Solidarity links arise between humans and non-humans as a response to the increasingly demoralized materialistic, blood-thirsty society. The commentary the show makes on the vicissitudes of exploitative tourism in a bitter way highlights the epistemological and characterological difficulties an individual confronts in collision with systemically organized dystopias. Robotic characters in the series struggle to develop a degree of critical insight. Their viewpoint is that of a complacent citizen whose awareness of the *status quo* is not the result of experience, but of programmatic education:

Bernard: Have you ever questioned the nature of your reality?

Dolores: No.

Bernard: Tell us what you think about your world.

Dolores: I like to remember what my father taught me. That at one point or another, we are all new to this world. The newcomers are

¹¹ The tension between critical visions of American society and the foundational utopian vision of the US as a utopian state is commented on by Artur Blaim: "American culture offers a very unique situation in which both literary and 'realised' utopias appear in a country that projects itself as a utopia. Thus, we have a case of a utopia-in-a-utopia, resembling that of a text-in-a-text, which has far reaching consequences for the status of practical utopian experiments or texts calling for a radically different mode of social organization" (Blaim 2017: 19).

just looking for the same place we are. A place to be free, to stake out our dreams. A place with unlimited possibilities. (*Westworld* season 1, episode 1)

The visually extravagant *Legion* (FX, 2017), a series based on the Marvel franchise, presents a schizophrenic mutant in a dystopian world of psychiatric institutions and suspect governmental agencies. The main character, equipped with a variety of curious superpowers, engages in solidarity relations with other patients of the asylum, in order to seek understanding of his subjectivity, and, ultimately, as could be expected, to wreak havoc on villains. Solidarity in the series not only underscores the functional effectiveness of coalitions combating dystopian systems, but also increases the plausibility of the fictional world presented. The more the characters cooperate, the more they understand their own individual – and collective – capacities. At the same time principles that govern the fictional world of the series are legitimized for the audiences as the possession of superpowers turns out to be an essential feature of most characters in the superheroic text. In other words, in the narrative rhetoric of the series, actions of the main character – entirely implausible in the face of any extra-textual doxa – appear plausible due to their similarity to other character's behaviours. A visual *tour de force*, the adventurous sequence that culminates the first episode not only problematizes the ontological status of the fictional world presented (Is the fictional diegesis composed of further illusions? Is – in this fictional world – seeing equivalent to knowing? Which of the versions of the fictional illusion is the most prominent?) but also highlights the importance of solidarity bonds that – in the face of an absolute absence of other promises – motivate characters to collective effort. What also seems at stake in this psychotic narrative is the individual mental disarray that psychiatric institutions fail to alleviate; apparently, contemporary TV dystopias find this intersection of individual experience and institutional failure increasingly attractive.

Solidarity functions in a similar manner in the fictional worlds of the Wachowskis' *Sense8* (Netflix, 2015–2017), a complex, disturbingly dynamic series that focuses on the experiences of eight individuals from eight parts of the globe, who discover they are “sensates” – humans connected parapsychologically to one another – and, despite their idiosyncratic cultural, sexual, and professional backgrounds, unite in a curious utopian coalition organized around a strikingly meaningful principle: “You are no longer just you”. The series refers to prejudice and preconceived normative notions in what seems to be an adamant statement on the condition of contemporary society, and proposes a novel system of informal social relations focused on mutual support and exchange of competences. In the face of all the struggles individual identity is forced to engage in in confrontation with dominant epistemological and characterological canons that organize the dystopian world of the series, characters of *Sense8* experience an almost utopian alternative. They can reassure their own “selves” in mirror relationships with the Other. “A self does not amount to much, but no self is an island. Each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before”, Jean-François Lyotard claims, suggesting that solidarity is a possible cure to numerous modern maladies (1979: 15).

The Handmaid's Tale (Hulu, 2017), an adaptation of Margaret Atwood's celebrated novel, presents a fictional world of what used to be the United States. In a totalitarian regime governed by religious fundamentalists in a period of a civil war, fanaticism rules, social classes are defined anew, military order is introduced, and women are subjected to devastatingly oppressive treatment. The dystopia is political, and the fictional world – materially analogous to the extratextual “real world”, is ideologically alien due to its radically ideological nature. The mode of presentation is mimetic, the rhetorical effect – as ominous as it could be. The narrative illustrates the dangers of totalitarian power and, symptomatically, shows the emergence

of solidarity bonds among women, whose combative and cooperative power appears to be not at all inferior to the regime governed by men. The lasting resonance of Atwood's novel, and of the dystopian paradigm in the presentation of women's rights and women's solidarity proved quite up-to-date during the visit of President Donald Trump in Warsaw in July 2017. In order to protest the visit a group of Polish female activists, dressed up as handmaids, held signs highly critical of Trump and his policy.

Solidarity as a pragmatic anti-dystopian gesture is more lasting than some might have assumed, and it is activated, as the series suggests, in moments of resistance. "A culture of fear, which employs appropriate tools to systematically eliminate independent narratives (frequently together with their potential story-tellers), aims at monophony", Ludmiła Gruszevska-Blaim aptly claims. "The polyphonic discourse", she adds, "would undermine totalitarian axioms and the control of the masses by the few who wield the power of coercing others into conformity and submission" (2011: 78). Because such submission does not lie in the nature of Ofred (who fails to follow the rules "of the meek") nor of any of the principal characters in the series discussed above¹², their relative success in opposing the oppressive regimes is a primary generator of narrativity in the series. In other words, *The Handmaid's Tale* narrative character – that is, that of an artifice that oc-

¹² Another instance of visually and narratively intricate series in which a dystopian setting and solidarity relations go hand in hand is Channel 4's grimly humorous *Utopia* (2013–2014), which presents a group of individuals – characteristically, of various ethnic and class backgrounds – who build a solidarity team to defend the global society against a villainous conspiracy of the British government striving to reduce the population of the planet by infecting masses with a virus that would make a major part of the human race practically infertile. *SS-GB* (BBC, 2017), in turn, is a counterfactual historical narrative that uses dystopian fictional worlds to speculate on the might-have-beens of Nazi invasion on Britain. The less complex *The Man in the High Castle* (Amazon 2015–2017) proposes an equivalent narrative of nazified America. The phenomenal *Black Mirror* (Netflix, 2011–2017), on the other hand, focuses on the terrors of a technological dystopia in which over-dependence of humans on devices results in the undermining of human agency.

curs when “somebody tells somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose that something happened” (Phelan 2005: 20) – hinges on the attractiveness of the impossible. If you have wondered who might wish to oppose a realised dystopia, well, characters in the series have learnt the lesson of „Solidarność” [Independent Self-governing Labour Union “Solidarity”] and employed a collective strategy of productive, comprehensive resistance.

One of the most spectacular cultural macro-events of the last 5 years, the rise of high-brow narrative TV series has attested to several tendencies in contemporary audio-visual culture, which today tends to do the following: to narrativize social issues, to undermine conventional genre distinctions, to highlight the artistic potential of popular cultural forms, and to use seriality as conveyor of comprehensive, engaging fictional worlds. The presentation of dystopian fictional worlds in the series mentioned above is perhaps the most significant manifestation of both the developing ambitions of the TV series, and the unfaltering interest of culture in the dystopian subject matter. In the series in question, solidarity actions and dystopian fictional worlds are frequently presented in conjunction in order to address a variety of social, political, ecological, and artistic preoccupations that have attracted the attention of the global general public in the last decade. A principal lever of social action and a generator of narrative utopias within the larger overriding dystopian narratives, solidarity appears to serve the following functions in the series analysed: 1. organizing the revival of individual subjectivity (and resocializing disturbed selves), 2. contributing to the reorganization of informal social relations (based on courageous confrontations with the Other and the known), 3. reorganizing the principles of plausibility within the fictional world (by making the unlikely individual success more likely as part of collective struggle), 4. increasing the narrativity of the dystopian text (by proposing a narrative of an anti-dystopian alternative), 5. enhancing the

mimetic function of the narrative (by referring audiences to the extratextual reality).

In the face of all the above arguments, it seems that the most significant of all the ambitions the TV series has entertained is to make a bold statement on extratextual reality, to assume a large, social, global, if not cosmic referential system for the fictional worlds presented. Insularity and repetitiveness are no longer the defining characteristics of TV shows, at least in the narrative domain. The preoccupation with social solidarity on the larger plane of comprehensive dystopian fictional worlds, together with an increased structural complexity of the series, points to a profound hermeneutic change that is also required of audiences. Although it might seem the TV series has envied the novel its monopoly for sociologically-engaged mimesis, the TV form has found its own way of addressing an ambitious critical agenda without forsaking its entertainment value. Now we need to learn to watch the TV series as attentively as we read literary dystopias. Because if the TV series becomes art, it is sometimes art of the engaged kind.

References

- Blaim, Artur (2017). *Utopian Visions and Revisions or the Uses of Ideal Worlds*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Blaim, Artur, Ludmiła Gruszevska-Blaim (2011). "Introductory remarks: The uses of dystopian worlds". In: Artur Blaim, Ludmiła Gruszevska-Blaim (eds). *Imperfect Worlds and Dystopian Narratives in Contemporary Cinema*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 7-10.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1984). *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Trans. Richard Nice. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Claeys, Gregory, Lyman Tower Sargent (1999). *The Utopia Reader*. New York: NY University Press.
- Debord, Guy (1995). *The Society of the Spectacle*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Zone Books.

- Gruszevska-Blaim, Ludmiła (2011). "Against the culture of fear: Terror and Romance in *V for Vendetta*". In: Artur Blaim, Ludmiła Gruszevska-Blaim (eds). *Imperfect Worlds and Dystopian Narratives in Contemporary Cinema*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 77-92.
- Lyotard, Jean-François (1979). *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Mittell, Jason (2003). "Audiences talking genre: Television talk shows and cultural hierarchies". *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 31/1: 36-46.
- Mittell, Jason (2006). "Narrative complexity in contemporary American television". *The Velvet Light Trap* 58: 29-40.
- Mittell, Jason (2015). *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*. New York: New York University Press.
- Phaelzer, Jean (1984). *The Utopian Novel in America 1888-1896: The Politics of Form*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Phelan, James (2005). *Living to Tell About It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Sargent, Lyman Tower (1994). "The three faces of utopianism revisited", *Utopian Studies* 5/1: 1-37.
- Shklovsky, Victor (2015). "Art as device". Translated and introduced by Alexandra Berlina. *Poetics Today* 36/3: 151-174.
- Sławek, Tadeusz (2012). "Utopia of apocalypse: Thinking which changes the world". In: Artur Blaim, Ludmiła Gruszevska-Blaim (eds.). *Spectres of Utopia*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 35-58.

Miłosz Wojtyna
ORCID iD: 0000-0003-4077-1216
Instytut Anglistyki i Amerykanistyki
Uniwersytet Gdański
ul. Wita Stwosza 51
80-308 Gdańsk
Poland
milosz.wojtyna@ug.edu.pl