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On the back burner: Depictions of fascism in contemporary TV drama

Abstract: The article seeks to describe and examine one of the possible (and arguably increasingly popular) approaches to the subject of fascism in contemporary TV drama: a narrative strategy that is defined by its willingness to go beyond the depiction of fascism as the absolute political Other, but nonetheless aims to produce a compelling and thorough critique of fascism. This is largely achieved by turning the subject of fascism into an ostensibly non-central element of the plot. By examining a number of contemporary TV series (*The Crown*, *The Man in the High Castle*, *Peaky Blinders*, *Pennyworth* and *The Knick*), and drawing certain analogies to Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones*, I aim to showcase the narrative effectiveness of a thus defined "back-burner" strategy — while linking this effectiveness to the formal possibilities opened up by contemporary TV drama.

Keywords: fascism, alternative history, TV series, TV drama, *The Man in the High Castle*, *Peaky Blinders*, *The Kindly Ones*

The article seeks to explain how a certain narrative strategy of approaching fascism in contemporary TV drama — one that goes beyond the idea of fascism as the absolute political Other, and avoids placing it at the very centre of the plot — may produce a type of anti-fascist critique that is at once narratively compelling and capable of avoiding some of the affective pitfalls associated with the subject. The selection of the analysed material (i.e. TV series), although to an extent arbitrary, is largely dictated by my desire to showcase this very strategy: thus, rather than offer a comprehensive review of contemporary series touching on the topic of fascism, I will focus on the narratives where fascism is both an explicit subject and an ostensibly non-central element of the plot.

Introduction

I would like to start with a somewhat provocative question: is it possible to "otherise" a fascist? If so, is it the right thing to do — or, for that matter, a *productive* thing to do — politically, ethically or culturally?

The answer to the first part of this question seems to depend primarily on whether we perceive fascism solely as a political doctrine — an ideology — or a social *identity* as well. One cannot really "otherise"[1] a worldview, no matter how alien one considers this worldview to be — we can *disagree* with a doctrine, even censor it and exclude it from the public debate and the spectrum of acceptable political views, but we can't otherise it in the same way we have historically done with, say, ethnic, cultural or sexual minorities. To otherise a person, to posit them as fundamentally alien, one has to take issue with what they *are*, rather than what they *hold*; the place from which they speak, rather than the meaning of the speech act itself.[2] Moreover, this very distinction is arguably the basis for many systemic anti-discriminatory and antifascist practices — the very idea that we can legally proscribe certain extremist organisations, while defending everyone's right to shape their own cultural (sexual, gender etc.) identity, either individually or collectively, may only function in practice insofar as we agree that a belief and a subject-position are not the same. There is a reason why so many fringe right-wing activists and alt-right internet trolls react to being banned or no-platformed with complaints about the supposed liberal or left-wing "intolerance of right-wing views"; if successful, this purposeful blurring of boundaries between views and identities would render all anti-fascist struggle if not impossible, then significantly harder — there would be no *qualitative* difference between being, say, a member of a long-persecuted ethnic group and a political advocate for white supremacy.

In other words, as long as we treat fascism as a doctrine, a set of beliefs, rather than simply a way of life, we cannot really "otherise" it, even if we openly exclude fascist ideas from the spectrum of acceptable political views. But as soon as we shift our perspective on fascism so that we perceive it first and foremost as an identity, a political *tribe* of sorts, we can also present it as "culturally" alien — laying not only outside of the permissible political debate, but also outside of the permissible forms of life: it's not that you cannot *promote* or *hold* Nazi views, you are also not allowed to *be* a Nazi.

Obviously, the line separating identities from views is always, in practice, quite porous; but even if the distinction were strictly analytical (which it is not), it would still remain hugely important for our discussion of political fringes and the limits of free speech. What seems important in the context of this article, is that this process, this whole symbolic operation, seems to work both ways — if you want to otherise Nazism, you need to transform it into an identity rather than

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[1] Throughout the article, I use the verb "to otherise" rather than "to other". I do not consider this a methodological/political decision; my choice is solely based on the fact that while the latter may be preferred in certain sociological contexts, the former seems more popular in everyday English usage. Broadly speaking, I consider them synonyms.

[2] I use the distinction between beliefs and subject-positions in terms proposed by Walter Benn Michaels (see e.g. idem, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History*, Princeton-Oxford 2004), to whom I also refer later in the article.

a doctrine or an agenda; but if you posit Nazis as the absolute political Other, you automatically cease to perceive it as an essentially political narrative. As a result, although reasoning behind the operation as a whole may differ, in the end it appears to us always as a dual process, or indeed a relationship between two processes: that of identification and that of otherisation. One always requires the other, if not in practice, then at least as a possibility.

The primary reason I'm offering these remarks in the context of contemporary TV and its "new frontiers" is the fact that in recent years we've seen many television scriptwriters, producers and producers take a renewed interest in the fictional representations of Nazism and fascism.[3] Moreover, it's here, in contemporary TV drama (and to a lesser extent comedy), that the fictional representations of fascism, both historically rooted and not, seem to break the usual conventions and narrative boundaries. Series such as *The Man in the High Castle*, *SS–GB*, *Peaky Blinders*, *Watchmen*, or even last year's criminally underrated *Pennyworth*, successfully avoid reproducing any of the well-known tropes: that of fascism as a mysterious, metaphysical evil with no real material foundation; or that of fascism as an infantile disorder of modernity; or even that age-old cliché, often attributed to Slavoj Žižek, that suggests that the unique nature of the totalitarian state is embodied in its ability to pressure essentially good people into doing essentially bad things.[4] Meanwhile, the aforementioned series allow its characters to enter a close, often unnervingly intimate relationship with fascism, reminding us that in the modern world fascism is never that far away, and the line separating mainstream politics from right-wing extremism is precarious at best.

In the so-called public debate, more often than not, references to fascism are weaponised against a particular, singled out political enemy; rarely is the history of fascism invoked in order to, say, analyse and reflect on the roots of one's own political tradition, or the roots of modern politics in general. Even when we accept some political responsibility for a fresh wave of fascist violence in the streets, we always do that on behalf of an imagined social totality. In other words, we're always ready to fight our inner Nazi — as long as it is acknowledged that we, personally, are not the ones who put him there in the first place. Fascism thus becomes an alien identity — allowing us to define our own subject-position — rather than a set of views that permeates modern society in general. What is particularly interesting is all the ways in which contemporary TV narratives analyse, subvert and question this image, in order to question our own everyday ideological leanings.

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[3] For the purposes of this article, I treat Nazism and fascism as largely interchangeable.

[4] See e.g. J.N. Jones, "Six questions for Slavoj Žižek", *Harper's Magazine* 11.11.2011, https://harpers.org/2011/11/six-questions-for-slavoj-zizek/ (accessed: 29.09.2020).

The Crown

I would however like to start (if only to provide a background of sorts) with a series that doesn't achieve any of those things — indeed, despite the predictably high production values, doesn't seem to have a subversive or critical bone in its body. In *The Crown*, Netflix' historical drama about the everyday hardships associated with being the monarch of a major former colonial power,[5] the famously complex and ambiguous relationship between the institutions of the British state and fascism is touched upon directly in just two episodes; this in itself is quite telling, considering the sheer scope of the series and its ostensible attachment to historical detail. One of the episodes[6] deals with the so-called Marburg Files — a portfolio of German documents, detailing the relationship between the Nazis and the Duke of Windsor (Queen Elizabeth's uncle and former King). The episode opens with a short historical flashback, which serves mostly as an opportunity to increase the on-screen presence of Jared Harris (in his role as George VI), and soon gives way to a predictable story about a young Queen faced with a high-stakes, if ultimately painfully simple moral dilemma: should she agree to her favourite uncle's request and appoint him to a high-profile (if largely ceremonial) public office,[7] or should she listen to her advisors who — motivated, as the British civil service famously are, solely by their concern for the public good — urge her to categorically deny his request? The Nazis are mentioned, but not really seen — they appear on screen for a total of some 32 seconds, divided into two short scenes, one of which focuses on the apparent unease with which the Duke of Windsor responds to a Nazi salute, as if to partly exonerate him for what we know today to have been sincere political convictions. What the episode achieves is ensure that the Queen and her father — and, through the powers of royal metonymy, the whole British state, including Churchill, the government and the civil service apparatus — are not at any point in danger of being examined or questioned on the issues of fascism as such. Flirtation with fascism is a sin unique to the Duke of Windsor, long ago singled out as the "black sheep" of the Royal Family.

Then three episodes later,[8] in a storyline dedicated entirely to Prince Philip and Prince Charles, the connection between Nazis and the Royals is finally shown in a more graphic, tangible form — but ultimately serves the same symbolic purposes. In a flashback to Philip's childhood, we see the future Prince Consort in a funeral procession in Germany, shortly after his sister was killed in a plane crash along with her husband and their two children. But although throughout the whole scene Philip remains surrounded by a bona fide crowd of fascists — it is worth remem-

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[5] *The Crown*, created by Peter Morgan, Netflix 2016–present.

[6] *The Crown*, season 2, episode 6. "Vergangenheit", directed by Philippa Lowthorpe.

[7] Of either an ambassador, a "special liaison" to the Board of Trade, or an official with the Commonwealth Relations Office.

[8] *The Crown*, season 2, episode 9. "Paterfamilias", directed by Stephen Daldry.

bering that three of his sisters married avowed Nazis — it seems like the director's and cameraman's focus is entirely on the ways in which Philip could be visually separated from the uniformed crowd. He's the only boy in the procession; he is the only one not wearing a uniform; he is one of the very few blond-haired people on screen (again, in a crowd of *actual German Nazis*). It is snowing, although historically the funeral took place in mid-November in Hessia;[9] eerie Lacrimosa plays in the background. All in all, the message seems clear: this scene is not real, it's not supposed to *feel* real; neither for Philip himself, nor for the audience. He's not *really there*, among *these* people.

What seems important from a formal point of view, is that following the format of a TV series, *The Crown* is able to do something that a traditional "movie" wouldn't be able to do: it buries the question of the Nazi connection under a dense structure of a myriad personal dramas, historical digressions and subplots; the sheer scope of the narrative pushes the Nazi issue aside in an almost organic manner (after all, *The Crown* is essentially a motivational coming of age story, one that's in perfect ideological sync with the main function of the British monarchy as the longest-running reality show in the world). No one could accuse the producers of omitting the Nazi issue entirely — after all, they seem to have devoted two entire episodes to it — but the overall impression the audience is left with is that there was never really any meaningful political relationship between fascism and the British establishment. The fascist connection becomes a mere accident, an aberration of history that has little bearing on the main political narrative, which remains dominated by — and underlines the alleged heroic aspects of — the more legitimate forms of British imperialism and conservatism, represented here by Elizabeth and King George, by Churchill, Anthony Eden, the consecutive Tory cabinets and the British state apparatus in general.

The Man in the High Castle

Luckily, *The Crown* stands largely alone in its conformist approach to the subject of fascism. It represents precisely the kind of a defensive, conventional attitude that the more interesting TV narratives seem determined to avoid or subvert.

First of all, let us take a look at *The Man in the High Castle*,[10] a loose adaptation of the alternative history novel by Philip K. Dick[11] — a thoroughly mediocre series that's rescued, somewhat surprisingly, by characters and subplots that have been basically added to the source material by the producers.

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[9] See i.e. "Funeral of the Hesse royal family", *Royalwatcherblog.com* 24.11.2019, http://royalwatcherblog.com/2019/11/24/funeral-of-the-hesse-royal-family-1937/ (accessed: 29.09.2020); (the blogpost includes pictures of the actual funeral).

[10] *The Man in the High Castle*, created by Frank Spotniz, Amazon 2015–2019.

[11] P.K. Dick, *The Man in the High Castle*, New York 1962.

One such character is John Smith — a high-ranking SS officer in charge of keeping peace and order in Nazi-occupied North America. He is a former American soldier who has 'gone over' to the German side after Hitler dropped a nuclear bomb on Washington sometime in the 1940s. By the time we first meet Smith, some 20 years after the ultimate German victory, he's already completely normalised for himself and those around him the everyday reality of living in a fascist America — he is still an American patriot, a veteran and a high-ranking security official living the suburban middle-class dream of the 1960s; it's just that the flag he salutes has a swastika on it, and in his office, the picture of the current president has been replaced with a golden-framed portrait of the current Führer. He has a wife, a son and two daughters, and values his family above all else.

In a true bourgeois spirit, the only thing that can lead Smith to shift his perspective on the regime he has embraced is a personal tragedy (the death of his only son). But as we can see in the last few episodes of the series, even then, even after his whole family is eventually put in mortal danger by the megalomaniac and psychotic mentality of the Nazi elites, Smith's apparent change of heart is only superficial — it's not that he doesn't recognise the criminal nature of the Nazi regime, it's just that he *doesn't remember* how to do things any other way.

Politically and ethically, Smith is thus not an "essentially good" man pressured into being a Nazi — he's a convinced Nazi, who also happens to be an advocate for global peace (or its somewhat warped alternative history version), and who generally represents the more "moderate" faction of the Nazi apparatus. He still tortures, blackmails and assassinates countless people, this way actively supporting the fanatically hierarchical, antidemocratic, genocidal system — but he does it out of respect for order, as well as what he believes to be a political necessity, rather than any notion of ideological purity. There's simply no alternative, to paraphrase one of Smith's spiritual cousins. What's more, for a large part of the series Smith remains convinced that the genocidal period of the Nazi regime is essentially over — as he explains himself at some point, he doesn't talk about the camps because he prefers to "look forward".[12]

In other words, Smith is a true American pragmatist, and a patriot to a highly-polished jackboot. In his own eyes, he's neither really a racist nor a xenophobe, and he's certainly not opposed to a weird form of multiculturalism — he doesn't speak much German, he eventually embraces the idea of splitting the "Greater Reich" into smaller political bodies, and if he dislikes the Japanese (the other global superpower in the series' universe), then it's only for the fact that, unlike the Nazis, they don't respect their own people,[13] especially the working classes. He's opposed to warmongering, and the only war he's eventually prepared to wage is one in the name of national reunification. In season three, while blackmailing

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[12] *The Man in the High Castle*, season 1, episode 6. "Three Monkeys", directed by Nelson McCormick.

[13] Ibid.

a lesbian journalist, he's careful to explain that he, personally, "doesn't judge" and takes no issue with non-heteronormative behaviours.[14] He's not really cynical in any of his behaviours either: on most occasions, he's genuinely striving to be what he thinks of as a good man, focused on the safety of his family as well as the good of the nation, quietly drowning some of the most serious moral implications of his past and present actions in alcohol, as deemed by convention and tradition. Smith is the ultimate cross-product of a Nazi fantasy and the American dream: though seen mostly in an SS uniform, he's only a step away from any of the essentially "good", decent and protective — even if ultimately depressed and psychologically disturbed — *patres familias* we've seen in countless films and novels about suburban middle-class life in the post-war West. Through Smith, we're able to see all the meeting points, all the shared foundations of these two ideological narratives.

A large part of the John Smith storyline is thus built around the grotesque reimagining of certain staples of the American cultural landscape. In an episode from season one, we see the Smith family and their guests as they celebrate the Victory in America day in the Smiths' backyard. Turkey is carved, youthful anecdotes are shared, cardigan and tie combos are worn, and a little baseball is thrown around (although the latter only off-screen). There's wine in copious amounts (Smith's underage son is allowed a single glass, as a special treat) and after dinner Smith brings out some "good stuff" whisky that's of course curiously spelt with an "e". At one point, everyone gathers inside to listen to Hitler's speech on TV; in our world, his tirade on the harmful nature of organised labour and in praise of national unity would surely earn him a place in the modern Republican party. For the middle class, life in the American Reich seems not only comfortable and (mostly) free of ideological obligations; it's also not that far off from "our" reality.

This is only reinforced by the opening scene of season two — another dark parody of scenes we know from countless films about life in post-war America; only this time, it takes place in a school.[15] For a few minutes, we accompany John Smith's teenage son as he gets off the school bus, wanders the corridors full of young bright people, talks to a couple of friends and finally leads his class in the pledge of allegiance. Paul Anka's *My Home Town* plays in the background. The devil, as usual, is in the detail: young Thomas' scout uniform is that of the Hitler Youth; the homework he allows one of his classmates to copy is a detailed question about George Washington's and Thomas Jefferson's ownership of slaves; and the stars in the Stars and Stripes have been replaced with a swastika. Perhaps the most important symbolic shift between our reality and the series' version of an American high school in the 1960s is the Pledge — which has been changed from a pledge of allegiance to the flag to a vow of "absolute allegiance" to Hitler himself.

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[14] *The Man in the High Castle*, season 3, episode 2. "Imagine Manchuria", directed by Alex Zakrzewski.

[15] *The Man in the High Castle*, season 2, episode 1. "The Tiger's Cave", directed by Daniel Percival.

The whole scene is not shy about its message, but it still feels powerful in its cynicism; time and again, *The Man in the High Castle* series' willingness to portray fascism not as the absolute political Other, but precisely as something that's always already here, in the very pores of modern liberal democracy. The central plot twist of the whole series, the idea of physical "cracks" between its reality and ours, only serves to reinforce this metaphor. In other words, what encourages and provokes fascism are not the *failures* of modern liberal democracy, but its *failings*, its systemic flaws — the bourgeois democracy itself. It's an important one, and one that's made here in a narratively compelling manner.

The Smith family's arc stands in stark contrast to the central plot of *The Man in the High Castle* — a naive and predictable story about resistance fighters, the ups and downs of their struggle, and their efforts to stop the regime from developing a new superweapon. In general, the "bad guys" storylines in *The Man in the High Castle* are much more compelling than their "good guys" counterparts. This is obviously the case with many contemporary TV series, but here it seems to stem from more than the villains' personal charisma — namely, the type of storytelling techniques used in both cases. Smith's storyline, as well as that of the Japanese officials Tagomi and Kido, relies heavily on world-building and environmental storytelling — the focus is on the structure of power relations rather than the emotional and psychological development of the character itself. Although crucial to the central plot, for the most part (with the exception of the final season) Smith's storyline remains in the background, on a sort of back burner. This way, it manages to circumvent certain potentially limiting narrative conventions; it doesn't have to offer a coherent narrative on the issues such as human cruelty, the nature of evil or personal trauma. Whereas the main protagonist's — Juliana's — arc, for instance, tries and fails to answer some fundamental questions about the origins of evil in man and the metaphysics of solidarity, Smith's storyline offers a much more grounded commentary on the politics of modern state. Whereas the protagonists of the series act permanently as if they were in the grittiest of war movies, Smith is an anti-hero straight from a political thriller. At the end of the day it's through Smith rather than Juliana that the show conveys the most interesting, the most analytically productive part of its message.

Peaky Blinders

Something similar happens, I believe, in the critically-acclaimed TV drama *Peaky Blinders*[16] — especially in its more recent seasons. After becoming a Labour MP in 1927, Tommy Shelby, the protagonist of the series and the boss of the eponymous crime organisation, enters into a weird and complex relationship

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[16] *Peaky Blinders*, created by Steven Knight, BBC 2013–present.

with Oswald Mosley, the future founder of the British Union of Fascists.[17] Mosley attempts to recruit Tommy and his organisation into the fledgling fascist party; Tommy initially refuses, but eventually agrees — ostensibly in order to sabotage the whole project from within, firstly by becoming an informant for the British secret service, then by trying to assassinate Mosley himself. There is, however, a certain ambivalence to Tommy's actions. Mosley's decisiveness and charisma, his willingness to take charge and do what's (allegedly) necessary, all speak to Tommy, who soon discovers some eerie similarities between his own character and that of the fascist leader. Throughout the whole of season five it's not entirely clear whether Tommy sees Mosley as a political danger to the working class movement — Tommy likes to think he's still essentially a working man — or more of a personal rival, a competitor rather than an enemy. Either way, in the end the assassination attempt fails, but Tommy is not named as the culprit — which leaves him, by the end of season five, in a very precarious situation, seemingly stuck in a political movement that he only recently and very publicly co-founded, but that he does not want to take any part in. He believed he could destroy fascism from within, but he failed — and what's more, he has to live with the failure, now as a fascist collaborator rather than a hero of the labour movement.

By allowing the protagonist to develop a disturbingly close relationship with fascism, by refusing to simply posit Mosley as the main antagonist in season five (it's strongly implied that there's another force at play, someone who, unlike Mosley, is really bent on destroying the Shelby family), producer Steven Knight seems to be making an interesting point. It seems crucial that Tommy's failure to assassinate Mosley cannot be reduced to any particular mistake on behalf of the protagonist or his allies — indeed, the last scenes of season five seem to invoke a sort of an anti-deus ex machina, a completely unpredictable intervention from some unseen and nefarious agents. From a *technical* standpoint, planning-wise, Tommy did nothing wrong — there were no errors of judgement, no flaws in character, no "weakness of will" that would doom his plan to failure. Once Tommy decided that he would try to destroy Mosley's movement from within, the events were basically set in motion, and there was no obvious thing he could have done "better". And so the point the series seems to make is that there aren't any foolproof strategies that we can develop in advance in order to protect ourselves against fascism — there is a risk that's inherent to *any* flirtation with fascism, no matter the reasoning behind it, no matter who is doing the flirting. Tommy finds out that it's indeed quite easy to find yourself unexpectedly stuck in a room full of Nazis. Here, we discover a certain psychological connection between him and John Smith; and like with *The Man in the High Castle*, this part of the plot only makes sense because the producers refused to depoliticise fascism, in the sense

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[17] *Peaky Blinders*, season 5 (2019), directed by Anthony Byrne.

of reducing it to an identity or a lifestyle. Tommy's weird relationship to Mosley cannot be reduced to his character, or to the "type" of man he is.

Peaky Blinders only works as a commentary on the nature of fascism as long as we don't *really, primarily* see it as a commentary on historical fascism. Otherwise it risks becoming, in the parlance of our times, *problematic* — it's a western, after all, and a mob film, and although Mosley and his supporters are put prominently on display in season five, their victims and opponents are so far almost absent from the series; no one is articulating a coherent counter-narrative to brownshirt fanaticism. In *Peaky Blinders'* universe, labour movement exists only insofar as its path crosses from time to time that of the Shelby family. It's an essentially *grim* world, and as such it's somewhat understandable that it doesn't offer any counterbalance to Mosley's fascism (except for Churchill, consistently and accurately portrayed throughout the series as yet another mob boss); but neither does it offer an explicit depiction of the fascist violence — when we see Mosley's Scottish protestant allies torture and murder gypsies, it's still within the framework of a gang war. This, again, could be seen as *problematic*. But as long as we don't demand that the issue of fascist violence be put front and centre, *Peaky Blinders* offers a nuanced commentary on the persistent nature of fascist ideology.

Pennyworth and *The Knick*

I won't try to describe another series in detail, but I feel that it's worth pointing out that this approach to the issue of fascism and Nazism — one that's based on what we could provisionally call a back-burner approach, where the crucial part of the series' message is communicated through environmental storytelling, world-building and storylines that may seem non-essential at first — is present in quite a few other contemporary TV series, including some very surprising ones. I would like to briefly mention just two examples.

Last year's *Pennyworth*, for instance, is ostensibly a new take on the origin story of Batman's butler Alfred Pennyworth[18]. However, the link to the original DC character is tenuous at best, and the series is in fact a dark comedy thriller in an alternative history version of 1960s Britain — one where, as the audience can assume based on little more than a few seconds of TV news playing in the background in one of the scenes, Nazis still dominate continental Europe. Within the framework of its own surreal universe, *Pennyworth* does something interesting with the fascist iconography or the aesthetics of fascism. Over the length of the first season, through some overt as well as implied world-building and scattered visual cues, it is shown that both the fascist party serving as the main antagonists of the series and the official British government, although allegedly fiercely op-

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[18] *Pennyworth*, created by Bill Finger and Bob Kane, Epix 2019.

posed to one another, draw largely on the same iconography and rhetoric. Over time, the line dividing the two becomes increasingly blurred, up to a point where fascism appears more as an aspect of the state (and indeed the whole fictional universe) rather than a separate political movement. This impression is only reinforced by the actions of the protagonist, an SAS veteran and a mercenary who, in the right circumstances, is willing to work for either side of the political divide.

Then there's *The Knick*, a two-season Steven Soderbergh series about a New York hospital at the turn of the 20th century[19]. For obvious chronological reasons, fascism is never explicitly referenced in the series — but in the very last episode, we find out that Dr Gallinger, a disciple of the main protagonist John Thackery (a deeply Holmesian/Housian protagonist, a genius surgeon-scientist addicted to drugs), is about to leave the US for Europe, in order to promote eugenics and his version of racial science in Germany[20].

This rather shocking development forces the audience to retroactively read the whole narrative of the series as a sort of a prelude to the rise of Nazism, a story about the invention of modern genocide. Once again, by putting its characters in an ambiguous relationship with fascism, and by developing this relationship over the course of many episodes, the series manages to ask some really difficult, challenging and surprisingly specific questions about the origins of historical fascism. The back-burner approach allows the producers to suggest that the line dividing modern mainstream politics and fascism is inherently blurred and porous, and that fascism by design feeds on the structures of modern society.

Conclusions

The question that remains is this: is there anything truly *new* in what series such as *The Man in the High Castle* or *Peaky Blinders* say about the danger and nature of fascism, and are they in any meaningful way *innovative* in this context, especially when it comes to the use they make of more formal aspects of their chosen medium, genre or format?

I believe so. To explain why, I must once again emphasise that in none of these series, the relationship between fascism and non-fascism — between fascism and the acceptable mainstream of modern politics — is central to the overarching plot. Unlike *The Crown*, this doesn't mean that the issue is eventually buried; quite the contrary, it's very explicitly *there*, always in the background, always

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[19] *The Knick*, created by Jack Amiel and Michael Begler, directed by Steven Soderbergh, Cinemax 2014–2015.

[20] *The Knick*, season 2, episode 10. "This Is All We Are".

present through various subplots and world-building[21] operations. If it were to be put at the very centre of the narrative, though, the series itself would risk becoming overwhelmed by and eventually buried underneath the ethical and affective weight of the predictable if fundamental questions about the general nature and origins of evil. It's only by formulating these questions over a longer period of time, through seemingly non-essential subplots and the so-called environmental storytelling, that TV series are able to circumvent certain limiting conventions and offer a nuanced, refreshing take on even the most serious of subjects. This is something that could not have been done within a framework of a shorter narrative — say, a movie or even a typical medium-length novel. To put it in spatial terms, a longer drama is able to expand not only its horizons, but its peripheries — even to a point where the relationship between peripheries and the centre is eventually inverted, and the minor subplots, pieces of world-building and scattered observations finally come together to express the deeper meaning of the text.

This in turn calls to mind some of the remarks offered by Walter Benn Michaels in the context of *The Kindly Ones*, the seminal novel by Jonathan Littell.[22] First in an article "The un-usable past"[23] in 2009, and then in 2013 in "Forgetting Auschwitz",[24] Michaels points out that Littell was able to say something refreshingly new about the structures of the modern state and its ideology precisely by refusing to have any meaningful personal and emotional connection to either Holocaust or Nazism. His novel thus took on an eerie, depersonalised quality, and in the end he was capable of delivering a convincing commentary precisely on those social structures that are independent of any particular subject position, those *objective* structures that do not depend on how we — or anyone, for that matter — *feels* about them. In his focus on the objective and the structural, Littell is able to transcend the strict historical framework of his novel and offer a criticism of not only the totalitarian Nazi state, but modern state apparatus in general (including its neoliberal form). If we were to believe Michaels, this focus is in turn dependent on the author's ability to produce a certain sense of detachment or emotional distance. In other words, there is a type of structural criticism that, even in fiction, requires depersonalisation and even indifference on behalf of the author; certain things become more visible when put in our peripheral vision.

As far as I know, Michaels never commented on the sheer length of *The Kindly Ones*, but it seems safe to assume that Littell would not have been able to offer such a criticism, were he to cut the page count by half. Shorter narratives tend to

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[21] For the history and various definitions of this term, see i.e. *World-Builders on World-Building: An Exploration of Subcreation*, ed. M.J.P. Wolf, London 2020; *World Building: Discourse in the Mind*, eds. J. Gavins, E. Lahey, London 2016.

[22] J. Littell, *The Kindly Ones*, transl. C. Mandell, New York 2009.

[23] W.B. Michaels, "The un-usable past", *The Baffler* 18, 2009.

[24] W.B. Michaels, "Forgetting Auschwitz: Jonathan Littell and the death of a beautiful woman", *American Literary History* 25, 2013, no 4, pp. 915–930.

rely more on what we could call affective stances or affective correlatives, using them as narrative shortcuts of sorts.

This is not to say that *Peaky Blinders*, *The Man in the High Castle* or *Pennyworth* do the same thing as *The Kindly Ones*; they differ wildly from a formal, narrative and topical perspective. Even emotionally or affectively, they seem to have a very different overall tone. Their politics might also ultimately be quite different. But they have one thing in common: they use the sheer length of the narrative to focus on that which is not explicitly *in* focus, to circumvent conventions that would risk them reducing inherently political issues to the domain of the personal and the affective. It is quite telling that David Simon's last project is a TV adaptation of Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*.[25] Roth's desire to say something about the persistence of fascism through the medium of an alternative history novel (rather than a biography or a memoir), and Simon's well-known refusal to build a story around a single central character, seem to stem from the same critical approach.

Na dalszym planie. Przedstawienia faszyzmu we współczesnych serialach telewizyjnych

Abstrakt

Artykuł zawiera próbę analizy pewnego (coraz bardziej, jak się zdaje, popularnego) podejścia do faszyzmu jako tematu we współczesnym serialu telewizyjnym — narracyjnej strategii, która wykracza poza traktowanie faszyzmu jako absolutnego politycznego Innego, a mimo to jest w stanie zaproponować przekonującą i zasadniczą jego krytykę. Owa strategia opiera się w znacznej mierze na tematycznym przesunięciu — kwestia faszyzmu zostaje pozornie umieszczona w tle, przedstawiona jako niecentralny element fabuły. Analizując kilka seriali (*The Crown*, *The Man in the High Castle*, *Peaky Blinders*, *Pennyworth* oraz *The Knick*) i oferując pewną analogię do *Łaskawych* Jonathana Littela, staram się pokazać narracyjną efektywność owej strategii, łącząc ją jednocześnie z formalnymi możliwościami charakterystycznymi dla współczesnej telewizji.

Słowa-klucze: faszyzm, historia alternatywna, seriale telewizyjne, *Człowiek z Wysokiego Zamku*, *Peaky Blinders*, *Łaskawe*

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[25] *Plot Against America*, created by Ed Burns and David Simon, HBO 2020.

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