

Aesthetics, Capitalism, and Control: TV Series as Spectacle

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This article examines the contemporary TV series as a cultural form central to platform capitalism in general and to streaming services in particular. It argues that the aesthetic complexity of many key series—manifested in narrative composition, visual spectacle, and bingeable segmentation—is tightly bound to algorithmic control platforms aim to exercise, transforming viewer engagement into cognitive labour. Analysing the aesthetic foundations of binge-watching, as well as the logic of the recommendation systems that generates it, the article shows how aesthetic complexity conceals the commodification of attention, taste, and identity. Serial narratives become instruments of ideological control, turning interpretive effort into productive apathy. Drawing on Horkheimer and Adorno, as well as contemporary TV series criticism, the article frames the TV series as a spectacle of control characteristic of many trends in digital capitalism.

KEYWORDS: binge-watching, narrative complexity, productive apathy, algorithms, spectacle, TV series

In the digital age, whose cultural dimensions have been defined by the omnipresence of platforms, algorithms, and personal devices, serialized television has emerged not merely as a form of entertainment but as a central apparatus in the cultural logic of capitalism. Once dismissed as a lowbrow cultural form predominantly focused on delivering segmented undemanding entertainment, the TV series has undergone a remarkable transformation in the 21st century, developing complex aesthetic ambitions and embracing formal experimentation, while remaining tightly bound to the infrastructures of digital distribution and platform-based consumption. This article argues that the contemporary television series operates as key cultural product, in which aesthetic strategies and technological systems converge to facilitate control various entities within the broad culture industry exercise over audiences. While the nature of this control is cognitive, affective, and temporal, its foundations lie in aesthetics, on the one hand, and technological affordances, on the other. Through non-linear narratives, complex visual spectacle, and formats optimised for continuous engagement, the serial form participates in the attention economy: a system that commodifies human attention as a scarce and commodifiable resource. Within this context, aesthetic experimentation is increasingly integrated into the logic of digital platforms; in other words, aesthetics has little to do with resistance; instead, it serves as a mechanism of audience retention. The practice of binge-watching, now a culturally entrenched norm, illustrates how gratification, compulsion, and habit-

Introduction

uation are entangled in a form of media consumption that seamlessly blends leisure with labour. With these tendencies in mind, this article examines the television series as a spectacle of control—a mediated experience that enlists aesthetic and formal strategies in the service of digital capitalism’s imperative to extract time, attention, and affect. Drawing on Horkheimer and Adorno’s classic critique of the culture industry, and on contemporary theories of algorithmic culture and cognitive capitalism, I explore how the “construction of taste” through recommendation systems and platform interfaces—together with the use of specific aesthetic, compositional techniques that reward interpretive effort while demanding continuous consumption—fits broader economic and ideological trends. As platforms like Netflix, HBO, and Amazon Prime refine their ability to profile and anticipate viewer desire, they do more than merely curate content—they participate in the algorithmic shaping of subjectivity itself.

The Culture Industry in the Digital Age: Spectacle, Algorithm, and Attention

The guiding (if perhaps counterintuitive) premise of this article is that serialised post-televisual narratives are a prominent vehicle of audience control exercised by the contemporary culture industry. The origins of the term “culture industry” lie in the work of Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer. In their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*,^[1] and in essays published over the next two decades, Adorno and Horkheimer claim that cultural production under capitalism loses its critical autonomy and becomes standardised, repetitive, and governed by the logic of profit. Dissemination channels that rose to ever-greater prominence in the mid-20th century, including film and radio, are understood as ideological tools: designed not to challenge, but to reinforce conformity and submission. Part of the model, the aesthetic pleasure resulting from the consumption of culture in these media is not emancipatory but pacifying—it sustains the illusion of choice while masking systemic control. In *Prologue to Television*, Adorno described the *double entendre* of “programming” that characterises the culture industry in general, and television in particular:

The social, technical, and artistic aspects of television cannot be treated in isolation. They are in large measure interdependent: artistic composition, for instance, depends upon an inhibiting consideration of the mass public, which only helpless naïveté dares disregard; the social effect depends upon the technical structure, also upon the novelty of the invention as such, which certainly was decisive during television’s beginnings in America, but the social influence also depends upon the explicit and implicit messages television programs convey to their viewers. The medium itself, however, as a combination of film and radio, falls within the comprehensive schema of the culture industry and furthers its tendency to transform and capture the consciousness of the public from all sides.^[2]

[1] M. Horkheimer, T.W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Herder and Herder, New York 1947.

[2] T.W. Adorno, *Prologue to Television*, [in:] idem, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, Columbia University Press, New York 2005, p. 49.

Guy Debord extended this critique into the visual and media-saturated conditions of late capitalism. In *Society of the Spectacle*, he wrote of the “perpetual present” of commodified visibility – of the spectacle that mediates social life through the circulation of images that alienate while appearing to connect.[3] Contemporary serial television—particularly in its on-demand, always-available format—serves this logic, constructing worlds that absorb viewers’ time, emotional energy and cognitive labour, while appearing to offer sustained gratification and relatively large doses of agency.

The logic of the spectacle Debord described has been profoundly reconfigured in the digital age. Whereas legacy media relied on passive spectatorship, digital media platforms employ an algorithmic model—an arrangement in which attention, identity, and taste are datafied, monetised, and used to shape consumption. The rise of streaming services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, HBO Max, and Disney+ marks a decisive shift not only in how cultural content is delivered, but in how cultural subjectivity is produced.[4] As I have articulated elsewhere, platforms no longer merely respond to consumer preferences; instead, they “produce taste” through what might be described as a four-fold process: (1) personalisation, (2) instant accessibility, (3) bingeable segmentation, and (4) pseudo-engagement.[5] These features collectively constitute a “spectacle of control”, in which aesthetic form is no longer autonomous or expressive, but instrumentalised within the platform’s techno-economic architecture.

The first mechanism, personalisation, provides the consumer with an illusion of agency while enacting epistemic control over them. What appears to be a range of texts the platform has selected and curated for us is not only an ersatz of actual choice but also a site of soliciting user labour. As Striphas and Gillespie have shown, recommendation algorithms do not merely filter content—they delimit the horizon of what is visible, and thus what is thinkable.[6] The “algorithmic production of taste” operates as both a diagnostic and a prescriptive tool: by tracking viewing behaviour, platforms define user identity, categorise it into marketable “taste clusters”[7] and circulate content that reinforces these constructed profiles. As Anthony Elliott observes, this process is “at once radically individualist and crushingly conformist.”[8] “Netflix’s nihilism”—manifested in the “play something else” feature—provides

[3] G. Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb, Rebel Press, London 2005.

[4] Y. Ibrahim, *Production of the “Self” in the Digital Age*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2018.

[5] M. Wojtyna, *From Disneyization to Netflixification: Algorithms and the Production of Taste*, “Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich” 2025, vol. 68, no. 2, pp. 69–81.

[6] T. Striphas, *The Late Age of Print: Everyday Book Culture from Consumerism to Control*, Columbia

University Press, New York 2009; idem, *Algorithmic Culture*, “European Journal of Cultural Studies” 2015, vol. 18, no. 4–5, pp. 395–412; T. Gillespie, *The Relevance of Algorithms*, [in:] *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality, and Society*, eds. T. Gillespie, P.J. Boczkowski, K.A. Foot, MIT Press Cambridge, MA 2014, pp. 167–194.

[7] A. Elliott, *Algorithms of Anxiety: Fear in the Digital Age*, Polity, Cambridge 2024, p. 58.

[8] Ibidem.

“an escape from the tyranny of choice”[9] through its promise of personalised playlists.[10]

The second aspect, the instant accessibility of cultural products, removes the friction once involved in media consumption; no more waiting, searching, or choosing is to be expected, only continuous availability of multiple texts of any genre, in any language, with various formats, themes, and kinds of aesthetics.[11] With variety available at any time, and a systematic conviction that the variety is tailored to personal preference, the audiences of streaming services are encouraged to believe that it is worth giving up other activities in favour of consuming whatever suitable piece of culture the service suggests. But this convenience is not neutral; it facilitates a continuous flow of user activity that trains the algorithm and extends platform dwell time. Every scroll, pause, and replay constitutes unpaid cognitive labour, supporting the ongoing refinement of the platform’s behavioural prediction model.

The third feature, bingeable segmentation—the compositional principle governing the aesthetics of many contemporary series—encourages prolonged viewing[12] by delaying closure and foregrounding what Meir Sternberg[13] calls “curiosity, suspense, and surprise”. Building on the complexities of narrative composition, ambitious TV series today exploit the psychological readiness of audiences to delay cognitive closure in ways that used to be characteristic of low-brow forms such as the soap opera. Optimised to reinforce compulsive modes of engagement, and delivered in streaming services that are always available, the contemporary TV series has managed to balance narrative complexity with the audience’s willingness to continue consuming and interpreting. This is why, perhaps, the TV series seems to be a cultural form particularly fitting for the ambitions of cognitive, platform capitalism. Yet in their excellent commentary on the cultural formation of binge, Kozak et al. fail to see this germinative conjunction of complexity and segmentation when they claim that “as a practice of television audiences,

[9] Ibidem, p. 73.

[10] Elliott offers a nuanced critique of the assumption that personalisation produces profound satisfaction. He claims, instead, that “this much sought-after entertainment escape still disappoints viewers more often than not, with many consumers resorting to ‘Play Something Else’ again and again. This is precisely the kind of anxiety-generating predicament that is routinely encountered in the algorithmic age, and it raises some substantial questions about the side effects of machine-learning algorithms (mistaken for predictions) at the level of the individual self, as well as about many extant and novel forms of cultural anxiety” (ibidem).

[11] Appadurai and Alexander challenge this view in their reading of contemporary technologies (includ-

ing streaming services) as essentially designed to frustrate such simplistic, idealistic expectations (of “immediacy and instant gratification”, for example) their users have towards them. A. Appadurai, N. Alexander, *Failure*, Polity, Cambridge 2020, p. 21.

[12] D. Broe, *Birth of the Binge: Serial TV and the End of Leisure*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit 2019; M. Jenner, *Netflix and the Re-Invention of Television*, Springer International Publishing, Berlin 2018; A. Wansbrough, *Capitalism and the Enchanted Screen: Myths and Allegories in the Digital Age*, Bloomsbury Academic, New York 2021.

[13] M. Sternberg, *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1971.

binge-watching seems resistant to textual analysis.”[14] Conversely, it seems relatively clear that segmentation and interpretive challenges are the most effective textual sources of prolonged consumption.

Pseudo-engagement is the fourth factor in the spectacle of control that streaming platforms have developed. The aim is to produce the kind of “premium” or “quality” experience once reserved for high art, now repurposed to make entertainment appear culturally elevated. Viewers are encouraged to decode and interpret complex stories, often rewatching them in pursuit of cognitive closure. This ongoing interpretive labour not only delivers a sense of satisfaction but also fosters a habitual engagement that goes beyond the single text, gradually shaping the viewer’s taste and reinforcing platform loyalty. Anyone who has watched *House of Cards* in 2013 would be likely to turn to Netflix for more. Complexity thus becomes a transactional device: if the content appears meaningful or artistically valuable, audiences may become more tolerant (if aware at all) of the underlying exploitative mechanisms, such as the commodification of their user behaviour and identities, or the anxiety induced by algorithmic personalization. In this new model of serialized consumption, aesthetic engagement masks systemic control: the pleasure derived from complexity remains a managed experience within a pre-designed cultural framework. What may seem like interpretive investment becomes a component of data feedback loops; a form of “emotional labour” not unlike what Arlie Hochschild or Rose Hackman describe, but performed in the service of predictive analytics and content development.[15]

This layered system, I argue, is a continuation and intensification of Adorno and Horkheimer’s proposals about the culture industry: the production of standardised goods designed to pacify and manipulate, now supercharged by algorithmic configuration of preferences and choices. In this configuration, taste is not a product of social experience or critical judgement but of computational modelling – a set of statistical artefacts mistaken for desire. A specific form of the “Netflixification” of culture, then, emerges as the cultural manifestation of platform capitalism, a system that replaces user autonomy with data-driven prefiguration, and substitutes interpretive freedom with the appearance of customised complexity.[16] All that appears in a manner strikingly compatible with the diagnosis Adorno offered decades ago:

Commercial television atrophies consciousness, but not because the contents of its programs are any worse than those of film or radio. [...] The responsibility lies with the How, not the What. That awkward ‘intimacy’ of

[14] L. Kozak, Martin Zeller-Jacques, Tom Hemingway et al., *Bingeing Narratives: Conclusion*, [in:] *Binge-Watching and Contemporary Television Studies*, ed. M. Jenner, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2021.

[15] A. Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialisation of Human Feeling*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA 2012; R. Hackman, *Emotional Labor: The Invisible Work Shaping Our Lives and How to Reclaim Our Power*, Flatiron Books, New York 2023.

[16] M. Wojtyna, op. cit.

television, which allegedly engenders a community through the effect of the television set around which family members and friends sit idiotically who supposedly would otherwise have nothing to say, satisfies not only an avidity that allows no place for anything intellectual unless it is transformed into property but, moreover, obscures the real alienation between people and between people and things. It becomes a substitute for a social immediacy that is being denied to people. They confuse what is mediated through and through—the life deceptively programmed for them—with the solidarity they are so acutely deprived of. This reinforces the regression: the viewing situation itself stultifies, even when what is being viewed is no more stupid than the usual fodder fed to compulsive consumers. The fact that they probably indulge themselves more in television, it being convenient and inexpensive, than in cinema and more than in radio, because they receive the visual on top of the acoustic, contributes further to the regression. Addiction is immediately regression. [17]

Analogically, algorithmic culture not only governs what we consume, but how we consume, when we consume, and increasingly, who we become in the process. The aesthetic preferences formed within this environment are inseparable from the infrastructures that enable them, and the television series stands as a privileged object within this system—a high-circulation, data-rich format that exemplifies how aesthetics, narrative, and interface design are conscripted into the production of user identity, and the reproduction of capital in ways that are essentially new (or at least as new as platform capitalism). The shift from linear broadcasting to platform-based delivery is not without its consequences either: it has profoundly altered the cognitive and temporal organisation of media consumption. Viewers are no longer bound by external schedules or spatial constraints; instead, they participate in what seems to be a paradise of deinstitutionalised choice but which in fact is a regime in which the structures of planning, searching, and selecting are absorbed into the algorithmic and interface-level design of the platform. Such a displacement of active decision-making is key to the platform's ability to maintain uninterrupted engagement through the underlying mechanics of "choice". Autoplay, continuous scroll, preconfigured playlists, and targeted trailers and teasers collapse the temporal gaps that once punctuated television viewing. As a result, the viewer's cognitive effort is reoriented—from acts of selection and critical evaluation to acts of passive reinforcement. Technological mediation, in this sense, does not remove friction but replaces it with habituation, inserting viewers into a rhythm of perpetual readiness.

Amid this economic and technological infrastructure, aesthetic form continues to play a crucial role—not in opposition to platform logic, but in synergy with it. Scholars such as Allrath and Gymnich, Mittell, Benson-Allott, Bandirali and Terrone, Barra and Scaglioni, as well as Wojtyna, Miceli and Zgierska have observed how "narrative complexity" in contemporary television is often celebrated as a mark

[17] T.W. Adorno, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

of cultural sophistication.[18] Yet this complexity often works hand-in-hand with platform affordances.[19] Non-linear timelines, ambiguous narrators, mind-game plots, slow reveals, and large narrative arcs extend viewer investment across seasons and years, transforming attention into a long-term commitment. Mittell's concept of "complex TV" highlights how serialised form demands active decoding and interpretive labour, supporting the notion that watching is no longer a passive act.[20] However, this labour is not only aesthetic or interpretive—it is also economic. Viewers are not simply reading texts; they are producing data, fuelling recommendation systems, and contributing to the predictive accuracy of content delivery. The result is a convergence between aesthetic pleasure and platform utility.

The mechanisms of aesthetic control, algorithmic recommendation, and viewer habituation ("programming") described in previous sections find their most vivid expression in contemporary serial television. While many series could serve as examples, several stand out for the ways they integrate narrative complexity (including some daring formal experimentation), compositional strategies aimed at soliciting prolonged consumption, and an illusion of agency to construct what has been termed a spectacle of control. The examples presented below, drawn from various genres and platforms, illustrate how the compositional dimensions of television converge with technological affordances and platform's business objectives to produce cognitive, affective, and interpretive shackles on the audience.

The first Netflix original, *House of Cards* (2013–2018), does what a serial narrative must do in the age of streaming services: it offers a complex narrative that addresses a broad range of compelling subjects, alludes to canonical texts of high culture (Shakespearean drama, for instance), employs a strong cast of actors and actresses, and demands focused interpretive effort from its audiences. With its trademark rhetorical playfulness (the metaleptic communication Frank Underwood engages in with the viewer), *House of Cards* signalled very clearly and early on what Netflix was attempting to do: to capture the attention of audiences in ways that

Engaging Complexity in Selected TV Series

[18] G. Allrath, M. Gymnich, *Narrative Strategies in Television Series*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2005; J. Mittell, *Complex TV The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, New York University Press New York 2015; C. Benson-Allott, *Remote Control*, Bloomsbury, New York 2015; L. Bandirali, E. Terrone, *Concept TV: An Aesthetics of Television Series*, Lexington Books, Lanham 2021; *A European Television Fiction Renaissance: Premium Production Models and Transnational Circulation*, eds. L. Barra, M. Scagliolini, Routledge, London 2021; M. Wojtyna, B. Miceli, R. Zgierska, *Reading TV Series: Aesthetics, Themes, and Reception*, Peter Lang, Berlin 2022.

[19] There is more to these affordances, too, than just broadband capacities and image quality. The interface, the paratexts, and the screen architecture also become part of the aesthetic experience itself. Serialised television, in this sense, is not just a formal object – it is a media ecology, shaped by the demands of continuous engagement and configured by the economic logic of platform capitalism. For more detail on matters related to capitalism and platforms, see N. Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2017.

[20] J. Mittell, op. cit.

had never been so systematically exploited before. The character-audience communication itself is a prominent feature of contemporary high-brow serial narratives. In USA Network's *Mr Robot* (2015–2019), BBC's *Fleabag* (2016–2019), Netflix's *She's Gotta Have It* (2017–2019) and the more recent *Mussolini: Son of the Century* (Sky Italia, 2024) and *Aniela* (HBO, 2025), rhetorical metalepsis is an engagement-boosting narrative device that proves the capacity of TV series to embrace formal experimentation. Unreliable narration is another case in point – unreliability (employed in such key texts as *Mr Robot*, *The Affair* [2014–2019], *The Young Pope* [2016], *True Detective* [season 1, 2014], *13 Reasons Why* [2017–2020], *Homecoming* [2018], and *Legion* [2017–2019]) demands critical viewing and reassessment, and thus promotes an uninterrupted watching style, or even rewatching for cognitive closure.

An interesting example of a puzzling show that nevertheless glued audiences to their screens, the German series *Dark* (2017–2020) exemplifies Netflix's strategy of commissioning and globalising high-concept serials that foreground enigma, fragmentation, and temporal disruption as generators of curiosity and engagement. *Dark*'s complex timelines, character arcs, and metafictional themes foster online interpretation communities while reinforcing viewers' dependence on the platform to provide further content, and answers that could solve the puzzle. Few recent shows, it seems, have demanded rewatching so consistently as *Dark*.

Free of the pressures of continuous plot developments, *Black Mirror* (2011–2025) is marked by a different kind of narrative complexity. A paradigmatic critique of digital culture that simultaneously reinforces platform logic through its multi-season anthology format, this canonical TV series attempts to offer a serious, critical view of technological advancements, inviting interpretation and reflection in episodes such as *Nosedive* and *Fifteen Million Merits*. In *Bandersnatch*, it experiments with an interactive format to offer yet another take on the illusion of choice that audience pseudo-agency relies on.

Another flagship product of the Netflix brand, *Stranger Things* (2016–2026), is characteristic of a different aesthetic strategy: it deploys nostalgia as a mechanism of emotional legibility and “platform stickiness”. Its allusive style and adolescents-centred narrative format encourage cross-generational viewing, fostering affective investment that can be easily measured and re-targeted through merchandise, spin-offs, and recommendation clusters. The show's pacing and reliance on end-of-episode suspense are finely tuned to binge-viewing patterns, too. The visual form, in turn, is spectacular enough to have become synonymous with the immense capacity of the contemporary TV series to impact public imagination.^[21] HBO's *Euphoria* enjoys a similar status. The show merges visual spectacle with narrative fragmentation, producing a somewhat overstimulating aesthetic. Its hyper-saturated

[21] The reception of the last (fifth) season of *Stranger Things* (released in instalments in November and

December 2025, and on 1st January 2026) is an interesting case in point: the relative dissatisfaction of

colour palettes, disjunctive editing, and surreal interludes align with the perceptual regimes of social media and music video culture, drawing viewers into a state of visual immersion that bypasses critical distance. The show's episodic density and visual excess exemplify a mode of capture that is both aesthetic and affective. Similar strategies are characteristic of *Legion* (FX, 2017–2019), *The Get Down* (Netflix, 2016), and *Utopia* (Channel 4, 2013–2014), among others.

Examples abound, and compositional complexity is indeed a striking feature of the TV series today. All the above TV series are highly bingeable, prestige-branded shows that reward their audiences with aesthetic satisfaction. There is an urgent paradox to address here: the aesthetic effects of the products of the culture industry are hardly innocent. Conversely, the forms these products take, the dissemination modes they are in, and the behaviours they elicit are coordinated with the broader logics of digital capitalism, user data extraction, cognitive labour, and dopaminergic addition. The spectacle of control that these series encourage us to be victims of defines a central function of streaming services, and of other instances of cognitive capitalism: to extract the labour of users in exchange for a playlist of pretty things.

In the contemporary media ecosystem, the aesthetic sophistication of serial narratives—their narrative complexity, visual density, and thematic ambition—functions not only as a cultural achievement but as a cover for increasingly refined mechanisms of control. As outlined in earlier sections, the convergence of aesthetic form with technological infrastructure and platform logic results in a cultural *dispositif* (in Foucault's sense), where the viewer's time, attention, and interpretive capacity are systematically exploited. Under these conditions, aesthetics becomes a conduit for labour, its surface complexity masking the economic imperatives that shape it.

Again, referring to Adorno and Horkheimer's notion of the "culture industry", this arrangement exemplifies how cultural products can operate as instruments of conformity, even when they appear formally ambitious. The repetition and standardisation that the Frankfurt School decried have not disappeared: they have been internalised within the formal grammar of complex storytelling itself. Today's "prestige" series, rather than rejecting convention, codify and monetise it, transforming aesthetic challenge into a mechanism of viewer retention and identity capture. The relative novelty, together with an illusion of choice and interpretive agency, is central to this process of aesthetic deception.

large groups of viewers with how narrative instabilities in the series were resolved encouraged many to anticipate further developments to be presented in a secret, unannounced extra episode that would, as enthusiasts hoped, offer an alternative ending to the compelling narrative. The interpretive community

that has developed around the series is testament to the engagement Netflix and the Duffer Brothers have managed to generate in their audience both through complex aesthetics and the distribution model that inspires what seem to be insatiable appetites for continuity.

Aesthetics Conceals Control, Control Demands Labour

This is particularly evident when examined through the lens of algorithmic culture[22] and platform capitalism.[23] The very strategies that position television series as cognitively or affectively demanding—ambiguous plots, psychological depth, delayed closure—are deeply compatible with the data economies of streaming platforms. They promote behaviours that can be tracked, predicted, and monetised. In this context, complexity is not subversive: it is functional. As Beller argues, even the act of watching becomes a form of value-producing labour, part of a cinematic mode of production in which perception itself is commodified.[24]

The spectacle of control thus operates through a dialectical tension: viewers are invited to decode, critique, and engage, yet they do so within a framework that has pre-structured their behaviours and responses. The aesthetic form conceals the infrastructural design. This concealment is not incidental but integral to the system's operation. As Debord famously observed, the spectacle is not a collection of images but a social relation mediated by images.[25] The serial television series today enacts precisely such a relation: it organises viewer subjectivity not by dictating meaning, but by engineering the conditions under which meaning is sought. Moreover, the cognitive labour performed by viewers—interpreting, recommending, rating—feeds directly into the platform's algorithmic modelling. As Elliott notes, this labour is shaped by the tensions between abundance and automation, choice and coercion.[26] Viewers experience aesthetic engagement as a site of freedom, yet that site is conditioned by the “algorithmic production of taste.”[27] In other words, individual preferences are no longer expressions of individual self but artefacts of predictive systems, calculated to maximise engagement and limit churn rate.

In this sense, serial aesthetics no longer exists separately from economic infrastructure: it is deeply imbricated within it. Aesthetic experience becomes a managed activity—scripted by design teams, filtered by recommendation systems, and normalised through feedback loops. The promise of immersion, emotional catharsis, or narrative satisfaction is delivered through architectures that extract surplus value from every click, pause, or scroll. Thus, the digital television series serves as both a cultural artefact and a technological interface of capital. Its aesthetic richness conceals its disciplinary function, too. It organises cognition, desire, and affect in ways that are aligned with the imperatives of attention economies and data capitalism. What appears to be engagement is often habituation; what seems like agency is frequently pre-scripted “productive apathy”: systematic reliance on algorithm and

[22] T. Striplhas, *Algorithmic Culture...*

[23] N. Srnicek, op. cit.

[24] J. Beller, *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle*, Dartmouth College Press, Hanover, NH 2006, p. 1.

[25] G. Debord, op. cit., p. 2.

[26] A. Elliott, op. cit.

[27] M. Wojtyna, op. cit.

continuous feeding of it with information on our choices and aesthetic judgements.

To employ a diachronic perspective on all these matters, one might be tempted to ask how control is exercised by streaming services over the audiences of serialised post-televisual narratives different to the predicament of twentieth-century consumers of culture? To put it differently: Does the model put forward by Horkheimer and Adorno need an update in the realities of digital culture? There are at least two emergent differences that should be stressed here. Firstly, the increase in the accessibility of cultural content is astounding: access to culture has not merely become egalitarian, it has become the object of solicitation by platforms, networks, and organisations that proffer their cultural products as alternatives to any other form of social, intellectual, or emotive activity. The “binge is the new normal” because it has relied on the inescapable charm of technological affordances. Secondly, to be a consumer of cultural products today (a member of the audience, a subscriber) is to be a member of the “cognitariat”, whose duty is not only to watch, read, and play what they are being offered by algorithms, but also to feed the algorithms’ incessant appetites for data, and thus allow themselves to become data objects. As the viewers of the TV series do the cognitive labour of choosing, playing, pausing, assessing, bingeing on and discussing shows, they participate in forming their own consumer identities as well as in the “algorithmic production of taste”. With the TV series being particularly apt material to stimulate such processes, streaming platforms’ investment in complex, stimulating aesthetics and fantastically user-friendly interfaces is a strategy that secures their ultimate goals: the attention and loyalty of consumers, whose “productive apathy” consolidates the position of streaming services as fundamental manifestations of the digital culture industry—an industry that brings about “the end of leisure.”[28]

The complicity between aesthetics and control that this article has discussed demands a rethinking of interpretive practices. To regard serial television critically in the streaming era does not merely imply assessing its form or content, but examining the infrastructures that govern its creation, circulation, and reception. Aesthetic judgement alone is no longer sufficient: what is required is a political-aesthetic critique, one that recognises the coercive charm of complex forms employed by capitalism’s culture industry. After all, we do not really want to be told what to watch, even if everything we see is so spectacular.

[28] D. Broe, *op. cit.*

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