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Serial Nostalgia and Nostalgic Television Series
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In the last episode of Season One of the television series *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007–), Donald Draper, creative director of Sterling Cooper Advertising Agency, pitches an advertising campaign for Kodak's new slide projector. Instead of concentrating on its technological newness, as the client wishes, Don emphasises the possibility of a 'sentimental bond with the product' and suggests that nostalgia is a powerful way to create this bond. He presents a slide show with photographs from his own family life and names the projector 'the carousel', a carousel that 'lets us travel the way a child travels, round and round, and back home again'. The scene condenses a lot of what the series is all about: reconstructing and reimagining the past visually, discursively and historically by portraying and referring to the key political, social, economic and aesthetic elements of former times. But, while *Mad Men* seems to be *the* paradigmatic example when it comes to the relationship between television series and nostalgia, it is by no means alone in dealing so overtly with the subject. In fact, there seems to be a trend towards the nostalgic in modern television: *The Hour* (BBC, 2011–), *Boardwalk Empire* (HBO, 2010–) and *Downton Abbey* (ITV, 2010–), for instance, are all evidently vintage in atmosphere. Svetlana Boym would call this pre-existent nostalgia 'prefabricated'; she would say that they obviate creativity for the future (2001, p. 351). But even a short look at the carousel scene shows that such a reading would be far too simplistic. This volume intends to show, via different theoretical and methodological approaches and via case studies, that media present several different notions and functions of nostalgia. Media can trigger nostalgic emotions, media are formative in the aesthetics of the nostalgic world they portray (through visual

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appearance, sound and narrative) and, at the same time, nostalgic media serve as a cure for the viewers' suffering and longing for a past era, the concept of which the media themselves may well have created. Media can also be technological objects of nostalgia and, by recalling their own past, they can even become nostalgic themselves. Hence, nostalgia offers the possibility and necessity of reflecting on mediation, media and their related technologies (Boym, 2001) and vice versa. In this context, television occupies a very important role, not only because of its capacity to imagine, evoke, quote, show or repeat aspects of the past, including its own, but also because it is simultaneously a medium of forgetting. Television cannot maintain the memory of everything, and not all broadcasts are automatically archived. Consequently, the notion of loss, closely associated with nostalgia, becomes an almost inevitable phenomenon: some pictures are gone forever. However, television can both renew 'real' past pictures, if they are archived, and invent an imagined past via the aesthetics and narratives of a series. Television in this sense is a complex time machine navigating in between an ephemeral present, an often unknown future and an intriguing past (Niemeyer, 2011). There is a trend of linking nostalgia to a more or less unrealistic past, adorning its portrayal exclusively with affirmative and positive feelings. But television in general and television series in particular have a more complex relationship with nostalgia. A nostalgic series is very often the object of its audience's longing. At the same time, nostalgia seems to be one of the preferred subjects for television series to engage with on multiple levels. Both these concepts (this is our assumption) are based on the fact not only that a series, due most notably to its structural and temporal characteristics, is particularly suitable to unfold the multiple dimensions of nostalgia, but also that nostalgia, through its modes of being and its tense, can itself be regarded as one of those characteristics. This chapter is dedicated to introducing and discussing different types of nostalgia that are generated and revealed through television series and the serial characteristics of television. *Mad Men's* carousel scene is used as the conceptual starting point for this chapter because it typifies the crystallisation of the different forms of nostalgia that fill the frames of *Mad Men* and expand its frontiers, offering a reflection on television, nostalgia and seriality on a broad and profound level.

Serial homesickness

The carousel scene does not portray nostalgia merely as being useful for emotional advertising campaigns. It also reveals the historical and

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psychological complexity of the notion of nostalgia, which Immanuel Kant and Karl Jaspers both discussed: that painful longing for a romanticised, stable and more innocent past, a past related to one's own biography and to the idea of childhood as an innocent and perpetually light-hearted state (Boym, 2001; Bolzinger, 2007). No less important than the mentions of the past in the carousel scene is the notion of what Don and many others regard as a particularly special place – the 'home', or, as Don describes it, 'the place where we know we are loved'. This recalls the initial meaning of nostalgia: homesickness. Don's mention of his Greek friend Teddy, from whom he learns that nostalgia in Greek means 'the pain from an old wound', combined with this notion of homesickness, immediately evokes Homer's *Odyssey*. The *Odyssey* is one of the very first serial narratives and tells the story of Odysseus' wanderings as he attempts to find his way home, only to realise, when finally coming home after ten years, that no-one recognises him. But the story Don tells is not exclusively an allusion to the *Odyssey*. It is also the story of Don himself, who lives and acts out every one of these dimensions of nostalgia. His old wound is his (at this moment in the series) still unrevealed and mysterious past as 'Dick Whitman'. What is evoked here as 'the place where we know we are loved', his actual home, the suburb where he lives with his family, is *not* the place he feels at home. The opposite is true: Don never feels at home, but always feels out of place, isolated, disconnected. In contrast to the apparently better times which are presented via the projected photographs, his marriage is in fact undergoing a deep crisis.

Mad Men, as already mentioned, is not the only series to overtly address nostalgia as a subject or as a function of its *modus operandi*. There are two examples from earlier decades, analysed in their political dimension by Marcus (2004). The first is the 1980s series *The Wonder Years* (ABC, 1988–1993), in which each year in the show's diegetic universe is presented as having taken place 20 years before the original air dates, and whose unseen and now adult narrator tells us in a bittersweet manner the story of his childhood and youth. The second is the sitcom *Happy Days* (ABC, 1974–1984), which aired in the 1970s and takes place in an idealised version of the mid-1950s and early 1960s, a version very different from the portrayal of these years in *Mad Men*. Other recent series that are not overtly labelled 'vintage' or nostalgic deal in a more subtle way with nostalgia by broaching the issue of homesickness and expressing the loss of identity, continuity or stability. Homesickness, loss and the notion of the home are the pivotal elements of *Lost* (ABC, 2004–2010). Exclusion from former life is a major basis of the narrative

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on the island, which itself becomes a new home-to-be and later even a place to be longed for (Niemeyer and Wentz, 2014). *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011–) often hides the notion of longing behind its emphasis on violence and intrigue: most of the protagonists leave their homes to protect and defend them, but the return they long and fight for is shown to be impossible, difficult or bound to fail. Sometimes this even includes the destruction of their beloved walls and castles. In *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010–), the last uninfected humans fight for survival against the backdrop of a zombie apocalypse. In one scene, two of the protagonists, Rick and Shane, walk through a forest talking and laughing about their high school loves and lovers (S01E05) until Shane states: 'We shouldn't talk about this stuff. That life has gone and everyone with it [...] Our people and stories are dead.' When Rick replies, 'Can't you just forget them?' Shane's answer is in the negative, saying, 'Digging up the past, I tell you what it is... Nostalgia, it is like a drug. It keeps you away from seeing things as they are and that is a danger. [...] Survival, Rick, it means making hard decisions.' Nostalgia creates bonds to one's personal history, but in doing so impedes work on and in the future. It is not a paradox that Rick and Shane discuss these two aspects of nostalgia, because, as has been noted, nostalgia 'can be both a social disease and a creative emotion, a poison and a cure' (Boym, 2001, p. 354). The protagonists realise that their former everyday lives are gone forever and that they need to reidentify themselves, an idea which Shane establishes in the very first episode when he states: 'We are surviving here. We are. Day to day' (S01E01). This is homesickness for a home that no longer exists and will never exist again. Disturbed and disrupted identities relating to nostalgia also appear in the television series *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011–), inspired and based on the Israeli version *Hatufim* (Il, Channel 2, 2010–). In both shows, the return of the protagonists from the war against terrorism is not a happy homecoming but entails a profound interrogation of what home and homeland mean, a very powerful question in countries where the concept of the home has historically always been central (Duyvendak, 2011, p. 17). The American version is a historical and geopolitical view on what happened after the September 11 attacks. There was not only an overwhelming eruption of institutional structures like the *Homeland Security Service*, but also a wider problem in redefining the values and attributes of what the home might be in contemporary times (p. 113).

But concepts of feeling at home or homecoming as responses to homesickness are not only important to the aesthetics or characters of a televisual narrative. They also concern audiences. Watching television

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can induce a homely feeling. A component of serials themselves is the necessity of habitual viewing, and this seems to strengthen the feeling of longing on the part of the audience.

Serial homecoming and longing

The carousel scene discloses that nostalgia is not just a vague emotion, but, rather, is intrinsically bound to its mediatised appearance and method of production: it cannot be separated from its mediated existence. The white rectangular projection surface at the end of the slide show stands in for this function of media as the projection space for our individual or shared nostalgic longings. Of course, this scene is highly self-reflexive, since the *Mad Men* slide projector overtly reveals nostalgia as having a specific function for media, where the evoking of nostalgic emotions, the symbolic charge of things, aims at turning those things into desirable commodities. Moreover, Don's description of the slide projector as a time machine, 'moving backwards, forward, round and round', can be assigned without restrictions to television, and television series in particular. With regard to television series, this description depends not only on the negotiation between cyclical and linear temporality, but also on the sentimental bond the viewers build with a series, which becomes one of the most important reasons to make them tune in repeatedly. Watching television series relates to personal habits based on new ways of organising the time and space of the viewing itself. The recent success and explosion of television series can at least partly be explained by the rituals they create in everyday life (Esquenazi, 2009), rituals that have already been analysed and discussed on a more general level as being central to television and correlated with the idea of a sharing community (Silverstone, 1988; Dayan and Katz, 1996). This assumption can be underpinned by Bolzinger's work (2007) about the history of nostalgia and the coining of the term by the doctor Johannes Hofer in 1688. Hofer's work underlines that nostalgia is mainly provoked by missing everyday life rituals and is itself a ritual disease. The hospitalised soldier, as Hofer and others found out, feels better when he can listen to the music of his homeland, or when he can interact with people having the same accent. His condition improves when the doctor tells him that he can go home soon. After a few days, if the promises are not kept, the soldier feels worse and may even die (Bolzinger, 2007, p. 140).

In our globalised world, the old, initial idea of nostalgia could explain why people are homesick or why they tend to want to leave the country

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which, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, they live in (Duyvendak, 2011). But these homesick people do not die, and progress in medicine and the healing capabilities of psychopharmacology might be the reasons for the fact that the old, initial meaning of nostalgia is rarely employed (Richard, 2004; Viennet, 2009). More pleasant symptoms of nostalgia, on the other hand, can be 'healed' or at least 'calmed' by objects or products of our consumer and media culture. In other words, the attributes of folklore and other traditions have mostly, or at least frequently, shifted to popular culture, a culture that creates common everyday shared life patterns, habits and memories. Television series that are common products of this popular culture take part in these rituals. Consequently, television series can become objects of longing themselves. As *The Wonder Years*, for example, still has not appeared on DVD, some viewers might wait for their cure, its rerun. One could even assume that nostalgic longing belongs intrinsically to the logic of seriality, and television takes advantage of this longing by several strategies: by endless reruns and by remakes of successful series like *Beverly Hills 90210* (Fox, 1990–2000, *90210*, the CW, 2009–2013), *Dr. Who* (BBC, 1963–1989, 2005), *Battlestar Galactica* (ABC, 1978–1980, Sky One, 2004–2009) or, one of the latest examples, *Dallas* (CBS, 1978–1991, TNT, 2012–). There are even whole networks whose programming is entirely based on the rebroadcasting of old television shows, especially series, for example *Nick at Nite* or the speaking '*Nostalgia television*' (Holdsworth, 2011). Nostalgia obviously has links to the inevitably mediatised past. It is based on the indivisible connection between one's own past and the media that accompanied that past. Media storage saves it and thereby makes it repeatable and memorisable today. As Don Draper puts it, 'It takes us to a place, where we ache to go again.' Series thus appear as the place where nostalgia can be healed, at least for a brief moment.

Over and above this, nostalgia seems to be a concept that fits without restrictions the structural characteristics of televisual seriality. Series can never (this is the hypothesis) *not* evoke a feeling of nostalgia, because they are based on the imperative to always leave a void. The void is inevitably present, whether in the form of the temporal gaps between episodes and seasons, the void a long-watched series leaves when it finally ends, or the never-arriving closure of an unfinished narrative. Series always create gaps that can never be filled, even by rewatching them. This longing, which pertains to the logic of seriality, clearly shows, once again, that nostalgia is not just the preserve of the past, but can be directed just as well towards the future or even the present (Boym, 2001).

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Serial nostalgia

As we have mentioned, it would be considering the matter too narrowly if one linked the relationship between seriality and nostalgia only to a series' potential to evoke a nostalgic longing in either the viewers or the narrative. Rather, series, as they accumulate time, and thus a past and an imagined future, can be, and often are, nostalgic themselves. Hardly any long-running series gets along without flashback episodes, where the characters remember the series' past. *Friends* (NBC, 1994–2004) and *How I Met Your Mother* (CBS, 2005–), for example, have one or more in every season. Beginning with its title, the latter is even built on a continuous flashback that interlaces flashbacks of flashbacks and also imagined flashforwards that then become part of the fictional narrator's imagined memory. Nostalgia in *How I Met Your Mother* is located on a narrative level but is mainly created by the temporal and visual montage of the whole story. The longing to finally meet the mother concerns not only the two children, who are shown at the beginning of many episodes on their sofa listening to the story being told, but also the viewer (perhaps also sitting on a couch), who longs for this moment to come (cf. Wentz, 2009). This particular combination of narrative and interrelated montage is an element you can find, once again, in *Mad Men*. A strong parallel to the work of Edward Hopper, who coincidentally was himself an illustrator in advertising, can be drawn with the series' aesthetics. The recurring, long, almost photographic shots of Donald Draper sitting alone in a bar recall the famous work *Nighthawks* (1942). The melancholic glances of emptiness in offices recall paintings like *Office at Night* (1948) or *New York Office* (1962). Loneliness, alienation and longing percolate these nostalgic templates, which induce what Vera Dika (2003, p. 25) calls 'inner dialogue and memory'. The 'experienced time' (Ricoeur, 1993) of the epoch is incarnated via these 'tableaux of time', recalling Edward Hopper's work on an aesthetic and conceptual level. The very slow montage also emphasises these aspects of longing. These elements reinforce the idea and impression of the individual loneliness of beginning a stressful life in an advertising working environment and a modern world. As Gabriele Schabacher (2013) has recently emphasised, *Mad Men*, by referring to the 1960s, reanalyses an epoch which is already visually conventionalised and the self-conception and self-understanding of which are intrinsically linked to the processes of modernisation, and especially mediatisation. Of course, television and advertising are among the most important agents of that process. In this sense, serial nostalgia concerns not only the individual past of every

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series, but also the whole construct of an always already mediatised history. Another striking example of a television series dealing with this is *The Newsroom* (HBO, 2012–), the narrative centre of which is a news desk and the outstanding characteristic of which is the fictional news coverage of events that really happened in the very recent past. Every real event which is taken up by the series and whose coverage is still in our short-term memory serves as an example of journalism as it *should* be and also *could* be. This specific configuration is deeply nostalgic, as nostalgia means not only a melancholic memory of what was, but also the regret that it was not *different*, the fantasy of what *could* have been. Already the title sequence gives a clear idea of this melancholic–nostalgic attitude towards the past. It is divided into two parts. After the very first picture of a satellite circumnavigating the world, a very slow montage of black-and-white photographs unfolds, showing scenes and iconic figures of American television journalism. Among them, for example, is Edward Murrow, whose 1950s news show *See It Now* has shaped the image of critical journalism ever since. Chet Huntley and David Brinkley, the NBC News anchormen of the 1960s, also feature, as does Walter Cronkite, the main anchor of the *CBS Evening News* during the 1960s and 1970s and the 'most trusted man in America', who not only covered the Kennedy assassination and the landing on the moon, but was also a late but sharp critic of the Vietnam War. Text overlays like 'News Bulletin', 'Evening News', and so on repeatedly disrupt this montage. Subsequent to the black-and-white images, scenes from the first season of the series appear, only cut in a faster rhythm, and interrupted or overlaid by the same inserts signifying 'the News'. This second part differs from the first one in that it is in colour and uses some visual tricks, such as, at certain moments, translucent surfaces gliding over the images. More important yet than the *distinctive* features and effects of *Televisuality* (Caldwell, 1995), marking 'New Television', is the aesthetic feature that is *common* to both parts: all the images are overlaid by overarticulated horizontal stripes, instantly recalling 'interlaced video mode'. This was the prevalent technique before the invention of high-definition television, and one whose disturbing artefacts appeared in the form of this kind of stripe. The fictional news desk of *News Night*, a programme on the fictional news network *Atlantis Cable News*, places itself via this montage in the tradition of a television journalism understood as being investigative, educational and full of integrity. Such journalism is linked very clearly to a certain period, from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s, exactly the same period of time covered by *Mad Men* and *Happy Days*. This period of American

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history has not been chosen randomly. It was the so-called *Golden Age* of the history of television, the time of big broadcast networks, prior to the invention of cable and target-group-specific television (it is not a coincidence that sitcoms from that time are among the most popular programmes for nostalgia television). The more recent television series *Desperate Housewives* is also a show which is set in the present, but re-enacts the relationship between television, its domestication after the Second World War and the socio-spatial formation of the suburb (cf. Spigel, 1992). *Desperate Housewives* can thus be regarded as portraying the very same 'critical nostalgia' as television critic Gary Edgerton describes for *Mad Men*, not simply towards the 'good old times', but towards 'the good old times' of (American) television (Edgerton, 2011, p. xxvii).

Television has recently begun to come under threat. Television and modern television series have started to transform and expand, or cross over entirely, into other media (cf. Maeder and Wentz, 2013). As television in its current form faces its potential end, it is possible to ask whether the nostalgic trend of modern television could be the expression of television's fear that it will lose its own place, its home, and soon become just a part of the past itself. The homely family feeling that television has inspired since the 1950s by occupying an important place in the living room or kitchen and being an important symbol for family life after the Second World War (Spigel, 1992) seems to be falling apart, which could be one of the reasons why this medium is entering a nostalgic cycle (Marcus, 2004) on all the levels described. It is nostalgic for its own past times and places, and television narrates and shows this nostalgia to provoke a response in its viewers. Nevertheless, it remains the projection space for this intriguing sense of longing that television series can mutually provoke and heal by their very particular status as both ritual-makers and ritual-breakers.

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