

INTRODUCTION

PREEMPTIVE NARRATIVES AND TELEVISUAL FUTURES

The television series *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008–13) opens on Walter White’s frenzied, dramatic escape in an RV through the New Mexican desert. After a few brief opening shots, the image places us inside the RV’s microcosm of mayhem: scantily clad in his briefs and a steamed-up gas mask, the driver barely manages to control the vehicle; in the seat beside him lies an unconscious passenger who is also wearing a gas mask; in the “recreational” space behind him, test tubes are breaking and falling into a toxic brew that laps across the floor; in it, two bodies slide from side to side. Going at full speed, the RV begins to swerve across the desert roads and ultimately crashes into a ditch. The driver frantically leaves the vehicle and takes off his mask. As he gasps for air, the stench of chemicals makes him bend over and retch. After nervously putting on his green dress shirt, he pulls out a video camera and records a confession. The image trembles as the driver looks directly into the camera and identifies himself as Walter White (Bryan Cranston). While Walter speaks to his family through the shaky camera, asking for understanding if not exactly forgiveness, sirens are wailing in the distance and slowly increasing in volume. The speed run was, in all appearances, a chase and the followers are closing in. Walter pulls a gun out of his briefs, places himself squarely in the middle of the desert road, and, in a somewhat iconic shot, points his gun at his arriving pursuers. Right then, after three and a half minutes of high-octane pursuit: cut! The opening titles intervene to suspend our attention at this moment of imminent escalation. After the title sequence, however, we do *not* return to this moment. Instead, we see the most conventional establishing shot: a residential house, Walter’s, with the subtitle “three weeks earlier” (see figures 1.1–1.3).

What has just happened? *Breaking Bad* begins with a loop through the future in the sense that the juxtaposition of disjunct moments in time



Figure I.1. *Breaking Bad*: Walter White (Bryan Cranston) before imminent confrontation with his presumed pursuers.



Figure I.2. *Breaking Bad*: opening sequence.



Figure 1.3. *Breaking Bad*: establishing shot “three weeks earlier.”

triggers a perceptual movement that makes us see the present through the future.¹ The series anticipates a dramatic chase across the desert and an impending stand-off *before* it provides a proper exposition to introduce characters, settings, and themes. Now, *after* the flash-forward and the opening titles, we learn what will have caused the previewed calamity in an emphatic *da capo*. Thus, as we receive the necessary background information, we are already poised for the future to return. Narrative progression is now a matter of catching up with the foretold showdown. As we see Walter, a responsible teacher and family father, go through the depressing routine of his everyday life, we already wonder what could possibly turn this person into a hunted criminal within only three weeks . . . And in this particular case, we do not need to wait long for the answer: *Breaking Bad* catches up with its first preempted future within the pilot episode. In the meantime, we learn that Walter’s transformation was triggered by a personal prophecy of doom that anticipates the ending, or *an* ending, of the series as a whole: a terminal cancer diagnosis. So by the time the pilot of *Breaking Bad* has closed its first episodic loop through the future, it has already drawn up another dark horizon that looms over the entire show. Throughout the series, these episodic loops through the future will return to such an extent that they have become part of *Breaking Bad*’s recognizable signature style

(see Logan 2013; Sánchez-Baró 2014).² Indeed, while the series explicitly tells us, by way of a subtitle, in its first two episodes that we have jumped in time, we are subsequently expected to understand how the narrative operates without any such indication. When the sixth episode, “Crazy Handful of Nothin’,” preempts its ending again without any subtitle, we have attuned to the ways in which the series moves through time. In this way, *Breaking Bad* fosters and expects a certain level of media literacy in its audience. But what do these loops effectuate? Surely, *Breaking Bad* uses what I call the preempted ending as a means to create suspense, but what kind of suspense is this exactly? If the series repeatedly anticipates events that are bound to happen, it is to make felt the inevitability of a calamitous future and, as a consequence, the precariousness of the present. In the case of *Breaking Bad*, the inevitable is the steady corruption of Walter White. We are made to feel the inexorable erosion of the American middle class within an increasingly harsh society, where healthcare is a luxury and a high school teacher has to supplement his income with a side job at the carwash and, soon enough, as a meth cook (see Logan 2013, 2016). The suspense created here does not follow a logic of revelation—*what will happen?*—because we already know, at least to a certain extent, what will happen. Rather, suspense emerges from the interval between the present and the foretold future, from the intensely vibrant joy and the felt certainty that every step along the way will inevitably lead to the announced calamity.³ The thrilling question is that of *how* things will have come about.

The answer to that question does not always come as quickly as in *Breaking Bad*'s pilot episode. On other occasions, the series takes much longer to catch up with its foreboding visions, most notably in its second season when it lassoes eerie shots from a more distant future into the preemptive movement. The season opens on the desaturated image of an empty residential backyard accompanied, again, by the wail of a siren. After a few disjoint shots of the backyard, the camera is placed inside the pool and captures an eyeball that is slowly sucked into the water drain. Color first enters the image when a bright-pink teddy bear drifts into the frame. As the stuffed bear circles through the water, we come to see that it is half-charred and missing one of its (plastic) eyes (see figure I.4). This damaged toy is the attractor that pulls the narrative toward its cataclysmic end, intentionally setting off a series of speculations on the



Figure 1.4. *Breaking Bad*: portentous pink teddy bear in pool.

part of the viewer. Has there been a meth lab accident at the White residence? Has one of Walter's enemies taken revenge on him and his family? Throughout the season, *Breaking Bad* repeatedly loops these future moments into our experience of the narrative, keeping perception in the thrall of the eerie, inevitable ending.⁴ In this way, the series never lets us forget that Walter White's existence teeters on the brink of collapse.

This narrative loop through the future is television's new refrain, that is, a consistent and repeatable "gathering of [discursive, aesthetic] forces" that brings existential territories into existence (Bertelsen and Murphie 2010, 145).⁵ Given how often TV series currently preempt their own futures in ways similar to *Breaking Bad*, this narrative device seems to have a particular consistency and force that make for powerful storytelling that is, moreover, capable of expressing certain future-related concerns of our time. *Figures of Time* explores the aesthetic force of the preempted ending, suggesting that its strength lies in the affective responses it elicits in viewers. It is worth noting that, in the case of *Breaking Bad*, it is the viewers themselves, not the fictional characters, who have visions of the future that influence their perception of a narrative present. So whatever preempted endings do, they do it to and with the viewer. Although the examples discussed in this book vary substantially in their treatment of the future visions (including fictional characters

who see their own future), the focus here will be on the viewer's embodied experience, in particular the suspense, effectuated by the loop through the future. This is the first reason why I call this particular aesthetic movement a "refrain": the preempted ending must be thought as a nonrepresentational motif that orders how we perceive the represented stories in the first place. As I have briefly suggested in my opening example, *Breaking Bad* repeatedly preempts its future to make us sense the slow but steady decline into precarity of the American middle class. In this particular example, then, the aesthetic movement reinforces the series' representational project. But this is not always the case: nonrepresentational aesthetic movements can just as well undermine or counteract the explicitly stated project of a series. In order to understand the wide variety of effects that this refrain of the future can have, this book will draw on aesthetic theories of the *figural* because it is in the nonrepresentational, affective dimension of the figural that preempted endings acquire the consistency of a refrain. Secondly, preempted endings constitute a refrain because the ordering of perception they accomplish is politically relevant. As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari suggest, refrains express territories (1987, 310–16). Indeed, the political argument of *Figures of Time* suggests that television's loop through the future participates in the recent shift toward preemption politics. This political resonance is what distinguishes television's new refrain from previous refrains of the future.

250 Years Earlier

The territory of the future has been actively charted and contested for at least two centuries. The period we call modernity alone has given us a variety of refrains of what is yet to come. Consider the argument for necessary progress that relied, among other things, on a concept of linear, teleological time that has legitimized a remarkable series of social utopias. Support for this manageability of enlightened social teleologies came from the domain of science where classical mechanics, which considers time reversible, articulated the comforting idea of a calculable, foreseeable future. Introduce a cause here and observe the desired effect there. It does not surprise, then, that utopias set in the future as well as time travel narratives, which rehearse these concepts of time for

a lay audience, emerge as literary genres at roughly the same time, in the late eighteenth century (see Hausmann 2009). The discovery of entropy in the nineteenth century shook this confidence: as the now notorious second law of thermodynamics formulates, entropy implies that time is irreversible and the future uncertain. And, sure enough, the late nineteenth century feared “general entropy” as a state of complete energy dissipation that would put an end to progress, as numerous fin-de-siècle dystopian narratives confirm.⁶ When H. G. Wells’s time traveler rushed millions of years into the future, he found “a steady twilight brood[ing] over the earth, a twilight only broken now and then when a comet glared across the darkling sky.” To his dismay, “the sun, red and very large, halted motionless upon the horizon, a vast dome glowing with a dull heat, and now and then suffering a momentary extinction” (Wells 1975, 99). This fear of extinction due to the dissipation of energy was not merely a popular adaptation of powerful scientific concepts. The opposite is true: art appropriates these notions of time to express a conceptual territory that cocreates social and political realities (see Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 316).⁷ Power is in the transversal relations between the heterogeneous fields of science, philosophy, and art. Today television, as any other art, articulates refrains of the future that help bring today’s political territories into existence. These futures are not or not only represented or mediated; refrains of the future are first and foremost aesthetic movements that eventually lift off from moving images and are directly sensed by the viewer. Television is an aesthetic vector of subjectivation. Given this nonrepresentational efficacy of the aesthetic and the fact that political theory and practice of recent decades have actively harnessed and weaponized perception, the aesthetic is considered immediately political in the present account. *Figures of Time* explores one of the contemporary connections between aesthetics and politics by tracing how the nonlinear complexity of fictional television, understood here as an artful mode of expression, crafts preemptive movements into the audience’s perception.

Territories being contestable, art never simply confirms the political territories it helps establish but continuously tests their potentials and traces their limits. Here is another familiar version of the future, this time from the realm of finance: Economies of credit bank on the future,

trusting that a debtor will be able to pay for what has already been purchased. Credit's sidekick, the insurance industry, guarantees that the money value of an as-yet-unpaid commodity is upheld even if that commodity is lost or broken at some point in the future. Although these are surely useful achievements, cinema and television know the fine print that comes with an ensured future. Countless once-loved spouses, estranged siblings, and geriatric great-aunts have had to bite the dust on the screen for the price tag attached to the loss of their life. The commodity to be broken and reimbursed might as well be you, goes one future-tending audiovisual refrain that resounds from *Double Indemnity* to *The Widower* and through countless episodes of crime television.⁸ Art offers counterrefrains to destabilize territories, temporal and otherwise, to sound out the existential loopholes in their reassuring provisions. Accordingly, *Figures of Time* does not read the television series under study here in a mode of critique. Instead, the book sets out to engage with televisual aesthetics as a mode of thinking in its own right. The arguments that aesthetic movements unfold over time may lead in various philosophical, political, and ethical directions, sometimes confirming powerful doctrines and sometimes slowly unraveling them from within. *Figures of Time* proposes an encounter with television's aesthetic thinking in motion to intervene in the debates around a contemporary politics of perception.⁹

In all of this, the future exerts its ontogenetic power not so much through representations of itself (even though it is often represented). It works through affect. Third refrain, this time from the realm of politics: The twentieth century fostered the politics of prevention and deterrence, both of which consist in taking measures so that a certain future does *not* materialize. As we will see, this is what clearly distinguishes them from the doctrine of preemption.¹⁰ Prevention proceeds by empirically assessing the causes that will lead to the threatening future, devising methods to counteract or eliminate these causes, thus solving the problem at its root. This is of use in the management of a population's health, for instance. Deterrence, dominant during the Cold War era, is a strategy for averting catastrophe when prevention has failed. When both the US and the Soviet Union were in possession of sufficient amounts of nuclear weapons to destroy each other, the only thing that prevented nuclear war was the scenario of mutually assured destruction itself. For

this scenario to act as a deterrent, it requires an equilibrium between the adversaries' destructive powers. Since each side must continuously make sure that its weaponry is up to par, the equilibrium is necessarily dynamic. Deterrence fuels an arms race for the sake of peace. Two of the audiovisual refrains that grafted this duplicitous dynamic into the bodies of the audience are the Doomsday Clock and the fictional Red Button (or Red Telephone) to launch the nuclear missiles. The doomsday clock's frightening suggestion that it might be just about too late is also an injunction to make sure that the clock never strikes twelve. The fear that we are running like clockwork into catastrophe is complemented by the conservative desire to stop time. The red button expresses a similar ambivalence. Operated through the smallest physical effort, possibly at a whim, it articulates the fragility of the status quo and intensifies apprehension through the embodied knowledge that the forbidden button is also the most tempting one. The affective singularity of these refrains consists in an ambiguity that oscillates between a suspense that pulls toward the coming catastrophe on the one hand and, on the other, fear and the imperative of moral superiority that push away from it. The politicality of uncountable Cold War narratives consists in rehearsing the balancing act of deterrence in the affective mode. That the red button in the Oval Office does not actually exist is of little consequence. Art *fabulates* fictional refrains whose affect feeds back into "real" politics, regardless of their truth-value.¹¹ *Figures of Time* investigates such affective refrains and their political resonance. More specifically, the book looks at recent serial dramas and argues that a remarkable number of TV series of the last two decades have developed and circulated a new, properly televisual refrain of the future. The political doctrine that these narratives support aesthetically is neither that of prevention nor that of deterrence. It is the doctrine of preemption.

Politics: Preemption and Narrative

That the future should still be a resource for political action today is not beyond dispute. In fact, thinkers from various fields hold that the future has run its course as a driving force for social progress. Historian François Hartog suggests that the acceleration of life and the proliferation of crises over the twentieth century have produced a new order of time that he calls *presentism*, the contemporary experience of an "omnipres-

ent present” (2015, xviii). In this view, the modernist notion of a continuous social progress toward the future is no longer adequate to the ways in which history can be thought in a globalized, late-capitalist world. The future is outdated. Franco Berardi concurs in *After the Future* that “a progressive model for the future” is no longer credible. Consequently, “when the collective imagination becomes incapable of seeing possible alternatives to trends leading to devastation, increased poverty and violence,” the future appears as “a threat” (Berardi 2011, 58–59). Hartog and Berardi are right. But to say that the future has become a “threat” is far from declaring it obsolete. It is to say that it continues to shape our present through affective charges.

A new refrain—preemption—resonates through our contemporary political territories and it draws on this affective force of threat as a present futurity. Preemption does not respond to an actual danger in order to thwart it as prevention or deterrence would do; it evokes an indeterminate threat in the future in order to modulate and potentialize the present. If preemption does not counteract a preexisting danger, it is because it does not know the future in the same way that prevention and deterrence do. Today, our future is so uncertain, so indeterminate, that one cannot possibly rely on rational calculation and fact-based purposive action. “Terrorists and terror states do not reveal [their] threats with fair notice, in formal declarations—and responding to such enemies only after they have struck first is not self-defense, it is suicide,” the presidential refrain begins (Bush 2003). The alternative is to harness that very uncertainty and evoke an indeterminate threat on which to act. “Saddam Hussein *could* build a nuclear bomb within months *if he were able* to obtain fissile material,” the tune continues (White House 2002, emphasis added). This conditional logic—would have, could have—is at the heart of the refrain. Since the factual basis for preemptive action is affective in nature, there will never have been any hard evidence to prove the necessity for preemptive action. You must therefore insist that the threat *would have* fully materialized by itself if you *had not* taken measures on time. This means that preemption is always and openly based on a lack of knowledge and factual evidence. It operationalizes an epistemology (lack of knowledge) and an ontology (the mere potentiality of the threat) in order to potentialize the present. The hard facts do not matter; what counts is fear as an “affective fact” that piggybacks your action plan into

existence (Massumi 2015, 189). “The security of the world requires disarming Saddam Hussein *now*,” the cadence falls (Bush 2003, emphasis added). The vague threat of a potential future attack has leveraged a real invasion of foreign territory in the present. Preemptive politics is what happens in the interval between the present and the future catastrophe that could be. Its goal is not to prevent but to make a vague threat materialize in one way or another so that, at least, one has something to respond to.¹²

If this rings a bell, it is because preemption operates in ways similar to the more familiar prophecy of doom. A prophecy consists in predicting a catastrophe in the future so that we can take measures in the present to prevent that catastrophe. Based on the affective state of fear triggered by the prophecy, its recipients will then take countermeasures. If all goes well, the predicted catastrophe will not happen. Note that, following this logic, a “good” or “efficient” prophecy is one whose predicted catastrophe never occurs. In other words, a “good” prophecy will turn out to be false; it falsifies itself, as it were. Consider this to be not a mere side effect but an integral part of the process: the efficiency of a prophecy of doom *depends* on its capacity to falsify itself. This also means that, if the prophecy is efficient, there will not be any proof that the measures taken actually needed to be taken. In fact, the very lack of proof can be recast as proof that whatever was done must have been appropriate. After all, the catastrophe did not come about. It is clear why this is possible and unproblematic within a theological view of the world: the biblical god who imparts the prophecy also stands in as a transcendent guarantor of a truth that cannot be verified in this world. That this should also be the *modus operandi* of contemporary secular politics is worrisome, to say the least. Preemption sanctions virtually any kind of concrete action (including war) by means of a hypothetical conditional proposition and, yet, contemporary political thinkers hold that we *should* tackle future threats and uncertainties in the same way as biblical prophecies do.¹³ The limitation of such arguments is that they continue to consider the future a purely epistemological problem, neglecting the possibility that the infamous known and unknown knowns that the future holds are deployed to produce immediately felt, affective realities. As I further explain in chapter 1, arguments that insist on rational scenario planning tend to neglect the active role that contemporary media play in the dis-

semination of fearful “doomsday” scenarios and, more specifically, the way in which they can help undermine rational, deliberative politics.¹⁴ Indeed, preemption’s ecology of fear firmly relies on the mediation of potential future catastrophes through news and current affairs media as well as fiction programming. As the example of *Breaking Bad* has already shown, the narrative loop through the future gives primacy to the affective force of moving images and subordinates their referential or communicative content; for contemporary media the future is not or not primarily an epistemological problem.

Staging an encounter between television studies and cultural theory, *Figures of Time* explores one way in which contemporary media culture has adapted to the increasing geopolitical uncertainty of our time by drawing on affective facts to *create* futures. The book argues that the creation and modulation of affective states in the mode of preemption rely first and foremost on the nonlinear temporal movement described above and the specific aesthetic experience it enables. More specifically, the book’s aim is to show that contemporary TV fiction contributes to this modulatory, ontogenetic dynamic through what I call *preemptive narratives*. Preemptive narratives are fictional television series that infuse their stories with glimpses of a daunting future and, in this way, prime viewers to interpret the present in light of a worst-case scenario. As a result, I contend, television normalizes preemption and attunes us to its functional principles. These narratives produce an embodied and affective experience of contemporary future politics, a popular preemptive nonconscious as a complement to official preemption-based policies. While other media certainly participate in this process as well (notably news media), I contend that fictional television series are particularly conducive to a differentiated negotiation of preemption politics because of their extended narratives with many internal tensions, their serial structure, and the relative freedom that fiction affords.

Preemptive narratives have proliferated in recent years. Examples include several seasons of *Revenge* (ABC, 2011–15), *How to Get Away with Murder* (ABC, 2014–present), *Bloodline* (Netflix, 2015–2017), *Quantico* (ABC, 2015–2018), and *Big Little Lies* (HBO, 2017–present).¹⁵ While preemptive narratives exist in many different genres and many cultural contexts, the corpus of the present study has been restricted to Anglophone serial dramas belonging to various subgenres of crime fiction. Furthermore,

the fictional programs discussed more closely in this book—*Damages* (FX/Audience Network, 2007–12), *Life on Mars* (BBC, 2006–7), and *Flashforward* (ABC, 2009–10)—deploy this temporal movement as the functional principle of their narrative project in that they persistently anticipate their own (season) endings. As a result, the entire narrative is structured around the loop through time. Each of these series pre-empt or predicts its catastrophic outcomes and only afterward returns to the beginning, now imbued with the gloom of the foretold disaster; the narrative then slowly unfolds the events leading up to that disaster over the duration of an entire season. These series thus activate the interval between the present moment and the foretold ending as the domain where reality is generated, where time is made: ontogenesis. This means that the future is by no means a purely epistemological problem; it does not provide excess information in a straightforward way, to merely add meaning. Most of *Breaking Bad*'s flash-forwards confuse and disconcert the viewer instead of providing useful information that would allow her to assess the narrative present in light of its foretold future (see Connelly 2015). The seemingly objective presentation of the future *creates* meaning for the purpose of leading and misleading the viewer in the present; it makes and unmakes sense in the now of watching; it triggers affective responses that color the perception of the present moment. It is crucial in this context that, by way of genre, many of these future-tending narratives relate to issues of justice, law, and law enforcement.¹⁶ They are crime dramas like *Breaking Bad*, police procedurals like *Life on Mars*, legal thrillers such as *Damages*, or FBI action-adventures as in the case of *Flashforward*. All these genres have their own powerful refrains with established social and political commitments. Usually taking off from a disruption of the social order, these narratives conduct an investigation into the crime or other offense at hand to arrest the offender or dispense punishment and thereby mend the social fabric. Clearly, then, the preemptive temporalities that so often occur in the series belonging to these genres are relevant to the ways in which we conceive social relations and order through fiction. The question is *how* they are relevant. What happens when crime fiction's measured legato toward harmonic resolution is syncopated by preemption's commanding loop phrase? *Figures of Time* argues that the preempted ending provides a narrative counterpoint that transforms the basic narrative schemes of the cop show or the court

drama, including the underlying notions of justice and law enforcement. The inspectors, agents, and litigators of preemptive narratives no longer investigate a crime as a preexisting reality waiting to be uncovered. Rather, they interfere with the attending world to create a milieu conducive to their exercise of power. By emphasizing the affective factuality of the future, for instance through persistent flash-forwards to the coming disaster, these narratives and their dubious heroes exploit these felt realities to leverage ethically questionable action plans, stratagems, or policies. Fear is instrumentalized to impose tight security measures as comforting protection. Hate is fueled to foster support for “enhanced interrogation techniques.” Uncertainty is propagated to bring the population in line with those who pretend to know. In this way, the preempted ending renders the ontogenetic force of a felt future to generate what comes to count as real and true in the present.

But preemptive narratives can also carry a critical impetus. When the second season of *Breaking Bad* proliferates future visions and weaves them into each other—the returning pink teddy bear, a dead body lying next to Jesse’s bouncing red lowrider, anonymous men wading through a river and finding Hank’s trophy of kingpin Tuco’s teeth grill enclosed in glass—the loop through the future circles in and puts pressure on the precarious present of the middle class. The preempted endings make felt that the status quo is highly unstable, that minor decisions or deviations from plan can lead to utter devastation, and that it is always almost-too-late for course corrections. As suggested earlier, the depressing affect of *Breaking Bad*’s preemptive movements brings the bare survival of middle-class Americans into perception. One of the achievements of contemporary television and preemptive narratives in particular is that they negotiate their political concerns in the same way as policy makers: through sensation. And yet the critical dimension of *Breaking Bad*’s ominous pink teddy bear is seriously undermined when it turns out in the season finale that it has barely anything to do with Walter White’s immediate situation. It did not bode of a lab explosion in the White residence that might have put the entire family in danger, nor was there an attack organized by one of Walt’s increasingly numerous enemies. The teddy bear literally fell from the sky—*ursulus ex machina*. Numerous viewers felt underwhelmed and manipulated by a resolution that was all but tangential, especially because these inauspicious glimpses of the

future created much of the suspense that the second season ran on. We were made to fear for the Whites—and for nothing. Such TV moments as this one bring into awareness our participation in the popular preemptive nonconscious mentioned earlier and make clear that the real affective dynamic of preemption may operate autonomously from a relevant factual basis.¹⁷ In the face of such a realization, one important question is what other effects our affective engagement has helped leverage in the meantime. In other words, how do television series operationalize such affective facts? The following chapters provide a range of different answers to these questions. Preemptive narratives can obviously participate in a politics of fear, as I will argue for *Flashforward* in chapter 3. But they can also launch philosophical investigations into the nature of time, as does *Life on Mars*, which I consider in chapter 2, or propose ethico-aesthetic solutions to the problem of preemption like *Damages*, as I further explore in chapters 1 and 4. It must be noted, then, that the core dynamic of preemption can give rise to a variety of perceptual movements that can potentially be constructive or destructive, enabling or restrictive.

The book's focus on affective realities and their efficacy is the reason why the various stories narrated in these TV shows, though they will be discussed in due measure, are not the main focus of this book. It is a particularity of preemption that, while it continuously modulates representations, it is not in the mode of representation that its force operates. Rather, it acts directly on the senses, as an attack on perception induced by evoking a future threat. Consequently, an engagement with preemptive narratives must pass through their aesthetic investment in time and the politically relevant experiences of time they create. Throughout this book, I argue that the central insights concerning preemption are articulated *by* the image as well as its movement through time, and not so much *in* the image, or on the level of story and content. While television's new refrain of the preempted ending certainly does tell us many stories, this refrain, by virtue of its sheer frequency, acquires its own consistency and becomes "autonomous from the dramatic action" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 319).

Such an endeavor makes it necessary to think what media might be as an assemblage in motion. *Figures of Time* offers a theory of televisual time—constructed around the concept of the *figural*—that adequately

describes the aesthetic experience of time in preemptive narratives. And to first of all understand the emergence of these narratives in the twenty-first century—to understand why television is capable of producing such aesthetic experiences—the book thinks television itself as a machinic assemblage of heterogeneous elements (technical, social, political, ethical) that co-compose our lived experience of TV. Finally, the book tries to offer an innovative way of scholarly engaging with television that begins precisely there, in lived experience. This method is indebted to William James’s radical empiricism and the aesthetic theories it has influenced, including those of Gilles Deleuze, Brian Massumi, Thomas Lamarre, Anna Munster, Erin Manning, and Alanna Thain. James insists that a thinking that intends to be radically empirical “must neither admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced” (2003, 22). This means that a radically empirical study of our encounter with television must not reduce its field of investigation to a research object or “text,” to a production “context” or a technological “apparatus.” It must engage with the field of relations as such, thinking the connections between all the elements that factor into an experience. Thus, in order to think with television in radically empirical fashion one must ask: What is seen, heard, and felt through a program’s images and sound? What exactly comes into sensation? How does this experience come into existence? How exactly does it engage the body? These questions will be the starting points for the analyses in the following chapters.

In the remainder of this introduction, I provide a more detailed framework for the book’s main fields of engagement. Besides the political engagement with the doctrine of preemption, *Figures of Time* is grounded in theories of *technics*, *aesthetics*, and *ethics*. While each of these fields will be introduced separately, it will become clear that they are deeply connected. Simplifying a bit, one could say that the new technical capacities of television give rise to a new televisual aesthetic that, in turn, allows for new political resonances and requires appropriate ethical consideration. As I will shortly lay out in the following sections, each of the main chapters also focuses on one of these areas: chapter 1 explores the technics of television as an enabling condition for new aesthetic movements while chapter 2 provides a first in-depth reading of figural aesthetics in serial television. The third chapter engages the implications of

preemption politics head-on and prepares chapter 4's investigation into a possible ethics for preemption and the control society.

Technics: Television as Abstract Machine

According to this book's core argument, fictional television participates in the shift of political culture away from a model of rational deliberation and representation to a politics of preemption. This hypothesis regarding the politicality of contemporary televisual aesthetics cannot be argued without engaging the notion of televisual time itself.

Conventionally, the medium's temporality is defined through the transient but persistent present of the live broadcast, which later produces more general notions of *flow*.¹⁸ Given the requirements of programming, this is by no means an open, undetermined movement through time. Rather, "televisual time is programmed and scheduled as precisely as possible, down to the last second. Television's time is a time which is, in effect, wholly determined" by its mode of distribution (Doane 1990, 237).¹⁹ Thus, the focus on the technological deployment of the moving image and on its linear organization in broadcasting schedules produces a concept of time as the linear, steady, and determined passage from instant to instant. Subsequently, the sequential progression of the apparatus is generalized into "the" time of the medium. Inadequacies arise when such a general concept sneaks into discussions not just of a medium's technological substratum but also of narrative structure and even the aesthetic experience of time. Consider, for instance, the various attempts at thinking a certain strand of recent narrative cinema and television that are characterized by anachronisms, temporal loops, parallel and crossing timelines, repetitions, and so forth. A list of examples would surely include such films as *Butterfly Effect*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Memento*, *Inception*, and *Edge of Tomorrow* as well as many TV series, including those discussed here. It has been suggested that such narratives take us "out of time" and make moving images "atemporal" (McGowan 2011). But why would one call repetitions, loops, and anachronisms *atemporal* if not because one has already conceptualized time as a linear, homogeneous chronology? At the beginning of such an argument stands an impoverished concept of time that does justice neither to aesthetic experience nor to contemporary politics. If, however, one begins with a different concept of time—based on notions

of, say, topology, becoming, and emergence—one would actually have to consider these films all the more “temporal” for their strange loops and nonlinear timelines. They take you *into time* rather than out of it. Their quirky temporalities speak not to a dismissal of “real” time but, quite the contrary, to a serious engagement with time as an aesthetic, political, and ethical problem. In order to think those engagements, it is necessary to develop and hone a practice of what Bliss Cua Lim (2009) calls “temporal critique,” or a practice of reading that can think such irreducibly heterogeneous and nonlinear temporalities or “immiscible times” as cinema or television’s very own temporalities. In order to think the effects of these temporalities, it is moreover crucial to go beyond strictly narratological accounts of temporal structures that are provided by a lot of recent work on “narrative complexity.” Instead of an apparatus, mode of distribution, or narrative structure, this book therefore takes *aesthetic experience* as its starting point to build a more appropriate concept of televisual time.

If such an approach to television is not entirely new, it nonetheless attempts to fill a considerable gap within the available research. While cinema has since its very beginnings been considered for the strong aesthetic experiences it creates, television has often been described as a notoriously anaesthetic medium. Here, the term *anaesthetic* must be taken in at least two senses. First, television as both an entertainment and a mass medium is considered utterly uninteresting from an aesthetic viewpoint, providing only formulaic and shallow junk to its audience. Second and more importantly, it is understood as the medium of distraction par excellence. Its continuous onslaught of images thwarts our capacity for attention and numbs our senses like a powerful anesthetic, so that eventually we perceive it as little more than white noise. Given these general views of the medium, it is little wonder that strong aesthetic theories of television have not existed for a long time and only become available quite recently (see, e.g., Butler 2010; Caldwell 1995; Cardwell 2013 and 2014; Jacobs and Peacock 2013).²⁰ The dismissal of television as an anaesthetic medium is one of the main reasons that, while much ink has been spilled on the time-images or “pure optical and sound situations” of cinema, one is hard pressed to find accounts within television studies that would consider TV equally capable of such intensive aesthetic experiences (see Deleuze 1986, 1989). *Figures of Time* argues that television

is indeed capable of the feat and that therefore we require approaches that allow us to think the medium's aesthetic potential.

To do this, however, it is not necessary to reject the technological aspect of moving-image narratives. On the contrary, technological innovations and the techniques of viewing they enable have made a significant contribution to the creation of new and more complex temporal experiences in television series. Such aesthetic experiences are *co-conditioned* (rather than determined) by a range of factors that, in the case of television, include but are not limited to network systems, digital technologies, production companies, distribution sites and practices, writing processes, reception practices, and politics. These factors are not discrete entities that enable or preclude certain processes as on a switchboard. Rather, they must be thought as elements of a “functional ensemble” (Guattari 1995, 35) that sustains “a process of mutual stimulation that exceeds what they are as a set” (Fuller 2005, 1). What comes into being or, rather, into thinking, then, is a dynamic network of differential relations between the various components. Félix Guattari gives a name to this dynamism that animates and differentiates the assemblage of concrete components over time: *abstract machine*. Because the differential push-and-pull of the abstract machine at the same time *sustains* the assemblage and *differentiates* it in time, it gives rise to an *autopoietic heterogenesis*, a *self-creating becoming-other*. If subjectivity is processual, continuously produced at the intersection of various, heterogeneous components, then there is no stable subject whose perception of (televsual) time is determined by an apparatus; there is only collective self-differentiation (see Guattari 1995, 33–57). Not incidentally, this way of emphasizing the collective becoming of the assemblage is, as Jussi Parikka notes, “a fundamentally and radically *temporal* way of looking at the world” (2010, 81, emphasis added).²¹

It becomes possible then to think the concrete components of today's television assemblage—be they technological, industrial, economic, or other—in terms of their creative potential and to articulate the ways in which they collectively effectuate singular movements of sensation (see also Rizzo 2015). One way of conceptualizing this way of bringing in abstraction, potential, and sensation without isolating them from concrete matter and assemblages is to think in terms of *technics*, understood as the complex of technology and the techniques it enables. The goal of the

first chapter is precisely to articulate this relation between the concrete technologies of TV fiction and television's potential for creating innovative techniques and aesthetic movements, some of which are invested in a politics of perception aligned with the doctrine of preemption. In chapter 1, I define the *serial machine* as the singular abstract machine that animates the diagrammatic relations between the various components of contemporary television and that allows for a new aesthetic of television seriality to emerge. The chapter explores how the technology of television (with its new modes of production, distribution, consumption, etc.) has coevolved with a number of expressive machines, such as new genres, season formats, episode structures, long-arc narratives, complex temporalities, and more.²²

The concept of the abstract machine also allows the continuities and discontinuities, the confluences and differentials within processes of becoming to be addressed in equal measure. For machines are as much about “conjunctions, connections, couplings, transitions, concatenations” as they are about “interruptions, ruptures, refractions, fragmentations” (Raunig 2010, 8, 9). Consider the genre of the soap opera as a brief example. The waning popularity of the soap opera is due in part to the fact that it does not connect with digital technologies in the same way other genres and formats do. Soap operas are not segmented into seasons and they are not made for rewatching. For these and other reasons, they hardly ever make it to the DVD market (except for the occasional special collection). This example, to be considered in more detail in the following chapter, indicates that the productivity of abstract machines is by no means a matter of flow and continuity alone. The serial machine sustains itself by disconnecting from other, henceforth minor genres of the serial format. But it also establishes new connections, which is particularly clear in the case of *Breaking Bad*. It has been repeatedly stated that the series would not have been successful without Netflix. Vince Gilligan, creator of the show, went so far as to say that “Netflix kept [*Breaking Bad*] on the air” (Sim 2016, 192; see also Landau 2016, 313). How can this be explained? The short answer is that video-on-demand services have opened up a new distribution window for content and, through this additional revenue, made edgier, more provocative programs intended for niche audiences financially viable. This explanation is certainly right but it also reduces *Breaking Bad*'s success to a matter of

finding the right audience for the right program. *Figures of Time* intends to trace the more interesting follow-on and feedback effects that shift the television's machinic assemblage as a whole and allow for new modes of expression to emerge. For instance, one of the important achievements of digital TV networks and services like Netflix consists in overcoming TV studios' dependence on syndication, or the distribution of content to other, mainly local network affiliates for reruns. Syndication was a necessary industry component during the broadcast era because it allowed studios to make relatively large revenues on their mainly deficit-financed programs. But an attractive syndication deal comes with a number of requirements: a program should have accumulated a sizeable catalog of at least eighty episodes and ideally more than one hundred. It also helps if the episodes do not rely too much on continuous story arcs as the audience for reruns consists of mostly casual viewers. It does not surprise then that the most successful shows in syndication are sitcoms such as *Seinfeld* and *Friends*. In this way, syndication as a distribution strategy produces feedback effects on the kind of television content that gets produced in the first place.²³ It becomes clear also that a series like *Breaking Bad* hardly meets these requirements given its shorter seasons and its heavy reliance on an ongoing storyline. If *Seinfeld* is the classic case of a syndicated show, *Breaking Bad* is a prominent example of bingeable content. Binge-watching, in turn, makes for more attentive audiences and thus also allows for innovative, more complex storytelling (Tryon 2015, 110). Written and distributed in such a way as to enable continued watching, *Breaking Bad* illustrates that a singular aesthetic experience always comes into experience at the crosscurrents of various conditioning factors.

This insight feeds into the radically empirical approach chosen here. As James explains, "Against [the] rationalistic tendency to treat experience as chopped up into discontinuous static objects, radical empiricism protests. It insists on taking conjunctions at their 'face-value,' just as they come" (2003, 124). Thus, to understand the technics of contemporary TV, *Figures of Time* traces the entanglements of both enabling and deactivating relations within the assemblage of contemporary television. Crucially, this approach allows me to go beyond the stale and general discussions around "consumer agency." Recent discussions around this topic rely heavily on a conceptual framework that was developed in re-

sponse to the introduction of remote control devices (RCDs) in the 1970s and 1980s. Critics believed that RCDs were a “subversive technology” because they wrested power away from the dominant networks and gave it to the viewer (Bellamy and Walker 1996, 1). While power was earlier understood in terms of choice and control alone, the list has more recently been extended to five *c*’s, now including convenience, customization, and community (Lotz 2007, 245).²⁴ Either way, power is presented as something that can be possessed or lost, something that one wants to keep or take away from somebody. This book sets out to push against these discourses by showing that power is in the complex relations of an assemblage. Via the works of Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, power is here conceived as relational, nonlocal as well as operational or ontogenetic.²⁵ As the brief examples of soap operas and the *Breaking Bad*–Netflix connection show, what can or cannot be done is not determined by any single party that “has” the power. What is and is not possible depends on a constellation of conditioning factors that are in turn transformed by the singular ways in which they relate as well as by that which they bring into the world. As much as *Breaking Bad* depended on a confluence of innovative practices in writing, production, and distribution, its success has also fed back into network management as a lesson on how initially low-rating programs can be turned into critical and commercial successes. This nonlinearity is why the serial machine and its components are continuously emergent: their ways of relating to one another produce them as provisional terms of a relation.

Chapter 1 thus shows how today’s technics of television allows for a figural aesthetic. While the majority of *Figures of Time* is grounded in close reading and aesthetic analysis, this first chapter explores some of the key industrial and technological conditions for preemptive narratives. The chapter also defines the concept of the figural in a first engagement with *Damages*. Within the ecological framework for TV as a transformed medium, two of the book’s central questions are: What is television capable of today? What are the new social and political potentials of contemporary TV? In *Figures of Time*, I understand television—a medium many of us live with on a daily basis—as a vector of subjectivation that inflects our individual and collective existence. If television as a medium is undergoing considerable changes, then we must ask how the transformations feed back into the wider context of contemporary cul-

ture. The recent transformations of the medium have allowed it to participate in the development of new modes of perception, particularly as regards the aesthetic experience of time. More specifically, then, chapter 1 explores in depth to what extent television's contribution to a popular preemptive nonconscious is conditioned upon a number of technical factors. The overall claim defended throughout the book is that television has a new propensity to create singular experiences of time—to *make time*—which also allows it to participate in the political operationalization of time and, in particular, of the future. What's more, my exploration of the serial machine will show that this push toward complex temporalities is particular to television, if not exactly unique to it. Looking at the genealogy of preemptive narratives, we will see that they are firmly grounded in televisual conventions and innovations. So, to the question occasionally raised as to whether television still matters in a postnetwork era, whether it even still exists, I respond that it does and that the medium's continuing relevance lies in the shifting political alliances that it forms in a highly mediated world, the innovative and singular modes of expression that it gives rise to, and the qualitatively new aesthetic experiences it enables.

Aesthetics: Making Time

It is evident that a particular concept of time is already at work in the technics of the serial machine. If I subsequently think narrative, politics, and ethics along the same lines, this is not, however, because the approach taken here is as determinist as that of certain conceptions of “cinematic” or “televisual” time. The decisive difference is that, in this approach, it is not the apparatus that comes first but time itself. For if time is thought as the creative self-differentiation of a topological world, then *everything* discussed in this book—from media technics to preemption politics and then on to the control society—must fall within the purview of this concept. This claim rejoins the earlier contention that, in this thinking, there is no “out of time.” We shall see, in fact, that we can let go of distinctions between inside and outside altogether and simply say that everything *is* time—*space-time*—and, more precisely, space-time in the making.²⁶

What does it mean to say that a television series “makes” time and gives it to perception? First, the way in which contemporary television

makes time goes beyond mere representations of time. As an example, consider the British television series *Life on Mars*. It is an interesting show to engage with in this respect because it offers three different representational logics for its story. A present-day police inspector has an accident and, when he comes to, finds himself in 1973. Has he traveled in time, is he in a coma, or is he mad? Each of these premises—time travel, (un)consciousness, and madness—resonates with a specific concept of time or an aspect thereof. Interestingly, though, the three representations of time in *Life on Mars* are mutually exclusive: if you look at the story through one representational logic, you temporarily cancel out the other two. More importantly, no single representation can account for what is actually going on in the image; time is irreducible to any one representation. If one forces it into a representational logic nonetheless, one aspect of it or another is bound to be lost. Eventually, the continuous oscillation between the different premises undermines an increasingly unstable narrative and foregrounds the processual form-taking of the image. So while *Life on Mars* takes the viewer out of various representations of time, it does not take her “out of time.” An aesthetic theory that wants to account for the creativity and efficacy of perception cannot begin with notions of coded signification or representation because images—televsual, filmic, or otherwise—are not already bound up with a meaning or a *signifier* to form stable, repeatable signs (in the way that the sound and signifier \‘trè\ is bound up with the little drawing of a tree in Ferdinand de Saussure’s notorious model of the linguistic sign). Instead, “the image *gives rise* to signs” (Deleuze 1986, 69, emphasis added). Moving images employ their available resources (color, contrast, depth, focus, sound, etc.) to create meaning, to make sense, potentially differently each time. This is a way of approaching moving-image narratives that does not discredit representation; rather, it takes a conceptual step back to see *what else* there is and to integrate representation as one way of making sense among many.

What else is there, then? There is sensation, irreducible to the sense perception of images and sounds alone. The experience of audiovisual material does not exhaust itself in an appeal to eyes and ears: it melts the senses into one another. We see and hear, obviously. But we also have goose bumps, cringe and flinch, gasp and cry.²⁷ The important point is that when, for instance, a horror film or series scares us out of our seat,

our reaction does not pass through signification, representation, or reflection. The horror film's orchestral stab, often used to do the job, carries its name for a reason: it is a signal that directly hits the senses and produces a visceral reaction. From this vantage, the "spectator is no longer passively receiving optical information, but exists as a bodily being, enmeshed acoustically, senso-motorically, somatically, and affectively in the film's visual texture and soundscape" (Elsaesser and Hagener 2010, 10). This, then, is what I mean by *aesthetics*: not the poetic codes of a genre or format, nor the current set of "narrative devices" in TV fiction, but rather the perceptual dynamics and intensities of sensation specific to a given media ecology.²⁸ *Figures of Time* explores these dynamics between television series and the viewer, between the medium and the body as forms of knowing, as modes of thought. The contention is that television series trigger experiential movements through time that bring something to expression that is not thought representationally.

These suprarepresentational forces of expression of the image will be called *figures of time*, following Gilles Deleuze's notion of the figural developed in his consideration of Francis Bacon's paintings. As the following chapter explores in detail, the figural is a concept for thinking beyond the figurative, to speak of the ways art has of "capturing forces" and "*directly* relating them to sensation" (see Deleuze 2004b, 31). What comes into focus then is the *immediate* experience of the medium, not what is represented in or mediated by the image but how the image itself is experienced. While this immediate aspect of experience may be fairly easy to grasp in the above-mentioned example of the orchestral hit, it is much less evident how we may think the visceral sensation of an aesthetic movement that is not startling and bloodcurdling but is painted into a still canvas or slowly unfolds over hours of viewing. The challenge is to think the direct or immediate without reducing it to the fast and easy. The figural impact of one of Bacon's paintings can slowly grow on the spectator just as the figural movement of the TV shows considered here slowly builds from the interval that is opened up between the pre-empted ending and the present moment. This book proposes the concept of the *figure* and a method of figural analysis to think TV's serial movements through time as an abstract shape slowly but directly crafted into sensation and that must be understood as an important site for the image's political efficacy. In chapter 1, figures are conceived as the singu-

lar aesthetic experiences that “lift off” from a narrative assemblage conditioned by the innovative serial machine (Massumi 2011, 19–20).²⁹ Figures, as they are defined here, are neither rhetorical strategies nor formal elements of moving images but *events* or *effects* produced in the encounter between moving images and the viewer.³⁰ Figures are fundamentally *relational* because they emerge within a favorable constellation of conditioning factors, and *processual* because they occur over time, feed into other processes, and eventually fade. Finally, figures are *asignifying* because the way in which they make sense is not reliant upon coded and conventionalized signification; instead, figures require and foster what Guattari calls “non-discursive, pathic knowledge,” a kind of thinking directly through the senses (1995, 25). Grounded in such a concept, figural analysis is a method for studying the procedural modulation of affective forces running through moving-image narratives. As Alanna Thain puts it in her engagement with cinema: “This figural form of analysis gets us productively lost in the medium via *attention to passage itself*, taking a lost highway rather than the royal road of narrative analysis. Being lost in the medium subjects us to these *de-ranging effects of reading time against the grain*. . . . The figural attunes us to the *plastic temporality* of film figures as the unique materiality of the film as audiovisual image and the mutable, even ‘virtual’ side of film” (2017, 51–52, emphasis added). Figural analysis emphasizes the audiovisual materiality of moving-image narratives and asks how the images and sound we perceive are not already *in* time but create a singular experience of time in the first place. In conjunction with its specific argument regarding preemption politics, *Figures of Time* intends to make a valuable addition to nonrepresentational methodologies by analyzing the political impact of narrative media through a particular focus on temporal movements. It is worth noting that while the argument of this book requires a strong focus on preemption politics and warrants a select corpus of programs relating to themes of crime and justice, the method proposed here can be productive across the boundaries of academic disciplines. In other words, and as the important precursors in the fields of literary theory, art theory, and film studies suggest, figural analysis is a transdisciplinary approach to media. If in this book I develop an aesthetic theory of *televisual* figures of time in particular, this is because the resulting method of figural analysis allows me to unfold the various aspects of this book’s

central political argument regarding preemption as a mode of televisual aesthetics. This focus on the aesthetic experience of time and figural analysis is also the reason why *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* and *Bergsonism* are my central reference points within Deleuze's work. Other relevant texts such as *The Logic of Sense* and its preoccupation with serialization support the argument intermittently but do not provide its backbone. And although the *Cinema* books are an important reference point throughout the following chapters, some readers may find that they do not figure quite as prominently as they might expect from a book as indebted to Deleuze's thinking as this one. This is again because this book draws on Deleuze's engagement with the nexus of aesthetic experience, time, and affect across his entire oeuvre (including the *Cinema* books) but also because of a certain dissatisfaction with the inflationary and thus less productive use of terms like the time-image in what is sometimes dubbed Deleuze studies.

Focusing on what moving-image assemblages effectuate, *Figures of Time* attempts not to pin down all their formal qualities with descriptive accuracy but to see what they *do*, what they give to experience. Such a "functionalist conception" of aesthetics, which "only considers the function a quality fulfills in a specific assemblage, or in passing from one assemblage to another," focuses on the ways in which, in the present case, the production of temporalities is ecologically carried by a relational field in which a technic (in itself complex) intersects with modes of media consumption, social and political ecologies, and other attending existential domains (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 306).³¹ For instance, binge-watching, enabled by serial repetition as well as long narrative arcs and technologically supported by distribution on DVD and through on-demand platforms, is a functional component of the serial machine that facilitates a figural aesthetic. The intensive engagement and sustained temporality of long viewing sessions create a new sensitivity to the aesthetic idiosyncrasies and minor perceptual movements of television's long serial narratives. Binge-watching is functional in the present account in that it creates an attentional disposition that allows the concrete materiality of serial narratives to take figural effect.

How, then, can we describe the figure of time that *Breaking Bad*'s media ecology composes for? What does it effectuate? How does it make sense without signifying? One might be tempted to say that Walter

White's precarious present is experienced as a hopeless deadlock that makes escape impossible (see, e.g., Freeley 2014, 48–50). But precariousness is not synonymous to a lack of potential. On the contrary, Walter's case makes it amply clear that a precarious present—precisely because there is no security to be found in tried-and-tested solutions—makes previously unimaginable paths of action conceivable. What comes into sensation when we glimpse the innocent teacher's future as a meth cook in the pilot is the interval between these two moments in time, an interval open wide with the potential for radical change. First, then, the preemptive movement brings into sensation that precarity is potentializing in the most unpredictable ways. Moreover, *Breaking Bad's* repeated loops through the future make felt that a precarious present, far from being an impasse of imposed immobility, *compels* to action. When Walter declares to Jesse that he will only cook the meth and refuses to have anything to do with its distribution, we already—by way of the image's intercutting between present and future—see him walk away from the scene of an accident, blood-smeared moneybag in hand (“Crazy Handful of Nothin’”). The preemptive loop relentlessly pushes the precarious present toward the limit of permanent collapse, a limit from which one only returns by way of yet another reluctant self-differentiation. *Breaking Bad's* temporal movement conveys the extent to which Walt's existence has become a continuous act of enforced self-transformation that serves the sole and sad purpose of saving him from one near-impossibility to the next. In this way, the series crafts a figural movement—co-conditioned by the complex set of innovative writing, production, distribution, and viewing practices described earlier—that articulates the temporality of neoliberal subjectivation as an enforced propensity toward flexible self-differentiation in the midst of a present atremble with inauspicious potentialities.

Figures of Time explores the political import of such temporal movements in and of narrative. Along the way, it is hoped, the book becomes a proposition for watching television differently, *productively*, by which I mean once again that we engage with television as a vector of subjectivation in a variety of ways, attuning to or inflecting the directions in which it takes us. This book is itself the product of such an attunement that thinks with television's preemptive narratives to create an aesthetics, a politics, and ultimately an ethics of time. If the narrative move-

ment of the preemptive loop intersects with a political ecology, then how do we engage with it? The answer will potentially have to be different in each case because each program inserts itself differently into the existing ecology of media, culture, and politics. And each program engages the viewer differently. Chapter 2 engages with *Life on Mars* to illustrate the subjectivating force of participatory viewing, which should not be understood as the active production of meaning by the viewer. Rather, we will see that the viewer co-composes—in concert with the narrative—the making and unfolding of immediately felt time. Furthermore, the chapter teases out important differences between the concurring concepts of time that it puts into play, ultimately arguing for an understanding of time as creative becoming.

Conceived in this way, figures of time are more than fictional models of what Richard Grusin has called *premediation* to describe the relation between media and affect. Grusin shows that, after 9/11, American news networks have tapped into the “affectivity of anticipation” to develop “a form of medial pre-emption” (2010, 4, 2). Media no longer only mediate preexisting content. In a globalized and accelerated world characterized by uncertainty and fear, they cover possible future events as much as the past, potentialities as much as actualities. His example is once again the war in Iraq, which was mediated at least a year before it started: “The mediation of war and its aftermath always preceded the events themselves, . . . such real events as war and its aftermath occurred only after they had also been premediated by networked media, by government spokesmen, and by the culture at large” (45). In the logic of premediation, the main goal of media is not to convey reliable information but to attune the public to a shared affective state of fear and to create the felt necessity for security measures.³² This is a valuable reminder that the political must not be thought in terms of nation-states and governments alone. The dynamics of preemption make clear that “Big Politics” cannot be disentangled from the micropolitical, from individual or shared affect, and that their entanglement passes through the media. In this book, the political is understood as just such a complex articulation of the macro and the micro. In the end, however, my focus on aesthetics, sensation, and affect is also the reason why the term *premediation* itself rarely makes it into my own writing even though the logic it describes is pervasive in the preemptive TV series addressed in this book. It is be-

cause preemptive figures of time are *directly* felt, *immediately* sensed, that this project is less interested in what is re- or premediated than in what is “immediated” (Thain 2017, 2, 11–12).³³ This is yet another way of saying that the approach proposed here is more interested in the figural than in the figurative. I insist, now and repeatedly throughout this book, that this shift in perspective does not discard narrative in any way but looks at it differently. It is, to borrow a phrase from Andrew Murphie, a “shift away from an interest in representation to *operation*,” in this case: away from narrative as representation to *narrative as an operation* (2002, 193). The key question to be answered is not How do these narratives represent the future? (Though it is answered in passing.) Instead, I examine the following questions: What kinds of aesthetic experience does the narrative loop through the future activate? What kinds of movements—of perception, of thought—does this narrative move enable or foreclose on this side, our side, of the screen?

A tentative, general answer would be to say that preemptive narratives create aesthetic experiences that make time felt as a complex and creative process. Having indicated why such a concept of time is crucial to an adequate understanding of the *technics* of serial TV fiction and their *aesthetics*, it must be noted that it can also produce a more appropriate understanding of the *politics* in question here. Many theoretical discourses on the experience of time in modernity have foregrounded the aspect of speed and acceleration. Since Alvin Toffler’s seminal work from 1970, the notion of the “future shock” has been associated with the loss of permanence produced by “the roaring current of change” (3). However, the problem of change—that is, time and the future—is largely reduced to the “accelerative thrust” in sociocultural processes and the general lack of “adaptivity” among the population (4). In the recent *Futurism of the Instant*, Paul Virilio continues to argue that the extreme acceleration of life through information and communication technologies has contracted our experience of time to an “omnipresent instant”; it has “exhausted chronodiversity” and produced the “atemporality” of experience or a “hygiene of Time” (2010, 71, 72, 102). The difficulties these concepts pose are the same as in the case of the notion of “atemporal cinema” for they evoke a lack of experiential complexity that is belied by the processes of contemporary politics. If anything, contemporary politics (and serial narratives, for that matter) operate in more

complex ways than ever before, which is to say, they are fundamentally nonlinear and co-causal processes.³⁴ In the geopolitical situation of the twenty-first century, sociocultural and sociopolitical processes speak not only to acceleration and instantaneity but, more importantly and worryingly, to shocks induced by means of recursive loops, nonlinear causalities, and complex modulations.³⁵ The concepts proposed here try to account for these developments.

Chapter 3 proposes a reading of *Flashforward* that foregrounds the temporal complexity of preemption. I will show that while the series figuratively (i.e., on the level of representation) continues to adhere to discourses of prevention and choice-based politics, the figural movement of the series thwarts any resistance to institutional politics and helps enforce a general consensus. In other words, the figurative focus on discourses of acceleration and prevention in *Flashforward* covers up the powerful figural dynamic of preemption.

Ethics: Surviving Complexity

The wager of this book is that the concepts it offers, as they open up new potentials for thought, also enable new modes of action that allow individuals to respond to the changed requirements of an increasingly complex life environment and mediascape in particular. This complexity can be usefully thought through the concept of *control* as contrasted with the Foucauldian notion of discipline (Deleuze 1995, 169–82). Within a social context of control, individuals can no longer assure success by fulfilling reliable norms or following codes. While the disciplinary society imposed a mold or form that individuals can *conform* to, the control society continuously modulates or *reforms* its requirements. For individuals, this amounts to a qualitative change of how they are held to behave and perform. Instead of proving themselves against a general standard of evaluation, they are more likely to be pitted against one another, trying to outperform competitors by constantly investing in themselves in order to “get an edge.” While such self-improvement may well pass through the conventional channels of education and professional training, it more and more often requires so-called soft skills and affective labor ranging from flexibility over creativity to likability.³⁶ Intensified self-differentiation is the coerced virtue of the control society.

Crucially, the shift toward control, whose mechanisms are closely

tied to the economic principles of neoliberalism, also produces a transformation in the ways that morality and crime are considered within society. Foucault himself addresses this issue in his lectures *The Birth of Biopolitics*. American neoliberalism, he writes, promotes the “inversion of the relationships of the social to the economic” so that economy is no longer in the service of and regulated by social concerns but, instead, is given analytical primacy over all other domains of social life (Foucault 2008, 240). As a consequence, the economic model expands and generalizes into an “analytical schema or grid of intelligibility” of society as a whole in such a way that “everything . . . can be analyzed in terms of investment, capital costs, and profit” (243, 244). As Foucault shows, this model ultimately applies to criminality as well. As opposed to the anthropological criminologists of the nineteenth century who believed that one could be a “born criminal” or physiologically predisposed toward criminal behavior, “in [the neoliberal] perspective the criminal is not distinguished in any way by or interrogated on the basis of moral or anthropological traits. The criminal is nothing other than absolutely anyone whomsoever. The criminal, any person, is treated only as anyone whomsoever who invests in an action, expects a profit from it, and who accepts the risk of a loss” (253). In other words, a criminal—like Walter White—is just another *homo oeconomicus*, an economic man, and crime is just another way of making a living, albeit at a higher risk. At the same time, the aim of penal policy is no longer the complete eradication of crime on moral grounds but the regulation of the market for crime. Foucault quotes economist Gary Becker’s formulation of the two questions that will henceforth guide penal policy and law enforcement: “How many offences should be permitted? Second, how many offenders should go unpunished?” Note that these are quantitative questions that subordinate qualitative concerns regarding the nature and gravity of crime. To determine these quantities, neoliberals ask at what point the investments made into law enforcement and crime prevention become unprofitable—that is, at which point a higher investment no longer corresponds to a lower crime rate. Crime that persists beyond that cut-off point will be a tolerated (business) activity. In short, the mechanisms of control and those of neoliberalism are complementary in that the former dynamize social relations and open them up toward continued modulation while the latter reevaluate social activity in primarily economic

terms—such as performance and profitability—and subordinate other modes of valuation, for instance through moral values. How is an individual's life affected by such a fundamental shift in a society's functional principles? What are the effects and challenges of these transformations?

Contemporary television negotiates these questions of neoliberalism and control through its many antiheroes like Walter White, Dexter, Tony Soprano, Hannibal, *True Detective's* Rust Cohle, Annelise Keating from *How to Get Away with Murder*, or Patty Hughes from *Damages*. The problem at the core of these series is not whether a character's behavior is morally "good" or "bad." (The answer to that question is easy: bad.) The problem to be thought consists precisely in the paradox that what old-fashioned minds might consider immoral behavior has long become necessary and even advisable under conditions of control and neoliberalism. A show like *Dexter* (Showtime, 2006–13) operates on the premise that if law enforcement limits its efficiency according to the requirements of due procedure or extramoral, economic criteria, then those who seek justice and social order must themselves move outside the law. (This is also, of course, the definition of the "state of exception.") Television's corrupt and criminal cops suggest that the police apparatus is too faithful to its outdated disciplinary origins and therefore incapable of moving at the speed and in the same directions of crime. When lawful action is slow and toothless, the only efficient way to fight crime is crime—this is the mantra of many contemporary police procedurals and legal dramas, including the ones discussed here. In chapter 4, I return to *Damages* to show that the recent transformations within the genre of the legal drama are television's way of participating in the socioeconomic shift from discipline to control.

To fight crime by bypassing the law, to move like one's enemy: these, too, are characteristics of preemption (see Massumi 2015, 12). It seems to me that, for a lot of fictional TV of recent years, narrative preemption has become the launching pad for explorations of the question how one can move through such a complex social field, how one can survive the control society. In *Breaking Bad*, the pressures of control and neoliberalism lead to a game of evasion in which Walter White is always just about to get caught, a social slalom that requires an extreme agility and sensitivity to shifts in the environment.³⁷ Walter and more generally *Breaking Bad* deploy impressive diversionary tactics, perform vir-

tuoso just-in-time solutions, and creatively play with laws and rules (of narrative). Saul Goodman, the lawyer who helps Walter break the law, is an important figure in this respect inasmuch as he emphatically uses and abuses the law for economic gain. The above-mentioned trickery of the pink teddy bear is an example of how the narrative itself stretches its own rules to mislead the viewer in a complex way that is just related enough to be accepted as plausible. As I explore further in chapter 4, preemptive narratives do to the viewer as their protagonists do to their own fictional surroundings.

The proposition here is to follow these movements and modulations of the image, foregrounded by the preemptive loop, in order to develop perceptual techniques for moving through and surviving the control society. *Figures of Time* is ultimately an ethico-aesthetic project to the extent that it explores how we can attune our perception to the nonlinear and shifty processes that constitute our contemporary (media) environment. The goal is not to embrace the functionings of the control society but to critically assess and inflect them toward more livable conditions. Following Deleuze and Foucault, I argue that this task necessitates a change in thinking from moral to ethical requirements.³⁸ Here, morality is understood as a system of judgment based on a preexisting set of transcendent and immutable values, whereas an ethics considers the continuous recomposition of relations within a given environment. In a dynamic field of relations, the ethical requirement would be to adapt one's capacities to affect and to be affected in such a way as to create mutually sustainable relations, to maintain the field's liveliness. This creates two major differences between a morality and an ethics. First, the constraints of an ethics are not immutable, transcendent values but variable, immanent criteria. And second, an ethical practice does not produce judgments but continuous *experimentation*. Experimentation within a relational field is inevitably an *ecological* practice, leading to what Isabelle Stengers calls an "ecology of practices" (2010, 37). The first thing Stengers says about ecologies of practices is, once again, that that they create their own values. These immanent criteria that are invented as various, heterogeneous beings pose the situated "question of what counts for its mode of life" (37). From this angle, an ecology is the dynamic and therefore always only metastable constellation of various modes of life that overlap and intersect in such a way as to tentatively

re-create their metastable commingling for the next now. A key requirement in this respect is *attention*. To take one's place in an ecology is to be aware of how the multiple and entangled forces intersect to maintain a metastable collectivity. In a second step, attention must facilitate the invention of *techniques* understood as situated practices, however molecular they may be, that cocreate the ecology in a future-oriented, re-potentializing manner.

The concept through which this book will articulate this dynamic response to control and open up its aesthetic project toward a practical media philosophy is that of the *procedure*. Drawing on the work of artist-philosophers Madeline Gins and Arakawa, chapter 4 will conceive procedures as “processes linked, no matter how briefly, to awareness” and “staged” by a concrete assemblage of conditioning elements such as materials, textures, sounds, perspectives, techniques, and so on (2002, 53). The emphasis on composing-for-procedures highlights that aesthetic experience cannot be separated out from its concrete narrative assemblage. In a way, this is the inverse of the argument so far. Until now, I have stressed that there is more to a TV show than narrative structure and concrete images, that there are suprapresentational, directly felt movements through time. What Gins and Arakawa stress is that this excess, to be accessed or “entered wittingly” (53), must be carefully composed for. One must rigorously compose with concrete “features and elements” and give them “physical shape” to effectuate a procedure (Gins and Arakawa 2006, 115). So in the end, the ethical questions are the following: How do you build for a procedure? How can you compose for a lift-off? How do you combine concrete techniques to form a metastable aesthetic ecology? Chapter 4 answers these questions in an engagement with the legal thriller *Damages* because it rigorously composes with three specific visual and narrative techniques to create a singular sensation of futurity. To be sure, *Damages* plays with its audience in ways that are generally similar to those deployed by *Breaking Bad*. The series loops future visions into our perception to mislead, manipulate, and trick us. However, it preempts its future not to overdetermine the present but to flush the viewer's perception with potential. In this way, the viewer becomes herself a radical empiricist held to register a multiplicity of possible relations between different characters, parallel plot strands, and moments in time. So instead of making the viewer en-

gage in a politics of fear, the preemptive narrative of *Damages* enables a procedure that fosters speculation as a generative technique, asking what else is possible, how else a situation can play out. Through this procedure, the series aligns itself with a speculative pragmatism to the extent that it firmly (radically empirically) grounds us in its perceptual ecology and at the same time asks that we perceive at each moment the various futurities that this present contains only in germ. As the viewer learns to hold this potential and navigate the image's complex figure of time, the perceptual ecology that *Damages* composes for comes to function as an aesthetic training ground for alternative modes of perception, modes of confronting and rechanneling the demands of the control society.

So when morality and ethics are opposed in the present account, it is not to suggest that an ethical practice is “nicer” or “easier” to do. Likewise, the conceptual contrast between discipline and control does not imply that one is more or less sufferable than the other. The key point is that each regime of power comes with its own requirements. While the requirements of the control society are perhaps *less strict* than those of the disciplinary society, they are for that very reason *more demanding* in their insistence that individuals continuously attend to ever-changing relations in their shared environment. However, the contention of this book is that these aspects of attention, co-composition, and movement can be procedurally articulated and inflected toward productive modes of ethico-aesthetic engagement. Any engagement with a surrounding ecology, whether considered from a technological, perceptual, political, or other viewpoint, should consider that what an ecology “wants”—its tendency—is the potentializing continuation of its process. This also holds for the ways in which academic thought enters the media ecology of contemporary television series. For this reason, this book does not provide an objective outsider's perspective to produce positive knowledge but stages encounters between (academic) thinking and (creative) doing. This is also why, for instance, the final chapter does not end in a conclusion but in an invitation. The last word is a first step toward renewed action: a set of propositions to inflect our modes of attending within the media ecology of serial TV fiction. For, if preemptive narratives spark powerful perceptual dynamics relating to new political paradigms, we need strategies for engaging with them. As the following chapters show, preemptive narratives draw on the aesthetic force of con-

temporary television to drop image-bombs into sensation and creatively disrupt our sense of temporal and political orientation. How can we defuse such an explosive aesthetic or, better yet, channel its force into a productive politics of futurity (instead of looping the future into a politics of fear)? The focus on the generative force of procedures adopted here is a reminder that procedural thinking and doing are *speculative* and *experimental*. One cannot know what a procedure will end up doing, where it will move thought, and that is precisely why one should follow it. *Figures of Time* is an attempt to take the arsenal of contemporary television and turn it into ethico-aesthetic sparklers.