

Television Series as Sources of Moral and Political Education: An Overview, Notes and Comments on the Global Justice Conference by Sandra Laugier

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On the 9th of March 2023, the esteemed international intellectual, author and professor of philosophy at the University of Paris-1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, Dr. Sandra Laugier, visited Doshisha University to speak publicly at the 68th Public Seminar on Global Justice. Laugier specialises in ethics, moral philosophy, and philosophy of language. She has published extensively on topics such as the ethics of care, ordinary language philosophy, and the philosophy of literature. Laugier is also a member of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique and has been a visiting professor at several leading universities around the world. In addition to her academic work, Laugier is also a frequent commentator on contemporary issues, particularly those related to gender and politics. The Graduate School of Global Studies at Doshisha University regularly holds lectures and seminars titled ‘Global Justice’, and so at this event, co-organised by the Center for Feminist, Gender and Sexuality Studies, Laugier focused on the topic of ethics, or the moral and political education, provided by contemporary television series. Although discussing principally from the perspective of globalised American television shows, the emergence of cross-cultural flows, such as the recent Korean hit ‘*Squid Game*’, were also covered.

Although starting her introduction that she is not a television specialist, Laugier provided a unique take on television series from the perspective of care. Especially contextualised with the recent memory of lockdowns and the wide adoption of working from home practices by many companies, many people have only recently emerged from a protracted period of isolation. For many, television has therefore played an important role in providing comfort and maintaining a sense of connection to other beings. Though television is a one directional medium, the serialised broadcast format allows the audience to become attached to the characters which appear and reappear on the screen with expected regularity. In this sense, these characters and the otherwise exciting lives that they portray for us, have provided an outlet for emotional connection which was sorely lacking during this devastating period of our recent history. And as Laugier pointed out even today, with seemingly the harshest period behind us, shows still play an important social role as a common social lubricant—i.e., as a

common talking point among those we do not know well, providing us with a method of reconnecting.

Television provides not just care, Laugier explained, but also as the title of the conference suggested, a form of moral education through the portrayal of ethical dilemmas and exploring different moral perspectives. It was Warshow (2001) who proposed that education continues into adulthood through the medium of film. As adults, although for most formal education has ended, we continue to be exposed to moral storytelling in the movies and series, we watch. ¹Some shows explicitly address moral issues, for example the sci-fi anthology series '*Black Mirror*' (2011–) directly addresses specific moralistic questions each episode, while others may indirectly touch on these topics through character development and plotlines, such as the crime series '*Breaking Bad*' (2003–2013) and the development of the main character Walter White from schoolteacher to hardened criminal.

The case for film provided by Warshow remained so during the latter half of the 20th century, when it was the most popular medium. Today, Laugier proposes that this role has been taken over by serialised programs. We generally still refer to these shows as '*television shows*', but with the advent of digital streaming services such as Netflix, HBO or Amazon Prime, politely skipping over the availability of pirated content through torrents or other download protocols, the television itself has become the non-essential element. As such, access through smartphones, tablets and computers have made them more accessible than film had ever been during the previous century. The development of this accessibility is important because it represents the democratisation of this form of moral education. We now spend significant time engaging with our devices and access our favourite shows, gaining the experiences those shows provide, without the need for a fancy diploma, competitive scholarship or exceptionally large bank account to afford modern post-graduate education. Therefore, this moral education of the masses remains an area of study with exceptional importance but lacking in serious scholarly attention.

The unfortunate dark side of this democratisation of access is the dictatorship of choice. More specifically the algorithms which govern which shows will show up in an users recommended list. Most streaming services govern users access through such data generated

¹ Cavell, S., *The Claim of Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press)

recommendations, resulting in a virtual echo chamber where content the system decides is outside the scope of interest of the user will not be advertised. If the democratisation through access has merely resulted in niche viewing based on previously conceived social-political biases than little education can truly be expected. As Laugier quoted from Stanley Cavell (1979, p.125):

*“In this light, philosophy becomes the education of grownups. [...] The anxiety in teaching, in serious communication, is that I myself require education. And for grownups, this is not natural growth, but change.”*²

Furthermore, the addictiveness of such algorithmic systems is why today TikTok and Instagram are among the most popular applications in the world, providing users with the instant gratification uniquely tailored to their specific profile. However, unlike for instance TikTok, which thanks to being a medium of videos merely several seconds in length, can accumulate user data points such as their likes and dislikes with amazing speed, Netflix is limited to a mere handful per viewing. As a result, the algorithm is far less accurate in judging what users might be interested in.

Nevertheless, whether by algorithm or choice we ultimately enjoy surrounding ourselves by likeable characters to whom we grow attached during their arduous trails and ordeals. Shows, through their serialised format, also enable novel forms of education by presenting complex issues through stories and characters. The example of *Breaking Bad* is one such journey. Moreover, also the aesthetics of empowerment itself contribute to this education. For more and more people it is becoming easier to identify with such characters as diversity is spreading throughout the medium. Laugier pointed to the global phenomenon of ‘*Game of Thrones*’ (2011–2019) and its highly diverse cast of characters, featuring strong young, women and disabled characters in important roles. This show therefore provides us education as to the integration of diversity into the everyday life of the watcher. These likeable characters, some the watcher might identify with, provide the vehicle to generate moral relevance for the show. Unfortunately, as the final season of *Game of Thrones* showed, moral and ethical relevance does not necessarily translate in a good show, with the final season receiving harsh reviews by critics and fans alike. Even more unfortunate, as Laugier pointed out the aesthetic potential of

² Cavell, S., *The Claim of Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press)

making ethical issues visible and the ability to promote democratic empowerment of audiences have not yet been analysed, and the ability to confront cultural and social upheavals and democratic values has not yet been analysed.