



## **BEYOND THE BINGE- THE VIEWERS' COMPETENCE AS A DEMOCRATIC ISSUE**

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### **Abstract**

This article proposes a philosophical framework for understanding television series, building on but moving beyond traditional film philosophy. While TV studies are well established in Anglophone contexts, French research often neglects the philosophical dimensions of series, despite their deep integration into everyday life. Television series influence how we see the world and engage morally with it, not through abstract ideas but through familiar, ongoing relationships with characters. These relationships foster care and attention, not on the basis of identification, but through repeated, intimate encounters.

Drawing on Cora Diamond's notion of moral expressiveness, the article argues that series highlight the moral significance of gestures, speech, and daily interactions. This "texture of being" shapes moral perception, revealing what matters in human lives beyond conventional ethical categories.

Stanley Cavell's concept of cinema as a form of companionship and subjective education is extended to TV series, which offer a shared, autobiographical mode of experience. Their importance lies not just in content, but in their place within everyday social practices. Ultimately, the article argues that TV series deserve recognition as a serious form of moral and philosophical inquiry, offering unique insights into contemporary life and ethical understanding.

### **Keywords**

Democratic Issue, Philosophy, Civilization

### **1. From Film Philosophy to TV Philosophy**

Research on TV series has long flourished in the USA and England, but is still relatively rare in France, except from the angle of media sociology, Anglophone civilization studies and information and communication sciences. Such a gap is striking - between the intellectual, political and moral influence of series, their place in conversation and ordinary life, and the extent to which this reality is taken into account in research. We propose here to examine one of the ambitions of television series, which is to change not only our visions of the world, but the world itself, by arousing, exercising and representing *care*; the strength of the series lies in its integration into everyday life, in the ordinary frequentation of characters who become close to us, no longer on the classic and hackneyed model of identification and recognition, but of frequentation and familiarization, or even affection. It's about knowing how the presence of a practice in our societies (and it's a very general one, because there are series in every country) is going to transform them, change not only our visions of the world, but the world itself. Television series, and the place they and their universes have taken in viewers' lives, are a phenomenon that we can all observe on a daily basis, and sometimes if not in our own lives, then at least in the lives of others. The strength of series lies in their integration into everyday life, in the ordinary frequentation of characters who become close to us, no longer on the classic, hackneyed model of identification and recognition, but of frequentation and familiarization. We care about the characters, exactly on the model of concern for others, which we have identified as a specific attention to the way of being, the moral texture of people.

This particularity of attention to moral detail, to the moral expressiveness of people, has been very well analyzed by Cora Diamond, notably at the significant conclusion. of *The Realistic Spirit* :

"We cannot see the moral interest of literature unless we recognize gestures, manners, habits, turns of speech, turns of thought, styles of face, as morally expressive - of an individual or a people. The intelligent description of these things is part of the sharp, intelligent description of life, of what *matters*, what makes a difference, in human lives." (Diamond 1911)

For Diamond, moral philosophy needs to change its field of study, from the examination of general concepts to the examination of particular visions, of individual "configurations" of thought. TV series have taught us to pay attention to these configurations. It is indeed in the use of language (choice of words, conversational style, bodily expression) that the moral vision of a person is openly displayed or intimately elaborated, creating a *texture of being* (texture can appear in various modalities, visual, aural and tactile). This texture has nothing to do with moral choices and arguments, and thus with classical moral philosophy: it defines morality not by categories of right or wrong, but by "what matters" and what makes and expresses the differences between individuals. By gradually perceiving what matters to a character, or a series, we also work out what matters to us.

TV series thus continues the search for the ordinary, and the pedagogical task, in the sense defined by Stanley Cavell, undertaken by popular cinema, of subjective education through shared experience. The starting point of Cavell's inquiry in *The World Viewed* is indeed to reiterate the gesture by which Tolstoy substitutes the question of the essence of art with that of its *importance*. The importance of cinema for Cavell is defined by its place in our form of life (such an emergence of importance being part and parcel of moral perception), and this is a way of defining popular culture. For there are two facts that interest Cavell in the value of cinema: an indisputable "first fact" that distinguishes cinema from the other arts, namely that it has had and continues to have importance for a very wide, socially and culturally heterogeneous audience. But this is even truer of television series. Secondly, it's an art of companionship. To speak of experience of films, Cavell describes his experience as an "accompanied" one, in the company of friends rather than a solitary one (like reading), or a large collective (like that of concerts or parties).

Cinema has a lot to do with friendship, and therein lies its *perfectionism*. The cinema experience is that of a group of friends, and if you're there alone, even for pleasure, it's in reference to this group practice. It is in this perspective that we can take up Cavell's specific method, in all his books on cinema, of relying essentially on his memories. The source of knowledge about the concept of cinema is nothing other than what we ourselves can say about it when we have mastered it. *The concept is therefore a matter of trust*. When it comes to the experience of cinema, the judgment and memories of each individual have a claim to universality. So cinema, as ordinary culture, has to do with autobiography.

We involve the films in ourselves. Films become new fragments of what's happening to me, new cards added to the well-mixed deck of my memory, without my being able to guess their place in the future. Like childhood memories whose treasure no one appreciates but me, whose content is nothing compared to the unspeakable importance they have for me. (Cavell 1971)

What's important to me, to you, has nothing to do with the established values of criticism. Herein lies the specificity of Cavell's definition of popular culture and his proposed subversion of criticism. In *More of the World Viewed*, written several years later, Cavell contests the possibility of determining the importance of a film from a purely theoretical or historical point of view. I alone can determine the importance and meaning of the films I see. This is the *democracy of cinema*, which may be extended to the way in which each individual determines her choice of TV series. Cavell bases his work on "the intelligence brought by the film to its own making", a care for films and their various producers (screenwriters, actors, producers and not just directors). In fact, no reflection on popular culture can do without this question, which Cavell confronts, refusing both the critic's contempt for forms seen as minor, and the condescension of intellectuals who claim an interest in series which is always governed by the certainty of a position of superiority in relation to binge /addiction practices of viewers.

This raises the question of *trust*: when and how to *trust one's experience*, to find the validity of the particular. Reconnecting with experience, and finding a voice for its expression. What remains is to articulate this subjective expression with the attention to the particular that lies at the heart of *ordinary ethics*. Hence Diamond's redefinition or redescription of morality based on literature. "I have tried," she says, "to describe certain features of what the moral life *looks like*, without saying anything at all about what it *ought to* look like." This phenomenal description of the moral life enables a transformation of ethics.

Ethics is attention to others, concern for others. The twentieth century produced a new attention to reality through the experience of cinema, and why the twenty-first century is again changing our perception of reality through the even more repeated and ordinary experience of series, the diversity of care's aesthetical forms. Care is a more central theme in TV series, certainly by the recognition they allow of a plurality of moral positions and voices, the staging of disputes, debates, misunderstandings ; the polyphonic nature of series, which have evolved from isolated characters (Columbo) or couples (Starsky and Hutch) to a « choral » dimension beginning with *Friends*, *ER*, *The West Wing*.

Sabine Chalvon-Demersay<sup>1</sup> has made a remarkable analysis of the kind of moral training provided by the very form of presentation of the series, and the radical turnaround achieved with the series of the 1990s (*ER*, *West Wing*): regularity, integration of the characters into the viewers' ordinary and family lives, initiation into unexplained forms of life and new, initially opaque vocabularies, without the viewer being heavily guided and

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<sup>1</sup> Sabine Chalvon-Demersay "La confusion des conditions : une enquête sur la série télévisée Urgences", *Réseaux*, 95, 1999, p. 235-283.

enlightened as he or she was in earlier productions. It is this methodology of the series - not only the narrativity, but above all the introduction and construction of the characters - that makes them relevant and morally expressive: but this forces us to revise the status of morality, to see it not in rules and principles of decision but in attention to ordinary conduct, to everyday micro-choices, to individual styles of expression ; all transformations of morality called for by philosophers weary of an overly abstract meta-ethics. The material of TV series allows for contextualization, historicity (regularity, duration, familiarization and perceptual education (paying attention to the expressions and gestures of characters we're getting to know, and who conversely may surprise us completely). To understand this requires us to take seriously the moral intentions of the producers and scriptwriters of TV series and movies, again in line with Cavell's reading: the latter, in fact, breaking with a critical tradition that made the intelligence and meaning of film a by-product of critical reading, affirmed the importance of the collective writing of film, of the function of the scriptwriter and director, but also of the actors, in the elaboration of the meaning(fulness) and educational value of film. In the moral expression constituted by the series, we need to highlight the collective and individual moral choices, negotiations, conflicts and agreements that form the basis of morality: the choices and itineraries of fictional characters, narrative turns, conflicts, reconciliations, repressions.

Just think of the importance in teen culture of the *Buffy the vampire slayer* series, conceived by its creator, Joss Whedon, as a feminist work designed to morally transform a co ed teenage audience, by showing a seemingly ordinary girl who is nonetheless capable of fighting. Buffy's moral strength lies in her nature as an ordinary girl in addition to being a formidable slayer, and her strong embodiment of *care* (for her friends, for her mother and sister... for the world she regularly saves). This is what makes her a "role model" for boys too, *care* being defined as an ability common to all genders.

If we also remember that Dewey, in *The Public and its Problems*, defines the *public* on the basis of a confrontation with a problematic situation in which people experience a specific disturbance that they initially perceive as a private matter, and in which the answer, never given in advance, emerges through the interplay of those who decide to give it public expression in their turn - we realize that television inherits the challenge of moral education from popular cinema. Characters in TV fiction can be "let go" and opened up to the imagination and use of each individual, "entrusted" to us - as if it were up to each of us to take care of them by taking care of ourselves, and sometimes to accept their irremediably unfamiliar yet familiar character (as in the case of great heroes like Jack Bauer).

A viewer who follows a series from the beginning can live with its characters for 5 or 7 years or more. That's a lot of time. And when a new character arrives, our first reaction will be rejection, before we get to know the different faces of her character, enter into her temporality, and discover what's important to her. It's all this work of attention and understanding that makes the series a genuine moral apprenticeship.

Series must be analyzed as genuine social interactions: readers, listeners and viewers receive them by making use of practical reasoning skills and ordinary knowledge of the world, as well as a moral competence, given but also to be educated both by the exercise of a viewer's competence experienced in various genres, and by the constant confrontation with reality, exemplified by political series. Moral sensitivity makes it possible to go beyond classical moral conceptions, through different moral approaches: people's way of being, natural expressions and reactions, the shifting texture of personalities, the constitution of characters over the long term, the expression of a worldview through discourse and personal style, the presentation and appreciation of the enemy.

*ER* constantly articulated the demands of private life and work, and internal conflicts in patient care (moral or medical care). In another, sometimes wackier, style, *House MD* (Doctor House), through the invention of an original and strong character, enables the paradoxical emergence of a care that is expressed in the very refusal to care about individuals, but is no less effective and real. The cult HBO series *Six Feet Under* was also essentially an extension of the realm of *care* to the ordinary dead; as, in a sense, is *Cold Case*. The objects of these series, in their various styles, are always linked to *care*, which is an inescapable subject or motif of everyday fiction. But care is not just a central topic: the series is also a means of arousing care (by arousing affectivity, depicting moving figures, attachment): *ER* with the real attachment felt for certain characters through their regular attendance, which meant that a highlight of the series was often the illness of one of the characters (Mark Greene). These extreme moments highlight the kind of attachment we have to fictional characters, which can only be understood in terms of care. The strong concern of viewers and fans for the fate of characters like Jon Snow in the cult series *Game of Thrones* is not a marginal phenomenon. They reveal the true heart of TV series, the attachment we have for characters built up over the years.

One of the tasks of TV criticism would be to highlight, in the reading of the moral expression constituted by series, the collective and individual moral choices, negotiations, conflicts and agreements that underpin moral representation: the choices and itineraries of fictional characters, turns in the narrative, turns in the scenarios. We shift the question of morality to that of the interpretation of public choices and the elaboration of a common sensibility, both assumed and educated/transformed by the media. The care of the public in every sense of the expression, or the public of care as constituted by this symbolic expression and the education provided by this expression. The question is crucially raised by political or "security" series that portray the struggle of democracies

against terrorism, presenting both the geopolitical and political stakes and intelligence techniques, but also the point of view of the "enemy", most often humanized (24, *Homeland*, *Fauda*, *The Bureau*).

We become attached to these characters because they affect us. Because we are affected and concerned by what happens to them, even if it's not our life. This affection has all the dimensions of attachment. But what's really at stake in this affection is a moral bond, the sharing and emergence of what matters. We care for the characters who in turn care for us, remaining inscribed in us after the series ends. The final scenes of *Lost* are a reflection on this way in which the experience of a series remains in each of us - just as the forgotten experience of the island is present deep down in the characters who, in this episode, have lived a completely different life where they don't know each other. More generally, great series *teach* us to separate ourselves from characters to whom we've become deeply attached by their very flaws (*The Wire*, *Six Feet Under*, *Mad Men* come to mind)... and the way they end, often long-prepared (or even thought out from the start), testify to the centrality of viewers' relationships to characters.

## 2. RECO

The ERC DEMOSERIES aims to showcase the results of research carried out on TV series, and to develop products that apply the innovative knowledge produced on the social impacts of TV series. The results of DEMOSERIES have highlighted the moral and epistemic capacities of audiences by exploring their behaviors with the security series genre (espionage, post-9/11 terrorism). By offering the first analytical framework to take into account all the stages in the life of a TV series, from creation to reception, and by analyzing an omnipresent television genre (ethical and deontological issues, relationship with intelligence institutions, geopolitical stakes), the project has achieved a scientific breakthrough and gained international recognition by emerging as a player in cultural and social innovation that highlights new sources of civic education and well-being. Through its collaboration with the world of intelligence (DGSE, IRSEM) and series production; the project has concretely analyzed how the images, words and characters of series shape the experience and demands of viewers, and provide an "out of academy" education.

The number of TV series available to viewers has exploded. This is mainly due to the various streaming platforms, which in addition to their original productions, broadcast series from different channels and countries. One of the consequences of this profusion is the growing difficulty for viewers to navigate through this offer and make an informed choice of programs likely to interest them. In 2022, 31% of viewers took more than 30 minutes to find a new series to watch when they had just finished watching one. The increase in the supply of series has not been accompanied by an improvement in selection and recommendation tools, or in critical advisory practices. As a result, viewers often have no choice but to follow the platform's algorithmic recommendation. Or to rely on very general descriptions based mostly on metadata and presented in the form of lists, directories or rankings devoid of explanation or analysis. They end up relying on a "gut feeling" or the advice of friends.

Initial results from the ERC DEMOSERIES project show that series have an ethical and political impact on viewers. By projecting themselves into universes often inaccessible to the general public, by becoming attached to all kinds of characters, by enlivening their ordinary conversations, by exploring specific genres, series viewers enrich their experiences and refine their judgment. How, then, can we give power back to viewers, enabling them to construct and mobilize this cultural, ethical and political experience with greater autonomy, and deflect the algorithmic biases resulting from platforms' economic interests and the arbitrariness of certain metadata-based thematic groupings? How can we integrate their nomadism between platforms and resources?

Since series help to build and animate a common representation of democratic life, how can we preserve this democratic life with the sort power of series?

After capturing the living rooms all over the globe in recent years, video streaming giants like Netflix and Amazon Prime Video are confronted with first signs of market saturation. While the idea of having unlimited access to an ever-growing library of video content was attractive enough for customers to subscribe to such services, latest developments like Disney's market entry and frequent price hikes put consumers' loyalty under test. It is doubtful that Netflix and Amazon can face growing competition and changing consumer tastes by boosting and promoting exclusive content production. Recommendation by the platforms seems both inefficient and unreliable, and what is needed is a breakthrough in the recommendation systems design.

How can TV series be "better viewed/consumed"? Even if viewing conditions have changed radically over the last few decades, with the advent of platforms and the mobility of media, series are content that arouse the

attachment of viewers and debate within society, creating a specific public space. DEMOSERIES is highlighting the powerful impact of TV series on individuals, populations and politics, and their production of a spectator competence that is essential in choosing series.

In the midst of the mass of video data constituted by series, taken individually and even more collectively, how can we find a motif, a scene, a statement, a character, a scene or, even more difficult, an idea, an atmosphere, an emotion? Are there scenes or episodes that are more *important or memorable* than others, and if so, how do we

define and find them? Here again, the tools offered to the public are insufficient. They underestimate the viewers' cultural, moral and technical capabilities, the agility of the circulation from a platform to another, the shaping of judgement. This comforts our vision that smart TV series searching tools, as opposed to metadata or behavior based TV series searching tools, are technological tools with a huge potential.

As a cultural object, TV series, in their development since the end of the last century, constitute an important and acknowledged corpus, with its classics; still considered as a consumer object rather than an authentic form of culture, a phenomenon reinforced by the ephemeral mode of distribution offered by streaming platforms. Building a corpus of important, influential series and a structured and curated access to them is necessary to have them acknowledged as works in their own right. There is a need for the development of exploration/exploration tools adapted to the needs of different potential users: creators, broadcasters, viewers, critics, researchers.

How to empower the consumer/viewer? Regular viewing of series is not passive bingeing ; over the long term and the development of expertise in genres such as security or others (fantasy, teenage, romantic, apocalyptic, political, office place comedies...) develop a competence and moral demands. The series of the XXIst century feature situations of moral dilemma that educate ethical reflection, while proposing a relatively coherent ethics of the concern for others, the desire for justice, inclusion and equality, as well as the need for individual development and progress (note presence of the concept of « good » in the world of series).

We have seen how TV series, a seemingly minor genre, have the ability to bring out the moral competence of each viewer. Their form gives them their moral value and expressiveness: the regularity and duration of their viewing, the integration of the characters into ordinary and family life, the initiation into new and initially opaque professions and vocabularies. The characters in television dramas are so clear and striking in their moral expressions, that they can be open to the imagination and use of all viewers. By projecting themselves into universes often inaccessible to the general public, by becoming attached to *all kinds* of characters, by enlivening their ordinary conversations, by exploring specific genres, TV series viewers enrich their experiences and refine their judgment.

Now, how can we concretely apply the knowledge produced on the impacts of TV series to cultural and social innovation, and find in popular culture new sources of citizen education and even well-being? Since the launch of our project, the number of TV series available to viewers has exploded. One of the consequences of this profusion, beyond the concept of « binge » is the growing difficulty for viewers to navigate through this offer and make an informed choice of programs likely to interest them. The increase in the supply of series has indeed not been accompanied by an improvement in selection and recommendation tools, nor in critical advisory practices. How can we give power back to viewers, enabling them to construct and mobilize this cultural, ethical and political experience with greater autonomy, and deflect the algorithmic biases resulting from platforms' economic interests ? Since series help to build and animate a common representation of democratic life, how can we implement this knowledge of series by viewers who are also citizens?

The lifestyles of viewers have changed over the past two decades with the introduction of cable channels, then digital and the development of platforms. These platforms have undoubtedly strengthened the position of English-language productions, but have also led to the circulation of Turkish, Korean, Israeli and African...series, which have fans in all countries. But today, faced with a massive and increased offer, viewers are finding it increasingly difficult to choose the series they want to watch independently. 50% of viewers have trouble finding the next series to watch. More than 30% of viewers take more than 30 minutes to find their next series to watch after finishing one! And when you take into account the fact that they use different offers (2.2 SVOD offers on average), this makes the recommendation incomplete and frustrating and not cross-cutting. Viewers are becoming more demanding and sensitive to new evaluation criteria, also not addressed by current tools, such as the type of aesthetic experience offered, the themes addressed, hybrid genres, or the objectives pursued (ethical, educational).

However, automatic recommendation tools have a major impact on the use of video streaming platforms. It is estimated that on Netflix, 80% of viewing time is the result of a recommendation. One of the problems with existing systems is that they often rely on simple algorithms that only take into account a limited set of factors, such as the user's past ratings or the popularity of the series (understood in a simplistic way). They therefore fail to recommend series that the user *might be* interested in; or, as we know, they may recommend series similar to those the user has already seen or to what other users who like the series also like, but not necessarily what the user would like to watch or discover.

In this context and with these results, it is important to highlight specific criteria in order to offer precise and moral recommendations. The DEMOSERIES team and ISJPS have thus built, in partnership with the BetaSeries recommendation platform an interdisciplinary CNRS project called RECO+. It aims to create an artificial intelligence system capable of processing large volumes of text and video data in order to identify new categories, such as types of scenes, styles of dialogue, mood and emotions. These categories would be richer and more relevant than those currently available in existing databases such as IMDb. They would transform recommendation by respecting viewers' competence and basing recommendations on the content of the series and the qualities of the corpus instead of user behavior.

The innovation takes place on three levels, linking the cultural, the industrial and the AI. On the cultural level, by highlighting the richness of the content of popular serial culture. On an ethical and social level, by giving more weight to the judgment of the ordinary viewer and allowing him to evaluate the series according to his experience and preferences. On a technological level, thanks to an AI-based search engine and a LLM, RECO+ shall analyze the content of the series, rather than the similarities between user profiles or their viewing history. The idea of giving back the user power over the recommendation thus draws directly on the understanding developed by the ERC of the impact of series and the viewer competence, and on the results of its survey on the reception of series of the source genre (of security series).

## Appendix

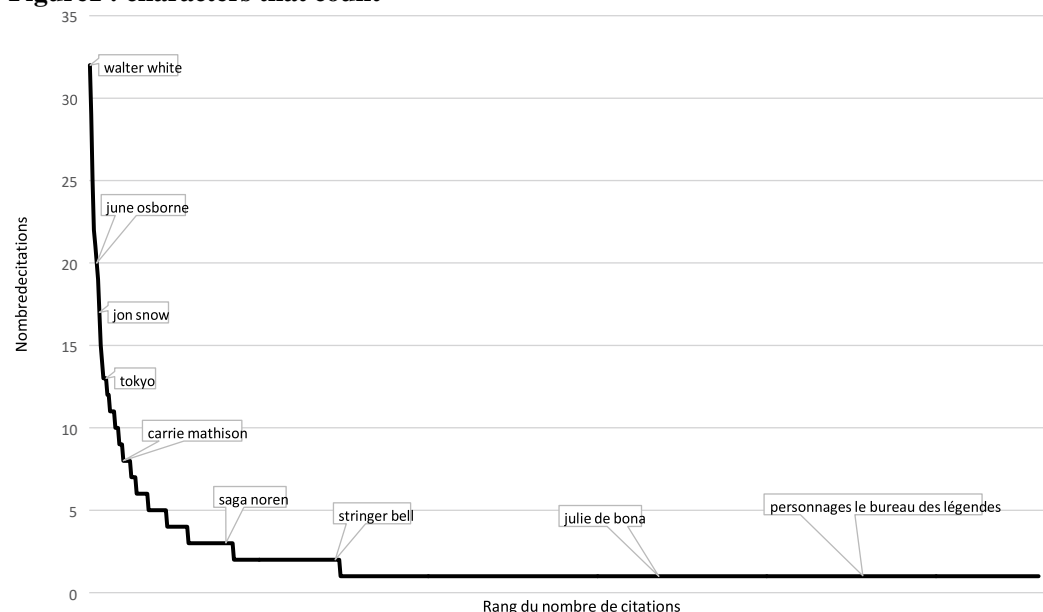
### A taste for diversity ? the 2022 DEMOSERIES survey and the recent BETASERIES tests

For sociologists Hervé Glevarec and Clement Combes the series character is the preferred designation and point of interest for fans and viewers of TV series. As part of a questionnaire survey carried out in 2022 among a representative panel of French adults, the question was asked: "Have any characters mattered for you? One viewer in two answered this question in the affirmative. Three dimensions of characters - *what she is*, *what she does* and *what she represents* - emerge, configuring the contemporary serial character as at once close and autonomous, endearing and inspiring, concerning and resilient.

**Two out of three viewers (59.1%), representing 96% of French respondents, say that characters have meant something to them.** They cited a total of 718 characters, the vast majority of whom are hapaxes, with all characters corresponding to 460 different series. The responses confirm the hypothesis implied by this question, which is that "counting for someone" refers to positive reasons. We hardly ever say "he/she counted negatively for me". In fact, respondents overwhelmingly mentioned character features with a positive valence ; apart from the violence that is sometimes pointed out, there are no deleterious and negative effects massively emphasized and highlighted by the respondents.

Characters "who mattered" to the respondents were given freely. Of the 1,935 series viewers, 690 indicated at least one character who "counted", i.e. almost one viewer out of two (59.1%), citing a total of 718 characters and formulating 1,239 reasons. All responses are counted as characters, including those relating to pairs of characters (i.e. "Elizabeth and Philip Jennings (*The Americans*)") or sets of characters (i.e. "the characters from *Friends*"). In other words, the answer "female characters in *Alta Mar*" counts as a character in the same way as an answer - rather suggested by the question - mentioning an identified character (i.e. "Dana Scully"). In this way, certain characters can be counted twice, once as individuals, in a single response (e.g. "Astrid Nielsen"), and in a response mentioning a couple or group of characters (e.g. "Astrid and Raphaëlle" from the eponymous series). This set of 706 collected characters includes animated characters such as Homer Simpson or Naruto, a few animals (Rintintin, Bojack Horseman), two robots (Bender (*Futurama*) and B2EMO (*Andor*)) as well as entities visibly conceived as "characters" in their own right.

**Figure1 : characters that count**



DEMOSERIES 2022; Number of quotes by respondents.

It should come as no surprise that the characters most frequently mentioned here belong to the series most frequently seen and preferred : example, Walter White (*Breaking Bad*), Elizabeth II (*The Crown*), Alex Hugo (*Alex Hugo*), Thomas Shelby (*Peaky Blinders*), Malotru (*The Office of Legends*) and June Osborne (*The Scarlet Handmaiden*) top the list of characters who matter to the French. Is this simply a case of cause and effect: the most-viewed series lead to greater familiarity with their characters, who end up mattering to more people than characters from lesser-viewed series? Probably so. But another hypothesis - supported by the coincidence with the list of favorite series - is to consider that the most popular series are so precisely because they feature characters who are worthy of interest, endearing and memorable. In short, *good* series (those that appeal to audiences) are built on *good* characters. This is the conviction of French screenwriter Éric Rochant, in particular of the series *Le Bureau*

and *Mafiosa*: "How can you not get tired of the main actors over time? They have to be credible, of course, but above all sincere, charismatic and profound. A good story isn't enough: it has to be based on very good characters. The time of the series allows us to deepen their personalities, make them more complex, transform them and give them a past." (Rochant, 2017). Nevertheless, it's worth noting that Alex Hugo, the police officer hero of the eponymous French series, ranked 11<sup>th</sup> favorite, climbs to third place. His success is no doubt due, among other reasons, to the celebrity of the actor who plays him, Samuel Le Bihan, on the one hand, to the topicality of the series, on the other, to its consensual nature. Indeed, the answers to the open-ended question (to which we'll return later) on why this character matters to the interviewees highlight a character praised for his humanity and altruism, his moral sense, but also his courage, charisma and professionalism. Alex Hugo represents a luminous hero of *high mimetic mode*, in relative contrast to the more troubled personalities portrayed by Walter White, the failed chemistry teacher turned drug baron, or Thomas Shelby, the ambitious Birmingham gang leader.

**Table1 : the main characters who counted**

Personnages (séries)	N	% sur l'ensemble des répondants	Personnages (séries) (suite)	N	% sur l'ensemble des répondants
Walter White (Breaking bad)	32	4,6	Tyrion Lannister (Game of Thrones)	10	1,4
Elisabeth 2 (The Crown)	29	4,2	Daryl Dixon (The Walking Dead)	9	1,3
Alex Hugo (Alex Hugo)	25	3,6	Fox Mulder (X-Files)	9	1,3
Thomas Shelby (Peaky Blinders)	22	3,2	Harvey Specter (Suits)	9	1,3
Malotru (Le bureau des légendes)	21	3,0	Carrie Mathison (Homeland)	8	1,2
June Osborne (La servante écarlate)	20	2,9	Inspecteur Columbo (Columbo)	8	1,2
Le Professeur (La Casa de Papel)	19	2,7	Monica Geller (Friends)	8	1,2
Jon Snow (Game of Thrones)	17	2,5	Personnages Friends (Friends)	8	1,2
Dr Shaun Murphy (The Good Doctor)	15	2,2	Saul Goodman (Better Call Saul)	8	1,2
Daenerys Targaryen (Game of Thrones)	14	2,0	Sheldon Cooper (The Big Bang Theory)	8	1,2
Astrid (Astrid et Raphaëlle)	13	1,9	Dr Philippe Dayan (En thérapie)	7	1,0
Dr House (Dr House)	13	1,9	Docteur Who (Dr Who)	7	1,0
Tokyo (La Casa de Papel)	13	1,9	Naruto (Naruto)	7	1,0
Dexter Morgan (Dexter)	12	1,7	Sherlock Holmes (Sherlock)	7	1,0
Morgane Alvaro (HPI)	12	1,7	Bree Van De Kamp (Desperate Housewife)	6	0,9
Arya Stark (Game of Thrones)	11	1,6	Capitaine Marleau (Capitaine Marleau)	6	0,9
Dr Meredith Grey (Grey's Anatomy)	11	1,6	Eleven (Stranger Things)	6	0,9
Ragnar Lodbrok (Vikings)	11	1,6	Geralt De Riv (The Witcher)	6	0,9
Rick Grimms (The Walking Dead)	11	1,6	Hercule Poirot (Hercule Poirot)	6	0,9
Birgitte Nyborg (Borgen)	10	1,4	Lucifer (Lucifer)	6	0,9
Leroy Jethro Gibbs (NCIS)	10	1,4	Luna Torres (Plus belle la vie)	6	0,9

**Table2 : the gender of the characters who counted**

	Effectifs	%
Personnages masculins	386	54,7
Personnages féminins	261	37,0
Ensemble de personnages (mixte)	50	7,1
Autre (animaux, robots)	10	1,4
<b>Ensemble des personnages</b>	<b>706</b>	<b>100</b>

DEMOSERIES 2022; All characters who counted (N706)

Homo-, bisexual, trans and queer characters are a minority among the most quoted characters, who are almost exclusively heterosexual. Among the latter only the characters of Doctor Who (in some of his most recent incarnations) and Lucifer (even though he's the devil, not a human) are marginally bisexual. Of the 700-plus characters mentioned by respondents, fewer than 40 are explicitly LGBTQ+. These include the character of Willow



Rosenberg, Buffy's loyal ally; *The Wire*'s lone gangster Omar Little; Thomas Marci, the co-manager of the Mistral bar in *Plus belle la vie*; Shane McCutcheon, the rebellious, magnetic heroine of *The L Word*; and Annalise Keating, the brilliant lawyer in *How to Get Away with Murder*. Gay, lesbian and bisexual characters are no longer (as much) relegated to secondary roles, stereotyped and confined to their sexual orientation. They are also less destined than before to a tragic fate, with this narrative trope known as "Bury your Gays" or "Dead lesbian syndrome" leading gay and lesbian characters to death more often than not. Two of the characters mentioned, Nomi Marks (*Sense8*) and Anna Madrigal (*Tales of the City*), are trans women. The former is played by Jamie Clayton, a trans actress. The latter is portrayed by two people of two different ages: a cisgender woman (Olympia Dukakis, who had already taken on the role in a first adaptation of the novels in the 1990s) and a trans woman (Jen Richards, playing the younger character). For some respondents, it is precisely the non-heteronormative nature of these characters that constitutes an advanced reason for their attachment.

### Concern and attachment for characters who matter

What is the gender affinity for male and female characters? Citations of characters according to respondents' gender indicate a distribution of both masculine and feminine characters among women, as well as mixed ensembles, and a tropism among men to favor characters of their own gender; Here we find an identity issue that translates into a more open gender identification among women than among men. They choose characters of the other sex more than men do. There is also an interpretation that understands this asymmetry as a valorization of the masculine over the female.

The gender of the characters that counted, according to the gender of the respondents

Sur 100 répondants citent un personnage	féminin	masculin	mixte (ensemble de personnages)	autre
Femme	<b>25,9</b>	25,8	<b>3,4</b>	0,2
Homme	12,0	<b>26,6</b>	2,3	<b>0,2</b>
<b>Ensemble</b>	<b>19,0</b>	<b>26,2</b>	<b>2,9</b>	<b>0,2</b>

Affinity with the most frequently cited characters follows fairly clear socio-demographic lines, even if the numbers, often less than five individuals, preclude too much certainty, and testify, once again, to the strong fragmentation of serial practice (Like the "particularly concerned audiences" of *L'institut* and *Urgences*, as S. Chalvon-Demersay (2003) calls them, schoolteachers and medical staff, reception is structured by a principle of minimal, even strong, involvement.

First of all, gender affinity. If it's present at all, it's once again on the side of men for male characters, with women again having crossed gender affinities; once again, it's as if men had more exclusive sex/gender affinities for male characters, and women less exclusive gender affinities. We hypothesize that any reduction to a single variable limits our understanding of the concernements, which do not function in mirror image, but according to a shared condition (Chalvon-Demersay, 1999a) : a social or ethno-racial identity, a family role, secondary characteristics, and so on. This is why we can be a man and love a female character, because we like another of her dimensions: her courage, her rebellion. You may have been a teenager who loved the *Zora the Redhead* series in the 1980s for Zora's independence and rebellion.

Walter White (*Breaking Bad*), for example, is a character who appeals strongly to men under 40 with university degrees. Often for his evolution, an evolution that consists of both a process of selfaffirmation and a descent into hell (he meets a tragic fate and takes his loved ones with him). "A 40year-old executive says: "A sheltered professor who loses it and very gradually becomes a drug baron, an incredible evolution of a character. His ability to bully those around him, starting with his wife, and his "cold and cynical" side (male, 43, white-collar worker) must have been reasons that kept female audiences away. Unlike the character of Thomas Shelby (*Peaky Blinders*) who, although more important to men, also attracts the attention of women... no doubt because of his youth and beauty, but also because of his greater sensitivity. Thomas Shelby is a kind of "gangster with a soft heart". He is praised for his "charisma and intelligence" (woman, 43, executive), "strength of character" and "uprightness" (man, 35, blue-collar worker).

Elizabeth II (*The Crown*) is the first female character to be highlighted by the interviewees, and is primarily of interest to middle-aged, educated and managerial women. The series gives us a better understanding of this figure from the history of the twentieth century, so far removed from us: "She left her mark on an entire century, and we learn a lot about her from the series" (Woman, 58 years old, intermediate prof.). In so doing, *The Crown* opens the door to greater empathy for the woman behind the Queen: "We're inside the head and body of a legendary queen. We understand even her most intimate choices. She now counts in my personal life" (man, 79, retired, former executive); "The

Respondents indicated the reasons why a particular character might have been important to them: "his tenacity and loyalty" about Jack Bauer (*24h Chrono*), "he's charming, athletic, a good listener, sympathetic" about

Alex Hugo (*Alex Hugo*), "she dares to say and face her thoughts, her quirks, her doubts in order to move forward" about Ally McBeal (*Ally McBeal*).

We note the diversity of the reasons given in this open-ended question. While we have grouped them together - as with any categorization exercise - we also wanted to preserve some of the singularity of the responses. As a result, this list of reasons why these characters mattered presents a (long) trail of categories referring to a handful or even a single response ("he's modest", "he's misunderstood", "he's cultured", etc.). The majority of answers evoke qualities, usually in redundant terms: the character is "intelligent", "clever", "ingenious", "charismatic", "imposing", "commanding", "hard-hitting", "tenacious", "determined", "fighter", "reckless", "courageous", "heroic", etc. These redundant terms constitute the categories in which the answers are grouped. These redundant terms make up the most numerous categories. A few rare verbatims highlight more neutral or equivocal characteristics ("tormented", "vulnerable", "morally ambivalent", etc.), or even those with a clearly negative valence ("cynical", "unhealthy", "unsympathetic", or "mean / cruel", etc.).

### The meaning of characters: what they are, what they do and what they represent

The first set of meanings concerns the quality of the character - *what he or she is*. The category "he's intelligent" groups together the greatest number of verbatims expressing this quality as such, or indicating "the character's intelligence despite his disability" [Astrid Nelsen d'Astrid et Raphaëlle] (man, 72, retired, former executive); but the category also includes responses dealing with pragmatism or ingenuity. So the character's intellectual, psychological or pragmatic quality is a major criterion, dominating the other criteria of the characters' effect on viewers. The intelligence of the character who counts manifests a valued figure of the clever, strategic, thoughtful individual, faced with situations or a world perceived as an obstacle, in the manner of Philippe Rickwaert from *Baron noir*: "A brilliant character sacrificed by his peers in the name of personal careerism. Endearing because human and eager to advance his noble ideas" (woman, aged 60, executive) or Birgitte Nyborg from *Borgen*: "his ability to make himself heard, his diplomacy and uprightness in his positions" (woman, aged 37, executive) or even the Professor from *La Casa de Papel*: "putting his thinking and his genius at the service of an evil or a good" (man, aged 21, intermediate teacher). The character's intelligence enhances his ability to deal with the obstacles he encounters.

The second category is not unrelated to intelligence: it concerns the character's "tenacity" and determination, which, once again, demonstrates the quality of perseverance: "his tenacity and loyalty" [Jack Bauer, *24h chrono*] (male, 44 years old, executive); "determination and reflection in the face of challenges" [Birgitte Nyborg, *Borgen*] (female, 52 years old, retired, former intermediate teacher); "showing that you have to give up nothing and that no law, no situation can lead you to say 'never'" [Walter White, *Breaking Bad*] (male, 21 years old, intermediate teacher); "to show that you can't give up and that no law, no situation can lead you to say 'never'" [Walter White, *Breaking Bad*] (male, 21, intermediate teacher).

The character's quality of altruism and empathy also comes to the fore: "Alex Hugo, another altruistic character who doesn't hesitate to put himself in danger to help others while defending nature" [Alex Hugo] (woman, 63, retired, former executive). "He's a lawyer who does everything he can to find the solution for the neediest, even if he sometimes takes inordinate risks" [Saul Goodman, *Better Call Saul*] (Male, 54, employed). "He died on the show for standing up for one of his neighbors, that's heroic" [Mike Delfino, *Desperate Housewives*] (Female, 36, executive). "His inhuman humanity!" [Dr. House] (woman, 48, executive). The following verbatim indicates a moral transformation through the experience of the series. "It's his character, his way of being, he exudes kindness, he's tolerant. He's homosexual, which isn't what I prefer, but I like him all the same, he's decent" [Thomas Marci, *Plus belle la vie*] (woman, 93, employee). "Kindness, wisdom, leads us to reflect on the interpretations we make of others" [Saru, *Star Trek Discovery*] (man, 45, executive). "He's an inspiring, caring leader in a way rarely seen on TV, he's endearing and vulnerable, he's one of the first gay men in teen animation" [Takashi Shirogane, *Voltron Legendary Defender*] (woman, 33, executive).

The character's "charisma" includes designations such as "charismatic character" [Alex Hugo]; "charisma, courage incarnate" [Jon Snow from *Game of Thrones*]; "charisma, poise, assurance... wanting to be like him" [Lucifer from *Lucifer*]; "his charisma, his intelligence" [Thomas Shelby from *Peaky Blinders*]; "his charisma" [Tony Soprano from *The Sopranos*]. "He's original" codes the effects in terms of difference from a norm: from "original" to "his atypical style", "crazy", "his nontraditional way of leading his life" or "unpredictable".

Related to the tenacity mentioned above is the character's "power", which is understood as the ability to overcome life's trials: "the courageous hero" [Jon Snow, *Game of Thrones*] (Male, 42, prof., intermediate); "she's so strong and has overcome a lot in her life, and she's always been able to keep her cool" [Dr. Meredith Grey, *Grey's Anatomy*] (Student, 22). "she's so strong and has overcome so much in her life, and she's always kept her cool" [Dr. Meredith Grey, *Grey's Anatomy*] (Student, age 22); "strong, resilient character" [June Osborne, *The Handmaid's Tale*] (Female, age 40, Employee).

The contemporary feminist dynamic emerges through responses dealing precisely with feminine power. We chose to code all mentions of "she's a strong woman" and feminist identifications with the eponymous category "a strong woman" [Aurore Jacob, *Demain nous appartient*] (woman, aged 50, intermediate prof. intermediate teacher); "she was a strong woman despite appearances, and very endearing" [Gabrielle Solis, *Desperate*

*Housewives*] (woman, 31, intermediate teacher); "*I like her feminist and committed, intellectual side*" [Eloise Bridgerton, *The Bridgerton Chronicle*] (woman, 49, employee). There's a fine line between exemplarity and particularity. One woman said of Alicia Florick from *The Good Wife*: "*a woman who reveals herself and asserts herself little by little after having lived in her husband's shadow*". We put her in the "she's a strong woman" category, reading an emancipatory, feminist dimension into the response.

"He's complex": "a complex character, who sometimes asks himself questions, and who at other times remains true to his profile" [Jack Bauer from *24H Chrono*] (Male, 48 years old, executive); "*let's say he's a rather dark character like the series, quite complex at the same time and then a character who has already lived, in fact, for whom nothing is all black and white in fact*" [Capitaine Niémans from *Les rivières pourpres*] (Female, 72 years old, retired); "*he accumulates three problems: overweight, parental divorce and school harassment, but in the series, this never turns into a caricature, and the actor played it very well*" [Robin from *En thérapie*] (woman, aged 73, retired, executive); "*a contradictory character, but one who is always committed to defending his values despite the oppression of the new society in which he is forced to evolve*" [June Osborne from *La servante écarlate*] (woman, aged 34, executive).

"He's fair": "his vision of justice and his attachment to the mountains his conception of today's society" [Alex Hugo from *Alex Hugo*] (man, 56, blue-collar worker); "*he defends nice values*" [Alex Hugo from *Alex Hugo*] (woman, 74, retired); "*his perception of what's right and wrong*" [Malotru from *Le Bureau*] (man, 45, employee); "*their uprightness*" [The Shelby brothers from *Peaky Blinders*] (man, 35, worker); "*the honesty of the character who doesn't let himself be corrupted*" [Fox Mulder from the *X Files*] (woman, 83, retired).

"She's resilient": "*she's having her life turned upside down and I was curious to see how she would react as a conservative woman*" [Bree van de Kamp from *Desperate Housewives*] (man, 28, employee); "*her resilience, her history of addictions, her will to get through it*" [Dr Amelia Shepherd from *Grey's Anatomy*] (man, 56, employee). "He/she is beautiful": "*her beauty, her hair, her outfits*" [Cersei Lannister from *Game of Thrones*] (woman, 49, executive); "*he was cute :-)*" [Finn Hudson from *Glee*] (male, 45, executive); "*the way she dressed, she was an attractive sensual bombshell with a very great memory. In character, you don't believe she works for the police. For me, it's incredible. I wonder if I can go out with a woman like that, given the way she dresses and her eccentricity*" [Morgane Alvaro from *HPI*] (man, 57, retired); "*handsome guy struggling with his demons*" [Lucifer from *Lucifer*] (woman, 39, executive); "*attractive, exceptional, gifted, impressive, very very handsome*" [The Mentalist from *Mentalist*] (woman, 43, blue-collar worker).

### **What the character does for us: she's endearing, makes me laugh, is close to me.**

A second type of response emphasizes the bond with the character, a bond of attachment or closeness.

These answers refer to *what the character does to us*.

The category "she's endearing"<sup>2</sup> includes the following numerous occurrences: "*he's an endearing character*"; "*his endearing side*"; "*they came into my life as if I knew them*"; "*you quickly become attached to this character*", but also "*he's close to me*" or "*he's my youth*". Here we have confirmation of the centrality of a qualification by "attachment" of viewers' relationship to serial characters, in terms of both companionship and affective investment (Author A, 2012).

Respondents talk about the character's possible emotional effect, as covered by the categories "*he makes me laugh*", "*he touches me*", "*he fascinates me*", etc., or his cognitive effect (as covered by the categories "*he makes me think*", "*he broadens my knowledge of others*", "*he helps me or makes me more combative*", "*he makes me more empathetic*" or "*he shows me an alternative to my life*").

Let's take a look at the responses we've grouped together in the "he's close to me" category: "*I found it amusing/interesting to identify with this character*" [Dr House from *Dr House*] (male, 57, selfemployed). These are responses that testify to a closeness of condition or identity, manifested in the response "find myself in the character": "*I find myself in this character*" [Jack Bauer from *24 H Chrono*] (man, 41, employed). "*I find myself in her*" [Daphne Bridgerton from *The Bridgerton Chronicle*] (woman, 18, self-employed). "*The hero's personal life has a lot in common with my own. I had a particular emotion watching this series*" [Pol Rubio from *Capitaine Niémans*] (man, 42, executive). Or even in terms of their impact: "*She's an HPI [high intellectual potential] who has trouble finding her place in society, like my daughter*" [Anne Shirley from *Anne With An E*] (woman, 53, executive). "*That is to say, you have to know that I have Jewish descent so I'm closer to her than some. The courage he first had in the camps to get out and start his life again, rebuild a family lose it again and rebuild another to move on*" [Dr Klein de *Dr. Klein*] (woman, 66, retired, former employee). "*His life and his choices are similar to mine*" [Abby Lockhart from *Urgences*] (woman, 56, intermediate teacher). "*I recognized myself in all of them*" [*Friends* characters] (Female, 34, executive). "*Characters who helped me grow and evolve*" [Rory Gilmore from *Gilmore Girls*] (Woman, 28, executive).

<sup>2</sup> The term itself is in the majority in this category, which also includes expressions such as "nice", "nice" or "I like his personality".

Among the subjective effects of the characters, responses demonstrate a "broadening of my knowledge of the world or of others". These are responses that demonstrate an impact of the character on the viewer in terms of enrichment of perspectives, adoption of an off-center point of view, consideration for another condition, awakening to empathy and understanding, even intellectual emancipation: *"I became attached to them and recognized myself in them, despite my principles in real life"* [Walter White, *Breaking Bad*] (student, 27); *"another vision of adolescence"* [Haley Scott, *The Scott Brothers*] (woman, 35, executive); *"you're inside the head and body of a legendary queen. You understand even her most intimate choices. She now counts in my personal life"* [Elisabeth II from *The Crown*] (man, 79, retired, former executive); *"their reactions, their way of doing things"* [characters from *Tokyo Vice*] (man, 64, retired, executive); *"a complex character who highlights high intellectual potential with a touch of craziness to crack"* [Morgane Alvaro from *HPI*] (woman, 26, executive); *"everyone's life difficulties that I'm not necessarily aware of in my daily life. I show empathy and moderate my certainties"* [Maeve Wiley from *Sex Education*] (male, 55, employee).

### What it represents : its evolution, its incarnation, its truth

A third set of answers focuses on what the character represents: "its evolution", "its incarnation", "its veracity" or "its documentary interest".

"His evolution" includes answers about the character's development in the series, in terms, for example, of *"positive progress in life"*, *"character development"* or *"emancipation"*. It shows the importance of long-term companionship and the psychological density acquired by the series character. It's not unrelated to attachment, as we saw earlier. Here are a few examples.

*"We learn at the beginning of the series that he has cancer and that he doesn't have long to live. Knowing that, we're going to follow his adventures and see him evolve for better or worse"* [Walter White from *Breaking Bad*] (male, 25, employee).

*"The evolution of the character, the character, the strength"* [Arya Stark from *Game of Thrones*] (male, 44, intermediate prof.).

*"His evolution, his independence, his will to protect, his courage, his speed of action"* [Peter Quinn from *Homeland*] (woman, 21, student).

*"You dive into his life with him, you're baffled by the volatile nature of his real identity and I spent the whole series trying to figure out who he really was (duplicity of the character)"* [Malotru from *Bureau des Légendes*] (woman, 40, intermediate teacher).

*"I've been watching him for 10 years, he never stops evolving and inspires me to never give up on my dreams"* [Luffy from *One Piece*] (man, 20, self-employed).

*"He's been there since the beginning and he's had to deal with a lot of racism. I've seen him evolve during the soaps with his family and everything that revolves around the police station"* [Jean-Paul Boher from *Plus belle la vie*] (woman, 65, retired, former intermediate teacher).

*"Her evolution is extraordinary, this woman has incredible inner strength"* [Laëticia Belestia from *Plus belle la vie*] (woman, 36, employee).

"Her embodiment", in turn, expresses the interviewee's confusion about the fictional nature of the character. *"She plays remarkably well, and I think she must have been involved with autistic people to pick up on their gestures and attitudes"*, about Astrid Nielsen in *Astrid et Raphaëlle*. While the coding "his incarnation" takes into account the reference to the actor's acting (*"realistic and touching acting"* about Dr. Shaun Murphy from *The Good Doctor*), the coding "his veracity" takes into account the difference expressed by some respondents between what belongs to the actor and what belongs to the character. When a respondent refers to what we might call the character's realism or relevance, we consider that "what counts" for him or her is the character's "veracity": *"character pretty close to reality, in my opinion"* [Lieutenant Grace Billets de *Bosch*] (man, 69, executive).

We'll end on the "documentary interest" found in the characters who made their mark: *"her history, her life and the responsibilities she had"* [Elisabeth II from *The Crown*] (woman, 36 years old, intermediate prof. intermediate); *"she taught me a lot about life, psychopaths in general and ways of hurting others"* [Jeffrey Dahmer from *Dahmer*] (man, 32, executive); *"the role of the examining magistrate"* [Alice Nevers from *Alice Nevers*] (man, 64, retired, former employee); *"the place of politics in Denmark"* [Birgitte Nyborg from *Borgen*] (woman, 72, retired, former executive). The responses show that the series are a great source of learning about historical figures, social and professional environments, and ways of life (democracy, for example).

In conclusion, the three main reasons why serial characters have come to count - "she's smart", "she's endearing" and "her evolution" - all testify to a contemporary configuration contrasting with the old figure of the hero in fiction. "He's intelligent", , and not so much "strong" or "handsome". The character remains desirable, but without the price of remoteness. All these characters possess a kind of humanity, that is, something that makes them "human", in the sense of their proximity to our human condition as viewers and to our concern for others. The human qualities of outstanding characters are essentially character (a courageous character who fights and confronts existence and the obstacles to achieving her goals), empathy and sensitivity (she cares about others), but also charisma (she seduces people with her drive and personal qualities).

The valorization of the character's intelligence is that of his ability to negotiate with the complexity of reality, just as his "evolution" (and "resilience") testifies to the importance of the "trials" she faces. The *characters who count* lead their lives rather than succeed or fail. Responses show that series characters often influence viewers' personal development, their worldview, their visions of good and bad and their ability to empathize with experiences and lives different from their own.