

# Social imaginary of Physical Education built from Spanish TV “teen series”

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**Abstract:** This research investigates the imaginary built around Physical Education based on Spanish “teen series”, whose reference was life in a school. As a phenomenological study, it uses a qualitative methodology to analyze information produced by viewing the series under study (*Compañeros; Física o Química* and *El Internado*). Video was categorized using NVivo10 software. The main results show a socially undervalued discipline that is anchored on a mechanistic approach with practical, uncritical and intellectually devalued teachers.

**Keywords:** Physical Education; qualitative analysis; adolescent behavior; mass media.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Television’s impact and influence in today’s society has reached such a level that “[...] ideas about the world are increasingly concerned with how some pieces of information are selected and displayed while others are hid and ignored within that mass culture” (LOMAS, 2005, p. 49). That situation is such that, according to Montero (2006), there are cases in which a topic treated in a TV series achieved levels of social awareness that are

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higher than certain advertising campaigns or actual information on the subject. In fact, “[...] the media contribute to form professional identities as well as stereotypes about them” (RODRÍGUEZ-CAMERO; RODRÍGUEZ-CAMERO; AZAÑÓN-HERNÁNDEZ, 2008, p. 119). According to several investigations about the matter, those stereotypes are “[...] a general image, commonly accepted by a group – about other people or groups – that are transferred in time and may acquire the status of unquestionable truth” (GALÁN, 2007, p. 230).

In this context, the teenage public and even many adults end up raising the stereotypes they are offered to the category of absolute truths because, as noted by Rodríguez-Camero, Rodríguez-Camero and Azañón-Hernandez (2008, p. 120), “[...] the media have been legitimized as ‘reflections of reality’ or ‘repositories of truth’”, even creating trends in society (Medrano, 2005). These statements are reinforced by the very data on television consumption, which reached a peak in 2008 and 2009, according to TNS Audiencias de medios: 3 hours and 45 minutes per person/day. Besides, we must also be aware of society’s low or virtually nonexistent critical education regarding that medium, resulting in a lack of proper mediation in terms of filmic, situational and evaluative limits and teaching about it (MEDRANO, 2005).

For over a decade, according to studies by Medrano, Palacios and Barandiarán (2007) and Medrano, Aierbe and Palacios (2010), the main reference for (chiefly young and adolescent) audience is fiction series, regardless of certain sporting events as pointed out by García de Castro (2008). As shown by the latter author in a study commissioned by Televisión Española, one of the main reasons for the great appeal of those series is that “[...] Television fiction is a highly flexible product that is adaptable to viewers’ new routines and life habits” (GARCÍA DE CASTRO, 2008, p. 148). Besides, a number of television productions recreating the lives of professionals working in schools have become fashionable in series (“*Compañeros*”, “*El Internado*”, “*Física o Química*”...). Productions describing a world that is very significant for teenagers,

who have become the star characters of television strategies.

Therefore, assuming that the media not only reflect reality but also largely contribute to create it (GÓMEZ CALDERÓN, 2005), it is evident that there would be a true reality and a media reality, and although the latter should be a reflection of the former, it is usually built only on those parts that interest the most (RODRÍGUEZ-CAMERO; RODRÍGUEZ-CAMERO; AZAÑÓN-HERNÁNDEZ, 2008). Therefore, Imbert (2008) notes that the current television model goes one step further and, not satisfied with building its own reality, turns it into spectacle.

Physical Education (PE) was also reflected in the mirror of television series we mentioned before. We could say that the reflection effect is twofold: on the one hand it allows us to recognize ourselves as a significant segment of society sees us and, on the other hand, the image it reflects helps shaping viewer's perception on PE. Studies on the subject are scarce in Spain (GALÁN, 2006; GONZÁLEZ-ARÉVALO, 2006; GARCÍA-MUÑOZ; FEDELE, 2011) and those series are important in shaping collective imaginary about PE. We focused on describing and interpreting social stereotypes ascribed to the discipline and its characters, through the analysis of the most significant "teen series" in Spain, recreated in school contexts and aired in prime time.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

The study was based on a qualitative approach from which we will describe and interpret reality – in this case, fiction, our object of study (GIBB, 2012; RUIZ, 2003). The "teen series" selected were aired on primetime television from late 1990 until 2011, which gives us an idea of their high acceptance. The basis of the investigation are the series "*Compañeros*" (1998-2002), "*El Internado*" (2007-2010) and "*Física o Química*" (2008-2011) – all broadcast by private channel Antena 3 TV. Another important factor for the choice of these series is that all of them include a PE teacher among their main characters. In Table 1 we can identify

the characters that have been analyzed. We also analyzed four substitute teachers (3 females and 1 male) who have replaced any of the main characters at different times of the series.

**Table 1:** Seasons, chapters and main characters analyzed

Series	Chapters	Season	Main Characters	
<i>Compañeros</i>	9	107	Virginia	
<i>El internado</i>	7	81	Pedro	Hugo
<i>Física y Química</i>	7	81	Jonathan	Vaquero

Source: Prepared by the authors

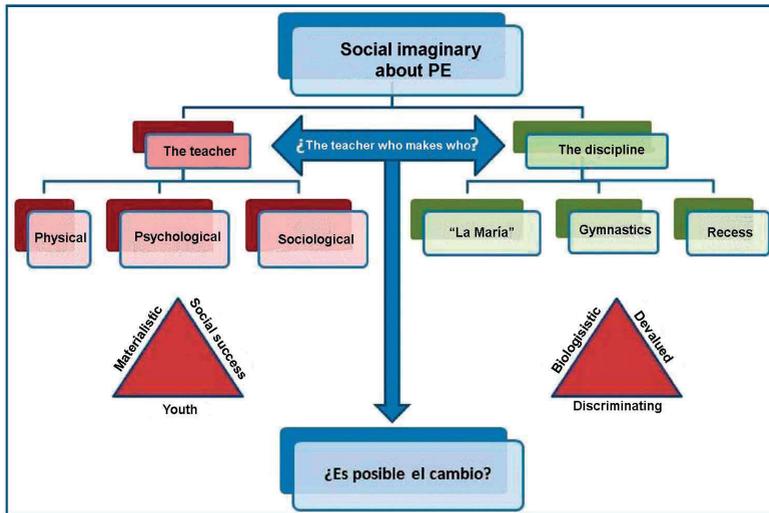
To perform the analysis, we have relied on the guidelines set by Gallant (2006; 2007) for the study and analysis of television fiction, but using functions offered by NVivo10 software (TRIGUEROS; RIVERA; TORRE, 2011; VALDEMOROS-SAN EMETERIO, M. A; PONCE-DE-LEÓN-ELIZONDO, A.; SANZ-ARAZURI, E., 2011; WILTSHIER, 2011). It allowed us to classify and categorize each video sequence selected for the analysis based on the following criteria: series; season; chapter; time for beginning and end of sequence; character of the sequence and his or her characterization in it under three profiles defined: physical, psychological and sociological.

**Figure 1** - Word frequency results with NVivo10

Palabra	Longitud	Conteo
geográfica	10	2
gestor	6	1
<b>gimnasia</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>70</b>
global	6	4
globales	8	2
globalización	13	1
golfo	5	1
gran	4	1
grandes	7	1
grupo	5	1
grupos	6	1
guerra	6	1
guión	5	1
ha	2	1
haber	5	1
haberno	7	1
habilidades	11	4
habitantes	10	1
habituales	10	4
habría	6	1
hace	4	3

Source: Prepared by the authors

After the step described above, we started an analysis of the discourse produced in each of the sequences, following guidelines set by Strauss and Corbin (2002) and focusing on those topics that emerge naturally in the discourse and that will form the imaginary created around PE. This first analysis allows us to make a first inductive (live) categorization; then we move to reorganize it around the main topics present. In addition, taking advantage of the possibilities offered by NVivo, we conducted frequency analysis for significant words that initially indicate the weight that the concept can have in the discourse (Figure 1). As a result of this analysis, we created a preliminary conceptual map that will guide us through the process of description and interpretation of the most significant findings (Figure 2).

**Figure 2** – Social Imaginary on PE built in TV series

Source: Prepared by the authors

### 3 DESCRIPTION AND INTERPRETATION OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS

Our reference for this analysis will be the conceptual map (Figure 2) based on the most representative topics that emerge from the study. We should note that this map is drawn after the categorization described in the previous section. Two key axes of analysis are established: the first question would be: Who makes who? Do teachers define the lines or the discipline's inertia draws them to consistently reproduce existing topics and practices?; secondly, we have to reflect on the possibilities of change: Is it possible? Roughly two core topics grouped around the teacher and the discipline are identified. The teacher emerges as a young person who takes care of his or her body, is socially extroverted, seeks social acceptance and obtains it in most cases, and is concerned with the present, immersed in a “presentism” that excludes

critical attitudes and concern for cultural growth. By looking at the discipline we find both social and school devaluation, with a clear biologicistic purpose that causes, in most cases, distancing and enmity of the less gifted in motoric terms.

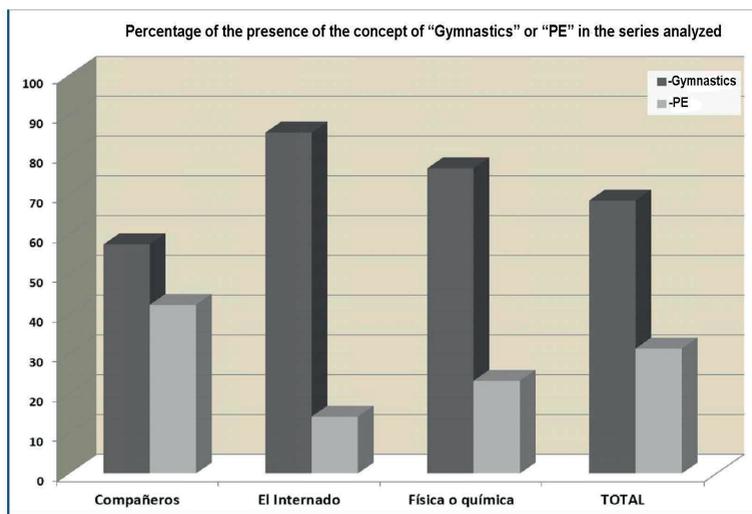
That is, we remain anchored in that “gymnastics” introduced to us by the Spanish dictatorship and which 30 years of democracy have not been able to change yet. Let us conduct a more detailed analysis of the lines we have just described.

### 3.1. PHYSICAL EDUCATION RATHER THAN GYMNASTICS

The analysis shows the difficulty to banish the outdated and erroneous concept of “gymnastics” and refer to school PE. That indicates great ignorance or carelessness about the true meaning of that discipline and creates terminological confusion, with major consequences for the image of the area. From the frequency of words counted in selected sequences, we found a total of 70 references (Chart 1). *Gymnastics* was used in a little over two out of three sequences (68.6%) while PE was used only in the remaining third (31.4%). *Gymnastics* is not used only by students, but also by teachers, principals and even PE teachers themselves. That obviously does a disservice to the area, since the characteristics and the educational value attributed to gymnastics have little to do with those of PE.

It is remarkable that the concept of “Gymnastics” is more often present in current series (“*El Internado*” and “*Física o Química*”) than in “*Compañeros*”, which can be interpreted as a move backwards, although it can also be a mere screenwriter problem. What is clear is that the PE of Spain’s democratic period, which has a multidisciplinary curriculum and whose emphasis is on more value-based aspects than motor performance, still has not been able to replace, at least conceptually, the twenty-first century gymnastics that prevailed during most of school physical activity time in Franco’s Spain.

**Chart 1** - Frequency of use of the terms gymnastics and PE in the analyzed series



Source: Prepared by the authors

We can also see how the media – the press, radio, television – sustain the concept in advertisements, news on the PE area or in conferences and interviews. Let us just remember the example of a detergent advertisement made by a famous football player (David Villa) – who becomes the school’s gymnastics teacher – to convince mothers that his product washes whiter. The problem is the social impact which unconsciously reinforces not only the concept of “gymnastics” but also identifies the class with a mere football match.

Obviously, scriptwriters are highly responsible because most of them have experienced Francoist gymnastics fully or at least closely, so it makes sense to take their experiences as references to give it greater credibility (GONZÁLEZ ARÉVALO, 2006). Furthermore, we have to keep in mind that those series are aimed at

an all-age audience, so it is easier to identify with PE aimed at mere functional improvement, based on analytical, repetitive exercises, with very rigid formations and a performed under whistle blows. In this sense, the three series that make up the bulk of this study are not the only ones in which we can find examples of this.

In one of the chapters in which a new PE teacher arrives, the first thing he does is to put the students in line to jump the horse under whistle blows, as if it were the army (Compañeros; 2/06, 6'42"/9'17").<sup>1</sup> In fact, a student ends up having nightmares about his teacher (dressed in military uniform) as a result of his difficulty to jump. The sequence is obviously far from the PE we see in schools today, but we must not forget that the social imaginary is also based on those images that, as Galán (2007) says, can be turned into truth unquestioned by viewers when relating reality and fiction.

### 3.2. PHYSICAL EDUCATION; A “MARÍA”<sup>2</sup> DISCIPLINE HEADING TOWARDS CURRICULAR EXILE

If we understand the school curriculum as the relevant culture that a society intentionally wants to convey to its future generations (GRUNDY, 1991), we are probably witnessing the agony of PE at school. When we look at the dialogues of the series, we can see how that idea of “maría”, to which we alluded earlier, manifests itself. The suspense in PE is associated with the highest level of stupidity a student can reach – “Fuck, isn’t that girl stupid, she’ll fail even gymnastics” (Internado; April 4, 45’51”//45’53”). On another occasion, its value and presence in the school curriculum are questioned when a male student asks a female colleague to alter his suspension in PE on computer records; not really sure about what she is doing, she asks him: “Please remind me of how you convinced me to do this”, to which he replies: “Because we both

<sup>1</sup>In this order: the series of reference, the chapter, the season, and the duration of the sequence.

<sup>2</sup>The term “maría” (mary) is assigned in Spain to the disciplines where a student is supposed to pass with little or no effort. The name comes from “the three marys”: music, PE and Religion.

thought that gymnastics should not be mandatory” (El Internado; 5/06, 57’30”//57’35”). In another example, another student who is a leading character of the series says, after the new PE teacher’s requirement: “We won’t pass even the crappy ones” (Compañeros; 2/06, 7’14”//7’16”).

These comments that provide a basis to the idea of PE conveyed by these series show a fairly widespread perception of the discipline as “recess during school time”, in which students (especially in high school) feel increasingly less comfortable to see how the discipline becomes more challenging in order to try to be like the rest (LÓPEZ-RODRÍGUEZ, 2011).

The low curricular value ascribed to PE by students in series analyzed is fully shared by teachers. An example is found in one of the sequences of “Compañeros”, when Sara (a student with good school records) fails PE. Given the uproar that this circumstance creates among teachers, the principal meets with PE teacher, the head teacher and the student’s tutor. At one point in the meeting, given the pressure over the teacher for her to pass, the teacher asks one of them why he does not do the same thing with a male student who failed. To which the principal defiantly answers: “Because sciences are more important than gymnastics. As simple as that, and the sooner you realize it, the better” (Compañeros; 3/14, 43’30”//43’35”). In addition, one of the teachers states that “Sara’s average grade will drop because of something as minor in her academic career in gymnastics” (Compañeros; 3/14, 37’06”//37’13”). These fictional dialogues are common in schools, especially those whose private nature restricts teacher freedom (MORENO-DOÑA *et al.*, 2013).

The only chance we envisaged to avoid exile in non-school time is once again in biological approaches to the area, linking health, physical activity and food (JOHNSON; DESHPANDE, 2000; RYE *et al.*, 2008; SALMON *et al.*, 2007). Obesity, particularly among children and teenagers, has become a pandemic (GÓMEZ; MARCOS, 2006), by transforming active leisure time

in passive time. It is the triumph of new communication and information technologies over streets, squares, backyards or sports courts (STRASBURGER; JORDAN; DONNERSTEIN, 2010). Considering this reality, which almost nobody dares to challenge, we should ask whether there are other routes the discipline should take.

### 3.3 THE PE TEACHER: HEAD, BODY AND LIMBS

How do the series analyzed portrait PE teachers? We could answer that they portray them as the perfect complement to the discipline we have presented. Far from critical models, the view is based on the principles underlying the technical and practical models—and the latter prevails over the rest (DELGADO, 2000). Let us dissect the image conveyed and analyze the profiles considered in the analysis. Regarding the physical aspect, it presents us with a 25-40-year-old (male or female) teacher noted for his or her physical attractiveness – “... a little simple, but he’s hot” (Física o Química; 1/02, 26’58”//27’) – who, as Jonathan tells a colleague, wanted to “... be more than a body and a pretty face”. They intend to be “body models” for their students, causing their admiration and provoking comments like “... that new teacher, what he doesn’t know is that he’s really hot” (El Internado; 5/02, 12’04”//12’06”), “That new one, oh she’s hot!” (Física o Química; 1/06, 11’30”//11’33”). The only exception is Pedro from “El Internado”. Being older than the rest, he has a less striking appearance. Based on this philosophy, a PE teacher’s life is likely not to exceed 45 or 50 years at best, that is, we would be faced with professionals with planned obsolescence.

If we analyze teachers for their psychological profiles, we will find outgoing professionals among whom women appear even more so, and have greater sensitivity to and empathy for students. Male teachers stand as more pragmatic, with a perceptive temperament, reproducing the usual inequality in male and female representation in TV series (BELMONTE; GUILLAMÓN, 2008).

In none of the cases do they stand out for their intellectual

ability or general culture, except for Hugo, who had been an exemplary and highly qualified student. Moreover, Jonathan and Vaquero intend (or appear) to be what they are not, which causes them some problems with students. Jonathan usually stands out among his peers. Meanwhile, it is curious to see how Vaquero, surprised by finding himself as the school's majority shareholder after the death of his father and feeling overwhelmed by the responsibility, recognizes to a friend: "I know my father left me el burden of the school to show everyone that he was right and I'm a dunce" (Física o Química; 5/01, 39'35''//39'39'').

Their sociological profile is that of a usually single, childless and independent person living alone or sharing an apartment with coworkers. The lack of stability in relationships is constant in the characters analyzed, including infidelity in the case of Pedro, who has two simultaneous relationships with other teachers – Amelia and Elsa – the latter is pregnant with his best friend's baby. Male characters are sexually open, but female ones are not. Male teachers also show greater concern for their personal lives than their professional lives, unlike females.

Their relationship with their students is usually very close, to the point of causing situations that devalue the discipline and ascribe it the roles of "maría" and "school recess" to which we referred above. Vaquero's presentation on his first day at school is an excellent example of what we have just said:

Teacher: Since this is our first class, I'm going to give you guys a gift. Today you'll call the shots, we'll do whatever you say [Students evidently do not believe what they hear and after several demonstrations of disbelief, one of them asks the teacher]

Student: "Can we really say what we want?"

Teacher: "Sure," he answered, in a 'confused professor' style.

Student: "Well, nothing, then."

Teacher: “Nothing?”

Student: “Sure, here under this shadow, a little beer, some snacks, right?”

To the surprise of their students, the teacher answers: “Alright!”

And they end up going to the school cafeteria”  
(Física o Química; 4/04, 30’39”//31’22”)

These “good vibes” between the teacher and his students go even further when he asks them if they mind if he takes part in a party being organized to celebrate the birthday of one of them. To their amazement, he tells them: “Listen kid, big bottle parties were invented by my generation; and you outta to see me in the bottle, I’m the fucking king” (Physics or Chemistry; 4/08, 46’22”//46’29”). Not satisfied, scriptwriters take the teacher’s image to the limits by assigning him the role of supplier of alcoholic beverages to be consumed at the party by a group of underage teenagers. If we were hoping for the lifeline of being “guardians of health”, we are afraid it has just broken. We are aware of scriptwriters’ need to build characters who are easily recognizable by the public in order to facilitate the identification process (GALÁN, 2006) and who arouse their interest, which may be the reason for the image presented about him. For example, PE teachers can certainly embody the stereotype of a young, attractive man with a worked out body (according to the characteristics of their training), which attracts attention of a very specific target public and is beneficial to the business interests of that type of production. But that characterization, better yet, that caricature is obviously not positive or acceptable and calls into question the training and professionalism of the group.

How is the PE teacher depicted in the series in comparison with the rest of teachers? Primarily as a person who makes the cult to the body incompatible with the cult of culture and education of the spirit. We have plenty of examples of that as shown in “Compañeros”, in which, taking advantage of a lecture by [Spanish

philosopher] Fernando Savater, the school launched an initiative to encourage reading. When the person in charge comments that no teacher has been interested in the author's books, one of them teases (not without prejudice): "What do you have to say to that, Virginia? Even if you are a PE teacher, don't you think that as an educator, reading one would do you no harm?" (Compañeros; 3/11, 39'//39'07"). Something similar happens in "Física o Química" when a teacher comes into the library and, upon seeing Jonathan, she says wryly: "The PE teacher in the library! I should take a picture and show it to students!" (Física o Química; 1/02, 21'59'//22'06"). The eternal idea of seeing strength or beauty as incompatible with intelligence would make sense in the context of nineteenth century PE. But today, when the concept of body has overcome Platonic dualism, PE and the teachers who impart it should be removed from the machine-body approach focused exclusively on obtaining maximum performance for the biological body. They should seek whole educational proposals involving global individuals as thinking beings who feel emotions and work to communicate with themselves, others and the context in which they develop.

The final result of that process is professional discrimination endured by PE teachers compared to other colleagues. While it has been possible to mitigate that in recent years (PE teachers used to earn 30% less than other teachers for equal times in the 80s in Spain), still latent in the collective imaginary is the belief shown by the characters in the series when, during a teachers' strike (demanding wage increase), the principal tells the head teacher: "They want to earn more, they say, all of them, even the gymnastics teacher!" [to which the head teacher responds]: "Him too? What a cheek" (Compañeros; 5/03, 38'21'//38'-27").

Is it possible to change it? Yes, it is always possible. It must obviously start with a critical attitude by teachers in the area, aware of the reality they face. Recent research found PE teachers more concerned with developing values translated into healthy lifestyles, promoting attitudes of respect, tolerance and cooperation, improving

their students' motoric performance (HERNÁNDEZ-ÁLVAREZ *et al.*, 2010; SÁENZ-LÓPEZ; SICILIA; MANZANO, 2010). Nevertheless, we still see a dispersed area as to its development, partly as a result of initial training that is decontextualized, overly mechanistic and removed from social reality (RONSPIES, 2011; SMITH; SCHMIDT, 2012); and by too open and ill-defined a curriculum that leaves its implementation to teacher's judgment, thus creating lack of consistency and uniformity that weakens the image of the discipline compared to others (VALVERDE, 2008). This is leading us toward a clear depreciation of the area, more than it is already depreciated. PE is gradually losing its curricular status for the benefit of traditional areas, which can eventually lead us outside school time and to extracurricular spaces (CZYŻ; TORIOLA, 2012). We still have time, but we must draw the outlines of the disciplines and provide them with social value. One axis is clear: health, but with it we must begin to design a PE concerned about conveying values that create critical citizens. We think this is not incompatible but, on the contrary, it perfectly mixes with the idea of offering students a level of competence and motoric commitment solid enough to link it to a systematic and responsible practice of physical activity.

#### 4 CONCLUSIONS

The results show the low social value ascribed to PE by students, teachers and school managers in the series analyzed. We see a discipline that is lax and distant from its functions according to the curriculum, and focused on the development of students' motoric capabilities and skills. Teachers are identified as people of low intellectual education who are more concerned about their external appearance than with responding to the demands of the area. Extroverted, close to and with great sympathy towards students, they usually turn the class into a playful space where learning takes little room and the only concern is doing by doing.

The mechanistic model based on the figure of the practical

teacher shown in this study is not far removed from the imaginary built around PE by a large segment of society that sees the discipline more as recreational than as an educational space. Their responsibility as professionals in the field lies in changing that image and replacing it with one that, through reflection and criticism, leads students to know the difference between fiction and reality, between a mechanistic PE and another one concerned with meeting social demands for knowledge, respect and care required by our body when it is seen as an indissoluble whole. That PE must address all facets of the person, both physically and emotionally, psychological and social ones.

For the above, we need to respond to basic aspects such as increasing student's television competence (PÉREZ-TORNERO, 1997; MEDRANO, 2008) with a work of analysis, reflection and criticism at PE classrooms. We must see television not as a competitor but as a source of learning (MEDRANO, CORTÉS; PALACIOS, 2007), exploiting its potential importance for society. In addition, future studies should investigate the causes that led to the construction of the imaginary perceived from the series under study.

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