

*The Television Series: An Ars Dominandi*¹

Benjamin Simmenauer

It would appear to be an accepted fact that cultures are, like nations and species, in a fight for survival². However, the means by which a culture finds itself in a dominant position and manages to retain this position, remain obscure: what enables a given culture to contaminate the individuals of another culture on a long-term basis, to change their beliefs and transform their way of life? The notion of “soft power” that first came up in the context of international relations theory³ is sometimes used to describe the way in which American culture maintains its empire. This notion is interesting in as much as it substitutes the idea of coercive domination with the idea of a co-opted domination: the “soft” dominant party no longer imposes its will through force; it makes others believe and want the same things as it does. We appear to be stating the obvious as it is difficult to see how anyone could be forced to consider something desirable: cultures have always influenced one another in a soft manner, and not by using weapons or bodily constraint. Even though we can doubt that the soft power concept constitutes huge progress in the analysis of the reproduction of beliefs among individuals belonging to diverse cultures, we have to admit that the current infatuation with *soft power* lets us ask some relevant questions. For example, it gives us a chance to review the difference between

the different types of influence according to media, and their specific constraints. Thus, while the soft power of American cinema has often been studied⁴, that of television series remains to be explored, even though they occupy an increasingly important place in the American cultural industry. The question of the influence spread by these television series is difficult and important, for at least two reasons. Firstly, because the way series are consumed is nothing like the way films are consumed: unlike the cinema, the series is not an authoritarian medium⁵. Series do not have the ability to fascinate; they do not have the magical powers of the darkened cinema and the big screen. Their influence is on the minor scale of progressive interference, and not that of immediate subjugation. Secondly, because in recent years, series have developed a reputation of offering a perhaps freer and more critical representation of American society than that of Hollywood.

To examine this point in more depth, we will approach the issue in three phases. First of all we should remember certain generalities about the genre of the contemporary television series. Then we will examine the reasons for the success of American series around the world more closely, and the nature of the critical take the more recent series pretend to offer on the reality that they depict. Finally, we will try to define, resorting to a poetic (or structural) analysis, the specific form of influence the series genre has (as opposed to the cinema or any other cultural content).

From the sub-genre to total fiction

Why don't we take a look at the TV listings for the week of December 15th to 22nd 2012 on the “ex-terrestrial” channels in France after 20:30? On Saturday at 23:20 on TF1, there were three episodes of *CSI*, on M6 three episodes of *Once upon a time* at 20:50, then three of *Lie to me* at 23:20; on Sunday at

23:15 on TF1 two episodes of *CSI Manhattan*; on Monday, two episodes of *Castle* at 20:40 on France 2, two episodes of *Revenants* on Canal+ at 20:50 and three episodes of *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* at 22:35; Tuesday night had *Mentalist* on TF1, with a total of four episodes; Wednesday saw *Criminal Minds* at 20:50, followed by *Dexter* from 23:20... There is no need to go on: the start of this list is enough to grasp the place series occupy currently on French general television channels. It seems so long ago when the range available in terms of series was split between reruns of soaps, police procedurals or spy thrillers (*The Young and the Restless*, *Columbo*, *Derrick*, *The Persuaders*, *The Avengers*, *K2000*...) with French sitcoms (*Premiers baisers*, *Hélène et les garçons*...), coming in second, early in the morning or mid-afternoon or the middle of the night. Now, television series, be they American or French have prime time slots and their viewing figures would lead us to believe that they are here to stay: 52 of the 100 most-watched programmes in France in 2012 were series⁶. While American series like *CSI* or *Mentalist* are also historic success stories for TF1, *No Limit*, a Luc Besson production for TF1, managed to garner over 6 millions viewers and *Les Revenants*, a well-written science fiction show was watched by around 1.5 subscribers to Canal+. Nevertheless, the “series phenomenon” which has been given widespread coverage in recent years, can not be reduced to the mere increase in the number of series broadcast and watched. The transformation is qualitative also: today’s series are thought to be of “better quality” and more “immersive” than their earlier counterparts. Series now propose more complex stories, mixing plotlines on several levels (in *Lost*, the fate of each character was dealt with in a separate plotline) and they deal with difficult, realistic or transgressive themes (the story of the last years of the Roman republic in *Rome*, daily life in the projects of Baltimore

in *The Wire*, a chemistry teacher with terminal cancer who starts producing and dealing in drugs in *Breaking Bad*), that were until now the preserve of the more noble formats of the cinema and literature: they are slowly becoming true cultural products. Televised fiction has left the anecdote aside and now deals with “big subjects”: the conquest and conservation of political power (*Game of Thrones*, *Boss*), the philosophical issues of fate and free-will (*Lost*), personal identity (*Mad Men*, *Homeland*), or the role of violence in history (*Deadwood*, *Boardwalk Empire*). Finally, big name writers and film makers are increasingly collaborating with television productions: some of the directors involved such as Martin Scorsese, Gus Van Sant, David Fincher produce and direct episodes of (respectively) *Boardwalk Empire*, *Boss*, and *House of Cards*, Olivier Marchal develops *Braquo* and has directed some episodes; and novelists like George Pelecanos and Dennis Lehane participate in the writing of *The Wire*, Jonathan Ames is the series runner on *Bored to Death*, and in France, Emmanuel Carrère is co-writer of *Revenants*.

In addition, series today are considered to be more “immersive” than before. Series lovers (in French “sériephiles”) willingly describe their viewing experience as the discovery of a little world that, for a season, replaces their own: they spend time with people whose daily lives, habits and rituals they share, which is impossible with film characters as they disappear back into the darkness the cinema had dragged them from just after we’ve met them; they go to places that they feel they have always known; and above all, they slowly discover the (natural and moral) rules that govern these places and give the small world of the series its coherence and singularity. Series are moving forward thus in two apparently different directions: they have acquired a certain cultural legitimacy, and they entertain their growing public in an increasingly effective way. The current success of series may seem surprising:

once a cheap and easy sub-product that channels bought to fill holes in their scheduling and to keep tired viewers happy, series have now become television programmes that demand maximum attention levels from the viewer. Most modern series have long-term intrigues that cover the entire season⁷, and to understand what's going on in an episode, it is practically essential to have seen the previous ones. Have viewers become more demanding? Do they now expect something more from television than daily recreation, all the more enjoyable as it requires just a moderate effort? This is far from sure, and in fact studies show that a great number of them⁸ remain impervious to the modern series as they are put off by the time and concentration required. In addition, the density of the series market seems to be having an exponential growth spurt: even the most dedicated "sériephiles" will admit that it is becoming difficult to follow too many series at one time. A new landscape is forming: instead of a few flagship programmes that are generally popular with everyone (like *CSI*, *24*, *Desperate Housewives*), we now have a hyper-segmented galaxy of series aimed at specific groups of the population (sometimes only a niche).

Beyond these remarks that invite caution (everyone is not going to start watching every series); it is still tempting to see in the modern television series, a long-lasting field of expression and form of entertainment. The principal argument in favour of this hypothesis is factual: the general viewing public has some very diverse profiles and the seasoned seriephiles are to be found both in the younger population (15-35), for whom the consumption of series is a privileged part of their general pop culture (music, videos, video games...) systematically shared online, as well as the older viewers (35-50 and beyond) with traditional cultural habits (by which I mean: heritage-based, institutional, dominant), often from the higher echelons of society, and who will only

follow a television programme on condition that its qualities are reminiscent of what they look for in the cinema or in books. Certain series are aimed more at the former: sitcoms, science-fiction (recent examples: *The Big Bang Theory*, *Gossip Girl*, *Community*, *Fringe*, *The Walking Dead*, *Game of Thrones*⁹), others aim for the latter category: historical or political series, social epics or realistic police procedurals (*Borgia*, *The Tudors*, *The West Wing*, *Treme*, *The Killing* or *Engrenages*). And both categories cross over at times: *Lost*, *The Wire* or *Breaking Bad*, among others, present a level of polysemy that means that they are appreciated for their metaphysical mysteries as for the originality of the narrative (*Lost*)¹⁰, as much for the power of the urban mythology as for the exactitude of the sociological modelisation (*The Wire*), and for the provocative and delirious dimension as for the critique of middle America (*Breaking Bad*).

Thus, while the modern series finds fans among individuals with distinct preferences and lives, it is perhaps because it fulfils a deep need for "total" fiction that crosses over and brings together generations and social groups. The strength of today's series is that it deals with the "big" picture and deals with it *broadly*, meaning in the form of a narrative that is long enough to provide an unabridged representation (as opposed to the more fragmented representation in film) of a fictional space and time. It is not surprising that the canonical genres of the fresco or the epic have been covered by a number of television productions: where cinema, and even the novel (with the exception of the *roman-fleuve*), must use ellipses and editing, the televised narrative can, thanks to its long format, commit to a much more wide-reaching description of its universe.

The mirror of time

Today's series is supposed to give an image of

the time¹¹, to propose a reflection on the state of the world. It can do so thanks to its longer format (in terms of temporality), and it aims to do so as is obvious from the efforts of show runners and channels to tackle ambitious subjects. This is particularly true of American productions that the public and the critics alike continue to consider superior to others (even though the gap is narrowing). The originality of the subject matter, the freedom of tone, the attention to detail in writing and direction: American series are always a step ahead. This is not surprising as, historically, television series are an American genre: ever since the fifties they reveal America's take on itself and the world. The international success of American series, broadcast on channels worldwide, is reminiscent of a paradigmatic case of cultural domination. But this inference is only very weakly informative. It doesn't say anything, about the reasons for the imperialism of the American series, or about the specific methods through which the television series influences the viewer effectively. This section will cover the first of these two points; the last section will develop an explanation for the mechanism of influence that is specific to the series.

Why do American series take over everywhere, besting local or neighbouring productions? There are doubtless, historically, technical and financial causes for the massive export of American series that we will not go into here. We will concentrate on what makes the American series the standard by which all others are measured. Vincent Colonna¹² gave a very good explanation as to why American series were often more entertaining than others: the essential reason can be found in the way they master polyphonic writing, how they cleverly weave numerous interdependent plotlines, and characterise a broad range of main characters. But, as we pointed out in the previous chapter, today we praise the capacity American series have to be "stimulating

witnesses as to the state of the world"¹³ as their capacity to entertain. If one listens to viewers, one can see that the writers on American series are not only excellent story-tellers, and that the success of series such as *The Wire*, *Homeland*, *Boss*, or *House of Cards*, is down to the fact that points of view expressed are on the money and very daring as well on their narrative qualities. Let us look at what the more recent American series, those often given as an example for their transgression and their critical strength, tell us about the America of today in more detail. *Boss*, broadcast since late 2011 on Starz, opens with a medical diagnosis: a doctor tells his patient that he has Lewy's syndrome (an incurable neurological disorder). The camera pans out and the viewer sees that the protagonists are alone in the middle of a deserted factory. The patient is Tom Kane, the mayor of Chicago, whose biggest fear is that his handicap could go public. *Boss* in no way sympathises with the fate of the diminished hero. First of all, Tom Kane doesn't give up political life: neither the perspective of his very or relatively imminent death (at best he has five years), nor that of the deterioration of his cognitive and motor skills, has any effect on his maniacal desire to control everything, to run the city of Chicago like he has been doing since his election, as a paternalistic tribune (for the electorate) and guardian of the status quo (for his financial supporters, for whom his motto is "the illusion of change on the surface"). Then, knowing he is doomed has no humanising effect on Tom Kane: the "boss" is invested with a huge *libido dominandi*, as though the shadow of death¹⁴ is leading him to a final, bloody round. And as such, the first season of *Boss* reads like a catalogue of all of the perversions of power: to attain his political objectives, Tom Kane betrays his daughter, pimps out his wife, has a number of people murdered, humiliates his closest colleague, and walks all over traitors and competitors using sexual blackmail. The subject of *Boss* is

the illusion of democracy: elected officials do not act in the interest of their electorate, but in the interest of their clients. Tom Kane is the keeper of continuity: he might make speeches about the history of the heroes of Chicago, those “Bright Knights”, who, following on from the Presbyterian pastor Jeremiah Porter, fought vice, corruption and crime, its true function is to make sure that the powerful in place remain where they are, above the law and resistant to all change.

Boss was a big hit with both critics and series fans. Then, Pierre Sérisier, a renowned French expert, writing on his blog said “the lessons we learn from *Boss* possess a universal and timeless character. We could even go as far as to say that we are watching a sort of documentary, a dissection of politics”¹⁵. Indeed, the Kane character can also evoke a “Florentine prince from the fifteenth century” as much as a Shakespearian character such as Richard III or Lear, and cynicism, corruption, treason, rottenness, the major themes of *Boss*, are the universal themes of satirical fiction. What makes the world of *Boss* stand out is the desolation: Kane indeed constantly acts in the most vile manner, but we never really feel sorry for his victims, either because they are as repugnant as their torturer (his wife Meredith, his deputy Stoney, Gov. Cullen...) or because they remain perfectly insignificant (the nurse, the neurologist...) ¹⁶. The world of *Boss*, with the massively incompetent press, the visionless technocrats, and absent population, deserves Kane just as Kane deserves his Lewy syndrome. This has two consequences.

1) The target for criticism in *Boss*, remains too generic. If the crime is deserved, it is no longer a crime: in a world without innocents, injustice doesn't count. *Boss* lists the malfunctions of a democratic system that is perverted by the unilateral control of authority. But we already know about these malfunctions, either because we have had the bad luck to experience them directly, or because a number of other series,

that take place elsewhere, or at another time, have already been shown. In fact, the series fails to indicate particular political malfunctions, specific to the current situation of a big American city.

2) The critical power of *Boss* is weakened: the multiplication of dirty tricks (by Kane and other characters in *Boss*) doesn't scandalise the viewer. On the contrary, watching *Boss* is, in the end, pure enjoyment. The series is full of surprises, the baddies outdo one another fascinatingly, and Kane's chicanery even makes him admirable. *Boss* is a show about cynical dirt bags who live in a bubble of power, cut off from reality, but it never shows this reality: in their determination to reveal the secret passages of power, the series writers forget to observe the consequences of these political manoeuvres on the lives of Chicago residents with the same meticulousness¹⁷. The paradox of *Boss* then is that by concentrating exclusively on the ins and outs of the political sphere, it reproduces the same mechanism of abstraction through which this class has managed to separate itself from the rest of the world. This means that the representation of the moral breakdown is reduced to an entertaining but inoffensive show. So, we could reproach *Boss*, not for being an immoral series, but more for not inciting any moral questions. Tom Kane is a despicable person, but we don't really hate him, not because we feel sorry for him, but more because in the series the unhappiness he causes is limited to the members of his entourage, for whom we have very little sympathy also. It is because the characters in *Boss* do not inspire any great emotion that the series does not incite reflection, or revolt. Thus, the portrait of Kane not the equal of Richard III: by making Richard a demonic character but also a miserable, solitary and angst-ridden individual, trapped by his own villainy, Shakespeare awakens the monster in each spectator, incites empathy and provokes a moral dilemma.

Another example: *Homeland*¹⁸, a show that has been broadcast by the cable channel Showtime since late 2011, is often presented as a critical description of an America that has become paranoid, with two heroes, Sergeant Brody a marine that has been “turned” by terrorists, and Carrie Matheson, a CIA spy with bi-polar issues.

So how was Brody “turned”? His conversion to the cause of dangerous Abu Nazir was not provoked by brain-washing but by a crime committed by his own country: American drones (following orders from Walden, the heinous Vice-President) bombarded the school of Nazir’ son Issa, who dies from his wounds (Brody had acted as the boy’s tutor during his captivity). So how will Brody accomplish his terrorist fate? In the last episode, Brody is supposed to blow himself up with a jacket full of explosives, taking Walden and all his team with him. But just as he is about to let the bomb off, he gets a call from his daughter who says she needs her father and wants him to come home, which puts him off pressing the button. In critical situations Brody follows his heart: Brody may be a double traitor (to his country first of all, and to his master), but he is also a father of two. *Homeland*, which is innovative through the combination of genres of the melodrama and the spy film, tells us that feelings are stronger than geopolitics. But to affirm that the true “home” is the family, here or elsewhere is not only to reduce the political issues at stake to insignificance, but it also, in the name of simplistic humanism, considers that “everyone is the same underneath”. This sentimental schema is doubtless harmful to the series’ veracity, but it is above all an obstacle to the series’ aim to make us reflect: by sending us back to human qualities that are doubtless recognisable *sub specie aeternitatis*, the series, like *Boss*, deprives itself of a critical evaluation of the specifics of the situation here and now, and contents itself with anthropological banalities.

Boss and *Homeland* are critical series: they can not be accused of blindly praising a country, a political system, or a way of life. But the critical dimension seems to come up against a “need for generality” that limits its accusatory strength. In reality, the criticism is not so much hampered or awkward as it is orchestrated: no self-respecting viewer would be prepared to take a piece of fiction seriously that made an unreserved apology for America, series have no other choice but to reflect the doubts the American model arouses today. Faced with this obligation to mark the distance relative to the nation’s great ideals, series such as *Boss* or *Homeland* display a radical critical ambition, introducing cynical characters, extreme situations, chicanery of all kinds, shifting slowly from man’s daily life to the universal root of all evil (corruption, lack of empathy, selfishness...). The first advantage of this type of criticism is that it is easy to take on board by a broad range of viewers. Another advantage is that by going on the offensive, the fiction takes contestation out of the hands of the viewer. So it is not so much a question of a frontal cultural domination, where a culture imposes on another through an idealistic representation, as a form of “soft power” where the imperfections of a society are admitted and identified from the start, integrated in its vision of itself that presents all of the tokens of impartiality. If this interpretation is correct, then we should not be surprised to find, on the horizon of the critical charge, typically American values set up as anthropological or political universal truths (the unimpeachable character of the family unit, or the danger of the democracy with a clientele). The success of these pseudo-criticisms can thus easily be explained: they satisfy the viewer’s intellectual demand, who, if they are not careful, doesn’t in any way feel taken in by their disabused description of the ways of the world, and they relax them efficiently, thanks to their spectacular dimension and the technical quality of their narratives.

The addiction constraint: the rule of a minor art form?

We still have to elucidate the nature of the mechanism through which these series exercise their influence. This explanation should also help us understand the strange power (mentioned just now) that enables these series to dismantle the viewer's vigilance. Even though it seems vain to speculate on such a vast category, we can try to uncover certain elements of a "poetic" of the series that would enable us to see if with *Homeland* and *Boss*, we were just unlucky or if we have a chance of identifying a recurring limitation.

A frequent way of looking at things, when we want to explain why series, compared to other forms of narrative, seem to lack depth, is to mention their production values: we are reminded that the production of a series implies a huge number of participants, show runners, writers, directors, producers and television channels, each of whom at one point or another have some influence on the final result. All series are by definition a compromise, and never the unique, intransigent and free vision of one "auteur". It is highly possible that this explanation is often right, but it has two shortcomings: first of all it relies on an empirical observation that is difficult to verify, and above all it remains extrinsic to the very nature of the final object (the series).

Inversely, if all series are perhaps not produced in equivalent conditions, they all share the same finality: that of creating an addiction in the viewer. It is, first of all, a condition for survival, because a series that does not make its audience faithful is condemned to being taken off the air. The addiction constraint is an *a priori* constraint, part of the serialised narrative, as it is dictated by the way the series is watched. The series is watched in a discontinuous manner, including interruptions between episodes that are often much longer than the episodes themselves. The writing

of the series must integrate the principle of the break and restore an underlying continuity to this scattered structure. To do so, the serial narrative always includes, at the very moment of its enunciation, the preparation of the spectator for its imminent disappearance and subsequent return. This engenders an addictive effect: following a series is to go cold turkey on a presence one had become accustomed to, and one wants to go back to again and again. This characteristic of the serial format predisposes it naturally to install beliefs or representations "softly". What are the concrete means by which a series causes addictive behaviour in the viewer?

First of all, the mechanism that makes an addict of someone can not be reduced to the artefacts used to retain the viewer's attention, these are merely one component. These artefacts are well known: they can be for example twists in the main plotline, the appearance of new sub-plots, bits of narrative that up until now were disjointed but finally come together, or the famous cliff-hangers that end each episode. When a series uses these artefacts cleverly, it creates a conscious desire within the viewer to find out more, to see what happens next. Preserving interest is crucial, but does not exhaust the brief of the serial narrative, and does not fully explain the addictive phenomenon of series: one can very well be an addict for example to a series where the episodes are all one-story, and there is no continuity in the story from one episode to the next, and as a result, no interest in the follow-up. *CSI* is a series of one-off stories with millions of faithful fans.

There are many other causes of series addiction than keeping the viewer interested in the story. So as to identify them, it is useful to remind ourselves of the very nature of addictive behaviour. It is linked to what Freud referred to as "repetition compulsion"¹⁹, a process through which the psyche attempts to get back to a previous state. Being addicted

to something, a food, a chemical substance, a person or a television series, is to constantly search through that thing, a return to a past experience that the addict wants to reproduce identically. We should note that this dynamic goes against the one described earlier relative to maintaining the viewer's level of interest: a story is only interesting if it surprises, and in addition the interest is less something that is maintained, rather it is something that is renewed. Inversely, addiction is a question of "compulsion", a force that governs us: we do not have any control over this tendency which pushes us to long for a return to the same. This opposition can be found in the qualitative difference between discovering a new series and following a series which we have been faithfully following for a number of episodes. Starting a series demands an effort, an intense activity for the viewer to understand the action, identify the locations, characters and rules of the universe they are being introduced to. Seeing a new episode of a series one is following means going back to a familiar, well-known environment, a territory that has been domesticated through habit, it means prolonging one's daily life by another quotidian that intensifies and enchants it. The viewers of *Desperate Housewives* can't go without their favourite show, not because they want to find out at all costs who killed Marie-Alice Young (motive of interest for the story of the series), but because they want to participate in a bitching session with the four heroines, to spend time with Bree in her kitchen, or to laugh at the catastrophes inevitably caused by Susan's social ineptitude. The list of means through which the impression of familiarity, of what is already known, is built up slowly, and is doubtless very long but we can start the inventory nonetheless:

– The presence of refrains in the story: scenes that resemble one another, whose principle is identical, like the interrogation process in *24*, Frank Underwood's barbecued ribs breaks

House of Cards, or Bunk and McNulty's drinking sessions in *The Wire*;

– Characters' habits: Columbo never leaves a room without turning around and saying "Oh Sir, just one more thing" and catches the guilty party without showing it;

– The association between a musical theme and a type of scene: in *Highlander*, every time McLeod starts to feel the melancholy of his immortality among mortals, we hear Kansas start singing "Dust in the Wind";

– A recurring structure: every episode of *Alias* can be broken down into a briefing at SD-6, taking on a false identity in an exotic location, accomplishing a perilous mission.

Thus, the addiction constraint works on the writers, who must define, as a counterpoint to the progression of their narrative lines, an ensemble of routines, that are aimed at the viewer's subconscious and renders them faithful not thorough interest but through force of habit.

In order to create a powerful addiction, it is not enough to put markers around the series' fictional space. A series can only become a habit, and watching it a conditioned reflex, if it is anchored on the spectator's previous habits, and if it manages to connect with previous representations. We can only hypothetically elaborate this "genre law", but at least it takes into account the impressions *Homeland* and *Boss* left us. If the vocation of a series is to cause an addictive compulsion in the viewer, and this addiction is only possible in as much as the viewer finds themselves confronted with a series of familiar representations of the world, it is vain to expect of a serial narrative that it enables one to "see things differently" (objective that is often assigned to artistic creations, at least since German Romanticism²⁰). Series are more likely to reinforce broadly shared convictions, and not to give voice to dissension.

We could wonder to what extent it is possible for the writing teams behind series to play

with this constraint and propose a reflection on thinking habits and dominant representations. Instead of listing the series that propose an attempt at this genre, we will instead turn to the interesting case of *Curb your enthusiasm*. This comedy series, which is now off the air, is very addictive. It depicts a character called Larry David (a fictional double very close to the writer), a Jewish comedian from New York with depressive tendencies who has made a fortune in television and has moved to Los Angeles to live a life of leisure. Larry has become exceedingly rich but his life hasn't really changed: he still comes up against life's trivial problems (strange noises in his new house, the cable box on the blink, a cleaning lady who doesn't wear a bra...), that, as insignificant as they may seem, take up all of this energy and wreck his life. All of the episodes follow the same schema: Larry had a problem he needs to solve, but every time he tries he only manages to make the initial situation worse, and reinforce a downward spiral which ends in a final catastrophe in which Larry is often humiliated. Cruelty is certainly an element of the addiction: every time, the spectator is thrilled to see the trap close slowly on this grumpy and misanthropic character. But this is not the main motive for addiction to *Curb*. It is mostly linked to the fact that *Curb*'s viewers identify very quickly with the character of Larry²¹. If Larry has so many problems, it is because he appears to be incapable of following the basic rules of everyday life that most other people have adopted: he ever knows up until what time it is ok to call someone who is not a close friend or family member, he always hesitates about the correct amount to tip, he doesn't understand the point of having a drink elsewhere than the restaurant you are going to eat in... Larry is not unaware of conventions; he just fails to see the point of them, and breaks them without thinking, convinced that he is right to do so. In fact, quite a lot of his trouble comes not from

his actions as such but from his insistence on justifying them by using his own alternative code of conduct that he alone respects. The addiction mechanism is right there: the series shows us, through Larry's awkward behaviour and the resulting malaise, the arbitrary nature of the conventions on which all of social constructions rely. The various transgressions he is guilty of, as well as his determination to defend his own rules against those of the world, are a source of great enjoyment which we know we will experience again thanks to each episode of *Curb your enthusiasm*. An addiction to *Curb* can be explained easily in the terms of our hypothesis: the impression of familiarity comes from the universal character of the social conventions that Larry tries to avoid, conventions we are all familiar with and in ordinary circumstances are respected. The originality of the series is that it goes against what we're used to, it shows us the convention for what it is, that is to say as arbitrary as it is convenient, but definitely not necessary like a law of nature. Instead of reinforcing common beliefs, *Curb* unlocks them and enables the viewers to both realise their painful consent to these rules and to taste the fantasy relief of seeing them explode.

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1. The remarks that follow are largely inspired by a number of market studies carried out by the House of Common Knowledge. They also rely on my views as a passionate series watcher.

2. Since Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (1925) notably.

3. Joseph Nye, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, New York, Basic Books, 1990.

4. For example: Benezet et Courmont, "Washington et Hollywood: l'arme fatale ?", *Revue internationale et stratégique*, 2004/3 (n° 55), p. 19-26.

5. According to the David Foster Wallace's expression in "David Lynch keeps his Head", in *A Supposedly*

Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again, 1997.

6. Source: *mediametrie* January 7th 2013.

7. Stand-alone episodes are those where each episode tells a separate story. This distinction however is a little misleading as a number of series include both a continuous narrative arc from the beginning to the end of the season (a main plot, for example a case in a police show), and a story per episode (for example, a case that is solved quickly in parallel to the main case) that enables a two-speed take.

8. Viewers that are resistant to modern series watch on average less television in general (number of TV hours lower than the average) and are more likely to be over fifty.

9. *Game of Thrones*, the first heroic fantasy series from HBO (but not the first series of this genre, as opposed to what is being said: *Legend of the Seeker* and *Xena Warrior Princess* came along before it), was the most illegally downloaded series in 2012 (over 4 millions downloads per episode on *torrentfreak.com*).

10. Cf. for example Sarah Hatchuel, "Lost in Lost. Entre quotidien anodin et déstabilisation fantastique, entre réalité alternative et fiction collective", in *TV Series*, 1, 2012.

11. "Written, shot and shown slightly after their time, television series, just like the theatre, literature, cinema and cartoons, look at the world in a way that is more contemporary and more incisive: the best series are stimulating witnesses to the state of the world", according to the dust-jacket of Martin Winckler's *Petit éloge des séries télé*, Folio, 2012.

12. *L'art des séries télé*, Payot, 2010.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

14. According to Michel De M'Uzan, in *De l'art à la mort*, Gallimard, 1977.

15. <http://seriestv.blog.lemonde.fr/2011/12/19/boss-lillusion-democratique/>

16. The only exception could be his daughter Emma, but her character is not developed enough to engender real empathy.

17. The series is also quite naive when it deals with the interaction between the media and politicians, and hesitates between two simplistic clichés: one where the media is completely controlled by the mayor's office (and especially by his assistant Kitty), or where it forms a sort of counter-power that can not be bought (example: the character of Sam Miller the clean reporter).

18. For a résumé of the series see Wikipedia.

19. This notion is introduced in "Beyond the pleasure principle" (1920), in *Essays in applied psychoanalysis*.

20. I owe this historical precision to Vincent Colonna.

21. The visual for the campaign for season 6 showed a crowd full of Larry David clones with the tagline "Deep inside you know you're him".