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The Cinema of Cruelty in Streaming: Elements of Perversity in *Chernobyl* and *Years and Years*

Carlos Fernández-Rodríguez and Luis M. Romero-Rodríguez

Abstract

This study aims to diagnose how the cinema of cruelty has been inserted into mainstream culture through the current streaming series, analyzing the elements of the eroticism of perversity and the cinema of cruelty in the series *Chernobyl* and *Years and Years* (HBO: 2019). This is done by designing a content analysis sheet based on the interpretation of theoretical constructs, validated by expert judgment. The results show the presence of a cruelty cinema that has been seeded in prestigious film festivals and has been reborn on streaming platforms through the narratives of the series of the third golden age of television. In this sense, the growing audiovisual success of misanthropic, entertaining, and pornographic narratives is evident. It is concluded that discomfort, fun, horror pornography, and their respective prestige, are installed in contemporary popular television culture, reproducing a relationship between the depressing and the entertainment.

Keywords

Cinema genre; mainstream; abjection; horror; series; entertainment.

Introduction

Today's society is in love with audiovisuals in which entertainment, more than ever, charged with pessimism, despair, and cruelty, feeds the morbidity of viewers anywhere in the world, this being possible thanks to mainstream culture, a way of understanding entertainment that the writer Frédéric Martel (2011, p. 18) defines as "market culture". This is, in short, the entertainment society which, according to Martínez López (2011, p. 7), is that destined to satisfy the "ludic-recreational appetite" through the industrialization of leisure, which ultimate goal is none other than to convince consumers that the meaning of life is to enjoy.

In this sense of entertainment, the essayist José Ovejero (2012, pp. 38-39) went so far as to say that it is a deception that people enjoy life as an ultimate goal, but that it is a deception typical of the entertainment industry, which has tended to promote a culture that would function as a "travel agency" of great emotions, where the viewers are tourists of great intensity that "real life" cannot offer or satisfy by itself. It can be inferred that an unsatisfied society is trying to make up for its shortcomings in an increasingly cathartic audiovisual.

As for the cinema, the specific field in which this research is situated, it can be understood as a media that is currently undergoing permanent changes in its production and distribution model for various reasons: On the one hand, films premiered at home and series released at festivals can be seen, and on the other hand, the division between cinema and television is becoming increasingly thin -even in terms of quality- since streaming platforms such as Netflix, HBO or Amazon Prime Video are dedicated to making popular audiovisual fiction and entertainment products with more facilities than ever to «democratize» content and reach more and more viewers.

According to Heredia Ruiz (2016, p. 277), Netflix and the enormous growth of the Internet as a platform have profoundly transformed the classic windows of film distribution, as well as the television industry, promoting an industrial culture based on the «let the consumer decide» (Neira, 2017, p. 48). In other words, a more flexible, accessible, and intuitive audiovisual culture for a spectator who is closer than ever to being a consumer.

-Figure 1. *Greed*, directed by Erich von Stroheim-



Frame of *Greed*, von Stroheim's most representative film, who according to Bazin was "the inventor of the cinema of cruelty".

Source: <https://www.moma.org/calendar/events/5837>

Cinema of Cruelty and Mainstream Culture: From Morality to Mass Pornography

The cinema of cruelty is a concept that was born from the film critic André Bazin in 1975¹. Through a compilation of film chronicles that reflected on the vision of cruelty in six specific filmmakers² -who began to become world references on the doors of modern

cinema-, director Francois Truffaut became interested in Bazin's texts. In his opinion, they expressed a vision of a cinema that could be understood as one that portrays, from a subversive and moral viewpoint, the most decadent and tragic vision of human experience (Truffaut, 1977, p. 10), although the book does not offer a specific definition of the term. It was cinematography intended to return to a narrative cinema that focused on catching the spectator's eye, on «showing» as the main exercise of the story.

According to Bazin (1977, p. 5), Erich von Stroheim invented this way of understanding these films of cruelty due to its innovative character and detractor of the filmmakers of his time, coming to fulminate with his cinema the idea of the collective dreams, the myths of stardom or abstract heroes to focus on "the most singular incarnation of the actor, the monstrosity of the individual" coming to create "a revolution of the concrete" (Bazin, 1977, pp. 25-26).

-Figure1: *Greed*, directed by Erich von Stroheim-

As a result of this controversial collection of chronicles about six prestigious directors of the time, it could be pointed out that the seduction of cruelty, spectacular abjection or aesthetic pornography have awakened debates that have interested and aroused the curiosity of audiences and researchers concerned with the prestige of modern and postmodern cinema as the leading architects of gaze-based on visual pleasure. As photographer Susan Sontag (2010, p. 68) said, a bloody battlefield can be a landscape, as many war painters have shown throughout history. Based on this, the presence of cruelty is not only a necessity of this era or exclusive to cinematographic art, but that, in short, human torment and the visual pleasure it produces is a canonical theme in the history of art (Sontag, 2010, pp. 42-43).

There have been various researchers or film critics of the second half of the 20th century who have explored the aesthetic pleasure residing in the gaze of the film audience focused on the «eroticism of cruelty» or the abjection that the public received as debate. Serge Daney (1992), a disciple of Bazin, even stated that the paramount quality of modern cinema was its cruelty that rejected the hypocritical sentimentalism of a humanism that was then very charlatan, denoting the existence of an industrial butchery that was not incompatible with the human condition.

These thoughts of Daney (*op. cit*) came from his famous article *Le travelling de Kapo* (1992)³, inspired by the article *De l'abjection* (1961) by Jacques Rivette, in which the author delved into a shot that appeared in the film *Kapò* (1960) directed by Gillo Pontecorvo, in which the camera focused on an electrified corpse on the fence of a concentration camp during World War II in a stylized travelling from a counterpoint angle, even stating that the director of that scene deserved "the deepest contempt" (Rivette 1961, p. 54). Daney, 30 years later, compared *Kapò* to Alan Resnais' documentary *Nuit et Brouillard* (1955), even stating that *Kapò*'s "artistic pornography" was outrageous as opposed to the "honest return" of the images in Resnais' work (1992).

Figure 2. *Kapò*, directed by Gillo Pontecorvo



Travelling counterpoint that focuses on the body of a Jewish prisoner in a concentration camp during the Second World War, which so outraged Jacques Rivette, in *Kapò*.

Source: <https://www.revistafilm.com/la-noche-de-12-anos-2018-2/travelling-kapo/>

According to Rivera García (2016), regarding the debate raised by Bazin, Rivette, and Daney about the abjection and limitations of cinematographic representation: "The abjection of aesthetic pornography consists in the fact that the artist does not feel repugnance towards decomposition, waste, corpses, but only ideological indignation". In the same way, Truffaut (1977, p. 12) stated that behind the filmmaker of cruelty, there was a moralist, implying that the great range of cruelty shown on the screen was being pursued an ideological, moral, or merely preachy purpose.

Pornography of horror and visual pleasure at the postmodern cinema

Laura Mulvey (1975) expressed open criticism of the «Hollywoodian magic» in her article *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, in which she challenges the existence of a high degree of manipulation of visual and satisfactory pleasure in the film audience -essentially from male filmmakers to viewers of the same genre- who seek in the "formal beauty" of film language a voluntary "opening" to the alienation of these canons, mainly due to the imaginary tearing of potential feelings of loss and terror fed by a fantasy that needed to be satisfied. All this would lead to what Professor Gerard Imbert (2017, p. 17) called "horror pornography" in contemporary cinema. Furthermore, according to the philosopher Byung-Chul Han (2021, p. 77), there is currently "an extraordinary degree of cold cruelty" in feature films. In this sense, the pornography of violence is installed, which manages to turn violence or crime into a painless matter, creating a passive, indifferent, and silent spectator before the excess of violent images from the mass media (Chul Han, 2021, p. 78).

Thus, it could be said that the cinema of cruelty today, so pornographic, vindictive, shocking, and aestheticized, understanding *aestheticization* as the process by which an object creates a particular spectatorial pleasure and generates a form that serves as a model and then reproduces itself, is fed by a model "learned" as a genre in itself (Imbert. 2017, p. 17). Concerning the cinema of cruelty today, there are some indications that this «look» has remained alive and has been introduced into the audiovisual of mainstream culture, in an even more graphic way -if possible- than in the second half of the 20th century.

According to Starks (2002, p. 122), one of the most characteristic contemporary examples of the cinema of current cruelty can be seen in the film *Titus* (1999) by Julie Taymor, about which its director explains:

[...] explores modes of film representation and blurs the boundaries of high/low art by challenging the conventions of classic narrative cinema, particularly the horror film genre, as well as using realistic and stylized modes of representation to explore abject images on multiple levels.

Consequently, according to Tait (2008, p. 107), the term «pornography» ends up expanding into the contemporary contexts of the viewer in order to point out his public anxieties, while excluding the understanding of the specific crime that may be represented, as well as the gazes that such images may draw. Also, psychoanalyst Mirta Goldstein (2006) refers to the «eroticism of cruelty» as a modern symbol of more compassionate or humane values reinforced in different ways through various cultural products. Therefore, it is possible to mention a «spectatorial pleasure» in the cruelty, as well as an erotic language for it, a lack of prejudices that allows the morbid subject to enjoy without complexes with the perversity for what, for the same author, the cruelty would constitute a way of "enjoying the pain of the similar". According to Goldstein (*op. cit.*), this enjoyment acquires different nuances in each era, and ours is characterized by enjoying cruelty that no longer requires incriminating prejudices.

It would be a matter of saturating the spectator with simple and straightforward stimuli, more typical of mainstream culture, which expresses the most perverse aspects of the human being similarly as something attractive. To all this, about the concepts of «magic» that Mulvey used to refer to Hollywood or «pornography» that Tait and Imbert used in current cinema, Baudrillard (2006, p. 27) used the reference of a world that disguised itself behind the «orgy of images» as an illusion. This massive and pornographic illusion, reinforced with images that stimulate the spectators, has the power to eroticize and seduce an audience increasingly thirsty for spectacle.

According to Wheatley (2016), spectacle "is part of the everyday fabric of television broadcasting", and visual pleasure is as important to viewers as narrative or information transmission. Likewise, Wheatley (2016) does not see spectacular television as explicitly cinematic, but "the aesthetics of spectacle more commonly associated with cinema could equally well be associated with certain forms of television".

Spectacular television, then, offers the viewer moments in which they contemplate beauty, the erotic, the grotesque, and the breathtaking; it presumes a relationship between spectator and programme which is intense rather than casual, and which is punctuated by moments of powerful visual pleasure (Wheatley, 2016).

According to Villanueva *et al.* (2013, p. 591) [...] "violence on television, whether fictional or real, interests and attracts viewers. All this is morbidity that works as the main interest, as a tasting of the destructive and negative (2013, p. 591). Therefore, the erotic of cruelty can be perceived as a way to produce aesthetic sensations in the spectator, similar to pleasure through many violent images that appropriate the look and desires of the audience as an «innocent» illusion and even vindictive on some occasions. At present, this evasive, pleasant, and abject way that seems to breathe the contemporary audiovisual is at a crucial moment due to the facilities offered by marketing thanks to the arrival of streaming platforms.

From cinema to television: The narrative language of cruelty.

Today, television series are a new form of cinematography. According to Heredia Ruiz (2017, p. 294), "Netflix emerges with a new convergent model, as a 21st-century company that has shaken the classic film and television industry with its strategic decisions", taking into consideration that together with Netflix, there are other important platforms in the industry of mainstream series such as HBO or Amazon Prime Video. This model seems to have become popular in recent years, immersed in the golden age of television⁴, where the culture of series denotes an era of a cinema devoid of quality compared to television fiction. According to film critic A. O. Scott (2010), the traditional

relationship between film and television has undergone an enormous change due to the promotion, in recent years, of conservative and cautious filmmaking in the face of daring and risky series.

According to Muñoz-Fernández (2016, p. 70): "If for years television series had been ignored or degraded to the mere condition of vulgar mass art, now they are compared to literature or art". This redefinition of the quality of mainstream television series has always been observed with some mistrust by viewers and film critics, who considered television series to be on a lower rung, either from an artistic or industrial point of view, compared to the seventh art. For his part, Reviriego (2011, p. 8) supported this doctrine by explaining that: "cinophilia is now telephilia and its cult has gone mainstream", while the New York Times film critic, A.O. Scott (2010) explained that "The relationship between cinema and its audience, which has endured for more than a century, has reached a difficult point" having more narrative quality in the series than in the film.

Nowadays, television transforms cinema, and cinema transforms television. The influence is hectic and mutual, a two-way street. Increasingly, film directors are accepting offers of work from television (Martin Scorsese, Woody Allen, Amy Heckerling, David Fincher) or moving there seemingly altogether. (Martin, 2018, p. 49).

Also, according to Reviriego (2011, p. 7), successful series such as *The wire* (2002-2008), *The sopranos* (1999-2007), *Treme* (2010-2013), or *Mad men* (2007-2015) are audiovisual products that share an editorial line regarding topics such as "the culture of power and image or the institutional and political failure of the post-industrial era". Hence, it can be understood that there are in these mass successes irreverent series that intend to deepen in transcendental issues without denying the entertainment to the public. All this, employing a more democratized and simple access for the spectator who has found in the series a new window to the entertainment of greater narrative and audiovisual quality in the middle of an era that releases films on streaming platforms and series in prestigious film festivals.

According to Suzunaga Quintana (2013, p. 247), we find ourselves "in an era of shamelessness in the face of enjoyment" of art, leaving the viewer with an "erotic impoverishment as an effect of the excesses of both hope and despair"(Quintana 2013, p. 251). According to film critic Fernanda Solorzano (2020, p. 172), since the mid-20th century, art and mass culture joined forces, and this has been widely criticized by many researchers or critics such as Martin-Barbero (2012, p. 83), who expressed that the rejection of mass culture is resistance to expanding political ideals and aesthetic tastes. That is why mass culture should not be interpreted as "the spreading of a cultivated culture, but as the deformation of popular culture" (2012, p. 83). In other words, the problem of mass culture does not lie so much in its transcendental potential but in the mercantile potential that lives disguised as a denunciation.

The objective of the present study is to determine variables of analysis of the cinema of cruelty, from the theoretical constructs ut supra reviewed, from the judgment of experts, and the analysis of content - as an applied test of the construct - of two series transmitted in the streaming platform HBO - *Chernobyl* and *Years and years* -, to explore the presence of these characteristics of the cinema of cruelty in massive audiovisual products.

Materials and method

This study arose from the need to trace the pornographic perversity present in current television series belonging to mainstream culture, relating it to some characteristics of the so-called cinema of cruelty to discover what ingredients are most present in these audiovisual works that seek to denounce human perversity.

On the one hand, it is intended to reflect on the existence of a cinema of mass cruelty, which is becoming ever closer thanks to the «democratization» and flexibility of streaming platforms, which trivializes that which it denounces with a moral and abject tone at the same time. On the other hand, it seeks to offer a vision that allows «unraveling» the audiovisual language of contemporary entertainment in which the depressing and the fun seem to go hand in hand.

The main objectives of the study are [O1] to analyze the characteristics of the cinema of cruelty immersed in the current mainstream culture, [O2] to diagnose how this cinematography has been introduced into that culture through the current streaming series, [O3] to determine what features of this cinematographic vision have been established in the two television series to be analyzed as a model test - *Chernobyl* and *Years and Years*, that is, to notice the presence of the characteristics present in this typology of contemporary cinematography in the analysis and, [O4] to relate both series as a symptom of the eroticism of cruelty in the audiovisual language where the mass spectacle and the eroticism of cruelty come together in the contemporary mainstream television.

Therefore, a qualitative research approach has been chosen, as it allows researchers to provide essential intersubjectivity in interpreting the data to discover the hidden meanings in the social context (Salgado Lévano, 2007). Likewise, this research has an exploratory-descriptive scope. According to Sampieri (2014, p. 91), exploratory scope studies are used when the objective is to examine a little-studied or novel topic. On the other hand, a study of descriptive scope seeks to specify essential properties and characteristics of any phenomenon being analyzed (Sampieri, 2014, p. 92). Through qualitative methods, the aim is to analyze a series of indicators (variables) extracted from the theoretical quest and found in two current television series taken as an intentional sample to be analyzed.

Sample

According to Otzen and Manterola (2017, p. 230), purposeful sampling is a type of non-probability sampling characterized by "selecting characteristic cases from a population by limiting the sample to only these cases". On the other hand, it is considered a sampling in which, according to Namakforoosh (2005, p. 189), the elements are chosen by the personal judgment of the researchers since they are thought to have prior knowledge of the population elements so that the sample can be representative.

The two series that have been decided as a pilot sample of the analysis model have been *Years and years* (2019) by Russell. T. Davies and *Chernobyl* (2019) by Craig Mazin. Some of the reasons that have led to the selection of both series as a corpus of validation are their mainstream character, being two products typical of that culture due to its focus on the mass -also distributed on the HBO streaming platform-, how recent they are (both from 2019), the prestige that they bring with the criticism received, as well as the interest of the public and, finally, the ingredients typical of the cinema of cruelty that make it interesting to delve into them in order to detect the possible presence of the erotic of cruelty in the mass audiovisual and recent.

Firstly, *Years and years* is a British mini-series (co-produced by the United States and France) created by the British Russell T. Davies (the only scriptwriter of the entire

series), composed of a single season of 6 episodes and premiered on May 14, 2019, on BBC One, reaching a single season of approximately 6 hours, obtaining a position on IMDB of 8.4/10 (voted by 24,167 viewers) and FilmAffinity of 7.7/10 (voted by 10,328 people) and with an audience of 2.39 million viewers in its first episode (Ling, 2019). The series relates the history of the Lyon family, resident in Manchester, from 2019 to 2034. Throughout this period, the family unit will face terrifying and convulsive political, technological, and economic changes that will affect them in various aspects of their private life.

Secondly, *Chernobyl* is an American mini-series (co-produced between the United States and the United Kingdom), created by Craig Mazin (the only scriptwriter of the entire series), composed of a single season of 5 episodes and premiered on May 6, 2019, on HBO, with a total duration of approximately 5 hours. It obtains a position in IMDB of 9.4/10 (voted by 571,395 people) and FilmAffinity of 8.5/10 (voted by 39,601 people). *Chernobyl* also broke an audience record with 8 million viewers, 52% of which came from HBO networks and streaming platforms where it is broadcasted (Saloz, 2019).

On the other hand, one could think of similar series beyond the two mentioned as is the case of dystopian works such as *The Leftovers* (2014), *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017), the aforementioned *Black Mirror* (2011), or *The Collapse* (2019) by Jérémy Bernard, Guillaume Desjardins, and Bastien Ughetto, which have a place of honor in the erotics of cruelty within mainstream series for their hyperreal and aestheticized capacity to spectacularize cruelty as entertainment, even encouraging fiction to be "black mirrored" (Ramírez, 2019) in the so-called prestige series.

Consequently, it is essential to attend to what is considered a prestigious series currently. Kathryn VanArendonk (2017) found that some of the elements to detect a prestigious series were the following: It resembles a novel or a movie, it does not have "episodes" but "chapters," it does not have a "first season" but "a pilot," it gives prestige to the abject, it is dark, it is difficult to understand, it leaves small elements to be deciphered in which "every piece of the puzzle matters." it usually stars sad, violent middle-aged men trying to make their way in the world, they mistreat women and require sex to forget their existential emptiness, nothing is funny (in fact, it must be deeply depressing). It is usually directed by and stars well-known stars of the movie scene. All this would express the different ways cinema and television feedback under the language of prestige, aesthetics, and cruelty.

Chernobyl tells the story of the explosion at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant on April 26, 1986, in Ukraine - in a context where the Soviet Union still existed - from those who had something to do with the event. The awards that the series has received are the Golden Globe for Best Mini-Series 2019 and Best Supporting Actor (Stellan Skarsgård), 10 Emmy Awards (including Best Mini-Series and Best Screenplay), and 14 Bafta TV Award nominations.

Instrument and procedure

As for the analysis technique, we have opted for content analysis with an interpretative basis, which, according to Andréu Abela (2002, p. 22), consists of "a set of systematic interpretative techniques of the hidden meaning of texts". In other words, it is a matter of discovering those elements present in the two series to be analyzed in order to understand their position regarding the cinema of cruelty in the current context of transformation suffered by the industry and the public.

It is a matter of analyzing and deepening its latent content and the social context where the message is developed. Therefore, the narrative development of the plots would

be developed and expanded, combining it with the theories of cruelty cinema and mainstream series through an expertly validated analysis sheet.

Table 1. Theoretical constructs that make up the initial analysis sheet

Variable (V)	Interpretation
V1. The erotic of cruelty	That in the narrative, there is enjoyment in the presence of perverse acts in some characters.
V2. Spectacularization of cruelty	That elements of "horror pornography" -physical or emotional- are found in the plot. Similarly, the stylization and aestheticization of perversity would fall under this category.
V3. Misanthropic and pessimistic vision	Negative reflection of past events that actually occurred (typical of the black chronicle) as well as apocalyptic predictions that strive to appear real and convincing.
V4. Hyper-realistic cruelty	Use of sequential shots or fixed shots of long duration to show the perversity in the most realistic way possible.
V6. Routine perspective	Cruelty from the viewpoint of the average citizen's routine, usually upper-middle class.
V7. Cruelty as gloat and banality	A vision that revels around the miseries of the human being with the disguise of being a simple exploration of evil.
V8. Cruelty as a shock element	Excessive denigration and physical, emotional, or sexual abuse of minorities, socially excluded groups, and animals in order to impact the viewer.
V9. Show over narration	The images become themselves in the story, specifically in the psychological peculiarities of perverse characters with a denouncing purpose.
V10. Cruelty as entertainment and merchandise	The cinema and the pessimistic, uncomfortable and perverse series are the protagonists of the spectator's leisure time. Currently, there is no artistic vision of cruelty in movies and series, only a mercantilist approach typical of cultural industries.

In order to validate the indicators that make up the analysis sheet, their content and reliability were tested through expert judgment. According to Escobar-Pérez and Cuervo-Martínez (2008, p. 29), the expert judgment is a method of validation that is described as "informed opinion of people with a background in the subject, who are recognized by others as qualified experts in the subject, and who can give information, evidence, judgments, and assessments". Therefore, once the analysis sheet by theoretical constructs was made, a group of experts was tracked to validate the analysis indicators for the research. The experts selected were professionals from the film industry (4), whose selection criteria were that they are filmmakers and/or screenwriters, with relevant international awards; university professors specialized in narrative and film (6) and a film critic and cultural journalist.

A survey was conducted through the Google Forms platform, consisting of 10 questions - one for each variable - with Likert scales from 1 to 4, being 1 "Strongly Disagree" and 4 "Strongly Agree", with which the experts could assess to what extent they were in favor or not with each variable of the theoretical construct (see Table 1).

Based on the answers, the arithmetic mean was obtained, which is the value of the variable in which the distribution of observations is balanced (Castro Sánchez, p. 2002). As the Likert scale is from 1 to 4, the average should result in this case of a minimum value of 2, so any indicator that obtains more than this number would be considered validated for the analysis. In the present study, all the variables (V1-V10) of the theoretical construct (see Table 1) obtained a mean of more than 2, so it was considered appropriate not to withdraw any.

Table 2. Arithmetic average of analysis indicators validated by experts.

Experts	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6	V7	V8	V9	V10
Exp. 1.	3	1	2	2	2	2	1	3	2	1
Exp. 2	3	3	3	3	3	4	4	4	4	2
Exp. 3	4	3	3	2	3	2	2	2	3	2
Exp. 4	2	3	2	3	3	2	1	3	3	3
Exp. 5	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	3
Exp. 6	1	1	2	2	1	2	1	1	2	4
Exp. 7	3	3	2	2	2	1	3	2	2	1
Exp. 8	2	1	2	2	2	1	1	2	1	3
Exp. 9	3	2	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	1
Exp. 10	3	3	3	2	3	2	2	3	2	2
Exp. 11	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	3	4
Exp. 12	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	1
MEDIA	2,67	2,50	2,58	2,50	2,67	2,42	2,33	2,75	2,58	2,25

Note: The total average of the validated instrument is 2,507.

The next step was to calculate the reliability with the help of Cronbach's Alpha (α). According to Ledesma, Molina, and Valero (2002), Cronbach's Alpha is the reliability method most used by researchers and allows access to a greater degree of homogeneity in the instrument, in this case, the analysis sheet, to provide information about the validity or not of the indicators established to measure the objectives set in this study. According to Tavakol and Dennick (2011), the result must be between 0.7 and 0.9 for the instrument to be considered reliable (0 being the lowest position and 1 the highest). Since Cronbach's Alpha in the present study has resulted in α 0.928525, it can be considered highly reliable.

Since there were many differences between the values assigned to each variable by the experts, we proceeded to perform the Fleiss' Kappa (k), which is a statistical formula that adds the calculation of the encoder bias (precision-error) and the calculation of the concordance (calibration) (Torres Gordillo and Perera Rodríguez, 2009). The interpretation of Fleiss' Kappa index would be as follows: Between 0.40 and 0.60 would be a regular match, between 0.61 and 0.75 would be a good match, and if the result is higher than 0.75, the match would be excellent (Torres Gordillo & Perera Rodríguez, 2009, p. 99). In the case of the expert survey, the (k) resulted in -0.0067, so that there is no great overall agreement between the various experts in the study. Therefore, the indicators used in the interpretive-based content analysis sheet are shown in Table 3 because they have been the most positively and consistently validated by the experts.

Table 3. Validated analysis sheet

Experts' consideration	Variable	Interpretation
Variables considered most favorable by experts	V1. The erotic of cruelty	That in the narrative, there is enjoyment in the presence of perverse acts in some characters.
	V2. Spectacularization of cruelty	That elements of "horror pornography" -physical or emotional- are present in the plot. Similarly, the stylization and aestheticization of perversity would fall under this category.

	V9. Show over narration	The images become themselves in the story, specifically in the psychological peculiarities of perverse characters with a denouncing purpose.
Variable considered equally favorable and unfavorable by experts.	V10. Cruelty as entertainment and merchandise	The cinema and the pessimistic, uncomfortable and perverse series are the protagonists of the spectator's leisure time. Currently, there is no artistic vision of cruelty in movies and series, only a mercantilist approach typical of cultural industries.

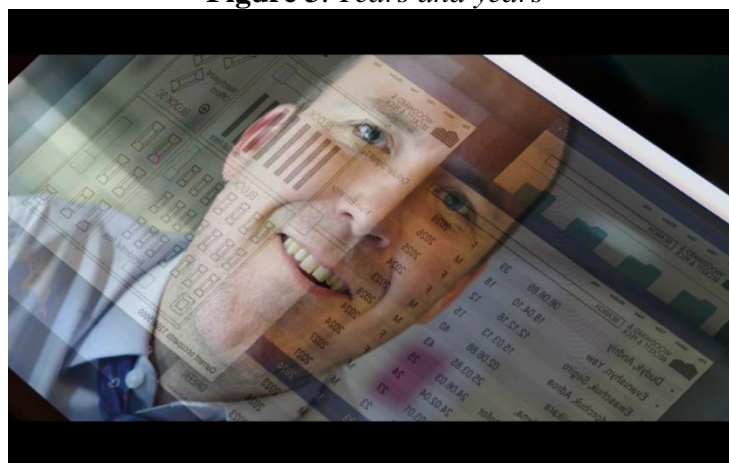
Results

Firstly, in the series *Years and years*, we find an initial editing sequence at the beginning of each episode in which future events occur in a cathartic way as the years go by. What its creator, Russell T. Davies, intends is to show his narration explicitly, as well as to intensify the images, which focuses on the terrifying changes in the world, accompanied by the rhythm of Murray Gold's omnipresent soundtrack, through an explosion of images and music that invades the spectator's screen (V2). This explosion of color and horror is made explicit in a harmonious way: The apocalypse is coming, even if the Lyons does not perceive it or prefer to ignore it.

In the series, there are many apocalyptic events within its six episodes: The North Pole has melted, banks go bankrupt, pharmaceuticals are out of medicine, data analysts control interference from other countries, a «Grexit» begins in Greece, Hungary declares bankruptcy, Italy suffers the yoke of martial law after the resignation of its government, Floods rule the world, dirty bombs explode in cities creating radiation, there are constant blackouts that could come from various sources, bees are extinguished, journalists who confront the government begin to be banned or there is a global pandemic arising from a monkey. For all these reasons, one can appreciate the desire to narrate through explicit images (V9) the events of the protagonists through the spectacle of horror.

The series shows how an average person could even introduce an illegal immigrant into a terrifying refugee camp in the name of revenge, as in the case of Stephen's character with Viktor's (figure 3), in which we see his smile reflected in the simple technological action he has just performed by which we see in this scene a joy in the face of the pain of others (V1).

Figure 3. *Years and years*



Stephen sends Viktor to a concentration camp for personal revenge with a smile on his face.
Source: HBO

In this way, in the narrative of the series, terror becomes every day, and world power seems to be magnified in front of the protagonist family, thus challenging humanism or activism based on terror, populism, and demagoguery, the primary means of social control and manipulation. On the other hand, the presence of more humane robots and more robotic human beings could be one of the main theses of *Years and years*, a series that travels from convulsive political changes to the evolution of a new human being - almost always represented in the transhumanism of Beth Lyons' character. Somehow, it shows an apocalyptic entertainment that seems to «sweeten» transhumanism based on the latent misanthropy of its author through a representation of constant symbols and an overflowing pessimism, depressive and alarmist, which invites the viewer to want to see more of what hurts.

Figure 4: *Years and years*



Beth Lyons hiding her fears and humanity behind technology.

Source: <https://thingwithfeathers.home.blog/2019/07/19/years-and-years-in-conversation-with-hayley-sleigh/>

Secondly, in the series *Chernobyl*, based on an actual event from the American point of view, the irresponsible and reckless decisions of politicians about the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear plant narrated in the series led thousands of civilians to die, to lose loved ones, or pets or to suffer fatal diseases such as cancer in a few years (V1). However, any right action that inhabits any character in the HBO series' plot will be rewarded with death or banishment (V2), and all of this is orchestrated, as in *Years and years*, by politics. Therefore, it can be understood that *Chernobyl* refers to the famous nuclear accident that cost so many human and animal lives as not being "just an operator's mistake" - as Legasov says in the epilogue of the series - but as a series about the fall of the USSR from a tremendous viewpoint.

As can be seen, the cinema of cruelty is tremendously critical, moralistic and, at times, preachy and, at present, all this lives more focused on the more private everyday life of the characters, as can be seen in the first episode, when the explosion can be seen from inside Ignatenko's house, an event that would take the life of her future baby and her young husband (V9) (Figure 5). In the same way, the visual style is reinforced with pictorial and dark planes of mortuary landscapes and deserts, animals -dogs, cows or birds die through weapons or radiation in the series-, human beings, and their clothes on the ground or devastated by radiation and even a way of showing radiation as a «beautiful»

element, as can be seen in the bridge scene of the first episode under the rain of ashes or the air transporting the radiation to Prypiat (V2, V9, V10).

Figure 5. *Chernobyl*



The cruelty that will be witnessed will have consequences in the routine, inside the lives and homes of the people close to the plant. Source: HBO

Figure 6. *Chernobyl*



The evidence of horror in the face of political denial. Source: HBO.

In the series, we find several scenes that seem to beautify the cruelty aesthetically, as is the case of Valery Legásov's suicide before reaching the fifth minute of the first episode, the radioactive ash falling from the sky as if it were snow on the civilians of Prypiat -like a beautiful dance with death-, the way the camera, always solemn and intimate, shows the happy steps of school children. In contrast, a bird that dies instantly falls from the sky on the feet of the little ones or the scene where the three men enter the tanks of the power plant, hearing a constant sound of the barometer of radioactivity about to explode, the lights of the flashlight going out and the men being afraid (V1, V2, V10).

The scene is narrated from an immersive vision, typical of postmodern cinema and the intimate horror of today's cruelty, concluding when the light of the flashlights goes out, leaving the spectator and characters in the dark (and intrigued to consume the next episode). In this way, the spectator is immersed in the cruelty and the tenebrous and dark atmosphere full of radiation, deaths, suicides, threats, and hopelessness, focused on an apocalyptic vision of a country and a political class that leads to thousands of deaths.

Final considerations

The entertainment in these series, built on the foundations of a cinema of mainstream cruelty, seems to be the expression of pornography of horror and violence - not always understood in a physical sense - that has been developing in the first years of the 21st century under the codes of postmodern cinema and the prestige of the most important film festivals worldwide. Thus, several important events took place: While television series were losing ground to the cinema, the most abject cruelty cinema plots were gaining weight in film festivals, thus reaching a meeting point between this new cruelty cinema and the third golden age of television series. The thesis of this study is based on the premise that, as Reviriego (2011, p. 8) rightly pointed out, film culture has become «seriesphilia» and this evolution does not come from a simple displacement of the series against the cinema, but constant feedback between both languages. Postmodern cinema and the third golden age of series crossed paths and embraced an aesthetic of cruelty and abjection without any complexes.

All this arose from a postmodern cinema that was no longer simply cruel. However, eroticized cruelty (Goldstein, 2006), prescribing *jouissance* over rational understanding (Quintana, 2013, p. 247), even encouraging the existence of a prestigious cinema, that which occurs in the most renowned festivals such as Cannes (Lerer, 2014), which granted success and prestige to the most abject and pornographically aesthetic films that had, as an ultimate goal, ideological indignation (Rivera-García, 2016). Artaud or Bazin's emotional and transformative depth had on artistic cruelty thus evolved in postmodern cinema into abject pornography that, rather than denouncing, aims at shouting its intensified indignation in the face of human injustice.

This can be seen today more than ever in contemporary television series, where the so-called third golden age of television has ended up turning the series into an unaccomplished compared to cinematographic or literary art, coming to be equated rather than compared to the same ones (Joyard, 2011, p. 14). Hence, the dystopian fashion of the early twentieth century resurfaces, but with a new current nuance: they are mainstream, they eroticize the tragic cruelty of their dark narratives through aesthetic pornography, they are deeply depressing, preachy, and a sign of prestige for all of this. (VanArendonk, 2017).

The moral discourse, used as an alibi for the flow of intensified perverse images, is beginning to leave aside the pedagogy of images to surrender to an emotional saturation of them, as Fontcuberta (2016, p.9) would affirm in the concept of post-photography, being for the author the "symptom of a cultural and political pathology" in which the "visual overabundance" would end up breaking and hiding the inner meaning of the images.

The series's culture seems to be immersed in a dystopian trend where the narrative, under the pretext of shock, explores different levels of abjection in the series of the third golden age of television, allowing the viewer to feel depressed or insecure as a sign of intellectual nourishment. In the same way, current television series seem to behave as the new artistic prestige of our time and their flow of perverse images as the nourishment of the dystopian fears so booming in the postmodern culture.

The current historical pessimism, that amount of Prozac that the current cultural consumption apparently demands (Vargas Oliva, 2015, p. 121), seems to be determined by a culture above teaching something, focuses only on the search for emotional impact under the simulacrum of moral denunciation. Thus, the art, the narrative, and the mood of the spectator seem to decline in the name of prestige and fashion of the seriesphilia culture.

Declaration of interest statement

The authors do not declare any conflict of interest with this research.

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¹ The French publishing house Flammarion released in 1975 this compilation of posthumous film chronicles written by André Bazin and selected by director François Truffaut under the title *Le cinéma de la cruauté: de Bunuel à Hitchcock*.

² Luis Buñuel, Akira Kurosawa, Alfred Hitchcock, Carl Theodor Dreyer, Preston Sturges, and Eric von Stroheim.

³ This is an article, entitled *Le travelling de Kapo* (1992), which appeared in the publication number 4 of the French magazine Traffic. In that article he reflected on Bazin's cinema of cruelty based on an article by Jacques Rivette entitled *De l'abjection* (1961). Available in Spanish at: <http://www.cinefagos.net/index.php/documentos/442-el-travelling-de-kapo.html>.

⁴ According to Benchichá López (2015, 135), the third golden age of television addresses issues such as "abortion, prisoner rights, workers' and union rights, racial division, terrorist attacks, prostitution, drugs, electoral fraud, the underground economy, and genocide. Almost always focused on entertainment and aimed at viewers hungry for complex plots.