



**TV/Series**

22 | 2023

Repenser les disciplines universitaires à travers les séries télévisées : perspectives épistémologiques

---

## The Sky and the Mud. The Art and Politics of Television

Samuel A. Chambers

---



**Electronic version**

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/tvseries/7791>

ISSN: 2266-0909

**Publisher**

GRIC - Groupe de recherche Identités et Cultures

---

This text was automatically generated on January 6, 2024.

---

# The Sky and the Mud. The Art and Politics of Television

Samuel A. Chambers

---

- 1 The field of television studies has been formed by scholars coming from a diverse array of disciplines. What, then, has been the “return effect” of the emergence of this new field on those extant disciplines? The blunt answer in the case of my own discipline: *there has been no return effect*. In fact, the resounding response of political science to the study of television series has been at best an utter failure to engage with either the now vast substantive literature, or the works themselves (i.e., television), and at worst an almost willful refusal to even acknowledge the existence of the field<sup>1</sup>.
- 2 In reflecting on the history of the non-encounter between my PhD discipline and the object of television, this essay turns back to some theoretical – that is, specifically *epistemological* – reflections on television from the late twentieth century. In the 1980s and even into the 1990s, all rigorous philosophical considerations of television came coupled with a nagging compulsion to consider television first and foremost as a *problem*. Rereading some of these texts today, I am keenly struck by how much their reductive definitions of television resonate with the treatment of television by political science.
- 3 I will narrow my focus to a single, rhetorically powerful and widely read, essay by David Foster Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” originally published in 1993 and then anthologized in a best-selling 1997 collection. Wallace’s primary conceit is that the high art of contemporary fiction is locked in a battle to the (spiritual and cultural) death with television – and television is winning. Wallace asseverates that television is a “malignantly addictive” cultural form that renders its passive viewers into cynics and addicts, all while repeatedly insisting that he’s not some crusty conservative who sees only civilizational decay in this decadent form of life<sup>2</sup>. Unlike such conservatives, Wallace wants us to know that he watches a lot of TV, that he (usually) likes it, and that he takes it seriously<sup>3</sup>.
- 4 As is his wont, Wallace takes a topic that seemingly calls for a short essay (intended for publication in an outlet that often publishes short-form pieces), and then writes 21,000

words that range across this topic and many others besides. To give my reader a humorous but accurate sense of the piece, I note that 28 pages into this 62-page essay, Wallace introduces a new subheading titled, “I do have a thesis.” Despite this, and despite the other various twists and turns, the game is up right from the start. What matters most for our purposes, for the epistemology of television, appears in just the fifth paragraph, where Wallace neatly defines television.

For television’s whole *raison* is reflecting what people want to see. It’s a mirror. Not the Stendhalian mirror that reflects the blue sky and mudpuddle. More like the overlit bathroom mirror before which the teenager monitors his biceps and determines his better profile<sup>4</sup>.

- 5 Bracketing Wallace’s possible prescience in capturing the soul of social media almost two decades before it comes into existence, this master of prose not known for his brevity makes his fundamental claim in a three-word sentence, followed by a sentence fragment. Television is a mirror – and not the Stendhalian kind. This is not Wallace’s *thesis*, which comes 27 pages later; it’s his grounding *presupposition*. But this starting point matters more today than his argument about early 1990s postmodern literature and the fight against irony.
- 6 I wish to unpack both the metaphor and the allusion by asking what it means to call television a *mirror* and what that may or may not have to do with Stendhal. Wallace wants to get at (what he sees as) deep and abiding problems with culture and politics (at least American culture and politics<sup>5</sup>), and he avoids the reactionary reduction by resisting calls to blame television for those problems. Rather, television functions as a symptom, and therefore also an opportunity – a chance to “view” or “monitor” the larger problems of which it is only a part. Hence the mirror: Wallace believes that he can see in or on TV<sup>6</sup> what’s wrong with us.
- 7 Notice, however, that Wallace now has two different mirror metaphors in play. On the one hand, Wallace says that television reflects back to us what *we want to see*; we look into that mirror as the 1990s teenage boy would do, flexing his muscles and thinking himself a man. Wallace’s essay will later pile on further metaphors of television as sugar or alcohol – an addictive substance with the power to destroy us – but their foundation rests on this earlier metaphor of television as mirror that reflects our own desires. Wallace thus distinguishes the *active voyeurism* of fiction writers, who carefully observe people, things, and events in the world without the watched knowing they are being watched, from the *passive viewing* of television, in which we watch actors, professionals paid to perform for an audience<sup>7</sup>. Within the terms of this first mirror metaphor, fiction writers should get the message that they ought to turn off the TV and go outside – to observe the world rather than stare at their own idealized reflections. Indeed, one can deduce from Wallace’s logical premises that fiction writers who passively view TV will end up writing stories and novels about nothing but themselves.
- 8 On the other hand, however, Wallace tells his readers (interpellated as fiction writers, or at least fiction *readers* who don’t mind imaginatively occupying the subject position of fiction writers) that their mistake lies in not “tak[ing TV] seriously enough,” and in this very essay Wallace makes television the object of his critical gaze, referring to dozens of shows and episodes, and interpreting some in close detail<sup>8</sup>. Despite the length of his essay, Wallace mostly manages to avoid close readings of any television series or episodes, with one significant exception: he devotes four pages of detailed exegesis and interpretation to the *St. Elsewhere* (NBC 1982–1988) episode “Close Encounters.” After

appearing to go into full-on literary criticism mode, Wallace concludes his reading by *mocking* two distinct but related ideas: first, the very notion of treating a television episode as an object of literary criticism; second, the belief and practice of treating television writing as a work of art. I don't use the word "mocks" hyperbolically. Here is Wallace on point one: "Of the convolved levels of fantasy and reality and identity here... we needn't speak in detail; doubtless a Yale Contemporary Culture dissertation is under way on Deleuze & Guattari and just this episode"<sup>9</sup>. Ironically (for he is a novelist and critic) Wallace flatly dismisses the idea of attending to the meaning within the episode as its own work, and says that the real meaning lies "behind the lens"<sup>10</sup>. On point two, in describing this episode he literally puts the word *creativity* in quotation marks, before presenting the following facts as cutting commentary: "St. Elsewhere's episode was nominated for a 1988 Emmy. For best original teleplay"<sup>11</sup>. Wallace's tone here cannot be mistaken: he underscores it with an intentional sentence fragment because he wants his reader to feel his palpable disbelief in having to type these words.

- 9 Notice, though, that when Wallace looks at television in this way – when he turns his analytical and critical fiction-writer's gaze toward tv – it no longer functions as a flat bathroom-wall mirror reflecting his desires back to him; rather, in this mode Wallace tacitly renders television as microscope or telescope, a tool of analysis that he can wield to illuminate something besides himself. Specifically, Wallace can use television to examine culture, art, and politics. By turning the television mirror on society, Wallace hopes to render both critical diagnosis and positive prognosis of society's (hence television's) ailments. Within the terms of this second metaphor, fiction writers ought to carefully and critically watch TV as a tool of research for their art.
- 10 How do we know which mirror metaphor applies when we "turn on" the television? How can we tell if the television "passively" reflects our own image, or actively illuminates small-scale or distant aspects of society? This is where the literary allusion plays a decisive role. Wallace's key sentence fragment must not be dismissed as a supplementary stylistic flourish. Quite the contrary, the allusion carries an essential burden for his argument: it establishes the legitimate order that will distinguish passive from active viewers. Sure, television is a mirror, but "not the Stendhalian mirror that reflects the blue sky and mudpuddle." This is a cheap move on Wallace's part, because his reference is at best frivolous and at worst disingenuous, an issue to which I will return in a moment. For now, the point is simple: the fragment is a shibboleth. Recognizing the opaque reference to Stendhal's 1830 novel *The Red and the Black*<sup>12</sup>, simply summarized as one of the founding realist novels, legitimates you as one who understands the literary, *the artistic*, use of mirrors. You are therefore authorized to *watch* TV in order to observe society. But if you don't get the allusion, then you are doomed to *view* TV, seeing nothing but yourself (i.e., your projected desires, whom you wish you were). Wallace can mobilize two distinct mirror metaphors by confining one group to the former practice and granting to a smaller group access to the latter power.
- 11 I, too, have a thesis – namely, that Wallace's allusion does more work for him (by distinguishing those who can watch from those who merely view) than his generic metaphor. And this minor thesis will support my major thesis about the art and politics of television. For now, and pace Wallace, suffice it to say that all art and all cultural artifacts are "mirrors" in the sense that they "reflect and refract the world"– the world of which they are a part and in which they are produced as art or artifacts. To say that the novel, the poem, or the tv series is a mirror...is at first not to say much at all.

- 12 And this was Stendhal's real point, a point Wallace seems to badly miss, and does so surely because Wallace *mentions* Stendhal not in order to *discuss* him genuinely, but only to *gate-keep*<sup>13</sup>. Instead of tossing out names, what if we did discuss him (Stendhal)? It turns out that if we are genuine about the effort to understand the refractive and reflective work that television can do, Stendhal makes for an interesting and provocative source.
- 13 The standard bullet point on Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* comes from Erich Auerbach's magisterial and much celebrated *Mimesis*, wherein Auerbach calls Stendhal the founder of realist modern art<sup>14</sup>. For Auerbach the question of "realism" (in Stendhal and after) was a question of the *necessity* of the artist to attend to the social world in which they find themselves, and therefore to take into consideration in literature the *temporal change* that constitutes and reconstitutes that social order: "without reference to the immense changes...one could not represent [society]"<sup>15</sup>. A realist work of art, in Auerbach's sense, therefore absolutely cannot just *reflect* society (like a simple mirror); instead, it must "*deal with the reality which presents itself*" to the author<sup>16</sup>. Realism, then, is not mere mirroring. Perhaps this explains why in this canonical text that itself serves to establish Stendhal as the founder of realism, Auerbach says not a word about "Stendhal's mirror."
- 14 Unfortunately, and surely unsurprisingly, the "standard account" of realism – by which I might as well mean what Wikipedia says on the topic – indicates that realism "presents things as they are"<sup>17</sup> (Wikipedia, "Literary Realism"). Given that Stendhal is the putative founder of this literary realism, and that he famously introduces the metaphor of novel as mirror, it is but a simple deductive step of logic to get to the notion that "Stendhal's mirror" reflects social reality.
- 15 But Wallace knows better, which is precisely why he contrasts the Stendhalian mirror with the bathroom mirror that only shows us ourselves, and why he (Wallace) is careful to mention "the blue sky and mudpuddle." In one fell swoop (in one quick allusion) Wallace implements two powerful distinctions: first, as discussed above, between those (artists) who watch tv as a powerful micro/telescope and those (couch potatoes) who view it passively; second, between those who think literary realism is itself mere reflection (bathroom-mirror style) and those who understand it as something more. In both cases Wallace places himself on the side of the knowing artist, while simultaneously reinscribing the line between real art and mere entertainment.
- 16 When political scientists write papers on *Orange is the New Black*<sup>18</sup> they seek to occupy the same position as Wallace: that of the knowing scholar authorized to police the boundary between, in this case, actual politics, on the one hand, and "mere entertainment" on the other. Without having had to read Wallace or Stendhal, they confirm Wallace's account of television as a simple mirror. On the occasions that *OINTB* reflects the horrors of injustice in the American penal system, these social scientists praise the series faintly for its potential political consciousness-raising, but when it becomes overly "comedic" or "melodramatic," these same readers dismiss the series for having rendered itself politically useless<sup>19</sup>. Significantly, in both cases (commendation or condemnation) we are dealing with the same mirror. The political science reading of *OINTB* can only conceive of television as mirror that points back to the viewer, just as with Wallace's first metaphor (the bathroom mirror); the question (for these political scientists) is only whether that reflection raises the consciousness of

the viewer and inspires them to go out into the world and act politically, or if it sates their sugar-like desire and keeps them firmly in place – passive and apolitical<sup>20</sup>.

- 17 But what about *Stendhal's* mirror? Wallace has referenced it, used it as a marker of distinction, but he has not analyzed or mobilized it. And perhaps this is Wallace's greatest failing in his otherwise careful and comprehensive indictment of television. For if we turn to Stendhal himself, we find a work of art that consistently refuses and resists efforts to draw the line Wallace wishes (and seemingly needs) to carve – that between art and non-art. The easy reading of “the mirror” in Stendhal – so much easier to carry out today in the age of searchable text – takes us straight to the opening of chapter 13 of *The Red and the Black*, where we find this epigraph<sup>21</sup>:

A novel: a mirror which one takes out on one's  
walk along the high road.

—Saint-Réal

- 18 The substance here seems straightforward, as it directly articulates the novel-is-mirror metaphor. And many references to “Stendhal's mirror” redirect here, as it were, suggesting that Stendhal, the founder of literary realism, saw the novel as a mirror. This proves untenable even at first blush, for two reasons: the metaphor appears not to be Stendhal's, but Saint-Réal's, and the chapter in which it appears seems to say nothing at all about the nature of novels or mirrors. Tarrying for a moment at this location in the text, we also need to ask: who was Saint-Réal and why might Stendhal cite him? The first answer proves fairly simple: Saint-Réal was a seventeenth-century French historian, novelist, and historiographer. Operating in that last mode he argued that in the writing of history, interpretation and understanding supersede facts themselves; in other words, his conception of history was not simplistic (bathroom) mirroring<sup>22</sup>. Much more significant may be the harder second question, because one can find no evidence that Saint-Réal ever wrote or spoke the quote attributed to him by Stendhal, and a great deal of evidence to suggest that Stendhal, famous as he has become for false attributions of epigraphs throughout his writings, just made it up<sup>23</sup>. Whatever *Stendhal's* mirror may be, it is safe to say it is not “Saint-Réal's mirror,” which is itself a false projection (i.e., another type of mirroring) by and from Stendhal.
- 19 Searching for clues to *Stendhal's* mirror (as distinguished from “Saint-Réal's”), over the course of the next 35 chapters of the novel, one will find none – as Stendhal says nothing therein about the novel as mirror. He then opens chapter 49 with an epigraph from Shakespeare about the sprouting and passing of love, before spending a page describing the inner thoughts and turmoil of Mathilde (the novel's heroine, and aristocratic daughter of the Marquis de Mole) in her lovesickness for Julien (the protagonist, and low-bred employee of the Marquis). Julien has recently declared his love for Mathilde, who loves him too but hates herself for her attraction to someone not of society. During a night at the opera Mathilde works herself into a frenzy that the narrator describes as madness. That same narrator then interrupts his own narrative to point out that “this page will be prejudicial in more than one way to the unfortunate author”<sup>24</sup>. The criticism, says the narrator, will be indecency – a charge of libel lodged by high society Parisian women against the author, who demeans and debases those women through his very degrading of the character of Mathilde. But, replies the narrator on behalf of the author: such Parisian ladies have no cause to take offense, since it proves quite obvious that they are not prone to Mathilde's fits of madness. His evidence? The fundamental lack of “realism” (my word) in the character herself.

Concerning Mathilde, writes Stendhal (as narrator): “that character is purely imaginary, and is even drawn quite differently from [the] social code” of early nineteenth-century France<sup>25</sup>.

- 20 And that brings us, at long last, to the blue sky and the mud puddle. It is specifically in the voice of the narrator who has cut-in on his own narration in order to call into question any sort of direct, simplistic mirroring of reality in the novel, that Stendhal finally comments on the metaphor of the novel as mirror:

Yes, monsieur, a novel is a mirror which goes out on a highway. Sometimes it reflects the azure of the heavens, sometimes the mire of the pools of mud on the way, and the man who carries this mirror in his knapsack is forsooth to be accused by you of being immoral! His mirror shows the mire, and you accuse the mirror! Rather accuse the main road where the mud is, or rather the inspector of roads who allows the water to accumulate and the mud to form<sup>26</sup>.

- 21 Wallace invokes the “Stendhalian mirror” in order to force a clean break between television and literature, between simple mirroring-as-reflecting and artistic mirroring-as-showing. But *Stendhal’s* mirror is not fit for that purpose. Stendhal shows us something else entirely: that all representation is production. Nothing is “just a mirror.” Or better, no mirror is of just one type: every mirror that reflects *back* (on the viewing subject) also reflects *out* (on the world)<sup>27</sup>. *Stendhal’s* mirror therefore does not just reflect, and certainly not in only one way.
- 22 *Stendhal’s mirror blurs*. It blurs the very distinction Wallace would draw between reflecting and creating. We cannot know in advance whether the mirror will reflect the viewing subject or the observed world, because the mirror is never fixed or stationary. *Stendhal’s mirror moves*, which means by definition his mirror is itself an object in the world, moving through it and therefore existing as a part of it. This returns us to the subtle sense of realism articulated by Auerbach: realist art does not just reflect reality as it is, and it turns toward the concrete social order not merely as an alternative to classical, mythological, or fantastic narrative tropes, but precisely because that temporal social order (reality) refuses to disclose itself to us. It is in need of explanation (Auerbach 1946: 462). The mirror has to move and often to blur, because we cannot objectively view the sky and the mud simultaneously<sup>28</sup>. Realist art thus reflects *and refracts* a reality that cannot reveal itself transparently.
- 23 Moreover, to call the novel – or the poem or the television series – a mirror, means to enable the artwork to be any type of mirror it can become. The mirror metaphor cannot be contained within a pre-determined mirror typology (bathroom reflection; -scopic tool of analysis), as Wallace’s framework tacitly yet incorrectly presupposes. The moving, blurring mirror will traverse those categories and erode the barriers that sustain the typology.
- 24 By first attributing the mirror falsely to a historian, and then deconstructing the mirror metaphor as part of a self-conscious questioning of “realism” itself, Stendhal points us toward a radically different concept of art than the tired one that Wallace relies upon (while trying desperately not to appear to be doing so). In her own elaboration of Stendhal’s mirror Jessi Stevens captures the creative artistic and political force of this “souped-up mirror,” which is “not particularly attentive to the accurate reproduction of the surfaces of things, but to capturing a sweeping excerpt of life in progress, juxtaposing as many differing elements—thick mud, clear sky—as it can”<sup>29</sup>. This Stendhalian mirror has the capacity to get beyond a presumptive surface



“reality” of the social order, to – in Auerbach’s words – *deal with* that society by exploring its tensions and contradictions. Stevens emphasizes the capacity of this sort of mirror to move beyond or past “the limited perspective of an individual consciousness”<sup>30</sup>.

- 25 Yes indeed, Stendhal’s mirror is not a bathroom mirror reflecting nothing but our own desires; its power of representation brings to bear a transformative political force – a power to change not only ourselves (and our desires) but also the world. Yet Stendhal’s mirror, “souped-up” though it may be, is still just a mirror. *It moves because we move it.* We could just as easily affix it to the bathroom wall. In other words, to give an account of Stendhal’s mirror, as I have now done, is to illuminate a fundamental fact: there are never two kinds of mirrors (simple mirrors and Stendhalian mirrors), but only ever just mirrors. Stendhal’s mirror is a powerful mirror in motion, but we all have access to such mirrors. After all, we can always remove one from the bathroom wall and take it out into the world. Like many before and after him, Wallace ultimately wants to keep television in its (lower) place (perhaps so that literature can remain in its, higher, place)<sup>31</sup>. But in his effort to refuse television entry into the category of art, he not only fails to contain it but also misconstrues the very nature of art – and also politics.
- 26 Against Wallace, I counterpose Jacques Rancière’s recent work. Over the same period as the momentous rise of the study of television series, Rancière has developed his ideas on “art,” “aesthetics,” and their complex relation – an account that always remains entwined with his account of politics. Rancière’s framework can help me braid a number of strands of my argument in this essay, starting with his initial claim that the idea of “art” in the singular dates only to the late eighteenth century<sup>32</sup>. More radically, he argues that this category and idea of art has been repeatedly and consistently sustained over the past 200 years *not* by excluding “non-art” – and thereby preserving art in its purity by policing the boundary between “art” and its other.” Instead, “art” emerged and perdured by way of exactly the reverse mechanism: the category of “art” continually renews and redefines itself by *including* those “images, objects and performances that seemed most opposed to the idea of fine art.” Rancière premises his project on this question: what makes possible “art” in the singular – *art* as a unique mode of both experiencing the sensible world and also a unique configuration of that world. He provides an utterly counterintuitive answer: “Art exists as a separate world since *anything whatsoever can belong to it*”<sup>33</sup>.
- 27 Art lives off of its own transmogrifications. From the moment of art’s coming into existence it has constantly incorporated its outside into its inside. This means that one of the central tropes of modern art is to represent non-art as art, and in so doing, not to *make non-art art, but to change what art is.* Wallace therefore has it completely inside out. The project to draw the line between art and non-art will always fail, because art is precisely that which transforms non-art into art. Contra Wallace, we can never secure ourselves against addiction and the “tyranny of irony” by categorizing television as a bad mirror. First, as Stendhal shows, because there are no “bad” and “good” mirrors, just mirrors, but also because, as Rancière suggests, art itself depends not on using the right mirror, but on *misusing the wrong one.* Art flourishes when we rip the bathroom mirror off the wall and carry it out into the street, where it variously illuminates the brilliant blue and the mirthless muck<sup>34</sup>.
- 28 I draw above from Rancière’s recent book on modern art, but the title of that book, *Aisthesis*, points forcefully back to his earlier writings – specifically to his major,



transformative work on democratic politics, *La mésentente*. Rancière first introduces the ancient Greek term “aisthēsis” in that book, and importantly, he does so by immediately translating the term into French as *le partage du sensible*. In an essay written soon thereafter, Rancière expounds on the meaning of his own phrase:

We will call *partage du sensible* a generally implicit law that defines the forms of part-taking by first defining the modes of perception in which they are inscribed, the *nemein* [distribution] upon which are founded the *nomoi* [laws] of the community. This *partage* should be understood in the double sense of the word: on the one hand, that which separates and excludes; on the other, that which allows participation<sup>35</sup>.

- 29 *Aisthesis*, or *le partage du sensible*: the distribution or partition (*nemein*) of that which is capable of being apprehended by the senses (*aisthēton*). This idea powerfully binds “politics” to “aesthetics” not by forming a link between two discrete objects, but rather by demonstrating that *aisthesis* must always be simultaneously political and aesthetic. This renders nonsensical the idea of a *politics of aesthetics*, by making it impossible to separate politics from aesthetics<sup>36</sup>. Works of art are not things that can be made political (or not), because they partake of a primary structuring of the perceptible world that is always already bound up with politics.
- 30 This means that the question of television’s “politics” cannot be dissociated from the issue of television’s status as modern “art.” The politics and art of television, if such they be, can only be established at one and the same moment. “The politics of television” is neither internal to any individual television series, nor instrumental to the “use” or “effect” of that series. Television (as art) is uniquely suited to achieve the disordering, disrupting of hierarchy, rearranging of roles that is the very fact of politics. Rhonda Wilcox made this central argument early in the rise of the study of television series<sup>37</sup>, but in my discipline, no one paid it any mind. One can easily speculate as to why: because TV is still not high art, even when a scholar argues convincingly that it is; because that scholar was not in a “hard” social science but in the “soft” humanities; because that scholar was a woman, working within and alongside feminist scholarly projects. The answer must surely include a bit of all these things, I suspect. But their combination increases rather than mitigates the culpability of political science in its failure to address critical television studies. And in failing to take up critical television studies we missed out on a chance to change the discipline of politics (for the better). To read or watch a television series for its *aisthesis* means to consider the artistic and political force of it as it mobilizes a Stendhalian mirror. In other words, in order to grasp the politics of television we must first accept and understand its status as art. The failure to accede to the latter fact drives, I submit, the consistent refusal and stubborn resistance of political scientists to allow works of television and the project of critical television studies to reflect back on the disciplinary status of political science. There are many ways to do this, as a generation of critical television scholars has so ably shown. As a first step, just look for the sky and the mud<sup>38</sup>.

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

AUERBACH Erich, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, (1946), 2013.

CAVELL Stanley, "The Fact of Television" (1982), *Daedalus* 111 (4): 75-96.

CHAMBERS Samuel A., "Translating Politics" (2016), *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, Vol. 49, No. 4: 524-548.

CONFERENCE "Rethinking Disciplines with TV Series: An Epistemological Perspective", Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier, Montpellier, 7-8 April 2022. CFP available at <https://call-for-papers.sas.upenn.edu/cfp/2021/09/09/rethinking-disciplines-with-television-series-an-epistemological-perspective>. Last accessed 15 August 2023.

CONNOLLY William E, *A World of Becoming*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2011.

FERGUSON Michael, "Orange is the New Black as a Risky Act of Consciousness-Raising", (2014), *The Contemporary Condition*. Available at <http://contemporarycondition.blogspot.com/2014/10/orange-is-new-black-as-risky-act-of.html>, last accessed 15 August 2023.

FINLAYSON Alan, Personal Communication with Author, 2022.

FRIED Michael, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1998.

KLOSTERMAN Chuck, 2011. "Bad Decisions: Why AMC's *Breaking Bad* Beats *Mad Men*, *The Sopranos*, and *The Wire*", August 2, 2011, URL: <https://grantland.com/features/bad-decisions>, last accessed 15 August 2023.

KLOSTERMAN Chuck, *The Nineties: A Book*, New York, Penguin Press, 2022.

NIETZSCHE Friedrich Wilhelm, *Twilight of the Idols and the Anti-Christ*, London, Penguin Books, 2003.

"Orange is the New Woman," Panel convened at the American Political Science Association meetings, Washington (DC), August 28-31, 2014.

RANCIÈRE Jacques, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, London, Verso Books, 2013.

RANCIÈRE Jacques, *Dis-Agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

ROMANO Andrew, "TV's Most Dangerous Show", *Newsweek*, June 26, 2011, <https://www.newsweek.com/breaking-bad-finest-hour-television-67999>, last accessed 15 August, 2023.

SAINT-RÉAL (DE) César, *De l'Usage de l'Histoire*, Paris, C. Barbin et E. Michallet, 1671.

SONTAG Susan, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, New York, Picador/Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996.

STENDHAL, *The Red and the Black*, New York, Limited Editions Club, 1947 (1830).

STEVENS Jessi Jezewska, *Didion's Mirror*, FSG: Work in Progress, 2019. Available at <https://fsgworkinprogress.com/2019/12/05/didions-mirror/>, last accessed 15 August 2023.

TAÏEB Emmanuel, *House of Cards: Monsters in Politics*, Bristol, Intellect Ltd, 2022.

THOMPSON Robert J., *Television's Second Golden Age*, New York, Continuum New York, 1996.

WALLACE David Foster, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments*, 1st ed. Boston, Little, Brown and Co, 1997.

WILCOX Rhonda, *Why Buffy Matters: The Art of Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2005.

## NOTES

1. Of course there are exceptions, especially outside of the United States. For just one example, see Emmanuel Taïeb, *House of Cards: Monsters in Politics*, Bristol, England, Intellect Ltd, 2022.
2. David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," [1993], republished in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments*, 1st ed. Boston, Little, Brown and Co, 1997.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
5. Wallace's overall *oeuvre*, and certainly this signature essay on television, exemplifies a certain 1990s American parochialism, where the inward-looking nature of 1990s culture combines with the post-1989 "end-of-history" zeitgeist to enable so many American agents of various sorts (artistic, political, cultural) to presume the world is America. Perhaps the most powerful example of this phenomenon, one that uncannily captures this historical moment, can be found in Chuck Klosterman's *The Nineties: A Book*, New York, Penguin Press, 2022. Klosterman repeatedly depicts the decade in subtle and evanescent detail, and readers who lived through the period as adults will be consistently impressed by his ability to bring to life moments the reader had completely forgotten. But throughout it all, Klosterman treats exclusively American examples with American meaning and impact, all without ever once acknowledging that this fantastic book is not a book on "the 1990s" but on "the 1990s in America." The point of this note goes beyond calling out Wallace and Klosterman for their parochialism, because the post-1999 flourishing of "quality TV" and the rise of television series studies renders that parochialism far more problematic – far more untenable. Both television and television studies today must be understood as hybrid productions of multiple nations, cultures, societies in ways that would be unrecognizable to Wallace in 1993.
6. Here might be as good a place as any to trace a fundamental issue that I cannot address in this essay: the meaning of "television" has shifted so significantly in the past 30 years that we now have two "televisions" in play. First, for thinkers like Wallace and Stanley Cavell, along with most other earlier analyses, "television" signifies a kind of central cultural form made possible by a specific technological apparatus. In this sense "television" is a thing one turns on or tunes into or runs in the background, and across it flows an endless sequence of images and sounds – dominated by talking heads, game shows, sports, and advertisements. (Early books on television frequently place an image of a physical television set on their cover). Second, "television" or better, *television series* denotes a kind of serial art form that can appear across multiple technological media. The age of streaming has made this separation of the "two televisions" complete, as it were, whereas so many of the canonical texts of critical television studies first appeared during the transitional period. Crucially, television in the first sense, though much diminished, still exists, and television in the second sense appears within the context of television in the first sense. The capacity for scholars of television series to extract the series (television 2) from the flow (television 1) depends on a variety of factors, including the decline of television in the first sense. Obviously proper treatment of this topic requires at least its own essay; hence my bracketing of it here.
7. Wallace, *op. cit.*, p. 21–25.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 31. “Close Encounters” is Season 4, episode 7, and overall the 75th episode, which Wallace wrongly refers to as “episode 94.” Others have read the episode quite differently, of course. The definitive account surely belongs to Robert Thompson who goes into exquisite detail tracking the intertextuality of this episode, which quite likely has more television cross-references and allusions than any episode ever made (Robert J. Thompson, *Television's Second Golden Age*, New York, Continuum New York, p. 75–97). The conclusion of Thompson’s reading proves most significant for our purposes, as he wraps up not with ironic mockery of the show but with serious comparison of it to Milton and the Bible. A minor, but perhaps even more important point comes at the end of Thompson’s summary (before his interpretation). Wallace quotes from the character of Dr. Ausschlander that television is a “distraction,” but he leaves out the key line from Ausschlander with which Thompson concludes: “we look into the television and see ourselves” (St. Elsewhere: S4E7; Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 89). This is Wallace’s starting premise, of course. But what does it say about Wallace’s critical capacity if his best foundation for a critique of television is borrowed from a character on television?

10. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

12. Stendhal, *The Red and the Black*, New York, Limited Editions Club, 1947.

13. No one has diagnosed this discursive mechanism – the use of language to reinforce norms, to distinguish in-group from out-group, to exercise authority and a kind of policing power – better than Wallace himself, in his masterful “Authority and American Usage” (Wallace 2006: 66–127, see especially 96–109). Originally published in 1999, this essay departs significantly from the 1993 television essay in that questions of structural power, of elitism and democracy are in play in the later essay, while with the former a kind of elite line-drawing power is being exercised without being marked as such (and certainly without be genuinely questioned as problematic).

14. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2013 [1946], p. 463.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 462.

16. *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

17. This bald and ultimately false depiction of realism resonates with one of the most common phrases of English-language discourse today: “it is what it is.” However, we might say that on Auerbach’s reading of Stendhal “it” *never* is what “it” is. Literary realism shows this banal idiomatic expression to be false, because the world is a world of becoming, not being; it can never be mirrored “as it is” but only ever *re-presented* in its constant transformations. I borrow the phrase “world of becoming” from William Connolly (*Twilight of the Idols and the Anti-Christ*, London, Penguin Books, 2011), who arguably coined it from Nietzschean bullion (Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and the Anti-Christ*, London, Penguin Books, 2003 [1990]).

18. *Orange is the New Black* (Netflix 2013–2019). In the text above I refer to a 2014 APSA panel (“Orange is the New Woman.” 2014. Panel convened at the American Political Science Association meetings, Washington, DC, August 28–31, 2014) which to my (limited) knowledge was one of the first mainstream political science treatments of television series after the rise of the study of television series in the early 2000s. I attended the panel with excitement, as I had spent the past 15 years working on television series. But I left disappointed, because none of the papers took *OINTB* seriously as a television series that could itself do political work. Rather, they could only conceive of the show as either a direct piece of political messaging (i.e., as ideology or propaganda) or as “mere entertainment” (Michaele, Ferguson, “*Orange is the New Black* as a Risky Act of Consciousness-Raising,” *The Contemporary Condition*, 2014. Available at <http://contemporarycondition.blogspot.com/2014/10/orange-is-new-black-as-risky-act-of.html>, last accessed 15 August 2023.). The idea that there could be a politics to the series itself, that it might do politics in a non-instrumental fashion – that idea was never even broached.

19. Ferguson, *ibid.*

20. If space and time permitted one might hypothesize that the above “political science approach” to television proves *interpretive* in the very sense articulated by Susan Sontag in her essay “Against Interpretation.” Sontag writes: “interpretation amounts to the philistine refusal to leave the work of art alone. Real art has the capacity to make us nervous. By reducing the work of art to its content and then interpreting that, one tames the work of art. Interpretation makes art manageable, conformable” (Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation: And Other Essays*, New York, Picador/Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996 [1966], p. 14). In listening to those original panel papers on *OITNB* I sensed the very nervousness Sontag describes here.

21. Stendhal, *op. cit.*, chapter 13.

22. César de Saint-Réal, *De l'Usage de l'Histoire*, Paris, C. Barbin et E. Michallet, 1671.

23. Jessi Jezewska Stevens, *Didion's Mirror*, FSG, Work in Progress, 2019. Available at <https://fsgworkinprogress.com/2019/12/05/didions-mirror/>, last accessed 15 August 2023.

24. Stendhal, *op. cit.*, chapter 49.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*

27. One way to read Foucault's reading of Velasquez's painting *Las Meninas* would be that it (the painting, the reading) shows (mirrors) and traverses the border separating painting (as mirror) from world, that it reveals the space where painter, subject of painting, and world intersect, overlap, and merge.

28. Alan Finlayson, Personal Communication with Author, 2022.

29. Stevens, *op. cit.*

30. *Ibid.*

31. Wallace tacitly draws from another famous philosophical rumination on television from a decade before – namely, Stanley Cavell's “The Fact of Television.” That is, on my reading, Wallace's distinction between *watching* (or, as he puts it, *espial*) and *viewing*, seems clearly to owe something to Cavell's earlier account of the relationship to television (unlike film) as one of *monitoring*. (Stanley Cavell, “The Fact of Television”, *Daedalus*, Vol. 111, no. 4, 1982, p. 85 [p. 75-96]; Wallace, *op. cit.*, p. 22). I find Cavell's approach more well-intentioned than Wallace's, but the philosophical structures prove quite similar. Michael Fried likely constitutes the third leg of this triangle. While to my knowledge Fried never writes about television per se, his entire project can be grasped as the effort to uphold a concept of high modern art by distinguishing *art* from *non-art* (Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1998 [1967]). This project (which is surely not Fried's alone) must be consistently invoked in order to *deny* (the art and politics of) television. In turn, such a project can be overturned not only by work like Rancière's that offers a novel conception of art, but also by the specific works of television series scholars – works that repeatedly undermine Friedean categories.

32. Rancière argues that numerous arts and artistic practices have flourished across a variety of civilizations throughout history. These arts existed as part of a group of “fine arts” that could be distinguished from “mechanical arts.” The former were always the province of so-called “free men” – that is, those with the available leisure time and status in a hierarchical society that allowed them to pursue the arts (Rancière 2013: loc 34).

33. Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, London, Verso Books, 2013, loc 49, emphasis added).

34. Rancière offers readings of twelve unique works of art as exemplification of his broader thesis about modern art. It should come as no surprise that one of those twelve is Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*. In his chapter on Stendhal, Rancière never mentions the mirror carried through the road. Curiously, two chapters later Rancière delivers a reading of Emerson, including this line from 1844: the poet “resembles a mirror carried through the street,” and at this point Rancière does mention Stendhal's mirror (a possible inspiration for Emerson?) (Rancière, *op. cit.*, loc 1191).

35. Jacques Rancière, *Dis-Agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1998, p. 176, translation mine).
36. Samuel A. Chambers, "Translating Politics," *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, Vol. 49, No. 4, 2016, p. 529. [p. 524-548].
37. Rhonda Wilcox, *Why Buffy Matters: The Art of Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2005.
38. I would look to a clip from *Breaking Bad* (AMC 2008–2013). To see the sky and the mud one could almost draw at random from that part of Vince Gilligan's oeuvre set in Albuquerque, New Mexico, but here I reference the opening scene of episode 5 of Season 2. As two unknown immigrants cross a river, the camera moves with them, reflecting both the muddy river and the bright sky, and acting precisely as a Stendhalian mirror. In turn, were I to develop the conceptual and epistemological points outlined in this essay by turning to a concrete television series, I would take up Gilligan's *Better Call Saul* (AMC 2015–2022). The concepts of art and politics detailed herein both involve disruption and especially transformation, i.e., the change that is central to Stendhalian/Auerbachian realism. One of the powers of television series, built into its serial nature, lies in its capacity to chart and track intense temporal change. This is particularly the case with character development: characters can change on tv in a way that seems almost impossible in other forms of art, and scholars have tracked these changes with some profound examples (e.g., Spike from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, WB 1997–2001, UPN 2001–2003). Other serial forms also allow for character development, but before the age of streaming, television series moved in a kind of "real time" (over the months and years of airing the series) that encouraged a distinctive sort of artistic realism in television series. (Perhaps this structural condition has been lost in our new streaming age, and this accounts for the shift toward epic and fantasy genres.) In general, these conditions create possibilities for art and politics, as described above, because television characters have the capacity, over the course of numerous series and countless episodes, to go places they are not supposed to go. Gilligan himself set out in his first show, *Breaking Bad*, to create a series in which "the fundamental drive is toward change" (Andrew Romano, "The most Dangerous show on Television", *Newsweek*, 2011. Available at <https://www.newsweek.com/breaking-bad-finest-hour-television-67999>, last accessed 15 August, 2023, quoted in Chuck Klosterman, *Bad Decisions: Why AMC's Breaking Bad Beats Mad Men, the Sopranos, and the Wire*, 2011. Available at <https://grantland.com/features/bad-decisions>, last accessed 15 August 2023.). With *Better Call Saul* Gilligan ups the ante, since he again makes change the driving force, but does so with a character whose destiny is already known by almost the entire audience. Not only does Saul Goodman try to go where he is not supposed to go, to become what he is not supposed to be. But also, the viewer bears witness to these failed crossings: we empathize with Saul as he is consistently and thoroughly thwarted.

---

## ABSTRACTS

The "return effect" of critical television studies has proved difficult if not impossible to discern in the discipline of politics. This essay suggests this failure may have much to do with the pervasive and insidious dichotomy art/non-art, which undergirds the refusal to see television as capable of *doing* politics. I argue for the fundamental politics of television by way of a critique of David Foster Wallace's 1993 effort to keep television in its place. Wallace's polemic pivots on a cheap allusion to Stendhal's novel of 1830, *The Red and the Black*, because Wallace defines

television as a mirror – “not the Stendhalian mirror” but a mere “bathroom mirror” that reflects our own image back to us. I turn this allusion against Wallace by showing that a careful reading of Stendhal unravels the entire thread of Wallace’s own critique. Drawing from Jacques Rancière’s account of “art” as that which sustains itself by including “non-art,” I show that Wallace has television exactly inside-out, because he gets both Stendhal and art completely wrong. Contra Wallace’s typology, there are never two kinds of mirrors (simple mirrors and Stendhalian mirrors), but only ever just mirrors. Stendhal’s mirror is a powerful mirror in motion, but we all have access to such mirrors. The rich and vibrant history of television studies repeatedly explores television as precisely a Stendhalian mirror, capable of not just reflecting but also *refracting* the world. Television is a moving, blurring, zooming, and focusing mirror capable of showing us the sky or revealing the mud in a way that may alter the very partition of the sensible.

Aux États-Unis, l'effet « retour » des études télévisuelles sur la science politique comme discipline universitaire semble difficile, voire impossible, à discerner. Cet échec a sans doute beaucoup à voir avec la dichotomie art /non-art, cette dichotomie sous-tendant le refus de considérer la télévision comme de « faire » œuvre politique ; le présent article passe donc par la critique de l'essai de David Foster Wallace (« E Unibus Pluram : Television and U.S. Fiction », 1993) dont le but était de « maintenir » la télévision à sa place. L'essai polémique de Wallace s'articule en effet autour d'une allusion un peu facile au roman de Stendhal *Le Rouge et le Noir*, Wallace définissant la télévision – « non pas [comme] le miroir stendhalien » mais comme un simple « miroir de salle de bains » fixe et narcissique. S'appuyant sur Jacques Rancière, Samuel Chambers argumente que Wallace fait un contresens sur la télévision (et sur les séries télévisées), parce qu'il se trompe complètement à la fois sur Stendhal et sur l'art. Contrairement à ce que Wallace avance, il n'y a pas deux sortes de miroirs (les miroirs ordinaires et les miroirs stendhaliens), mais seulement des miroirs. L'histoire (riche et dynamique) des études sur la télévision et les séries télévisées explore précisément ce médium en tant que miroir stendhalien, capable non seulement de refléter mais aussi de réfracter le monde. La télévision est un miroir en mouvement, qui à travers ses effets de flou, de zoom et de focalisation se révèle capable de nous faire voir le ciel ou de nous révéler la boue d'une manière qui modifie le partage même du sensible.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** art, politics, mirrors, Stendhal, Aisthesis, partition of the sensible

**Mots-clés:** art, politique, miroir, Stendhal, partage du sensible

## AUTHOR

### SAMUEL A. CHAMBERS

Samuel A. Chambers is an interdisciplinary political theorist whose writings extend from critical television studies to political economy. He has authored eight books, edited four more, and published dozens of articles and essays. He is co-editor-in-chief of the journal *Contemporary Political Theory*, and Professor of Political Science at Johns Hopkins University. His most recent book is *Money Has No Value* (de Gruyter, 2023).

Samuel A. Chambers est un théoricien politique interdisciplinaire, qui a publié tant en études télévisuelles qu'en économie politique. Il a écrit huit monographies, dirigé quatre ouvrages



collectifs et publié des dizaines d'articles et d'essais. Il est rédacteur-en-chef adjoint de la revue *Contemporary Political Theory* et est professeur de science politique à l'université Johns Hopkins (Baltimore). Sa dernière monographie en date est *Money Has No Value* (de Gruyter, 2023).