

## What Ever Happened to Gary Cooper? 21<sup>st</sup> Century American Television and the Rise of MAGA

The pilot episode of HBO's *The Sopranos* aired on January 10, 1999. The narrative is shaped by the initial meeting between Tony (North Jersey mob boss) and his female therapist, Dr. Melfi. Tony begins therapy by lamenting his feeling of displacement in American life: "I'd been thinking: it's good to be in a thing from the ground floor. I came in too late for that, I know. But lately I'm getting the feeling that I might be in at the end. That the best is over." Melfi's response is sympathetic: "Many Americans, I think, feel this." As the conversations advance, Tony's frustration builds until, somewhat exasperated, Tony asks "Whatever happened to Gary Cooper?"

On a micro level, *The Sopranos* is about Tony's frustrations with trying to reconcile the (20th century) values that shaped his formative years with the confusions and disorientations of (21<sup>st</sup> century) American life. On a macro level, the series reflects America's more general realization that 20<sup>th</sup> century values are becoming increasingly incompatible with the realities of 21<sup>st</sup> century life. Hindsight reveals that Tony's serialized confusion not only accurately captured his own historical moment in 1999: it also portended the eventual rise of both MAGA and Trumpism in American life.

Our volume suggests that MAGA is a fundamentally made for and made by television movement whose the fingerprints are evident across a range of American television formats dating from ca. 1999. Trump's political persona was shaped by (and on) television and included experiences in performances as varied as beauty pageants, professional wrestling and reality television, while the rise of right-wing populist politics in America seems unthinkable without the emergence of Fox News and associated media platforms.

Our purpose is a collection of essays that explores the development of MAGA as an ideology as it emerges in American television dating from ca. 1999 – present. We are interested in a essays that explore topics as divergent as how Trump's command of television developed across his years on *The Apprentice* to how the elements of the emotional frustrations and sense of displacement that proceeded MAGA are apparent in series like *The Sopranos*; *Deadwood*, and, *Breaking Bad*, but also in the likes of *Desperate Housewives*, various superhero shows and series on the CW Network. We are also interested in franchises like *The Real Housewives* (2006-) that trade in and precipitate America's growing infatuation with celebrity for celebrity's sake, as a central tenant of Trumpism.

Topics of interest include:

- The rise of reality television
- Changing images of masculinity

- Reimagining America's "war on drugs"
- Reimagining the American gangster.
- New female identities and agencies
- Loss of confidence in 20<sup>th</sup> century institutions
- Reimagining the American Western
- Reimagining the American home and the American family
- Loss of heroes in American life
- Suspicion of "expertise"
- Loss of faith in the American "legacy media"
- Depictions of police, "law and order" and vigilantism
- Depictions of LGBTQ+ Americans
- Portrayals of immigrants and immigration as a political issue
- Depictions of national, state and local politics
- The rise of social media as reflected on television

Palgrave Macmillan has expressed preliminary interest in the volume. Chapter proposals will be reviewed in the order received until the requisite number of high-quality chapters have been assembled. The deadline for submitting 500 word abstracts is April 15, 2025.

About the editors:

Ben Alexander teaches in the English and Film Study Departments at both Barnard College and Columbia University. He is currently working on a monograph entitled, *Yaddo: Shaping the American Century* (Cornell University Press) and just completed a co-edited volume entitled, *When American Television Became American Literature*. He has published in (among others) *The New England Quarterly*, *American Archivist* and *English Studies Canada*. During his graduate studies Alexander worked as a Rare Books and Manuscripts Specialist for the New York Public Library and continues to teach matters archives, memory and history of books in the Masters of Library and Information Studies at the University of Southern California (online). Prior to accepting his appointment at Columbia Alexander was a visiting scholar in the department of English and both Stanford and Harvard.

Reto Winckler is assistant professor in the Department of English at City University of Hong Kong. He is interested in Shakespeare, ordinary language philosophy, contemporary anglophone popular culture, and adaptation studies (particularly in television series and digital media). His articles have been published in *The Journal of Popular Culture*, *Texas Studies of Literature and Language*, *Shakespeare*, *The Journal of Adaptation in Film and Performance*, *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, and *Adaptation*. He is a member of the editorial boards of *Shakespeare* and *Adaptation*. He is the co-editor of *Television Series as Literature* (Palgrave, 2022) the forthcoming *When American Television Series Became Literature* (Brill) and the *Adaptation*

special issue *Adaptation Machines/Machine Adaptation: Adaptation Studies and Generative AI*  
(forthcoming).