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Rewriting Desire: Intimacy, Identity, and Pleasure in Complex Storytelling

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Abstract

Desire, a transformative force, is one of contemporary serial narratives' most intricate and multifaceted dimensions. Far from being reducible to a mere representation of sexual attraction, desire in television seriality operates as a prism through which to explore issues of intimacy, identity, and power. This paper seeks to analyze how desire is staged and problematised within a set of emblematic series that have significantly shaped contemporary cultural imagination. *Grey's Anatomy* explores the entanglement of desire with professional life, emotional fragility, and collective trauma, constructing narratives where eros intersects with affective labour and the negotiation of identity within high-pressure contexts. *Sex and the City* proposes a very different model, placing female desire at the centre as a space of autonomy, experimentation, and confrontation with the normative frameworks of late capitalist society. By contrast, *The Handmaid's Tale* reimagines desire within a dystopian theocracy, assigning it an overtly political function: here, erotic impulses and affective attachments become acts of resistance against systemic repression and biopolitical control. More recently, *Sex Education* embodies a cultural shift, presenting desire through a plural and inclusive lens that embraces diversity of sexual orientation, gender identity, and relational practices. These case studies, when viewed collectively, reveal how television series rework cultural codes of sexuality and intimacy, producing new imaginaries of the body, pleasure, and identity. In this perspective, serial narratives emerge as key cultural laboratories, reproducing and challenging dominant ideologies of desire while offering audiences opportunities for recognition, critique, and affective engagement beyond the screen.

Keywords: desire; storytelling; TV series; narratology; ethics; sexuality

1. Introduction

Desire constitutes one of contemporary television's most powerful and complex narrative forces. Far from being a mere thematic element, it operates as both narrative engine and affective drive: it structures relationships, generates conflict, and shapes identities. Desire functions as a cultural and narrative device that exposes deep tensions between the individual and society, body and identity, norm and transgression. In contemporary television, desire is not simply represented but staged as a fluid, shifting, and often ambivalent dynamic that traverses genres, characters, and narrative structures.

The evolution of television seriality, which intensified in the 1980s and 1990s (Mittell 2014, 2017), has radically transformed the way stories are told. The medium's transformation has been accompanied by growing openness to interactivity and a constant push toward narrative expansion across platforms and formats and through the cultural

Check for updates

Received: 24 November 2025
Revised: 29 January 2026
Accepted: 3 February 2026
Published: 9 February 2026

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codes they interrogate and reconfigure. As Benvenuti (2018) argues, transmediality—now a defining feature of contemporary production—extends beyond media boundaries to cultural ones, triggering a continuous negotiation of difference and belonging. In this sense, the concept of the medium itself is deconstructed through the logic of remediation (Bolter and Grusin 2000), whereby traditional media redefine themselves in relation to new technological and communicative environments.

Television series thus emerge as complex cultural forms that generate narratives that exceed linear storytelling and challenge traditional analytical models. The interplay between different media and cultural frameworks produces layered texts open to reuse, appropriation, and reinterpretation, reshaping both reception and audience participation modes. Desire is deeply implicated in this process: no longer a mere theme, it becomes a generative force shaping plots, bodies, relationships, and audiovisual languages.

As Jenkins (2006) notes, convergent culture operates through a dual dynamic: top-down production processes typical of media conglomerates, and bottom-up participatory practices that redefine the spectator as co-creator of narrative worlds. This tension fuels transmedia storytelling, where each medium contributes to constructing a shared universe, expanding the reach and meaning of the original story. Each series can thus function as a node within a larger network, a gateway into a complex narrative system (Jenkins 2006; Giovagnoli 2020).

The expansion of narrative worlds entails a parallel reconfiguration of how bodies and desire are represented. Mallamaci (2018) states that every medium shift produces textual emanations that enrich and stratify the story, enabling new articulations of intimacy and subjectivity. Within this framework, desire is never neutral: it is shaped by cultural codes, gendered languages, and power dynamics, and performed through bodies, gazes, spaces, and narrative temporalities.

Complex TV (Mittell 2017) responds to these transformations by adopting cumulative, open, metatextual narrative structures that refuse closure and demand active spectatorship. Television proves particularly suited to this mode of storytelling, thanks to its capacity to foster an affective and familiar bond with viewers (Sepinwall 2014), who recognize in characters and stories a reflection of their own dynamics of desire.

Contemporary seriality thus offers a privileged site for observing how desire—in its multiplicity and ambiguity—is staged, reimagined, and shared. Transmedial and transcultural strategies are not merely technical devices but epistemological tools illuminating the entanglement of media, bodies, and imaginaries, reshaping representation coordinates in today's audiovisual culture.

For decades, television series were dismissed as products of a "light" or superficial culture, concerned primarily with spectacle (Cardini 2015, p. 49). Such assumptions, however, overlook the narrative depth of many productions, which often conceal complex storytelling strategies and nuanced representations of desire beneath their apparent simplicity. Overcoming these prejudices is therefore essential to fully recognize the textual richness and narrative sophistication of much contemporary seriality.

With the advent of postmodernism, and later metamodernism (Vittorini 2017), new narrative patterns emerged, amplifying processes already underway: the erosion of the boundary between high and popular culture (Jameson 1989, p. 10) and the proliferation of new narrative forms. Scholars attempted to distinguish among overlapping categories (Donnarumma 2014, p. 26), just as we now grapple with the nuances of intermediality and transmediality. As Vittorini observes, when addressing literary (and audiovisual) narrative, we always resort to a few major categories—modern, modernism, postmodern—and to the countless subcategories into which they are articulated, each with its own spatio-temporal coordinates and more or less precise epistemological and aesthetic connotations

(Vittorini 2015, p. 11). Franzini further underscores this point, noting that "terminological uncertainty reflects the absence of unequivocal definitions in these fields; consequently, 'modern' and 'modernity' (and their post- counterparts) are often used as synonyms, since they designate the same conceptual horizons, detached from precise periodizations. Modern and postmodern are in fact 'cultural' terms, insofar as they do not mark a specific historical period, philosophical movement, or stable conceptual framework" (Franzini 2018, p. 17).

Moving beyond postmodernism into the globalized context of world literature, Vittorini argues that contemporary storytelling "deploys the centripetal and ordering strategies of the modern novel, while enhancing them with the centrifugal and deconstructive strategies of postmodernism, oscillating between the naïve and/or fanatical idealism of the former and the skeptical and/or apathetic pragmatism of the latter, thus moving within a 'metamodern' space" (Vittorini 2017, p. 19; 2021, pp. 33–35). Metamodern cultural production thus operates within a multiform horizon that profoundly shapes narrative practices.

As Gallese and Guerra have shown, spectators' engagement with characters and their emotions is mediated by processes of "embodied simulation," characterized by a strong sensory and intersubjective component (Gallese and Guerra 2020). Therefore, desire is represented and *experienced* through the spectator's body. Moreover, desire is always "oriented": it is not simply something we feel but something that moves us, situates us in the world, and positions us in relation to others (Ahmed 2004). In this sense, television seriality does not simply depict desire but directs, modulates, and sets it in tension with dominant cultural norms. In this framework, desire is not understood simply as narrative motivation in a formalist sense, nor as a functional driver of plot progression. While desire may overlap with motivation at certain moments, it is approached here as an embodied and affective orientation that exceeds character intentionality and operates at the level of collective feeling. Drawing on affect theory (Ahmed 2004) and theories of embodied simulation (Gallese and Guerra 2020), desire is treated as a force that emerges through bodies, gazes, rhythms, and relational dynamics, shaping not only narrative outcomes but also modes of spectator engagement. This article, therefore, aims to examine a set of emblematic contemporary television series—*Grey's Anatomy*, *Sex and the City*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *Sex Education*—that represent desire as an ambivalent force, oscillating between liberation and control. This article does not aim to offer an exhaustive account of desire in contemporary television, nor to theorize desire as a universal or transhistorical category. Rather, it focuses on representations of female and other non-heteronormative desires within mainstream serialized television, where desire is staged as a problem, a tension, and an affective force rather than as a stable identity or narrative function.

This focus responds to the historical predominance of heterosexual male desire both in televisual representation and in television studies, where desire has often been treated implicitly as a neutral or universal drive. By foregrounding female and non-normative desiring subjects, the article seeks to address a critical gap and to examine how contemporary serial narratives articulate alternative affective orientations, ethical frameworks, and embodied experiences of intimacy.[1] The four case studies discussed are not intended as a representative sample of contemporary television, but as analytically comparable case studies. These series have been selected based on several shared criteria: their engagement with complex serialized narration; their central concern with bodies, intimacy, and affect; their positioning within mainstream television rather than niche or experimental contexts; and their significant cultural impact across different historical moments and platforms.

Despite their differences in genre, tone, and target audience, all four series explicitly foreground desire as a site of negotiation between personal experience and social norms, making them particularly productive for a comparative analysis of how desire is narratively

and aesthetically constructed. The analysis focuses on selected episodes that function as moments of narrative and affective intensification within each series. These episodes are not treated as representative of the series as a whole, but as emblematic configurations in which desire becomes especially visible, conflicted, or transformative. The methodological choice privileges close textual analysis over exhaustiveness, allowing for attention to audiovisual strategies, narrative structures, and embodied performances through which desire is staged.

Rather than generalizing findings to entire series, the article examines how specific scenes and episodes condense broader narrative logics and affective dynamics, offering insight into the ways contemporary television organizes and problematizes desire.

2. Grey's Anatomy

Grey's Anatomy (ABC, 2005–present), created by Shonda Rhimes, is one of the longest-running and most influential television series in the contemporary landscape, playing a central role in the serial representation of desire as a complex, ambivalent force, constantly intertwined with dynamics of power, trauma, affectivity, and care.

American television series classified as dramas—including *Grey's Anatomy*—serve as a mirror through which audiences reflect on themselves and their everyday lives, represented through relational dynamics of various kinds. Serial television can construct a parallel world in which familial, romantic, friendly, professional, and social relationships are recognizable and offer viewers an experience of mirroring on multiple levels. In relation to series, the very concept of relationships is shaped as a continuous interplay of reflections between self and other, giving rise to what has been termed a "community biography" (Jullier and Laborde 2013, p. 95; Esquenazi 2010, p. 119). The slow pace at which the narrative often unfolds has led some to consider these stories superficial or lacking genuine development; however, this judgement is not always accurate, as series employ specific narrative mechanisms, such as the depiction of multiple types of relationships among characters, the use of redundancy and variation, which are capable of constructing a complex and nuanced relational universe (Cardini 2015, p. 56).

Set in a hospital—a space emblematic of vulnerability, exposed bodies, death, and rebirth—the series transforms romantic and sexual relationships into narrative devices capable of interrogating contemporary emotional and cultural conditions.

In *Grey's Anatomy*, desire is never linear—it is traversed by grief, urgencies, ethical and professional dilemmas, and it is precisely in this complexity that its dramatic strength lies. Erotic relationships between characters are never isolated from the surrounding context: love and sex intertwine with clinical emergencies, difficult medical decisions, external disasters (such as plane crashes, shootings, pandemics), as well as internal crises like burnout, depression, traumatic family relationships, and mental illness. Meredith Grey, the protagonist and narrator of the series, embodies a model of desire marked by a fraught relationship with her mother, fear of abandonment, and a deep need for connection. Her long and turbulent relationship with Derek Shepherd exemplifies desire in tension between passion and stability, recognition and escape, eros and pain. Moreover, through her subsequent evolution—after Derek's death—the series explores the possibility of resilient desire, capable of surviving loss and reemerging in new forms. Meredith desires again and loves again, but is different: less idealized, more self-aware, less fragile, yet freer.

The series begins when Meredith is a recently graduated medical student entering the group of surgical interns at Seattle Grace Hospital, moving into her mother's former house in Seattle. Her internship experience is shared from the outset, on one hand, with a group of young peers—also facing personal challenges—and, on the other, with senior staff, who are in some cases effective mentors and in others still trying to understand themselves and their roles.

The first episode reveals the representation of desire and the series's underlying premise. The narrative begins *in medias res*: after a wild night of passion with a charming man she met the previous evening at a pub, Meredith wakes up in her mother's living room with him beside her. At that moment, they only knew each other's names. Still, a few hours later, upon arriving at the hospital for her first day as an intern at Seattle Grace, she discovers that the man is her neurosurgery attending and direct superior. From the very beginning, Meredith reacts to various stimuli—particularly those arising from Derek's presence—through a physiological response based on bodily expression changes and tendencies to initiate action and counteraction. This is precisely where the series of the famous "elevator kisses" begins, which defines the early period of Meredith and Derek's romantic relationship: passion and desire are central, alongside trauma,[2] pain, and death.

The desire trajectory is neither Meredith's alone nor individual: many characters follow similar paths. Miranda Bailey, a Black woman, top-tier surgeon, mother, and wife, experiences desire as a constant challenge to gender and racial stereotypes; her mature sexuality is treated with respect and depth, far from clichés portraying motherhood as a denial of desire. Callie Torres, in one of the series' major storylines, discovers her bisexuality and engages in intense, often conflictual relationships, always deeply tied to her search for identity and belonging. Her relationship with Arizona Robbins is one of the first prime-time depictions of a lesbian relationship portrayed with complexity, real conflict, and non-stereotyped affection. Characters such as Alex Karev, Amelia Shepherd, Owen Hunt, and Teddy Altman also experience paths in which desire is constantly tested by extreme experiences—infidelity, abortion, war, grief, addiction—and by a highly meritocratic but dehumanizing and competitive work environment. Metaphorically, surgery is where bodies and identities are opened: surgeons, touching others' vital organs, confront their fears, traumas, and wounds. In *Grey's Anatomy*, desire is often both healing and destructive, a drive toward the other and a risk of self-erasure. Sexuality is never marginal: it is political, emotional, and relational. In key episodes—such as "Losing My Religion," "Sanctuary/Death and All His Friends" (season six, episodes 23–24), and "Silent All These Years" (season 15, episode 19)—desire is addressed as survival, resistance to violence, and affirmation of self even in the darkest moments.

The episode *"Losing My Religion"* (season 2, episode 27) is structured around emotionally charged monologues from the five interns—Meredith, Izzie, George, Cristina, Alex—as a narrative device to represent their personal transformation. The visual dimension is dominated by dark tones, except for Izzie's pink dress: a contrast that emphasizes her emotional isolation and the loss of her idealism. At the same time, the dance itself shifts from a celebration to a space of mourning. For the first time, the absence of the narrator's voice interrupts Meredith's usual filter, compelling the viewer to confront unmediated emotions directly. The slow pace of the images, fixed shots, and silences amplify the depiction of Izzie's emotional fragility when she discovers Denny is dead and reveals that she activated the LVAD. Desire in this episode emerges as a tension between affective responsibility and self-destruction, while intimacy is mediated through glances, silences, and a body frozen at the moment of trauma. Desire here is not erotic but emotional: belonging, loss, and the choice to act even at the cost of oneself.

In this episode, the plot unfolds during a dance organized in honour of Chief Richard Webber's niece, to which the entire Seattle Grace staff is invited, ideally with a partner. At that time, Meredith and Derek are no longer together: he is attempting, with difficulty, to mend his relationship with his wife, Addison, after his infidelity, while Meredith has begun seeing Finn, the young veterinarian caring for the dog they once shared. While Meredith dances with Finn in the evening, she unexpectedly encounters Derek and his wife, who are also dancing. The two former lovers lock eyes, with their respective partners turned away:

Derek's intense, fixed gaze unsettles her, causing her to blush and appear disturbed. Using the excuse of the heat, Meredith steps away, and Derek does not hesitate to follow.

The entire scene is constructed as a sequence of stimuli and reactions, where every gesture, glance, or movement becomes a vehicle of desire:

> (Meredith looks up and sees Derek, who is looking at her.)
>
> Finn: You all right?
>
> Meredith: Yeah, just um, hot. And claustrophobic.
>
> Derek: (To Addison) There's a patient I forgot to check on.
>
> Meredith: (To Finn) You know, I'm just going to run and splash some cold water on my face.
>
> Derek: (To Addison) Be right back, ok?
>
> Meredith: (To Finn) Be right back, ok?
>
> Addison: Ok
>
> Finn: All right.
>
> (Meredith is running through the hall, Derek is running after her.)
>
> Derek: Meredith.
>
> Meredith: Leave me alone.
>
> Derek: Meredith.
>
> (Meredith enters an exam room and Derek follows)
>
> Meredith: Just leave me alone.
>
> Derek: I just want to make sure you're all right.
>
> Meredith: No! I'm not all right! Ok? Are you satisfied? I'm not all right! Because you have a wife and you call me a whore and our dog died and now you're looking at me. Stop looking at me!
>
> Derek: I'm not looking at you. I am not looking at you!
>
> Meredith: You are looking at me! And you watch me. And Finn has plans and I like Finn. He's perfect for me! And I'm really trying here to be happy! And I can't breathe! I can't breathe with you looking at me like that! So just stop!
>
> Derek: Do you think I want to look at you? That I wouldn't rather be looking at my wife? I'm married. I have responsibilities. She doesn't drive me crazy. She doesn't make it impossible for me to feel normal! She doesn't make me sick to my stomach thinking about my veterinarian touching her with his hands! Oh, man, I would give anything not to be looking at you!
>
> (She turns to face him and he kisses her.) (Bunniefuu 2006)

The scene is constructed as a precise choreography of stimuli and bodily responses, in which desire is articulated less through explicit declaration than through physiological and affective breakdown. Meredith's accelerated breathing, sweating, and loss of verbal control signal the failure of cognitive regulation in the face of overwhelming affect. The repeated insistence on the act of looking—culminating in Meredith's plea to be freed from Derek's gaze—positions desire as a form of exposure that destabilizes both subjectivity and agency.

In this sequence, desire is not reducible to erotic attraction but emerges as a relational force that invades the body and disrupts intentionality. The gaze functions as a narrative and affective trigger, transforming visual attention into a source of both intimacy and distress. Rather than advancing the plot in a conventional sense, the scene condenses the emotional logic of the series: desire appears as an embodied tension between connection and self-preservation, intimacy and vulnerability, control and surrender.

https://doi.org/10.3390/h15020028

Meredith responds in a profoundly emotional and empathetic way to everything the preceding episodes have prepared, leading her to intense intimacy and shared desire with Derek. Desire here is a long, layered narrative, in which characters participate through immediate bodily reactions, transformed and reintegrated into the plot of their mutual bond. In this scene, love and desire are never explicitly named but expressed through physical signals: gestures, posture, heat, sweat, and laboured breathing. The repeated term *breath* becomes the culmination of the representation and the conduit triggering the subsequent emotional response. On screen, a precise and palpable bodily language—blushing, tears, spasms—is faithfully conveyed through the scriptwriting and the actors' intense performance.

The final episodes of season six, *"Sanctuary"* and *"Death and All His Friends"* (episodes 23 and 24), represent some of the most intense and dramatic moments in the entire series. The hospital becomes the stage for a shooting that threatens the lives of doctors and patients, creating an extreme emergency: within this framework of death and fear, desire emerges as a primary force, an expression of the life drive and the need for connection, capable of resisting violence. Desire here is not only erotic or sentimental but extends to the desire to live, to protect, and to build a future. Cristina Yang and Owen Hunt are tested by the killer's violence, which forces Cristina to operate on Derek Shepherd with a gun pointed at her. Here, desire is less romantic than the will to remain true to oneself, to resist fear, and to uphold medical ethics. Cristina embodies the desire for autonomy and integrity, opposing the brutality of the situation. Owen desires to save her but must learn that love also implies respecting the strength of the other.

The relationship between Meredith Grey and Derek Shepherd stages another nuance of desire: the desire for a shared life. In the midst of tragedy, Meredith discovers she is pregnant, but joy is immediately tempered by the risk of losing Derek, shot by the killer. Pregnancy becomes a symbol of desire that transcends individual survival: the desire to generate, to continue, to affirm life even when death seems to prevail. This vital impulse is further intensified in the scene where Meredith, facing the possibility of losing the baby, expresses fear and manifests it through language, fragility, and strength. This desire cannot be fully controlled. Another significant narrative thread is Miranda Bailey, who must care for a severely injured patient under armed threat. Here, desire manifests as responsibility: the will to care for and not abandon those who suffer, even at risk to one's life. In this act emerges an ethical dimension of desire, transforming it into care for others and resistance to indifference.

The tension between desire and death permeates both episodes, where death intrudes into everyday life, and characters reaffirm desire. This is not merely romantic desire but a deep impulse to maintain bonds and not relinquish one's humanity.

Finally, *"Silent All These Years"* (season 15, episode 19) is among the most intense and visually conscious episodes of the series, focusing on a traumatic theme: the treatment of Abby, a survivor of sexual assault, and the parallel with Jo's personal history, born of rape. The episode largely avoids a musical soundtrack, opting for a mix of amplified ambient sounds, tremors, and silences that reproduce post-traumatic sensory dissociation, immersing the viewer in the survivor's subjective experience. The verbal language is sober but powerful: Jo repeatedly asks, *"Are you ready?"* before each phase of the rape kit, restoring the power of consent to those who lost it. Visually, the climactic scene of the "wall of women" along the hospital corridor is designed as a symbolic and visually striking gesture: a close-up on Abby's face alternates with wide shots showing collective solidarity, creating a moment of communion that is both aesthetic and social. The episode narrates, with rare delicacy and courage, the story of a woman reporting rape, giving medical and hospital narratives an ethical and empathetic dimension: the hospital becomes a space of

care, and the violated body is treated not merely as a clinical object but as the subject of a story to be heard and respected.

This episode, among many others, demonstrates how *Grey's Anatomy* has helped shift the focus of desire from aestheticization to politicization: to desire means to expose oneself, to claim, to seek intimacy, but also to claim space, rights, and respect. The series's strength lies in making visible desire in its most uncomfortable, contradictory, sometimes desperate, yet never banal aspects. The narrative recognizes the body—fragile, desiring, suffering—as the site where our humanity is enacted.

In these two episodes, a narrative approach is evident that combines linguistic techniques—interior monologues, repeated phrases as empowerment rituals, explicit consent requests—with precise visual choices: use of colour, selective absence or presence of music, slowed editing rhythms, and shots privileging faces and meaningful gestures. In *"Losing My Religion"*, emotional tension is mediated through visual minimalism, making trauma and loss palpable. In contrast, in *"Silent All These Years"*, trauma is embodied through the patient's body, the glances of her supporters, and the rhythm of silence. Desire intertwines here with care, empathy, and the regained power of self-representation: on one side, acts of surrender, on the other, strongly physical gestures of agency and support—visual lines that become metaphors of recognition and resistance.

3. Sex and the City

Sex and the City (HBO, 1998–2004), created by Darren Star and based on Candace Bushnell's newspaper columns, represents a fundamental turning point in the portrayal of female desire within Western television, marking the explicit entry of sexuality, autonomy, and the identity complexity of single women into mass culture. Set in a glossy, hyperstylized Manhattan, the series emerged as a cultural and media phenomenon capable of redefining the imagination of intimacy and pleasure, particularly regarding white, urban, professional subjectivities. *Sex and the City* is a rather complex franchise that has expanded along different trajectories. It is seemingly a light-hearted product, but it branches out in heterogeneous ways: not initially conceived as an expanded franchise, it became one over time thanks to a loyal and passionate audience.

The first product that launched the intergenerational and transcultural phenomenon of *Sex and the City* was the series of articles published in 1994 and the following two years in the *New York Observer* by journalist Candace Bushnell under the pseudonym Carrie Bradshaw. These articles were later collected in Bushnell's novel, published in 1996 under the title *Sex and the City*. However, the television series, created by Darren Star and broadcast by HBO from 6 June 1998, to 22 February 2004, over six seasons, propelled this franchise to global success. It achieved immense popularity not only in the United States but worldwide, centering on the lives of four young, single, career-oriented friends navigating complicated and spicy relationships against the backdrop of a bold and flamboyant New York.

This worldwide success led to numerous derivatives and paratexts, many expansive and highly successful. Among these are the two films *Sex and the City* and *Sex and the City 2*, released in 2008 and 2010, respectively. Additionally, there is the television prequel series, aired from 2013 to 2014, inspired by Bushnell's 2010 book *The Carrie Diaries*, which focuses entirely on the protagonist's life during adolescence. The prequel series also enjoyed wide audience success, as did the reboot *And Just Like That*..., aired from 2021 to 2025, where the friends—along with some new characters and previously central figures moved to the background—face new relationships and issues typical of women in their fifties.

While the multiple products mentioned constitute the core narrative of the *Sex and the City* paratextual apparatus, there are many other types of paratexts, including numerous organized tours for fans visiting locations from the series—from the four friends' apart-

ments[3] to bars, restaurants, and shops they frequent—as well as markedly transcultural adaptations, such as the Ghanaian web series *An African City*, which transposes the U.S. series to a different context while maintaining its foundational elements.

The franchise's success has significantly impacted the redefining of gender roles and their fluidity, shaping New York society's imagination and, more broadly, the United States. *Sex and the City* captured cultural and social transformations in the U.S., including those surrounding the period before and after the September 11 attacks, through its protagonists' differing experiences and perspectives. While at first glance the series may appear light and focused on seemingly frivolous female topics, it has increasingly addressed complex issues such as post-9/11 collective trauma, the evolution of LGBTQIAP+ rights, gender identity fluidity, racism, and various sexual taboos. Within this narrative ecosystem, books, series, and films have fed into each other, constructing a more layered social discourse beneath an ironic and casual surface. From a narrative standpoint, this depth has been made possible by the project's transmedia structure, which progressively enriched the series' universe, guiding audiences toward a more nuanced and informed understanding of its characters and themes.

Desire in *Sex and the City* is never neutral or universal; it takes different forms and intensities depending on the protagonist, each embodies—albeit with symbolic simplifications—a narrative archetype that stages real tensions between pleasure and norms, autonomy and dependence, vulnerability and power. Carrie Bradshaw, narrator and Bushnell's alter ego, turns desire into writing, a field of observation, and a philosophical tension, treating sexuality not as mere gratification but as a continuous inquiry into the self and others. Miranda Hobbes, a rational and often cynical lawyer, highlights the difficulty of reconciling career, motherhood, affection, and desire, exposing the contradictions between emancipation and loneliness in the rhetoric of urban post-feminism. Charlotte York initially represents the most rigid adherence to traditional romantic codes. Still, she undergoes profound crises over the series, redefining desire in terms of marriage and motherhood and openness to the unexpected, difference, and fragility. Samantha Jones, finally, is the most transgressive figure: sexually liberated, uninterested in monogamy, and resistant to social judgement, she embodies self-determined, explicit, and assertive female desire that requires no legitimation and remains radical even in the face of illness, ageing, and marginalization.

In episodes such as *"La Douleur Exquise!"* (season 2, episode 12), desire is represented in its painful form, with Carrie confronting unreciprocated feelings and obsession with Big, showing how pleasure intertwines with frustration and how desire involves loss of control, exposure to rejection, and vulnerability. In *"Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl…"* (season 3, episode 4), Carrie's relationship with a bisexual partner invites reflection on fluidity and fear of non-definition, while in *"I Love a Charade"* (season 5, episode 8), the gay marriage of two friends is celebrated with emphasis, marking an initial attempt at including queer difference within a largely heteronormative universe. In *"The Post-It Always Sticks Twice"* (season 6, episode 7), the series humorously critiques male desire's inability to cope with relational complexity, contrasting it with an increasingly self-aware femininity regarding value and expectations.

The city—Manhattan—becomes a metonym for desire: a dynamic, mutable, excessive space where encounters occur, fade, and reformulate, with relationships constantly mediated through language, objects, performance, and consumption. Desire is also expressed through fashion, architecture, food, and money. Every gesture is eroticized and politicized within a symbolic network demonstrating how the body, in urban modernity, is simultaneously surveilled and spectacularized. Despite its limitations—the marginalization of racialized subjectivities, the near absence of non-conforming bodies, the elite representation of female experience—*Sex and the City* opened a new space for the television narrative of

desire. It demonstrated that desire can be female, plural, contradictory, ironic, painful, and political. It offered millions of viewers the idea that desiring is not something to hide or justify but a right and a necessity. In other words, the series inaugurated a discursive mode in which women are no longer merely objects of others' desire but authors of their own erotic and affective narratives, paving the way for a more conscious, critical, and complex engagement with contemporary emotional experience.

4. The Handmaid's Tale

The Handmaid's Tale (Hulu, 2017–2025), an adaptation of Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel of the same name, offers a radical representation of desire within a context of systemic repression. Set in a dystopian future where an ecological and demographic crisis has led to the establishment of a totalitarian theocratic regime—the Republic of Gilead—the series follows the story of June Osborne, forced to become a "Handmaid" and therefore subjected to periodic ritualized sexual assaults for reproductive purposes. Acclaimed for its visual power and ability to depict systemic oppression, the series has established itself as one of contemporary television's most significant and disturbing products, reflecting—through the lens of dystopia—urgent issues related to the body, power, and desire.

In Gilead's theocratic regime, desire is forbidden, pathologized, and suppressed. Women's bodies are reduced to reproductive tools, and any expression of non-normative sexuality is punished with violence. Yet, precisely within this claustrophobic scenario, desire resurfaces as an act of resistance, a claim to pleasure, subjectivity, and freedom. Secret relationships, forbidden glances, and minimal gestures become acts of insubordination. The series' aesthetics—composed of close-ups, traumatic point-of-view shots, and fragmented bodies—emphasize the embodied dimension of desire, making the viewer a participant in an experience that is simultaneously sensory and political. Here, desire is not merely erotic: it is the desire to escape, to pursue justice, and to live.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the representation of desire is deeply intertwined with its denial and the institutionalized violence structuring the entire narrative framework. The Republic of Gilead, a theocratic regime founded on biopolitical control of reproduction, strips sexuality of its affective and erotic content, reducing it to procedure. However, even within this system of extreme repression, desire is not eliminated: it survives as a force of rebellion, a latent tension, a deviant gesture that reaffirms identity and memory.

In season one, episode five, "Faithful," desire assumes a dual significance: on one hand, it is a tool of manipulation and a survival strategy—when Serena Joy suggests that June (Offred) have relations with Nick to facilitate pregnancy—but on the other hand, it functions as self-reclamation. The relationship between June and Nick, though ambiguous and not without power implications, represents an opportunity for the protagonist to rediscover her corporeality and pleasure in a context where sex has been emptied of emotional meaning. The scene in which they make love is constructed through a visual language that departs from Gilead's cold and controlled aesthetics: the lighting is warmer, the camera moves more fluidly, and the bodies touch with tenderness. Desire here is not merely erotic but profoundly identity-affirming: it reinstates subjectivity within a system that denies it.

This return of desire as an act of resistance is even more evident in season two, episode ten, "The Last Ceremony," where the monthly ritualized rape—a brutal mechanism of sexual ritualization—is loaded with additional cruelty when Fred decides to exercise his power over June arbitrarily and punitively. The depiction of the scene is deliberately disturbing: the shot tightens on the protagonist's paralyzed face, the light is harsh, and the silence is deafening. At this moment, the total negation of desire emphasizes how its eventual reclamation represents a radical act. The absence of desire becomes the actual trauma: the erasure of the possibility to choose, to will, and, above all, to feel.

https://doi.org/10.3390/h15020028

In season three, episode three, "Useful," desire resurfaces through memory. In one of the most significant sequences, June recalls her relationship with Luke and the passion that connected them before Gilead. The flashback is filmed with warm colours, gentle camera movements, and diegetic music that evokes lightness and complicity. The contrast with the coldness of the present reinforces the idea that desire, even when confined to the past, continues to exert symbolic power, a narrative force that gives meaning to action and fuels resistance. Desire thus becomes memory and vital impulse: not merely nostalgic recollection but a driving energy of dissent.

Finally, in season four, episode nine, "Progress," we witness a new type of desire: maternal, affective, and relational. June reunites with Luke after years of separation, and in their rapprochement, desire manifests in a complex form, intertwining attraction, trauma, emotional distance, and the will to rebuild. Their intimacy, marked by scars, is represented without idealization: the series chooses to show how desire can also be fragile, strained, yet still full of significance. The depiction is never sugar-coated but realistic and layered, consistent with the emotional and psychological dimensions of the characters.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, desire becomes a field of tension between oppression and agency, institutional erasure and intimate reclamation. The series employs a visual grammar of contrasts, silences, fragmented bodies, and expressive faces to depict desire not only as eroticism but as a political and affective instrument of resistance. Even when it cannot be openly enacted, desire inhabits the scene as sensitive memory and imaginative possibility, becoming a narrative force and a form of opposition.

5. Sex Education

Sex Education (Netflix, 2019–2023), created by Laurie Nunn, stands out as one of the most advanced narratives in representing desire from an inclusive, affective, and intersectional perspective. Set in a British secondary school, the series addresses topics such as sex education, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, and trauma in a direct and non-moralizing way, presenting desire as something constructed through relationships and dialogue.

Unlike many traditional narratives, *Sex Education* avoids the spectacularization of the body or the rhetoric of shame, privileging an inclusive and relational perspective. Desire is conceived as the possibility for discovery, communication, and care. Characters—primarily adolescents, but also adults—experience confusion, pleasure, disappointment, and affection, collectively building a shared emotional lexicon.

The series also functions as a discursive laboratory, thematizing the relationship between desire and language: words—often difficult to find—definitions, and labels become tools to make sense of bodily experience. In this respect, *Sex Education* offers a pedagogical and affective space where viewers can reconsider and renegotiate their own conceptions of desire.

The improvised sex therapy clinic run by Otis, the son of therapist Jean Milburn, becomes a narrative space where adolescents can explore their drives, doubts, and relationships dialogically and consciously: an example of "participatory affective education" that makes serialized storytelling a powerful pedagogical tool (Capalbi 2025, pp. 78–93). Desire is not reduced to its erotic dimension. Still, it traverses bodies and language as an expression of identity and recognition, a process that challenges the dominant "heterosexual script" and opens up queer and female representations of pleasure (Ryalls and Mazzarella 2024, pp. 239–50). Particularly significant is the representation of kink—a range of non-normative sexual fantasies and practices—through the character of Lily, whose erotic imagination is staged as a creative and legitimate element of female desire within a context that typically stigmatizes such expressions (Derzioti 2024). The series thus constructs an emotional lexi-

con accessible to a global audience, becoming, as Mady and El-Khoury have demonstrated in the Lebanese context, a transnational educational resource capable of compensating for gaps in traditional school systems (Mady and El-Khoury 2022). Furthermore, the narrative promotes a vision of adolescent desire that challenges commercial pornography, privileging self-narration and consent as instruments of agency (Dudek et al. 2021).

Several episodes clearly illustrate the series's approach to constructing desire that challenges heterosexual and binary norms, valuing queer, neurodivergent, adolescent, and marginalized subjectivities. In season one, episode three, Maeve discovers she is pregnant and decides to terminate the pregnancy; the abortion scene is treated with sobriety and dignity, free from dramatic rhetoric, and becomes a moment of intimacy and care with Otis, who accompanies her and provides emotional support: desire here is not represented as eroticism but as empathic closeness, a form of support, and respect for another's autonomy. In another episode of the same season, episode five, Otis and Eric dress up for a school party, and Otis, wearing feminine clothes, is attacked: this event illustrates how desire can be linked to gender dynamics and how non-conforming performativity is still punished, revealing the fragility of spaces where desire can be freely expressed. In episode eight of season two, the condition of Lily, who suffers from vaginismus, is addressed: during an attempt at intimacy with Ola, Lily experiences pain and communicates it naturally, demonstrating therapeutic tools and openly discussing her experience; the scene represents desire as a nonlinear process, also involving blocks, vulnerability, and the re-signification of pleasure, highlighting the importance of shared language for inhabiting intimacy.

Across these examples, desire is never represented as an object but as dialogue, affective construction, and the possibility of subjective bodily expression. Season three brings this reflection to a more explicitly political level: in episode one, Otis discovers the existence of the "Sex King," a male figure spreading erroneous sexual advice in school bathrooms, and, together with Maeve, intervenes to counter misinformation, reaffirming the value of knowledge and communication about sex; in episode four, the new headteacher imposes a repressive sex education policy, limiting instruction to abstinence, and the student protest, led by Otis and Maeve, functions as a collective defence of the right to desire, complexity, expressive freedom, and identity plurality.

All these episodes demonstrate how *Sex Education* adopts a narrative model in which desire is always linked to relationships, consent, responsibility, and knowledge, deconstructing stereotypes and dominant representations to offer an alternative, empathetic, and transformative imaginary. In this sense, *Sex Education* does not merely depict desire; it redefines it as a communicative act, a political space, and a form of mutual care, combining ethics, aesthetics, and affectivity.

6. Conclusions

This article has examined how contemporary television series stage and problematize desire through complex narrative structures, embodied performances, and affective aesthetics. Across *Grey's Anatomy*, *Sex and the City*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *Sex Education*, desire emerges not merely as an erotic impulse or narrative theme, but as a site of tension in which identity, power, care, trauma, and agency intersect. In other words, from a mere narrative theme, desire emerges as a discursive, aesthetic, and political force traversing bodies, languages, structures, and ideologies. The television series analyzed represent emblematic examples of how desire is staged not only as an erotic or affective drive, but also as an expression of identity, a tool of agency, a site of resistance, and a mode of negotiation with cultural norms.

Each production offers a specific and situated perspective: *Grey's Anatomy* depicts desire as an inextricable intertwining of care, trauma, passion, and work; *Sex and the City*

celebrates its plurality and its feminist reclamation within an urban, (post)feminist framework; *The Handmaid's Tale* presents desire in its tragic dimension, as a force of resistance that survives even under the pressure of systemic violence, transforming into a political act; and *Sex Education* redefines desire as a communicative, affective, and pedagogical process, deconstructing stereotypes and giving voice to marginalized subjectivities. In all these narratives, desire is never represented neutrally or univocally; it is always traversed by social, cultural, and emotional tensions, complicating its depiction and multiplying the possible interpretations.

Within the limits of textual and aesthetic analysis, this article argues that contemporary television does more than represent desire, it constructs affective scenarios that invite, orient, and modulate viewers' engagement with intimacy and relationality. Through audiovisual strategies, narrative pacing, and embodied performances, serialized television creates conditions for affective alignment and embodied simulation, without implying deterministic or empirically measurable effects beyond the text itself.

By foregrounding female and non-heteronormative desires, these series contribute to the reconfiguration of dominant cultural imaginaries surrounding the body, pleasure, and intimacy. In doing so, they position television as a crucial cultural site for negotiating the ethics and politics of desire in contemporary society. Desire thus appears not as a stable object to be represented, but as a dynamic process—narrative, affective, and relational—through which contemporary subjectivities are explored and contested.

Through the skillful use of visual, linguistic, and performative codes, series construct emotional scenarios in which the viewer is called not only to identify, but also to feel and position themselves. In this sense, audience engagement occurs through embodied simulation processes (Gallese and Guerra 2020): viewers do not simply observe desire; they experience it through a sensory and empathic participation that strengthens the connection between narrative and subject. Desire, therefore, is not only represented, it is performed and shared.

Serialized narratives operate as genuine cultural devices for the reworking of collective affect. Desire becomes a key to interrogating forms of contemporary subjectivity, power dynamics, gender relations, and configurations of intimacy. As Ahmed (2004) argues, desire is orientation, movement, and tension toward the other: it positions us in the world. Contemporary television, through its expansive and layered narrative worlds, shapes these affective trajectories, offering audiences symbolic maps to navigate the emotional chaos of modern life.

Within a media ecosystem characterized by convergence and participation, desire becomes a central cultural negotiation node. Serial productions are no longer closed texts, but discursive environments where voices, ideologies, and affects meet and clash. The possibility of representing non-normative desires—queer, female, intersectional—thus takes on a profoundly political value. As serial and transmedia discursive practices, series can rewrite dominant codes and propose new ways of being and desiring in the world. At a time when the politics of the body and intimacy are increasingly subject to control and public debate, television can provide critical tools to deconstruct heteronormativity, create space for diverse experiences, and promote a culture of listening, consent, and relationality.

In conclusion, this analysis demonstrates that desire in contemporary television is no longer reducible to a theme to be represented, but is configured as a process to be traversed, a dynamic to be explored, an affective grammar to be rewritten. Television series do not merely reflect reality, they interpret it. In them, desire becomes narrative, experience, and memory, contributing decisively to constructing new forms of living and thinking about the other.

https://doi.org/10.3390/h15020028

Contemporary television increasingly functions as a space for the cultural reworking of desire. Through multifaceted characters, layered narratives, and conscious aesthetic choices, series challenge normative codes of sexuality, proposing new forms of representation for intimacy, the body, and pleasure. Desire thus emerges as a narrative and political force, capable of interrogating identities, redefining relationships, and subverting social expectations.

In the current media context, the representation of desire also becomes a question of responsibility: how can the desiring experience be narrated ethically, pluralistically, and sensitively? The series analyzed offers some answers, showing that desire is not only a narrative theme, but also a discursive, aesthetic, and cultural practice in constant evolution.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Notes

1 A comparison with male-oriented prestige dramas such as *The Wire*, *The Sopranos*, *Mad Men*, or *Breaking Bad* would require a different analytical framework and raises distinct questions regarding masculinity, power, and narrative authority. While such a comparison would undoubtedly be valuable, it exceeds the scope of the present article, which remains deliberately focused on female and non-normative configurations of desire within contemporary serialized television.

2 Each season of the series addresses a range of traumas, roughly in parallel with real-world events. For example, in the seventeenth season, the characters are visibly affected by COVID-19 and all the consequences it entails. In the most recent seasons, not only COVID-19, but also the post-traumatic stress disorder experienced by many soldiers, the difficult circumstances faced by many Black Americans following the death of George Floyd, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the denial of abortion rights in certain states are represented.

3 Numerous photos are taken by tourist fans at the four addresses of the protagonists, which have become true pilgrimage sites: Carrie lives at 245 East 73rd Street, Charlotte at 700 Park Avenue in the Upper East Side, Miranda at 331 West 78th Street in the Upper West Side—before moving to Brooklyn with her husband—and finally, Samantha at 300 Gansevoort Street in the Meatpacking District. In November 2021, the rental platform Airbnb announced on social media that it had recreated Bradshaw's apartment, offering the opportunity to stay there for a few nights and immerse oneself in the world of the protagonist (https://news.airbnb.com/it/sarah-jessica-parker-diventa-host/) (accessed on 1 October 2025).

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