Practical philosophy and television drama. Ethical and anthropological remarks on some European television series (2015)

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ABSTRACT
When reasoning about the stories and dramas of television series, it is useful to resort to an ethical and anthropological criterion. This approach calls for distinguishing between an anthropological reason applicable to people in the real world and the dramatis personae. There are two coherent anthropological behaviors that may contribute to a viewers’ active position. The first one is to consider that Aristotle’s Poetics and the contemporary extension of his content can rationally account for those stories and dramas, today precisely qualified as ‘tragic’. The second one is to understand the real world and its dramatic representations, in accordance with the Leonardo Polo’s transcendental anthropology, the vision which Jürgen Habermas finds in religions, and Joseph Ratzinger - articulating reason and faith - has summed up as living veluti si Deus daretur.

1. Introduction
This study considers an anthropological, ethical, and poetic way of looking at audiovisual stories and dramas. Specifically, at a group of television series produced in Europe in 2015, with thematic content associated in part with family matters.

This interest arises from the desire to discuss and nuance two generally accepted considerations. The first one is that the stories that appear in fiction reflect – in a selective and amplified way – significant behaviors typical of the society in which we live. The second one is that the Ricoeur’s ‘reading contracts’ (Valdés 2000) that we use with fictions do not always include the necessary esthetical distance to avoid ‘confusing the representation with the thing represented’ (Girard 2002, 186).

Considering actions and lifestyles as something present, on the one hand, in the diégesis or narrative development of the incidents in television stories, and on the other hand in the world in which we live, the necessity arises to consider ethical,
political and anthropological reasons. The analytical perspective of this study believes that it is consistent to consider the personal condition of the human being as proposed by the transcendental anthropology of Polo (1999–2003), instead of dealing with human nature. In this way, the reference of dealing with stories and dramas is concentrated on human acts, which are deliberate and have a specific and free meaning, in contrast with the internal necessity that governs the characters within the stories and dramas. This analytical method facilitates a renewal of the Aristotelian praxis in search of perfection and happiness. And it opens personal liberty, as well as its narrative representations, to a perspective in which the relationship with God makes rational sense.

Regarding the Ricoeur’s reading contracts, and observing the rational distance that there is between the characters and their actions in fiction and personal actions in the real world, the perspective of practical philosophy continues in force. Besides the ethical and political reasons, there are poetical, rhetorical and esthetical reasons too. In accordance with the principals of transcendental anthropology, this study continues some investigations concerning the audio-visual narrative from the perspective of the Aristotelian Poetics (García-Noblejas 1982, 1984, 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2009, 2010, 2016b; Brenes 2008, 2011a, 2011b, 2012, 2016; Gutiérrez 2012, 2013; Mora-Fandos 2015). For the sake of clarity and brevity, we will pay attention above all to ethical and esthetical reasons, more present in the collective imagination, with occasional references to the others.

Esthetical reasons refer to beauty, without being something merely ornamental. Beauty is distinguished by its capacity to bring together and congregate the other personal transcendentals: this is the way we talk about the beauty of free co-existence, of personal knowledge and of gift-love (Sellés 2009). The possible estheticism (thinking beauty is a priority) disappears if we know that ‘its good’ is not only at stake but also, as Aristotle says of wine, ‘it would be ridiculous to wish well to a bottle of wine: at the most one wishes that it may keep well in order that one may have it oneself’ (Eth. Nic. 1155b 28-33).

Considering the television series produced in Europe in 2015, there is an abundance of references to the family sphere as a relevant context for the development of their storylines. We have concentrated on this study here, knowing that some of these series do not take the family as the central subject of their primary storylines, but develop this thematic aspect in secondary storylines.

Twenty-eight of the fifty countries in Europe are members of the European Union and eight have applied for membership. Many of them produce drama series, whose scope is rich and heterogeneous and includes a small number of international hits and a vast majority that never make it beyond the national boundaries.

This diversity and, obviously, the vicissitudes of series that appear and are promptly cancelled make it impossible to give a general outline. In fact, we can say that in the so-called ‘European series’ category there is no concrete defining attribute in common susceptible of specific description (Urichio 2008)². However, when we adopt an ethical (González 2016) and thematic viewpoint (Grasso and Penati 2016, 195–238), it is possible to observe some concrete features that form a core of narrative and dramatic common ground in the stories of some of the fiction series aired in
Europe in 2015. The European industry has explored two outstanding issues, namely, the family and personal identity.

2. An ethical perspective

Stories and dramas are relevant to get to know ourselves. Paul Ricoeur reasoned that stories should be considered ‘a form of discourse [about reality] which aspires to meaning and truth’ (Ricoeur 2013, 237–276). Stories, therefore, particularly if we go into the debate on relativism (Barrio 2011), are the object of philosophy and not only of philology or sociocultural anthropology.

Also, Alasdair McIntyre reminds us that ‘the human being in practice as well as in his/her fictions is in fact a story-telling animal (…). There is no way of comprehending any society, including ours, if we do not try to do it through the wealth of narrations that form its basic dramatic resources’ (Macintyre 2003, 216).

In any case, the passage between the world of a story or a fictional drama and the real world is not something direct, as outlined here:

‘The world that offers us a film ‘de dicto’ is not a mere mirror image of the world we inhabit ‘de re’ (Kneale 1962) yet it presents itself as something ‘that can be inhabited, that can be welcoming, strange, hostile’ (Valdés 2000, 160), something with which it is possible to establish ‘a game strategy, even a strategy of combat, of suspicion, of rejection, enabling the reader to create a distance in his appropriation’ (Valdés 2000). However, it is only possible to ‘speak with propriety of ‘world’, when the work interacts with the spectator or reader and the process of refuguration causes the horizon of his expectations to waver; only in the extent to which it can refigure this world does the work reveal itself capable of a world’ (Valdés 2000). Not everything is a work of art, not everything is mere entertainment. It is wrong to confuse the comprehension of a possible world with its artistic density, or to deduce the comprehensibility of that possible world because of subjective pleasure. Art adopts a distance from reality, knowing that it is part thereof and that there it must return. As Ricoeur recalls: ‘if art did not have, despite its initial withdrawal, the capacity to return and burst in among us, in the bosom of our world, it would be entirely innocent; it would be condemned to insignificance, reduced to mere diversion, and limited to constituting a parenthesis in our daily concerns’ (Valdés 2000, 160).’ (García-Noblejas 2004b).

2.1. No clear frontier between the real world and the possible worlds of fiction

In this sense, when we speak of ethics there are two things to remember. The first one is that in present times there is a lack of integration of ethics into people’s lives. For Leonardo Polo this is due in great part to

‘the discovery of other legalities; in particular, scientific legalities, which have helped us to undertake the great technical progress characteristic of the last centuries. This implies a plurality of rules, of behavior patterns that compete with each other, so that ethics is sometimes relegated in favor of other orders of social life. Consider, for example, the so-called economic laws. Although they do not abound nor are as stable as claimed by some economists who have not reflected on the fundamentals of the science they cultivate, they resort to them to make decisions when correcting the dysfunctions of social dynamics’ (Polo 1996).
The second is something apparently obvious: the habitual referent of ethics is the life of people in the real-world society we live in, and not the actions of characters in the possible diegetic worlds of fiction (Lavocat 2010).

Rightly so, ethics, assets, virtues, duties and obligations refer to our personal and social life and to the moral links that must be respected and promoted to bring about a more humane society (González 2016, 41), not to the fictitious lives constructed by means of the dramatic articulation of actions and characters – at least not initially.

We know that as spectators, we submit to implicit reading pacts (García-Noblejas 2004a), which make us view what the worlds of fiction offer ‘as if’ it was reality, in a ‘first navigation’ that is necessary to understand what the plot is about (García-Noblejas 2004b; Brenes 2011a, 2012). In addition, we initially resort to the real ethical reasons available in our conscience and our personal contexts to apprehend the actions that take place in those worlds of fiction. Such actions may at times exceed the limits of elementary morality: in a casual way, as if it was the most natural thing in the world, the screen shows wanton violence and deaths, justified in the fashion of utilitarianism and consequentialism (Carrasco 1999). Under the cover of the ‘reading pacts’ of fiction we assume a conditional and hypothetical reality of deceit, adultery, treason, impiety and other situations and attitudes that bear little or no relation to ethics (Nussbaum 2016), and may not necessarily coincide with ours.

We take for granted that this is a fictitious reality and that if we, as readers and spectators want to know what happens in the fictional world, we must accept it almost unconditionally following Coleridge’s principle of ‘voluntary suspension of disbelief’. I shall return to this later.

In fact, normally this initial immersion in the events of the diegesis, originates a ‘second navigation’ (García-Noblejas 2004b) of an interpretive kind, which refers to the actual life sense of such actions and events, more than to the denouement that they lead to within the diegesis. This is the sense in which we generally understand and consider the possible worlds of fiction from the viewpoint of the ethics of the spectator’s own personal conscience and world.

At this point, it may worth noting that we should not assume that there is a rigorous boundary separating ethics and life in our everyday world, and ethics and life in the possible worlds of fiction. There are too many multidirectional nuances and many interactions and loans to forget that such variable permeability is one of the incentives of fiction.

Also, we must bear in mind that the sense of the series – the reality to which their diegetic worlds point – normally corresponds to a conception of ethics that is quite consistent with the propriety and political morality prevailing in the world we live in. Thus, ethics tends to appear and be assumed today as a sort of vague moralism, rather ideological in nature, ‘which inevitably slides into the party-political sphere. Such moralism is mainly and above all, a pretense addressed to others rather than a personal obligation in our daily life’ (Ratzinger 2005).

All this leads to consider that it may be of interest to observe things from the spectator’s standpoint, particularly given that, as suggested by Aristotle in his Poetics, we can contribute to those stories with a cathartic look, as we articulate our own pity and fear onto them.
2.2. Ethics, an anthropological matter more than a legal matter or one of public opinion

In my opinion, it is appropriate to assume an ethical perspective to discuss TV series and their contents, because this dimension is familiar to spectators and is also considered by the professionals of the genre, perhaps with the confusion or reduction of some moral issues to ideology (Dant 2012; Krijnen 2011; Rabb and Richardson 2015; Bennett 2014). Hence it makes sense to clarify the content and reference of ethics, which is today excessively understood as a sociological, regulatory, and legal issue, and not regarded as a crucial anthropological issue.

As is known, classical ethics considers human beings in terms of their familial or social coexistence as beings endowed with ‘words’ and not only ‘voice’. Aristotle places ethics beyond the feelings that irrational animals are capable of expressing, within a context of contents and assessments in which all humans can participate by debating and reasoning about what is fair or unfair, what is useful or noxious (González 2016).

Classical ethics dealt with order and the articulation of human actions and passions and in principle considered man as made in the image of God. Today ethics discards all considerations that are inherently metaphysical or religious (Ratzinger 2005), as not ‘scientifically verifiable’, and thus restricts itself to organizing the flood of technical activity (Sanguineti 2004) that has taken over all the spheres of human life. The confusion between the world of personal and social relations – which is ethical in nature – and the ‘technosystem’ – a combination of state, market and media (Llano 1999a) – identifies ethics with rules or regulations and gets mistaken for the law, public opinion or the prevailing opinion disseminated by the media, including television series.

We forget that ethics – as well as freedom – is something primary in human beings. In a philosophical sense ethics forms part of anthropology, not sociology (Polo 2013, 2015; González 1996). Ethics precedes the law or public opinion, which are subsequent to people and thus to families and societies. Therefore, when ethics is considered to speak of the sense of characters and their actions in TV series, it is necessary to refer to its three inherent dimensions, which are prior to any representation (Llano 1999b): goods, virtues and rules, teleologically oriented to a full life. It is necessary to insist that ‘goods call for norms, and norms are goods and have to do with goods; they partake of goods if they are good. But there is more to ethics than goods and norms: there is also a need for virtues’ (Polo 2013, 138).

Thus, ethics cannot be reduced to any of these three dimensions, unlike hedonism, which tends to consider only immediate goods; or stoicism, which considers virtues in a selfish manner; or modern rationalism, which confuses living according to virtues with a simple theoretical affirmation of values (Llano 2015, 150) in which ethics is replaced with a set of conventional norms, as something natural and inexorable. When ethics is embodied in ‘positive or affirmative’ rules that tell us and offer us (and at times order us) ‘what is right and must be done’, we often find ourselves in front of a blatant and unjust abuse of human freedom.

Something of the sort happens, no doubt, with the ample margin of trust granted by readers or viewers when they accept, even temporarily, the ‘reading pact’ presented...
by the text or the author of fictions. Obviously, fictional characters are not real people and have been vested with virtues and defects or vices from outside themselves, by the writers that make them act in one way or another. In other words, there is a pretense that characters do things by themselves. Also, obviously, in the game of fiction, we cannot accurately speak of a possible ‘abuse of [the characters’] freedom’ by those who have conceived and move them, since these characters also receive their freedom from their creators. In any case, the ethical perspective of whoever conceives and develops the personality and lifestyle of the characters (at least of the protagonists) is crucial in this respect.

It is also relevant to take into consideration the lifestyles which the characters are given. Because, for the spectator it is very difficult not to establish a relationship with the real ethical and social life of people. But at the same time, we find that the current narrative and dramatic panorama does not usually include habitual references to the natural transcendent dimensions of people, to their radical liberty and to its social manifestations.

In this sense we can always refer to Jürgen Habermas, in order to ‘cultivate a post secular standpoint, a conception that takes into account the persistent general vitality of religion’, given that ‘religious practices and the perspective that they offer continue to be important sources of values that nurture the ethics of a multicultural citizenry and promote solidarity and respect among all’ (Mendieta and Vanantwerpen 2011, 14–15). The active role of spectators who are not satisfied with being mere consumers is also related to attitudes of this type, which assume post secular standpoints.

The technical knowledge of how to move about along the narrative and dramatic twists and turns does not suffice. It is also necessary to lift our heads above the resulting maze and know how to find our bearings in social life in which there are styles of life that include, as Habermas says, not only scientific and philosophic doctrines, but experiences of ‘participation in cult practices’ and ‘existential beliefs rooted in the social dimension of membership, socialization and prescribed practices’ (Mendieta and Vanantwerpen 2011, 62–63).

### 2.3. Ethics and lifestyles in the possible worlds of television series

In the context of TV fiction, what Jo Nesbo (the Norwegian author of the detective Harry Hole best-sellers) says about his work is illustrative: ‘As a writer, I like to describe situations. The role of fiction is to know how to understand and how to get hold of human behavior’ (Azoury 2015). Because what is certainly at play in the characters is ways of being or human behaviors.

This is why we should remember that one thing is the behavior of ‘virtuous men’ which gives rise to ethics in our real world and very much another the behavior of the characters within the peculiar world of fiction of a story, shaped as virtuous or not by the TV series writers and showrunners. Sometimes, rather than the characters themselves, we should consider the narrative modes and the staging, because through them we can perceive ‘the presence of the discourse position towards values (sometimes called subtext), which in these [Nordic] series tends to question – rather than corroborate, as usually happens – the same passive acceptance or referential validation of the suggested diegetic world’ (García-Noblejas 2016a).
In fact, ethics says that there is no catalogue of goods to turn to make the best possible choices. For example, there is no way we can possibly say ‘to forgive is always better than to punish’. This would turn the pursuit of happiness into a mere technical matter with applicable external guidelines – something that, fortunately, is not the case. ‘The pursuit of happiness is a moral issue, a venture in which success or failure depend on our way of being, on our own character (the ‘ethos’ that each of us shapes around virtues and vices). Awareness of virtue as the ultimate and irreplaceable resource to attain happiness is the primal knowledge that helps us move towards happiness’ (Cruz 2015, 272).

That being the way things stand for human beings in the real world, it remains quite clear that if we consider fictional characters as people, and if we cannot distance ourselves properly from the story involving these characters, we shall understand things the wrong way round. Because, besides knowing what screenwriters and showrunners normally do, we know what Aristotle defines as verisimilitude⁷ and what Coleridge refers to when he speaks of endowing his characters with enough ‘human interest to procure the willing momentary suspension of disbelief, which constitutes poetic faith’ (Coleridge 1817)⁸. The voluntary credulity with which we enter fiction implies that the viewer is not and should not be considered at any time as naive or alienated (Aumont 2014), lest we pretend to abuse them, by reducing them to mere rather unaware consumers of basically commercial or ideological products.

In this sense, I understand that when we think and talk about truculence and immorality in the Nordic series, we must also in all fairness consider that the portrait they show has at the same time a strong element of perplexity, warning or rejection of an undesirable situation. There is no clear positive or justifying attitude towards the grave moral disruption shown, but there is a sort of acquiescence of what – with an adjusted ethical vision – we know to be its cause. Therefore, there is no straightforward rejection. On the contrary, the expressive features that show that serious moral distress are typical of the whining attitude of those who detect evil in themselves and do not know where, how, or what to do to mend their ways (García-Noblejas 2016a).

There is no denying that with their actions in the dramatic and narrative plots the tragic characters that we will briefly see moving about in the world of the TV series may appear at first sight immoral in their real reference (García-Noblejas 2011)⁹. However, they are also worthy of compassion because, beyond pity and fear, they can and perhaps should evoke mercy in the different life contexts of sufficiently alert spectators.

While the diegetic worlds of today’s dramas present at times bleak images of our human condition, we can say that, up to a certain point, by doing so they are also doing their duty to highlight and show possible and plausible signs of the presence of evil in human life, without intending to offer alleged solutions.

The spectators who are alert and vigilant will not remain engrossed in the possible textual worlds or their intertextualities. They will also perceive the ample real referential panorama of misery and conflict in everybody’s personal life and in the world. In this real context, the so-called ‘works of mercy’¹⁰ suggest and offer real-life personal responses and not only ideas for our intellectual consideration and abstract public statements about values.
3. Some European series from 2015

Television series in today’s Europe depend almost exclusively on an industrial system that makes production and exhibition decisions based on the audiences in local markets. There are also exceptions of a civico-political kind, as in the case of Danish public TV, in which an important production criterion is promoting public debate on matters not much openly discussed in society, but which this public service considers relevant in order to contribute to the normalization of postmodern values considered to be politically correct.

Such is the case of the particularly lurid ‘Nordic noir’ stories developed in Danish dramas (The Killing or The Bridge), as well as in some historical (1864) or political stories (Borgen). These Danish and some Swedish productions (Mankell, etc.) were well received by Nordic audiences (Hedling 2014; García Avis 2015), attained immediate success in Britain and from there (with English subtitles) quickly jumped to the rest of Europe (Collins 2013). Somehow, the linguistic affinity between Norwegian, Danish and Swedish audiences and their similar mentalities and lifestyles have created a common ground of ‘Scandinavian’ stories that have promptly become an unexpected benchmark for European TV drama series.

It is true that there is also great potential for co-production in Europe, but, unlike Hollywood, Europe is not underpinned by a genuine common political constitution to serve as a preamble permitting the construction of a clear ‘we the people’ common identity. There is, of course, the Treaty of Lisbon of 2007, but it is a document devoid of foundational meaning for the European mentality. In our case, as regards series produced in other countries, in the present absence of a consolidated European identity and peacefully stable cultural roots we have to make do with international products that are usually thematically contrived and highly dependent on the narrative and dramatic trends adopted (thriller, comedy, detective, etc.).

A case in point is the series The Team (2015), a detective story that mingles Danish, German and Belgian investigators, trying to solve the murder of three young women in Copenhagen, Berlin and Antwerp. When they are in their own country, the characters speak their native language, with subtitles in English, and when are mixed together, they speak English. From a thematic point of view, there is a surfeit of predictable stereotypes and morbid clichés about prostitution, traffic of persons, and tax fraud; from a narrative and dramatic point of view the conventional standards of the genre are adhered to, but do not make their own mark.

According to IMDb, The Team has a rating of 6.8 points, with 800 votes, whereas Occupied (2015), a Norwegian coproduction with Arte has a rating of 7.5 points with 1,800 votes; the Danish The Legacy (2014–15) has a rating of 7.8 points and 1700 votes; the German Deutschland’83 (2015), a rating of 8.3 points and 4,300 votes; the British Humans (2015) a rating of 8.1 points and 18,500 votes; the French Engrenages (Spiral, since 2005) a rating of 8.6 points and 3000 votes; and the Italian Gomorrah (2014) a rating of 8.7 points and over 7000 votes. In any case all these series lag far behind the large American productions like Fargo, with 9.1 points in IMDb and over 150,000 votes. It goes without saying that comparisons are odious, but we must admit that the label ‘Made in Europe’ is not quite on a par with the label ‘Made in USA’. However, although there are excellent American series in terms of narrative and
dramatic resources, Europe has some thematically innovative productions which show their fullest sense when we look at them through a suitable ethical dimension.

With these premises, I will briefly mention some European series. One which makes thematic reference to personal and civic identity, and five which coincide in situating the family as an essential narrative and dramatic feature. There could have been a few more, for example, the Icelandic detective series *Trapped* (2015), in which—in a remote town—the police must solve a crime amid a heavy storm of wind and snow that isolates the town. In addition to the amazing vision of a (more or less) ordinary life in an inhospitable place, the family factor is pervasive and intertwines with the resolution of the crime. It would have also have been interesting to refer to the family details present in the protagonists of the Danish series *Bedrag* (translated as *Follow the money*, 2015), which deals with economic crimes committed by people corrupted by greed and ambition, which barely get exposure during police investigation or in journalistic reports. Also, the eight-part French series *Disparue* (2015), distributed in the context of ‘Nordic noir’ productions, is a police thriller about the tragic and strong family melodrama affecting the Morel family when Léa, the elder daughter goes missing on the same day of her seventeenth birthday.

Although I could have included more, I do not wish to refer to series that the reader may not be familiar with and, in any case, the ones I mention are a significant sample. There are also other series like the Italian *Don Matteo* or the Spanish *Isabel*, successes in their countries of production, but finding difficulties in their distribution in Europe. In order not to draw out the references to series that perhaps the reader does not know first-hand, I think that those that are mentioned below are a sufficient sample.

I shall now say a few words about some European series in the light of these premises. One of the series addresses the issue of personal and civic identity, and five have the family as a primordial feature or thematic core.

### 3.1. Occupied

Jo Nesbo (author of the idea of *Occupied*) says that what is currently wrong with the inhabitants of Scandinavian countries is that ‘we take things for granted’ (Rustin 2014). We believe that things are the way we see them, although both things and situations change and some may do so very rapidly, as happened for example in the case of the Crimean annexation or independence crisis in 2014.

The series takes place in Norway, in the near future. The Prime Minister keeps an election promise and announces that he will put an end to oil exploitation in the country. Russia—with the consent of the European Union, which is undergoing an energy crisis—occupies Norway to force the government to change this policy.

Since it is not an armed invasion, with tanks, bombs and physical violence, but a capillary invasion of the political and administrative bodies, with no apparent effect, the plot revolves around the very roots of the freedom, democracy and independence of the people in a country.

Jo Nesbo says that he was inspired by historical events that affected the Norwegian society and his own family in 1940, because the German invasion. At the time, most Norwegians resigned themselves to the situation and accepted it. In Nesbo’s case, his
father was a collaborationist and his mother joined the resistance (Langlais 2014). Through five or six characters chorally interlocked in the plot with political circles and some professional spheres of the civil society, the series dilemma is whether the civil society will react by cooperating or fighting the invasion. As the occupant nation, does not force substantive changes in customs or life style, the series becomes an invitation to reflect on freedom and the reaction and commitment capacity of society.

3.2. The Bridge

There are two Nordic series whose thematic focus is the family as an institution. One of them is the Swedish-Danish co-production The Bridge (2015) (García Avis 2015), currently in its third and last-but-one (Plunkett 2016) season of serial killings, whose protagonist is a policewoman with Asperger syndrome. The series deals with family issues in all its plots and subplots. These issues are weird, but have the appearance of normality. They involve a peculiar soon-to-be-dead Danish policewoman who is assigned to be the protagonist’s partner, the two co-protagonist cops and, of course, the murderer and each of the victims.

Among other things, this series shows a family formed by two lesbians, one of them a pioneer in ‘gender-neutral’ pre-school education, and the obsessive reactions of a father (the co-protagonist) who has lost his wife and two daughters in an accident (like him, we continue to see them in his house, until they vanish when he finds female company). The viewer is also shown the co-protagonist’s appalling relation with her mother. The daughter reneges on her because her mother does not love her, has never loved her and could have prevented her sister’s suicide. We also see the serial-killer in action and towards the end, learn that his intention has been to kill all those who had not loved him or accepted him as a son. Meanwhile, the killer’s father is expecting a new child from a surrogate mother, etc.

There is no doubt that art and show business normally exaggerate things present in reality. At times, as happens in this case, this is accompanied by the – vital rather than merely rational – denunciation of the deep malaise in political spaces where social welfare states are the rule (Brunsdale 2016; Bondebjerg 2015; Novrup Redvall 2013). Since ordinary life in Sweden and Denmark does not seem to have anything in common with the exaggerated morbid concern about family issues of this series, when The Guardian interviewed the leading actor, she was asked questions not about the series but about her everyday life as the wife of a Lutheran pastor and mother of two children. She answered as follows: ‘The family is absolutely everything to me. I love being an aunt and godmother to three children (two members of my own family and one of a friend’s). Being a mother is very satisfying and exhausting, but it is the most rewarding role of all’ (Lewis 2016).

3.3. The legacy

The first two seasons of the Danish series The Legacy (2014–15) seem to respond to the following query: ‘what goes on in a hippie family some thirty years after the first wedding?’. The series narrates the story of the four children of a well-known hippie
artist (two of them by different fathers), whose lives are deeply affected by their mother’s unexpected death and will.

Without going into the byways and digressions of the plot, the magnificent dramatic exploration of the situation and the evolution of a clearly dysfunctional and almost pathological clan are worth mentioning. Not even in Denmark today is it normal that the aging widower of the deceased – a rather unsuccessful composer and impenitent pot smoker – should at the same time have an affair with a lawyer; sire a daughter with a girl that is scarcely of age, and manage to turn the manor house – which his late wife has left to a daughter she had given up for adoption – into a hippie commune. All this takes place in the context of a more or less peaceful coexistence of siblings and step-siblings living under the same roof, each with their own families and stories.

Two episodes in the narrative plot of The Legacy are very enlightening. They are related to the end and beginning of life: the burial of the deceased mother and the so-called christening of the old father’s new daughter. I mention them because it is striking that there should not be the slightest transcendental reference in either of them. Yet, they show the unease of those involved as they appear not to know what to do or the actual meaning of these ceremonies for which a sort of ritual is invented or improvised there and then.

The burial of the ashes of the mater familias in the garden of the house is preceded by the family searching for and finding the right place. The burial ceremony itself is performed in a halfhearted way, as the members of the family are bewildered to find themselves living an abstract idea with no historical tradition or personal sense. There is an awkward silence because none of the children know what to say. It is as if none of them remember that the first human prehistoric findings have been burial sites, that is, religious signs of an afterlife.

In The Legacy events take place as if everyone was a mere individual and not a human person, with nothing transcendental above, around or next to them. Their relations with spouses, partners, siblings and children are affected as they are superseded by their respective professional activities and illusions over and over again.

The christening is rather an explicit social party and is clearly presented as pagan, with a more or less artistic ritual with primitive resonances, conceived of by the old hippie, the father of the child. The ceremony includes fire and beads and takes place next to a small pond where the child almost drowns in a moment of distraction of the mother.

The Legacy can be regarded as a sort of inorganic treatise or a casuistry of tragic mistakes of the type that Aristotle calls hamartemas (Guastini 2010), that is, involuntary misfortunes that are not unpredictable or free of guilt. The series presents a world in which there is no hint of religious transcendence – a mere context for living in which the structures, customs, atmosphere, laws, institutions, etc., are full of theoretical values yet, at the same time, tend to hinder the exercise of real and concrete personal virtues.

Perhaps it is precisely in these features that I have briefly referred to, that The Legacy shows what remains of a Protestant cultural context when the religious dimension disappears from society. In the words of Ronald Knox (Martin 2016) whereas a Catholic continues to be a Catholic even if he is a villain or a criminal, because he
can tell right from wrong when he does something wrong, a Protestant believes that his religion is true to the extent to which he lives it. Something of the kind takes place in the northern European and Scandinavian Protestant context: religion disappears from the public sphere of society when it disappears from the personal and family spheres, which, curiously, is the context to which religion is being relegated.

3.4. Deutschland’83

The German series Deutschland’83 (2015) is the story of a young East German soldier, who is sent to West Germany by the Stasi. His mission is to impersonate the aide-de-camp of the general who liaises with the American Army.

The series is a Bildungsroman, a spy story and refers to an actual historical event in which some NATO maneuvers were interpreted in the East as an impending nuclear attack. Some elements in the series are reminiscent of the characterization of the characters in Borgen, the conflict in The Americans, or the viewpoint of the film The lives of others. The core plot of the story revolves around the family setting, although many of the family ties are perverted: the protagonist is forced to take on the job by his mother’s sister, who will get a liver transplant in exchange for this collaboration.

The young protagonist must say goodbye to his girlfriend, be smuggled into the West instead of the real aide-de-camp who has been murdered, and find out what is going on. To do so, he will practically become a member of the gradually disintegrating family of the general for whom he works in the West. Eventually, he himself tells the general – partly out of loyalty and partly out of selfishness – that the East has misinterpreted the NATO maneuvers. Without the protagonist’s double dimension of family bonds, most probably the historical-cum-spy-story plot would not have a leg to stand on.

3.5. Humans

The British series Humans (2015) is a largely modified adaptation of the Swedish series Äkta Människor (2012–2013). Both deal with a world that is parallel to today’s, in which there are robots that are practically identical to human beings, which are used in different ways and for several purposes in industry and homes. Whereas the Swedish series delves into science fiction, horror and politics, somewhat in the style of Blade Runner, the British series is a family melodrama.

It explores the interactions of a real family (a married couple with three children), in a present-day urban middle-class environment, and a newly bought ‘maid for all work’ robot. This robot turns out to form part of a group of particularly gifted androids (who see themselves as a ‘family’), and whose leader is a bionic young man.

Regardless of the verisimilitude of the androids’ physical attributes (green eyes, blue blood, gestures that are occasionally mechanical, etc.), which most probably respond to the clichés expected from the genre, it is their intellectual and spiritual attributes that jar us the wrong way. Because one thing is their faking what they feel, but quite a different one is their carrying out pathological actions such as killing, or being intelligent and having a conscience and will assimilated to the identity of person
or, to boot, that all of this should be stored in a hard disc. Also disconcerting is a brief moment in which – with no prior build-up or subsequent follow-up – one of the robots falls on his knees saying that if God exists, He should look after beings like him.

This is a theoretical exploration, an imaginative game with a hypothetical premise of the ‘what if…?’ type, that follows the Cartesian route of opposition, separation and non-articulation of mind and body, reason and emotion (García 2016). At any rate, there are too many curious and confusing incidents about personal identity in and with androids (Gómez Perez 2016). There is, however, an interesting dramatic element that remains undeveloped in the background: the appearance of these androids in the life horizon of the real family makes the parents and the children open up and relate better to one another after the arrival of the first android.

The android is like a strange element that acts as a catalyst of the family’s life habits and feelings, which seem to have been stifled by routine and different personal quirks. Not only in science fiction does this happen. We have witnessed it in many families with the arrival of something transient, like a car, a TV set or a dog, let alone the arrival of a permanent member of the family, say, a sibling who makes the house become a home. In this series, the new addition to the family context is a logical hybrid that is the materialization of a theoretical object. In this particular case, it takes some effort to apply Coleridge’s ‘voluntary suspension of disbelief’.

3.6. Gomorrah

Gomorrah is an Italian series written by a team led by Roberto Saviano, who wrote the novel that made him a best-selling author and creator of a universe of his own. The film version was directed by Matteo Garrone. This series has been aired on pay TV and has become such a remarkable success with national and international audiences that a second season is already being aired and there are plans for a third one.

The book, the movie and the series share the characteristics of an informal collective of writers known as New Italian Epic, who write Unidentified Narrative Objects (Chimenti 2010). In a nutshell, Saviano and the different versions of the Gomorrah text represent the characteristic expressive mode of the group, whose sine qua non condition is the ‘rejection of the detached and ‘coldly ironic’ tone that predominates in the postmodern novel’. The group cultivates a narrative complexity in their texts and at the same time seeks popular appeal.

These characteristics give an idea of the expressive mode of Gomorrah the series, which is at times closer to a television journalistic document than to the narrative modes of present-day fiction, which incorporates those post modernistic narrative and rhetorical features that Saviano shuns.

The nihilism of Gomorrah’s world (Farnsworth 2014) is self-contained and centres on the sphere of influence of the mafia, almost without considering other crucial institutional dimensions and social contexts. From this point of view, the narrative and dramatic work presents the challenge of not having moral references other than those of the malavita to identify ways of seeing and judging the actions of the mafiosi from outside their own system.
Thus, the spectator finds himself before a strategy of show, don’t tell (Noble 2015), that provides no narrative or dramatic support and no tool to pass judgement on the morality of the actions of the different groups of Mafiosi who, in fact, move between the bad, the worse and the horrific. It is always up to the spectator to make explicit judgements.

The capo of the Savastano mafia family is also the head of his family, and has a wife and son. When he goes to prison, his wife takes over the clan and Savastano leaves young Ciro – his second-in command whose fidelity to the ‘system’ is beyond suspicion – in charge of the education and training of his son. The activities and power struggles of the clan in Naples and its relations with other clans in Milan and Barcelona, frame the different supremacy and survival plots in a drugs market. This involves a context of unrestrained violence, manipulation, vile murders, fear, hopes, deceit, pressure, revenge, promises, always intertwined with family life, relations between spouses, parents and children, cousins and friends, which are subordinated in an absolute and tragic way to the priorities of the clan.

The balance at the end of the last episode shows the almost full extinction of the clan’s secondary characters and paves the way for the appearance of new ones who will most probably be developed along the same lines as in Season One, this time catering to an international audience.

4. Personal contributions to the representations of our lives

We may think that what we have shown so far assumes a bleak moral view of society. The actual point is that given this panorama, the spectator can adopt a proactive position and stop moaning and submitting passively to the moral outlook of the stories mainly produced for commercial entertainment purposes.

It may be worth considering that these series – warts and all – are like messengers who should not be immediately ignored without listening to the message they are trying to convey about ourselves. What is at stake here is life in our real world, and not the tragedies presented in these series.

4.1. Continuing the classical poetical approach today

As I have explained before (García-Noblejas 2016b), it is possible today to demonstrate a rational way to continue philosophically the poetic endeavor proposed by Aristotle, beyond the ethical and political molds of civic life (Castillo Merlo 2015). This endeavor includes personal liberty in a fundamental way and is therefore not of a strictly metaphysical nature.

In this sense, as indicated at the beginning of this paper, it is appropriate to take into consideration the thought of Leonardo Polo, in his development of a transcendental anthropology (Corazón et al. 1999; Corazón, García González, and José Padial 2009). This philosopher proposes the rationality of ‘an extension of the transcendental’, in which personal liberty plays a relevant part. A liberty that is not limited to ‘liberty from’, in the dimension of autonomy or independence, but is above all ‘liberty to’ (as distinguished by Isaiah Berlin, On Freedom): the to of personal liberty is its destiny (…) And destiny affects the being [el ‘ser’] of man, not his mere
temporary state [el ‘estar’]. The human being does not culminate in technique, nor in culture, nor in history, nor in nature, but in his free personal assignment to God (Cfr. Sellés 2010).

The Greek condition of man, according to Polo, ‘stops in the consideration of man as “possessor” and does not manage to recognize the aspect of “donor” that, being also exclusive and even more radical, does not enter in contradiction with the other, but affirms it’ (González 1996). This being as ‘donor’ supposes a deepening that

‘was only historically possible with Christianity, concretely after the Christian revelation of God as love. The introduction of love in God meant putting at the forefront an aspect of the will neglected by the Greeks (…) Taking the Christian contribution, Polo is able to establish a contrast not only with ancient thought, but also with modern, where man as such begins to receive with particular intensity a different treatment before nature, and begins to understand himself preferentially in terms of liberty. Nevertheless, it is advisable to insist that Polo does not oppose ancient and modern thought in a symmetrical way. If his posture before the Greeks – vg. Aristotle – can be described in terms of ‘prolongation’, ‘profundization’, and ‘complement’, before modern philosophy, on the contrary, it must be described in terms of ‘rectification’’ (González 1996).

Some of the features of this Polian step from a Greek situation to a Christian one have been described with the purpose of proposing a ‘poetic position’ for the spectator of film and television (García-Noblejas 2016b), seeking to pay attention to what David Mamet (1988) suggests as the specific subject of dramas: ‘problems of the soul and mysteries of human life’, not its ‘quotidian calamities’.

4.1.1. Christian meaning for personal destination

This transcendental anthropological position allows the continuance today of what we have been thinking of as the Aristotelian poetic myth. If the core of the poetic representations supposes the representation of actions in search of happiness, of the personal human praxis, today we can say that its vital reach in these terms of happiness does not stay in the territory of strict intellectual knowledge. It is oriented instead in terms of love as Christian ágape:

‘In Christian love the three Greek senses of love are united and elevated: eros, filía and ágape. The first, for the Greeks, was love of the superior; the second, the love of friendship, that is, love among equals. The ágape is love of the inferior. Christian love is, of course, the synthesis of these three Greek versions of love, as is seen in the explanation of the Gospel. If for the Greeks the love of friendship could not yet be a love of God, because of the complete absence of equality, Jesus calls his disciples friends in regards to the fact that he has communicated to them all that he has heard from his Father’ (Polo 2007, 570).

As precisely observed from an ethical perspective, as an extension of the poetic approach, it turns out that ‘when orienting and rectifying one’s own actions it is not indifferent to propose as an end the perfection of nature itself – in which Aristotle makes happiness consist – or the giving of oneself, just as is proposed in a radical way by Christianity’ (González 1996, 667–668).

In this sense, the continuation of the Aristotelian point of view of which we have been speaking implies incorporating Christian inspiration, with which we see that ‘the theme of destiny is broader than among the Greeks; it is intensified. The end
is that to which one must destine oneself (…) For the Christian, destiny has an active sense: it means to destine oneself (…) It is understood then as destination, as something that one takes in one’s own hands. And that is what the most profound sense of liberty is like’ (Polo 2012, 29).

Given that without a doubt the series mentioned here, together with other recent ones, present stories with strong tragic features, the subject deserves to be seen and considered in the light that Aristotle proposes in his Poetics. Not for nothing is this dedicated to observing the sense of tragedies based on the notion of myth in that it is the ‘soul of tragedy’ and is understood as mimesis praxeos, as the representation of personal actions and decisions of those who want to progress toward happiness.

In any case, it should be borne in mind that, obviously, Aristotle’s pity and fear were conceived of in Ancient Greece, that is, they are inherently pagan and pre-Christian and are formulated and presented as such. Therefore, among the numerous philosophical approaches to tragedy developed at different points in history (Garelli 2001), we mustn’t forget the already mentioned loopholes throughout our personal reading, which open up the possibility of intellectual and actual life transcendence.

### 4.1.2 Personal capacity for ethical and esthetical contribution

Accepting the contribution of Christianity continuing from the Greek thought, it happens that

‘human nature is now defined in another way: not in contradiction, nor in opposition, nor even in discordance with Greek anthropology. But, now, man is not defined ultimately, or only, as a being ‘capable of having’, because it is necessary to find the root of his capacity to give. The source of this giving must be more radical than immanence, and even more than virtue. It is what is called intimacy. This strictly determines the notion of person. The man is a personal being because he is ‘capable of giving’. From the person, giving means to contribute’ (Polo 1987).

The television series spectator can contribute his personal capacity to reason about these subjects, to the extent that he is not a passive spectator, a couch potato, a person who watches a lot of television and does not have an active life. The spectator ordinarily has resources to find openings in the plots and introduce himself in them and value them in accordance with his own vision and judgement (García-Noblejas 2004a). This applies not only when he must deal rationally with ‘tragedies’ like those we have considered here, but also when the spectator finds himself in front of mainly dogmatic or manipulative stories and dramas, scarcely oriented to dialogue.

As is currently known, the esthetical reasons of classical tragedy and of Aristotelian Poetics imply a catarsis that is the fruit of fear and pity in a world that fears the gods and does not look upon them with piety. In our day, the ‘prolongation’ or ‘updating’ of this same tragic feature implies a catarsis compatible with fear before one’s own weaknesses and impiety in front of divine love for its creatures.

The man formed in the Greek paideia understood that he could know the divine through the things of the world and therefore went to the theatre to learn the poetic myths (Guastini 2003). While Christ becomes man to save men, it turns out that Greek men become gods, ‘projecting all the carnal characteristics typical of the human being, thus immortalizing the image of their own mortality’ (Guastini 2003, 163).
This way it happens that what is normally at stake in Greek tragedy must do with a sensible equilibrium, a ‘golden mean’ between the excesses and deficits of passions and virtues. While ‘from a philosophical point of view, Christianity has added to Greek anthropology the comprehension of life itself as a gift that, directed by the development of the virtues, manages to reveal the deepest sense of human liberty: the giving of oneself’ (González 1996, 665).

Passing for a moment from the ethical perspective to the esthetics of transcendental anthropology, it can be observed that the Platonic strength to ‘engender in beauty’ is translated into the capacity of beauty to congregate, to convene a conversion and union of the personal transcendentals (free co-existence, personal knowledge and gift-love) among themselves. In this sense, the cognitional task continues that Aristotle allocates to poetics to make the citizens understand what is the human praxis (Guastini 2003).

The beauty of the poetic works as personal transcendental is not like an added decoration, but something central in its capacity to congregate and gather personal coexistence, knowledge, and love (Sellés 2009). The criterion of liking, the medieval Thomist ‘quod visum placet’, ‘is the index’ of the perfection of the object. It is not the perfection itself of the object, but it is an index of it’ (Polo 1984, 271; Sellés 2009, 130).

4.2. A post-secular position open to transcendence

In this sense – contrary to what happens at present – there are reasons not to marginalize transcendent and religious personal behaviours from the screen. One of those reasons is that the sociological perspective coined the term post secular as a social self-comprehension category reflecting the prevailing mentalities. The term is used by Habermas to ‘describe those modern societies that find that religious groups continue to exist and that the different religious traditions continue to be relevant even though the societies themselves may be secularized to a large extent’ (Mendieta and Vanantwerpen 2011, 62–63). In fact, this relevance grows, as recently observed (McGrath 2015).

In fact, Joseph Ratzinger has observed that at times like ours we cannot put into practice that interesting idea of the Enlightenment to understand one another according to a valid morality etsi Deus non daretur, even in the case that God did not exist. Perhaps in other times, the strength of tradition made it possible to talk about morality based on that theoretical hypothesis. Now that things are no longer the same as in Hugo Grocio times, perhaps, as Ratzinger says, a convenient alternative is to ‘assert that even those who cannot find their way to the free acceptance of God, should try to live and organize their lives veluti si Deus daretur, as if God existed. This was Pascal’s advice to his non-believer friends and it is also the advice that we would like to offer to our non-believer friends’ (Ratzinger 2005).

This perspective is worth considering when what is at play is not only the praxis of dramatis personae (in its immanent actions in search of happiness), but the real personal praxis.

This is the reach of the perspective that brings us to this point, and allows us to speak, not only about dramatic representations of the search for perfection in human
virtues, civics or politics, but also of the real sense and of the transcendental reach that speaking in terms of the Christian search for personal sanctity definitively proposes.

It is a sense that deserves to appear in fictions, to the degree in which the Aristotelian notion of praxis and its contemporary philosophical ‘prolongation’ is accepted, without the necessity of entering in sociological territories that speak of ‘religious television or cinema’, considered as marginal genres or niches in current audio-visual production.

Given that these fictions reflect actions and lifestyles typical of ordinary people, it is coherent to think that these fictions should also include lifestyles with transcendent personal attitudes and actions oriented to the gift of self, giving rise to esthetical pleasure in front of the beauty of the hypothesis veluti si Deus dare tur. That is, to the harmony of the reason for being, the truth and the goodness of such a hypothesis.

Notes

1. This text refers to European productions but does not include Spanish ones. It forms part of a panel discussion in which other participants referred to the Spanish and the American situation (Congress on “Possible Worlds in television fiction. The golden age of series”, organized by Signis and the Universidad Francisco de Vitoria, in Madrid, 7–8 April 2016).

2. See, in particular, Jerôme Bourdon’s chapter, “Imperialism, Self-inflicted? On the Americanization of Television in Europe”, which asserts that “although there are many institutions in Europe that claim to deal with or to represent European television, there is no such thing as far as viewers are concerned. There are no European programmes reaching a European audience across the continent or even a sizable part of it” [Ebook, p. 83 of 185].

3. Ricoeur makes this assertion in order to do justice to the “myth” in Aristotle’s Poetics, which is the ultimate reference of dramatic stories. Gone is the relativistic phenomenon of contempt for truth, as stated by Joseph Ratzinger (Seewald 2010).

4. Neither should we forget the existence of organizations lobbying to show and highlight certain lifestyles on screen. Such is the case, for example, of GLAAD, dedicated to the on-screen promotion of LGBT characters and situations: Samantha Allen, “GLAAD Calls for LGBT Characters in ‘Star Wars,’ Shames Movie Studios for Paltry Representation”, The Daily Beast (http://ow.ly/XGZM3001f9D)

5. Joseph Ratzinger in his latest conference (“Europe in the crisis of cultures”, Subiaco, 1 April 2005) said: “No one can deny that today there is a new morality articulated around key words such as justice, peace and conservation of the created, etc.; words that refer to fundamental moral values that we need imperatively (…) The political moralism of the seventies, whose roots are not quite dead, was a moralism that succeeded in fascinating even young people full of ideals. But it was a moralism with wrong goals, because it lacked a serene rationality and because, in the final analysis, it placed the political utopia above the dignity of the individual” (Ratzinger 2005).

6. The use of the word “value” is confusing and pathetic, “especially when it is used to pretend that educational, entrepreneurial or political activity is full of ethical content. We accept with resignation that reality lacks a meaning of its own. We do not realize that the notion of value implies, in itself, a loss of the self when the being becomes the object of representation. This represented object is ascribed — in a conventional, ideological or simply arbitrary fashion — a determined value. Thus understood, the value is a mere object and, therefore, something unreal that cannot serve as a goal for human activities” (Llano 2015, 150).
7. In the Aristotelian sense of “pitanon” (credible, persuasive) in 1451b 16 and 1461b 11 as well as in the sense of “eikos” (having verisimilitude in reference to passions) in 1456b 4.

8. The complete text of this well-known quotation is: “… It was agreed, that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic, yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith”.

9. Immorality is manifested in many ways related, for example, to prudence and justice, and does not necessarily refer to the sexual and violent exhibitionism that sometimes proliferates and often betrays a lack of narrative and dramatic resources and also an excess of resources to conquer the superficial attention of viewers turned into consumers. It is interesting to address in our days the Greek criterion of what appears on scene or what is obscene and thus does not appear before the viewer (Garcia-Noblejas 2011).

10. Works of mercy (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Works_of_mercy ) are practices by which we come to the aid of others in spiritual and bodily necessities. The spiritual ones consist in instructing, advising, consoling, comforting, forgiving and bearing wrongs patiently. The corporal works of mercy consist especially in feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and burying the dead”.

11. An overview of the 27 European countries members of, in E.A.V.I. (2016). As I’ve suggested in another publication, I understand that “the ethical and political dimension of the Nordic noir series gives us a critical point of view that has been socially accepted by a large part of the Swedish and Danish public. It’s important to know that these national spectators, living as citizens in a society considered similar to the one we see on the screens, have made these bestsellers into blockbusters. And they have also made the series (Forbrydelsen / the Killing or The Bridge) produced by the Danish public television into a social phenomenon, deliberately created as quality entertainment and, at the same time, a direct means of promotion of public debate on ethical and political themes” (Garcia-Noblejas 2016a).

12. Nesbo has commented “en Norvège, tout le monde se dit fils d’un ancien résistant, raconte comment sa famille écoutait la radio libre dans le grenier. Or, en 1940, quand l’Allemagne a envahi notre pays, la plupart des gens ont baissé la tête” (Langlais 2014).

13. See Aristotle, Poetics, 1453a 9–10. The ignorance that stands out in Guastini’s comment of the Aristotelian text about the hamartia shows that it is not a pure and simple ignorance of facts and circumstances. It is an “ignorance of good, of what is advisable to do in the possible circumstances of the action (...) error and not fault, but given that the error is caused by a lack of fronesis (prudence, practical wisdom), it therefore supposes responsibility on the part of he who commits it” (Guastini 2010, 258).

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