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MORAL EMOTIONS IN POLITICS

Inventing an Alternative
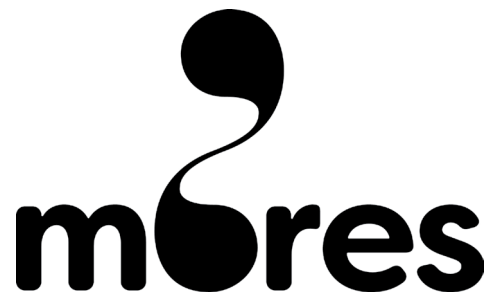
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Paper title: Inventing an alternative: Populist imaginations of political leaders in audiovisual culture

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Abstract

This working paper examines how contemporary European television series create alternative visions of political leadership in response to democratic crisis and public disillusionment with elites. Drawing on empirical media aesthetics and political theory, and within the Horizon Europe project MORES – Moral Emotions in Politics, we analyse the recurring trope of "democratic just anger" across three series: SERVANT OF THE PEOPLE (Ukraine), REPRESENT (France), and THE AMAZING MRS PRITCHARD (UK). Each features protagonists who rise from underrepresented social groups and channel moral emotions (particularly anger) into transformative political action. Using multimodal film analysis, we demonstrate how these series create affect dramaturgies that model different populisms, challenging both elite governance and exclusionary nationalist ideologies. We argue that these fictional representations serve not merely as mirrors of real-world populist movements but as experimental "populism laboratories" that explore the alignment of populist thought patterns with liberal democratic values. In doing so, the series reflect and shape contemporary political culture by staging the emotional labour of public educators, and by depicting politics as a site of moral struggle, collective imagination, and affective engagement.

1. Introduction

We argue that the selected series model an emotionally grounded, "value-based" populist alternative to established elite politics

Throughout Europe, populist parties achieved significant election gains over the last decades. In journalistic and scholarly debates on the reasons for these seismic shifts, political apathy and alienation are often cited: citizens of Western democracies feel like the system does not work in their interest. In this public sentiment, it's time for a change. In our research on the representation of politics and politicians in 21st-century TV series, within the context of the Horizon Europe project MORES—Moral Emotions in Politics, we asked: What positive images of power are being developed in times of the supposed perpetual crisis and a perceived lack of suitable political leadership? What glimmers of hope are imagined in times of systemic political crisis? With this survey, grounded in empirical media aesthetics, we contribute to the broader MORES research agenda on how moral emotions shape political identities in contemporary Europe—specifically in relation to fictional audiovisual mass media.

Our survey of the field of contemporary European polit-series (Naumann, 2025, p. 21) showed that these fictions lean towards intrigue, corruption and abuse of power. Positively connoted politicians, however, who are struggling in the service of the common good are rare to find—there is no European THE WEST WING. This could suggest that the current democratic crisis in Europe (polarised political landscapes and the rise of anti-/or post-democratic tendencies (cf. Selk, 2023)) is partly a crisis of imagination that manifests in audiovisual political discourses (cf. Horst & Scherer, 2024). The few positive imaginations of political leadership in contemporary series are often satirical or (post-)ironic. This paper analyses a recurring trope of "good" political leadership based on three European TV series: SERVANT OF THE PEOPLE (Ukraine, 2015-2019), REPRESENT (France, 2023), and THE AMAZING MRS PRITCHARD (UK 2006). Here, political candidates rise from underrepresented societal groups to positions of power, and their idealistic drive for broad societal change is tested by the realities of policymaking. Two similarities between these three series are striking: 1) In all, protagonists are propelled into political positions by an outburst of anger that is amplified by media—a trope we call "democratic just anger." 2) The series use populist thought patterns combined with policy-level ideologies not usually considered populist.

Using multimodal film analysis and political theory, we argue that these series model an emotionally grounded, "value-based" populist alternative both to established "elite" politics and exclusionary ethno-nationalism. These imaginations of a political alternative can be understood as a populism laboratory of popular culture that poses a provocative and delicate question: Can populist thought patterns align with liberal democratic values?

2. Theoretical Framework — Populism, Political Emotions and Spectator Feelings

An interdisciplinary approach to examining how political TV series portray value-based populism and the affective power of storytelling

For the following case study, three conceptual cornerstones of our interdisciplinary approach need to be introduced in more detail: a wide understanding of populism and populist thought patterns; a brief overview of how politics and emotions are intertwined; and an analytical framework for analysing emotions conveyed by audiovisual images.

2.1 Populism

While the term populism is often used deploringly, we use it descriptively in the following: it captures a wide range of different political ideologies that build upon an antagonism between positively valued 'the people' and a denigrated 'the elite' (Stanley, 2008). In that perspective, populism may even be good for democracy, e.g. if it can bring alienated people back into politics (e.g. Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). Even if these shows don't claim to be populist, a cultural imagination of populism can be identified. Populism, as Canovan (1999) emphasised, is not just a pathology of democracy but raises important issues for theoretical reflection: it entails an appeal to the people against both the elites and dominant ideas and values of society. This structural feature determines populism's characteristic legitimacy, political style, and overall mood. Populism thus has to be understood as a relational concept that provides a "contingent and (in many respects) conjunctural offer for demarcating one party from another" (Baloge & Hubé, 2024). In the fictional worlds of transnational series culture, populist thought patterns offer symbolic ways of demarcation between aesthetically condensed political ideas and currents. Naumann (2025, p. 267) argues that simplifications typical of conventional fictional storytelling in series, together with a normative logic of *idealpolitik*, can lead to populist world views.

This lens of populism described above creates in the audiovisual fictions an image of contemporary democratic societies where a new kind of political leader can emerge: someone who is relatable, "one of us", who—unlike the out-of-touch elite representatives—may offer better solutions to societal problems. Each show experiments with populist themes in its own way, and each goes beyond the illiberal nationalist-identitarian ideologies dominant in current European populist

movements. Populism in this sense does not constitute a stand-alone ideology, but can be understood as a "thin ideology":

> [...] it does not so much overlap with as diffuse itself throughout full ideologies. The wide variety of forms populism takes is attributable not to conceptual incoherence but conceptual thinness: the sheer openness and contestability of populism's core concepts makes it a receptive partner for full ideologies. (Stanley, 2008, p. 107)

These ideological pairings thus change decisively what and who is considered as "the people", "the elite" and which measures could reinstate the sovereignty of the people.

These series depict leaders who rise from unrepresented groups and create their own political movements. They are driven by idealism that is tested repeatedly by the realities of governance. How do these series conceptualise the relation between emotion and politics? What are the affect dramaturgies with which these populist candidates rise to power and wield power once elected? What recurring narrative tropes can be identified? The goal of this paper is to carve out common features and differences of democratic, value-based populisms in European series.

2.2 Emotion politics

In the last two decades, political science has developed a huge body of literature on the meaning of emotions in politics. From this vast literature, we lean on an approach that distinguishes between different types of emotions, namely binary, basic, and reflexive emotions (Beichelt, 2023). In particular, within the field of reflexive emotions, actors link their emotional states with moral considerations. On the conceptional level, we can thus combine specific types of emotions with value judgements, as suggested by Martha Nussbaum (2001) or Jonathan Haidt (2003, 2013). This helps us to distinguish between different kinds of statuses emotions have for politics. Binary emotions are mainly based on the difference between appraisal on the one side and rejection on the other. Basic emotions build on the binary distinction, but are more differentiated and fit for certain constellations. While the list of basic emotions varies in the literature, we assume anger, fear, joy, and mourning to be four different emotional states that serve as starting points for understanding specific modes of emotions politics, for example "politics of anger".

Large parts of the literature on politics and emotions insist on a distinction between good and bad emotions. Such characterisations do not hold long if applied to complex social situations. E.g. loving one's own country can go too far and may result in hostility towards others. We therefore propose to concentrate on the prosocial and antisocial effects of all emotions.

While the named emotional patterns play important roles in our approach to emotions in the political sphere, the fact that these emotions are displayed in or evoked by TV series, leads us to the third category: reflexive emotions. Binary and basic emotions are, in principle, seen as states of mind from which both in-

" The rise of populist movements in Europe can also be observed in the domain of fictional audiovisual series "

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dividuals and collectives cannot free themselves. Relying, among many others, on Daniel Kahneman (2011), we assume that the human mind has developed capacities to reflect on one's own emotions. While it is not possible to completely escape one's emotions, one can partially control them. Also, from an external perspective, it is possible to reflect emotions, for example, to think about somebody else's fear. Once this is accepted, there is a need to introduce a secondary perspective into the analysis of social or political emotions.

When thinking about the representation and mobilisation of emotions in TV series, we have to systematically deal with such a perspective. The central element of reflexivity in the mediatisation of emotions is that scriptwriters, actors and film directors (make-up artists, costume designers, …) create affective audiovisual compositions to trigger sensations and emotions of spectators. Audiovisual images, therefore, engage in "emotion management" (Hochschild, 1983). In this sense, we analyse polit-series reflexive emotional management concerning societal transformation processes.

2.3 Audiovisual expressive movements

From a media aesthetic perspective, the idea that audiovisual images only unfold in the perception of their audience is crucial. This theoretical position considers film-viewing as an aesthetic media practice—the *poiesis of viewing film* (Kappelhoff, 2018). Audiovisual images are thus not understood as mere representations of objects, persons, and locations, but as cinematic expressive movements (Kappelhoff, 2004; Müller & Kappelhoff, 2018). This framework draws on Deleuze's (1986 [1983]) notion of movement-images, the theoretical concept of expressive movement (at the intersection of early twentieth-century art theory, social philosophy, and anthropology), as well as on a neo-phenomenological, intersubjective understanding of experience in film-viewing as embodiment: "A film is an act of seeing that makes itself seen, an act of hearing that makes itself heard, an act of physical and reflective movement that makes itself reflexively felt and understood." (Sobchack, 1992, p. 3). While watching series, affect dramaturgies emerge: audiovisual images unfold as movement patterns, merging different staging dimensions (such as sound design, montage rhythm, camera movements, and bodily expressivity of the actors) into

Audiovisual images unfold as movement patterns, merging different staging dimensions into one temporal gestalt

one temporal gestalt. It is possible to reconstruct the perceptual and affective *parcours* spectators go through in viewing a film (Kappelhoff & Bakels, 2011) and describe the underlying compositional structures as expressive movement units (EMUs): "Each EMU traces the course of affective intensities along such expressive registers as music, acting, or camera movement. Such intensities can refer, for example, to the dynamic quality of a gesture, to a change in colour temperature, or to the rhythmicality of a montage sequence. Depending on the scene, different registers may dominate" (Kappelhoff & Lehmann, 2019, p. 121). To reconstruct those forms of audiovisual expressivity, the following analyses are based on such multimodal film-analytical close readings.

3. Case Study: The Trope of "Democratic Just Anger"

We explore how different connections of moral emotion and populisms emerge from the specific staging of each series

All three series use an outburst of anger as the starting point of the political careers of their protagonists. These outbursts of anger are then amplified and broadcast by different forms of media. As the public reacts positively to these displays of frustration and anger, running for a political office becomes even thinkable for the outside candidates.

Anger, as a moral emotion (Haidt, 2003), plays a crucial role here. It arises when people believe that someone has acted unfairly or harmed others in a way that violates their sense of justice. This judgement can be based on personal values, social norms, or cultural standards. Communities sharing moral anger may start actions or demonstrations against perceived injustice. However, moral anger also has an anti-social dimension: For instance, political leaders or groups exploiting anger in their messages may create an "us" versus "them" mentality, fuelling aggressive rhetoric, conflicts, and sharpening divides between political groups. Therefore, it is crucial to identify the community represented by the "we" in these shows' fictional populist movements and to discuss how they relate to contemporary real-world political environments.

Among others, these qualities have led to anger being repeatedly discussed as a key emotion in populist political discourse that serves as a better predictor "of populist attitudes than socio-economic and socio-cultural factors" (Abadi et al., 2020). Rico et al. (2017, p. 455) argue that

> "[...] populism is intimately linked to the appraisal pattern of anger, as well as its cognitive and behavioral consequences, and is thus more likely to appeal to angry citizens than to anxious ones. [...] Populism can trigger anger, yet angry citizens appear to be receptive to populist discourse."

The outbursts of anger scenes in the series constitute the affective cores from which the respective series develop their unique versions of a contemporary populism, which is then played out over the subsequent episodes. We go into rather detailed descriptions in the following to demonstrate how different connections of moral emotion and populisms emerge from the specific staging of each series.

At the level of narration, we can identify the following arc as typical for the trope:

1. A spontaneous outburst of anger at a perceived injustice establishes the protagonist as a moral voice and community leader. **We-and-them-sentiments** are at the core of these scenes.

2. Viral media amplification transforms the local intervention into a national moment, leading to an unintended candidacy. A **populist appeal** leads to electoral success but also to a role conflict.

3. An emotional transformation during the campaign or in office becomes necessary—shifting from reactive outrage to responsible policymaking. This shift creates a role conflict: how to lead while remaining "of the people" and avoiding the label of "politician." **New populisms** are developed by the series in the mode of as if.

Let us now turn to the concrete scenes from which we derived this pattern.

3.1 A spectatorial, entrepreneurial, feminist populism?

The supermarket owner Ros Pritchard, the protagonist of THE AMAZING MRS PRITCHARD, begins her unexpected political journey after witnessing a heated brawl between Conservative and Labour candidates outside her supermarket. Stepping in to intervene, her sharp public criticism of the state of politics—broadcast on local TV—thrusts her into the political limelight. This moment not only marks the political becoming of Pritchard. It also serves as a metaphor for the realities of modern politics: male-dominated, deeply divided, and lacking a centrist voice. Visually, the scene underscores this reality, with each candidate's entourage positioned to the left and right of the screen, while Pritchard delivers her impassioned, morally charged speech from the middle, symbolising her role as a voice of common sense against the entrenched political elites (see Figure 1). Ros Pritchard acts as an advocate for the disappointed people. "The People" appear in the form of the supermarket employees behind her, painting the picture of a society of workers who start cheering when their boss tells "the lot" her opinion. Politicians are thus framed as male suits, who, with their aggressive and undignified behaviour, are unable to represent the people.

" In the analysed trope, particular emphasis is placed on the overcoming of anger and the articulation of collective moral emotions as a political resource for forging alliances among heterogeneous social groups "

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Figure 1. Intervention in the electoral campaign. THE AMAZING MRS PRITCHARD, episode 1, TC 03:20-04:05.

As the show unfolds, Pritchard's populism is characterised as white, middle-class, entrepreneurial, and feminist, stemming from a frustration with toxic masculinity in politics and a perceived lack of representation and result-oriented pragmatism that block overdue common-sense decisions. An all-female party is set to win the election under her leadership and management style, first introduced as she heads a supermarket branch. No longer confined to radical feminist circles within left-wing academia, this viewpoint, as THE AMAZING MRS PRITCHARD might have foreseen, had become visible in conservative centre-right groups in the 2020s (see Figure 2).

This position is not rooted in fears for democracy or a questioning of the system from a marginalised perspective; rather, it is a common-sense answer to voter apathy. Pritchard's platform also champions some entrepreneurial pragmatism that she believes will fix a messy government, just like she does in a profitable business—an approach popularised by figures like former Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš and tech mogul Elon Musk. The show weaves together themes of the underrepresentation of women in leadership, a business-minded approach to governance, and deep public dissatisfaction with elites who overlook ordinary citizens. The result is a populist stance that forges unlikely alliances between societal groups as a counterweight to those in power.

Figure 2: Gender crisis. Ros Pritchard with her all-female entourage in the House of Commons (left). The cover of the German magazine DER SPIEGEL covers the dissolution of the local government. Ex-chancellor Angela Merkel is quoted saying: "MEN!".

After the scene described above, the series cuts to Pritchard's home, where her family assembles on the sofa in the living room to watch the news report on the events in front of her store. Here, the protagonist sees herself commenting on the turmoil to a local television station. "What is politics?" she asks, "it is us, us people; it's about us, it's for us. So why do we end up relying on 'that lot', them talking riddles when they're not insulting each other." The camera catches the mesmerised gaze of Ros Pritchard, now seeing herself from the outside perspective as a woman with a political message and moral superiority. "What we need actually is more women in parliament!" she argues with emphasis while her family starts cheering. "Women can handle being wrong sometimes". Her husband crawled during the interview in front of the television to record the interview on a VCR. The staging of the scene opens up a triangular spatial arrangement. The husband, whose financial crimes will later seriously threaten Pritchard's presidency, is caught in the line of sight between his wife on the sofa and his wife on the screen, unfolding her vision of a different era of politics steered by wise women.

Figure 3: Mrs Pritchard – her husband – future president Pritchard. The doubling of a character as a metaphor.
THE AMAZING MRS PRITCHARD, episode 1, TC 00:05:32.

In the staging of the series, Pritchard transforms from a supermarket manager to a politician of a new kind, by seeing herself with different eyes in the mass media—and by distancing herself from the immediate anger. Becoming an audiovisual image means entering the sphere of politics. The nationwide stage of politics is thus aesthetically linked to the media representation. But the protagonist does not transgress completely in the sphere of high politics. She remains, at the same time, a part of the audience watching the news on television with her family. The visual splitting up of the figure serves two purposes: on the one hand, becoming a new kind of politician means remaining a part of the TV audience. The audience at home on the sofa is thus established as a key image for "the people" Pritchard represents. The term spectatorial democracy (Siniscalchi, 2021) is taken literally here, and the series shows visually how the allegedly passive media recipients become, through her representation, a political force. On the other hand, future role conflicts, that are core of the genre, are already foreshadowed poetically in this way: What does it mean to be a president, a mother, a wife, a citizen, an ambitious entrepreneur and a local community leader at the same time?

3.2 A "majority of minorities" populism?

REPRESENT presents a different form of populism: In an emblematic scene of the pilot episode, Stéphane Blé, a social worker, confronts Éric Andréi, a socialist mayor running as a presidential candidate, in front of the cameras when he visits the Banlieue. The previously wide concrete landscapes of the projects change into a cramped image space of several shaking hand-cameras filming from within the crowd that the politician has attracted. The perspectives shift often and suddenly. Overlays of different TV stations change repeatedly. The encounter in its emergence is already mediatised, and we, the viewers, see it in the mode of zapping between different TV channels—a staging mode of live-television-realism that creates an impression of immediacy. In response to the protagonist's disturbance of his PR event, Andréi tries different appeasement strategies, but each time Blé calls him out angrily and argues that his political promises are disconnected from the locals' needs. At the height of their argument, the social worker of African descent reminds the white politician of the core values of the
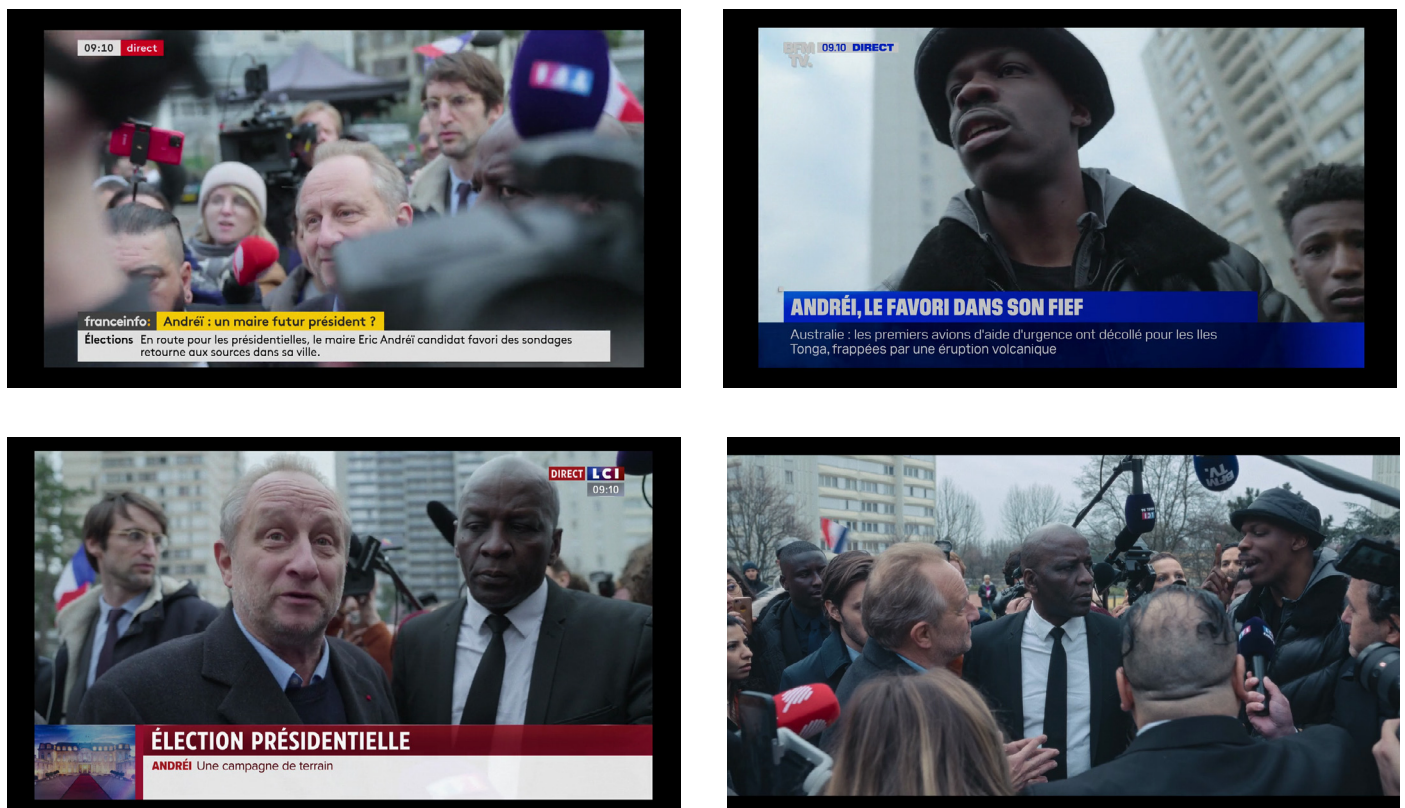

Figure 4: A debate with the man on the street seen through multiple TV channels.
REPRESENT ('EN PLACE'), episode 1, 05:45-08:14.

French Republic: "Are you looking for a slogan for your campaign? I've got one for you [...] It is '*Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*' (Liberty, Equality, Fraternity)." This confrontation, broadcast on TV, starts Blé's unexpected presidential campaign.

The idea of joining the presidential race arises—as in THE AMAZING MRS PRITCHARD—when the protagonist sees himself on the evening news while having dinner with his family. This idea becomes reality when an unscrupulous campaign manager pushes Blé into launching a full-fledged campaign. When one of the teenagers in Blé's group is arrested in a drug raid, Blé tries to free him so that he does not lose an apprenticeship position, but ends up in jail, too. His campaign manager arrives to help him, seizing the chance to praise his "very Mandela" attitude. He organises a protest in front of the police station that is streamed live via social media. As supporters arrive, the police escalate the situation and pepper-spray the crowd. In slow motion, the crowd disperses, and for a brief moment, a young woman in a headscarf appears on screen, waving the French flag. The fleeting situation thus becomes through audiovisual staging a symbol: As Blé appropriated the national motto, REPRESENT appropriates the painting *Liberty Leading the People* by Eugène Delacroix (see Figure 5). By appropriating the core values of the French Republic and claiming them for its grassroots political movement, REPRESENT projects a populism that understands "the people" it represents and what they should be defended against. The people in REPRESENT are not

Figure 5: Appropriating French Patriotism. REPRESENT, episode 1, 22:58 (left) and *Liberty Leading the People* by Eugène Delacroix, 1830 (right).

homogenous or like-minded but formed by an intersectional majority of minorities that reflect the complexities of contemporary French society, where minorities grapple with both discrimination and relative privilege.

This emblematic scene also illustrates how the show counters the discrimination and negligence of current politics without rejecting the republic and its history, but with renewed patriotism—one that insists on the values of pluralism. As such, REPRESENT challenges the notion of a banlieue patriotism promoted by the nationalist-identitarian National Rally party (*Rassemblement National*), and proposes that "the people", in their multi-layered manifestation, should be both politically represented and empowered.

REPRESENT stages this in the mode of a provocative and sometimes deliberately coarse culture clash comedy that spares no one. REPRESENT sees all, irrespective of class, race, gender, and political conviction, as flawed beings that constantly have to challenge their preconceptions about others. But REPRESENT draws a sharp line between racist (or classist, sexist, …) utterances and racists' (classists', sexists', …) ideology. Walking back on one's position, correcting views, listening, and empathising is part of the political culture that emerges with the fictional candidate as a necessary and neglected part of societal cohabitation. On the other hand, building belief systems and political identities on the depreciation of others is staged as boundary-crossing behaviour that poisons democratic societies. In the world of REPRESENT, there's no universalism possible that successfully just ignores race, class, or gender or that forces all members of a society to adapt to a monolithic national culture. Rather, it insists that being in a society means constantly managing the friction between different ways of being in the world—and with it the awkwardness, shame, anger and irritation that comes with it. Blé as a political alternative is not the "good foreigner" who excels in every aspect and thus "compensating" for his otherness—him being often embarrassing and wrong sometimes, but nevertheless speaking and stepping up, listening and adapting is the proposition by the series.

REPRESENT's fictional counterpoint challenges the underlying premises of French right-wing populism and proposes a different driver for radical change and political representation, which feels overdue in the eyes of many constituents. But what REPRESENT shares with the real-world nationalist populists is the disdain for "the politician" as the embodiment of a failed system that is disconnected from the life-worlds of "the people". Before the protagonist becomes politically active, he has to promise his wife Marion one thing: not to become a politician.

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3.3 An educated populism?

SERVANT OF THE PEOPLE is set in Ukraine in the aftermath of the 2014 Revolution of Dignity. In the first episode, history teacher Vasily Petrovych Goloborodko, played by former actor and now Ukraine's president Volodymyr Zelenskyy, delivers a fiery critique of the political system to a colleague in a private conversation. He draws a straight line between his country's lack of political culture and its politicians' disregard for history. In this scene, like in the other shows we discussed, Goloborodko's argument embodies the public's widespread frustration with politics and the sense that ordinary citizens have been abandoned. His sharp, impassioned speech takes aim at the local elites: "It's always the lesser of two assholes and it's been this way for 25 years", he sums up, as angry as it gets. Unbeknownst to him, a student records his moralised discourse, shares it on social media, and his speech goes viral—launching Goloborodko's journey to the presidency (see Figure 6).

The outburst of anger in the SERVANT OF THE PEOPLE is more conventionally staged than in the other shows and focuses solely on Zelenskyy's expressive performance. His portrayal seamlessly shifts from a sensitive teacher to an angry citizen, demonstrating a command of diverse archetypal characters (Kravchenko et al., 2020) while at the same time creating a rich political identity. However, unlike REPRESENT and THE AMAZING MRS PRITCHARD, Goloborodko's fictional rise is not reliant on traditional campaigning. His political career embodies the antique ideal of a leader who reluctantly accepts power for the benefit of the community: he does not run a campaign, give interviews, or appear on political billboards. His anger takes him into political power by miracle, a president seemingly immaculately conceived, who benefits not from the usual political paths but from unfiltered social media.

In a decade where populist candidates achieved surprising election results built on their popularity from the entertainment industry—Beppe Grillo in Italy, Donald Trump in the U.S., Slavi Trifonov in Bulgaria, and the list goes on—SERVANT OF THE PEOPLE captured this era's zeitgeist perhaps most outrightly. In the show, an ordinary man rises to power and claims to fix the country not through traditional policy debates or political agendas, but by embodying the core values and rhetoric of anti-corruption movements. Somewhat blurring the line between fiction and reality, Zelenskyy ascended to the presidency in 2019 by crafting an image that voters believed in—one shaped less by traditional policies than by the scripted success of his on-screen persona, Goloborodko.

As such, the show's populist appeal hinges on themes of modesty, moderation, and a reconnection with the country's past and its people (Coomans & Boulogne, 2022). "The people" Goloborodko represents from the outset are his students—a future generation of Ukrainians he wants to shape into responsible citizens. The system is irredeemably corrupt and has always been; therefore, the decent must rise. But "the decent people" do not just wait to reveal their political voice. "The

> **Vasily Goloborodko's anger takes him into political power by miracle, a president seemingly immaculately conceived, who benefits not from the usual political paths but from unfiltered social media**

people" in this series are not pure per se (as in other populist ideologies) but also need to change in order to carry this transformation. And that calls for a simple teacher as the father of a nation, who both teaches 'us people' and 'them politicians' while nevertheless upholding the difference. The unique historical situation and threats Ukraine faces as an independent nation require a history teacher who is able to push back against Russian annexation campaigns intellectually by evoking a sense for the history and the distinctiveness of the Ukrainian society. As such, the outsider candidate has a different role than his counterparts in uncontested states like France or Great Britain.

Figure 6: Before (top), during (middle), and after (below) the outburst of anger.
SERVANT OF THE PEOPLE, episode 1, 10:29-20.42.

4. Dreaming of Public Educators and Political Emotional Labour?

These series envision a transformation of contemporary political culture that resonates with classical populist demands for simple and sincere politics

One key takeaway from the analysis of series founding power on democratic just anger is that they all play with the figure of the public educator, which has a long tradition in European politics. Public educators, in the sense of the German terminology of the *Volkserzieher*, describe people who educate the broad population to enable them to act as responsible parts of democracies. Often, public educators played vital roles in national formation and revival eras. They instilled a sense of actual belonging to a national state, which served as an emancipatory act on the way to political self-empowerment by "the people". Public educators are also unifying figures concerning the countryside/city divide as they often transformed or translated intellectual movements from education centres to mass movements throughout the countries.

The revival of the educator of the people in the series expresses, in our interpretation, a desire for mental guidance as well as a fear of totalitarian control. The fictional outside candidates from this case study promote a new style of politics that breaks away from the establishment as an answer to contemporary challenges of democracies. Nonetheless, they inscribe themselves in a long tradition of public educators who mould the masses (and especially the youth) into citizens. Imagining the head of state as a teacher for all citizens sets a frame for conceptualising the exercise of power within democracies. Goloborodko is a high school history teacher with a close relationship with his students. The history teacher is first introduced asleep with a book on their face that shows a bust of the Greek philosopher and historian Plutarch, who famously wrote about the leaders of his time and their moral character (see Figure 7). Plutarch's famous quote—"the ruler who is good for anything ought not to beg his subjects to be ruled by him"—is fulfilled in the fiction of the series: The youth beg and push the educator to become a politician. Blé, on the other hand, is a social worker in the projects of the suburb where he lives. He accompanies a group of male teenagers, tries to keep them away from trouble and to get them into educational programs and jobs. Also outside of his small youth centre, Blé is known and respected as an informal community leader who cares about the lives of his neighbours. Then again, Pritchard is not in an educational profession but the

Figure 7: A modern leader with antique ideals: The introduction shots of the protagonist in SERVANT OF THE PEOPLE, episode 1, 04:52 (left). Volodymyr Zelenskyy after his successful election campaign, in 2021 (right). Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

manager of a supermarket. But the way she is introduced makes it clear from the beginning that she, as well, is an educator and community leader: We see her first in the series through a walk-and-talk camera movement. A staging device where the camera follows the protagonist through a maze of interactions, never standing still, but constantly conversing with different people they meet. On her way through the aisles of her store, she meets employees and customers, gives orders, advice, scoldings and encouragement while always remaining the focus point of the constantly moving camera. Pritchard is at the centre of the camera movement, the store, the image space, and the life of this small community.

We argue that these modern interpretations of the classical figure of the public educator focus less on the dissemination of factual knowledge and historical narratives, but the series locate them in a tradition of emotional education. This understanding of education can be traced back to the roots of the reform education movement—or even further to the Aristotelian ideals of moral education. But this emotional education is neither aiming at the repression of feelings in the political realm nor an over-emotionalisation for its own sake. The emotional labour of the public educator as president in these series is rather staged as a balancing act: Overcoming the political apathy of citizens in 21st-century democracies through emotionalisation by sharing a just anger against those in power while avoiding mob violence as the consequence of uncontrollable over-emotionalisation. By fostering a reflexive relationship with one's emotional responses and situating these impulses within a broader ecology of moral emotions, these series envision a transformation of contemporary political culture that, on the one hand, resonates with classical populist demands for simple and sincere politics but on the other hand, emphasises the continuous emotional labour that is necessary to transform a heterogenous society into a political community.

5. Conclusion

Our research shows how audiovisual fictional media adopts a reflexive stance towards moral emotions in politics. Viewer emotions can develop political relevance in the real world—and should be considered as a part of the affective economies of democratic societies

The rise of populist movements in Europe can also be observed in the domain of fictional audiovisual series. Candidates outside established parties and professional politics are imagined as heads of state and possible solutions to a perceived representation crisis that becomes graspable as collective anger. Our paper shows where these fictions rely on established depiction patterns of fictionalised political power: the unbroken appeal of the figure of the public educator. We also suggest that these series try out new and alternative ways of implementing populist thought patterns. In this sense, the analysed trope of "democratic just anger" channelled through public educators as protagonists in contemporary European series can be understood as a populism laboratory.

In brief analytic sketches of key sequences, we hinted at how these series create with aesthetic means affective experiences that can be interpreted with insights into emotion-political dynamics. The short analyses also illustrate different aesthetic complexities with which the series operate. They not only provide narrations about candidates, but they develop with the language of cinema different film worlds from which these multimodal and embodied fictions emerge. Blanket attributions to scenes featuring specific basic emotions cannot be made—e.g., anger can serve as a motor for unification and separation tendencies within the fictional political communities.

From an emotion-political and poetological perspective, constellations have to be regarded in their specificity to understand how affective stances towards political processes are shaped audiovisually. In the case study, we illustrate how series reference, fictionalise and speculate on events and ten-

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dencies from real-world politics. Artistic reflection and political persuasion cannot be distinguished categorically, as the success of Volodymyr Zelensky's Servant of the People party shows. The societal impact of such media formats comes from the transgressiveness of the format: A series painting a vivid image of a different kind of political leadership in democratic societies can be mere entertainment, art, a thirty-hour campaign commercial and propaganda.

Only thorough and interdisciplinary analyses can shed light on the different possible layers of meaning, which are necessary to understand the impact of these popular formats on the political culture of our societies and vice versa. Especially in times when the average news consumption is on the decline, these images could continuously shape understanding of what doing politics actually means.

Our research demonstrates how audiovisual fictional media adopts a reflexive stance toward moral emotions in politics. In the analysed trope, particular emphasis is placed on the overcoming of anger and the articulation of collective moral emotions as a political resource for forging alliances among heterogeneous social groups. Analysing moral emotions within, and elicited by, audiovisual fiction suggests that, on the one hand, aesthetically generated emotions in the fictional mode of as-if exceed the boundaries of everyday emotional experience. On the other hand, these viewer emotions can develop political relevance in the real world—and should thus be considered as a vital part of the affective economies of contemporary democratic societies.

By connecting these insights into moral emotions with populism theory, we have been able to trace populist patterns of thought in positive cultural imaginations of politics. This indicates that audiovisual culture, too, reflects a profound frustration with political elites

By connecting these insights into moral emotions with populism theory, we have been able to trace populist patterns of thought in positive cultural imaginations of politics. This indicates that audiovisual culture, too, reflects a profound frustration with political elites—figures who are staged as a counterforce to 'the people,' from whose ranks new types of leaders and political alternatives emerge. Our case study also suggests that fiction does not merely mirror existing populist movements, but that television series function as laboratories of populism, experimenting with a broad spectrum of political ideologies.

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